

Research Briefing

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# Children, young people and the built environment



## Summary

- 1 Access to outdoor space to play
- 2 History of legislation, policy and strategy for access to outdoor spaces
- 3 Responsibility across central government
- 4 Legislation
- 5 Current planning policy and guidance
- 6 Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland
- 7 Children and young people friendly initiatives in the UK
- 8 What are other countries doing?
- 9 Recent discussion in Parliament

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# Contents

1	Access to outdoor space to play	10
1.1	Importance for children and young people	10
1.2	Decline in unaccompanied play and time spent outside	17
1.3	Potential reasons for decline in time spent outside	19
2	History of legislation, policy and strategy for access to outdoor spaces	26
2.1	Garden cities and the Open Spaces Act 1906	26
2.2	Six Acre standard and National Playing Fields Association	26
2.3	Criminalising street play	27
2.4	Post Second World War	28
2.5	The 2008 Play Strategy	30
2.6	Home Zones	32
2.7	2010 to 2024	32
2.8	Low Traffic Neighbourhoods	33
2.9	Current government position	33
3	Responsibility across central government	35
3.1	Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government	35
3.2	Department for Education	36
3.3	Department for Health and Social Care	36
3.4	Department for Transport	36
3.5	Department for Culture, Media and Sport	36
3.6	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	37
3.7	Department for Science, Innovation and Technology	37
3.8	Home Office	38

3.9	Health and Safety Executive	38
4	Legislation	39
4.1	Local authority ‘youth services duty’	39
4.2	Restrictions on outdoor play	40
4.3	Children’s rights and parental responsibilities	44
4.4	Risk	45
5	Current planning policy and guidance	47
5.1	National Planning Policy Framework	47
5.2	National Development Management Policies	48
5.3	Other planning guidance and standards	48
6	Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland	52
6.1	Scotland	52
6.2	Wales	52
6.3	Northern Ireland	53
7	Children and young people friendly initiatives in the UK	55
7.1	Housing estates, developers and social housing providers	55
8	What are other countries doing?	59
8.1	Canada	59
8.2	Paris, France	59
8.3	Rotterdam, Netherlands	60
8.4	Norway	60
8.5	Bratislava, Slovakia	61
8.6	Barcelona, Spain	61
8.7	Vienna, Austria	62
8.8	UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative	63
8.9	Urban95 Academy	63
8.10	8 to 80 Cities	63

9	Recent discussion in Parliament	65
9.1	Levelling up, Housing and Communities Committee inquiry	65
9.2	Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee inquiry on Urban Green Spaces	65
9.3	Planning and Infrastructure Bill proposed amendments	66
9.4	Debates	69
9.5	Parliamentary questions	69
10	Further reading	75
10.1	Reports	75
10.2	News and media	76
10.3	Books	80



## Summary

Children and young people (under the age of 18 years) make up [over a fifth of the UK population](#). Their freedom to [play outside](#) or [travel around local neighbourhoods](#), unsupervised by an adult, has declined over the last century. Across the UK, what used to be a normal part of childhood – playing outside in the local community with friends of all ages - has become an [increasingly rare experience](#).

At the same time there has been an increase in incidence of poor [mental health](#), [unhappiness](#), [loneliness](#) and [obesity](#). Although there are many reasons for this, the Marmott review on [Fair Society, Healthy Lives](#) and [UNICEF](#) have both highlighted the importance of outside spaces to children's well being and physical health.

### Socio-economic inequalities

Children and young people spend [85% of their waking hours away from the school environment](#). Access to space where children and young people can be outside during this time is unequal. In England [one in eight children](#) (one in five children in London) live in a household with no access to a private or shared garden. Teachers have reported that some children go home after school on a Friday and [do not go outside again until Monday morning](#) when they return to school.

Natural England's monitor has found there is a [substantial difference in the numbers of children regularly spending time](#) outside between the most affluent and most deprived areas of the country. Children from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups were less likely to spend time outdoors than children from White ethnic groups.

### Potential causes

There are [many societal and cultural reasons](#) why children and young people [no longer play or are active outside](#) without adult supervision.

In 2018, the Children's Commissioner noted that "[today's children are the least active generation ever](#)" and linked this, in part, to time spent online. Others argue that it is the [inadequate built environment](#), [prioritising motor vehicles](#) and [unwelcoming outside spaces](#) which are pushing children inside and online.

The [Raising the Nation Play Commission](#) found that parents are highly aware of safety and social barriers to children playing outside unsupervised. [Surveys by Play England](#) have shown these barriers to be: fear of strangers, traffic, other older children's behaviour and a concern that neighbours will be disturbed. The Commission concluded that it is because parents do not

know how to help their children overcome these barriers, they are often reluctant to allow them out unsupervised. This is the case even for parents who played out as children themselves and where they recognise the importance of [developing independence](#).

When children do play outside [noise nuisance](#) is the main reason they are asked to stop. Some [complaints about children playing](#) outside have resulted in [play bans](#) by housing providers and management companies. The [Play Commission](#) refer to this as [a proliferating anti play culture](#) .

### Government responsibility

Previous governments have sought to influence the way children and young people interact with the built environment in a number of ways. Significant pieces of legislation include:

the [Open Spaces Act 1906](#), gave local authorities the power to acquire and manage land for open spaces where amongst other activities children could play.

the [Street Playgrounds Act 1938](#), enabled local authorities to close certain “suitable streets at certain suitable times” for use as playgrounds for children, especially those with no nearby playing fields.

the [Highways Act 1980](#), made it an offence to play ball games on a public road if it is to the annoyance of road users.

the [Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014](#), provided powers to local public services relevant to children and young people’s use of outside space: ASB civil injunctions, dispersal powers for individuals aged ten or older and [public space protection orders \(PSPOs\)](#).

the [Equality Act 2010](#), protects children and young people from discrimination on the basis of other protected characteristics, it does not protect them as a group on the basis of age (except within employment).

Responsibility for policy relevant to children and young people and the built environment is spread across government.

The [Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government](#) is responsible for the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) and [guidance on byelaws](#) for open space. The government’s proposed [National Development Management Policies](#) could provide an opportunity for introducing or revising policies which improve outside spaces for children and young people.

The [Minister for Children and Families](#) sits within the [Department for Education](#) which also funds the [holiday activities and food \(HAF\)](#) programme.

[The Minister with responsibility for Youth](#) is in the [Department for Culture Media and Sport \(DCMS\)](#), which also provides funding for physical activity. Non-departmental public body, [Sport England](#), distributes government and

national lottery money for this purpose as does the [National Lottery Community Fund](#) which distributes lottery money for play and community groups. In 2008, the DCMS along with the Department for Education produced a [Play Strategy](#), with the aim that children and young people would then have a clear stake in public space; and that their play would be accepted by their neighbours. It provided guidance to those who design and manage neighbourhoods to understand the importance of play and child-friendly spaces as well as funding to maintain or build new play areas.

The [Department for Transport](#) is responsible for [Active Travel England](#) and the [Manual for streets](#) as well as providing guidance on [road closures to enable play streets](#) and [school streets](#) for local authorities. Other transport-related policies for children and young people include [Low Traffic Neighbourhoods](#) and [Home Zones](#), whereby road space is shared between motor vehicles and other road users, but with an emphasis on children and on those who walk and cycle.

### Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Planning is a devolved matter. Both the [Scottish](#) and [Welsh](#) governments have a [play sufficiency duty](#). This is a [legislative duty](#) requiring a planning authority to assess the sufficiency of play opportunities for children.

Like England, Northern Ireland does not have a play sufficiency duty but its [Department for Education](#) has produced a [play and leisure policy](#) with an [implementation plan](#) as well as a [Play Matters campaign](#). The Northern Ireland [Department for Education's website](#) has leaflets and guidance to be used to [encourage adults to allow children to play](#) outside explaining its importance.

### Children and young people friendly initiatives in UK

There are examples of place based initiatives with older housing estates such as the [Whittington Estate in North London](#) and newer developments like [Marmalade Lane in Cambridge](#) which have been recognised for creating conditions where children and young people have the freedom to move around, meet up and play outside together.

There are also examples from local authorities such as: Leeds City Council which has a [play sufficiency action plan](#) including creating safer and more welcoming streets; and Hackney Council which has created [Growing up in Hackney](#), a child friendly places planning document. Both [Aberdeen City Council](#) and [East Lothian Council](#) have been removing 'No Ball Games' signs and replacing them with more positive messaging to children and young people encouraging them to actively use public space.

### What are other countries doing?

Organisations such as [UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative](#), [Urban95 Academy](#) and [8 to 80 Cities](#) promote child friendly urbanism to city leaders around the world.



Rotterdam and Bratislava both faced 'family flight', draining the cities of their inhabitants, so took strategic action. Rotterdam produced a [practical roadmap for making urban neighbourhoods a better place for children](#) and Bratislava initiated a child friendly '[planning revolution](#)'. Bratislava now holds an annual summit entitled [Start with Children](#) to encourage city leaders from around the world to come together to learn about the benefits of building better cities for children.

Both [Paris](#) and [Barcelona](#) have pedestrianised streets to create outside space where children and young people can socialise and be active. Vienna is building [Aspern Seestadt](#), a new family friendly district based around car free public spaces, housing 25,000 people and providing 20,000 jobs.

Other cities have amended laws to encourage healthy childhood activity and community. For example both [Bologna](#) and [Berlin](#) have exempted the noise of children playing from noise pollution laws. Utah, an American state, has clarified [negligence legislation](#) so that parents who allow their children out to play cannot be deemed negligent.

Canadian cities have benefited from central government policy and funding, such as grants for school streets and outdoor play as part of a [national implementation programme to promote physical activity and healthy living](#). In addition, the Canadian Paediatric Society have issued a policy statement on the benefits of independent, outdoors, 'risky' play to healthy child development.

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# 1 Access to outdoor space to play

## 1.1 Importance for children and young people

Children and young people make up a significant proportion of the population - currently over a fifth of people in the UK are under the age of eighteen.<sup>1</sup>

Children and young people's development and mental health are affected by various factors including the environments they are raised in, the relationships they build, and the experiences they have.<sup>2</sup>

In November 2008, Professor Sir Michael Marmot was asked by the Secretary of State for Health to chair an independent review on the most effective evidence-based strategies for reducing health inequalities in England. The final report [Fair Society, Healthy Lives](#), also known as the Marmot Review, was published in February 2010. The Marmot Review highlighted that:

Green space and green infrastructure improve mental and physical health and have been shown to reduce health inequalities. [...] Well designed and maintained green spaces can encourage social interaction, exercise, play, and contact with nature. Well designed, car free and pleasant streets encourage feelings of well-being, chance interactions and active travel; good quality and good access to public spaces contributes to pride in the community, integration and social cohesion.<sup>3</sup>

### Statistics on access to outdoor spaces

DEFRA's Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 found that 38% of the population do not have green or blue (coast, river or lake) space within 15 minutes' walk of their home.<sup>4</sup> Up to 1 in 5 children visit a green space less than once a month.<sup>5</sup>

Office for National Statistics (ONS) analysis in 2020 found that one in eight households (12%) in Great Britain had no access to a private or shared garden. This rises to more than one in five households in London (21%). It also found that "even when we compare people of similar age, social grade

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, [How many children are there in the UK? 2023](#)

<sup>2</sup> NSPCC, [Child health and development](#), accessed December 2024

<sup>3</sup> Institute of Health Equity, [Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Marmot Review](#), page 130

<sup>4</sup> DEFRA, [Environmental Improvement Plan 2023, January 2023](#)

<sup>5</sup> Outdoor Play and Learning, [The Power of Playtime](#), July 2021

and living situation [...] those of Black ethnicity are 2.4 times less likely than those of White ethnicity to have a private garden". However, the ONS noted that access to public parks was similar for minority ethnic and White ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup>

[Natural England's monitor of engagement with the natural environment](#) has found a substantial difference in the numbers of children regularly spending time outside between the most affluent and most deprived areas of the country. The monitoring also found differences by race: in England, the proportion of Black, Asian and minority ethnic children under 16 who spent leisure time outdoors at least weekly in 2018 was 57%; in comparison, the overall percentage for White children was 73%.<sup>7</sup>

Inequality in access to green spaces also extends to play areas. In 2025 Sheffield University [published research mapping the provision of playgrounds](#) in England. It discovered substantial inequality in provision despite being broadly comparable in terms of population. Deprived parts of England tended to have fewer, smaller, playgrounds which were further-away.<sup>8</sup> For example: comparing major settlements, Liverpool had nearly five times more children under 16 per playground than Norwich (1,104 compared to 236). In London, the difference was even greater: the borough of Redbridge had nearly eight times more children per playground than Islington (1,567 compared to 204).<sup>9</sup>

## Play sufficiency

The concept of play sufficiency is long established. Lady Allen of Hurtwood, elected the first Fellow of the Institute of Landscape Architects in 1930 (and its vice president in 1937)<sup>10</sup> did not see playgrounds alone as the answer to children's outdoor needs. She wanted local authorities to survey their regions, audit space and provision for play and work across housing, education, parks and public health departments to create playable streets and estates.<sup>11</sup> She was conscious that planners should "bring more sensitive awareness into places where people live and where they bring up families [...] so that children and their parents can feel they belong to a community."<sup>12</sup> Her pamphlets *Design for Play* (1961), and *New*

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<sup>6</sup> Office for National Statistics, [One in eight British households has no garden](#), May 2020

<sup>7</sup> Natural England, [Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment](#), September 2019

<sup>8</sup> Paul Brindly, [To Play or Not to Play: Mapping Unequal Provision of Children's Playgrounds](#), 25 February 2025; Play England, [Study Maps England's 34,000 Playgrounds, Revealing Stark Inequalities](#), 6 March 2025

<sup>9</sup> The Conversation, [We mapped 18,000 children's playgrounds and revealed inequality across England](#), 4 June 2025

<sup>10</sup> English Heritage, [Marjory Allen | garden designer | landscape architect | campaigner for child welfare](#), accessed February 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Adrian Voce, [Policy for Play: Responding to Children's Forgotten Right](#), 2015, Chapter 10; Lady Allen of Hurtwood, [Planning for Play](#), 1968

<sup>12</sup> Adrian Voce, [Policy for Play: Responding to Children's Forgotten Right](#), 2015, Chapter 10; Lady Allen of Hurtwood, [Planning for Play](#), 1968

*Playgrounds* (1964) and book *Planning for Play* (1968) went into multiple editions and their principles remain relevant today.<sup>13</sup>

Colin Ward, author of the book *The Child in the City* (1978), head of the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) in the 1970s and Professor of Housing and Social Policy at the London School of Economics quoted Herman Mattern who said in 1968:

One should be able to play everywhere, easily, loosely, and not forced into a 'playground' or 'park'.<sup>14</sup>

The concept of [play sufficiency](#) is reflected in the UN general comment 17 on Article 31 of the UNCRC. The purpose of this 'General Comment' was to clarify and emphasise the responsibilities of countries within the United Nations in terms of children's right to play:

The Committee, in its reviews of implementation of the rights of the child under the Convention, is concerned by the poor recognition given by States to Article 31 rights. Poor recognition of their significance in the lives of children results in lack of investment in appropriate provision, weak or non-existent protective legislation and invisibility of children in national and local level planning. In general, where investment is made, it is in the provision of structured and organised activities. Equally important is the need to create time and space for spontaneous play, recreation and creativity, and the promotion of societal attitudes that support and encourage such activity.<sup>15</sup>

The UN general comment goes on to recommend:

The Committee strongly encourages States to consider introducing legislation to ensure the rights under article 31 for every child, together with a timetable for implementation. Such legislation should address the principle of sufficiency – all children should be given sufficient time and space to exercise these rights.<sup>16</sup>

The importance of access to green and public spaces has been recognised in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which were adopted by 193 UN member states, including the UK. One of the targets under the goal of '[sustainable cities and communities](#)' is:

By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Open Library, [Allen of Hurtwood, Marjory Allen Lady](#). accessed February 2025

<sup>14</sup> Colin Ward, [The Child in the City](#), 1978

<sup>15</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, [General comment No. 17 \(2013\) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts \(art. 31\)](#), para 2, page 3, 17 April 2013; Ludicology, [The Concept of Play Sufficiency - its a children's rights issue](#) accessed February 2025 and Play Wales/University of Gloucestershire webinar: [Webinar 1: Introducing Play Sufficiency – Why and How](#), March 2025

<sup>16</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, [General comment No. 17 \(2013\) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts \(art. 31\)](#), page 20, 17 April 2013

<sup>17</sup> The Global Goals, [Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities](#), Target 11.7

In 2019, the UK Government published a [review of its progress towards the SDGs](#).<sup>18</sup>

Formal and informal play spaces extend beyond green spaces, as an [academic paper](#) published in 2025 by Professor Alison Stenning of Newcastle University shows. It presents research on the value of ‘grey’ outdoor spaces to children and young people finding that “children often express a preference for these spaces”.<sup>19</sup> This use of grey spaces by children and young people also features in an [article by academics on the changing nature of informal youth football](#) from its history on the streets of industrial towns.<sup>20</sup>

Equally, the provision of playgrounds may not equate to play sufficiency or meet the need for unaccompanied play. For example, in the 1990s research in Switzerland surveyed all five-year-olds within Zürich. It found that:

many parents who share unsuitable living surroundings with their children may make significant efforts to compensate for the resulting disadvantages. By frequent visits to public playgrounds, they carry out exactly what planners, educators and politicians have recommended for decades. Yet these efforts fail to compensate for the lack of a safe local environment. Good living surroundings cannot be replaced by public playgrounds. [...] For children, as well as for parents [...] it is decisive that unaccompanied play be possible.<sup>21</sup>

## Benefits of access to outside space

There is strong evidence of the value and benefits outside space to adults and children, as highlighted by the Marmot Review.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Department for International Development, [UK's Voluntary National Review of the Sustainable Development Goals](#), 26 June 2019

<sup>19</sup> Stenning, A. (2025). [Children's play in grey spaces: ludic geographies and the chromatic turn](#). *Leisure Studies*, 1–15. Grey space is described as “the grey materialities of concrete, steel, asphalt, granite, grime and detritus of urban built environments.” It looks at play “not only on streets but also on ‘roads, cul-de-sacs, alleyways, walkways, shopping areas, car parks, vacant plots and derelict sites.” The grey space “can be used “for all kinds of urban leisure, such as running, walking, cycling, parkour, rollerskating, and children’s play.”

<sup>20</sup> Crossley, S., Van Campenhout, G., & Billingham, L. [‘It’s a far cry from small boys in the park, jumpers for goalposts. Isn’t it?’ the changing space of informal youth football in the UK](#). *Leisure Studies*, 1–15, 2025

<sup>21</sup> Children’s Environments, [Children and Their Living Surroundings: Empirical Investigations into the Significance of Living Surroundings for the Everyday Life and Development of Children](#), Marco Hüttenmoser, Vol. 12, No. 4 (December 1995), pp. 403-413

<sup>22</sup> Kristie L Ebi, [Green and blue spaces: crucial for healthy, sustainable urban futures](#), *The Lancet*, Volume 401, Issue 10376, February 2023 ; Van den Bosch, M. and Bird, W, *The role of nature in improving the health of a population*, Oxford textbook of nature and public health, 2018; Pearson, D.G. and Craig, T. ‘The great outdoors? exploring the mental health benefits of Natural Environments,’ *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5, 2014; Dr William Bird, and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds [Investigating the links between the Natural Environment, Biodiversity and Mental Health](#), 2007

## Health, wellbeing and obesity

UNICEF, the United Nations agency for children, published a discussion paper [The Necessity of Urban Green Space for Children's Optimal Development](#) in 2021. It concluded that:

The scientifically proven advantages to children's physical, mental and social development, provided by such [green] spaces, are real and multi-fold. Local communities and institutions as well as municipal and national governments are called on to recognize green spaces as valuable assets in their cities and to ensure their preservation, improvement, creation and maintenance.<sup>23</sup>

The paper lists the advantages for children from access to urban green space: higher birthweights; better balance and motor co-ordination; more physical activity; improved cognitive development and academic performance; improved mental health and wellbeing and reduced stress and depression; reduced parenting stress; fewer behavioural and social problems; increased concern for nature; and stronger neighbourhood cohesion.<sup>24</sup>

The National Institute for Health and Care Research (NICE) noted the benefits of access to outdoor play and the limitations where this not accessible:

Children need time to play outdoors and to be in nature as an essential part of healthy development. While playing outside, children benefit from being exposed to sunlight, natural elements, and open air, which contributes to bone development, stronger immune systems and physical activity. Outdoor play is also important for children's mental and cognitive growth as it contributes to learning, social connectedness, confidence building and resilience. Older children and young people, especially, often replace outdoor play and face-to-face social interaction by accessing their social life via digital devices. This often leads to a more sedentary lifestyle, obesity, and a disconnection from the natural world.<sup>25</sup>

For more information on obesity, see the Library briefings on [Obesity policy in England](#) (June 2023) and [Obesity statistics](#) (January 2023). There is also information on physical activity and environmental factors in the 2021 [Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology \(POST\) briefing on childhood obesity](#).

## Reducing short-sightedness (myopia) and exposure to air pollution

There has been a large rise in short-sightedness (myopia, an irreversible disease) over recent decades which research has found to be linked to the decline in the amount of time children and young people are spending

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<sup>23</sup> UNICEF, [The Necessity of Urban Green Space for Children's Optimal Development, 2021](#) page 32

<sup>24</sup> UNICEF, [The Necessity of Urban Green Space for Children's Optimal Development, 2021 Executive Summary](#)

<sup>25</sup> National Institute for Health and Care Research, [What are the health and health inequality impacts of being outdoors for children and young people?](#), December 2022



outdoors. Research from the Global Myopia Awareness Coalition has found that 76 extra minutes outside a day can reduce the risk of short-sightedness by 50%.<sup>26</sup> Chris Hammond, professor of ophthalmology at King's College London and consultant ophthalmic surgeon at St Thomas' Hospital said that the best thing to prevent it was to get children and young people playing outside as much as possible.<sup>27</sup>

Prof Stephen Holgate of the Royal College of Physicians has said, in the context of reducing childhood exposure to air pollution:

Optimising access to open spaces for children—particularly for those who do not have access to such spaces at home—must become a greater public health priority.<sup>28</sup>

### Mental health and happiness

Academic research has suggested a decline in opportunities to play outdoors has contributed to a rise in mental disorders.<sup>29</sup> A [Canadian study](#) found that “Canadian children with greater freedom to roam showed lower levels of psychological distress.” A [2023 survey of children and young people’s mental health in England](#) found that 20% of children aged 8 to 16 had a probable mental disorder in 2023, up from 12% in 2017. Among those aged 17 to 19, 10% had a probable mental disorder in 2017, rising to 23% in 2023. For more information on mental ill health among children and young people in the UK see the Library paper [Mental health statistics: prevalence, services and funding in England](#) for further information.

Clarion Housing Group, a housing association, has found that the absence of regular outdoor play among children in social housing has serious effects on their long-term physical and mental health.<sup>30</sup>

The 2024 Children’s Society [Good Childhood Report](#) for the UK found that children’s happiness (aged 10 to 15) with their life as a whole, was significantly lower than when the survey began in 2009/10. Compared to the data from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2022) the UK’s 15-year-olds had the lowest average life satisfaction in

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<sup>26</sup> Sky News, [Spending time outdoors can reduce children's risk of developing short-sightedness](#), 17 August 2023

<sup>27</sup> BBC News, [Why spending time outdoors could help your child's eyesight](#), 28 December 2017; Daily Mail, [Playing outside can save your child's eyesight as short-sightedness doubles](#), 27 April 2015

<sup>28</sup> The Guardian, [Alarming lack of access to green space fuelling UK child obesity crisis, doctors warn](#), 18 June 2024

<sup>29</sup> Peter Gray, [Decline in Independent Activity as a Cause of Decline in Children’s Mental Well-being: Summary of the Evidence](#), *The Journal of Paediatrics*, Volume 260, September 2023

<sup>30</sup> LUHC Committee, Children, young people and the built environment, [written evidence from Clarion Housing Group](#), December 2023; Clarion Futures and SEMBLE: Celebrating the small outdoors: Improving connection to nature for children in disadvantaged communities, December 2020

Europe.<sup>31</sup> One of the Children's Society's recommendations to overturn the decline in children's wellbeing was to:

Let children play by providing improved, safe spaces for leisure and play. This includes rebuilding communities for young people and increasing opportunities for them to be active, creative and to socialise.<sup>32</sup>

### Strengthening community and addressing loneliness

Other academic research has found that the benefits are not just for children and young people but for the community as a whole.<sup>33</sup> Children and young people are considered to be '[community builders](#)' when they are out playing in their local area.<sup>34</sup> [Professor Alison Stenning](#) at the University of Newcastle observed that as a result of children and young people being outside, people of all ages and backgrounds said they got to know more people which meant it felt friendlier and safer, and that they belonged more.<sup>35</sup>

The [Campaign to End Loneliness](#) analysis of the latest Office for National Statistics data showed that the number of people who are chronically lonely rose to 3.83 million – half a million more than in the first year of the pandemic when 3.24 million people were chronically lonely. 7.1% of the population now say that they are always or often lonely. The youngest age group surveyed, 16 -19 years were the loneliest.<sup>36</sup>

Academics have also reported that the simple presence of children and young people outside offers a place a sense of vitality.<sup>37</sup> Tim Gill, author of [Urban Playground: How child-friendly urban planning and design can save cities](#) proposed that:

The presence across a town or city of children of different ages — boys and girls, with and without their parents and caregivers — is a sign of the health of that human habitat in the same way that if you see salmon swimming up the river.<sup>38</sup>

## Play deprivation

Where there are inadequate outdoor places to play, this may lead to play deprivation. Play Wales, the national charity for children's play in Wales,

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<sup>31</sup> The Independent, [Britain's children facing 'happiness recession' compared to European counterparts](#), 29 August 2024

<sup>32</sup> The Children's Society, [The Good Childhood Report 2024](#), accessed February 2025

<sup>33</sup> Peter Kraftl, [Including children and young people in building cities](#), The British Academy, May 2020

<sup>34</sup> Peter Kraftl, [Liveability and Urban Architectures: Mol\(ecul\)ar Biopower and the 'becoming Lively' of Sustainable Communities](#), Sage Journals, Volume 32, Issue 2, January 2014

<sup>35</sup> Alison Stenning, [Play Meet Street Survey 2022](#)

<sup>36</sup> Campaign to End Loneliness, [Half a million more people are lonely all or most of the time, 4 July 2023](#)

<sup>37</sup> Peter Kraftl, [Liveability and Urban Architectures: Mol\(ecul\)ar Biopower and the 'becoming Lively' of Sustainable Communities](#), Sage Journals, Volume 32, Issue 2, January 2014

<sup>38</sup> Tim Gill, [Urban Playground: How child-friendly planning and design can save cities](#), 2021

published a report on [Play deprivation: the causes and consequences for child development](#) in March 2024. It described play deprivation as:

the name given to the idea that not playing may deprive children of experiences that are essential to their development and result in those affected being both biologically and socially disabled.<sup>39</sup>

Research in Germany in 2015 concluded that children with the worst play deprivation were usually from the most socially and materially deprived families. The children who played outside most were from more affluent families and participated in more extra-curricular activities.<sup>40</sup>

## 1.2 Decline in unaccompanied play and time spent outside

The reduction in children and young people's freedom to play outside, roam or travel around their neighbourhoods unsupervised by an adult, known as '[free play](#)' or '[independent mobility](#)', has declined over the last century. The issue has been reported in the media.<sup>41</sup> Dr William Bird, CEO of Intelligent Health, an organisation which support individuals, communities and workplaces to improve health, and former strategic health adviser to Natural England, studied a family in Sheffield, [mapping the 'roaming distance' of four generations](#). He provided the evidence to the Levelling up, Housing and Communities Committee. He found that a child's allowed range of roaming at the age of eight had decreased from six miles in 1919 to 300 yards in 2008.

In terms of unaccompanied play, the [2020 British Children's Play Survey](#) found the average age a child is allowed to leave their home unaccompanied by an adult is now 10 years old; whereas for their parents it had been on average two years younger.<sup>42</sup> Research from the Policy Institute at the University of Westminster found that:

In 1971, 86 per cent of the parents of primary school children surveyed said that their children were allowed to travel home from school alone. By 1990,

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<sup>39</sup> Play Wales, [Play deprivation: the causes and consequences for child development, and the potential of playwork](#), March 2024

<sup>40</sup> Ellen Weaver, [Residential Environment and Types of Childhood](#). Humanities and Social Sciences. Vol. 3, No. 4, 2015, pp. 258-267

<sup>41</sup> Daily Mail, [How children lost the right to roam in four generations](#), June 2007; Evening Standard, [How children lost the right to roam in four generations](#), April 2012

<sup>42</sup> Helen F. Dodd, [Children's Play and Independent Mobility in 2020: Results from the British Children's Play Survey](#), [International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health](#), April 2021 "A significant difference was found between the age that children were reported to be allowed out alone (10.74 years) and the age that their parents/caregivers reported they had been allowed out alone (8.91 years)."

this had dropped markedly to 35 per cent, and there was a further drop to 25 per cent being allowed to do so in 2010.<sup>43</sup>

In comparison, a 2023 [study of 1,300 parents of 6–16-year-olds](#) by the vitamin company Vitabiotics found that current parents consider the age children should be able to walk to/from school alone as 11 years and five months, go to the park with friends at 11 years and eight months and play at home in the garden by themselves at 8 years and one month.<sup>44</sup>

[Play England’s 2023 Play Day report](#) found that the current generation of children and young people spend less time unsupervised outside in public spaces than previous generations.<sup>45</sup> Their research found that 80% of adults who were children in the 1970s remember playing in the streets regularly, compared with 22% of current children.<sup>46</sup>

Teachers have reported that some children go home after school on a Friday and do not go outside again until Monday morning when they return to school.<sup>47</sup> A [survey of nearly 3,000 teachers by Teacher Tapp](#) has found they have noted a drop in game playing in the playground. Those teachers who had been teaching the longest felt the most strongly that games have “decreased significantly” (56%) which was blamed on amongst other reasons: “Children don’t know how to play—no experience ‘playing out’ after school.”<sup>48</sup>

In 2017, a survey funded by Unilever of 2,000 parents of 5 to 12-year-olds [found 74% of children spent less than 60 minutes](#) playing outside each day which it compared to the [UN guidelines for prisoners](#), who are allowed “at least one hour of suitable exercise in the open air daily”.<sup>49</sup> [Recent Sport England data](#) shows that 53% of children and young people (3.9 million) do not meet the Chief Medical Officer’s guidelines for taking part in 60 minutes or more of daily physical activity either inside or outside. It also found that 2.1m children and young people were active for less than 30 minutes a day, while a further 600,000 were not active at all.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Shaw, B., Watson, B., Frauendienst, B., Redecker, A., Jones, T. with Hillman, M., 2013. Children’s independent mobility: a comparative study in England and Germany (1971–2010), London: Policy Studies Institute, See Summary

<sup>44</sup> Vitabiotics, [How to Raise Independent Kids](#), September 2023

<sup>45</sup> Play England [Street Play Report](#), July 2023

<sup>46</sup> Play England [Street Play Report](#), July 2023

<sup>47</sup> [The Guardian, ‘We have to be all things to our children’: how a school made sure pupils had time to play](#), 18 June 2024

<sup>48</sup> Teacher Tapp, [RIP hopscotch: playground games](#), 4 February 2025; Teacher Tapp is a survey app which has over 10,000 teachers answering research questions each day.

<sup>49</sup> The Guardian, [Three-quarters of UK children spend less time outdoors than prison inmates](#), 25 March 2016; and Huffington Post, [Why Our Kids Need To Get Outside More](#), 12 February 2018

<sup>50</sup> Sport England, [Children’s activity levels hold firm but significant challenges remain](#), 7 December 2023

## 1.3

## Potential reasons for decline in time spent outside

There are many [societal and cultural reasons](#) which may be impacting why children and young people no longer play or are active outside.

### Technology

Some commentators blame the decline in time spent outside on a rise in technology usage such as smart phones and online games.<sup>51</sup> Others believe inadequate built environments [prioritising motor vehicles](#) have pushed children inside, leading to a rise in technology usage.<sup>52</sup> The Play Commission found that “The erosion of space, time, and permission to play in public spaces has inevitably left many children with fewer places to go to play other than into the online world. Many children say this is not their preference.”<sup>53</sup> England’s Children’s Commission, Dame Rachel de Souza, found from her survey of over half a million children, [the Big Ask](#), that:

They want to be healthy—mentally and physically. They want to escape the digital labyrinth in which they have been trapped. This report tells you that they want to be outside—to be in open spaces, and play.<sup>54</sup>

An international survey by the company Ikea suggested that children prefer playing with their friends to being on a screen.<sup>55</sup>

### Parental Fear

Academic studies have found that parental fear is the main barrier to children and young people being outside alone.<sup>56</sup> Play England asked parents

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<sup>51</sup> For example, The Telegraph, [Children's screen time advice 'too lenient' on tech companies, say health professionals](#) 23 November 2024; The Guardian, [Violence on social media making teenagers afraid to go out, study finds](#), 25 November 2024; The Guardian, [Children are starting school unable to sit up or hold a pencil – and I know the culprit](#), 18 February 2025

<sup>52</sup> The Guardian, [It's not them, it's us: the real reason teens are 'addicted' to video games](#), 9 July 2024 and The New York Times, [The Internet Is a Wasteland, So Give Kids Better Places to Go](#), 18 March 2024

<sup>53</sup> Raising the Nation and Centre for Young Lives Play Commission, [Everything to Play for](#), June 2025, page 113

<sup>54</sup> The Children’s Commissioner for England, [The Big Answer](#), September 2021

<sup>55</sup> IKEA, [Play Report 2010](#), A survey in 19 languages, carried out in 25 countries. A total of 10,000 people – 7,500 parents and 2,500 children, aged 7 to 12 – were asked fifty questions. Children were asked to choose between being on a screen or playing with friends, nine out of ten chose playing with their friends.

<sup>56</sup> Shaw, B., Watson, B., Frauendienst, B., Redecker, A., Jones, T. with Hillman, M., 2013. Children’s independent mobility: a comparative study in England and Germany (1971–2010), London: Policy Studies Institute, LUHC Committee, Children, young people and the built environment written [evidence submitted from Ludicology](#), December 2023; BBC News, [England's children 'less free to play out'](#), 10 August 2015; BBC News, [Fear of intolerance 'stops children playing out'](#), 7 August 2013

what the main reasons were for their fear. The most common answers were stranger danger (33%), danger from traffic (28%), intimidation by other children/young people (27%) and parents'/carers' fears of upsetting neighbours (26%).<sup>57</sup> Recent research has also found the fear of dangerous dogs to have also become a concern.<sup>58</sup> Justine Roberts, the CEO of [Mumsnet](#), said in [an interview in July 2024](#):

I think, over the years, UK society has become more risk averse. If you just look at the way attitudes to outside play have changed over the last generation, it's very clear that parents are more reluctant to take on even the smallest risk.<sup>59</sup>

She believes British parents became more scared of unsupervised outdoor play in the early 1990s and blamed the decade's "breathless media coverage of the threats posed by paedophiles, violent crime and road traffic accidents."<sup>60</sup> Boris Johnson, the former Prime Minister, made similar comments in an interview with Henry Dimbleby the author of the National Food Strategy regarding problems with obesity amongst children.<sup>61</sup> Justine Roberts concluded that "it's a shame because giving kids freedom to run around with their friends outside seems to have many advantages – for the children and their parents."<sup>62</sup>

### Stranger danger and crime

'Stranger danger' is a term which was used in a government's awareness campaign which began in 1971 in response to cases of child abduction, including the Moors murders and the Cannock Chase murders of the 1960s. This term, although still widely used, is now seen as unhelpful by organisations such as [Action against Abduction](#) who highlight that it is often people known to children that pose the greatest threat whereas most strangers outside in the built environment will help rather than harm children.<sup>63</sup> The [NSPCC says](#) that "the vast majority of children who experience contact sexual abuse were abused by someone they knew" and that "this could be a family member, a friend or someone who has targeted them, like a teacher or sports coach."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Play England, [Street Play Report, July 2023, page 4](#)

<sup>58</sup> See research in Carmarthenshire: [Webinar 4: Exploring play sufficiency at neighbourhood level](#)

<sup>59</sup> The Guardian, [How to be a Norwegian parent: let your kids roam free, stay home alone, have fun – and fail](#), 11 July 2024

<sup>60</sup> The Guardian, [How to be a Norwegian parent: let your kids roam free, stay home alone, have fun – and fail](#), 11 July 2024

<sup>61</sup> The Times, [Boris Johnson blames the Church of England for obesity crisis](#), 25 November 2024

<sup>62</sup> The Guardian, [How to be a Norwegian parent: let your kids roam free, stay home alone, have fun – and fail](#), 11 July 2024

<sup>63</sup> Action against Abduction created a campaign known as "[Clever never Goes](#)" to replace Stranger Danger which teaches children how to stay safe from abduction whether they are outside or online.

<sup>64</sup> NSPCC, [Child sexual abuse: statistics briefing](#), February 2024



Jonathan Haidt in his recent book *The Anxious Generation* argues that in the west the outside world has been becoming increasingly safe for children and young people:

By almost any measure, children were safer in public [by the year 2000] than they had been in a very long time in terms of risks from crime, sex offenders, and even drunk drivers, all of which were present at much higher levels in previous decades.<sup>65</sup>

In 2023-24, the ONS estimated that 10.2% of children in England and Wales had experienced crime (as an alleged victim) in the past year. This has declined overall from 15.1% in 2011-12 to its present level, although in some years it has risen while in others it has fallen. The lowest recorded rate was 6.6% in 2019-20 which likely reflected the effect of the pandemic.<sup>66</sup>

Although this time series does not go back very far, it does appear to show a steady decrease in crime against children. In addition the ONS's overall crime estimates, for all age groups, show [a longer fall in crime](#) since 1995.<sup>67</sup>

However, it is hard to know from these statistics whether the outside world has really become relatively safer for children and young people from 'stranger danger' and crime. Firstly, the statistics do not indicate whether the person was known to the child as the ONS does not produce statistics on the relationship between victim and perpetrator for children (only for individuals aged 16 and above) equally since 2019 the nature of the crime is not recorded. Secondly removing children and young people from public settings potentially reduces the opportunity for them to be victimised. It is therefore not known what would happen to the crime level if parents were to have let their children out independently more than they are now.<sup>68</sup>

## Traffic

The table below shows data from the Department for Transport on the numbers of cyclists and pedestrians killed or seriously injured in 2023 (the

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<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Haidt, [The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness](#), 2024, page 88

The source given for this claim is a BBC article from 2014, describing a study in the USA which looked at child and youth wellbeing between 1975 and 2013 ('Childhood in the US 'safer than in the 1970s', 23 December 2014). The Child and Youth Well-Being Index, which was developed at Duke University, looked at indicators in different domains including crime victimisation, drug-taking, social relationships, and other risky behaviours.

<sup>66</sup> [Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)(table 11a)

<sup>67</sup> The ONS believes that crime peaked in the 1990s, mainly due to increases in violence, vehicle crime, and burglary. Since 2017, the ONS has included fraud and computer misuse in its crime estimates, which has substantially increased the headline estimate of the volume of crime but still to below the level in the mid-1990s.

<sup>68</sup> This is the same with the source used by Jonathan Haidt: although the Child and Youth Well-Being Index he used did show an improvement between 1975 and 2013 for children and young people, a large part of this was attributable to a reduction in risky behaviour by them in the mid-1990s. It was not the risk presented by dangerous people in the community which had changed necessarily, but rather children's exposure to these risks.

latest year statistics are available for) by age group. The calculated rates are based on population estimates for 2023.

Pedestrians and cyclists killed or seriously injured by age group 2023, Great Britain					
Pedestrians			Pedal cyclists		
Age	Number	Rate per 100,000 population	Age	Number	Rate per 100,000 population
Under 16	1343	11.1	Under 16	331	2.7
16 to 20	455	11.8	16 to 20	280	7.2
21 to 24	310	9.6	21 to 24	254	7.9
25 to 29	407	9.4	25 to 29	347	8.1
30 to 39	726	8.0	30 to 39	731	8.0
40 to 49	698	8.5	40 to 49	682	8.3
50 to 59	719	8.1	50 to 59	769	8.6
60 to 69	646	8.7	60 to 69	401	5.4
70 to 79	644	11.1	70 to 79	159	2.7
80 and over	474	14.0	80 and over	35	1.0
<b>All ages</b>	<b>6,472</b>	<b>9.8</b>	<b>All ages</b>	<b>4,029</b>	<b>6.1</b>

Source: DfT, [Reported road collisions](#), table RAS0202; ONS population estimates

The data shows that under 16s are more likely to be killed or seriously injured than average as pedestrians, but not as pedal cyclists. The rate for under 16 pedestrian casualties is 13% higher than the average for all ages. However, this is not adjusted for differences in propensity to be a pedestrian (e.g. “miles walked”). Therefore, it could be a reflection that children and young people are more likely to be pedestrians as they are unable to drive rather than an increased danger to the average young person who is a pedestrian.

In 2023, there were a similar number of deaths of children in cars as passengers (23) compared to those killed as pedestrians (25). Overall, out of the number of children who were casualties in road collisions (i.e. who sustained some level of injury), around 52,600 children were injured as pedestrians between 2014 and 2023, compared with 56,700 injured as car passengers.<sup>69</sup>

### Hostile environment

[London Sport](#) and [Play England](#)'s research found that children and young people were frequently told that they, and their play, are not welcome. This is made worse by signs that say, for example, ‘no ball games’.<sup>70</sup> Many playground signs also demand ‘adult supervision’ at all times. Play England

<sup>69</sup> DfT, [Reported road collisions](#), table RAS0202

<sup>70</sup> BBC News, [London charity wants 'No Ball Games' signs removed](#), 22 February 2024; London Sport, ['More Ball Games' campaign to champion play and sport for the capital's young people](#), 17 March 2025, The Guardian, [Yes, ball games: drive to take down signs warning against play begins in London](#), 18 March 2015

found making noise to be the main reason children were told to stop playing outside.<sup>71</sup> [Raising the Nation Play Commission's](#) interim report [State of Play](#) led by Paul Lindley, the founder of Ella's Food, and Baroness Anne Longfield, former Children's Commissioner for England has found that:

a proliferating culture hostile to young people and their freedom to roam has emerged which, at its most brazen, manifests itself in 'No Ball Games' signs, noise and disruption complaints, and community groups uniting to prevent children from playing.<sup>72</sup>

In a survey of parents carried out by the Play Commission 76% of parents agreed that people were generally less accepting of children playing outside now on the street than when they were a child.<sup>73</sup>

The Guardian reported in 2023 [UK families tell of threats and police warnings over children playing in street](#) and with examples of the consequences faced by parents who have let their children play outside. Brighton Police social media posted a warning to parents in the half term of February 2025 which was reported in local media saying, "Calling the parents of Brighton & Hove, it is half term this week...do you know where your children are? We are seeing underage drinking, younger children out and about unsupervised and antisocial behaviour in the city."<sup>74</sup>

[Playing Out](#), a parent-led organisation which supports play streets across the UK, reports that it has been regularly contacted by families about 'play ban' letters sent by councils or housing associations. Some families had even been threatened with eviction if their children continued to play outside. These letters increased during and after the covid-19 pandemic.<sup>75</sup> In response, Playing Out conducted research with housing providers, to understand why organisations implemented policies which restricted children's play. It found the main reason was simply a lack of understanding or consideration of the importance of outdoor play. The other reasons were concerns over liabilities and the cost of damage, or insurance requirements.<sup>76</sup>

### Parental dilemma

A survey of parents by Vitabiotics found that almost every parent polled (99 per cent), thought it was important to give their child more independence, with 63 per cent believing it helped them develop their decision-making skills but 59 per cent struggled to give their child more freedom due to their fears.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Play England, [Street Play Report, July 2023, page 4](#)

<sup>72</sup> Raising the Nation Play Commission, [State of Play](#), 24 February 2025 page 27

<sup>73</sup> Raising the Nation and Centre for Young Lives Play Commission, [Everything to Play for](#), June 2025, page 30

<sup>74</sup> Sussex World, [Police warn parents about underage drinking in Brighton](#), 21 February 2025

<sup>75</sup> Playing Out, [Playing out on estates, accessed December 2024](#)

<sup>76</sup> Playing Out, [How can housing providers support children to play out, September 2023](#)

<sup>77</sup> Vitabiotics, [How to Raise Independent Kids](#), September 2023

The Play Commission which reported in June 2025 concluded that their research had found that:

the decline in opportunities for children to play is certainly not down to a lack of understanding or effort from parents and carers[...]A key concern is how many parents describe feeling powerless to help their children overcome many of the barriers children face, including a lack of space [and] safety when playing outdoors.<sup>78</sup>

## Health and Safety

The [guidance from the Health and Safety Executive](#), Britain's national regulator for health and safety, promotes a balanced approach to children's play and leisure. It notes that "Health and safety laws and regulations are sometimes presented as a reason why certain play and leisure activities undertaken by children and young people should be discouraged". However, it explains that "decisions are often based on misunderstandings about what the law requires."<sup>79</sup>

The guidance states that "Play is important for children's well-being and development" that "the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits as no child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool" and that "accidents and mistakes happen during play – but fear of litigation and prosecution has been blown out of proportion."<sup>80</sup>

## Closure of play areas

A freedom of information request to all local authorities in 2023 found that almost [800 playgrounds had closed](#) across the UK over the ten years before (amongst those authorities that responded), over 400 of which were in England.<sup>81</sup>

The [report](#) by the Raising the Nation [Play Commission](#) highlighted that where playgrounds did exist, many had fallen into states of disrepair due to a lack of regular maintenance. It received evidence that over the past decade, over half the population (56%) have noted that the quality of their local park or play area had declined.<sup>82</sup>

## Adventure Playgrounds

In 2022 [Play England reported](#) that 21 adventure playgrounds had been lost across England in the preceding five years. There were 126 sites that matched the description of staffed outdoor play, free for children to attend

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<sup>78</sup> Raising the Nation and Centre for Young Lives Play Commission, [Everything to Play for](#), June 2025, page 31

<sup>79</sup> HSE, [Children's play and leisure: promoting a balanced approach](#), July 2012

<sup>80</sup> HSE, [Children's play and leisure: promoting a balanced approach](#), July 2012

<sup>81</sup> Aggregate Industries, [FOIs reveal a continuing decline in play park facilities in the UK](#), 27 March 2023

<sup>82</sup> Raising the Nation Play Commission, [State of Play](#), 24 February 2025, page 21

in 2022 which was down from 147 in 2017.<sup>83</sup> In 2024 Leicester nearly lost all of its nine adventure playgrounds due to council finances.<sup>84</sup> An article in the Financial Times in June 2025 reported the number of adventure playgrounds left in England to be 28.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> The Guardian, [‘It’s heartbreaking’: adventure playgrounds disappearing across England](#), 10 March 2022

<sup>84</sup> Leicester Council, [Council confirms funding position for adventure playgrounds](#), 19 March 2024

<sup>85</sup> The Financial Times, [Risk and reward: a new era for adventure playgrounds](#), 26 June 2025

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## 2 History of legislation, policy and strategy for access to outdoor spaces

The UK Government has historically made efforts to improve the physical and mental wellbeing of children and young people by changing their built environment. This has included the creation or protection of safe outside spaces for children and young people, as part of campaigns to improve urban dwellers' wellbeing including by Charles Dickens and Octavia Hill.<sup>86</sup>

### 2.1 Garden cities and the Open Spaces Act 1906

In the nineteenth century, Ebenezer Howard proposed the idea of garden cities in 1898 as a way to capture the benefits of the countryside and the city.<sup>87</sup> His vision included parks and play areas where children and young people could be outside. He founded the Garden City Association (now known as the Town and Country Planning Association, (TCPA)), which created First Garden City, Ltd in 1899 to build the garden city of Letchworth. The garden city movement influenced town planning, leading to the rise of green spaces within urban landscapes.<sup>88</sup>

In 1906 the [Open Spaces Act](#) was passed. This gave local authorities the power to acquire and manage land for open spaces, public walks or pleasure grounds. For example, Battersea Park was acquired under the act by the Borough of Wandsworth.

### 2.2 Six Acre standard and National Playing Fields Association

In the 1920s, the Government's Chief Town Planning Inspector to the Ministry of Health, George Pepler, recommended that there should be one

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<sup>86</sup> For example see: National Trust, [Octavia Hill's life and work](#); Charles Dickens's made a high-profile attempt to create more dedicated spaces for poor city children in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century see: Jon Winder, [Designed for Play: Children's Playgrounds and the Politics of Urban Space, 1840–2010](#), 2024 Chapter 1; London Transport Museum, [Play streets: reclaiming London's roads for play](#); Social History, [Play streets: women, children and the problem of urban traffic, 1930–1970: Vol 42](#); Child in the City, [A history of play provision in the UK](#)

<sup>87</sup> Rethinking the Future, [Ebenezer Howard: Ideology and Philosophy](#), accessed December 2024

<sup>88</sup> Town and Country Planning Association, [Garden Cities and New Towns](#), accessed December 2024



third of an acre of play space per thousand residents in urban environments.<sup>89</sup> In 1925, the Prime Minister David Lloyd George said, in recognition of this, that the right to play was “a child’s first claim on the community”.<sup>90</sup> In June 1926, then-Minister of Health and future Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, referred to “the crying need for playgrounds” in endorsing the creation of the National Playing Fields Association (now known as Fields in Trust).<sup>91</sup>

In 1927, the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin wrote to the Association stating:

The congestion of our great Cities is one of the unhappy legacies of the nineteenth century [...] those responsible for the lay-out of towns gave little pause for the consideration of claims other than those of industry. Insufficient thought was given to the needs for recreation and the scope for play was stunted.<sup>92</sup>

Initially, the Association advocated a standard of five acres of open space per 1,000 population, made up of four acres for team games and a further acre for informal use. In 1938, this was upped to six acres as part of the Association’s Open Space Standard Report. This so called “[Six Acre Standard](#)” came to be widely accepted and was officially recognised by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government in a memorandum of 1956.<sup>93</sup> The standard is still used today and was most recently [updated in November 2024](#).<sup>94</sup>

## 2.3

### Criminalising street play

While open spaces were being created for health benefits, other government policies and legislation were penalising children for playing in the street.

The [Highway Act 1835](#) penalised people who “play at Football or any other Game on any Part of the said Highways, to the Annoyance of any Passenger or Passengers”.<sup>95</sup> In London, the [Metropolitan Police Act 1839](#) created an offence for “Every person who shall fly any kite or play at any game to the annoyance of the inhabitants or passengers, or who shall make or use any slide upon ice or snow in any street or other thoroughfare, to the common danger of the passengers”.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Jon Winder, [Designed for Play: Children’s Playgrounds and the Politics of Urban Space, 1840–2010](#), 2024

<sup>90</sup> The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, [Consider how you can ensure children have access to daily outdoor play](#), accessed December 2024

<sup>91</sup> Fields in Trust, [The History of Fields in Trust](#), accessed December 2024

<sup>92</sup> Fields in Trust, [The History of Fields in Trust](#), accessed December 2024

<sup>93</sup> Six acres (2.4ha) of open space per 1,000 local residents

<sup>94</sup> Fields in Trust, [Guidance for Outdoor Sport and Play, November 2024](#)

<sup>95</sup> [Highway Act 1835](#) c. 50 Section LXXII

<sup>96</sup> Section 54 of the [Metropolitan Police Act 1839](#); this was repealed by the [Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984](#).

In 1860, a debate in the House of Commons noted that 44 London children were sent to prison for playing in the street the year before.<sup>97</sup> By 1935, over 2,000 children under the age of 17 were found guilty of playing in the streets in a single year.<sup>98</sup> Nancy Astor MP, the first woman to take her seat as an MP, told the House that “There is no more pitiable sight in life than a child which has been arrested for playing in the street [...] Though these children may be fined, we stand convicted.”<sup>99</sup>

As a result of growing concern, the [Street Playgrounds Act 1938](#) was passed. This enabled local authorities to close certain “suitable streets at certain suitable times” for use as playgrounds for children, especially those with no nearby playing fields.<sup>100</sup>

## 2.4 Post Second World War

After the Second World War, as part of the national rebuilding programme, there was a proactive attempt to create better outside spaces for children and young people. Women, including landscape architects such as Brenda Colvin as well as social workers and female politicians, were influential in promoting this.<sup>101</sup> They lobbied for imaginative spaces such as adventure playgrounds, an idea brought over from Denmark by Lady Allen of Hurtwood.<sup>102</sup>

A 1958 housing manual produced by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government [Flats and Houses: Design and Economy](#) said:

The important thing is to recognise that the beneficial social effects of good housing conditions can be largely cancelled out if there is nowhere

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<sup>97</sup> [Imprisonment Of Children - Hansard - UK Parliament](#): “George Dunn, aged twelve years, was sent to gaol for five days for playing at a game called “rounders” in which the boys stood in a ring and knocked a ball from one to another. When the policeman saw them, he was bound by the Act to take them into custody. It generally happened that the smallest child of the number was the person taken and made prisoner, because the others were old enough and their legs were long enough to run away; but the little one, with the shortest legs, was captured. Another case was that of John Evans, aged twelve. He was sent to prison for seven days for playing at “tipcat.”

<sup>98</sup> London Play, [History of play streets](#)

<sup>99</sup> [RECREATION FACILITIES \(URBAN AREAS\)](#). (Hansard, 28 April 1926)

<sup>100</sup> In 1960, the [Street Playground Act 1938](#) was repealed by the [Road Traffic Act](#). [The Road Traffic Regulation Act: Sections 29 to 31 of the RTRA 1984](#) dealt with play streets and are still in use today.

<sup>101</sup> University of Liverpool, School of Architecture, [Women of the Welfare Landscape, accessed December 2024](#)

<sup>102</sup> The Conversation, [How 1950s bombsites in the UK were turned into adventure playgrounds, 3 January 2023](#)

immediately near their homes where children find it enjoyable to play.<sup>103</sup>

In 1961, a report produced by the [Parker Morris committee on housing standards](#) included an extensive section on children's play provision.<sup>104</sup> In [1963, the Buchanan report, Traffic in Towns](#), proposed the creation of environmental areas, with reduced traffic in residential neighbourhoods making it safer for children.<sup>105</sup> In [1963 the Newsom Report](#) discussed children's need for physical activity outside school.<sup>106</sup> The [People and Planning Report of the Committee on Public Participation in Planning](#), published in 1970, recommended the inclusion of young people in planning decisions: that they should attend exhibitions of local developments and that planning should be part of the secondary school curriculum.<sup>107</sup>

The 1970s saw programmes such as the [Home Office's Urban Aid Programme](#), which funded adventure playgrounds, playschemes and temporary play spaces.<sup>108</sup> There was also funding for play spaces and road closures as part of General Improvement Areas (GIAs). These were regions of derelict or run-down housing which were regenerated rather than demolished (as had happened previously through slum clearance programmes.) These areas were designated through the [Housing Act 1969](#).<sup>109</sup>

The building of new towns such as Basildon, Harlow and Milton Keynes included play spaces close to homes, communal playgrounds in parks, adventure play centres and a children's play officer.<sup>110</sup>

During the 1970s those who worked in and around playgrounds formed associations such as the Association of Adventure Playworkers and Institute of Playleaders. They lobbied the government for funding for a national play organisation. In 1981, the Association for Children's Play and Recreation was formed.<sup>111</sup> Although the funding ran out after three years, it provided a

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<sup>103</sup> Ministry of Housing and Local Government, [Flats and houses 1958 : design and economy](#), 1958; Sally Watson, [Housing Landscapes and the Politics of Play: From Parker Morris to Byker, c.1955-c.1995](#), 2024 page 63

<sup>104</sup> Ministry of Housing and Local Government, [Homes for today and tomorrow](#), 1961, chapter 3 section iv

<sup>105</sup> Ministry of Transport, [Traffic in towns: a study of the long term problems of traffic in urban areas](#), 1963

<sup>106</sup> Central Advisory Council for Education (England), [Half our Future](#), 1963, pages 138-140

<sup>107</sup> Ministry of Housing and Local Government, [People and Planning](#), 1970, chapter 8

<sup>108</sup> The Home Office's Urban Aid Programme was introduced in 1968 by then Home Secretary James Callaghan as £20 to £25 million to be spent over 4 years. HC Deb [URBAN PROGRAMMES \(GOVERNMENT AID\)](#), 22 July 1968, vol 769 cc40-9

<sup>109</sup> Sally Watson, [Housing Landscapes and the Politics of Play: From Parker Morris to Byker, c.1955-c.1995](#), 2024

<sup>110</sup> Jon Winder, [Designed for Play: Children's Playgrounds and the Politics of Urban Space, 1840–2010](#), 2024, page 178

<sup>111</sup> Adrian Voce, [Policy for Play: Responding to Children's Forgotten Right](#), 2015, chapter 3

framework for the creation of the Children’s Play Council, which became the charity [Play England](#).

In 1989, the [UN Convention of the Rights of the Child](#), a global treaty, was agreed. Article 31 recognised “the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts”.<sup>112</sup>

The [Children’s Play Council](#) created a [Charter for Children’s Play](#) based on Article 31.<sup>113</sup> Principle 4 stated:

All our children should be able to play safely outdoors wherever they live, in cities and in the countryside. Older children should also be able to get around safely on their own.<sup>114</sup>

The [Charter continues to underpin the work of Play England](#) which has been updated in 2025 to become a new [10 year play strategy](#).

## 2.5

## The 2008 Play Strategy

In 2002, Tessa Jowell, Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport, commissioned [Frank Dobson](#) MP to carry out a comprehensive review looking at the needs of children. In his 2004 report, ‘[Getting serious about play](#)’ he set out the best way to invest £200 million of the National Lottery New Opportunities Fund which had been pledged at the 2001 General Election for children’s play facilities. His review found:

Far too many children have nowhere safe to play. They either don’t get out to play or they play in places where they aren’t safe. So they are deprived of the pleasure and stimulation of being able to play with their friends or they are in danger. That is bad both for them and for the peace of mind of their parents.<sup>115</sup>

In response, the [government explained how the Big Lottery Fund](#) would support Dobson’s review and its own £200 million commitment to play. The Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport said the Government would have a more strategic cross-departmental approach to play policy.<sup>116</sup>

Following this, David Cameron, then leader of the opposition, commissioned David Willetts MP to investigate why, [as reported by UNICEF in 2007](#), Britain was the worst place for children in the developed world and why “British children were unhappier, had poorer relationships with their friends and

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<sup>112</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), 1989

<sup>113</sup> Adrian Voce, [Policy for Play: Responding to Children's Forgotten Right](#), 2015, page 43

<sup>114</sup> Children’s Play Council, [Charter for Children’s Play](#), principle 4

<sup>115</sup> Frank Dobson, [Getting Serious about Play, Report to Government, 2004](#)

<sup>116</sup> Frank Dobson, [Getting Serious about Play, Report to Government, 2004](#): Government Response 16 January 2005

family, were unhealthier and were more prone to risky behaviour than in other countries”.<sup>117</sup>

Willetts’ report, “[More Ball Games](#), The Childhood Review”, analysed how changes in the outside world had driven children indoors and was having a profound effect on children’s well-being. A key recommendation was to make “outdoor space safer and more protected, so that parents and children feel more confident about spending time there”.<sup>118</sup>

In 2008, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families Ed Balls and Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport Andy Burnham launched a government ‘[Play Strategy](#)’ for 2008 to 2020 with an initial investment of £235 million over the first three years.

The strategy contained various concepts to aim for, including:

- Local neighbourhoods are, and feel like, safe, interesting places to play.
- Children and young people have a clear stake in public space and their play is accepted by their neighbours.
- Parks and open spaces are attractive and welcoming to children and young people, and are well maintained and well used.<sup>119</sup>

It provided guidance on design, risk management and partnership working to help those who design and manage neighbourhoods to understand the importance of play and child-friendly spaces.<sup>120</sup>

The Play Strategy involved cross-departmental work between the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Department for Culture Media and Sport. It was endorsed by other departments, including the Department for Transport, Department for Health and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.<sup>121</sup> The Association of Chief Police Officers was supportive and said it would work with stakeholders to fully integrate it into neighbourhood policing.<sup>122</sup>

The strategy was not taken forward by the coalition government, elected in 2010, due to the need to tackle the budget deficit and identify savings. The director of the Child Wellbeing Group at the Department for Education

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<sup>117</sup> UNICEF, [The State of the World’s Children, 2007](#)

<sup>118</sup> The Conservative Party, [More Ball Games: The Childhood Review](#), 2008

<sup>119</sup> Department for Children Schools and Families and Department for Culture Media and Sport, Fair Play: [The Play Strategy](#), 2008; [The Play Strategy, HC Deb 10 December 2008, Vol 485 Parliament](#)

<sup>120</sup> Department for Children Schools and Families and Department for Culture Media and Sport, Fair Play: [The Play Strategy](#), 2008

<sup>121</sup> Department for Children Schools and Families and Department for Culture Media and Sport, Fair Play: [The Play Strategy](#), 2008, page 79-80 Annex C Letter to Chief Planning Officers and Directors of Transport

<sup>122</sup> Department for Children Schools and Families and Department for Culture Media and Sport, Fair Play: [The Play Strategy](#), 2008, page 77, Annex B: Endorsements from stakeholders

wrote to local authorities' directors of children services and play leaders in the summer of 2010 to inform them.<sup>123</sup>

## 2.6 Home Zones

Home Zones were first suggested in the UK in the 1980s as a low-cost measure to reduce casualties from road traffic among children in residential areas and to allow them to play outside in safety. They are a form of shared space scheme; residential streets in which the road space is shared between motor vehicles and other road users, but with priority for children, pedestrians and cyclists.

Home Zones were created through section 268 of the [Transport Act 2000](#). The Minister for Transport, Keith Hill, said that:

they will give legal status to uses of the road for purposes other than the traditional one of "passing and repassing" – for example, purposes such as children's play, or simply standing around and talking.<sup>124</sup>

[Guidance for local authorities](#) on the creation of Home Zones was published by the Department for Transport. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, announced in April 2001 that the government would accelerate the growth of Home Zones in England, by investing £30 million. Home Zones are included in the Department for Transport's [Manual for Streets](#), which is technical guidance on street design. For more information, see Library briefing on [Home Zones](#) (2010).

## 2.7 2010 to 2024

In 2014, the Cabinet Office asked the [Children's Play Policy Forum](#) for evidence on the benefits of specific forms of play. This was published as [The Play Return: A Review of the Wider Impact of Play Initiatives](#).

In 2015, the [All-Party Parliamentary Group \(APPG\) on a Fit and Healthy Childhood](#) published a [report on play](#) which said that:

The disparity in attitudes and play opportunities offered to children throughout the UK is deeply disquieting; especially as play is so intrinsically bound up with their health and welfare.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> BBC news, [Hundreds of playground schemes mothballed, 11 August 2010](#); Also see [International Play Association, Play Rights Magazine, December 2024 'Is it time to go back to the future for children's play in England' by Adrian Voce](#)

<sup>124</sup> Transport Act, [HC Deb 15 November 2000 cc 1039-42](#)

<sup>125</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood, [Play](#), October 2015



It concluded that play “should not be viewed in the light of a policy ‘add on’ but as an absolute necessity” and recommended a national ‘Whole Child Strategy’ with play at its heart.<sup>126</sup>

From 2013 to 2016 the Department for Health put £1.1 million towards a national ‘street play’ pilot, led by Play England and [Playing Out](#).<sup>127</sup> The Department for Transport provided guidance on road closures to boost children’s outdoor play, although it did not provide direct funding.<sup>128</sup> The pilot’s evaluation funded through the government found play streets were positive for children’s health and community cohesion.<sup>129</sup>

## 2.8 Low Traffic Neighbourhoods

Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) have been around since the early 1970s. One of the first in the UK was in [De Beauvoir Square in the London borough of Hackney](#), which was designed to make residential streets safer for children.

LTNs gained renewed attention as part of the government’s response to the covid-19 pandemic.<sup>130</sup> However, in October 2023 the government withdrew its guidance on LTNs. As part of the Plan for Drivers, it committed to issuing new LTN guidance and to reviewing LTNs.<sup>131</sup> On 17 March 2024 the LTN review was published, alongside draft LTN guidance which emphasised the need to secure local support for LTNs before they are implemented.<sup>132</sup>

For more information on LTNs see the Library briefing [Active Travel FAQs](#).

## 2.9 Current government position

Although the Labour government has not made any specific announcements on children, young people and the built environment, many of its manifesto commitments are relevant. Within its five missions to ‘rebuild Britain’ there are policies related to children and young people’s relationship with the built

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<sup>126</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood, [Play](#), October 2015

<sup>127</sup> London Play, [History of play streets](#)

<sup>128</sup> Department for Transport, [Revised road closure guidance to boost children’s outdoor play](#); 23 August 2019

<sup>129</sup> Play England, [Why temporary street closures make sense for public health](#), 2016, summary

<sup>130</sup> Department for Transport, [Traffic Management Act 2004: network management to support active travel](#), updated 1 April 2022

<sup>131</sup> Department for Transport, [Plan for Drivers policy paper](#), 2 October 2023

<sup>132</sup> Department for Transport, [Low traffic neighbourhood review](#), 17 March 2024; Department for Transport, [Implementing low traffic neighbourhoods](#), 17 March 2024

environment. For example, the health mission contains an ambition to improve children's health:

Arguably nothing says more about the state of a nation than the wellbeing of its children. So right at the core of our mission will be a bold new ambition to raise the healthiest generation of children in our history.<sup>133</sup>

On 12 November 2024, the Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport, Lisa Nandy, and the Minister for Youth, Stephanie Peacock, [launched plans for a new National Youth Strategy](#) designed to involve young people in policies that affect them. On 5 March 2025 the DCMS began [a national listening exercise](#) to let young people have their say on support services, facilities and opportunities they need outside the school gates called '[Deliver You](#)'.

On 19 November 2024, the Department for Transport [published advice on how to set up and manage School Streets](#). It was developed by the Department for Transport and Active Travel England and is supported by the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care. In February 2025 Active Travel England announced '[Almost £300 million to gear up new walking, wheeling and cycling schemes](#)' to increase the number of journeys by foot and bike including the aim of more than 20 million new walk-to-school journeys by children and their parents.

On 10 March 2025 the government announced [a review of statutory consultees in the planning system](#). The review would consider removing Sport England as a statutory consultee for planning applications.<sup>134</sup> The example given by the government for the need to remove Sport England was the report of a two-year delay to a planning application for the development of 140 new homes next to a cricket club in Bradford because the application was thought to have not adequately considered the speed of cricket balls.<sup>135</sup>

Sport England said in response that it responded to over 98% of applications within 21 days and that in 70% of statutory applications it does not object. Sport England also commented that over the past five years, out of 398 concluded planning applications, 90% had resulted in improved or safeguarded conditions because of its involvement and that in 2022-23 it protected more than 1,000 playing fields across the country.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> The Labour Party, [Build an NHS fit for the future](#), 2024

<sup>134</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [Bureaucratic burden lifted to speed up building in growth agenda](#), 10 March 2025

<sup>135</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [Bureaucratic burden lifted to speed up building in growth agenda](#), 10 March 2025

<sup>136</sup> The Guardian, [Thousands of playing fields 'may be lost' if Sport England stripped of planning role](#), 29 April 2025

## 3 Responsibility across central government

Addressing the needs of children and young people in the built environment has always been a cross-government policy area. In 1975, civil servants prepared a guide to Whitehall responsibility and found that nine central government departments had some involvement.<sup>137</sup>

Commentators in the past have highlighted the difficulties with the cross-government approach when trying to find where responsibility lay.<sup>138</sup> This has been reported as a similar difficulty today. For example, [Fields in Trust](#), previously known as the National Playing Fields Association, referred to it at a 2024 hearing of the Levelling up, Housing and Communities select committee as “an ongoing carousel because everybody thinks it is someone else’s responsibility”.<sup>139</sup>

The following government departments are responsible for policies affecting the use of outdoor spaces by children and young people.

### 3.1 Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government

The [Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government \(MHCLG\)](#) oversees the planning system. It produces the [National Planning Policy Framework](#), which sets out the government’s planning policies for England and how these should be applied.

Most planning decisions are taken at the local level by local planning authorities. However, the Secretary of State can have a direct role in a small number of planning decisions.<sup>140</sup>

[Homes England](#) is the government’s housing and regeneration agency whose role is to “deliver homes and places people are proud to live in for generations to come”. It is an executive non-departmental public body,

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<sup>137</sup> Jon Winder, [Designed for Play: Children’s Playgrounds and the Politics of Urban Space, 1840–2010](#), 2024

<sup>138</sup> Jon Winder, [Designed for Play: Children’s Playgrounds and the Politics of Urban Space, 1840–2010](#), 2024

<sup>139</sup> LUHC Committee, Children, young people and the built environment [Q57], 24 January 2024

<sup>140</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government, [Plain English guide to the planning system, January 2015](#)

sponsored by the MHCLG and plays an active role in providing natural, high quality green spaces.<sup>141</sup>

MHCLG also provides [guidance on byelaws](#), which are local laws made by a local council requiring something to be done or not done in a specified area for example not allowing ball games. (see section 3.2)

Further information on planning can be found in section 4 of this briefing.

## 3.2 Department for Education

The [Department for Education](#) is responsible for the [holiday activities and food programme](#) which funds many play activities. The [Minister for Children and Families](#) sits within this department.

## 3.3 Department for Health and Social Care

The [Department for Health and Social Care](#) (DHSC) develops government policy in relation to mental and physical health, including that of children and young people. It also includes the [Office for Health Improvement and Disparities](#), which is responsible for improving the nation's health and gathers childhood [obesity statistics](#).

## 3.4 Department for Transport

The [Department for Transport](#) is responsible for roads and streets, including [Active Travel England](#) and the [Manual for Streets](#), which guides local authorities and planners on street layouts.

It provides the guidance on road closures to enable [play streets](#) and on [school streets](#) for local authorities. It is also responsible for [Highways Act 1980](#).

## 3.5 Department for Culture, Media and Sport

The [Department for Culture, Media and Sport](#) (DCMS) provides funding for physical activity via [Sport England](#). It is currently investing in [Place Partnerships](#) where it works with local organisations to overcome

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<sup>141</sup> Natural England, [Homes England plays an active role in delivering biodiversity net gain](#), September 2023

communities' barriers to physical activity. Sport England distributes both government and National Lottery funds.

In August 2023, DCMS launched a sports strategy; [Get Active: a strategy for the future of sport and physical activity](#).<sup>142</sup> It set a new target to get one million more children active by 2030. It aims to establish a lifetime habit of physical activity among children and young people.

The [Physical Activity Task Force](#) is within the DCMS. In addition, [the National Lottery Community Fund](#), an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by DCMS, provides [funding for playgrounds](#), play provision and other relevant community and environmental initiatives through national lottery funds. [The Minister with responsibility for Youth](#) is within this department and the [Statutory guidance for local authorities on services to improve young people's well-being](#) was issued by DCMS.

## 3.6 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#) (DEFRA), together with [Natural England](#), is responsible for the [Green Infrastructure Framework](#). The framework aims include meeting the needs of children and teenagers when creating green infrastructure.

[Nature Towns and Cities](#) is a new funding programme to increase urban green spaces.

DEFRA is also responsible for [The Environmental Protection Act \(EPA\) 1990](#) and provides the [guidance](#) on what constitutes 'nuisance'.

## 3.7 Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

The [Department for Science, Innovation and Technology](#) provides funding for the [Arts and Humanities Research Council](#), which in turn funds the [Design Council](#).<sup>143</sup> The Design Council launched the [Homes Taskforce](#) to work with

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<sup>142</sup> Department for Culture, Media and Sport, [Get Active: a strategy for the future of sport and physical activity](#), 2023

<sup>143</sup> The [Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment](#) (CABE) was a non-departmental public body responsible for advising government on architecture and urban design. It merged into the Design Council in 2011.

government on designs for new homes and neighbourhoods and published its first report [Design for Neighbourhoods](#) in March 2025.

## 3.8 Home Office

The [Home Office](#) is responsible for policing of public spaces and [anti-social behaviour legislation and guidance](#).

[Secured by Design](#) (SBD) is a police initiative that aims to improve the security of buildings and their immediate surroundings. It influences how places, including outdoor space are built and managed. Many local authorities make SBD a planning requirement.

## 3.9 Health and Safety Executive

The [Health and Safety Executive](#) (HSE) is a non-departmental public body that regulates workplace health and safety in Great Britain. Its “role goes beyond worker protection to include public assurance” and it works “[to ensure people feel safe where they live, where they work and, in their environment](#).”<sup>144</sup> The HSE provides guidance on [Children's play and leisure: promoting a balanced approach](#).

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<sup>144</sup> HSE, [Our mission and priorities](#), accessed February 2025

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## 4 Legislation

The previous section explained government departments and their policies affecting children and young people in the built environment. This section highlights the key legislation. It is not intended to be comprehensive.

### 4.1 Local authority ‘youth services duty’

The [Education Act 1996 Section 507B](#), introduced through [section 6 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006](#) sets out “the duty to secure access to positive activities”. This duty for local authorities relates to young people aged over 13 and is often referred to as the “youth services duty”. Its function is:

To ensure young people have access to sufficient educational leisure-time activities which are for the improvement of their well-being and personal and social development, and sufficient facilities for such activities; that activities are publicised; and that young people are placed at the heart of decision making regarding the positive activity provision.<sup>145</sup>

In September 2023, the [statutory guidance for local authorities on services to improve young people’s well-being](#) was issued by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport “to secure, so far as reasonably practicable, leisure-time activities and facilities for young people aged 13 to 19 and those with learning difficulties or disabilities aged 20 to 24”.<sup>146</sup>

The guidance noted that 85% of a young person’s waking hours are spent outside of school and that recreational and educational activities during that time can have a significant effect on young people’s development and well-being.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Department for Culture Media and Sport, [Statutory guidance for local authorities on services to improve young people’s well-being](#), September 2023

<sup>146</sup> Department for Culture Media and Sport, [Statutory guidance for local authorities on services to improve young people’s well-being](#), September 2023

<sup>147</sup> Department for Culture Media and Sport, [Statutory guidance for local authorities on services to improve young people’s well-being](#), September 2023



## 4.2

# Restrictions on outdoor play

## Highways Act 1980

Section 137 of the [Highways Act 1980](#) sets out that wilful obstruction is an offence:

(1) If a person, without lawful authority or excuse, in any way wilfully obstructs the free passage along a highway he is guilty of an offence and liable to [imprisonment for a term not exceeding 51 weeks or] a fine [or both]<sup>148</sup>.

[Section 161](#) explains penalties for causing certain kinds of danger or annoyance:

(3) If a person plays at football or any other game on a highway to the annoyance of a user of the highway he is guilty of an offence and liable to a fine not exceeding [level 1 on the standard scale].<sup>149</sup>

The website [Ask the Police](#) answers the FAQ “Can ball games be legally played on the road?” and explains how the Highways Act 1980 applies:

Aside from the legal issues it is not safe for children to play on roads. This can also cause a nuisance for lots of people in the area who are wary of driving down the street for fear of knocking over a child or getting their cars damaged.

Putting aside possible traffic or public order issues, it is an offence to play ball games on a public road if it is to the annoyance of road users. It is likely that ball games played on a public road will be to the immediate annoyance of road users.

It is also a breach of by-laws to play ball games to the annoyance of residents. By-laws are created by the local councils and may not apply to every street, there could be some designated as 'play streets' (and similar), where games are allowed, and the by-law may not exist at all in some towns.

If this is a problem in your street, then contact your local neighbourhood policing team who will be able to offer advice and assistance.<sup>150</sup>

## Local Government Act 1972: byelaws

[Section 235 of the Local Government Act 1972](#) sets out the ‘Power of councils to make byelaws for good rule and government and suppression of nuisances’.

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<sup>148</sup> [Highways Act 1980](#), Section 137

<sup>149</sup> [Highways Act 1980](#), Section 161

<sup>150</sup> Ask the Police, [Q519: Can ball games be legally played on a public road?](#), accessed December 2024

The government [guidance on byelaws](#) provides various sets of model byelaws with standard wording. The [model byelaw](#) on pleasure grounds, public walks and open spaces includes optional clauses prohibiting kite-flying, ball games, erection of swings, skateboarding or roller-skating, tree climbing and shouting. Some of the optional clauses can be used to permit ball games within designated areas.

There is also a [model byelaw](#) on 'Good rule and government' which, in section 10, provides for an optional clause prohibiting dangerous games near highways.

For more information on byelaws see the Library briefing [Local authority byelaws](#) (2016).

## Anti-social behaviour and nuisance legislation

### Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014

The [Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014](#) has two legal definitions for anti-social behaviour (ASB) depending on where it takes place:

- ASB that occurs within a housing context is defined as behaviour that causes or is likely to cause nuisance or annoyance<sup>151</sup>
- ASB that occurs in public spaces is defined as behaviour that causes or is likely to cause "harassment, alarm or distress".<sup>152</sup>

Parts 1 to 4 of Act provide six ASB powers to local public services. Three are relevant to outdoor play: ASB civil injunctions, dispersal powers for individuals aged ten or older and [public space protection orders \(PSPOs\)](#).

There are no published statistics on the use of these powers. Without robust data, it is hard to assess how these powers are being used and what impact they are having on children and young people. However, civil rights groups have expressed concern that these powers are being used to criminalise young adults, particularly the inappropriate use of public space protection orders. In December 2017, the government revised its statutory guidance to frontline professionals to emphasise that they should not be used to target "behaviour that is neither unlawful nor antisocial."<sup>153</sup> For more information see Library briefing on [Tackling anti-social behaviour](#).

A previous review of children's lives in 2008, by the Conservative Party recognised that "police need to be tough but they also need to ensure that harmless play is not stopped. The aim is safer neighbourhoods not neighbourhoods without children."<sup>154</sup> In 2009, as part of the former play strategy, the Association of Chief Police Officers said it "acknowledged that

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<sup>151</sup> Section 2(1)(b)(c) of the [Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014](#)

<sup>152</sup> Section 2(1)(a) of the [Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014](#)

<sup>153</sup> House of Commons Library, [Tackling anti-social behaviour](#), 21 April 2020

<sup>154</sup> The Conservative Party, *More Ball Games: The Childhood Review*, 2008

an environment that is welcoming and accepting of children and young people playing sociably and respectfully outside and meeting their friends is the sign of a healthy community”. It also “recognised the potential tensions and misconceptions within communities regarding groups of children playing on the streets and in open spaces and the need to manage this”.<sup>155</sup>

### Environmental Protection Act 1990

The [Environmental Protection Act \(EPA\) 1990](#) covers statutory nuisance in England and Wales. For the issue to count as a statutory nuisance it must do one of the following:

- unreasonably and substantially interfere with the use or enjoyment of a home or other premises
- injure health or be likely to injure health.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) provides guidance on what local authorities can deal with as ‘nuisance’, and how the process works.<sup>156</sup> DEFRA also has guidance on how councils deal with [noise nuisance](#). See the Library briefing on [Nuisance Complaints](#) which sets out the relevant legislation and local authorities’ powers and duties.

None of the documents mention the noise or behaviour of children and young people playing as a potential source of nuisance. However, there are many online discussion and advice forums about how the perceived noise and nuisance of children is or is not covered by legislation for example: [Planning for Noise in Child’s Play – Noise Nuisance](#) and [Can noise from kids be anti social behaviour?](#).

### Leases and tenancy agreements

As the government-funded [Leasehold Advisory Service](#) explains there is a common misconception that the long-standing legal principal in leases of a ‘landlord’s obligation to give quiet enjoyment to a leaseholder’ relates to noise levels at a property. It does not. It means the leaseholder “has a right, not just to occupy the property, but to use it in a lawful way, without interference from the landlord”.<sup>157</sup>

Tenancy agreements can however include a broad prohibition of anti-social behaviour. A threat of eviction may follow a perceived breach of a tenancy agreement. The [Tenancy Agreement Service’s website](#), which supports landlords, states that:

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<sup>155</sup> Department for Children Schools and Families and Department for Culture Media and Sport, Fair Play: The Play Strategy, 2008, Annex B Endorsements from stakeholders

<sup>156</sup> Defra, [Statutory nuisances: how councils deal with complaints](#), 7 April 2015

<sup>157</sup> Leaseholder Advisory Service, [The landlord is interfering with my rights under the lease. Can I do anything about this?](#), accessed May 2025

Noise is the most common type of problem landlords and occupiers experience. Often tenants are subjected to unreasonable and excessive noise within their neighbourhoods.<sup>158</sup>

It proceeds to recommend ways in which tenants can avoid noise and nuisance to neighbours, including:

Mak[ing] sure their children are playing in a way that is considerate to neighbours and not causing a disturbance.<sup>159</sup>

In August 2022 the Guardian reported on [the City of London](#) council telling families in a residential block in Southwark that the sound of children playing had been recorded on a “noise nuisance app” by neighbours, and that the games were “a breach of tenancy agreements” and therefore banned.<sup>160</sup>

### Neighbourhood and Community Standard

Social landlords (primarily local authorities and housing associations) are required to meet certain regulatory standards, including the Regulator of Social Housing’s [Neighbourhood and Community Standard](#). This sets out:

Outcomes landlords must deliver about engaging with other relevant parties so that tenants can live in safe and well-maintained neighbourhoods and feel safe in their homes.<sup>161</sup>

The standard includes the requirement that “Registered providers must work in partnership with appropriate local authority departments, the police and other relevant organisations to deter and tackle anti-social behaviour (ASB) and hate incidents in the neighbourhoods where they provide social housing”. It also says that “registered providers must co-operate with relevant partners to promote social, environmental and economic wellbeing in the areas where they provide social housing”.<sup>162</sup>

Social landlords are required to publish ASB policies and procedures. They have various powers to tackle ASB. See the Library briefing on [Anti-social behaviour in social housing \(England\)](#) for more information.

There are [various grounds for possession](#) that social landlords can use to re-possess properties from tenants guilty of ASB.

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<sup>158</sup> Tenancy Agreement Service, [How to deal with tenants who are noisy or being a nuisance](#), accessed December 2024

<sup>159</sup> Tenancy Agreement Service, [How to deal with tenants who are noisy or being a nuisance](#), accessed December 2024

<sup>160</sup> The Guardian, [Social housing tenants warned of ‘play ban’ for children in London site’s shared spaces, 2 August 2022](#)

<sup>161</sup> Regulator of Social Housing, [Neighbourhood and Community Standard](#), 2 April 2024

<sup>162</sup> Regulator of Social Housing, [Neighbourhood and Community Standard](#), 2 April 2024, para 1.3.1; Tenancy Agreement Service, [How to deal with tenants who are noisy or being a nuisance](#), accessed December 2024

## 4.3 Children’s rights and parental responsibilities

### Equality Act 2010

The Children’s Rights Alliance for England says in its guidance for children and young people, [Making the most of the Equality Act 2010](#), that the Equality Act 2010 “can be used to challenge children and young people’s experiences of inequality and discrimination”.<sup>163</sup> However, while the act protects children and young people from discrimination on the basis of other protected characteristics, it does not protect them as a group on the basis of age (except within employment).<sup>164</sup>

### UN Convention on Rights of the Child

As noted in the historic background section of this briefing, [Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child](#) includes “the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts”.<sup>165</sup>

The UK ratified the Convention in 1991 but has not incorporated it into domestic law. Therefore, although the government is bound by the Convention under international law, it is not necessarily implemented and enforced. The UK has preferred a sector-by-sector approach to implementing the Convention.<sup>166</sup>

For further information, see the Library briefing on the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: a brief guide](#).

Wales made the UNCRC part of its domestic law in 2011<sup>167</sup> and Scotland in 2024.<sup>168</sup>

In 2013 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child published a General Comment concerned by the poor recognition given by States to the rights contained in article 31.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Children’s Rights Alliance for England, A guide for children and young people: [Equality Act 2010 \(PDF\)](#)

<sup>164</sup> Equality Act 2010, sections [28\(1\)](#), [32\(1\)](#) and [84](#)

<sup>165</sup> Article 31, [UN Convention on Rights of a Child \(UNCRC\)](#)

<sup>166</sup> House of Commons Library, [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: a brief guide, 29 November 2016](#)

<sup>167</sup> [Rights of Children and Young Persons \(Wales\) Measure 2011](#)

<sup>168</sup> [UNCRC \(Incorporation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#)

<sup>169</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31), April 2013

## Children Act 1989

The child protection system in England is grounded in the [Children Act 1989](#). Statutory guidance published by the government, [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#) provides information on the core legal requirements.

There is no specific prohibition on children playing outside under safeguarding legislation and no minimum age for allowing children out alone.

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) answers questions about this legislation such as [is your child ready to go out without you?](#) and [What age can a child come home from school alone?](#) Its guidance for parents [Home or Out Alone: A guide to help you decide if your child is ready to stay home or go out alone](#) states:

Independence is a normal part of every growing child. Whether it's going to the park with friends, walking to the local shop or just going to the toilet on their own whilst you're out shopping.<sup>170</sup>

In contrast to the UK, Utah, in the USA, has explicitly legislated to ensure parents and carers cannot be accused of child neglect if they have made a reasonable judgment to support their child's growing independence. Utah State legislation, introduced in 2018, states that negligence does not include:

permitting a child, whose basic needs are met and who is of sufficient age and maturity to avoid harm or unreasonable risk of harm, to engage in independent activities including:

- a) traveling to and from school, including by walking, running or bicycling;
- b) traveling to and from nearby commercial or recreational facilities;
- c) engaging in outdoor play.<sup>171</sup>

## 4.4

## Risk

### Occupiers' Liability Act 1957

Under [the Occupiers' Liability Act 1957](#), the occupier of a premises owes a common duty of care to visitors. [Occupiers' Liability Act 1957 s. 2 Extent of occupier's ordinary duty](#) provides that "an occupier must be prepared for children to be less careful than adults."

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<sup>170</sup> NSPCC, [Is my child ready to be home or out alone?](#)

<sup>171</sup> 2020 Utah Code Title 80 - Utah Juvenile Code, Chapter 1 - General Provisions, Section 102 - [Juvenile code definitions](#)

Where an occupier of a property does not sufficiently protect child visitors from risks (for example, faulty play equipment or open water) they may be liable for related injuries.<sup>172</sup>

The Act applies widely to occupiers of property and there are many [examples in the case law](#). For example:

- the following have been held not to be allurements or traps to children, so as to impose liability on the occupier: a pond; a river; a swing; a chute; and
- the following have been: a shrub (atropa belladonna) growing a poisonous berry of attractive and appetising appearance; an insecure wall, which might contain birds' nests; and a rope haulage system with a rope on which to swing.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Charlesworth & Percy on Negligence 15th Ed. Consolidated Part II - Standard of Care Chapter 9 - Dangerous Premises Section 4. - The Duty Owed (C) - Liability to children

<sup>173</sup> Charlesworth & Percy on Negligence 15th Ed. Consolidated Part II - Standard of Care Chapter 9 - Dangerous Premises Section 4. - The Duty Owed (C) - Liability to children



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## 5 Current planning policy and guidance

### 5.1 National Planning Policy Framework

The government's national planning policy in England is set out in the [National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\)](#).

The NPPF requires all local authorities to develop their own local development plans and for these plans to be kept up to date. Development of the plan requires local consultation which is covered by the Equalities Act. The NPPF must be taken into account in preparing the development plan and is a material consideration in planning decisions.<sup>174</sup> Planning law necessitates applications for planning permission to be determined by local planning authorities (LPAs) in accordance with their development plan, unless 'material considerations' indicate otherwise.<sup>175</sup>

Previously the NPPF mentioned children once – in relation to providing housing for families (December 2023).<sup>176</sup> Children's play and independent mobility was not referred to, nor were young people. However, following a consultation in 2024, the version of the NPPF published in [December 2024](#) now includes more references to children. On safety, the NPPF states that:

The safety of children and other vulnerable users in proximity to open water, railways and other potential hazards should be considered in planning and assessing proposals for development;<sup>177</sup>

In relation to play, the NPPF states that:

Existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields and formal play spaces, should not be built on unless:

- a) an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the open space, buildings or land to be surplus to requirements; or
- b) the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location; or

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<sup>174</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), para 2

<sup>175</sup> [Town and Country Planning Act 1990](#)

<sup>176</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [National Planning Policy Framework, December 2023](#) (Archive) accessed February 2025

<sup>177</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), para 102

c) the development is for alternative sports and recreational provision, the benefits of which clearly outweigh the loss of the current or former use.<sup>178</sup>

## 5.2 National Development Management Policies

In addition to the NPPF, the government is drafting [National Development Management Policies](#) (NDMPs) which were introduced under [section 94 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023](#). There was a consultation on the principle and scope of NDMPs<sup>179</sup> in Spring 2023 but draft policies are yet to be published.

Once published, NDMPs must be considered by LPAs when determining planning applications. Witnesses to the 2024 Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee inquiry on [Children young people and the built environment](#) recommended there should be an NDMP on children and young people.<sup>180</sup> The committee did not publish a report on its inquiry before the 2024 General Election.

## 5.3 Other planning guidance and standards

In addition to national planning policies, there are various national guidance documents available which are relevant to designing spaces for children and young people's recreation.

### Planning Practice Guidance

Planning practice guidance (PPG) adds detail on the approach and application of policies. It is intended to be read alongside the NPPF; as such, PPG is also a 'material consideration' in planning. The government's [PPG on healthy and safe communities](#) defines a 'healthy place' as:

one which supports and promotes healthy behaviours and environments and a reduction in health inequalities for people of all ages. It will provide the community with opportunities to improve their physical and mental health, and support community engagement and wellbeing. It is a place which is inclusive and promotes social interaction [...] It meets the needs of children and young people to grow and develop.<sup>181</sup>

In promoting healthy and safe communities the guidance makes reference to the NPPF which has regard to proximity to locations where children and

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<sup>178</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), para 104

<sup>179</sup> [Chapter 10, Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill: Reforms to national planning policy \(December 2023\)](#)

<sup>180</sup> LUHC Committee, Children, young people and the built environment [[Q104](#)], 26 February 2024

<sup>181</sup> Gov.uk, [Guidance on healthy and safe communities](#), August 2022, para 003

young people congregate such as schools, community centres and playgrounds.

Government [guidance on open space, sports and recreation facilities, public rights of way and local green space](#) (March 2014) gives advice to supplement policies set out in the NPPF (December 2024).

## The National Model Design Code and Guidance

The [National Model Design Code and Guidance](#) published by MHCLG recommends that all new housing schemes over fifteen dwellings should have a local area of play as well as Local and Neighbourhood Equipped Areas of Play (LEAP and NEAP) for larger housing schemes. The [National Model Design Code Guidance](#) states that “well-designed places include open spaces with space for play” and covers concepts such as doorstep play.<sup>182</sup>

## Secured by Design Homes Guide

[Secured by Design \(SBD\) Homes Guide](#) is produced by the police. Many local authorities make SBD a planning requirement meaning applicants need to seek the advice of ‘Designing Out Crime Officers’ and follow the SBD guidance. SBD is referred to in the National Model Design Code.<sup>183</sup>

In March 2024, the London Assembly called on the Mayor of London to reconsider its use of SBD as it argued there was a risk that an over restricted environment designed to prevent crime and anti-social behaviour could also affect social behaviour and inclusion. The London Assembly heard evidence that SBD could prevent or deter young people from spending time outside.<sup>184</sup> In response, the Mayor advised that academic research had been commissioned from University College London to further understand the effective use of SBD and that London Assembly officers were in the process of preparing new London Plan Guidance to support the implementation of Inclusive Design.<sup>185</sup>

## Active Design guidance

[Active Design guidance](#) has been produced and supported by Active Travel England and the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities.<sup>186</sup> It aims to

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<sup>182</sup> Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Governments, [National Model Design Code Guidance](#), page 21

<sup>183</sup> The National Model Design Code states that neighbourhoods need to be designed "in accordance with the recommendations of Secured by Design", and that "Secured by Design advice incorporates proven crime prevention techniques and measures into the layout and design of places and spaces."

<sup>184</sup> London City Hall, [Shaping the next London Plan, 18 March 2024](#)

<sup>185</sup> GLA Planning and Regeneration Committee, [Mayor of London's response to the recommendations of the London Assembly Planning and Regeneration Committee 2023-24](#), pg 80-81, 9 September 2024

<sup>186</sup> Sport England, [Active Design](#)

help planners, designers and anyone involved in delivering and managing places to create and maintain environments that encourage people, including children and young people to move more for example to walk or cycle to school as well as ‘play along the way’.<sup>187</sup>

## Manual for streets

The [Manual for streets](#) for residential roads and [Manual for Streets 2](#) for busier roads, are design guides by the Department for Transport and MHCLG. The manual explains how to design, construct, adopt and maintain new and existing streets. It states that “A street design which accommodates the needs of children and disabled people is likely to suit most, if not all, user types”.<sup>188</sup>

The guidance is currently being revised.<sup>189</sup>

Another initiative used by some local authorities is [Healthy Streets](#), notably Transport for London.<sup>190</sup> The Healthy Streets approach also recognises the importance of children stating “the best test for whether we are getting our streets right is whether the whole community particularly children, older people and disabled people are enjoying using the space”.<sup>191</sup>

## Building for a Healthy Life

[Building for a Healthy Life](#) is a design toolkit for neighbourhoods, streets, homes and public spaces. It was written in partnership between Homes England, NHS England and NHS Improvement and integrates the findings of a three year [Healthy New Towns Programme](#) with the previous design tool [Building for Life 12](#).<sup>192</sup> In March 2025 [Design Codes for Healthy Living](#) was also published.

## Planning for Sport Guidance

[Planning for Sport Guidance](#) has been produced by Sport England to help the planning system provide formal and informal opportunities for people, including children and young people, to take part in sport and be physically active. It has been written to inform local authority planning in England as well as developers, neighbourhood forums, public health leads, sports organisations, community groups and individuals.

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<sup>187</sup> Sport England, [Active Design](#) page 73

<sup>188</sup> Department for Transport and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [Manual for the Streets](#) page 63

<sup>189</sup> PQ 42128 [on [Roads: Handbooks](#)], 1 April 2025

<sup>190</sup> Transport for London, [Healthy streets](#) (accessed 13 June 2025)

<sup>191</sup> Healthy Streets, [What is Healthy Streets?, accessed February 2025](#)

<sup>192</sup> [Building for Life 12](#) was published in January 2015 by Nottingham Trent University on behalf of the Building for Life partnership (Design Council Cobe, the Home Builders Federation and Design for Homes)

## Guidance for Outdoor Sport and Play

[Guidance for Outdoor Sport and Play](#) published by the charity Fields in Trust provides guidance on the quantity and type of play space in new residential areas and required distances from dwellings for different age groups. 75% of local authorities are working to this or equivalent guidance.<sup>193</sup>

It has been used by the government as a reference since it was created in the 1930s (when it was known as the 'six acre standard') and is currently referred to in the [National Model Design Code Guidance Notes](#). It was most recently [updated in November 2024](#) (see section 1.4 of this briefing).

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<sup>193</sup> Fields in Trust, [Standards](#), accessed December 2024

## 6 Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

### 6.1 Scotland

Scotland's [National Planning Framework 4](#) considers the needs of children and young people in outside space under [Play, recreation and sport Policy 21](#).<sup>194</sup> Section E states:

Development proposals that include new streets and public realm should be inclusive and enable children and young people to play and move around safely and independently, maximising opportunities for informal and incidental play in the neighbourhood.<sup>195</sup>

A [play sufficiency duty](#) was introduced in 2023. This is a [legislative duty](#) requiring a planning authority to assess the sufficiency of play opportunities for children.<sup>196</sup>

Scotland also has strategy and guidance on outdoor play including '[Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Action Plan](#)' which sets out steps to improve the play experiences of children and young people in Scotland and '[Out to play: Practical guidance for creating outdoor play experiences in early learning and childcare](#)', produced by the Scottish Government, Inspiring Scotland and the Care Inspectorate.<sup>197</sup>

### 6.2 Wales

In Wales, the [Wellbeing of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act \(2015\)](#) requires public bodies to prioritise long-term sustainability and wellbeing.<sup>198</sup> Welsh national planning policy, [Planning Policy Wales](#) and [Future Wales: the national plan 2040](#), was reframed in 2018 around the concept of 'placemaking'. It aims for the Welsh Government "to think about how we will retain and attract young people to all parts of Wales, provide

<sup>194</sup> Scottish Government, [National Planning Framework 4](#), 9 October 2024

<sup>195</sup> Scottish Government, [National Planning Framework 4](#), 9 October 2024, Policy 21, E

<sup>196</sup> Scottish Government, [The Town and Country Planning \(Play Sufficiency Assessment\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2023](#), 23 May 2023

<sup>197</sup> LUHC Committee, Children, young people and the built environment, [written evidence from Fields in Trust](#), December 2023; Also see International Play Association, [Play Rights Magazine](#), December 2024 'Shaping a Scotland for Play' by Jenny Woods

<sup>198</sup> The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, [Consider how you can ensure children have access to daily outdoor play](#)

opportunities to support children and young people and promote active lifestyles”.<sup>199</sup> Planning Policy Wales sets out the objectives of good design. This includes ‘inclusivity’ and requires provision to meet the needs of people with young children. For example, [Edition 12 of Planning Policy Wales published in February 2024](#) says:

New development should improve the quality of place and create safe, social, attractive streets where people want to walk, cycle and enjoy, and children can play.<sup>200</sup>

The Design Commission for Wales published a [Placemaking Guide](#) in 2020 which includes design for the needs of children and young people. Further guidance on active and social streets as well as recreational space can be found in these Technical Advice Notes: [TAN 12: design](#); [TAN 16: sport, recreation and open space](#). For example:

In every area of development earlier and greater attention should be given to the needs of all sectors of society, including older people, children and disabled people. This principle applies to the design of the public realm, to public transport infrastructure and to the location, design and layout of public leisure facilities as well as the design of individual buildings.<sup>201</sup>

The Welsh Government also produced statutory guidance for local authorities, ‘[Wales –a Play Friendly Country](#)’, as part of the [Children and Families \(Wales\) Measure 2010](#) on securing sufficient play opportunities for children. As in Scotland, it is a statutory duty for Welsh local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their areas.<sup>202</sup>

The [Ministerial Review of Play progress report](#) was published in February 2025. The review had two aims: to assess the Welsh Government’s work relating to play policy and to help the Welsh Government shape how it develops and progresses the play agenda.<sup>203</sup> The progress report demonstrates the achievements made to date and outlines the actions Welsh Government will take forward to meet the anticipated outcomes.<sup>204</sup>

## 6.3 Northern Ireland

The Northern Irish planning system is undergoing transition from the old [Planning Order 1991](#) to the newer [Planning Act 2011](#).

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<sup>199</sup> Welsh Government, [Update to Future Wales - The National Plan 2040](#) page 50

<sup>200</sup> Welsh Government, [Planning Policy Wales - Edition 12](#), para 4.1.19

<sup>201</sup> Welsh Government, [Technical Advice Note 12: Design](#), March 2016 para 5.3.2

<sup>202</sup> Welsh Government, [Planning Policy Wales - Edition 12](#) ; Also see International Play Association, [Play Rights Magazine](#), December 2024 ‘Play Sufficiency in Wales’ by Marianne Manello

<sup>203</sup> Welsh Government, [Written Statement: Ministerial Review of Play - Response to the Steering Group recommendations](#), 23 October 2023

<sup>204</sup> Welsh Government, [Ministerial Review of Play progress report](#), February 2025



Under the Planning Act 2011, councils are now responsible for local and major planning. The overarching [Strategic Planning Policy Statement](#) (SPPS), produced under the Planning Act 2011, refers to children and young people:

Everyone, particularly children, older people and people with disabilities should have easy access to open space and the opportunity to participate in sport and outdoor recreational activity or simply enjoy and have contact with nature.<sup>205</sup>

Under the [Planning Act 2011](#), each council is required to prepare and adopt a Local Development Plan (LDP) for its district, taking the SPPS into consideration.

Until councils have produced their finalised LDPs, Planning Policy Statements (produced under the old 1991 Order) have remained in place to provide more specific detail where the SPPS does not. For example, [PPS 8: Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation](#) refers to provisions for children and young people.

In addition, Northern Ireland's Department for Education has produced a [play and leisure policy](#) with [an implementation plan](#) as well as a [Play Matters campaign](#). The [Department for Education's website](#) has leaflets and guidance to be used to [encourage adults to allow children to play](#) explaining its importance.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Northern Ireland Executive, Department of the Environment, [Strategic Planning Policy Statement](#), September 2015, pages 86-87

<sup>206</sup> Northern Ireland Executive, [Play Matters](#); Also see International Play Association, [Play Rights Magazine](#), December 2024 'Borderline Play: Policy differentials between North and South in Ireland' by Alan Herron and Fiona Armstrong

## 7 Children and young people friendly initiatives in the UK

### 7.1 Housing estates, developers and social housing providers

#### Housing estates

Highgate New Town Phase 1, better known as the Whittington Estate in north London, is a housing estate built for the London Borough of Camden between 1972 and 1979. The 275-home development was designed by the Council's in-house team. It is the subject of a short film '[White Flats](#)' which details how the pedestrian nature of the estate allows children and young people freedom to move around, meet up and play outside together.<sup>207</sup>

#### Developers

There are examples of child and young person friendly designed, planned and managed housing developments which have won awards:

- The Royal Institute of British Architects ([RIBA](#)) awarded the RIBA East Award 2019 and RIBA National Award 2019 to the developer [TOWN](#) for [Marmalade Lane](#) in Cambridge which it said created a street "where children are able to play under the gentle gaze of parents and neighbours".<sup>208</sup>
- [RIBA's Stirling Prize](#) in 2019 went to [Goldsmiths Street in Norwich](#) by Mikhail Riches Architects which allowed play through a series of spaces accessible to children from their front and back doors.
- In July 2023 Redrow Housing launched a '[Play Here](#)' campaign alongside a [Play Making Report](#).<sup>209</sup>
- In June 2024 the land developer [Lands Improvement](#) published a 'placemaking whitepaper', entitled '[Better Play in new developments](#)'.

<sup>207</sup> The Developer, [There's a real outdoor community. Everyone joins up and plays](#), 2024

<sup>208</sup> RIBA Awards, [Marmalade Lane Cohousing](#), 2019

<sup>209</sup> In 2024 Redrow published a follow-up report: [Breaking the Glass Ceiling](#)

- The [Earls Court Development Company](#) has created an intergenerational approach to community engagement with their [Public Realm Inclusivity Panel](#) which includes several young people under 18 years of age.

## Social housing providers

Clarion Housing Group has recognised its role in promoting healthy places for children and young people to play out on its properties.<sup>210</sup> It has created a new play strategy, including a commitment to communicate with residents about the difference between play and anti-social behaviour as well as creating a shared understanding of the benefits of active play.<sup>211</sup> Peabody, another social housing provider, has also clarified it does not accept children playing to be anti-social behaviour.<sup>212</sup>

## Local authorities

### Leeds City Council

Leeds City Council has launched a [Play Sufficiency Action Plan](#) with nine strategic play priorities including the creation of safer, more welcoming streets that encourage children's play.<sup>213</sup> A councillor has been appointed to oversee this as a 'play champion'.<sup>214</sup> Leeds Council is also embedding child-friendly cities initiatives into its local planning policy through local plan updates, having already embedded youth engagement targets within the latest adopted version of the statement of community involvement.<sup>215</sup>

### Greater London Authority (GLA)

The GLA's [London Plan](#)<sup>216</sup> has a section on play and informal recreation as well as their [Making London Child-Friendly](#) guidance report.<sup>217</sup>

The London Plan outlines a range of principles to improve development for children, while also bringing in specific policies that must be followed. It requires individual boroughs to assess the need for children and young

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<sup>210</sup> LUHC Committee, Children, young people and the built environment, [written evidence from the Clarion Housing Group](#), December 2023

<sup>211</sup> LUHC Committee, Children, young people and the built environment, [written evidence from the Clarion Housing Group](#), December 2023

<sup>212</sup> Peabody, [Resident handbook: what issues are not considered anti-social behaviour \(ASB\)?](#), accessed February 2025

<sup>213</sup> [Leeds City Magazine, Council Commits to Play Sufficiency with New Champion and Action Plan](#), 15 December 2023

<sup>214</sup> Leeds City Council, [Senior councillors approve new play sufficiency priorities and appoint new Leeds Play Champion](#), 15 December 2023; Child Friendly Leeds, [Play sufficiency](#), accessed February 2025

<sup>215</sup> LUHC Committee, Children, young people and the built environment, [written evidence from Leeds City Council](#), December 2023

<sup>216</sup> The London Plan is the strategic plan for London, setting out an economic, environmental, transport and social framework for development.

<sup>217</sup> Publica, [Making London Child Friendly: Good Growth by Design](#), March 2020

people's play facilities and increase facilities for play and recreation, especially in residential developments, as part of their development plan preparation.

New developments are also required to have play strategies as part of the planning proposals submitted to the local authority.<sup>218</sup>

In 2021 the policy on play was updated and expanded to include references to independent mobility of children and stipulating that play provision [should not be segregated by tenure](#). This was in response to an investigation by The Guardian which found that new mixed tenure developments in London were segregating children's play areas blocking social housing residents from using green shared play spaces.<sup>219</sup>

The GLA is preparing the next London Plan with the draft plan consultation scheduled for 2026.<sup>220</sup>

### London Borough of Hackney

The London Borough of Hackney has produced a child-friendly places supplementary planning document: [Growing up in Hackney](#). The document aims to make doorstep play easier, make streets more walkable, to improve connection with nature, to ensure places are inclusive for all, to improve health and wellbeing, and to engage children and young people more in the process.<sup>221</sup>

### Aberdeen and East Lothian

The [Dennis Law Legacy Trust](#) launched [a campaign](#) in 2015 that resulted in Aberdeen City Council removing hundreds of No Ball Games signs from across the city. They then created 'yes ball games' signs.<sup>222</sup>

In East Lothian there has been an 'Ok to play' campaign where 'No Ball Games' signs have been removed, and instead pro play signs have been placed in public spaces. East Lothian council said:

No Ball Games signs make it worse as children say the signs make them feel unwelcome and when we feel unwelcome, we are more likely to stay home and play computer games.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> London Play, [The London Plan and Play in London](#), October 2024; Mayor of London, [Guide to preparing play strategies Planning inclusive play spaces and opportunities for all London's children and young people](#), April 2005

<sup>219</sup> The Guardian, [Too poor to play: children in social housing blocked from communal playground](#), 25 March 2019

<sup>220</sup> GLA, [The next London Plan](#), accessed September 2025

<sup>221</sup> LUHC Committee, Children, young people and the built environment, [written evidence from Fields in Trust](#), December 2023

<sup>222</sup> Dennis Law Legacy Trust, [Yes Ball Games](#), 2015

<sup>223</sup> East Lothian Play Association, [No more "No Ball Games"... East Lothian kids say it's "ok to play"](#), 3 August 2021



## 8 What are other countries doing?

The concept of child friendly urbanism has arisen from the realisation by a number of city authorities as well as national government of the benefits that child friendly planning can bring. The examples provided show how child friendly programmes may be driven either by the benefits for children and young people themselves, the links with sustainability and community, or the impact on urban economics and demographics – or a combination of these.<sup>224</sup> It can be led and funded from central government or on a city by city basis.

### 8.1 Canada

In 2024 the Canadian federal government provided \$CAD 9 million for a [national implementation programme to promote physical activity and healthy living](#) including funding for school streets and outdoor play.

Also in 2024, The Canadian Paediatric Society published a policy statement on the [benefits of independent, 'risky' play to healthy child development](#). It recommended that public health authorities and government policy-makers should advocate for it and support provision among teachers, local authorities and community organisers.<sup>225</sup>

### 8.2 Paris, France

Paris' mayor Anne Hidalgo, was first elected in 2014. In 2020 she was re-elected with a political ambition to improve the environment in Paris for children. She said [in an interview in 2023](#):

I have a dream, because I was born in Andalucía [in southern Spain], where the way of life is very different. When I was little, we — the children, the grandparents, everybody — would go down to the street with our chairs and we would play there. For me, that is like an ideal.<sup>226</sup>

<sup>224</sup> Tim Gill, *Urban Playground: How child-friendly planning and design can save cities*, 2021, Chapter 4 pp 58-59

<sup>225</sup> Canadian Paediatric Society, [Healthy childhood development through outdoor risky play: Navigating the balance with injury prevention](#), 25 January 2024

<sup>226</sup> Financial Times, [Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo: A city's creativity doesn't depend on cars. That's the 20th century](#), 13 March 2023

British based [Playing Out](#) advised Paris on how to implement their Bristol originated 'play street' model. The concept of '[Rues aux Enfants](#)' was introduced and now over 200 Parisian schools have car-free streets with the aim for over 300 to be created by the end of 2025. The car-free school streets have been found to provide a natural space for outdoor activities and socialising before and after school both for children and adults. Many of the streets have also had vegetation, benches, street art and games added.<sup>227</sup>

## 8.3 Rotterdam, Netherlands

In 2006 Rotterdam was seen as the worst municipality in the Netherlands to bring up a child resulting in 'family flight' which was draining the city of inhabitants. The city leaders decided to take strategic action under: [Rotterdam, city with a future: How to build a Child Friendly City](#).<sup>228</sup>

Since 2016 the city has had a vision of 'Lets go outside!' ('[Kom Op Naar Buiten!](#)') and removed car parking spaces, widened pavements, created squares with a range of play experiences, seating and a connection with the street network. This has created doorstep play spaces and spaces for people to socialise.<sup>229</sup>

## 8.4 Norway

In Norway children and young people are included in planning consultations. A [translation of Norway's Planning and Building Act \(2008\)](#) states that in relation to public participation in planning:

The municipality has a special responsibility for ensuring the active participation of groups who require special facilitation, including children and youth. Groups and interests who are not capable of participating directly shall be ensured good opportunities of participating in another way.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Creating Cities for Everyone, Webinar: [School Streets: Enhancing Neighbourhoods in Paris and Barcelona](#), City of Paris Urban Planner Priscilla Benedetti, February 2025; Alexander, S. A. [Regaining public space for children: the context and mechanisms of a play street intervention in central Paris](#). Cities & Health, 1 – 14, November 2024

<sup>228</sup> Early Childhood Matters, [Making-Rotterdam-child-friendly](#), November 2010

<sup>229</sup> Rethinking Childhood, [How a focus on child-friendliness revived one city's fortunes](#), 26 April 2018

<sup>230</sup> Norwegian Government, [English language translation of the Planning and Building Act \(2008\)](#), section 5.1



## 8.5 Bratislava, Slovakia

Bratislava is the second poorest capital in the European Union (after Sofia in Bulgaria). It was facing ‘brain drain’ as many young people were leaving. The city needed to attract families and businesses to relocate there as well as providing reasons for locals to stay.<sup>231</sup> City leaders launched a city-wide effort to focus its planning and development around the needs of children, in the hope of creating a cleaner, greener, safer city. Mayor Matúš Vallo said, “A city that’s friendly toward children is friendly toward everyone”.<sup>232</sup>

As a result, streets have been made pedestrian-friendly and public spaces have been better protected from traffic and less prone to siloing children into fenced-off areas. There is also a rotating roster of ‘play streets’ which allows children to temporarily play in different streets. Bratislava now hosts the annual [Start with Children Summit](#) bringing city leaders from around the world together to learn and exchange ideas on how to make their cities better places for children and young people.

## 8.6 Barcelona, Spain

The 2019 [Plan for Play in Barcelona’s Public Spaces](#) sought to transform Barcelona from a city with play areas to a playable city by 2030. In 2021, a [Plan for Childhood 2021-2030](#) was introduced to improve the lives of all children and teenagers in Barcelona. Now, any new development must take the well-being of children into account.<sup>233</sup>

The government also funded ‘[Superblocks](#)’ which are 400 x 400 metre units of open space in the city centre. The aim was to recover space for communities through limiting traffic and pedestrianising parts of the road network. Results so far have shown they have increased the number of journeys made on foot or by bike.<sup>234</sup> Academics at Manchester University have also found the superblocks have created an informal type of childcare:

This international example demonstrates the importance, value and impact of investing in public social spaces and infrastructures designed with children in mind, so that they can be used as intergenerational spaces of care.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Bloomberg UK, [A Planning Revolution in Bratislava Puts Kids at the Center](#), Fergus O’Sullivan, 26 June 2024

<sup>232</sup> Bloomberg UK, [A Planning Revolution in Bratislava Puts Kids at the Center](#), Fergus O’Sullivan, 26 June 2024

<sup>233</sup> Ajuntament de Barcelona, [Plan for Play in public spaces, 2030 horizon in Barcelona](#)

<sup>234</sup> C40 Cities, [The implementation of the Superblocks programme in Barcelona: Filling our streets with life](#), March 2018

<sup>235</sup> LUHC Committee, Children, young people and the built environment, [written evidence from Public Space and Social Infrastructure for Children and Young People](#), December 2023

The blocks achieve this by facilitating “interactions among parents and carers that are conducive to the creation of self-managed childcare systems beyond the home, as well as strengthening social bonds within local communities”.<sup>236</sup>

In March 2025 the Parliament of Catalonia passed an amendment excluding the sound of children playing from noise pollution legislation.<sup>237</sup> It followed the lead of German cities such as Berlin and Italian cities such as Bologna and Milan.

In Germany, courts have held that the sound of children and young people playing does not constitute 'noise disturbance' or as [one commentator put it](#) “the noise of playing children is defined as not noise”. Instead, noise from playing is seen as a reasonable expression of a child’s development.<sup>238</sup> Similarly, in many Italian cities complaints arising from children and young people playing outside are no longer accepted as legitimate. Children and young people cannot be banned from public areas.<sup>239</sup> Bologna’s new regulations recognise “the right of children to play” and that “children must be allowed to play in the courtyards, as well as in the gardens and outdoor areas of private residential buildings”.<sup>240</sup> Amsterdam is currently considering a similar change to its byelaws regarding the noise of children playing.<sup>241</sup>

## 8.7 Vienna, Austria

A newly created district is being built on the outskirts of Vienna – one of Europe’s largest development projects. [Aspern Seestadt](#), Aspern Lake, built around a manmade lake on a former airport, will, upon completion, house 25,000 people and 20,000 work places in an area of 240 hectares. The female architect, [Eva Kail who pioneered gender mainstreaming in Austria](#), has influenced the creation in Aspern Seestadt of a child and family friendly environment based around car free public spaces for people to meet, rest and play.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> LUHC Committee, Children, young people and the built environment, [written evidence from Public Space and Social Infrastructure for Children and Young People](#), December 2023

<sup>237</sup> El Pais, [Catalonia shields noise from school playgrounds: "They're children, not cars."](#) 12 March 2025

<sup>238</sup> Take Care, [Complains about children noise pollution? Find out what is reasonable for Germany.](#) May 2020; BBC News, [Noisy children no longer verboten in Berlin](#), 17 February 2010 ; AG Hamburg, judgment of 06.02.2002, Az .: 41B C 222/01).

<sup>239</sup> Il Giorno, [Giochi in cortile? Milano vieta di vietare la libertà ai bambini](#), 22 July 2019

<sup>240</sup> Bologna Today, ["I bimbi possono giocare in cortile": a Bologna è una norma del nuovo Regolamento edilizio](#), 5 August 2021

<sup>241</sup> The Guardian, [Amsterdam: sound of children playing not a valid reason for complaint, say experts](#), 8 May 2025

<sup>242</sup> 4 Cities, [Seestadt: Creating a livable city from scratch](#), 17 October 2019

The Guardian, [City with a female face: how modern Vienna was shaped by women](#), 14 May 2019

## 8.8 UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative

The [UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative](#) promotes the UN Convention for the Rights of the Child at the local level through a network of municipal governments, civil society organizations, the private sector, academia, media and children themselves in more than 40 countries.

[Cardiff is the first city](#) in the UK to be awarded UNICEF status. UNICEF child friendly candidate cities in the UK include Aberdeen, Derry and Strabane, Lambeth (London), Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham, Redbridge (London), Southampton and Wokingham.<sup>243</sup>

## 8.9 Urban95 Academy

The [Urban95 Academy](#) is located at the London School of Economics. It is founded on the concept that a city should be viewed from 95 cm above the ground – the height of an average three-year-old. It supports city leaders in understanding how they can improve the lives of young children and families by reimagining urban policies, programmes and places that put babies, toddlers, and caregivers at the centre.

The Academy began with 30 cities in 2022. By the end of 2023 it had trained over 600 city leaders from nearly 200 cities (including from the UK: London Boroughs of Islington, Waltham Forest, Tower Hamlets and Ealing, Wolverhampton, Brighton and Hove, Bradford, Cardiff, Leeds City Council and Oxford). The programme has been extended for three more years to provide training and support for a further 300 cities and 900 city leaders.<sup>244</sup>

## 8.10 8 to 80 Cities

[8 to 80 Cities](#) is built on the idea that cities should work equally for an eighty-year-old and an eight-year-old. Gil Peñalosa, (having moved to Canada from Bogota where he helped his brother Enrique Peñalosa, the former Mayor of Bogota transform the city) said:

Imagine if everything we did in our public spaces benefitted both eight-year-olds and eighty-year-olds. The end result would be great cities for everyone.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> UNICEF, Child-Friendly Cities Initiative: [United Kingdom](#)

<sup>244</sup> Urban95 Academy, [Start designing cities that work for everyone](#)

<sup>245</sup> 8 to 80 Cities, [Creating cities for all](#)

It works across Canada and North America to promote “Healthy, happy, and sustainable cities for people to grow up and grow old in; where all people have the right to safe and active mobility, welcoming and accessible public spaces, and inclusive city-building processes”.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> 8 80 Cities, [Creating cities for all](#)

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## 9 Recent discussion in Parliament

### 9.1 Levelling up, Housing and Communities Committee inquiry

In November 2023, the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee launched an inquiry on Children, Young People and the Built Environment to examine government policy in this area. Due to the 2024 General Election, the committee report did not publish a report. However, all of the [written evidence](#) it received and [transcripts of oral evidence](#) sessions are available.

The inquiry's [terms of reference](#) asked a number of questions including how children and young people experienced outdoor spaces in towns, cities and rural areas across the country as well as how and why experiences varied.

A summary of the evidence has since been published in December 2024 in a report by the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) entitled: [Raising the healthiest generation in history: why it matters where children and young people live](#). This contains the TCPA's recommendations, including to improve national leadership, develop a play strategy for England and enhance access to nature and green spaces.

### 9.2 Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee inquiry on Urban Green Spaces

In September 2023 the EFRA Committee launched an inquiry into [how green spaces in built-up areas can help to meet the environmental challenges of urban living](#). Public Health England had estimated the NHS could save [£2.1 billion in treatment costs](#) each year if everyone in England had equal access to good quality green spaces where they could exercise. The Committee [heard about the health and community benefits](#) that green spaces provide. It also spoke to those who work to protect and [manage urban green spaces](#) to learn about the challenges.

In March 2024 the Committee [wrote to the Defra Secretary of State](#) arguing that green spaces should be a much higher priority, and called for reforms and greater Government leadership to encourage more investment into and facilitation of green infrastructure. Rebecca Pow, the then Minister for

Nature [responded in April 2024](#) and the letter was co-signed by Ministers from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

## 9.3

# Planning and Infrastructure Bill proposed amendments

## Amendment NC 82 Planning and Infrastructure Bill

The [Amendment](#) was led by Tom Hayes MP. The amendment was not put to a vote.

### Play Sufficiency Duty

(1) A local planning authority in England must, so far as reasonably practicable, assess, secure, enhance, and protect sufficient opportunities for childrens play when exercising any of its planning functions.

(2) In fulfilling the duty under subsection (1), a local planning authority must—

(a) undertake and publish play sufficiency assessments at intervals to be defined in regulations;

(b) integrate the findings and recommendations of such assessments into local plans, relevant strategies, infrastructure planning, and development decisions;

(c) not give permission for any development which would lead to a net loss of formal or informal play spaces except where equivalent or improved provision is secured;

(d) require new developments to provide high-quality, accessible, inclusive play opportunities which incorporate natural features and are integrated within broader public spaces; and

(e) consult regularly with children, families, communities, and play professionals regarding play provision.

(3) A play sufficiency assessment produced under subsection (2)(a) must specifically evaluate and report on the quantity, quality, accessibility, inclusivity, and integration of play opportunities within the planning authoritys area.

(4) The Secretary of State may, by regulations, specify—

(a) the frequency, methodology, content, and publication requirements of play sufficiency assessments;

(b) minimum design standards and quality expectations for formal and informal play provision;

(c) developer obligations regarding play infrastructure contributions to be secured through planning conditions.

(5) For the purposes of this section—

“play” means activities undertaken by children and young people that are freely chosen, self-directed, and carried out following their own interests, in their own way, and for their own reasons;

“play opportunities” include formal and informal play spaces, parks, open spaces, streets, schools, neighbourhood spaces, natural green areas, active travel routes, supervised play settings (including adventure playgrounds), and community recreation facilities;

“sufficient” means adequate in quantity, quality, accessibility, inclusivity, and integration within community infrastructure.”

In [his response](#) the Minister for Housing and Planning, Matthew Pennycook MP said:

I recognise the importance of what the amendments seek to achieve, and the provision of play space is one of the areas we are considering as we prepare a new set of national planning policies for decision making, on which we will consult this year. I commit to my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East to writing to my counterparts at the Department for Education and at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to ensure that we are acting across Government to increase spaces for play. I will work with him to broker the necessary ministerial meetings that he seeks.<sup>247</sup>

## Amendment NC 165 Planning and Infrastructure Bill

The [Amendment](#) was led by Lord Addington.

Preservation of playing fields and pitches

(1) A local planning authority must, when exercising any of its functions, ensure the preservation of playing fields and playing pitches.

(2) The duty in subsection (1) may, when granting permission for development, be met through the imposition of conditions or requirements relating to— (a) the protection of playing fields or playing pitches affected by the development, or (b) the provision of alternative, additional or expanded playing fields or playing pitches.

(3) For the purposes of this section, “playing fields” and “playing pitches” have the same meanings as in the Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2010.

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<sup>247</sup> HC Debate [Planning and Infrastructure Bill - Hansard - UK Parliament](#), column 755

The Guardian, [Space for children to play should be a requirement in planning law, say MPs](#), 13 May 2025; Sky News, [Dozens of MPs back campaign to revive playgrounds](#), 10 June 2025; The Independent, [Playgrounds ‘left to rot’ as children stay indoors instead](#), 6 June 2025



Introducing the Amendment, Lord Addington said that local authorities and other owners of playing fields are “under pressure” to turn over these “greenfield sites” to other purposes.<sup>248</sup> The response from the Lord in Waiting to Amendment 165 is discussed with Amendment 179 below.

House of Lords: [Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#)

HL Deb 11 September 2026 | Vol 848 cc1652-1772

## Amendment NC 179 Planning and Infrastructure Bill

The [Amendment](#) was led by Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle. The Amendment replicates the wording of Amendment NC 82 led by Tom Hayes MP in the House of Commons, with the addition of a paragraph providing for the annulment of statutory instruments.

Introducing the Amendment, Baroness Bennett said that the Amendment covers both “structured” and “unstructured” play, including in “informal play spaces” such as street corners.<sup>249</sup>

In [his response](#) on Amendment 165 and Amendment 179, the Lord in Waiting, Lord Wilson of Sedgefield, said:

There is nothing in the Bill that removes the strong protection for playing fields, especially the commitments in the NPPF. Play spaces are vital for supporting the health and well-being of local communities and as such are already considered through existing planning policy and guidance which collectively protect their provision. The National Planning Policy Framework sets out that development plans should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the need for open space, sport and recreation facilities and opportunities for new provision. This includes places for children’s play, both formal and informal, including playing fields. [...]

In December last year, the Government updated planning policy to make specific reference to safeguarding formal play spaces in the National Planning Policy Framework, enhancing the protection of those spaces where they may be threatened by other development types. The framework is clear that play spaces can be lost only if the facility is no longer of community need or there is a justified alternative somewhere else. [...]

In recognition of the importance of play space provision for communities, we are also considering what more we can say about this important area as we prepare a new set of national planning policies for decision-making, on which we intend to consult this year. Further considerations on play spaces are set out in national design guidance that encourages the provision of such spaces and sets out how they can be integrated into new development. [...] The Government are in the process of updating that guidance. A new version is

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<sup>248</sup> HL Debate, [Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#), columns 1718-1719

<sup>249</sup> HL Debate, [Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#), columns 1719-1721

expected to be published later this year and play spaces have been reviewed as part of the update.<sup>250</sup>

The Lord in Waiting agreed to a meeting with Baroness Bennett and Lord Addington on Amendment 179. He also noted that an [All-Party Parliamentary Group \(APPG\) on Play](#) has been established by Tom Hayes MP.

House of Lords: [Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#)

HL Deb 11 September 2026 | Vol 848 cc1652-1772

## 9.4 Debates

Westminster Hall debate: [Playgrounds](#)

HC Deb 8 January 2025 | Vol 759 cc384WH-402WH

The debate led by Tom Hayes MP noted that it was the first debate on the subject in eight years and—at an hour—the longest for 17 years. A survey amongst his constituents (Bournemouth East - which received nearly 650 responses from parents) found playgrounds were seen as:

- “a place to grow, to experiment, to push themselves, to learn alongside others and to be free from a screen-obsessed childhood”;
- “in a cost of living crisis, playgrounds give families places to spend time at no cost”; and
- “playgrounds are vital outdoor spaces for parents and families who do not have space at home”.

He said “How can we keep our kids away from screens when playgrounds are broken, unattractive, a lot of times unkept and dirty?”

In response the Minister Alex Norris MP said:

Playgrounds are a vital part of our social infrastructure. As we have heard, they contribute to the health and development of our children and young people across the nation. Importantly for us as a Government, they also build on our mission of opportunities for all by ensuring that everyone has the best start in life.

## 9.5 Parliamentary questions

- [Sports: Children and Young People](#)

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<sup>250</sup> HL Debate, [Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#), columns 1725-1726

Asked by: Mr Andrew Snowden

To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, what steps she is taking to help improve access to sport for (a) children and (b) young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in the Fylde constituency.

Answering member: Stephanie Peacock | Department for Culture, Media and Sport

Every child should have the opportunity to play sport and do regular physical activity including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Prime Minister recently announced a new School Sport Partnerships approach and a new Enrichment Framework for schools to ensure all young people have equal access to high-quality sport and extracurricular activity. The ongoing independent expert-led review of the curriculum will ensure that all children can engage with a broad range of subjects, including PE and sport.

On 20 June 2025, the Culture Secretary announced that following the Spending Review, at least £400 million is going to be invested into new and upgraded grassroots sport facilities in communities right across the UK, supporting the Government's Plan for Change. We will now work closely with sporting bodies and local leaders to establish what each community needs, including for children and young people, and then set out further plans.

HC Deb 21 July 2025 | PQ 67579

- [Planning: Outdoor Recreation](#)

Asked by: Mr Peter Bedford

To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, whether she has considered including child development in the planning process to encourage outdoor activities.

Answering member: Matthew Pennycook | Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) recognises that access to a network of high-quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and physical activity is important for the health and well-being of communities, including children.

The Framework is clear that local planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the need for open space, sport and recreation facilities, and opportunities for new provision, including places for children's play.

In the revised NPPF published on 12 December 2024 we strengthened the strong protections already in place by adding explicit reference to safeguarding “formal play spaces”. That means that facilities can be lost only where there is clear evidence they are no longer required, where equivalent or better provision is secured in a suitable location, or where development of the site is for alternative sports and recreational provision, the benefits of which clearly outweigh the loss of the current or former use.

HC Deb 14 July 2025 | PQ 65413

- [Outdoor Recreation: Young People](#)

Asked by: Katie White

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, what steps he is taking to increase access to nature for young people.

Answering member: Mary Creagh | Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

The Government is committed to increasing access to nature for all, especially young people. In 2024, Defra invested £4.45 million in a second phase of the Generation Green programme, enabling over 25,000 disadvantaged children and young people to experience the natural environment. While Environmental Land Management schemes don't specifically target youth, a new three-year capital item supports educational access to farmland and woodland for school groups and care farming initiatives.

Defra also leads a cross-Government Children and Nature Working Group to share best practices on improving outcomes for young people through nature. The £16 million Access for All programme has funded inclusive facilities like pedal and play areas for young people.

Most of the 254,000-hectare public forest estate managed by Forestry England is open to the public, welcoming 313 million visits annually. England's 15 Community Forests, supported by the Nature for Climate Fund, engage schools and community groups in tree planting and outdoor learning—53% of England's population lives within 10 miles of one.

Additionally, on 15 May 2025, DCMS announced £4.7 million to increase access to outdoor learning. The competition for the Adventures Away from Home delivery partner is live and closes on 15 July 2025.

HC Deb 10 July 2025 | PQ 64694

- [Playgrounds: Equipment](#)

Asked by: Tom Hayes

To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, whether she is taking steps to encourage local authorities to buy playground equipment from UK manufacturers.

Answering member: Alex Norris | Home Office

Playgrounds are a vital part of our social infrastructure. They contribute to the health and development of children and young people across the nation and build on the government's mission of opportunities for all by ensuring everyone has the best start in life.

Local authorities work locally to support adults and children to lead more active lives through access to public leisure services, green space, parks and playground spaces. Their public health budgets are used to deliver local physical activity interventions such as the purchasing of playground equipment. The majority of funding in the Local Government Finance Settlement is unringfenced, recognising that local leaders are best placed to identify local priorities and that procurement is up to the discretion of Local authorities rather than the Government.

HC Deb 9 July 2025 | PQ 64236

- [Sports: Children](#)

Asked by: Louie French

To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, what steps she is taking to help ensure that children have access to (a) safe and (b) welcoming spaces for (i) play and (ii) sport within their communities.

Answering member: Stephanie Peacock | Department for Culture, Media and Sport

Playgrounds are a vital part of our social infrastructure. They contribute to the health and development of children and young people across the nation and build on the Government's mission of opportunities for all by ensuring everyone has the best start in life.

The National Design Guide demonstrates how new development can promote inclusive design by creating buildings and spaces that are safe, social and inclusive. This should include spaces for comfort, relaxation and stimulation, including play.

In addition, everyone should be able to take part in sport safely. National Governing Bodies (NGBs) are responsible for the regulation of their sports and for ensuring that appropriate measures are in place to protect participants from harm. Whilst NGBs are independent of Government, we are clear that health and safety of participants, including children, must be their top priority.

The Government is investing £100 million through the Multi Sport Grassroots Facilities Programme to build and upgrade high-quality grassroots sports pitches and facilities in the communities across the UK that need it most, including children and young people.

On 20 June 2025, the Culture Secretary announced that following Spending Review, at least £400 million is going to be invested into new and upgraded grassroots sport facilities in communities right across the UK, supporting the Government's Plan for Change. We will work closely with sporting bodies and local leaders to establish what each community needs and then set out further plans.

HC Deb 30 June 2025 | PQ 61843

- [Recreation Spaces](#)

Asked by: Betts, Mr Clive

To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, what steps she is taking to help ensure that people living in new homes have access to well-designed green spaces.

Answering member: Rushanara Ali | Department: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

National planning policy and guidance recognise the importance of high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and physical activity for the health and wellbeing of communities.

Our proposals to release 'grey belt' land for development will depend on meeting golden rules, ensuring that all new developments has accessible green space.

HC Deb 28 October 2024 | PQ 900885

- [Topical Questions](#)

Asked by: Mr Clive Betts

Let me first draw attention to my declared interest as a trustee of Fields in Trust.

In the last Parliament, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee received a large amount of evidence concerning the importance of well-designed open spaces for children and young people, but the national planning policy framework mentions them once and mentions bats twice. Is it not about time we got our priorities right, and did more to improve the design of—

Answered by: The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali) | Department: Housing, Communities and Local Government

The national planning policy guidance will recognise the importance of high-quality open spaces and opportunities for sports, physical activity, health and wellbeing in our communities. Our proposals to release grey-belt land for development will depend on developers' meeting one of the "golden rules" and ensuring that all new developments have accessible green space.

HC Deb 28 October 2024 | Vol 755 c528



## 10 Further reading

### 10.1 Reports

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- Arup, [Cities Alive: Designing for Urban Childhoods](#), December 2017
- Chief Medical Officer, [Annual report 2024: health in cities](#), December 2024 and [Annual report 2012: children and young people's health](#), October 2013
- Child and Adolescent Health Research Group, [Priorities for Play: Towards 2030 and Beyond](#), June 2023
- Children's Commissioner for England, [Playing Out](#), August 2018
- Design Council Homes Taskforce, [Design for Neighbourhoods](#), March 2025
- Demos, [Seen and Heard, Reclaiming the public realm with children and young people](#), 2007
- Fields in Trust, [Green Space Index](#), June 2024
- House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, [Public parks](#), Seventh Report of Session 2016–17, 11 February 2017
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- National Association of City Transportation Officials, [Designing Streets for Kids](#), 2019
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- Play England, [2023 Playday Report](#), 2023
- Play England, [It all starts with Play: A Ten Year Play Strategy](#), May 2025
- Play Wales, [Playing and being well: A review of recent research into children's play, social policy and practice](#), November 2024
- Publica, [Making London Child Friendly: Good Growth by Design](#), March 2020

- Raising the Nation and Centre for Young Lives Play Commission, [‘State of Play’ Interim Report](#), February 2025
- Raising the Nation and Centre for Young Lives Play Commission, [Everything to Play for](#), June 2025
- Royal Society for Public Health, [Playground Rules](#), 2024
- Royal Town Planning Institute, [Child-Friendly Planning in the UK: A review](#), 2019
- Save the Children International, [Mapping neighbourhoods for and with children](#), March 2025
- Solve the School Run, [School travel key findings](#), 2025
- Sport England, [Active Lives Children and Young People Survey Academic year 2023-24](#), December 2024
- Sustrans, [Children's Walking and Cycling Index](#), February 2025
- Town and Country Planning Association, [Raising the healthiest generation in history: why it matters where children and young people live](#), December 2024
- UNICEF, [The Necessity of Urban Green Space for Children’s Optimal Development](#), July 2021
- Van Leer Foundation, [The City at Eye Level for Kids](#), June 2019
- Van Leer Foundation, [Playing It Safe? A Global White Paper on Risk, Liability and Children’s Play in Public Space](#), October 2018
- University of East London, [Housing Design for Community Life: Researching how residents use external spaces in new developments](#), November 2016
- ZCD Architects and University of Westminster, [Neighbourhood Design: Working with children towards a child friendly city](#), February 2019

## 10.2

## News and media

- Alison Millward, [Seen but not yet heard](#), TCPA Journal 12, 1998
- [Anahita Shadkam, How our public spaces can be safer and more welcoming for children](#), The Conversation, November 2024
- Andrew Gregory, [Alarming lack of access to green space fuelling UK child obesity crisis, doctors warn](#), The Guardian, June 2024

- Andrew Solomen, [Teenage wasteland, Are social media and a safety first culture harmful to children?](#) The TLS, July 2024
- Anna Minton, [A new kind of gentrification is spreading through London – and emptying out schools](#), The Guardian, 26 May 2025
- Anne Longfield and Paul Lindley, [Where have all the childhoods gone?](#), Transforming Society, July 2024
- Anoosh Chakelian, [Britain’s new-build nightmare](#), New Statesman, 4 June 2025
- Ben Flatman, [Boomers to Zoomers: Designing for the Generations](#), Building Design, May 2024
- Caitlin Gibson, [The future of the playground](#), The Washington Post, June 2023
- Carl Stroud, [‘No ball games’ signs are NOT legally enforceable - and are now being scrapped](#), The Sun, 7 February 2017
- Charlotte Runice, [Our mollycoddled children need to learn to live dangerously](#), The Daily Telegraph, 7 September 2021
- Christine Murray, [Could the adventure playground hold the solution to the construction skills shortage?](#), The Developer, 2 November 2023
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