

Children, Young People and the Built Environment - Levelling Up Committee Inquiry

A response to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee's call for evidence

Professor Alison Stenning
Geography, Newcastle University

Background

Alison Stenning is a professor of social geography based at Newcastle University interested in issues of social, spatial and environmental justice in relationship to streets, neighbourhoods, and children's play and mobility. She is involved in research around play streets and playing out, especially in relation to questions of community and everyday relationships and in more disadvantaged communities; the experiences of play on streets during the pandemic; and children's neighbourhood play and mobility. Her expertise centres on geographies of children and play, particularly in urban areas and in neighbourhoods facing particular disadvantage, within wider social, political and economic contexts. She also coordinates play streets across the borough of North Tyneside with community group PlayMeetStreet North Tyneside and sits on the board of directors for Playing Out.

Key Recommendations

- Opportunities for children to play, move and hang out throughout their neighbourhoods should be prioritised over the provision of designated spaces for children and their play.
- The value of everyday play in neighbourhoods in building community resilience and connection, for those with and *without* dependent children, should be recognised and reflected in the framing of policy and planning approaches; this is not just about children.
- The connections between neighbourhood play and place attachment/belonging should be clearly understood, since they enable increasingly active and independent mobility and nurture stewardship for both immediate and wider environments.
- High-level support for play streets, as a step on the journey to both play sufficiency and safer, greener neighbourhoods, within both central and local government is critical to their development, especially within communities facing greater disadvantage.
- Play sufficiency should become a core duty in English and Northern Irish local authorities (mirroring commitments in Scotland and Wales) to enable play-related work across policy spheres (such as estates, green space, and holiday activities and food) to be connected, sustained and expanded in a manner which supports the development of local play strategies.

Children's Everyday Geographies and Places to Play

- Children should be able to – and certainly want to – play, move and hang out in the many and diverse outdoor spaces in their neighbourhoods. Provision for children should not only be focused on playgrounds and designated play spaces (MUGAs, soft play centres, sports centres), though they are, of course, valuable. One of the most important commentators on children and the city, Colin Ward, wrote in 1978:
“One should be able to play everywhere, easily, loosely, and not forced into a ‘playground’ or ‘park’. The failure of an urban environment can be measured in direct proportion to the number of ‘playgrounds’.”

- At times, policy makers and practitioners focus on “green space”, and although access to green space is critically important, children often choose to play in the “grey spaces” on their doorsteps (pavements, front yards, culs de sac, alleys, the road if they safely can), as Mike Barclay and Ben Tawil highlight:
 “the places children value most outside of the home are not formally recognised as spaces for play, but instead are the streets where they live”¹
- Children have the right to play, and to sufficient opportunities to play in their everyday lives and everyday spaces; this is enshrined in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and – in the built environment – this has been put into practice through the idea of ‘play sufficiency’.²
- Spaces beyond children’s doorsteps may not be easily accessible for all sorts of reasons: traffic and road danger, time, discrimination and ASB, availability of friends to accompany them, etc.; moreover, access to designated children’s spaces is shaped by class, gender, age, ethnicity, disability, and sexuality.
- We can identify ways in which children in more disadvantaged communities face particular issues relating to safe access to outdoor spaces for play and mobility, including road violence and ASB, quality of provision, environmental quality (air pollution, flytipping, dereliction, etc.).³
- Of course, recent years have exacerbated a longstanding decline in designated children’s spaces. The Association of Play Industries reports that over 400 local authority playgrounds were closed between 2010 and 2016, with at least one third of all local authorities making cuts to their play provision. They note that:
 “children’s access to play space is not equal; it’s the deprived areas that are hit the hardest by cuts in public play provision and the ones that will suffer the most” (The Independent, 13.4.2017)
- The failure to secure public space for children and teenagers does not mean that these children and young people disappear – they are forced back to their homes, or hang out in spaces that cause conflict.

Children’s Neighbourhood Play and Community Connections

- In surveys of those who organise “play streets” or playing out sessions, respondents of all ages and backgrounds regularly confirm that, as a result of playing out, they know more people on their street, that their street felt friendlier and safer, and that they belonged more.⁴
- Residents on such play streets say hello to each other more frequently and help each other out with favours (lending and borrowing, babysitting, keeping keys, watering plants, etc.).
- In research focused on play streets and community, a significant number of respondents suggested that new relationships with their neighbours meant that the street felt safer, not only because there was a greater level of recognition and acquaintance between residents but also because they talked to each other about concerns around crime and antisocial behaviour in their neighbourhoods.
- Many residents narrate accounts of older people, those without young children, and new neighbours, for example, getting involved in play streets, through helping out with stewarding, bringing out baked goods, other snacks and drinks, offering other kinds of advice and support (e.g. fixing bikes or teaching ball skills).

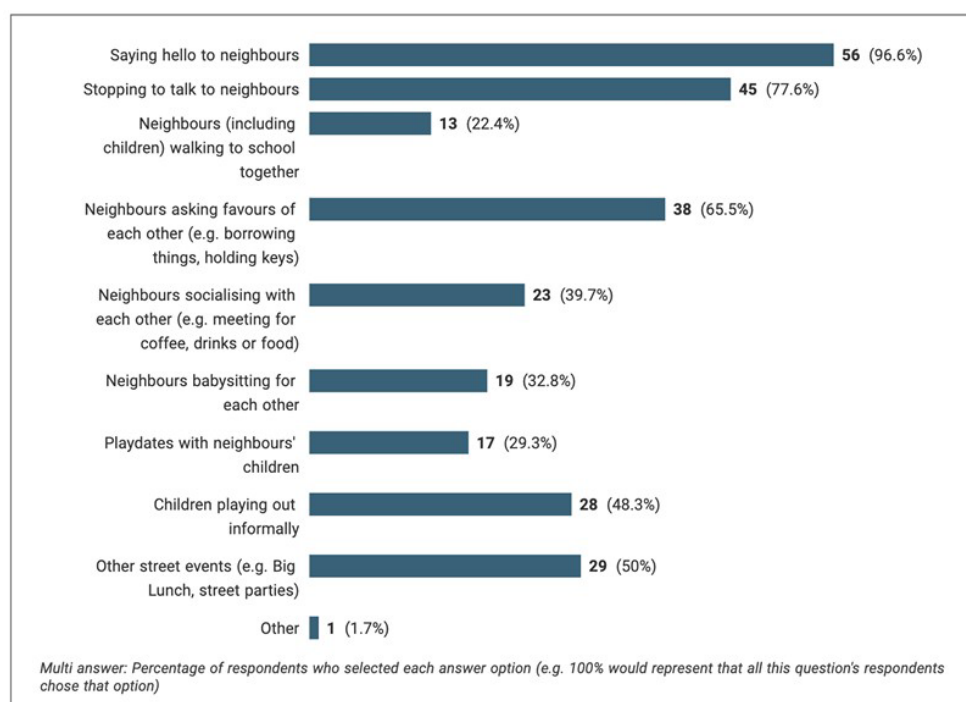
¹ http://193.62.42.46/assets/pdfs/play/wrexham_psa_abridged.pdf

² <https://ludicology.com/store-room/the-concept-of-play-sufficiency/>

³ <https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Playing-Out-Toolkit-final.pdf>

⁴ <https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Tackling-Loneliness-with-Resident-Led-Play-Streets-Final-Report.pdf>

Have any of the following increased in frequency since your street started playing out? (2020)



- There is strong evidence that play on streets creates new and important connections between neighbours of all ages. These connections support everyday contact and conviviality, friendships between adults and children, the exchange of help of all kinds, and a range of other neighbourhood activities; they are intergenerational in nature, not only between children and parents but also between children, teenagers and young people, other adults, and older neighbours.
- Creating space to play, move, connect and hang out on residential streets creates in turn opportunities for children and young people to engage with and participate in their communities; they can develop a sense of belonging and can become increasingly known by their adult neighbours (and vice versa) such that potential conflicts might be avoided and/or more easily resolved; this works in stark contrast to an approach which excludes and demonises young people.
- On many play streets, teenagers are integrated into the planning and running of sessions, helping younger children to play, caring for them, running errands etc. In streets where playing out is long-running many of today's teens have grown up knowing and connecting to their older neighbours and are confident talking to them, asking them for help, and indeed offering them support.
- There are often overlaps between the organisation of regular play streets and one-off events such as street parties for the Big Lunch, the Great Get Together, or the recent jubilee and coronation, which draw in neighbours of all ages and backgrounds.
- One of the ways in which the community benefits of play streets are reinforced is through the street Facebook and WhatsApp groups that have developed as a result of the play street. These groups complement the in-person socialising on the street and enable connections to continue between play street sessions. In surveys, residents noted a wide range of topics discussed on these groups, in addition to the kinds of support mentioned above:
 - recommendations for tradespeople and services (e.g. plumbers, roofers, electricians, dog walkers, cleaners); people offering unwanted objects (furniture, books, games, plants, etc.); safety, security, crime and anti-social behaviour on the street; tracking

missing post and parcels; reminders of bin day, roadworks, etc.; sharing information about other local events, new shops/cafes etc., parking issues, queries about other street issues (internet, water, power cuts, noise, etc.)

It's clear that these groups, developed alongside play streets, support residents in all sorts of ordinary but important ways that simply make life easier.

- One of the particular ways in which play streets enabled support was during the pandemic. In a survey of North Tyneside play streets, 72% of resident-respondents on streets that had started playing out before the pandemic stated that their play street positively impacted their street's experience of the pandemic, through quickly enabling mutual support to vulnerable or shielding households, organising socially-distanced social activities, and just chatting over garden walls.⁵
- Research on the emergence of playful activities during the first UK lockdown (from March 2020) suggests that safe, covid-appropriate play and everyday mobility in the most proximate neighbourhoods created spaces of care, respite, connection and reassurance for young children, their families and the wider community which reinforced their capacity to cope and be resilient despite the pressures of the pandemic.⁶

Children's Neighbourhood Play, Place Attachment, and Mobility

- When the space of the street is safe to play, children engage in hundreds of different kinds of play activities, representing most of the so-called 'play types'.⁷ Outdoor play offers opportunities to be out in the elements, with greater freedom to run, scoot or climb, to play with others, to be boisterous or creative.⁸
- The table below includes the many different kinds of play North Tyneside children engaged in when their streets were closed to enable play.⁹

Chalking	Dolls and prams	Throwing and catching
Cycling	Skipping	Obstacle courses
Firing rockets	Chatting	Role playing
Hopscotch	Water play, water fights and water pistols	Picnicking
Colouring in	Kerby	Tin can alley
Bubbles	Quizzes	Giant jenga
Scooting	Bingo	Sand and water trays
Races and chases	Scavenger hunts	Indoor toys on blankets
Noughts and crosses	Bug hunts	Remote control cars
Playing music	Treasure hunts	Messy play
Dressing up	Party games	Football
Duck duck goose	Dressing up	Badminton
Hide and seek	Basketball	Creating their own worlds
Playing in dens and tents	Planting seeds	Plays and performances
Toasting marshmallows	Toy planes	Loose parts play
Slaloms	Reading	Cardboard boxes
What's the time, Mr Wolf?	Stuck in the mud	Skipping
Rollerskating	Skateboarding	French skipping (elastics)
Piggy in the middle		

⁵ <https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/alisonstening/playmeetstreet-survey-2022/>

⁶ Stenning, A. and Russell, W. 2024, *Children, Families, Play, and Neighbourhood Spaces of Care During the First UK Lockdown*, Working Paper, Newcastle University.

⁷ Playworker Bob Hughes developed a description of 16 play types. These are Communication Play, Creative Play, Deep Play, Dramatic Play, Exploratory Play, Fantasy and Imaginary Play, Locomotor Play, Mastery Play, Object Play, Recapitulative Play, Role Play, Rough and Tumble Play, Social Play, Socio-Dramatic Play, and Symbolic Play. For more, see <https://www.playscotland.org/resources/play-types-poster/>.

⁸ Russell, W. and Stenning, A., 2021. Beyond active travel: Children, play and community on streets during and after the coronavirus lockdown. *Cities & Health*, 5(sup1), pp.S196-S199

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23748834.2020.1795386>

⁹ <https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/alisonstening/playmeetstreet-survey-2022/>

- Few alternative play spaces afford such a broad range of play types; play on streets creates almost endless opportunities for fun, hours when children can enjoy themselves with their siblings, friends and neighbours, of all ages.¹⁰
- These diverse forms of play on streets enable all sorts of physical and social skills for children, including:
 - running, chasing, scooting, cycling, ball games, skateboarding, rollerskating, climbing, balancing, mark-making, coordination
 - interacting with children and adults of all ages, taking turns, caring for younger children, teaching other children and adults games and skills.
- Residents also discussed how play on their streets facilitated children's increasingly familiarity with the people and places in their neighbourhoods, developing a sense of spatial awareness and place attachment, taking pride in their streets, learning about street flora and fauna, noticing the weather and the seasons.¹¹
- One of the strongest arguments for the value of children's play within and exploration of their neighbourhoods relates to the idea of childhood place attachments, seen as the bonds developed by children to the people and places in their everyday geographies. These attachments are created through spending time in and actively engaging with places regularly and over time; for children, engagement takes place primarily in the form of play, on their own or with others (particularly siblings, friends and neighbours).
- These kinds of place attachments are the first step in children's ever-growing independence, facilitating their increasing mobility as they grow older; familiarity with and confidence in their most proximate environments enables children and young people to move around their neighbourhoods and localities without their parents, on foot, by bike, or on public transport, as they grow older.
- As Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell note, "Play is the principle way in which children participate within their own communities."¹²

Local Authorities and Everyday Play in Outdoor Space

- Because play is not identified as a "statutory provision", it is rarely prioritised by budget-restrained local authorities.¹³
- Beyond playgrounds, few local authorities have active "play strategies" or dedicated play teams; outdoor play is often folded into broader policies and teams focused on estates or green space policies, with little explicit or integrated focus on the needs of children and young people.
- The number of playworkers employed by local authorities has declined dramatically in recent years, reflecting the declining value attached to play policies and play spaces in our villages, towns and cities.
- A number of local authorities are working towards "child friendly" status, with Cardiff the first UK city to be formally recognised in October 2023.¹⁴
- Some local authorities are committed to "play sufficiency" policies, including particularly in Wales and Scotland where it is now, I understand, a statutory duty; Leeds City Council were recently the first English local authority to commit to "play sufficiency" and appoint a

¹⁰ Helleman, G., Nio, I. and de Vries, S.I., 2023. Playing outdoors: What do children do, where and with whom? *Journal of Childhood, Education & Society*, 4(3), pp.322-337, <https://www.jces.com/index.php/jces/article/view/285>

¹¹ <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/universityevents/files/playing-out-briefing-paper-alison-stenning-nu-kess.pdf>

¹² <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED522537.pdf>

¹³ <https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/civiculture/2019/10/03/space-to-play-austerity-and-the-loss-of-play/>

¹⁴ <https://www.childinthecity.org/2023/10/30/cardiff-is-the-uks-first-unicef-child-friendly-city/>

“play champion” to coordinate cross-departmental work within the council to prioritise children’s access to play across the city.¹⁵

- Local authorities engage to varying extents with play streets initiatives, from enthusiastic and active support to passive approval, with many reluctant to enable and promote play streets, despite the documented benefits, as a consequence of perceived obstacles, objections and conflicts. A stronger governmental steer and a clearer framework for local authorities to take on play streets work would enable a more consistent picture here.
- Leeds City Council stands out, again, with its Play Streets Enablement Project which sought “to inspire, engage and support parents/residents in priority neighbourhoods in Leeds to independently and sustainably host and organise Play Streets on a regular basis”. Despite various challenges, more than 20 play street sessions were organised in neighbourhoods across the city, drawing in hundreds of children and their families. Neighbours met and engaged with local community organisations and with each other, building on existing relationships and establishing new ones. Children played, actively, creatively, across age groups and ethnicities – and they evidently had fun. Communities reclaimed their doorstep spaces for play, whether through formal road closures or the claiming of neighbourhood green space.¹⁶
- Much of the funding support for play in its various forms in local communities now flows through the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programmes, led by Department for Education.¹⁷ There is considerable potential for HAF schemes to support and enable children’s access to outdoor space in their communities and for HAF providers to deliver in the context of play streets and play sufficiency policies.

Children’s Neighbourhood Play and the Reimagining of Street Space

- As the evidence above suggests, play on streets connects to a number of policy spheres that extend beyond play itself and connect to related policy areas within and beyond DLUHC, such as active travel, net zero, health.
- Research by Playing Out¹⁸ concluded that 80% of residents involved reported that play streets enabled children to learn or improve riding a bike; 57% felt that play streets had changed how they felt their street could be used and many noted that being involved in play streets has led residents to campaign for zebra crossings and 20mph zones, create parklets, campaign around air quality, and change their own driving and travel behaviour.
- Qualitative research suggests that regular, temporary street closures create an appetite for quieter streets and there is widespread evidence that neighbours engage in other forms of activism including around walking and cycling and ‘better streets’ campaigns.
- Play streets can be connected to school streets to start to create low-traffic neighbourhoods and to enable behaviour change in ways which support the move to net zero.
- Research also shows that those who are intimately and intricately connected to the places in which they live are more likely to notice and care for their natural environments, from actions such as litter picking to connecting to climate campaigns.¹⁹

¹⁵ <https://news.leeds.gov.uk/news/senior-councillors-approve-new-play-sufficiency-priorities-and-appoint-new-leeds-play-champion>

¹⁶ <https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Leeds-Play-Streets-Enablement-Project-Evaluation.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/holiday-activities-and-food-programme/holiday-activities-and-food-programme-2023>

¹⁸ <https://playingout.net/play-streets/impact-overview/play-streets-active-travel/>

¹⁹ <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/universityevents/files/playing-out-briefing-paper-alison-stenning-nu-kess.pdf>