



Children, Young People and the Built Environment LUHC Commons Committee Inquiry Submission by Playing Out

Summary

- Children and young people's physical and mental health are in serious, long-term decline, significantly exacerbated by poverty and inequality.
- Children want to be outside and active, playing with friends near home, walking/cycling to school (and parents want this too) but face many environmental barriers.
- Government policy to date has not addressed some of the root causes of this – and in some cases has added to the problem.
- Everyday outdoor free play and mobility = healthier, happier children.
- The key factor enabling this is a safe, accessible, welcoming outside environment.
- Child-focussed built environment policy could transform children's lives, health and well-being.
- A co-ordinated cross-departmental approach is needed (planning, housing, transport, public health).
- Examples of good practice exist in UK and internationally.
- Effective, evidenced low-cost policies could be enacted almost immediately.

About Playing Out

[Playing Out](#) was started by parents in Bristol and established as a non-profit organisation in 2011 in order to support the spread of the (now UK-wide) [temporary play street model](#) and the related growth of a parent-led movement aimed at restoring children's freedom to play out near home.

12 years on, 100 local authorities now have a play street policy and 1,600 street communities have organised regular play streets, involving thousands of adults taking action in their own communities and directly benefitting up to [48,000 children](#).

Alongside this, Playing Out has been a voice for children, parents and communities, calling for local and national policy that supports and enables children to play out freely near home, for their health, happiness and sense of belonging.

Evidence

Even pre-pandemic, 80 per cent of children were not getting the basic hour per day of physical activity they need to be healthy and well.ⁱ One in four children now leave primary school clinically obeseⁱⁱ and children's mental health is at crisis point.ⁱⁱⁱ The problem is getting worse, not better, suggesting current Government policy is not working.

Rather than continuing to do more of the same, Government policy needs to address the root causes of the inactivity and isolation that is contributing so much to making children unhealthy and unhappy.

Children everywhere have lost the freedom they once had to play out, socialise and get around independently near home – daily activity that was cost-free and did not depend on close adult supervision,



a special destination or car ownership. Children's time spent outdoors,^{iv} outdoor play^v, 'roaming range' and independent mobility^{vi} have all massively reduced over a few decades.

Restoring children's freedom to play out near home and get around their local area could go a long way to ensuring all children, regardless of background or circumstance, are happy, healthy and part of their communities.

Undoubtedly, the biggest barrier to children's freedom is traffic dominance of residential streets. Car numbers have more than doubled since the 1980's and driver behaviour/culture have also changed, with streets no longer shared spaces for all. Parents consistently say that the very real danger posed by cars is the main thing preventing them from letting their children play out near home or roaming further afield.^{vii}

Outdoor space within housing estates has also become increasingly off-bounds for children. Adults' right to 'quiet enjoyment' of outdoor space is often a condition of tenancy agreements whereas children's right to play is not. Play bans or No Ball Games signs are all too often implemented by housing providers in response to a single complaint. Patches of green and other informal space are sold off or built on, without regard to their play value for local children.

The loss of access to free (in all senses) outdoor play in shared space has [impacted children from the most disadvantaged communities the hardest](#).

[Play streets](#) - a temporary, community-led intervention - demonstrate that when children are given time and permission to play out together in a safe space on their doorstep, they choose to do this rather than be indoors, isolated and on screens. [When they play outside, children are naturally physically active](#). Research from the University of Bristol¹ using accelerometers found that children were 3-5 times more active during play street sessions than on an average day after school. Outdoor free play is also how children naturally develop physical literacy, socialisation skills, confidence and independence, and a sense of belonging to 'their patch.'

Q: How do children and young people experience their built environment and what is the impact of this? How do inequalities exacerbate this?

For decades, public policy in England has failed to create, maintain and protect places that support children's healthy development and wellbeing. Traffic-dominated neighbourhoods, low quality housing layouts, inadequate facilities, and poorly designed housing estates, along with a lack of parks and green spaces and other accessible high quality natural spaces, have harmed children's health, and undermined their quality of life.

Children's access to play and physical activity is increasingly dependent on access to organised clubs, classes and facilities and is no longer inclusive or democratic as in previous decades. As a result, economic deprivation² and racial inequality³ are both significant additional factors compounding children's lack of access to outdoor play, physical activity and greenspace.

The impact of this on children's mental and physical health - including all the statistics below - is also far worse for those already suffering from inequality and disadvantage. The Royal College of Paediatrics says children's health in the most disadvantaged communities is "a terrifying picture", adding, "Paediatricians

¹ https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Play-England_Why-temporary-street-closures-make-sense-for-public-health.pdf

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-childrens-report-mene-2018-2019>

³ <https://playingout.net/blog/playing-fair-how-does-race-affect-childrens-access-to-outdoor-play/>



cannot be any clearer on this point; child health is in crisis and rampant health inequalities can no longer be ignored.”⁴

The built environment itself plays a significant role in children’s (lack of) access to outdoor space, play, active travel and physical activity.

In terms of streets, parental concern about traffic danger⁵ is the main reason children are not given ‘licence’ to play out near home or to walk/cycle to school⁶. This concern is based in reality – in 2021, 1,665 child pedestrians/cyclists (0-15) were killed or seriously injured on the streets. Children in the most deprived 20% of areas are six times more likely to be injured on Britain’s roads than those in the least deprived 20%.⁷ The evidence is clear that slower speeds where children live would save lives and give children more freedom.⁸

Children are also prevented or discouraged from using other ‘doorstep space’ – for example on housing estates – due to both a lack of safe, accessible or suitable space *and/or* lack of permission to use the space outside their homes. ‘No Ball Games’ signs and culture are still prevalent in social housing schemes across the UK.⁹ Access to play space on mixed estates is sometimes segregated according to tenure.¹⁰

Where children have designated outdoor spaces locally - parks, playgrounds and sports areas - these may be difficult to get to independently due to traffic danger and are often unsafe or in bad repair¹¹. Playable outdoor space is also being rapidly lost to development and children are often excluded from public space e.g. through anti-skating measures or ‘mosquitos’.

Key statistics

- 1/5 of UK population are under 18
- Children spend far less time outside than they used to
- Children play on their own street far less than they used to (80% in 1970s - 22% in 2022)¹²
- Children walk/cycle to school far less than they used to (86% in 1970 - 25% in 2010)¹³
- 1,665 child pedestrians/cyclists (0-15) were killed or seriously injured in 2021¹⁴
- 24% of children would like to cycle or scoot to school. Only 4% actually do so.¹⁵
- 30% of UK children live in areas with unsafe levels of fine particulates¹⁶
- Only 21% of children in England (5-15) meet official targets on physical activity (1hr/day)
- A quarter of children now leave primary school clinically obese, with economic disadvantage doubling the impact.¹⁷
- The poorest 20% of children are 12 times more likely to experience poor health outcomes by the age of 17¹⁸

⁴ <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/news-events/news/health-outcomes-continue-worsen-uk-children-say-leading-childrens-doctors>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/dec/07/man-arrested-after-boy-seven-dies-in-folkestone-crash>

⁶ Shaw, B. et al (2015) *Mobility: an international comparison and recommendations for action*. University of Westminster

⁷ <https://www.bmj.com/content/379/bmj.o2862>

⁸ https://www.20splenty.org/duty_of_care_mandates_20mph

⁹ <https://playingout.net/play-streets/info-for-councils/housing-and-playing-out/>

¹⁰ Grant, H. and Michael, C. ‘Too poor to play: children in social housing blocked from communal playground’ *The Guardian*

¹¹ API-Play (2022) *#Equal Play: Every child’s right to Everyday Play*

¹² Helen Dodd / Play England, 2023. *Trends in Children’s Street Play*

¹³ Shaw et al, 2010. *Children’s Independent Mobility: a comparative study*

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/reported-road-accidents-vehicles-and-casualties-tables-for-great-britain>

¹⁵ <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/our-blog/news/2021/september/survey-reveals-just-2-of-uk-pupils-currently-cycle-to-school>

¹⁶ <https://www.unicef.org.uk/publications/child-health-breath-of-toxic-air/>

¹⁷ <https://digital.nhs.uk/news/2021/significant-increase-in-obesity-rates-among-primary-aged-children-latest-statistics-show>

¹⁸ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(23\)00029-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(23)00029-4/fulltext)



- The UK has the second lowest life satisfaction of 15-year-olds across all OECD countries.¹⁹
- Children themselves consistently say that they want to play outside more in their local area.²⁰

Q: How well are children and young people’s needs currently met by the planning process in terms of policy and guidance?

It seems that children’s needs are barely even considered in the planning process, let alone met.

Children are only mentioned once in the National Planning Policy Framework (in connection with assessing housing needs) and there is no national guidance on child-friendly design and planning.

Children are not considered a statutory equalities group either in terms of considering their needs or consultation/involvement in decision-making. Amazingly, whilst Great Crested Newts and other species have to be considered in any planning process, children do not.

Children’s needs – especially for free, unstructured outdoor play near home and independent mobility around their neighbourhood – are not well understood, so even where guidance exists and is voluntarily followed, it does not necessarily result in children’s needs being met.

Increasingly, housing is built without sufficient, accessible playable space for children. Whilst private car-parking space is regarded as essential and non-negotiable by developers, safe doorstep space for children is rarely even a consideration.

There is also little to no accountability in the process, so that developers can promise wonderful playable space on paper and then fail to deliver this in reality.

The huge social and health impact of all this is set out above.

Q: How are children and young people’s views and voices heard, considered and acted upon in the planning system if at all?

If children are consulted at all in the planning process - which is rare - our experience is that this is often tokenistic, done badly and doesn’t result in meaningful outcomes.

Consultation with children needs to be appropriate, meaningful and cannot replace adult responsibility for understanding and meeting their needs.

Q: Where are the examples of policy and good practice that are improving children and young people’s experiences in the built environment?

Play streets are one example of an intervention that is improving children’s access to and relationship with their immediate “doorstep” environment. Whilst play streets are only a temporary solution - enabling children to play out together once a week or once a month, rather than every day – they are a step towards longer-term change, helping to restore a culture of children playing outside in their communities.

¹⁹ <https://www.oecd.org/publication/pisa-2022-results/>

²⁰ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/the-big-answer/>



Play streets also clearly demonstrate what children need on a more permanent basis: safer streets and doorstep space - and permission to use that space. The huge take-up of this resident-led model (which takes time and hard work to organise) shows that children and parents desperately want this.

The fact that **100 local authorities** now have an explicit play street policy shows that many councils also understand the importance and value of doorstep space and play for children and communities. However, many councils are not yet supporting play streets due to confusion about the legal requirements. Government could hugely help play streets to happen in all local authority areas by simplifying the national legislation and providing clear procedural guidance for councils (Playing Out can advise on this).

School streets and low-traffic neighbourhoods are examples of more permanent interventions that help children to feel safe and welcome in their local environment. Play streets can be a valuable step towards these more permanent changes, helping to build support and understanding within the local community.

A few councils and housing associations have taken a lead on removing **'No Ball Games' signs**, sending a message to children that they are welcome in the space outside their homes. Some examples are listed here: <https://playingout.net/play-streets/info-for-councils/housing-and-playing-out/> . Playing Out and Clarion Housing have recently launched a 'Pro-play housing network' with around 10 major housing providers so far signed up, with the aim of co-developing policies that support children to play out within new and existing housing.

In England, a handful of relevant **child-friendly city** initiatives have been taken forward by the Mayor of London and in a few English local authorities, including Leeds, Hackney, and Newham. Some architects and developers are also starting to lead the way in developing child-friendly outdoor space around housing – notably ZCD Architects and [Redrow Housing](#). The [Marmalade Lane](#) co-housing development in Cambridge is a gold-standard example of new housing designed with children in mind, where houses back onto The Lane - “a child-friendly, car-free street” - and car parking is kept to the periphery. And bodies such as Sport England are increasingly focussing on [active environments](#) as the key to enabling children and young people to move more.

However, far more support and direction from the UK Government is needed in order for these pockets of good practice to become widespread.

A literature review carried out by Helen Forman for Playing Out in 2017 – [“Street Design and Play”](#) provides a strong evidence base for the importance and value of child-friendly planning and design, and some clear policy recommendations for putting this into practice.

In Wales and Scotland, devolved governments have implemented a Play Sufficiency Duty, requiring local authorities to conduct a play sufficiency assessment as part of the planning process and to consult with children on local plans.

There are also many great examples outside the UK. Germany, Norway, and Sweden all have relevant national policies and/or guidance, and at the municipal level, the cities of Barcelona, Freiburg, Ghent, Paris, Pontevedra, Rotterdam, and Tirana (amongst others) have all taken forward ambitious programmes aimed at restoring children's freedom to play outside and access their local environment.

Q: Are government departments working together to address children and young people's needs in this respect?

Short answer: no.



The UK Government was heavily criticised for its performance on children’s rights in the latest [Concluding Observations from UNCRC](#) and children’s rights charities have said, “too often decisions are made without proper consideration of how they affect children”.

One recent example of this is in the development of Manual for Streets 2 (MfS2), which had a steering group consisting of experts representing every equalities group except for children. The way that children’s need to play outside was neglected during the Covid pandemic - despite persistent lobbying from children’s charities and experts - is another clear example of the lack of understanding and consideration within Government of this basic need and right.

In order to start creating an environment that meets children’s need for outdoor play, freedom of movement, physical activity, community, social contact and connection with nature, a co-ordinated cross-departmental approach is needed. Relevant policy areas include: housing, planning, local government, levelling-up, public health, transport, policing and climate/clean air.

Government policy to address this could include:

Quick/immediate:

- Clarification of national play streets legislation and procedural guidance so that all local authorities are encouraged to support resident-led temporary play streets
- Review and new guidance on measures that restrict children and young people's opportunities to play and socialise in public space (eg No Ball Games signs, ‘mosquitos’, anti-skating measures)
- Requirement for all registered housing providers to develop a proportionate, balanced approach to outdoor play following existing best practice
- Public health messages aimed at all the relevant professionals (LAs, GPs, police, planning officers etc) around importance of free play and active travel for children’s health

Medium-term:

- Revising National Planning Policy Framework to include requirements for planning applications to meet children’s need for safe, accessible outdoor space on their doorstep for active play and social connection.
- High quality guidance on child-friendly planning to sit alongside NPPF
- Requiring that children are considered a statutory equalities group in the planning process.
- Requiring that children are meaningfully involved in significant local planning decisions
- Child Impact Assessment as standard part of planning process
- A Play Sufficiency duty on all local authorities
- A coordinated cross-dept approach to restoring children’s access to outdoor space, play and mobility (involving DLUHC, DfT, DHSC, DCMS)
- ‘Child-lens’ approach to transport policy ensuring safe streets in residential areas and around schools
- 20mph default speed limit where children live, learn and play
- Public health and physical activity strategies prioritising children’s free outdoor play

Whilst none of these recommendations require any specific funding commitment, Government should also explore cost-effective, equitable ways to enhance the capacity and expertise of local authorities, and to secure additional funding for high-quality delivery (both capital and revenue) through developer contributions and other mechanisms.



Conclusion

Children's needs in the built environment have been ignored by Government policy for too long, resulting in enormous damage to their health, happiness and wellbeing - and incalculable cost to society. This now needs to change. The positive impact of prioritising children's needs in this area could be enormous. Many organisations and experts would gladly contribute to developing a new Government policy approach to children and the built environment, ensuring children can safely access the space outside their homes and across their wider neighbourhoods, giving them the free play, social contact, freedom, healthy development and physical activity they need and benefitting society as a whole.

ⁱ NHS Digital. (2019) *NHS Statistics on Obesity, Physical Activity and Diet, England, 2019*. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/statistics-on-obesity-physical-activity-and-diet/statistics-on-obesity-physical-activity-and-diet-england-2019>

ⁱⁱ Gregory, A. (2021) *Childhood obesity in England soars during pandemic*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/nov/16/childhood-obesity-in-england-soared-during-pandemic>

ⁱⁱⁱ Local Government Association. (2022) *Children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health - facts and figures*. <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/bright-futures/bright-futures-camhs/child-and-adolescent-mental-health-and>

^{iv} Cleland V, Timperio A, Salmon J, et al. (2010) *Predictors of time spent outdoors among children: 5-year longitudinal findings*. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 64:400-406.

^v Play England. (2010). *ICM survey for Playday*. <http://www.playday.org.uk/campaigns-3/previouscampaigns/2010-our-place/>

^{vi} Shaw, B., Fagan-Watson, B., Fraudendienst, B. et al. (2013) *Children's independent mobility: a comparative study in England and Germany (1971-2010)*. London: Policy Studies Institute

^{vii} Playday. (2013) *2013 opinion poll summary*. <https://www.playday.org.uk/2013-opinion-poll/>