

# Playing Out – Written evidence (NPS0052)

## Background and evidence

### About Playing Out

Playing Out ([www.playingout.net](http://www.playingout.net)) is a non-profit organisation supporting a UK-wide parent-led movement aimed at restoring children's freedom to play out in the places and spaces near home – including their own streets. We developed and provide support for the resident-led 'play street' model that began in Bristol and has now been taken up by well over 1,000 street communities across the UK. Over 80 local authorities have established a play street policy based on our model, with a similar number in the process of doing so.

### About play streets

Temporary play streets (or 'playing out' sessions) are short road closures, usually organised by neighbours on their own street after school or at the weekend, creating a safe space for children to play out together on their doorstep. They allow children to play freely, without organised games or activities. In practice, this means children cycle, scoot, skate, chalk, skip, hopscotch, kick a ball around and make up games. They are joyful, self-motivated and naturally active.

Bristol University's 2015 evaluation of play streets found that children are three to five times more active than they would be on a 'normal' day after school:

<https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/street-play-public-health.pdf>

Play streets are a low-cost, simple and effective temporary intervention, bringing enormous benefit to children and communities. They are already tacitly supported by the Government through DfT guidance for councils on the legislation underpinning them, but much more could be done to ensure this effective and successful model is available to communities in all parts of the country.

Play streets also demonstrate some important factors that are relevant for wider policy to support children's physical activity:

- Children have an innate desire to be active through play
- Free, unstructured play is an effective way for children to be physically active
- Traffic is a major barrier to children's play and activity
- Safe space immediately outside children's homes enables them to be active
- Parents value and support children's need to play outside

### Beyond play streets

More widely and longer-term, ALL children need the conditions provided by play streets - safe space on their doorstep, permission to play, supportive, connected

communities and other children - in order to play outside near home, freely and safely, as part of their normal everyday lives. Creating these conditions will be a major undertaking, involving cross-departmental policy and commitment, but would have enormous impact on children's physical activity levels outside school, as well as for their general well-being.

### **The significance of free outdoor play for children's activity**

Unstructured outdoor play and games – including informally 'playing out' near home – is the first and main way that children are physically active in their daily lives, develop physical literacy and a sense of enjoyment around this. It is also where the 'seeds' for later possible interest in competitive sport are planted. It is a very important way that children can be physically active as part of their normal daily lives, alongside active travel to school and elsewhere. This is especially true in Covid times as the opportunity for more organised and indoor activity is restricted and diminished.

A national approach to tackling inactivity that doesn't recognise the crucial importance of outdoor free play for children as the main starting point for lifelong participation in physical activity will have a huge blind spot, making for less active children and requiring more intervention and cost later on.

#### Physical activity

Simply observing children during any 'play street' session - running, jumping, scooting, skating, cycling, hooping - should be enough to convince anyone that children are incredibly active when given the opportunity and space to play out freely on their doorstep.

Research from Ghent and Bristol University found that the opportunity for unstructured outdoor play afforded by play streets *significantly increased children's physical activity levels*, especially 'moderate to vigorous physical activity' or MVPA.

<https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-019-6609-4>

#### Physical literacy

As well as having multiple benefits in itself, physical literacy is a key underpinning factor for children's physical activity. According to Sport England's 'Active Lives- Children and Young People Survey' (2019), "Physically literate children do twice as much activity. The more of the five elements of physical literacy - enjoyment, confidence, competence, understanding and knowledge - children have, the more active they are".

Because free play is non-prescriptive and by nature involves diverse activities and ways of moving and exploring, it naturally *builds children's physical literacy and skills*. A survey conducted by Playing Out (2017) revealed that 85% of children participating in play streets either learnt or improved their physical skills through activities such as scooting, riding a bike (80%), skipping (66%) and roller-skating (63%).

Further to this, a 2020 literature review of play streets and physical literacy by LaTrobe University, commissioned by Sport Australia, looks at how play streets contribute to children's physical, psychological, social and cognitive capabilities and concludes that "*Play Streets support the development of physical literacy in children holistically, with a particular strength in developing psychological and social capabilities...*"

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342014995\\_How\\_Play\\_Streets\\_supports\\_the\\_development\\_of\\_physical\\_literacy\\_in\\_children\\_A\\_research\\_review](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342014995_How_Play_Streets_supports_the_development_of_physical_literacy_in_children_A_research_review)

## Motivation

Children do not need to be told to play: they are *intrinsically and instinctively motivated* to do so because *they enjoy it*.

According to Sport England's 'Active Lives- Children and Young People Survey' (2019), "Enjoyment is the biggest driver of activity levels", so this is hugely important.

## Simple and low-cost

Children also do not need organising, instructing or – from a certain age – supervising in order to play; neither does play require a special place, professional instruction or expensive equipment. In order to play freely and actively with all the physical and emotional benefits that brings, children simply need *time, access to safe space, permission and other children to play with*.

## Inclusivity and equality

*ALL children*, regardless of ability, gender, ethnicity, location or family circumstances, can and do play. Outdoor play in greenspace and the built environment is *free and open to all*, as long as the social and environmental conditions are in place to allow it.

## Community, Connection, Belonging

Play is a key way that children *connect with each other across barriers of age, gender, race, ability and social background*. It can also bring adults together. A 2017 survey found that 91% of participants knew people on their street as a result of play streets, and 84% said they felt a greater sense of belonging in their neighbourhood.

Research by Professor Alison Stenning of Newcastle University

<https://playingout.net/play-streets-build-community/> also found that play streets tackle loneliness and build connection on streets. Play itself was found to be important: "*the potential of play itself to enable new connections seems to be critical, not just for children but also for adults*" (Stenning, 2020)

## Active neighbourhoods

Enabling active play in streets and the wider built environment goes hand in hand with creating active environments for *walking, cycling and everyday physical activity*. If children are able to play out safely on their own streets, walk

or cycle to school or to the park or other activities, the environment created will be one that is beneficial for everyone.

Multiple other benefits for children and communities

“Play is an activity that is essential to supporting children’s wellbeing and development. Play is linked to improved mental health and wellbeing and to better physical health (Hills et.al., 2011), resulting in happier, more confident children who are better at dealing with stress (Children’s Commissioner, 2018).

Play also supports children’s cognitive and social development, teaching them to develop and use language effectively, as well as solve problems collaboratively and independently (Children’s Commissioner, 2018). There is also growing evidence that supports children’s play benefitting the family and wider community via improved family wellbeing and increased social action and volunteering (Gill, 2014; Meyer et.al., 2019).” (LaTrobe University, June 2020)

Research has shown that when children have the space and opportunity to play out freely together near home – such as during a play street session – they are naturally physically active. They don’t need to be told to move around, or provided with organised games or activities, they just do, because they choose to and enjoy it. This tallies with Sport England’s findings – now underpinning their new strategy – that “Enjoyment is the biggest driver of activity for children”. <https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/active-lives-children-survey-2017-18-attitudes-report.pdf>

### **Response to Questions**

NB. We will only respond to the questions most relevant to our work and expertise.

#### **1. How can local delivery, including funding structures, of sport and recreation be improved to ensure that people of all ages and abilities are able to lead an active lifestyle? For example, how successfully do local authorities and other bodies such as Active Partnerships, Leisure Trusts, local sports clubs and charities work together, and how might coordination be improved?**

As a general point we would like to say that it is absolutely essential that this committee is an opportunity to step back and take a completely fresh look at what is really needed in order for people of all ages and abilities to be more active. More of the same is not an option.

In particular, there needs to be an honest assessment of the value and limitations of organised and delivered sport, fitness and leisure compared to the enormous potential for increasing everyday physical activity in the general population through enabling active travel and outdoor play. Enabling this type of everyday physical activity is heavily dependent on removing barriers and creating the right environments. This will take cross-departmental commitment at both national and local government levels but is undoubtedly the way forward for tackling inactivity in the long term and to achieving this for everyone regardless of age, ability, ethnicity, income-bracket or gender.

The main barrier to ordinary, everyday physical activity is motorised traffic – particularly the dominance of private cars in towns and cities. This is especially true for children, for whom traffic danger is by far the biggest obstacle to independent mobility, active travel, freedom to roam and outdoor play near home. Unless this ‘elephant in the room’ is tackled, through joined-up policy across transport, planning and environment, children will continue to lead largely indoor, sedentary lives and adults will continue to be car-dependent and inactive.

A particular concern is the current focus on electric vehicles as being ‘the answer’ to the car problem. Whilst this technology may bring some benefits in terms of air pollution and climate change, privately owned electric vehicles will have exactly the same impact on children’s freedom as those using fossil-fuels, continuing to dominate street space in towns and cities, posing a danger to children’s lives and acting as a deterrent to being outdoors and active. If we are serious about enabling physical activity and averting an impending public health disaster, strong policy is needed to shift society away from private car use and towards walking, cycling and public transport.

Housing and planning policy also have an important role to play, to ensure that the spaces and places around where children live are safe and accessible. Where housing has been planned with children in mind, such as the Stirling Prize winning ‘Goldsmith Street’ in Norwich, where a safe and overlooked alleyway between houses provides an ideal space for children to play freely, parents report that children choose to be outdoors and physically active on a daily basis.

## **2. How can children and young people be encouraged to participate in sport and recreation both at school and outside school, and lead an active lifestyle? If possible, share examples of success stories and good practice, and challenges faced.**

Again, we feel that this question perhaps needs to be asked from a different angle as the erroneous and damaging assumption behind much public health, sport and physical activity policy is that children don’t want to be active or are lazy and need to be ‘encouraged’. In fact, provided with the right conditions, we have seen for ourselves that children need no encouragement to be active and it’s more a case of trying to stop them! The focus needs to be on removing barriers to children’s natural desire to play and be active.

Children have an innate and natural urge to play and this often involves being physically active, especially if they have immediate access to safe, playable space. This does not necessarily mean playgrounds or special equipment - in fact, standard playgrounds can be limited and prescriptive in terms of children’s activity. The more important thing for children’s everyday play and activity is access to safe space right outside their front door. Residential streets and shared space within housing estates can both serve this purpose if the space is made safe from traffic, overlooked (to provide informal supervision) and there is clear permission for children to play there. These things are all highly achievable.

As already mentioned above, resident-led play streets (or 'playing out' sessions on estates) are one successful way to do this on a temporary basis, but this involves commitment, time and effort from parents and will only ever be an interim measure reaching a small proportion of children. Policy-change is needed to make all residential streets safer and to ensure all children can safely and legitimately access other shared spaces near their homes, particularly in tower blocks where people have no private outside space.

School streets and 'stay and play' schemes (where school grounds are kept open for informal play after school) are other successful and replicable ways to provide children with the right conditions to be active immediately before and after school.

Enabling children's everyday physical activity through active travel and play is essential if we want to ensure that all children can be active, healthy and happy. A focus on creating environments that enable this, especially in more disadvantaged areas, would ensure that children are not excluded from physical activity through lack of resources, geographical location or other barriers. Playing outside near home costs nothing and requires no special management, infrastructure or equipment. It is something that all children can do, whether they are 'sporty' or not. But it does require a serious focus to tackle the very real barriers currently stopping many children from having this simple freedom.

**3. How can adults of all ages and backgrounds, particularly those from under-represented groups, including women and girls, ethnic minorities, disabled people, older people, and those from less affluent backgrounds, be encouraged to lead more active lifestyles? If possible, share examples of success stories and good practice, and challenges faced.**

One important point to note is that research shows that "active children become active adults" so focussing efforts on enabling children to be active – and in particular building this activity into their everyday lives through active travel and play - will also ensure that a future adult population is more active.

We would also just reiterate the points made above – creating 'active environments' that enable and encourage everyday physical activity such as walking, cycling and informal recreation right where people live would also benefit people of all ages, especially those from less affluent backgrounds who have more barriers to accessing formal sport or leisure opportunities.

Women in particular, as the main providers of childcare, would benefit enormously from less traffic-dominated streets and easy and safe, walkable neighbourhoods, as well as quality, safe greenspaces where they can informally supervise children playing.

A notable feature of play streets and 'playing out' sessions has been the coming together of neighbours of all ages, ethnic backgrounds, abilities and socio-economic groups in a shared public space. Girls and boys are also equally active at these sessions where they have complete freedom to play as they choose. This demonstrates the importance and potential for increasing physical activity

amongst under-represented groups through creating safe, accessible space on the doorstep.

**9. What successful policy interventions have other countries used to encourage people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to participate in sport and recreation, and lead more active lifestyles?**

We need to look to countries such as the Netherlands, where a holistic policy approach is taken to public health – crucially including transport and planning. It is no accident that countries where transport and planning policy are integrated with public health outcomes have far higher rates of active travel and, crucially, of children’s independent mobility and free outdoor play.

It may be more helpful though to look to what has been achieved at the level of cities around the world. Arup’s report, [‘Cities Alive: Designing for Urban Childhoods’](#) and Tim Gill’s recently published [‘Urban Playground: How Child-Friendly Planning and Design Can Save Cities’](#) are both excellent reference points for how planning, transport and other policies can come together with a shared aim of creating a child-friendly built environment that enables and encourages physical activity for all age groups.

**10. Should there be a national plan for sport and recreation? Why/why not?**

What is needed to address the very real crisis in our nation’s health goes far beyond a national plan for sport and recreation. Continuing to invest in organised sport and the leisure industry, without addressing the barriers to everyday physical activity for the entire population, and for children in particular, will not result in change at the level that is so desperately needed in this country.

We need a bold, integrated and evidence-based long-term strategy that brings together planning, transport, housing, community, local government and environment policies to address the very real barriers to inactivity and to create a physical and socio-political environment where everyone – including children - can be active in their daily lives.

Without this, children’s physical and mental wellbeing will continue to suffer from all the effects of inactivity, through no fault of their own. Through prioritising other things - economic growth in particular - we have inadvertently created a society where children’s wellbeing is bottom of the pile and is now at a crisis point where no amount of school PE lessons and organised sport will fix it. To truly turn this crisis around will require vision and a clear commitment to change and to putting the needs of children first. In particular, we need a national approach that will create the environment they need to be active, healthy and happy: safe streets and neighbourhoods where they can play outside freely, walk, cycle and belong in their communities.

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