

Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: State of Play: Play, HC 1122

Tuesday 2 September 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 2 September 2025.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Zöe Franklin; Damian Hinds; Dr Rupa Huq; Natasha Irons; Jo Platt; Tom Rutland; Paul Waugh.

In the absence of the Chair, Natasha Irons took the Chair.

Questions 1 - 49

Witnesses

I: Tim Gill, author and independent consultant; Paul Lindley OBE, Chair, Raising the Nation Play Commission; and Baroness Anne Longfield CBE, Chair and Founder, Centre for Young Lives.

II: Eugene Minogue, Chief Executive, Play England; Nicola Noble, Associate Headteacher, Surrey Square Primary School; and Ingrid Skeels, co-founder, Playing Out.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Tim Gill, Paul Lindley OBE and Baroness Anne Longfield CBE.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this morning's meeting of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I am Natasha Irons, the MP for Croydon East. I am sitting in for our wonderful Chair, Dame Caroline, who is away today.

Last year we launched the State of Play inquiry, inviting suggestions for one-off evidence sessions on issues and sectors that have not received the interest they need from Parliament or Government. Some submissions followed the title very literally, and this morning we are looking at the state of play itself—what the late Frank Dobson described as “what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas, in their own way, and for their own reasons”.

In our first panel, we are looking at the Play Commission, a year-long piece of work that has come up with 10 recommendations for the Government on how to encourage and support more play. We are joined by Paul Lindley, OBE, the chair of the Raising the Nation Play Commission, Baroness Anne Longfield, CBE, chair and founder of the Centre for Young Lives, and Tim Gill, author and independent consultant, and part of the commission. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Before we begin, I remind Members to declare any interest before they ask questions. I will kick off with question 1, probably to Paul. What does play encompass?

Paul Lindley: Thank you for inviting us and for making this such an important issue in Parliament, as it is out in the country to families. You gave it a great definition there: Frank Dobson's informal definition of what play is encapsulates everything. If you look in the Oxford dictionary at what play is, you find a very different and unhelpful definition. It says something along the lines of play is what we do for entertainment and recreation and for no other serious purpose. That definition gives a paradox about what play is. On the one hand, it is frivolous and nothing, but we know from our commission, and what we will share, that it is fundamental to life.

Play is what children do for their work, effectively. It is how they enjoy their childhoods and how they learn the skills that they will need for the rest of their lives. It is future-looking, as in we will have a better society if children learn all the skills that will make us a better society and then better individuals in the future. It is also about what we do here now and how we treat children.

In a culture Committee, it is cultural. It is who we are. The 20% of our population who are children should be afforded the same spaces and time, rights to the public realm as the rest of us, and play is a way that they can access that. It is fundamental to our society, and it is fundamental to individual childhoods, but opportunities to play have been



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decimated over the last 10, 15 years. That is what play is: it is what children do for work.

Q2 Chair: Just to broaden it out—you touched on it in your answer—what are the benefits of play? If we talk about tangible benefits to children, what are the benefits of play? I will open that up to everybody.

Baroness Longfield: Paul has set out how play is how children interact with the world around them. As I see it, whatever the age of the child who is playing—or indeed the adult—it is how you work and how you learn about the world about you, how you interact and how you learn about your own abilities.

The benefits are manifest. They are about social and emotional development, cognitive development, health benefits such as physical health, but also mental health. Particular kinds of play—like adventure or more risky play—are seen to be particularly beneficial in reducing anxiety and depression.

Also, in addition to that, play is a social activity. It is how children learn how to get along with other kids. It is how they learn how to negotiate, how to come to conclusions in a negotiated way. And discovery—there is such a strong element of discovery within this.

You can look at particular times and examples of how children play and what it means to them. During covid, quite quickly, there were reports of kids putting masks on their dolls and playing with their dolls to try to work out what was going on, in a way that was often not as threatening as it would be in real life. Certainly, in countries experiencing wars, that is something that children will often be doing.

From babies and early years, right through to teenage years, play is about how children learn, grow, develop and express themselves in the world.

Q3 Chair: Tim, do you want to add anything?

Tim Gill: You mentioned Frank Dobson, who I worked with closely on the play review. I want to quote another eminent parliamentarian, Lloyd George, who talked about play being “nature’s training for life”. For me, that is the best four-word definition of play I have ever come across. It captures how it is natural for children to play; it is a natural learning impulse.

But what is crucial about play, and what distinguishes play from other ways in which children learn, is that it is about children’s agency. Children themselves are setting and exploring the world around them for their own reasons—Frank’s words. That connection with agency also allows children to feel what it is like to take responsibility for themselves, and helps them on that path—which we all hope all children will take—to being engaged, responsible, resilient, connected adults. Agency is absolutely crucial to what we are talking about when we talk about play and why it is different from, say, sport or leisure.



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Paul Lindley: There are a whole load of life skills, and we have touched on some. The other one I would touch on, because it is so manifestly related to things that are going wrong for children's childhoods, is self-regulation. Play helps them understand their agency, their impact upon the world, how they fit with their friends and their place, but also how to regulate their emotions. One in five children has a probable mental health issue, and there is a correlation there between the reduction in play and the rise in mental health challenges. Self-regulation is not just in human beings; you see it in the whole of the mammal kingdom. All animals play; mammals play.

Q4 **Chair:** Maybe this is just to Anne: what makes this such a difficult challenge to solve across Government? Why has play become such a tricky thing for Government to provide and solve for young people?

Baroness Longfield: I do not think it has to be a tricky thing but, like every area of Government activity, you have to want to do it, because there are so many competing aspects. Tim talked about working with Frank Dobson, and you will be aware of the play strategy back in 2008, which many of us can remember.

There was that feeling, when play became a sideline issue, that somehow this was a frivolity—it was something that just happened and was not something that merited policy time. Even to this day, there is still that feeling that play is not quite as serious as sport or fitness. It is not quite as serious as proper learning. Actually, if you take what everyone has said about definitions, it is about learning, doing and taking part in the outside world on kids' terms.

I think it is a policy priority issue, rather than a difficulty issue. Clearly, it goes across many Departments but, as part of a mission-led approach, it should fit perfectly. There are huge benefits that we could list, and have already listed, for every Department. Locally, communities and children and families are more than keen for this to happen, but it does need that framework nationally. It does need that catalyst and some funding to give it that boost and give it that status within the wider policy framework.

Chair: Thank you. We are going to move on to the next question, with Jo.

Q5 **Jo Platt:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning. There are lots of Government changes and reforms to the planning system, especially in reducing the barriers and consultees, such as Sport England and the Theatres Trust, rather than adding requirements. Tim, what reception have you had to the recommendation of making the national planning policy framework pro-play?

Tim Gill: I will add to the case, but I will look to Anne and Paul to speak to the official response from Government. Within those different institutions, agencies and companies even that are involved in planning, there is a big appetite for making places more child-friendly. I have worked with several developers. We had some at the Levelling Up



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Committee inquiry saying, “We want more leadership on this. We want to have the bar raised, because we know that what we are building right now isn’t great for families.” I take the point about the regulatory burden, but we clearly do need regulations around house building and creating great places. If we are saying, “Oh, but we don’t need to worry about the 20% of the population who have no democratic voice in any other way,” that is pretty unacceptable.

Baroness Longfield: Let’s remember that there are 2 million children who do not have access to a park within 10 minutes of where they live. One in eight children does not have a garden—one in five in London—so there is a real need for their voice to be represented.

I will let Paul have most of the say on this, but I would say that, as well as developers, there are also some brilliant urban designers and planners who are doing fantastic things and who want to do much more about access to nature, green spaces, active travel and routes to school, and around the home. Many of them are ambitious about what we could achieve, particularly around new housing ambitions and targets, but things need to move beyond these individuals with a real interest and will to make this happen.

Some local authorities have taken a particularly strong lead. I look to Leeds as one of those areas. The deal in Leeds is that if you want to do things and move forward in terms of development in Leeds, you have to look at how that contributes to the overarching ambition for policy around child-friendly Leeds. It is a local authority with a really strong role here.

Paul Lindley: I would add that, over recent years, there have been two pressures on planners, local authorities and developers that have relegated children’s voices within what is being built. One is around efficiency and the need ultimately to maximise the number of houses on a piece of land, resulting in small gardens or no gardens—one in eight children grows up with no garden.

Secondly, around risk, there is the risk of providing something as a result of which a child is going to get hurt or that is deemed not safe in some way. The bar in terms of what not safe is, versus the benefits of risky play, has moved, or is not where it needs to be for children.

Both those things, coupled with the fact that children do not have voices at the table when planning decisions are being made in the national planning policy forum, has resulted in those voices being diminished. We see those pressures, but they can be overcome, we believe, if we look at children as being like any other citizen, with a vested interest in what is being built.

Q6 Jo Platt: What facilities and designs would you like to see adopted in new developments?

Paul Lindley: Things like the London plan—other cities have plans like that—say that a child should have immediate access to 10 square metres of space, either a garden or a park, within 10 minutes of their home.



There are non-cost things, like removing “No ball games” signs and traffic-calming measures, which do pitch the rights of different people in the community against each other, but they are small cost. There are those sorts of things, together with training and working on ways for children and their families to have the appropriate voice when planning decisions are being made.

Q7 Jo Platt: Anne, is there anything else that you could add?

Baroness Longfield: If we look at strategies in Wales and Scotland, there is much to draw on—how, with relatively low budgets, you can have a systematic approach to making play a priority. One of the things we are talking to a number of areas about, post the commission, is having a place-based approach, which we are calling “playful towns”.

What that would do—obviously it would be whatever was appropriate, suitable or possible locally—is take every aspect of children’s lives and look at how you can lean into play within it. That might be a route to school. Again in Leeds, they are doing fantastic work on making playful routes to schools, particularly through dense housing. It might be around use of open spaces. It might be around playtimes in schools. Great schemes such as the OPAL scheme are bringing to life playgrounds in a lot of areas, working with parents, putting more play into school and education time.

You can really look at the geography of a child’s life, the cycle of a child’s life and of parents’ lives as well—obviously they are very interlinked—and at ways to put playful opportunities into all of those. Leeds takes mobile containers to dense housing estates, opens the doors, has lots of resources, and play workers come in. Kids look over their balconies, they hear it, they see it and they come down, and it comes to life. They have boxes in libraries—basically everywhere. Some of that is about resources, and some of it is about the will to take people with you on that mission.

Tim Gill: Can I just add that I don’t think we are just asking for children to be seen as yet another special interest group, like disabled people or older people? Bringing children into the thinking and the conversation acts as a catalyst and a lens for seeing much broader and wider benefits for everyone.

Enrique Peñalosa, the former mayor of Bogotá, the capital city of Colombia—not the greatest city 30 or 40 years ago—used the phrase, “Children are an indicator species”. It was not just a slogan for him; it was a way to build a consensus about what that city should be like, and it led to the transformation of that city. There are heaps of examples of that kind of approach in mainland Europe—in Germany, in Austria.

So there is a lot that planners can draw on here to create more successful, environmentally sustainable and even economically vibrant places. One of the things we are facing here in London—my city—is families leaving the city. That is not a long-term prospect that any city will want to have, so thinking about children, and not just services but



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the quality of life for families in the city, can really help to create a long-term vision for what cities and towns need to be like.

Q8 Jo Platt: Paul has mentioned this, but I want to ask you specifically, Tim, whether parents' concerns about the risk of playing outside and away from home are overblown?

Tim Gill: No. Most parents want their children to grow up to be confident, capable people who have a sense of connection with the world and who are confident and can deal with everyday challenges. When they look outside their front doors, I think most parents see a world—and even a neighbourhood—that is not encouraging of them: heavy traffic, fears about safety, and fears about being judged as a parent, if you are seen somehow to not be matching the new parental norm. Let's remember that it is quite new. I am sure everyone in this room will remember that when they were children, their parents'—our parents'—attitude to playing out was very different, and the world was not a safer place back then.

I think parents are right to be concerned, right to feel under-supported, and right to feel that the world is against them when they try to create opportunities for their children to play out. But a significant proportion of parents still do let their children play out, especially as children grow up, because parents know they cannot keep the apron strings tied on forever.

It is really important to shift away from seeing this as a problem for parents and to see it as a system problem about culture, society and neighbourhoods.

Jo Platt: You just made me reminisce then, Tim, about my playing out days.

Baroness Longfield: We all remember that. We all know that that was really formative. But it will not be what the majority of children now remember, because there has been this huge, 50% drop in the number of children playing out, just in a generation.

Tim Gill: There is an opportunity moment now, and a virtuous circle we could start to build, of getting the next generation of parents to feel more connected and more confident. Or there is a vicious circle where, with each passing generation, you get a cohort of parents who are less and less comfortable with the idea that their children should be out of doors playing and getting around.

Q9 Jo Platt: Rather than just planning—again, this is to you, Tim—what needs to happen to reverse the decline in mobility of children that we have seen over the decades?

Tim Gill: Well, planning is top of the list—planning and transport. It should be a matter of shame—not just for the UK, but for almost every high-income country—that we are still seeing dozens of children being killed in the streets where people live in our country. There were hearings about this in another Select Committee not so long ago. It is a very deep-seated challenge. It is a long shadow cast for decades and decades, but it



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is still shameful, for instance, that no Government has had any significant road safety policy around children for the last 15, 16 years.

It is about tackling traffic and mobility at a strategic level, and about seeing children as the people who are most affected by poor transport planning, and who are stuck indoors or dependent on their parents for even taking a short trip around the corner. That should not be acceptable. Creating neighbourhoods where, say, an eight or nine-year-old can get out of their doors and can walk, or bike or scoot, to the places they need to get to is a pretty good litmus test that the planning and transport world should be adopting. That is what they do in the Netherlands, in Austria and in Scandinavian countries, and we should be doing it here.

Paul Lindley: In terms of the way we approached our commission and the report that ultimately came out, we really built our recommendations and approach around a triangulation of three things. One was political leadership. There is no Minister of play or Minister responsible for play, and that—to go back to the questions earlier—causes the problem of why this does not have such a profile in Government.

Secondly, there need to be legal protections for children, whether that is through the planning regulations, whether that is through the Equality Act—applying it better to children and their right to space and their right to play in space—or whether that is to do with the UNCRC or a play sufficiency Act, which Scotland and Wales have. That is part of it.

But there is also cultural change. How can Government help cultural change? How can it give the support that parents might need to find no-cost or low-cost play in their local area? One thing we came across in Bradford, for example, was the 50 Things to Do Before You're Five app that parents in that area have. They are all low-cost things. It is gamified a little bit, so it is exciting.

But as we move forward, the generation having children now played less than the previous generation, so they are less confident about how to play. The support they may need can be done—the new Best Start schemes and the new family hubs. We saw a fantastic example at Liverpool City Council, called, I think, Welcome to Play or Hello to Play. It provides support for parents of children aged nought to five. The council takes them through it. Part of it is socialisation—finding other mums and dads that can play too. So we framed our recommendations around those three areas.

Baroness Longfield: Sorry, really quickly on how play can be in every part of children's lives, 1,000 Best Start centres are coming along, and family hubs. Play being a really vibrant part of that across the age range is a good ambition. School playtimes and putting play back into playtimes is massively liberating for children and massively successful with parents as well. It is like a green light for children to be able to play freely.

Then there are ambitions around housing. I know there will be pressures on speed and the rest of it, but there can be some baselines in that. We



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have to look at what is going on in areas that impacts on children's and families' life, and then look at every space we could plan play in.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to go over to Rupa now, but can I just remind everybody to keep their questions and answers short. Over to you, Rupa.

Q10 Dr Rupa Huq: I want to move on to how you might enshrine the right to play in legislation. Where is the UK taking this seriously? I know it was a recommendation of the Play Commission.

Paul Lindley: If you look at a rights approach, you ultimately go back to the UNCRC, of which we are a signatory and in which there is a specific provision that children have a right to play. That provision is interlinked with all the other provisions: a right to be heard and a right to have a voice in planning opportunities, so that play opportunities come up there. Ultimately, it comes back to the UNCRC.

With devolved powers, the Welsh and Scottish Governments have moved forward. The English legislation is not where the Scottish and Welsh legislation is. I think the fundamental differentiator is a play sufficiency Act. In Wales and Scotland, local councils have a responsibility to audit every three years what play facilities are available in their local areas and to have a plan every year for what they are going to do about it if it is not up to scratch. That legal responsibility causes two things: it causes action, but it also causes the different parts of Government to work more closely together than they otherwise have done in the past or do in England.

The other area that we picked up on was around the Equality Act. It does not really apply to children outside of employment, but age is one of the prescribed characteristics. There are aspects of that that could help increase children's right to play locally.

Q11 Dr Rupa Huq: Do we have any indication from the UK Government on how seriously it is being taken?

Baroness Longfield: We have the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill at the moment, and certainly there are amendments around children's rights within it. So it is not incorporated in this country, as it has recently been in other countries.

Impact assessments on children—policy impact assessments—are a big part of that. The Government have moved forward towards some practice, but they are not really flexing their muscles on that. If you want this to happen, if you want this to be a policy priority and if you want children to be considered in policy, then impact assessments and sufficiency duties are how you build this in to ensure that it happens. It becomes part of the accountability process for local authorities as well.

Tim Gill: Briefly, you may want to ask Eugene in the next session about the details, because there has been parliamentary discussion of the play sufficiency idea, and some back and forth on that in terms of legislation. As I understand it, there is a lot of support from MPs, and that



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conversation is beginning to be taken forward in Government. Eugene is the person to get into it in detail.

Dr Rupa Huq: There is a very popular APPG. I think it is meeting tonight on this subject.

Tim Gill: Exactly—I will be there.

Q12 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Good, I'll see you in there. How realistic do you think it is to enforce this when it is going to be grown-ups doing it, and how would you recommend that there is engagement with actual children?

Baroness Longfield: Both Wales and Scotland have surveys and consultations with children, don't they, as part of their sufficiency accountability? That is something that they take very seriously.

But I think that this has to be about our responsibilities as adults, as policymakers, and within law as well. Everyone has to play their part. Then, clearly, as this is delivered in a local area, it will be absolutely vital that it responds to the lived experience and needs of families and of children as well, and that their voices are heard in there.

Paul Lindley: The heart of that question is why we are in this room with this Committee today. It is a cultural thing. We have to question ourselves as to how every citizen in this country gets their appropriate rights, their fair right, to the realm and the assets and what this country has to offer. Children don't. We have to work out if that is okay. If it is not okay, culturally, what does that say about us? And, legally, what can we do about it? We have touched on some of the levers that we can pull, both at the local level and at the national level. But, ultimately, as citizens, we need to ask ourselves how children can have the voice that the rest of us have and what levers we have to move that.

Q13 **Dr Rupa Huq:** So that it is not some sort of same old, same old, in terms of the children who are consulted, with consultation fatigue and a lack of children.

Baroness Longfield: There is a reality about that, but when it actually leads to something that children can actually see benefits and progress from, then it is quite different. I do not have the exact stats, but Wales now shows a much greater agreement from children that there has been progress. They can see that this is something that is moving, despite there not being a huge amount of resources in there—some, but not massive.

Q14 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Given how local authorities have been under the cosh since 2010, do you think they are going to have difficulty meeting those requirements in the play sufficiency duty?

Baroness Longfield: We know there has been a massive reduction in funding on play—I think 44% over recent years. What I would just say is that some of the people in local authorities are the most enthusiastic about making this happen. Local authorities have an absolutely key role as brokering partners in local development and communities—all those aspects. They know this is what brings communities to life. There is a



difference in communities where children and families feel like they belong, they feel safe, they can hear voices, they can hear kids playing. Local authorities know that that is what families and children want. Inevitably, whenever we hold any discussion about this, it is the local authorities, and indeed the LGA, who are very interested in how we make this happen. There is obviously a funding issue, which we do come on to, with some proposals for relatively modest funding, which we think could change the dial.

Q15 Dr Rupa Huq: Has funding not been extended for the HAF programme? Quite a lot of that is sporty stuff.

Baroness Longfield: Yes, that is in recent days—£600 million, which was fantastic.

Q16 Dr Rupa Huq: It was just the other day, wasn't it? Good, good.

Lastly, thinking about that APPG this afternoon, a constituent of mine, Jasmine Hoffman—you mentioned getting rid of the "No ball games" sign—is on a one-woman crusade. In fact, I think she has a whole NGO behind her now. You also said that one in eight children has no garden. Do you think this is a bit punitive? Just generally, without legislation, are there things that can be done? Sometimes there is local hostility. You talked about things like play streets for a certain part of the day. You get angry drivers who sometimes are sharper-elbowed and more vocal. It is the same with low-traffic neighbourhoods. What can we do to get rid of that opposition? Also, on the "No ball games" thing, Jasmine's housing association, L&Q, is just not having it.

Tim Gill: She is an amazing woman. I met her, and I think she is quoted in the report. I think that the culture change that Paul has talked about would be part of what would help. At the moment, nobody is supporting her in saying, "My children deserve to be able to get out and play." Everybody is pushing the other way. So we need some legislation, or at least regulatory pressure, to effectively ban those sorts of very blatantly discriminatory things.

I just invite you for a second to think about substituting the word "children" for another word in the lexicon of demographic groups, or especially "teenager". We talk about children and teenagers in a way that you would never countenance if we were talking about women or people of colour. That demonisation is part of what Jasmine and others are facing. That is why some leadership and a moral stand is needed.

That is not to say that we are giving children and teenagers a free pass. In many of these issues, we need to find a sweet spot. We need to get the balance right between, for instance, children's propensity to make a noise and sometimes be irritating when they play, on the one hand, and the desire for residents to have a degree of quiet or not to get too irritated. That is about balance. It is not about eliminating the problem. At the moment, the response from councils and housing associations is to try to eliminate children from public space. I hope we would all agree that



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that is basically unjust, and nothing will change until we start to build recognition that there is some basic justice here for children.

Chair: Thank you very much. We are going to move on to Paul Waugh now.

Q17 **Paul Waugh:** Rupa mentioned funding. Can we move on to that? Paul, the Play Commission proposes £125 million a year for play. What sort of thing should that money be spent on? What is a good example? How could that money be well spent?

Paul Lindley: A number of things—you would not spend it on one thing. Play touches all aspects of life. We think playful neighbourhoods rather than places to play is part of the answer. It is not, “Children play over there because we have built a playground” and they do not play anywhere between the home and the playground. Play happens everywhere, as we said. The opportunity to make playful neighbourhoods goes back to planning—so training for planning officers, as we build our environment. Certainly, in areas where there are few gardens and few parks, building quality places for children to play would be part of that.

There is also the training of teachers and preschool teachers in the skill of play, but not as in, “We are going to do a lesson on play. This is how you use play to teach maths or English or whatever.” We visited Denmark during our commission, and they do that there. They are only five years in, but it has changed the way that teachers see themselves and their role within the education system, and the results are starting to come through academically.

There are support packages for what we were talking about earlier—helping parents overcome a confidence issue or a time issue with play or with not knowing what to do with play. For example, maybe *50 Things to Do Before You’re Five* could be rolled out by schools or councils. We came across an organisation called BorrowMe, a toy scheme where toys are borrowed. We visited libraries around the country that are being transformed from being just about books to being about toys and books and places where parents can come and meet each other and where their children can play. Some of the money could be put behind the legal transformation stuff that we need—the impacts that may happen from a play sufficiency duty.

So it is about a little in a lot of places. The way the number came about wasn’t through 50 lines adding up to that number, but by triangulating what could be done in buckets—some of the buckets we have talked about in broad numbers; looking at what the previous play strategy in England did in 2008 or how much that was funded, with £235 million over three years, which is more or less the same number now with inflation; and looking at what Wales is doing with their commitments, scaled up for the English population versus the Welsh population, and it is around £125 million.

Baroness Longfield: Yes, I think Paul is right. This is about helping local areas to transform their play offer. It would not just be, “Here are the



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things on a shelf for you to go away and purchase.” It is quite a modest amount, but we think it could be transformative, especially in those areas that are bleaker for children and young people.

If you have a policy priority going alongside this, and you have legislation about sufficiency and the like, then you would be providing funds to help those areas transform what they offer. You would also want to bring in other funds as well. We would want to look at what schools can offer as part of their everyday education offer, at parks and at things like social prescribing for mental health. I think we would find that actually helping children to play was a lot more effective, and a lot less costly than some of the more clinical approaches.

We can look at how Sport England operates and at things like active travel. It is about interventions in areas, putting money into areas where they have come up with a plan or that are shouting out as an area of disadvantage. I would think that it would be about the areas where we have childcare deserts, where we know that children have the greatest need, and where we have the biggest challenge in meeting early learning goals. We do not have to make this up as a competing priority for everything that the Government want to do; we can look at how this can drive us further towards that.

We have not talked about social media yet, but just to plunk it in here, the alternative for a lot of children and parents—even though they would not choose it—is for kids to be online. We know that that is about kids being in isolation, sedentary, often doom scrolling—the absolute opposite of the really important agency that Tim has been talking about.

Q18 Paul Waugh: Paul, you mentioned that the 2008 play strategy was the basis for this funding figure, obviously adjusted for inflation. Are there any lessons from that strategy and how the money was spent there, and maybe lessons from how it ended as well?

Paul Lindley: Yes. The money was spent in three areas. One was around places to play. That was largely through sports; I don’t know if it was Sports England then, but it was sports facilities. It was more sporty play than playful play, ultimately, but there were more spaces to play linked with sport, and that grew. There was also training of play workers, so that there was more knowledge of how to play, with the touch points that children had in their lives. And then there was an emphasis on local play—on local authorities choosing what they needed in their areas. They were the three areas where the money was spent.

The empirical outcomes were that there was an uplift in feelings—from a qualitative point of view, feelings among the population that, “My children are playing more”—and there was practical evidence that children were playing more. In terms of the infrastructure of how the play was delivered, through Sure Start centres and through schools and their playing fields, some of those opportunities have disappeared.

I would say that the learnings are twofold. It is around physical spaces, but it is also around the training to help children play, and it is around



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local needs and devolving decisions about what money is spent on to the local level.

Paul Waugh: Does anyone want to add to that?

Baroness Longfield: The thing was that it barely got going before it ended. That is the thing we need to learn from it. In 2008, it started with lots of swinging action for the photo call at the time, but in 2011 a big ice bucket was applied. There is something there about the roots of evidence within it, the ability for it to be delivered as part of wider strategies. I think there was an emphasis on creating its own infrastructure—and I think that takes us back to making this place-based. But it is also about cross-party support, which this clearly did not have at that stage. It was easy pickings as a new policy area for the Government to take on when there was a change of Government.

Q19 **Paul Waugh:** Treasury always loathes the phrase “spend to save” because they do not like the spending, even though it encourages savings. So, just finally, what would be the savings that you have identified from this investment in play?

Baroness Longfield: The report does identify savings, which I will attempt to find. The 2018 report said that a 10% increase spent on creative play would lead to an 8% uplift in GDP. We have been talking about education, agency and mental health, but all of this is also grounded in the economics of the country. We want a country where our society of the future is confident, thriving, productive in the workplace—all of those things.

Another one is that every £1 invested in adventure playgrounds generated £4.60 in immediate and deferred benefits over seven years, which are pretty good outcomes, and way above many of the outcomes you will find in other areas. Barnardo’s had a Cumbria social prescribing service, which said that for every £1, £1.80 was repaid. Whichever one of those statistics you choose, the starting point is good: £4.60 for every £1 is fantastic, and the GDP figures are quite remarkable.

Paul Lindley: A lot of that is about growing the economy and adding to the Government’s P&L. There would be savings in health especially, whether that is physical health and reducing obesity through people being physically active, or mental health and some of the things we talked about at the beginning to do with self-regulation and agency

The Government has a whole focus on school readiness as a major part of its Department for Education policies. As well as school readiness at five, more playful teaching, more playful lessons, more playful ways of learning, and more playful time in between the lessons will all increase attendance. Again, going to Scandinavian countries, we saw in spades how they playfully teach. There are savings to be had in the education and health budgets, as well as adding to the efficiency of the economy.

Chair: We are going to move on to Damian. I just remind you that we are trying to finish by 11 am, Damian, so please work with me on that.



Damian Hinds: As always.

Chair: Okay, over to you.

Q20 **Damian Hinds:** Good morning. Can I start by asking about schools? We understand that school break times and playtimes have become shorter over time. There is a general assumption that that is due to more things being packed into the curriculum. Can you tell us what you know about home time over time?

Paul Lindley: Playing in home time or—

Damian Hinds: The time the school day ends.

Baroness Longfield: It has been brought forward quite dramatically for some schools. So there are schools that finish much earlier. We might all imagine that 3.30 pm is when school ends, but some schools end much earlier and some are looking at reducing a fifth day.

Q21 **Damian Hinds:** Indeed. There is a review of the curriculum, a curriculum assessment, going on at the moment. Would it be fair to assume that you would be looking to that review to guarantee a certain amount of playtime in the traditional little break and big break?

Baroness Longfield: We would like that. We have obviously been talking to Becky Francis, the person who is leading on this around the curriculum, and to officials in the DfE. That has largely been around the content of play, being part of the playful approach within learning and looking at how that can be built in, especially for younger children. Early years are not part of the curriculum review, nor is enrichment, so it slightly cut off those elements. But, more broadly, breakfast clubs are coming in, and we would want to make the most of playtime,

Damian Hinds: Breakfast clubs are not coming in. They are already there in most schools.

Baroness Longfield: Yes. We know that quite a few breakfast clubs have fallen by the wayside, but I know a lot of schools do it. A lot of after-school clubs do not operate to the extent they did at some points. In the next phase, I would like to see more after-school clubs, especially for primary school years. On all of those counts, schools have a really important role to play.

In terms of the running and management of schools, we know that schools are under pressure in many, many ways, but in some cases that pressure has started to top the priority for kids to have time when they are not learning in the classroom, or indeed not getting the full hours that they might. We have seen that, where schools prioritise play in the playtime, it transforms children's experience, not only of playtime but of the whole school day. Urban schools, often with a lot of issues going on in the community, have said that playtime has transformed from a time in a cramped little environment, which kids hated and where there was lots of friction, let's say, to one where, with the addition of mud, sand, play and other things going on, all of that has fallen away.



Q22 **Damian Hinds:** To some extent, all schools do have breaktime, lunchtime and playtime, and most schools have, and have had for quite some time, breakfast provision of some sort. Indeed, after-school provision is also extremely widespread. We have had the holiday activities and food programme now for a number of years, and of course there is further to go.

One of the new developments in recent times has been the growth of social media, as you mentioned. There is also the wider area of video games, which I see from our notes that we now call digital play. Many people have a lot to say about these areas, but do you think that health warnings or awareness programmes will ever make any difference to the prevalence of video gaming? Indeed, while you are on the subject, you might also say whether you think there are some positives that could be had from video gaming.

Paul Lindley: On the question you just asked, the answer is, no, not on their own, because, like everything, it is complicated. If there were sufficient places to play—if there were more places to play—children constantly told us over this last year, “I want to play with my friends in real life.” So there needs to be more provision there. Our recommendations had two reasonably strong—very strong, in the sense of put your foot forward and stand behind it—recommendations on raising the digital—

Damian Hinds: Call it the age of consent, but it is a terrible term.

Paul Lindley: Yes. Raise it to 16, and ban mobile phones in the school day—so phones go into a pouch, and they are not seen until the end of the day.

Going back to culture, how can you help parents to understand the world that their children are natives of, but also to work with their children collectively as families, behaving as a family unit, around digital, because children sometimes learn off their parents? We need to bring all that together with teacher training and teacher support. The answer is within all of that.

Maybe the video games you were talking about do not require an age consent. Digital play is fundamentally—I am not sure exclusively—addictive by design. It should be playful by design, and we talk about that in our report.

Q23 **Damian Hinds:** It is still play. There is a difference, that I think most of us would discern, between video games that you do on your own or with somebody else in the same physical space. Then there are these networked video games, which, of course, when almost all of us were young just did not exist. It is a whole new thing to parents. As a commission, do you have in mind a healthy limit for the amount of time in a day that a child would spend on video gaming?

Baroness Longfield: We did not go for a time. It is really difficult. There was a survey out at the weekend in *The Times* on the amount of time



that children are spending online now. It had teenagers spending up to 10 hours a day, huge amounts of time, and we know that that is starting younger and younger. A significant proportion of five to 10-year-olds will now have their own social media accounts, even though they are below the age-range. So, rather than say, "This is the amount of time"—less than two hours or less than four hours—we talked about having better and safer alternatives. Kids want to get off their phones and have an environment where they can actually be doing other things.

We absolutely understood that digital play has its role and huge benefits, especially for some children—children with special educational needs, sometimes neurodivergent children. We also understood that digital play could be a route into physical play, so it is not either/or here. We did, however, recommend having warnings, drawing on warnings on cigarettes, on some social media apps and video games, particularly those that are addictive by design, and those that are designed to draw children into wider networks as well. We are keen on that and think that there is something that could have a role as part of a wider legislative framework.

Q24 Damian Hinds: You say "addictive by design". If you are a game designer, or are indeed inventing a new sport, you want it to be good. You want people to want to come back to it, so to some extent all good activities are compelling. Are there particular features of certain video games that you think are a problem? People talk about loot boxes, for example. Are you thinking of a problem in this area that you would be looking for the Government to take some action on.

Baroness Longfield: That is one example that lures children into something where they do not know what is going to be in that purchase area. I am thinking of the ones that take children in, target them as part of that addiction and, once they have them in there, will keep them in there and expose them to networks that are not safe. There would need to be a definition that was broad enough to encompass those things, but it would be clear what video games or apps you were talking about.

Q25 Damian Hinds: We started this session with Natasha giving us Frank Dobson's definition of play, and later we heard about Lloyd George's. I think both those definitions included the word "natural". Do critics ever accuse you of over-engineering the problem, in that play does come naturally to children and there have been many generations where not everybody has had equal access to good facilities, many children have not had gardens and so on, but children will create their play opportunities?

What is new is the electronica—the video gaming, the social media. I wonder about the way we talk about this in public policy terms. We say, "Oh, it is a system problem." One of you—I think it was you, Paul—said the world has not got more dangerous. Of course, every child injury is a terrible thing, and every child death is a terrible tragedy. But overall, in many ways, the world has actually got safer. Yet, in our narrative, we are saying, "Oh, there are all these problems. We have to fix all these



problems.” Maybe the message is simpler.

Paul Lindley: Yes. I think what we have done is—some of this is by design, some by osmosis—is put barriers up that stop children naturally playing or that make it harder for them to play.

In our report—Tim would be a better person to talk about this, because he knows it in much more detail—there is a map of 100 years of four generations of one family around Sheffield. The great-grandfather went six miles every day from home to play. The great-grandchild, who is the child now, goes 300 metres to the end of the street. We can look at the causes for that, and not all of those causes will be digital. Yes, there is going to be inside play, but streets are perceived to be and are actually more dangerous; that is moving traffic and still traffic. There are twice as many cars on more or less the same number of roads as when I was a child. It is a perception maybe, and you may be telling me there are fewer car accidents, but—

Baroness Longfield: It is not just about the safety of cars, though, is it? People are much more mobile now in where they live. They do not know their neighbours in the same way. Most families have two people out at work, so there is not someone in the home to pop back into. The way we live has got faster and more mobile, and the environment has got less known for lots of families.

Parents do not want to do this, but in a way we are giving far too much responsibility for childhood over to massive global companies that run a few social media platforms, and that is only going to go one way. We can already see the impact of that on children’s lives, the pressures they are under and the mental health crisis, which we know is real.

We have to take back control of that. That just means rethinking how we provide the kind of environment where kids can be kids, and childhood can happen as part of everyday life, and we are not just talking about an activity that kids are taken to, that is paid for and that they enjoy for an hour—and then you come home and go back on you screens. It is about fundamentally looking at how can we change that experience of life. All the policy ambitions and the levers are there to be used to make that happen, in my view.

Tim Gill: The digital realm is the latest example of the side effect of modern life. I don’t think that anybody planned for children to be badly affected by the emergence of digital technology, in the same way that nobody planned for children to be affected by the growth in the number of cars over the last 100 years, but that is what we are dealing with. Play is anything but natural. I remember a parent in Hackney saying, “Play is a natural thing for my child, but it is hard for me to give them that natural thing.” The fundamental challenge is tackling these barriers, which are side effects of the way we live life today, and I think that that is fundamentally a political job.

Chair: Thank you so much for your contributions today. It has been a fascinating discussion. We will wrap up this session and move on to the

next one.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Eugene Minogue, Nicola Noble and Ingrid Skeels.

Chair: In our second panel this morning, we are looking in more detail at outdoor play and education. We are joined by Ingrid Skeels, a co-founder of Playing Out, which works to see more children playing in the street and where they live. We have Eugene Minogue, the chief executive of the national campaign organisation, Playing England. We also have Nicola Noble, who is the associate headteacher at Surrey Square primary school, which collaborated with the Play Commission and incorporates play in the school day in interesting ways. Thank you so much for joining us today. We are going straight to Tom, who has our first question.

Q26 **Tom Rutland:** Good morning. Before the summer, we finished our inquiry into community and school sport, which focused on organised, structured play and exercise. What does free outdoor play offer to children? Perhaps Ingrid first.

Ingrid Skeels: Outdoor free play for children gives a natural biological way to get a huge amount of benefits for children's health and wellbeing, both in the moment and as they grow into adults. The best way to describe it is to take you back again, because we really have to take in how much life has changed for children in a few generations.

When I was small, and many of you, I played out every day after school, weekends and holidays, with other children, and that was just a normal, natural part of everyday life. In that time, I had everyday activity, physical activity, every single day—running around, jumping, climbing, playing, skipping. I learned new physical skills, whether that was balancing or ball skills or learning to ride a bike, so physical literacy and new skills.

There is also socialisation, as Anne talked about—learning to make friends with other children, how to make up if you have fallen out, how to get on with each other, different ages, different backgrounds. There is also independence: how to be outside on your own, how to problem-solve, how to look after yourself and gradually, as you get older, how to go further and further in the patch where you live. There are also community benefits. Outdoor free play for children means that you are out in your community, you belong to their community, you meet your neighbours and you feel part of your patch.

All these things were huge benefits that children just got as a natural part of daily life. The other thing was that it was completely free. It did not matter whether you had money, whether you had a car, or even if you had a parent to look after you. As long as you had that safe space close to home, you could play out every day and have all those benefits. Access to that space, which was pretty democratic—nearly all children had it—was, in a way, access to a lot of health for free. And it was fun.



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Outdoor free play is joyful, you are in control of it and it is at your own pace. If you are not happy, you change the game or you go in.

Those are the huge, vast benefits that we all took for granted as children growing up, which have been gradually lost for children. By the time my children were small—this predates screens being the massive lure they are now—it was not happening for children. All those benefits have to be found in other ways, which take a lot of organisation, a lot of cost, or children are just not getting them, which is why we set up our organisation.

Q27 Tom Rutland: Fantastic. Does anyone else want to come in on that point specifically, or has that been quite comprehensive?

Eugene Minogue: I can certainly add to that. I was born in the 1980s, and arguably we were the last generation to play out in the way that most of the Committee would have done as children. My children do not have that luxury these days.

For me, free play is around developing resilience and community cohesion, and also an opportunity for children to play freely without adult supervision or intervention, particularly in developing, engaging with and learning from risk. Children need risk in their lives to become resilient, engaged adults. Also, we have to remember that a lot of our friends were strangers. They only became our friends because we played with each other. That is how you build friendships and connections. And it is not just the children; it is parents interconnecting with one another, and communities building around play.

Nicola Noble: One of the asks we have had from parents is about how they did not feel, because of the location of the school, that they could let their children play out. If their children had any kind of special need or complex need, they did not feel that even being in a playground felt very safe.

One day a parent said, "If only the school was open at the weekend," and another parent said, "That could never happen." I said, "What would it look like if the school was open?" They said, "We could sit and have a cup of tea or chat, and the children could play freely and safely in the playground." So we did that. It started off with about 40 people coming, and we now have about 350 people come on a Saturday to engage in that. We see that that is what parents want. It is not that the parents are on top of the children while they are there. As you said, Eugene, parents are enjoying the time and able to almost allow the children to have a bit of freedom, which they do not necessarily always feel that they have.

Q28 Tom Rutland: Thank you. I grew up on an unadopted road that was in pretty poor condition, so no vehicles used it as a cut-through, which was great for playing out on the street. We made friends with our neighbours' children, and we could play on the street every day after school and weekends, but I know that that is happening less and less. Ingrid, what has the reception to play streets been?



Ingrid Skeels: The reception has been amazing. I do not know if everybody knows what a play street is—a temporary resident-led play street. Two neighbours and friends of mine had the idea to do this first, and this was after we, as a group of parents, had tried lots of different ways to find spaces for our children to play more, including asking our school things like that. But our school did not do that.

They had the idea of just closing the road briefly for a time after school to remove one of the barriers, which is traffic—as Paul was saying, it is one of the major barriers in the city. For the first street, that reception was amazing, because children came out who did not know each other. Some of them were actually at the same school and they did not even know they lived on the same street. That is how indoors and separate we have all become. They met other children, they played with children of different ages, and neighbours came out who had not met each other. It was just all the benefits—well, not all the benefits, but quite a lot of the benefits I have just described happened in that session. It was a bit eye-opening that if you remove the barriers, these things will come back, children will play and people want to meet. It is really quite simple.

From that, the idea started to spread in Bristol and, to cut a long story short, around the country and to other countries, because it tapped into something that parents feel and that we were feeling. There is a lot of pressure on parents: you are indoors with children, quite isolated. Going back in time again, our parents did not have to do that much; they just let us out. Now, you have to be the educator and the entertainer, taking children everywhere.

It tapped into something that parents wanted, and parents who could make it happen on their street have made it happen. Over 1,600 street and estate communities have regularly organised sessions like this; 50,000 children have benefited regularly, and 25,000 adults have taken that action. Those are the absolute bare minimum numbers, because we do not always get answers from councils as to how many roads they have closed.

In that time, this has shown that, with just a bit of safe space, children are more physically active, neighbours connect more, and active citizenship happens—people step up, clear their road up and help each other out. Networks are formed in those sessions. Going into covid, for example, we talked to a lot of families and streets where they said, “Oh, it was amazing, we already knew everyone. We knew the old lady that we could help.” That was for hardly any cost at all, and certainly no cost to the street.

But the biggest success of play streets is demonstrating what would happen if you did that as a country. If you create safe space, life flows back and children get what they need.

Q29 **Tom Rutland:** It is fantastic to hear about all those positives. Where has the opposition come from?



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Ingrid Skeels: In order to hold a regular play street, you have to have a policy in place at the local authority that allows it. Bristol had a policy to allow you to do a street party three times a year—more of a big event with tables and food and things. We worked with Bristol to put a policy in place that would enable residents to do something every week, and you apply once a year for the whole year.

Every community and street we have worked with has had to do the same with their council, and not all councils want to do it. They do not all see the value of being able to do it. There are lots of counter-arguments about stopping traffic, even though, on the whole, it is just through traffic that is stopped. Actually, on the whole, drivers are great about it; it is a couple of hours after school.

So councils—this is not entirely always their own fault—are where the blockages are. We have had to put in a huge amount of work over the years, almost working individually to try to persuade leaders in the council, and highways. We have done a lot of resources and a lot of work, and 100 councils now have a policy in place. But if all of that could be made simpler and easier, with great encouragement from the Government to just do it, a bit like school streets, it would scale up a lot more.

Q30 **Zöe Franklin:** This very much follows on from what Tom has been talking about. We heard from the previous Committee that things are similar to the past, but also very different in terms of the outside environment. Can you give us an overview of what the risks of outdoor play are, but also of some of the perceived risks? Do you want to start, Nicola, please?

Nicola Noble: I think there is a low level of trust of children, generally, which I think is really sad. I think people are worried about the risk outside—the external risk, people within the local area. Generally, if children have that independence, they make sensible decisions. I think the perceived threat is other people, rather than the children themselves.

Then, with parents, there is a fear around, “What will happen to my child if I let them out?”, in terms of those external threats. Even in our park local near the school, we often have to clear litter, needles and dog faeces away before we can let the children play out. As a parent, that is another thing to have to do.

Antisocial behaviour is often rife as well. There is a worry about what the children will do when they are there. There is a worry about what other people will do when they are there. I think there is also a lot of judgment put on parents around keeping their children safe, and a worry around, “If something happens, I will be held accountable and be held to blame.” That then prevents parents from taking that step and allowing their children to go out.

Eugene Minogue: Our new strategy is called “It All Starts with Play!”, because everything does. You cannot put an athlete on a podium or an artist on a stage without starting with play. One of the key themes within



our strategy is society. We, as adults, do not truly value children as citizens. We need to shift society away from children being given permission to play, to accepting that children have the right to play. That is incumbent on all of us, both personally and professionally, virtually in everyday life. There are times virtually every day when you can ask yourself a very little question: "Have I denied a play opportunity today, or have I enabled it?" If you ask yourself, honestly, you are probably denying an awful lot of play opportunities, as opposed to enabling them. It is simple things like, "Get down from there. Don't do that. Don't jump in the puddle, you are going to get wet." These are small things that ingrain behaviour, and children learn from us as adults—they learn from learned behaviour.

It is incumbent on all of us, not just play workers, who have been absolutely decimated across England—we must restore them, and again that is in our strategy. All of us as adults have a role to play.

Ingrid Skeels: There are more risks. As Paul was saying, traffic has more than doubled, car sizes have changed, driver behaviour has changed, roads are now seen absolutely as being for cars. Even as a pedestrian, if you are crossing the road and not running, and a car is coming, you feel it, because roads are not quite the shared spaces they were. That is absolutely something we could do something about.

Stranger danger, which is often a very big, high risk in parents' minds, is not based on statistics, unlike road traffic accidents involving collisions with pedestrians, which are. There is a real basis for that fear, because 30 children a year are killed like that, and 1,800 are seriously injured on our streets as pedestrians, with way more happening in poorer areas. Stranger danger is something where there is a lot of fear, but most children are actually harmed by people they know. That is a horrific fact, but it is not strangers.

Then—this is not so much a risk, but more a factor—places have become much more unwelcoming, almost hostile, to children. The "No ball games" culture is one that has sprung up in the last decades. But we have also heard from parents following covid about a kind of complaints culture about children, almost in any way, about any noise. I was talking to someone last week who was saying that her estate management has had complaints that people cannot hear their television properly because children are playing outside, and that schools have been contacted. We heard of a school where people had said, "Could you keep the noise down because I am trying to work from home, and break times are too noisy?"

It is almost like the fact that people can say these things shows that children have been put in this box where they are not meant to be heard—they are not meant to be out there. The impact of that as they grow is horrific, and that is what we are seeing.

Q31 **Zöe Franklin:** You touched there on the "No ball games" signs. I do not know who to start with, so I will start with Eugene. What are your thoughts on how we rethink our built environment to encourage outdoor play?



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Eugene Minogue: Yes, absolutely. I am an avid campaigner on “No ball games” signs. I set up the original campaign back in 2011, and it has been reinvigorated this year, with London Sport’s campaign More Ball Games Unequivocally, we call in our strategy, and the Play Commission’s report calls for, those signs to be removed. They translate very clearly into, “Children are not welcome here.” They have no legislative basis whatsoever.

This then bleeds out into the wider built environment, as various other people have highlighted. We build our whole built environment around the car. Car is king. I am lucky enough to live in a cul-de-sac. The whole street was designed around the hammerhead. Can I get the refuse collection vehicle in and out? Children were not considered in that design.

That is why we need things like play sufficiency legislation. We have started to move towards it with the changes we secured in the national planning policy framework last December. Although policy is progress, it is not protection. We need play sufficiency legislation so that local authorities have a duty to consider children in the built environment. It is not just around more playgrounds, although those would be welcome because we have lost well over 800, and we have lost over half of our adventure playgrounds in my lifetime, since 1980.

The infrastructure for children has been decimated, and we need to treat play in the same way that we do utilities. It is critical infrastructure. Children do not just need a home; they need a childhood, and their childhood starts on their doorstep. As Ingrid pointed out, it is the most democratic place where children could play. I benefited from it. I am sure everybody on the Committee enjoyed playing out in the street with their friends, particularly over the summer holidays.

Q32 **Zöe Franklin:** Thank you, Eugene. Ingrid, do you want to add anything to that?

Ingrid Skeels: To add to the “No ball games” point, it is a bit of an iconic symbol of the almost joyless, children not being allowed to play or make a noise. But it is also important to put that next to the huge pressure and call for children to be more active. On the one hand, you have parents, schools and everyone saying, “They have to be more active. You have to get them moving. They are unhealthy. They are overweight.” As soon as you go outside the front door, you are not allowed to move, to play, to socialise, to belong. Something is really not matching up.

But to say a positive thing on “No ball games” signs, places are getting rid of them. Aberdeen City Council got rid of all signs. It came out of a semi-jokey conversation about Scotland never winning the world cup, but it led on to a serious, “Let’s just get rid of them.” They got rid of every single one. They think it has saved them money, because they did it one by one as they mowed the grass over a couple of years. Now they do not have to mow around the posts or put down weedkiller. They think that, overall, it has saved the council money, and it has opened up spaces. So



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simple low-cost things can start to make the difference, but obviously it needs bigger changes too.

Nicola Noble: I think it is also around quality. So many playgrounds, as you said, have either been closed or are in really poor disrepair, which makes it quite dangerous to be there. What is that telling our children? That we do not value them and do not want to invest in them, and they can just make do with poor-quality equipment and things like that. I think they feel that. Children will feel that. They are very clever human beings, who feel that sense, whether it is a “No ball games” sign or a complaint from a neighbour.

We were one of those schools who received complaints from neighbours around the noise at playtime—children “having too much fun”. It is about that shift in mentality around play being crucial and our children having fun only being a really good thing, because it will have such positive effects on their physical and mental health, and their life expectancy and life chances. All of that will come as a result of an investment in and a prioritisation of play.

Eugene Minogue: If I can just add to Nicola’s points on playgrounds, a piece of research by Sheffield University earlier this year mapped England’s 34,000 playgrounds and showed the stark inequalities. In most places, areas of deprivation are where provision is absolutely at its thinnest. Often, you have five times as many children in those areas than in others.

Nicola Noble: And also children who do not have gardens, or who are living in temporary accommodation or living in one room. They are the children who need to have the access to the outdoor quality space.

Q33 **Zöe Franklin:** Under the current situation, where there is perhaps not the legislation to do it formally, how do we get young people involved in that process of saying how they would like to see their streets and their communities made better for them and more accessible for play?

Eugene Minogue: Going back to play sufficiency, we tabled the amendment tabled by Tom Hayes earlier this year, in June. It was not voted for and it was not voted against. It was a very lively debate in the Chamber. Over 70 MPs backed that, with cross-party support. So there is a real appetite in Parliament for it. That amendment has been re-tabled in the Lords under the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. That amendment makes it a requirement to have meaningful consultation with children, young people, families and play professionals. We have baked that in. That has been modelled on article 12 of the UNCRC. We can do it; Wales have proved that, and they have had this for 10, 15 years now. Scotland have done it. But England is lagging behind. We desperately need play sufficiency legislation.

Q34 **Zöe Franklin:** Nicola and Ingrid, do you have anything to add very quickly?

Nicola Noble: There is a difference between consultation and hearing children’s voice, and them actually seeing action from it. I think that is



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critical. Often—we see this a lot in the areas in which our schools are based—there is lots of consultation that does not lead to action. Then people do not feel that there is any point in engaging in those consultations. It is absolutely critical that we have children's voice in that and that they see action happening as a result of that, so that they understand the power and importance of their voice in these processes.

Q35 Chair: I am going to move on to playtime at schools. We are talking about the areas where children are, and school is obviously a place where they spend a lot of time. Nicola, you are the associate headteacher at Surrey Square primary school, where you take quite a robust approach towards play. You are part of the outdoor play and learning approach in your playtime. I have a school in my constituency, Robert Fitzroy primary, that does the same thing. I went to visit one of their playtimes, and it was amazing. Do you want to explain a little what a playtime is like at your school?

Nicola Noble: Children spend 20% of their time at school outside, so it is important that it is of the highest possible quality and that we are maximising the potential of that time. There needs to be a mindset shift in seeing playtime, lunchtime, as part of the curriculum. There is a real extension for us at school of early years practice into lunchtime and playtime.

First, it is about children having control and having opportunity; it is about child-led play. It is about ensuring that there are so many different play opportunities that mirror the different types of play out there. People might come and see it and think, "Whoa, it's busy," but what you will see is 480 children engaged in play, and play that is relevant to them, from a giant sandpit, to children using crates to design and build a vehicle that they are using; from utilising old chairs that you might normally throw away, to creating vehicles with them. There will be small world play, children learning how to ride bikes, children learning how to roller skate. They put us all to shame.

Taking risks is absolutely critical as well. We hold a play assembly every week where we talk to the children about the play in the playground that week. We might identify particular issues that are coming up. Instead of saying, "Right, we are not doing that anymore," we talk to them about what we are seeing that is causing a few issues, why that is and what mitigations we think we need to make things safer or to ensure that there are no issues. That is supporting the children in problem solving, in collaborating when there are difficulties, and in ascertaining the risk element.

Remember the giant reels that electrical cables come on? Children will run along the top of them—you might have seen that at the school that you were at. That could put the fear of anything into you as an adult. Often, as you said, Eugene, adults are saying, "Get down. Don't do that." Children are totally safe, and it is enabling them to experiment, to gain that confidence, to support the development of their balance and everything like that. It is just about saying to them, "Okay, this could



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cause an accident. How are we going to do it in a safe way?" So you will see all of that.

What we see also is adults there, not supervising but supporting play. What is important then is that the adults understand what their role is in creating that environment, supporting that environment, identifying children who may be finding it more challenging, and thinking about how they can support those children. Then it is about making sure that those adults feel confident, through investing in staff training and even in staff resource like proper coats, because if you are outside in all the elements—and we are outside in all the elements—that is important.

It is important that both the adults and the children have the right uniforms, I guess, to wear. We have multiple pairs of wellies, waterproofs and so on, because we want children to be outside exploring when it is wet weather, jumping in those puddles and so on. Then there has to be education with parents, because often a child will come home dirty and the parents will complain. We have a lot of conversations with parents about, "This is a great sign that your child has had a great day."

Then there is the thinking about what kind of uniform supports play, and having a uniform that is practical. That is about ensuring that trainers are part of the uniform every single day, because we want children to be engaging in play, running around, being active. Why would you do that in those stiff shoes? Why would you expect parents to buy multiple different shoes? There are lots of different aspects to it.

What we have seen as a result is, first, there is more joy at playtime and lunchtime; staff and children are engaged and enjoying it. What does that translate into? It translates into children being able to perform better within the classroom. Traditionally, there has been a move for children to miss their lunchtime or playtime. We say that that just cannot happen. Children need to play; that is their right. Children need to be outside, letting off steam and engaging in physical play.

What we see then is that they are able to learn. At the school, we have extremely high levels of wellbeing, higher than the national average, and we get academic results. From our baseline of about 22% of children coming in on track within our early years provision, by the end it is around 80%, 85% on track. Is that all down to play? No, of course not. It is everything together, but play and the approach to it is absolutely critical.

During covid, we saw that the thing the children missed most was connection. When the children came back to school, we redefined what is traditionally called "golden time", which is a kind of reward time in school, to be dedicated play within classroom time, within the curriculum time. We call it joy time, and the whole approach is that it is planned in the same way the academic subjects are planned. It is quality-assured in the same way those subjects are as well, to show the high priority that it has. Children and adults during that time are expected to have fun and play and explore and be curious together.



Q36 **Chair:** Ingrid, did you want to come in?

Ingrid Skeels: Yes. It is amazing to hear about your school. There are a lot of schools that are not like that. We hear from a lot of parents, and I have had experience with schools in Bristol where it is not like that. Children are losing their breaks and lunchtimes as punishments, and they are not encouraged in all the ways that you are saying. It used to be, again going back to the past, that we all had limitless outdoor play in our lives and then school was the other bit. But now school is almost the place where you get to run around and play, and if school does not let you do that, and is saying no running, or is taking away play or wet play just because it is a bit grey, outdoor play is cancelled. We do not have a national education service anymore, where we can easily spread everything you are doing. I know it is a challenge, but I think there needs to be some way of sharing the critical benefits of this to education.

We have a lot of parents saying that their children are told they are not allowed to run in secondary school, that the ball courts are locked, and that children are told they are not allowed to run on the way home from school. So how are children going to get this physical activity that they are constantly being told they need, if behaviour control is also keeping them out?

Q37 **Chair:** On the decline of playtime and the reduction in time that we have seen, and also back to your school's approach, Nicola, what do you think can be done to reverse the decline, but also to roll out your school's approach more widely and make it normal to have a school prioritise play at playtime?

Nicola Noble: We were very lucky to receive support from OPAL to help us to develop our approach. Learning from that and being able to codify practice and spread that practice is important, as is demystifying challenges around it. It does not cost loads of money. You do not need to invest in loads of resources. In fact, a lot of it promotes sustainability by utilising resources that would otherwise be thrown away.

There is also staff training. If we look at initial teacher training, how much of that would be focused on play? I do not know, an hour maybe, at maximum. That is critical as well.

Often, people will say, "We do not have time for that. We have so much we have to fit in. We cannot fit that in as well." But we see that if you prioritise play, the rest of it happens more easily, because children are in a better state to be able to engage in their learning. It is a real mindset shift in what we are prioritising and understanding that if we prioritise those things, we get the outcomes that we want at the end.

Q38 **Chair:** Finally, do you feel like there is a bit of an inevitability that, as kids move through the key stages, we shift them into organised sport and that is how you deal with things? Is that a good or bad thing? What can we do to maybe have a bit more of a holistic approach to things? Maybe Eugene can come in.



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Eugene Minogue: Yes, I am happy to take that one. The easiest way to describe this is that we must remember that we play sport; you do not sport sport. So it all starts with play.

Certainly for me, and I have been saying this for many years, we "sportise" children far too early, far too quickly. That has exacerbated play being squeezed out of society but also the school day, and we have lost it in terms of community sport as well. We do not recognise the value that play has.

Going back to my own childhood, we had play workers in school, and we had play workers in the local adventure playground. I would go to a play scheme. I would not go to a HAF programme that was then football or table tennis or basketball, and pass from pillar to post. I would go to a play scheme. I would have play workers there. I would be on the zipwire one minute, I would be inside doing arts and crafts, I would be making cakes, I would be doing things I probably should not have been doing out in the adventure playground, messing with fire and axes and other bits and pieces. Then I would have a bit of a kick around. But it was not codified; it was not sportised in the way that it is now.

Certainly, that is why play is not recognised as foundational to sport and physical activity. It is why we have a decline in children and young people's participation in sport and physical activity. Sport England's own data tells us, if you look at their Active Lives survey, that the No. 1 thing children do by, an absolute country mile, is active play. That is their own data. But we have not recognised within the system how foundational play is to children's movement, physical activity and relationship with physical literacy, and then how that translates both into the school environment and more broadly out into the community environment.

Ingrid Skeels: We have been tackling the decline in children's physical activity levels with sport, and the statistics are showing that that is not working. Statistically, 53% of children are not getting the basic minimum physical activity to be well, which is an hour a day of physical activity. That can be spread over the day, and it includes walking. So they are not moving that much. Of the 50% of children who are physically active—so doing that hour—50% say they do not enjoy it. Yet the main factor for children being physically active is enjoyment. Children enjoy play and they are physically active in it. As Eugene says, that is really the basis for everything. If you can allow children to play, be active and enjoy themselves, out of that they will start to kick a ball around, they will copy and want to learn what their friends do, and then they can gradually get into sport. But without investment and without recognition and understanding of play, sport is not going to be the answer to all the ills of the lack of physical activity. It is also not going to get the best sports stars, because you need to include everybody, and not everybody wants to sign up for five-a-side football. But everybody would play out and maybe have a go, and then maybe find out they are brilliant at it.

Eugene Minogue: Can I quickly add that play is not only intrinsic, but universal? I have yet to be proven wrong on this. People do not have a



negative experience of play; they have an overwhelmingly positive one. If you contrast that with sport, people have polarising views—"I did not like it. I was made to wear this in PE. It was not really for me." Play has a real value that sport and physical activity do not have, but it is not recognised systemically.

Nicola Noble: Also, play is often associated with young children, and we limit the opportunities as children get older. What we are doing there is stunting children's creativity, their developing imagination and so on. Often you will see older children who get those opportunities role-playing, going into imaginary worlds and things like that. Often people think, "That is too babyish." What we are also doing is making our children grow up too quickly, which there is a danger to.

Q39 Dr Rupa Huq: I just wanted to follow up by asking how you would enshrine play in the curriculum. What would it look like in practice? We have the review coming up, haven't we, this autumn? What would be your ideal blue-sky thinking?

Nicola Noble: We would want to see a real extension to early years practice, into at least key stage 1. Children go from early years, where nearly their whole day is focused around play, into the formality of year 1, where the curriculum often narrows. They are expected to sit at tables all day. My own son went into year 1 and he is like, "Oh, Mummy, I am having to do proper work now." There is a real shift there.

But even more than that, we want to see a curriculum that encourages curiosity, that has that flexibility so that you can develop the learning opportunity and there is that element of fun, of play. We do a lot of project-based learning, which enables that. It enables children to explore, to experiment, and to not necessarily always have to get the right answer, but to learn that that is part of the process. Often these are some of the translatable skills that employers want to see later in life.

Offering explicit time where we are making time for play, not just at playtime but within the classroom environment as well, is important. What is also important in that is that the adults are part of it, so that it is not just seen as a child thing. It is a human thing that everybody can engage in and everybody can have opportunity with.

There is a real opportunity within the curriculum review to shape and change that, and to enable that flexibility and give school leaders and teachers the opportunity to develop that practice within their environments.

Q40 Dr Rupa Huq: You have a lot of examples of best practice. What things have worked? You mentioned bikes. We had cycling proficiency in my day, and I do not think my son had that. There was a Mayor of London scheme, where he learned to ride.

Nicola Noble: It is not a universal offer. That is the point. It depends on where you are, it depends on the links that you may have with different organisations. There are now so many children at the school who have learned to ride a bike, because it is part of the provision at lunchtime.



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The beauty of it is that you see children teaching children and encouraging each other.

It's the same with skating. It is amazing. We probably have about 20 to 30 children on roller skates at any one time, and you see them going from being all wobbly at the beginning to proficiently going around. There has been positive feedback from parents saying, "My child would never have learned to ride a bike had there not been this opportunity." This is obviously a real life skill that we want children to have. If we are thinking about pollution, and we are asking people to cycle more and more, it becomes a real barrier if we are not teaching them.

Q41 Dr Rupa Huq: What is happening with swimming?

Nicola Noble: Swimming is part of the curriculum, and there is an expectation that children are able to swim a certain amount by the time they leave primary school. Again there is a real disparity there. There are children who obviously do not have access to swimming outside school, and school is their only opportunity. It can become quite challenging for schools if a majority of the cohort have picked it up and are fine, to then think about how to continue to support the children who have not quite got it yet. Our staff are incredible. Staff are in the pool with them thinking about what different interventions they can support children with.

Q42 Dr Rupa Huq: It used to be badges, but you could just have a splashing around, mucking about, doggy-paddle thing in a more play way, rather than having to do 29 lengths.

Nicola Noble: A paddling pool in the summer is one of the highlights—water guns, sprinklers—that children love. Engaging in that play with mud, water and sand, and encouraging children to explore and be messy, is important, and important in an environment where potentially parents do not have that privilege because of the conditions in which they are living.

Q43 Dr Rupa Huq: How could you support teachers, when I think a DfE study shows that only 29% of primary school teachers feel prepared or well-prepared to facilitate play?

Eugene Minogue: It is one of the things in our strategy. Yes, play work and play workers are vital. One of the things we highlight very clearly in the strategy is that any person that works with children and young people has a role to enable play. Every person in those roles should have a sufficient level of training on play to enable it, and understand how foundational it is to absolutely everything. Whether that is in an education setting, a community setting, a sports setting or whatever it may be, we need to make sure that this is part of the training for professionals who work with children and young people.

Q44 Dr Rupa Huq: Do you think the DfE gets it? Does the Department understand the importance of play?



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Eugene Minogue: The DfE did get it when we had the 2008 national play strategy, which unfortunately we lost in 2010. It only lasted three years. It was supposed to go on until 2020.

Q45 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Was there one of those pictures of Andy Burnham and Ed Balls?

Eugene Minogue: There was indeed. I have got it here in the book if you would like to see it.

Dr Rupa Huq: Yes, that is the one, exactly. It is seared on my memory forever.

Eugene Minogue: Play is for everybody, and like Nicole said, as human beings we have an obligation to play. But, in similar way to what we have done with the sports system, with our education system we have regimented the day for children and young people from the moment they get up to the moment they go to bed. Their day is overly structured by us as adults and society. We do not allow enough time for free play to take place and for children to explore, make mistakes, be mischievous, do things that they probably should not be doing, and learn from that. Play is foundational to these things.

When it comes to the education sector particularly, there are things that we can learn, particularly from the Scandinavian countries. One of the things they have is a 45:15 rule: for every 45 minutes of learning there is 15 minutes of play-based recess, genuine recess, whereby children go out, they muck around in a sandpit, play outside, kick a ball around or whatever it may be, unsupervised.

There are small things within our gift that we can do. As an example, the Education Act makes provision for sufficient recreation and leisure opportunities but does not do the same for play. These are things that we can and should do as a society, as parliamentarians, and that are within our gift to do.

It is also important to point out that play sufficiency legislation is not just about the built environment. It is about schools and education as well. They are built facilities. The No. 1 thing that hits our inbox is, "Can you please tell our school to let our children play on the playground before and after school?" The number of children who go to school and get told they cannot play on the playground because there is nobody to supervise them—

Q46 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Ingrid, Jasmine Hoffman speaks very highly of you, and she will love what you guys have said about "No ball games".

Ingrid Skeels: Yes, she is amazing. Playing Out supported her, and I think a lot of people have. She is doing amazing things.

I do not think DfE do get it, and I do not think the Government get it. That is, in a way, why we are here. If you took the analogy of a school, say like with Nicola, you need someone at the top and at the head who gets it. If they get it, and it is in policies and in the vision of what we want childhood to be like—maybe it needs to be in the rights as well and



in equalities—then it will trickle down to children roller skating in the playground.

At the moment, that roller skating in the playground, metaphorically speaking, is happening through grassroots groups trying to keep it going, through schools that are beacons, through civil society sectors, through parents trying to make it happen, but up against a lot of barriers. If this was truly recognised by Government, DfE and all the Departments, we would not even need to be here. I think that is what needs to happen.

Q47 Zöe Franklin: Just to round off, we have talked a lot about how it is different now to what it was, but the report also clearly set out the fact that it is not the same experience for all young people when it comes to that equality of access. Could you outline for us the greatest disparities that you see in terms of access to play?

Ingrid Skeels: A few of them have been mentioned. What has replaced the loss of free outdoor space, just as something that everybody can access, has been, for a lot of children in this country, organised clubs, classes, activities and trips to the park with your parents—even to try to learn to ride a bike, putting the bike in the back of the car. We have probably all seen people going to the park, learning to ride the bike. That not only does not totally replace the amazing benefits of free unorganised outdoor play without adults supervising you, but only certain children are getting it. A lot of children do not have the money for clubs and classes, they do not have a car, and they do not have an adult who can take them. If they also are living in social housing where they do not have a garden, and the bit of green space where they are says no, they are really not going out. I have spoken to children and families who are not going out at all. They are not getting any activity; they are not doing anything over any holiday. Screens have enabled that to happen as well.

There is a massive discrepancy. The fact that free play has been lost affects all children, but it absolutely affects the poorest children the most. If we want to do something about equalities as well, we have to start with how children are growing up in that sense, because it is about their physical activity, their socialisation, their independence and their belonging. And it is also about opportunity—I think it ties to the Government's opportunity mission. If you do not know your neighbourhood, you do not know your neighbours and you cannot go out and about and take part in things, how are you going to feel that you can do anything, in a way?

Nicola Noble: Just to add to that, I hear that parents of children with special educational needs, particularly those with more complex needs, do not feel that they are able to be in even some of the places that potentially some children are. That is really isolating, particularly through the summer and at weekends. We have recently, through the summer holidays, run a summer provision for children with severe complex needs at the school to offer that opportunity, because they are not able to access even some of the free clubs that are on offer. Parents have just been so grateful for that, saying, "What would I have done otherwise?"



We also have to look at that as then having a negative impact on parent mental health and potentially parent physical health as well, which obviously is then having a societal impact. There is that, and then there are some children who are at even more of a disadvantage, where parents just do not feel safe, particularly single parents, taking their children out by themselves, which is really sad.

Q48 Zöe Franklin: Is there anything you want to add, Eugene?

Eugene Minogue: One of the things that it is key to highlight is that children today are growing up in a phone-based childhood, as opposed to a play-based childhood. That is a reflection of us as adults and society, and of how we have not just created the environment that children are growing up in nowadays, but we continue to curate that environment. It is incumbent on us as adults to change that, to make sure that we can get back to a play-based childhood.

If I may, there are a couple of things that I really wanted to highlight. Particularly when it comes to adventure playgrounds, these are civic treasures, historically and culturally valuable. We have lost over half of those in my lifetime, since 1980. We are seeing many local authorities, particularly in inner-city areas—London, Nottingham, Leicester—who want to remove virtually all their adventure playgrounds. We are working with those local authorities to make sure that the adventure playgrounds stay.

I also want to highlight the valuable role of play workers. As I said earlier, that workforce has been decimated. Through our new strategy and work we are doing more broadly, we need to re-establish that play work workforce, in the same way that Government is currently doing with the national youth strategy and youth workers. We need the same attention. Children do not just land here at age 13 and go into a youth club. They are here. They make up 20% of our population, but 100% of our future. We do not treat them that way. We must start with play.

We are making the right sounds, but it is not translating into policy and practice at this time. We need people like yourselves to stand up in Parliament, be the child's voice in Parliament and make the change that we can make. There are simple things that we can do, some of which I have highlighted. I will keep banging on about it, but play sufficiency legislation is one of them. It is a no-cost policy ask. It has broad support across the House. We need a new national play strategy underpinned by play sufficiency legislation.

We need £125 million per annum. To put that into context, that is 20 pence, per child, per week. That is about six hours of NHS spend. It is not just modest; it is tiny. It is the least we can do for our children and young people. But I will get off my soapbox for now.

Q49 Chair: Thank you so much. Just to wrap up, this has been a fascinating and wonderful opportunity to discuss this issue and the importance of the role of our young people and their feeling they have a stake in the communities around them. Yes, there is the national youth strategy and



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things like that. Is there one thing we can take away that you would want us to bang the drum about when we leave this room?

Ingrid Skeels: I do not know if it is “the one” for everybody, but I want to leave you with the sense that, honestly, for the group of politicians that pick this up, it has the potential to be game-changing for children’s lives, for their health, for everything, but nobody has done it. Everybody who works in this area can see the simple, low-cost things, and even some big low-cost things, that we need. It is just about prioritising children and saying, “We are going to make streets safer. Do you know what, we do not have a lot of money”—the local authority, the Government or whatever—“but we are going to make life better for our children. That means making the streets safer, making them welcoming. We are going to get rid of the ‘No ball games’ signs. If you want to close your road for a couple of hours, you can do it, that is brilliant. Let the children come out. We are going to turn it around for children.” I think that the group that does that has the chance to have a game-changing impact on children’s health. I do not want to end on a negative, but the thought of no one doing that is very frightening for children’s lives. So I really hope you can help.

Eugene Minogue: I can go again if you want me to. Please, play sufficiency legislation. The amendment has been laid down twice now. Hopefully, we will get the support in the Lords. When it comes back to the Commons, I would encourage Members to be the voice of the child. Remember what your childhood was like, and please stand up and support that amendment.

Nicola Noble: The children are too precious. My own daughter is here today. You want children to thrive. We need children to thrive, because they are our future. We talk a lot about the drain on the health service and all the different social issues that there are. What we see is that when we prioritise children’s wellbeing, when we give them those opportunities, they flourish. Why, societally, would we not want that?

That is why we have created a school around that, despite Government policy, because we see that it works. The dream, the ask, is that we show that it is possible—it is possible—and that we support people in being able to do it, both through policy and by sharing practice and by learning from practice. It does not cost the earth as we said. What is it? Twenty pence a child, a week. Aren’t they worth that? The time has to be now. We cannot wait any longer. Our children are too precious, and they deserve better.

Chair: Thank you very much, everybody. That is the conclusion of today’s session.