



It All Starts with Play!

Eugene Minogue

Executive Director



Introduction

Once upon a time . . . children had the freedom to play!

I was one of the lucky ones. Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, I had a play-based childhood. Fond memories of playing with friends and family, freely in the street, local park, school, adventure playground, and the wider community.

Arguably, we were the last generation that had the freedom to play, as the decline of play-based childhood began in the 1980s and accelerated in the 1990s.

We have reached a tipping point — a moment of cultural change and policy shift — recognising the dangers of a phone-based childhood and the vital role of free play and childhood independence.

The Decline of Play: The Facts

How play was once a social and cultural norm

- Unregulated, celebrated, and part of everyday community life
- Streets, parks, and open spaces as natural play areas

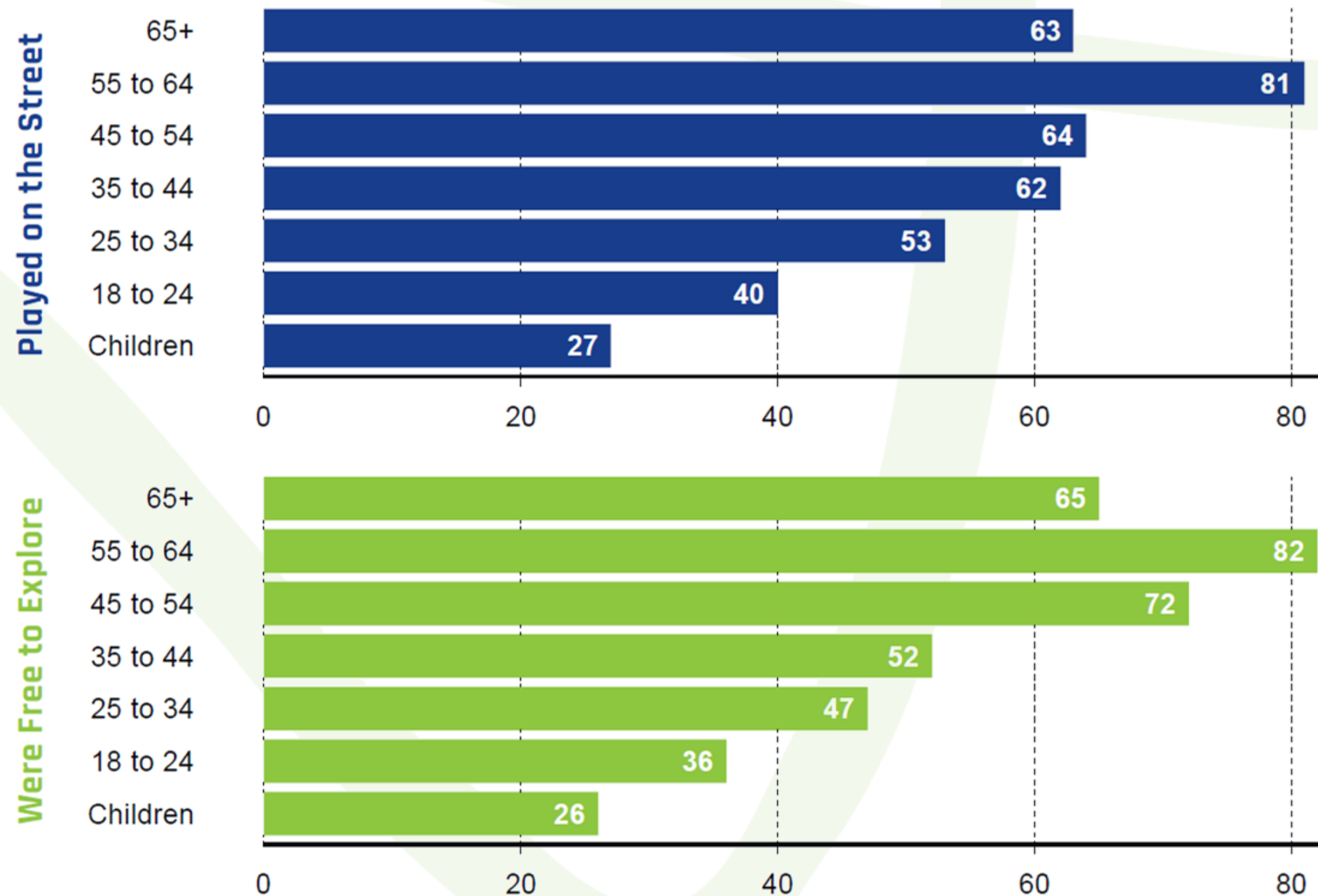
What changed?

- Safety concerns, urban design, shifting societal attitudes (No Ball Games signs)
- Institutionalisation of childhood activities (structured play vs. free play)

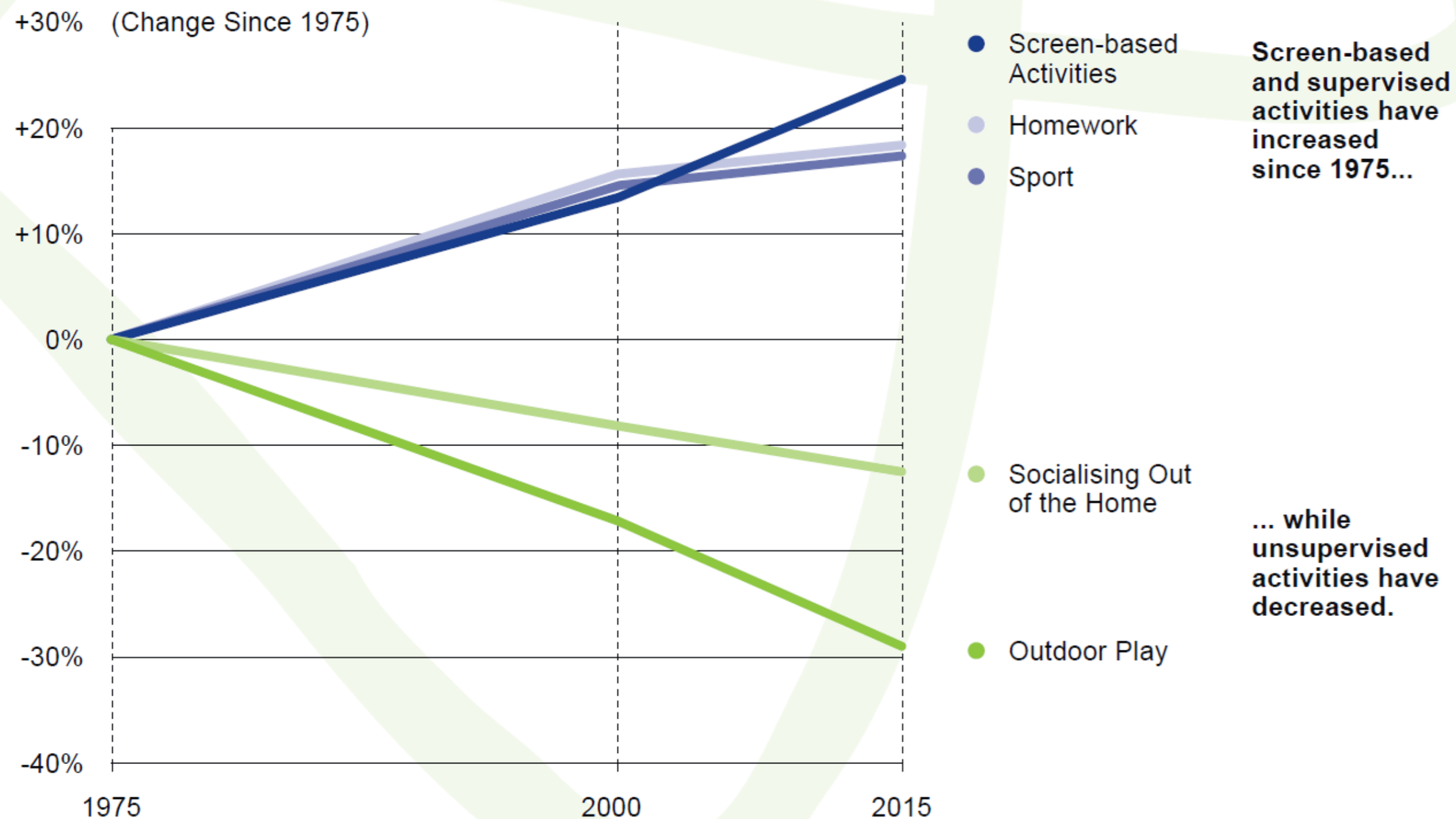
The Decline of Play: The Facts

- Time spent playing outdoors has declined by 50% in a generation.
- Less than 3 in 10 children play outside on their street.
- 400+ playgrounds closed in England (2012-2022).
- 2 million children lack access to a playground within 10 minutes of home.
- Park budgets fell by £350 million (2011-2023).
- Play funding dropped 44% between 2017/18 and 2020/21.
- The distance an 8-year-old is allowed to roam shrank from 6 miles to just 300 yards over four generations.

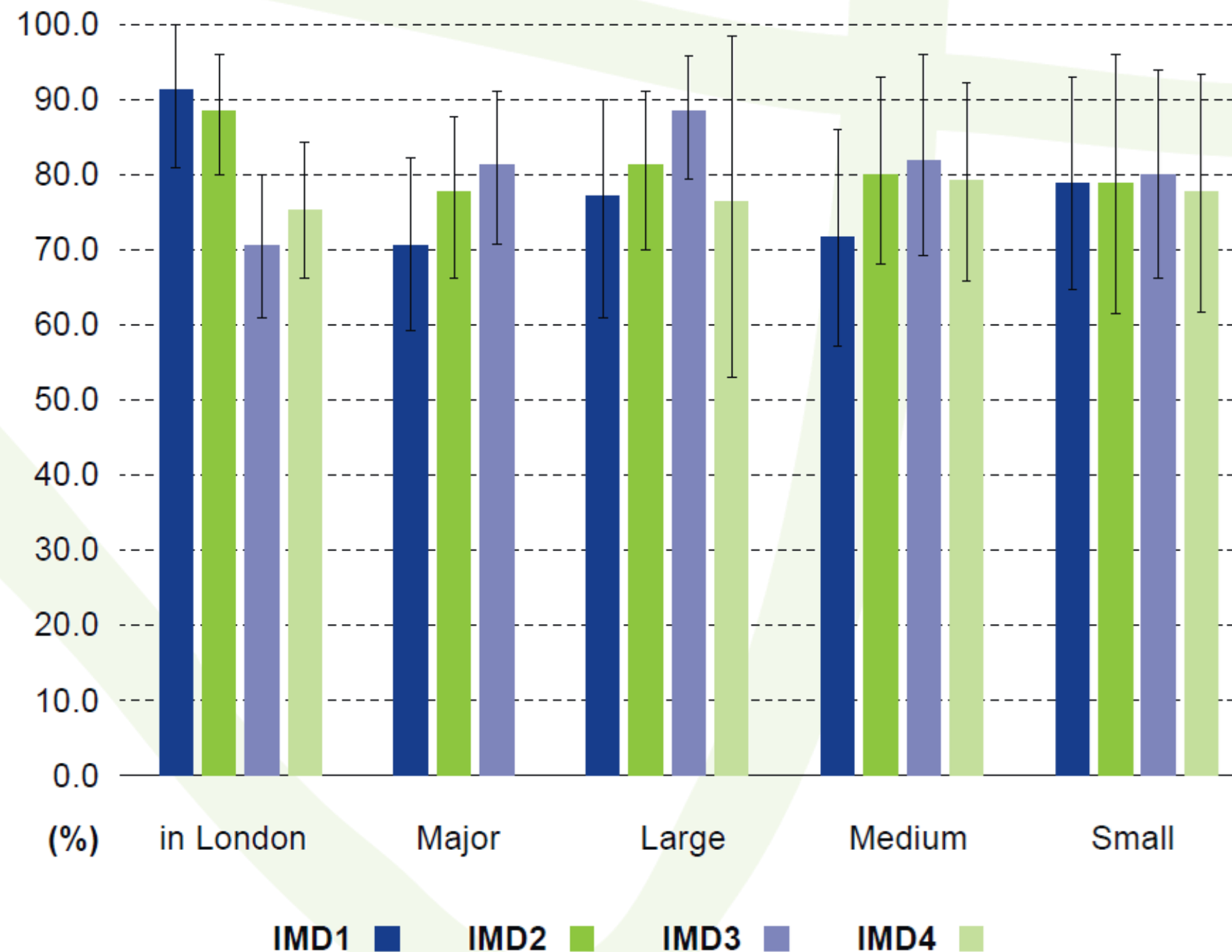
Children have less freedom than their parents and grandparents



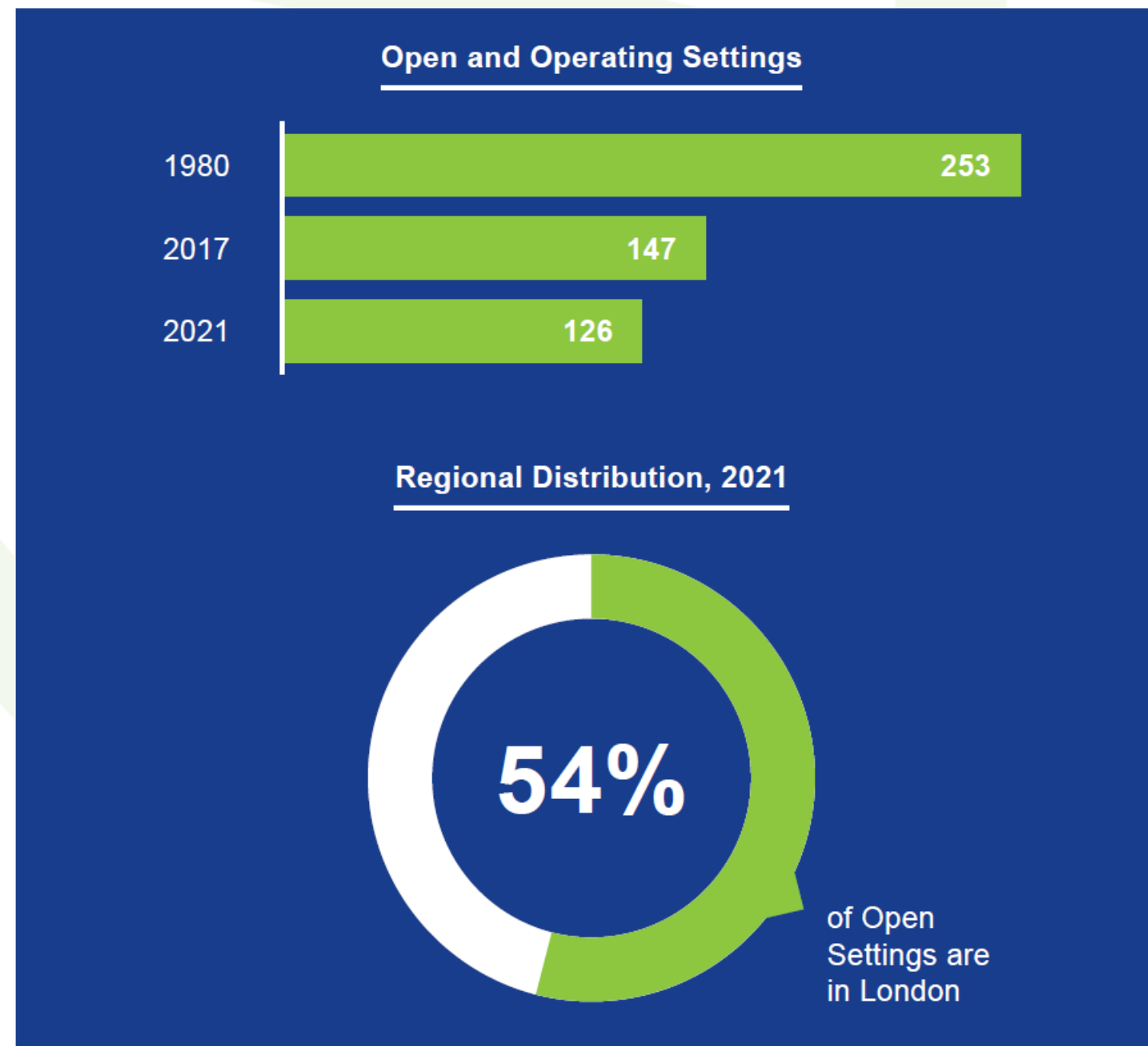
UK Children's Daily Time Use (1975 - 2015)



The Percentage of Children (Under 16) within 500m of Playgrounds



Decline in Adventure Playgrounds Since 1980



NO
BALL GAMES
ALLOWED BY ORDER
DIRECTOR
OF LEISURE SERVICES


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The Decline of Play

The decline of play has been normalised — but it is not inevitable. It is the result of choices.

Restoring a play-based childhood is not about nostalgia. It is about restoring the conditions and opportunities children need to thrive.

It's time to give children their childhood back. And it all starts with play!

The Impact of Play Deprivation

When children are denied time, space, opportunity and freedom to play, the consequences ripple through every aspect of their lives — across the systems that surround them, and across wider society.

Play deprivation is not just about missing out on fun. It means missing out on: Connection, Expression, Independence, Movement and Risk

The Impact of Play Deprivation

Play deprivation has been linked to:

- Increased childhood inactivity and obesity.
- Rising mental health issues, including anxiety, loneliness and depression.
- Higher stress and behavioural difficulties, particularly among younger children.
- Delays in social development, language and emotional literacy.
- Lower confidence and reduced independence, particularly in girls and disabled children.

The Impact of Play Deprivation

When children are denied play, they are denied a vital developmental opportunity — one that underpins physical and mental health, emotional wellbeing, and cognitive growth.

Play deprivation is both a social justice issue and a public health one.

An aerial photograph of London, England, featuring the River Thames, the Houses of Parliament, Big Ben, and the London Bridge. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue rectangle in the top left corner containing the Play England logo and text, and a large white star-like graphic in the bottom left corner.

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A new Government

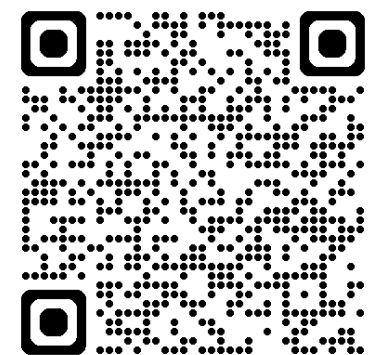
The Importance of play – Play England’s ‘ask’ of the new Government

There are nearly 12 million children living in England, yet they have no effective voice within, or mechanism for influencing, the planning system.

Therefore, Play England are calling for meaningful change within England’s planning system as part of the government’s legislative programme

- Play Sufficiency legislation in England

This would ensure that all children, young people, and families have access to enough time, space, opportunity, and permission to play and recreation throughout all aspects of their daily lives. It would protect, provide, and enhance opportunities for play and recreation at home, at school, in parks and public spaces.

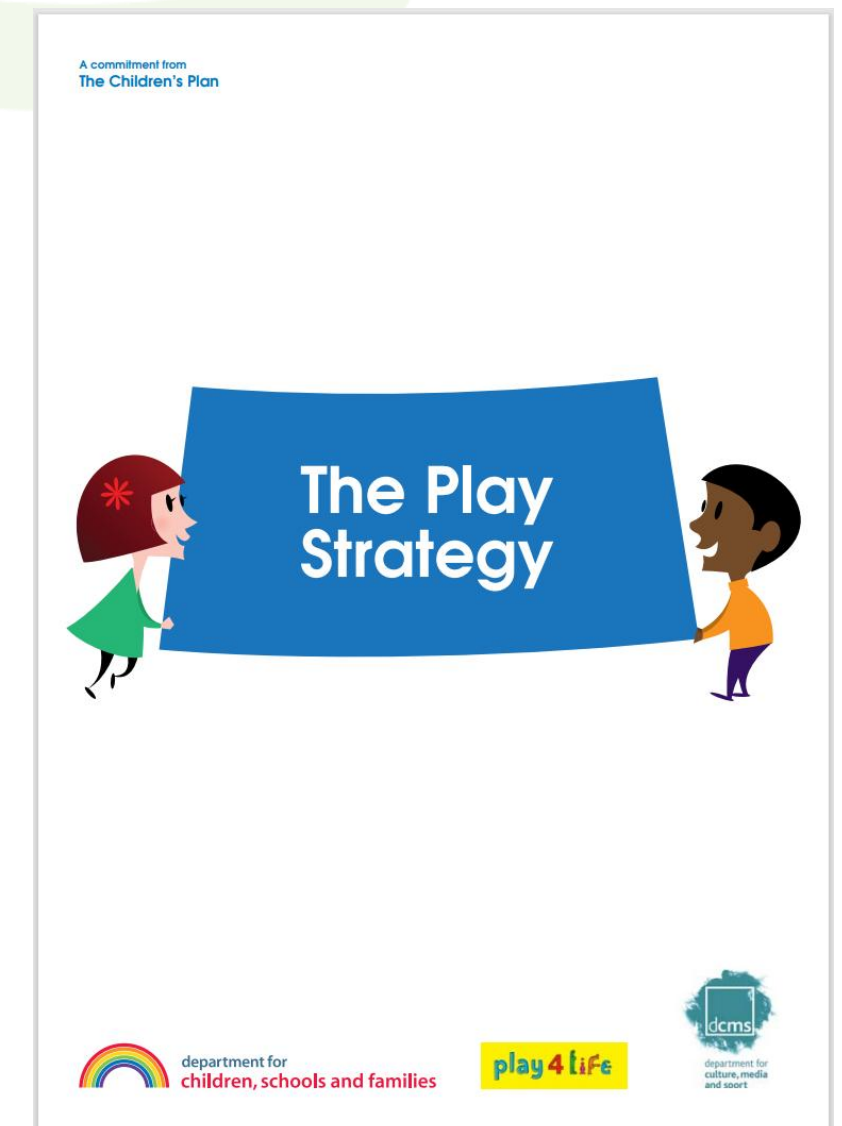


The Importance of play – Play England’s ‘ask’ of the new Government

- Develop a new National Play Strategy for England

There has been no national play strategy in England since 2008, which was developed by the last Labour government, together with Play England.

We, and sector partners, stand ready to support government in addressing the decline in children's play by developing a new, cross departmental national play strategy. This strategy would ensure that play sufficiency legislation is brought into meaningful practice, and that England becomes a child-friendly country where all children have freedom to play at home, at school, in parks and public spaces.





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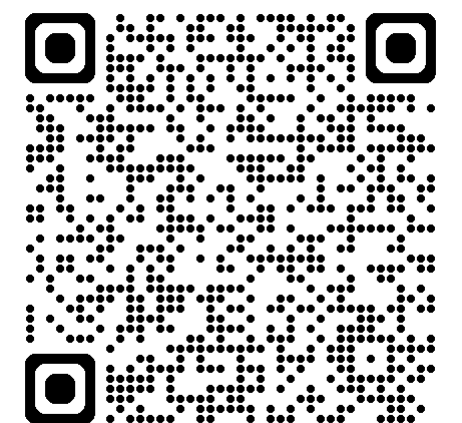
Why: Play Sufficiency legislation for England

The current planning system in England is very weak with regards to children, specifically play and recreation opportunities. For example, the updated 2024 NPPF makes only one single mention of children (in connection with assessing housing needs). No other Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) guidance addresses children explicitly.

By contrast, newts and bats are amongst the species covered by national planning guidance!

Whilst every local authority in England is required to have a local plan, and key organisations must be consulted on this plan (e.g. Sport England), spaces and place for play (playgrounds, adventure playgrounds, MUGA's, skate parks, outdoor fitness etc.) 'fall through the cracks', as there is no 'body' to speak for them... Play England would like to change that!

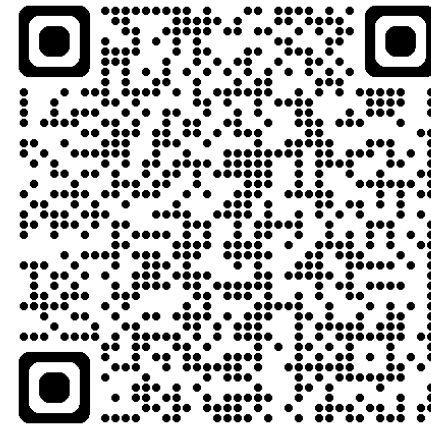
Manifesto wins: Smoke-free playgrounds (Nov 2024)



Manifesto Wins: NPPF amended to include 'formal play spaces' (Dec 2024)



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government



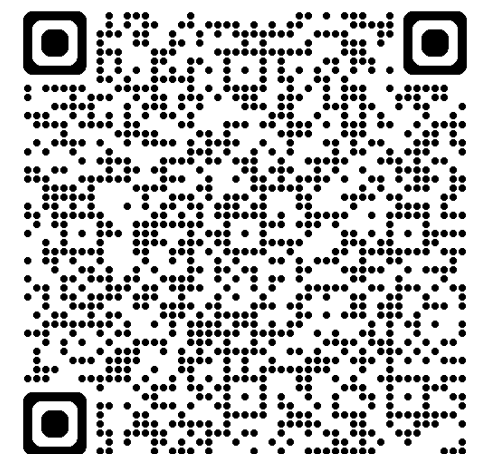
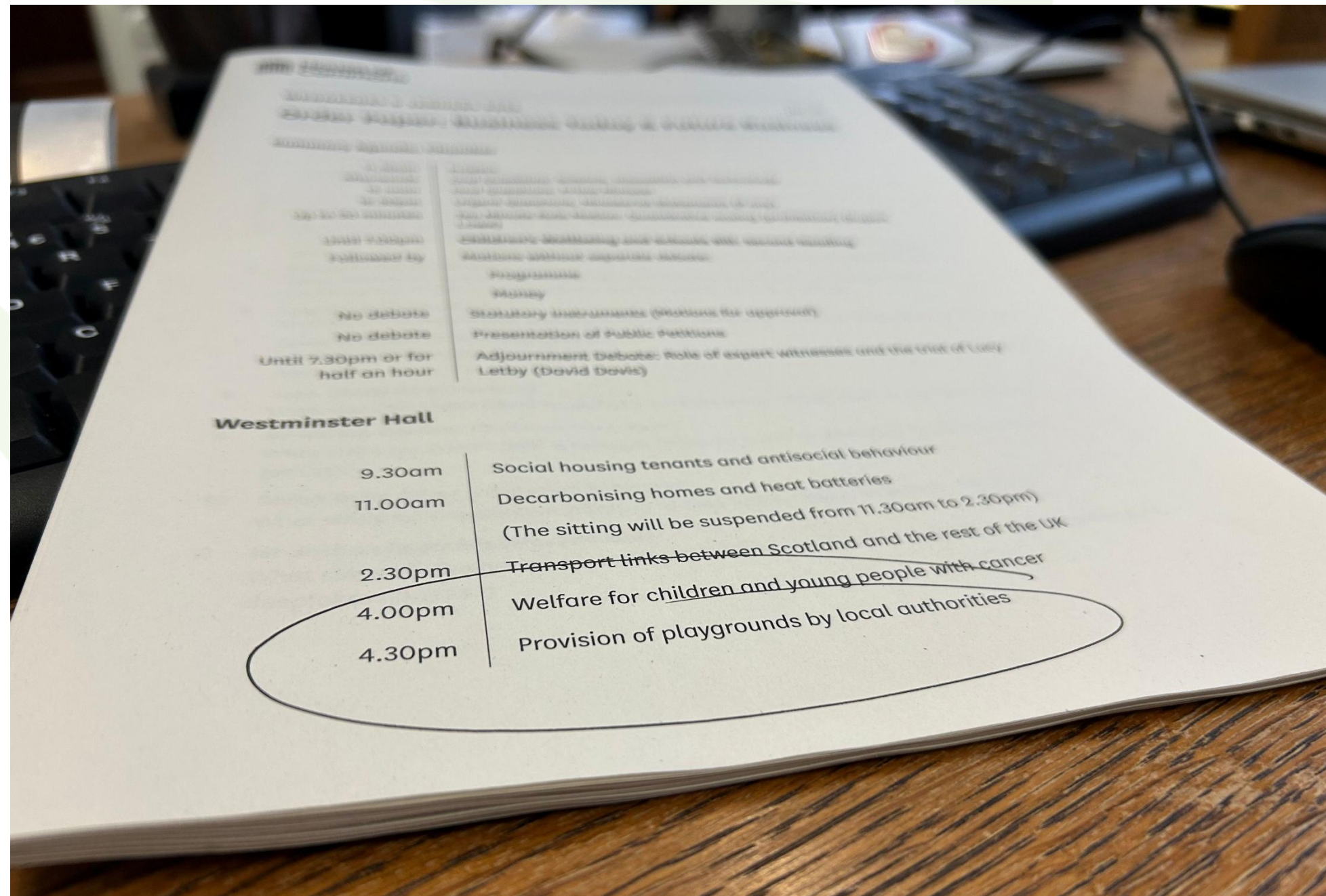
National Planning Policy Framework

December 2024

Open space and recreation

103. Access to a network of high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and physical activity is important for the health and well-being of communities, and can deliver wider benefits for nature and support efforts to address climate change. Planning policies should be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the need for open space, sport and recreation facilities (including quantitative or qualitative deficits or surpluses) and opportunities for new provision. Information gained from the assessments should be used to determine what open space, sport and recreational provision is needed, which plans should then seek to accommodate.
104. Existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields and **formal play spaces**, should not be built on unless:
 - a) an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the open space, buildings or land to be surplus to requirements; or
 - b) the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location; or
 - c) the development is for alternative sports and recreational provision, the benefits of which clearly outweigh the loss of the current or former use.

Parliamentary debate: MPs Unite for Children's Right to Play (Jan 2025)



Legislative opportunities (April 2025)



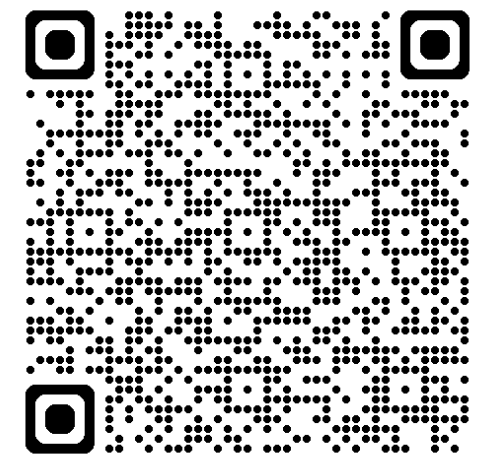
Parliamentary Bills

[UK Parliament](#) > [Business](#) > [Legislation](#) > [Parliamentary Bills](#) > Planning and Infrastructure Bill

Planning and Infrastructure Bill

Government Bill

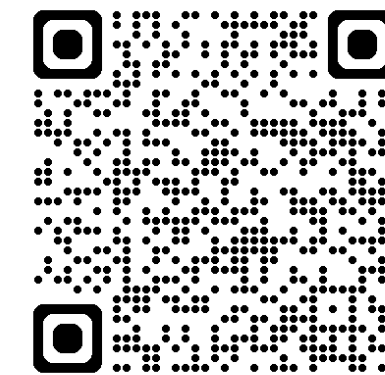
Originated in the House of Commons, Session 2024-25





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Our New Strategy

Vision:

A society where all children have the freedom to play.

This is the society we want to rebuild – a society where play is no longer the exception, but the accepted norm. A society where all children have the freedom to engage with their surroundings, their peers, and themselves in ways that are both creative and meaningful.

Mission:

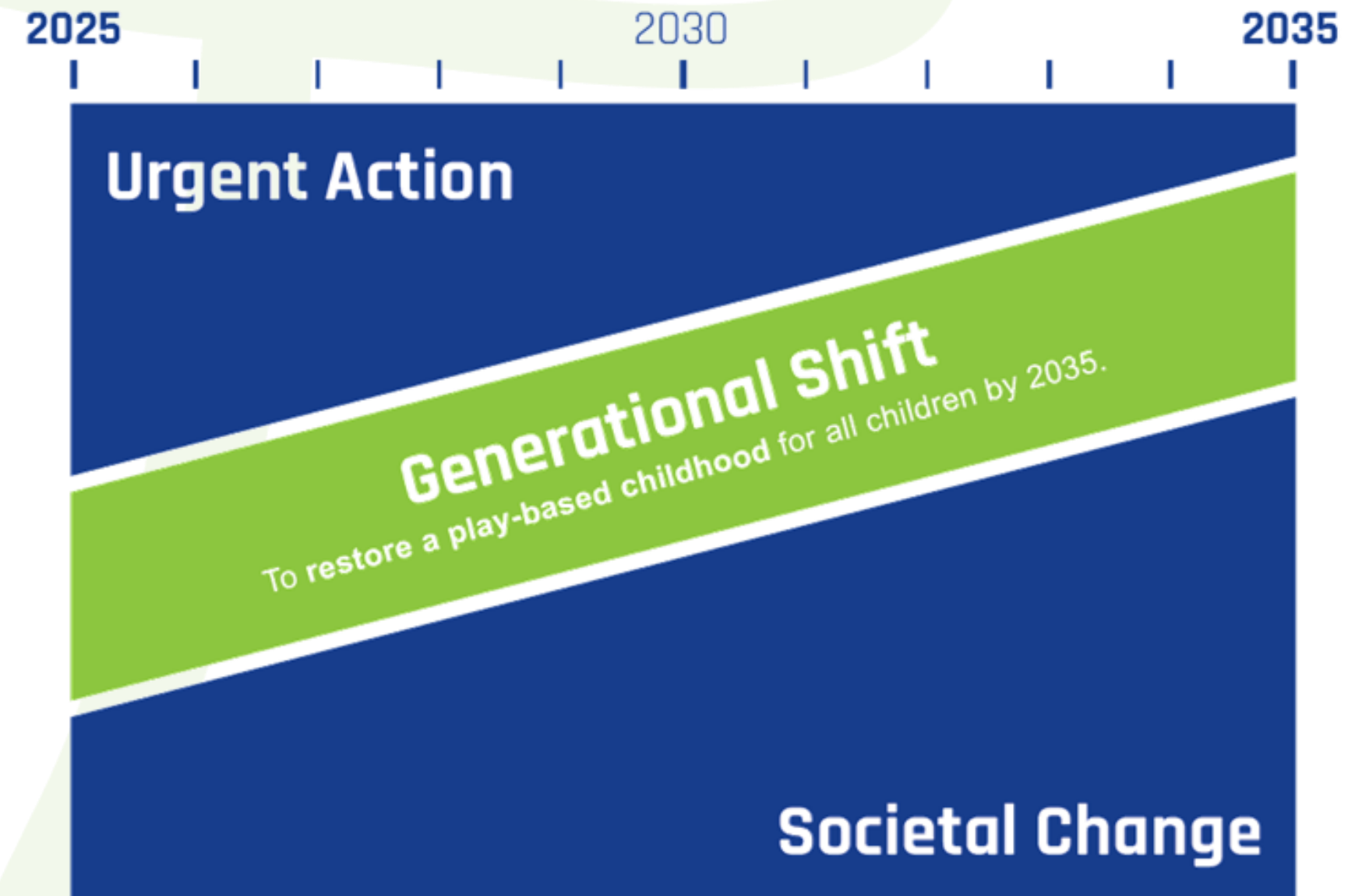
To make play a normal, accepted, and visible part of everyday life again.

To shift society to a culture where play is recognised, accepted, and protected – at home, at school, in our streets, in our neighbourhoods and communities. A society where play is seen as essential, and is embraced by families, communities, professionals and policymakers alike.

Our New Strategy

Our Objective

To restore a play-based
childhood for all children
by 2035.





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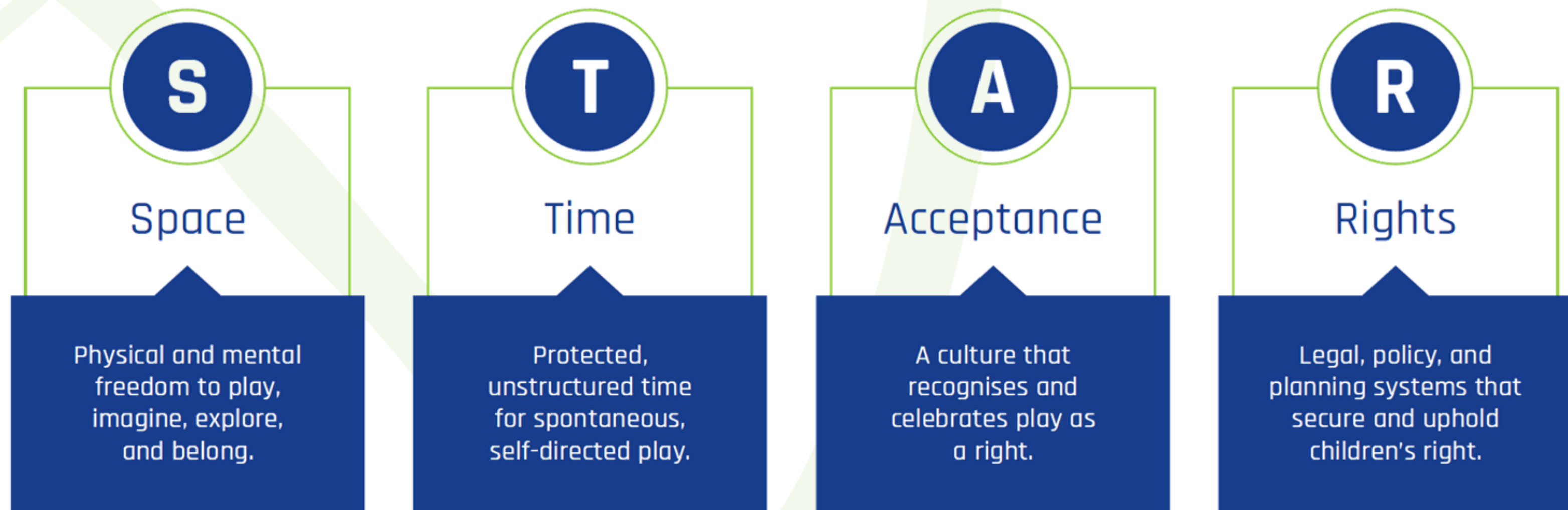
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Our Framework for Change

Lott's STAR Framework for Implementing the Right to Play



Our Values and Principles

Children First

We start, listen, learn and lead with children's rights, experiences and aspirations. Children are not an afterthought in decision-making — they are the starting point, with policy and practice informed by children's voices.



Relational Working

We prioritise people, trust, culture and shared stewardship alongside structures and outputs. We value people and relationships as key infrastructure within a play-friendly society.



Servant Leadership

We lead by enabling others — putting the needs of children, communities and partners before self-interest. We measure our success by the success of those we support.



Collaboration over Competition

We build collaborations, not silos. True system change happens when we act collectively, not competitively.



Hope and Humility

We act with optimism about what can be — and with humility, recognising where we are. We stay curious, reflective and open to challenge and new ideas.



Stewardship, not Ownership

We see ideas, spaces and movements as living commons to be cared for and nurtured — not as commodities to be controlled.





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Our Strategy: Four Interconnected Priorities

Spaces

Creating play-friendly environments wherever children are — at home, at school, on the street, in parks, their communities and digital spaces.

Skills

Recognising and supporting people who enable play opportunities — with playworkers at its core and a wider ecosystem of play enablers.

Our Strategy: Four Interconnected Priorities

Systems

Building a resilient play sector — rebuilding the infrastructure for play through national policy, legislation, research and funding.

Society

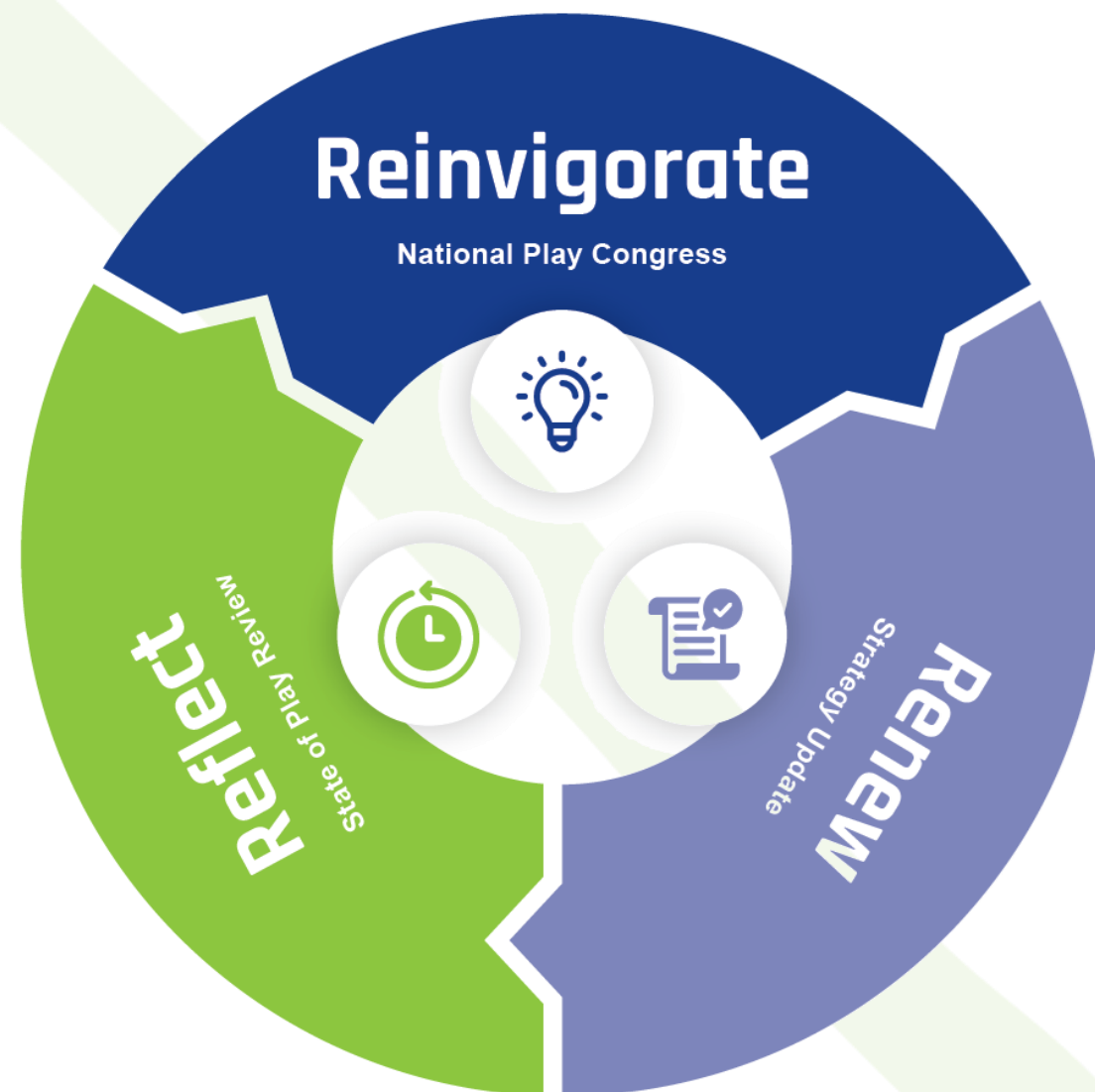
Re-norming play as an essential, accepted part of childhood — shifting culture from risk-aversion and control to trust, freedom and joy.

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How We'll Work

Three-year Cycle



Children's Assemblies



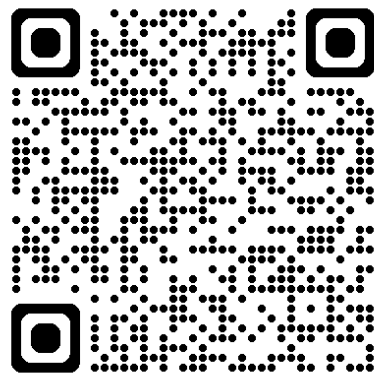
A photograph of a child swinging on a swing set at a playground. The child is in mid-swing, wearing a grey and white striped shirt and dark trousers. The swing chain is in the foreground, and the background shows other playground equipment and a grassy area under a blue sky with clouds. A large, stylized white graphic of a child's silhouette is overlaid on the image.

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Planning & Infrastructure Bill 2025: Play Sufficiency Amendment (June 2025)

UK Parliament

Parliamentary Bills

[UK Parliament](#) > [Business](#) > [Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#) > [Stages](#) > [Report stage](#) > [Amendments](#) > Amendment NC82

House of Commons

★ Tom Hayes' amendment

Planning and Infrastructure Bill

Report stage

Amendment number: NC82

Lead member

Tom Hayes
Labour, Bournemouth East

Decision

No decision

The House has not considered this amendment.

Amendment text

To move the following Clause—

“Play Sufficiency Duty

(1)

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

(2)

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

(a)

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

(b)

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

(c)

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

(d)

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

(e)

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

(3)

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

(4)

The Secretary of State may, by regulations, specify—

(a)

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

(b)

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

(c)

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

(5)

For the purposes of this section—

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

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

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

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11 June 2025, International Day of Play

RAISING

THE

NATION

PLAY

COMMISSION



appg on play



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www.appgonplay.uk

6 August 2025, National Playday 2025

Playday 

To find out more and to join in the fun,
please visit:

playday.org.uk

This year's theme is...

Spaces for Play

The importance of Play!

Play England campaigns for all children and young people to have freedom and space to play throughout childhood.

We work with national partners and other organisations with shared aims to raise awareness about the importance of play. We lobby government to make fundamental policy changes to protect and promote play, and encourage everyone who has an impact

on the lives of children and young people to recognise and plan for children's play.

Play England has also built up considerable experience and resources to help support individuals and organisations that work in these particular areas:

- Government
- Local Authorities
- Schools
- Playwork



We need your support

The new UK government is making positive noises about understanding the importance of play. However, against this positive backdrop, Play England is suffering from a lack of funds to pay for our essential work campaigning for children's right and freedom to play.

Donate today to support our work.
www.playengland.org.uk/donate

