



# MILLION

## ‘Fun and freedom’

What children say about play in a sample of Play Strategy consultations

August 2008

This document is aimed at:

- \* The DCSF Fair Play Consultation
- \* The Department for Culture, Media and Sport
- \* Play Partnerships
- \* Play practitioners



**“The 11 MILLION children and young people in England have a voice”**

Children’s Commissioner for England, Professor Sir Albert Aynsley-Green



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## Who are we?

11 MILLION is a national organisation led by the Children's Commissioner for England, Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green. The Children's Commissioner is a position created by the Children Act 2004.

### The Children Act 2004

The Children Act requires the Children's Commissioner for England to be concerned with the five aspects of well-being covered in *Every Child Matters* – the national government initiative aimed at improving outcomes for all children. It also requires us to have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC underpins our work and informs which areas and issues our efforts are focused on.

### Our vision

Children and young people will actively be involved in shaping all decisions that affect their lives, are supported to achieve their full potential through the provision of appropriate services, and will live in homes and communities where their rights are respected and they are loved, safe and enjoy life.

### Our mission

We will use our powers and independence to ensure that the views of children and young people are routinely asked for, listened to and that outcomes for children improve over time. We will do this in partnership with others, by bringing children and young people into the heart of the decision-making process to increase understanding of their best interests.

### Our long-term goals

1. Children and young people see significant improvements in their wellbeing and can freely enjoy their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).
2. Children and young people are more highly valued by adult society.

### Spotlight areas

Our 'Spotlights' are where we influence crucial areas of policy, practice and debate. 'Choices and Voices in Learning and Leisure', previously known as 'Enjoying education and leisure', was a Spotlight area in 2007-8.

### For more information

Visit our website for everything you need to know about 11 MILLION: [www.11MILLION.org.uk](http://www.11MILLION.org.uk)



## Play England

**Play England aims for all children and young people in England to have regular access and opportunity for free, inclusive, local play provision and play space.**

Play England provides advice and support to promote good practice, and works to ensure that the importance of play is recognised by policy makers, planners and the public.

Play England promotes standards, equality and diversity in play provision. We research and demonstrate the benefits of play, to raise awareness - at all levels - of the need to provide high quality play opportunities for all children and young people.

Play England is part of the National Children's Bureau (NCB) and is funded by the Big Lottery Fund.

For further information visit [www.playengland.org.uk](http://www.playengland.org.uk)

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## 2 Introduction

### Why look at play?

**All children play. The question for families and policy makers is how, as a society, should we support their play? It is a question that has been asked with increasing anxiety in recent years.**



**“Play means everything to me.”**  
A child involved in a play consultation

While household incomes have risen, opportunities for play have shrunk. The ways that we live, relate to each other, consume and travel in modern society have encroached on children’s play time and play space. *Ad hoc* local responses have failed to meet the scale of the problem. Without concerted action to counteract these trends, it has been argued that children’s play will narrow even further, with damaging consequences for their balanced and healthy development.

In 2004 the first ever government-sponsored review of play was published - *Getting Serious About Play*. It agreed that prospects were poor unless action was taken. The problem demanded not only new resources, but a newly co-ordinated response. It made recommendations on the use of National Lottery funding to improve play opportunities. Substantial new funding (£155 million) would be available to communities on the condition that local authorities took the lead in auditing provision, assessing needs and setting priorities – agreeing play strategies. Robust strategies would ensure that investment would make the biggest possible difference to the lives of local children.

Local authorities and the multi-agency Play Partnerships they convened were given substantial freedom in how they drew up their strategies. One clear expectation, however, was that children and young people would be consulted and their views taken seriously. Play England supported local authorities through their regional officer network in each of the nine government regions, and made comprehensive written guidance available: *Planning for Play: Guidance on the development and implementation of a local play strategy* (2006).

Taken together, these individual local play strategy consultations constituted an unprecedented conversation with children in England about their views on play. What were the children and young people saying, and how had they been asked? Play England and 11 MILLION decided that it would be helpful to review some of the learning from this process, draw out children’s voices and reflect on key themes and lessons learnt.

Since undertaking to carry out this review, the policy priority enjoyed by play has risen considerably. The Government’s announcement in December 2007 of a national play strategy, which will guide investment of £235 million over the next three years, has been described by the Children’s Commissioner as a ‘watershed’ moment in our society’s attitude to play. Play England and 11 MILLION believe that their review of learning from local strategies are a valuable contribution to the Fair Play consultation, and have therefore been submitted as evidence.

## The aims of this review

This review has two main aims:

- Consider some of the ways in which children's views have been sought in drawing up local play strategies.
- Consider what children and young people have said about their play preferences and opportunities during this process, identifying common themes and any local or regional differences.

For the purposes of this review, we have concentrated on young children (aged 5-11), but have taken into account the views of older children.

## Methodology

Play England identified two regions – the West Midlands and the North East – where it encouraged local authorities to submit details of how they had consulted with children and young people and what they had found. The selection of these two regions took into account the degree of interest among local stakeholders, whether local authorities might have particularly interesting stories to tell, and where some analysis was already in hand (initial scoping had begun in the North East). Local authorities were asked to share existing documentation, not undertake new work or prepare new summaries. 11 MILLION then reviewed this documentation, checking back with relevant officers for clarification where necessary. (See the appendix for a full list of the local authorities who submitted material and those whose public documents were referenced.) The report draws out common themes and reflects on challenges. It does not, and could not, fully describe how each local Play Partnership undertook its work.

To ensure that this desk research stayed in-tune with children's lived experiences, a session at Birmingham's Chinnbrook Play Centre was used to check-back with children on what appeared to be the main messages from the review. It was also an opportunity to spend time exploring, at first hand, how play preferences and barriers are experienced by children.

This review is based on a limited sample in which different types of evidence, gathered in a variety of ways, have been considered. It does not set out to provide a nationally representative account of children's involvement in the drawing up of local play strategies. However, we have no reason to believe that the West Midlands and the North East are markedly unusual. Between them, they allow us to hear the voices of tens of thousands of children. What those children are saying needs to be heard and deserves to be taken seriously.





### 3 Key learning points from this review

- Local authorities should balance their use of existing evidence of children and young people's views with fresh engagement which is play-specific.
- Local authorities should consider how their approaches can support an ongoing dialogue with children and young people.
- Good consultation and participation can generate excitement and interest in play among children and adults.
- Local authorities should consider how key questions can be asked consistently across time in order to support trend analysis.
- Consultation with pre-school age children is relatively sparse, so it would be helpful to share good and innovative practice.
- Freedom, sociability and physical activity are crucial elements in many children's definition of play.
- Play partnerships generally categorised children's responses in helpful ways, but greater consistency between areas would be helpful in assessing the diversity of play experiences and tracking how local authorities meet children's needs over time.
- Green, open space is crucial for most children.
- Gardens seem to be important, but consultation has not clarified how children use them.
- Children's experience of street play varies greatly across the country. It is a positive choice in some areas and should be supported.
- Play at school is important to children, but was not looked at in detail in most consultations.
- The idea of playing sport is very popular. A wider range of sporting interests seems to go hand in hand with a wider range of provision.
- Some older children want opportunities to socialise in safe environments without being judged or pushed towards structured youth provision.
- Safety concerns are a major barrier to children's play. They are made up of many different elements, some of which relate to negative experiences, and some of which relate to negative expectations.
- Fear of traffic is a barrier to play in many areas, including rural or semi-rural areas.
- Children and young people generally welcome the idea of some form of supervision, but the preferred form of supervision is strongly age and location specific.
- The physical appearance of play areas and facilities is crucial to either reassuring or alarming children about their safety.
- Young people believe that the range of leisure opportunities available to their age group is too limited.
- The distance of play and leisure facilities is a problem for many children and young people, although the problem can only be usefully understood through detailed mapping across the age range.

- Peer racism is limiting how and where some children play.
- There is some evidence that non-disabled children, as well as disabled children, welcome inclusive provision.





## 4 How did local authorities find out the views of children?

Most local authorities and councils undertook new, direct and specific consultation with children to inform their play strategies. In some areas, they engaged large numbers of children in particularly energetic and multi-faceted processes. There was no *necessary* trade-off between breadth and depth. Although in general it appears that paper-based surveys caught the largest number of children's views, practice in other areas suggests that creative, face to face ways of exploring children's views were able to engage similar numbers. For example, 13% of children and young people aged 4-19 in North Tyneside participated in a series of events; and over 6,000 children and young people in Dudley were involved in the consultation process, making it the largest programme of consultation with children and young people ever undertaken in the area.

In some areas the consultation base of the final strategy relied heavily on, or even consisted of, views that had already been gathered. Children's Trusts had undertaken wide-ranging consultation with children and young people in drawing up their Children's Plans in 2006 - a process that had generated significant new information on children's views and had led to new participative mechanisms being established. In Birmingham, for example, the plan had established the 'Engagement with Children and Young People's workstream and the 'Involvement of Parents and Families Group'. Conscious of the community development aspects of any play strategy, some local authorities took steps to align their play consultation with broader consultation processes, including some that were non-child specific.

Local authorities' decisions regarding the scope and methodology of their evidence gathering raise a number of questions:

- How can or should consultation with children on play be mainstreamed into other community development and service-development mechanisms?
- What are the resource implications of different consultation mechanisms?
- Where consultation findings include, or consist of, information from diverse surveys and processes, what weight should be given to the different elements?
- For how long do consultation findings from children retain accuracy and credibility?
- How can the gathering of children's views support the development of *participative* relationships with children and parents?

The following section gives examples of the main techniques that were used to find out children's views. As one would expect, most areas used a mixture of these, although the range varied greatly.

## a) Using existing evidence

### Newcastle

Newcastle Children and Young People's Partnership had conducted a major consultation during 2005 to inform its strategic priorities.<sup>1</sup> In a two stage project which involved over 2,000 children and young people, the partnership reviewed existing information in order to draw out priority themes. Children and young people were then involved in finalising the partnership's priorities and proposing actions to address them. Four of the 12 priorities of 'What Matters to Us'<sup>2</sup> relate closely to play, they are: space and opportunities to spend time with friends; outdoor play spaces; accessible sport and leisure facilities; and involvement in decision making. There was 'checking'<sup>3</sup> with children during the drawing up of the Play Strategy, but no fresh consultation or participation with children.

### Blyth Valley

Blyth Valley drew heavily on the findings of its 'Blyth Valley Young People's Consultation 2004'. Using a variety of methodologies, including trained peer interviewers, the authority had gathered the views of young people about the communities in which they lived and the services they accessed or would want to access. Most of this consultation took place with older children and teenagers. The Play Partnership also took into account findings of Northumberland's County-wide 'Having a Life' surveys in 2006 and 2007, which were developed in partnership with children and young people. The 2006 survey was returned by 8.3% of the county's children, with proportions roughly equal for younger and older children (53% 0-12, 47% 12-18). Only one of the survey questions referred directly to play and leisure: 'Activities outside school are easy to get to and join in'. No fresh consultation or participation with children was therefore undertaken in drawing up the Play Strategy.

## b) Using existing mechanisms

### Hartlepool

Hartlepool has Neighbourhood Consultative Forums – regular, open-access meetings for residents to express their views and concerns. Where views expressed in these meetings were relevant to the questions being asked in the play consultation, they were gathered and taken into account. By doing so, the Play Partnership took the opportunity to mainstream the question of play within the council's existing area-based democratic structures. The partnership was aware that the voices heard through these meetings were likely to be, predominantly, those of relatively confident parents and older children. The *totality* of Hartlepool's consultation was therefore designed to ensure that younger children and those with special needs or in unusual circumstances were supported to express their views.

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<sup>1</sup> Newcastle's 2005 report was produced by: Connexions Tyne and Wear, the Children's Society Voices Project, Investing in Children, Play and Youth Service, Youth Voice and Sure Start Armstrong.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *A Play Strategy for Newcastle upon Tyne, 2007-12*, p. 38

## Telford

Telford has an ongoing commitment to consulting with children who use its play services and to reaching out through schools to children who are not accessing provision. This iterative process enabled the Play Partnership to draft the main elements of the strategy without additional engagement. The draft strategy was taken to children's 'Raise Your Voice, Increase Your Choice' groups for comment. These groups are exclusively for children (aged 9-13), cover seven geographical areas and provide regular opportunities for them to raise issues about their communities and meet with adults to make improvements.



**“What you [adults] think is play is not what we [children] think.”**

A child involved in a play consultation in Gateshead.

### c) Using existing services

A number of Play Partnerships ensured that thorough user-evaluations of key services were considered as part of the strategy's evidence base. Existing services also proved helpful as settings in which children and young people could be enabled to discuss their experience of play, and the developments they would welcome.

#### Derwentside District

In Derwentside District, evaluation of the ELLIE youth bus project fed directly into the strategy. The views of children and parents were sought in direct consultations at parent and toddler groups, out of school clubs and Easter holiday playschemes. Young people using youth clubs and skatepark facilities were consulted on their views about play and leisure.

## Telford

Services incorporate regular opportunities for children and young people to say what they think about provision and what they would like to see in the future. Dot voting at Brookside Junior Youth Club covered sporting activities, trips, arts and crafts and other activities. Some of the most original proposals for new activities were captured in the 'Any other activities?' part of the voting, and showed the influence of contemporary culture and popular television programmes, as well as more well established games: 'Stars in Your Eyes', 'X Factor', 'Fashion Shows', 'DJ Mixing', 'Panto Night', and 'Hide and Seek Night'.

### d) Targeting vulnerable or disadvantaged children

Most local authorities identified the need to consult children whose views or needs might not otherwise be heard and accommodated. Groups specified in this regard were, most often:

- Children in care
- Black Minority Ethnic (BME) children
- Disabled children
- Children in rural locations

Birmingham referenced the KIDS inclusion checklist, which provides a framework to local authorities to include policy into practice for disabled children and young people for play and children's services.

Others vulnerable groups mentioned in one or two locations were:

- Children in relatively deprived areas
- Children with life limiting long term illnesses
- Lesbian and gay young people
- Young parents

## e) Questionnaires

### Birmingham

Questionnaires were one, although only one, of the techniques used in Birmingham.<sup>4</sup> A questionnaire was devised in two different formats, a booklet for younger children and a leaflet for older children and young people. Questions were asked in a multiple-choice format in the booklet and as open questions in the more text-heavy leaflet. Questionnaires were distributed in play groups, after-school clubs, children's playcare organisations, children's centres, nurseries, colleges, libraries, health care settings, community centres and children's charities. Some targeting of marginalised groups (see section [d] above) took place as part of this distribution. As only age and postcode were recorded, it is not possible to say whether the views of children in disadvantaged circumstances differed significantly from those of their peers. The total number of questionnaires returned was 1,523 (0.6% of Birmingham's under 16s, and a response rate of just under 8%).

As expected, booklets were most popular among 0-9 year olds, while the leaflet was more favoured by 10-19 year olds. Of all responses, 5-9 year olds accounted for just over half, with numbers falling sharply after 11 years of age. There were relatively few returns from very young children and older teens (1-4s, 2.5%, 15-19s, 2.1%). Given the scope of the Play Strategy, which is concerned primarily with 5-14 year olds, the Play Strategy Group was satisfied with this spread of responses. The level of returns was uneven across the city. This variation appears to reflect the distribution of questionnaires through existing services, and the number of children and families accessing them. The lowest number of responses came from the constituency with the third highest proportion of children.

Playtrain was commissioned by the Play Strategy Group to collate and analyse the findings. Their analysis suggested that the design of the questionnaire might have unintentionally influenced some of the findings. For example, illustrating the leaflet with images of particular types of play might have influenced some children's choices. A 'birds of a feather' effect was apparent where questionnaires had been completed in groups, with children tending to converge around each others' responses. Playtrain also pointed out the limitations of using questionnaires to explore the preferences of children living in areas where play opportunities were relatively narrow. Children from affluent areas – who could be expected to have experienced a greater range of

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<sup>4</sup> INSPIRE, a play training and development agency, was commissioned by Birmingham's Play Strategy Group to research children and young people's views, as well as to audit provision and interview service providers. In 2006, children and young people were consulted about park design at ArtsFest and at a separate event organised by Parks 4 Play.

play experiences – expressed a far greater range of preferences.

### Dudley

Part of Dudley's wide ranging consultation programme included 'Just Enjoy' media workshops that offered children a number of ways of expressing their views, including two different questionnaires completed online and using internet kiosks. Around 2,000 questionnaires were completed at the road shows and on the Just Enjoy website at [www.justenjoy.tv](http://www.justenjoy.tv), with around 2/3 of the children who attended the events choosing to use this format to express their views. Slightly more girls than boys completed the questionnaires, which represented the total number of participants overall. This evidence was used alongside a wide range of other strategies to inform the ongoing development of the play strategy.

### f) Feedback cards

#### Dudley

Children and young people in Dudley were invited to enter a competition to write or draw their answer to the statement 'Play to me is...'. Responses were on cards which could be either handed in during roadshow events or returned by Freepost. Children who returned their cards by Freepost, giving their name, address, gender, age and post code, were automatically entered into a prize draw. Around 4,000 wrist bands with details of the 'Just Enjoy' website were distributed to raise awareness of the competition and roadshow. Out of the 6,000 cards distributed, 1,737 were returned, the largest proportion coming from 6-9 year olds (43%). Responses were codified into those that expressed a preference for physical play, social play, creative play and other forms of play (such as video games). The inevitably blunt process of coding was supplemented by a more reflective analysis of what children had actually written and drawn. A selection of the cards were published on the 'Just Enjoy' website to demonstrate the range of children's ideas and the importance that children attach to play.

### g) Peer research and community action

Peer research does not appear to have been a major element in the consultations. However, there are a number of instances of children being supported to investigate needs and advocate for change, particularly at a neighbourhood level or in relation to specific service development proposals.

#### Sunderland

Although most of the questionnaires used in support of play strategy consultations were designed and administered by adults, there were some examples of children being more actively involved. Sunderland Children's Fund provided training to children in Southwick Park Primary School to enable them to set up the 'Southwick Investigation Squad', which devised a questionnaire for its peers to explore their use of four local parks. A campaign for a skatepark in the Seaburn area of Sunderland was initiated by a local 11 year old boy. Professionals provided some guidance and light-touch support, but the process of



advocacy and planning which followed was essentially young-person led. A team of 40 children and young people successfully made the case for the facility, developed funding applications and shaped the site's design.

### Dudley

Children and young people were resourced to document the views of their peers and of other members of their communities. Children at Tenterfields Primary School created a podcast of interviews with their peers. As part of Fun Days in Netherton Park and Upper Gornal, children interviewed adults, including a local councillor, about where and how they had played when they were young, and what they now expected for their own children.

### h) Roadshows, arts and play

Playfulness was built into many consultation processes. Events, fun days and roadshows provided opportunities for children and young people and their families to have fun while having their say. On the basis of the documentation, it seems reasonable to assume that such events have helped towards meeting one of the aims most commonly set by play strategies: to raise awareness of the value of play.

### Dudley

A wide range of consultation and participation strategies were used to develop and review the play strategy including a participation roadshow that visited over 25 locations around the borough. This was followed up with a 50 location 'Walk in the Park' with the Director of Children's Services, Cabinet Member for Children's Services and local Members of Parliament.

### Gateshead

Some consultation events in Gateshead took place during school time – where arrangements were made with local schools to facilitate attendance. Others took place at times when children, young people and parents or carers could attend together. The parent-child ratio at these community-access activity days was approximately 1:2. A range of techniques allowed children and young people to respond individually and as a group, both publicly and privately. Some techniques revealed hard statistical preferences, whilst others revealed ideas and emotions, for example:

- Ranking of statements, photos or pictures.
- Conversations between professionals, children and carers.
- Incorporating statements or pictures about play preferences within group art (e.g. a 'natural weave' of leaf shapes was put together, with each child writing their preference on their leaf).
- Placing questions in the toilets, allowing children to write up their answers anonymously.
- 'Voting' for preferred options, using dot-voting or fun variations (e.g. children voting with their used dinner plates in differently labelled wheelie bins; a giant Connect 4 game enabling children to vote with colourful discs for their preferred surfaces and environments).

- Inviting children to devise a drama game which expressed how strongly or weakly they agreed with statements.
- Answering questions in a 'Big Brother diary room' suitable for a wide age range (6-14).

It is worth noting that by no means were all the activities designed to feed directly into the consultation process - fun and play were encouraged in their own right.

### Key learning points

- **Local authorities should balance their use of existing evidence of children and young people's views with fresh engagement which is play-specific.**
- **Local authorities should consider how their approaches can support an ongoing dialogue with children and young people.**
- **Good consultation and participation can generate excitement and interest in play among children and adults.**
- **Local authorities should consider how key questions can be asked consistently across time in order to support trend analysis.**
- **Consultation with pre-school age children is relatively sparse, so it would be helpful to share good and innovative practice.**





## 5 How and where do children play?

### a) Children's definitions of play

A number of local authorities asked children how they defined play. This was not because of any lack of accepted definitions, or any apparent conflict over theory or values on the part of Play Partnerships. On the contrary, there was strong agreement across most areas that play should be approached as a rights issue, as articulated in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and that a proper definition of play will echo the influential formulas of *Getting Serious About Play* and *Best Play*<sup>5</sup>:

**“[Play is] what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons.”**

**“Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child.”**

By asking children and young people what play meant to them, Play Partnerships expressed these fundamental concepts of self-direction and self-definition in the consultation process.

Children in Dudley could use consultation cards – ‘Play to me is...’ – to write or draw their answers. Most children responded by specifying particular activities. A minority, however, describe play as a concept and a sensation:

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<sup>5</sup> DCMS (2004) *Getting Serious About Play: A Review of Children's Play*; and NPFA, Playlink, Children's Play Council (2001) *Best Play: What Play Provision Should Do for Children*



**“Play means everything to me.”**

**“Play is games - ‘sometimes being silly.’”**

**“Play means to me having fun and freedom with my mates.”**

**“P is for play which children love to do all day**

**L is for laughing, learning and listening to others while we play**

**A is for activities and amazing games**

**Y is for you and me playing in the sun together and having lots of fun!!”**

**“Play to me is like my heart it beats and adds rhythmic beat to my life. I love playing all kinds of stuff because it just makes me feel like things are happening in my head and everything I hear and see it makes me like life. Because of this feeling I feel good about myself. That’s what play is to me.”**

Dudley

What adults say about play, both positive and negative, seems to be readily absorbed by children:



**“Our park is great because it keeps us out of trouble.”**

**“[Play] has no goal or achievement [.] Anything that is enjoyable and is of own free will is playing. Best type of play is exercise [.] Your brain makes chemicals called endomorphines [.]”**

Dudley

Gateshead asked children if they thought adults played. Most were dubious:



**“Not really”**

**“No – don’t want to be an adult”**

**“What you [adults] think is play is not what we [children] think.”**

Gateshead

## **b) How have adults categorised what children have said?**

The play strategies do not, taken together, offer a consistent way of categorising or measuring children's play preferences. As one would expect, results are clearest when they can be drawn from questionnaire or voting categories. However, it should be noted that, in most cases, polling and questionnaires are elements within more complex consultation and participation approaches. The majority of strategies make available accounts of what children have said and draw thematic conclusions from the range of evidence. Some strategies quantify children's play preferences in broad categories, most commonly by location of play (indoor or outdoor), and the degree of organisation or supervision involved.

Given the aim of the consultations – to inform and encourage the development of play opportunities – this relatively loosely drawn account of children's views is appropriate. Partnerships had not set out to analyse the play experiences of children in forensic detail. However, using broad categories or drawing out general themes requires simplification, which may lead to some distortion. Playtrain, who analysed questionnaire data in Birmingham, strike a note of caution applicable to the process more widely. They point out that very little imaginative play has been identified as taking place. Was this a real deficit, or was it simply eluding the consultation methodology? Playtrain recommended that more detailed examination of play behaviours be conducted against the 16 play types which constitute the underpinning knowledge requirements for the Playwork Level 3 National Occupational Standards.

## **c) Where do children play?**

### **Parks and green spaces**

The strongest and most consistent finding of the consultations is the importance of active, outdoor play. As part of this, parks and green spaces emerged as very important to children and young people. These are where the great majority of children say they play and want to play, especially when younger. Of respondents in Birmingham, 55% played in the park. Of the younger children who completed the booklet questionnaire, this figure was even higher at 85%. In Dudley, 74% of respondents to the 'Just Enjoy' questionnaire said that they used their local park, making it the single most frequently named location after the cinema for play and leisure.

While other findings suggest that the popularity of parks and open spaces is partly dependent on the play activities and equipment they contain, it is equally clear that being outside in a natural space is important in its own right. Children frequently mention or draw sun, grass and trees. The children consulted in Sunderland's Dubmire Primary School expressed excitement at the prospect of various types of equipment or facilities, but were no less excited about playing in a green space, often identifying flowers, trees, grass, sky, sun and water as attractive elements:



**“I want water with ducks on it.”**

**“I want sky with red in it.”**

**“I like the mud because I go on bug hunts.”**

**“A rainbow.”**

Sunderland

Nature's importance to children also comes out in their enthusiasm for the use of natural materials in play areas. Children in Gateshead expressed a love of dens, wooded areas, wooden walkways, ropes and stone tunnels.

It should be noted that although nature is an exciting play space for most children, it can seem alarming to others. When 11 MILLION spoke to children in Birmingham's Chinnbrook Play Centre, one child identified a wooded space near a local stream as his favourite play space, while another independently identified this same area as her least favourite space because of scratchy branches and the risk of 'scary foxes'.

### Other outdoor play

- **The street**

Children's feelings about street play are complex and seem to differ significantly depending on locality. In Wear Valley, outdoor play was said to be the most common form of play, and play in the street was its most common location. Children aged 5-7 in Easington said that they wanted improved opportunities for street play. In Dudley, 'On the street near my house' is second only to 'Friend's house' as the most popular place to go to during leisure time. Yet when asked what would be the most important ingredients in their perfect play space, by far the largest number of children said that they wanted 'Interesting landscape – places to run, jump, hide, swing, make dens and ride my bicycle'. In Birmingham, playing on the street was common for only 24% of younger children, making it the least common place for play apart from childminders. The proportion of children saying that they *would like to* play on the street was roughly the same.

None of the strategy consultations show in great detail how public

spaces other than ‘the street’ are used for play, although a few children and young people describe how they ‘hang around town with friends’, or mention the city centre, shops and libraries (2.3% of Birmingham respondents). A comment from Sunderland suggests that a reduction in ‘brown field’ sites may be limiting children’s play opportunities:



**“Waste ground where used to play is now flats.”** Sunderland.

- **Homes and gardens**

Many consultations identify ‘home’ or ‘friend’s home’ as places for play, but very few specify whether the home play is inside or in gardens. About 50% of the children completing Birmingham’s questionnaire booklet indicated that they play in an ‘Open space / grassed area’, and it would be reasonable to assume that some of these children are thinking about gardens, but this can only be speculation. What evidence there is suggests that children want access to garden space and feel unhappy when it is not available. One message from Hartlepool’s consultation was that there should be more houses with gardens, while children’s voices in Birmingham suggest similar problems:



**“I would like to play in a garden I don’t have one.”** Birmingham, aged five.

**“I live in a flat and I would like a play area for me and my friends.”** Birmingham, aged nine.

Whether indoor or outdoor, play at home is a common feature of children’s lives – indeed, a more common feature than they want it to be. Birmingham’s questionnaire asked children and young people where they played and where they would like to play. Though 31% play at home, only 10% say this is where they would like to play. 73% of children using the booklet questionnaire play in friend’s houses, but only 4.5% of all questionnaire respondents would like to play and spend time there.

- **Clubs and play centres**

In Birmingham, 30.2% of children who responded through the consultation booklet said that they used activity clubs, playschemes, play centres and after school clubs. Their comments on these were very positive:



**“More playscheme.”** Birmingham, aged seven.

**“More play days please at Jakeman youthclub.”** Birmingham, aged seven.

**“We want a playscheme every holiday.”** Birmingham, aged nine.

The figure may be artificially high because of how the sample was accessed (often through play provision), and the fact that booklet responses were from younger children. The proportion of children *and* young people who said that they *would like to* play and spend time at these types of services was considerably lower – 11% (still their second most popular choice behind parks and green space). The higher average age of those answering the second question may be a key reason for the difference. Certainly, young people’s wish for more separate youth provision, including adventurous play and supervised sessions, comes across strongly from consultation in the North East. The issue is also sometimes expressed simply as more places for teenagers to socialise safely with friends, such as the proposal for ‘youth shelters’ in Derwentside.

- **School**

School playtime is very important for children. None of the consultations were designed to explore this dimension of children’s experience – indeed, the framing of some questions in terms of ‘leisure time’, evenings or weekends, would discourage its consideration. Nevertheless, playtime surfaces in a number of places, like children’s descriptions of what makes for happy play.



**“Me and my friends playing at break time!” Dudley.**

Discussion of play areas, too, sometimes led to consideration of the school playground and the type of equipment children want to see there. Of the children and young people consulted in Hartlepool, 57% wanted more access to school grounds outside of school time – apparently in answer to a direct question. Children in Tynedale also wanted access to their school grounds. More generally, however, children and young people’s association of play and school suggests a more ambivalent relationship. In Birmingham, 50% of children using the booklet questionnaire said that they were part of after school clubs, but the number of children and young people who said in their questionnaires (both formats) that they would like to play in school was 18%. In general, the evidence for how schools can support children’s play – during and after the day – is limited. More detailed exploration in this area would need to bear in mind the distinction drawn by a young person in Newcastle:



**“School does not count as being able to spend time with friends as you are in an ‘un-natural’ environment and there are teachers and security cameras watching everything.” Newcastle.**

- **Sport and activity areas**

Children frequently say they like leisure centres, skate parks and other places designed for energetic play and sport. Their preferences are not necessarily reflected in where they actually go. Birmingham’s questionnaire revealed a wide difference between stated preference and actual behaviour. The local leisure centre is children and young people’s second most popular choice of a place where they would like to play, while actually being their second least likely play location. Dudley tells a similar story. Interactive questionnaires suggested that



the most popular activity when children and young people go somewhere in their 'leisure time'<sup>6</sup> is meeting and chatting with friends (36%); far higher than the 16% who play ball games or the 7% who skateboard, and despite the fact that a coding of all local consultation data showed that 41% of children and young people said that physical play was their priority.

Section six explores some of the reasons why children enjoy a narrower range of play activities and play locations than they would like to. It is worth noting, however, that children's desire to seek out new and varied experiences is a healthy one which is integral to play. A child's wish to experience new and different things tomorrow from those that they have experienced today is not, by itself, a sign that current provision is unreasonably restricted.

#### **d) How do children play?**

##### **Indoor and outdoor sports**

Children enjoy being physically lively. Consultation with primary age pupils in Dudley showed that the vast majority liked being physically active: 85% of boys and 81% of year 5 girls enjoy it either a lot or quite a lot. The overall figure rises a little in year 6, with the slight gender distinction being maintained (87% and 84%). Unsurprisingly then, it is 'physical play' which emerges as the most popular type of play in Dudley's overall play consultation. It was prioritised by 41% of children, in contrast to just 9% for more sedentary forms of play like video gaming.

Messages about children's enjoyment of sport come through particularly clearly from Birmingham's consultation.<sup>7</sup> When asked 'What do you enjoy doing?', 42% of all responses mentioned outdoor sport and 40% indoor sport. This made it more than twice as popular as any other activity. Football, cricket and basketball are cited most often, but a wide range of individual and team sports are mentioned. Some of children's reported comments suggest that they may roll together a number of experiences within their conception of 'sport', and that this *may* have affected its high level of support:



**"I love gymnastics. I can do the splits. I like dancing."** Birmingham, aged six.

However, sport as traditionally defined comes across as a strong preference where children were free to provide 'Additional Comments'.

<sup>6</sup> The use of 'leisure' or 'leisure time' in some contexts, and 'play' in others, may influence children and young people's responses.

<sup>7</sup> Although there are photographs of two sporting activities on the leaflet version of Birmingham's questionnaire, it seems unlikely that this alone would account for the unusually strong support for sport in the city.

As in Dudley, there is strong evidence that children's play has not been as physically limited by new entertainment technologies as some observers have feared. The proportion of children favouring console gaming in Birmingham is low – 12%.

Although sport is mentioned in many of the consultations, it was not mentioned in the majority. Indeed, children and young people in Derwentside refer to sport negatively, saying that there are very few leisure time options for those who do not like sport. Where sport is raised as a positive option, football is the most popular. Children ask for new facilities or better facilities (for example, football nets in existing play areas), but they also approve of new and innovative approaches, like Telford's use of organised street football. Swimming comes a close second in popularity behind football. Wear Valley – which is unusual in being able to give statistics for sport preferences – shows 16% preferring football, 15% preferring swimming, 11% preferring trampolining, and 9% bowling. Skateboarding is identified in many other consultations. Where breakdowns for younger and older children are given, as in Easington, it is popular among both groups. There is some suggestion that children who are already involved in projects which offer a wide range of sporting opportunities may have broader and more adventurous tastes. Children in Telford youth clubs rate ice skating, tennis, rock climbing and horse riding above football and swimming.

For access to sport and leisure generally, cost was identified as a barrier for some children and young people. In Newcastle, they identified this as one of their twelve 'Priority Concerns'.

### Adventurous play

Across the consultations, children express their enthusiasm for play that is 'exciting'. One element of this is play involving risk and challenge. Although only a minority of consultation responses express children's preferences in the category of 'adventurous play', many more cite children's love of vigorous and potentially risky activity. This can range from being outdoors within an adventure area to BMX biking, trips to the countryside to time in a dedicated adventure playground. Almost half of the available North East play consultations raise the need for adventurous play. About a fifth of children and young people in Birmingham asked specifically for this type of play, and its appeal comes through many of their comments:



**"We want fun, exciting and daring life experiences."** Birmingham, aged 11.

**"Rollerblading, ice skating, driving, motorsport, rugby, flying an air balloon, shooting lessons."** Birmingham, aged 12.

## **Key learning points**

- Freedom, sociability and physical activity are crucial elements in many children's definition of play.
- Play partnerships generally categorised children's responses in helpful ways, but greater consistency between areas would be helpful in assessing the diversity of play experiences and tracking how local authorities meet children's needs over time.
- Green, open space is crucial for most children.
- Gardens seem to be important, but consultation has not clarified how children use them.
- Children's experience of street play varies greatly across the country. It is a positive choice in some areas and should be supported.
- Play at school is important to children, but was not looked at in detail in most consultations.
- The idea of playing sport is very popular. A wider range of sporting interests seems to go hand in hand with a wider range of provision.
- Some older children want opportunities to socialise in safe environments without being judged or pushed towards structured youth provision.



## 6 What is limiting children's play?

The following sections describe barriers to play using three categories:

- a) Safety: how are play choices affected by safety or perceived safety?
- b) Quality: how are they affected by the quality or attractiveness of what is on offer?
- c) Accessibility: how difficult or easy is it for children of varying needs and from a variety of backgrounds to take advantage of play opportunities?

The categories are imperfect, not least because of overlaps. For example, a child might say that they do not use play facilities because of their distance from home. This may be access related – a consequence of sheer distance, limited public transport or expensive public transport. On the other hand, it could be safety related – a dangerous road to cross or the impossibility of parental supervision at a distant location. Nevertheless, the categories bring out some interesting commonalities and differences across the consultation responses.

### a) Safety

In March 2006, children attending play events in Gateshead were asked what was most important to them when they play. The most popular answer was 'I feel safe when I am there'. Children in Sunderland said that 'good play' is 'somewhere you feel safe'. Given the fundamental importance to children of feeling safe, it is perhaps unsurprising that amongst barriers to play, those relating to safety are, taken together, the most common. In Birmingham, of the six top answers to the question "What stops you from playing?" five were safety related. Similarly, of the top six issues raised in Dudley, four were safety related. But, which particular threats restrict children's play? In some areas, 'feeling safe' is reported as a problem but not elaborated. This may mean that children are experiencing and reporting a generalised sense of anxiety, but it is more likely to relate to the methodology in consultations and the inherent difficulty of coding. Even in Birmingham, which has six safety related categories, not all of these avoid ambiguity or overlap – 'Children getting hurt', 'Other children bullying', 'Harm from adults' and 'Harm from children' – and a catch-all category - 'Safety' – is still thought to be necessary.<sup>8</sup>

Despite children's different and substantial safety anxieties, it is important to note the evidence that most children feel safe most of the time. Of those children answering Dudley's online questionnaire, 77% reported that they feel safe playing outside.

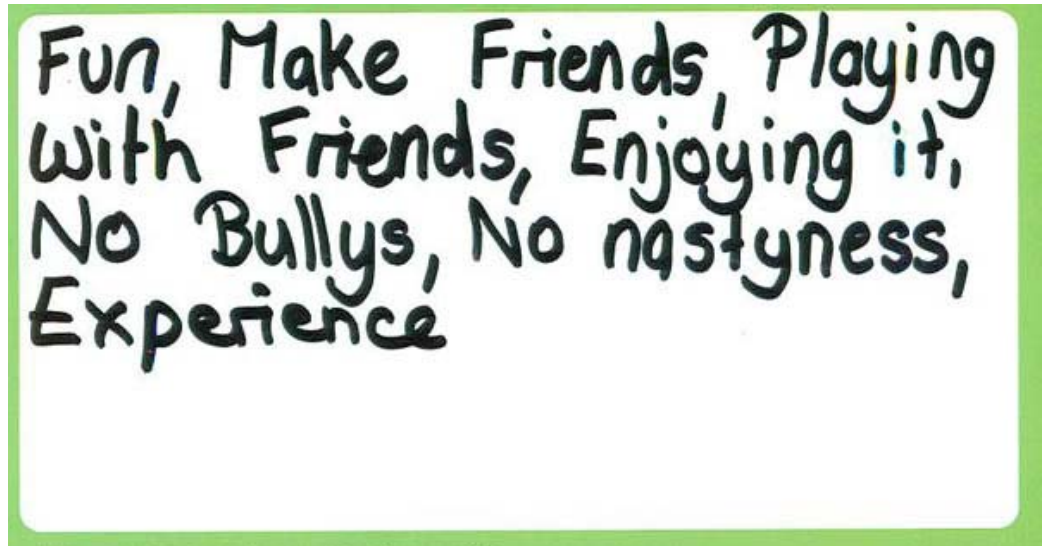
### Fear of other children and young people

Notwithstanding a lack of clarity in some of the evidence, anxiety about the behaviour or presence of other children comes out clearly as a major problem in most areas. In Birmingham's 'Harm from children' and

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<sup>8</sup> 'Roads too busy' is the sixth category.

'Other children bullying' categories are combined, peer-fear is second only to traffic as the most cited reason why children do not play in the city. Dudley, Hartlepool, North Tyneside, Wear Valley and Teesdale also report intimidation or violence from children as one of the main concerns. Children and young people frequently refer to 'bullying', which seems to follow play like the negative counterpart of the friendship and sociability which are some of its essential elements:



### Dudley

Children at the Springfield Fun Day in Dudley defined play as the antithesis of aggression and anti-social behaviour:



**“All play is is being nice to each other and sharing, not swearing at each other and having arguments.” Dudley.**

Bullying is a frequent problem, but do the consultations reveal in detail what type of bullying is occurring? It is possible that the problem consists largely of children falling out with their peers and friendship groups during play. However, where detail is available it points to 'bullying' being a problem of intimidation by strangers or outsiders – particularly older children. Hostile or threatening children are sometimes referred to in the consultation responses as 'gangs'. Indeed, children in Dudley say that 'gangs' are the number one reason for them not playing outside. There are some reports of underage public drinking by adolescents, and sometimes older children appear to have deliberately intimidated younger children or spoiled their play.

There also appear to be some problems of clashing 'tribes', which results in some children feeling unable to share space and facilities. For example, a young person in Gateshead is encouraged by the development of local play space, but discouraged by those who are beginning to use it:



**“... it’s not finished yet and there are Goths and charvas there.”**  
Gateshead

(See section 6 (c) for problems with racism).

More often, the sheer presence of teenagers appears to be frightening, and younger children are keen to suggest separate provision.



**“There’s 15 year olds hanging around.”**

**“There should be different bits for different ages – all with body guards.”**  
Sunderland

#### Fear of adults

Another threat to children’s sense of safety is fear of adult strangers. Children and young people identified this as a significant barrier to play in Birmingham, Dudley and Teesdale. Some specifically frightening types of adults are mentioned, including drug and alcohol users. In addition, children worry about adults who set out specifically to harm them through violence or sexual assault:



**“Baddies might get me”** Birmingham, aged five.

**“You might get kidnapped, someone might kill you”** Birmingham, aged 12.

On some occasions, children specifically report the fear of sexual assault as a parental anxiety which has resulted in a parental prohibition.



**“Grown ups stop you from playing because of perverts.”**  
Birmingham, aged 12.

In Wear Valley, 10% of children and young people cited parents’ fear of strangers as something which stops them playing. More often though, it

is unclear whether the children have accepted their parent's warnings as a set of rules to be followed, or whether they have taken on their parents' anxieties and are themselves frightened. In a number of areas, parental 'worry' is reported as a barrier to play without the nature of that worry being specified. It would seem reasonable to conclude from the lack of explanation given to children that 'stranger danger' may be the underlying concern:



**"I would like to go outside because I never get a chance because my mum is worried."** Birmingham, aged nine.

**"My Mummy and Daddy do not let me out to play."** Birmingham, aged six.

### Traffic

Another threat to their safety mentioned by children and young people was traffic. In Birmingham, it was the main reason given by children for not playing, and this may relate to the unusually low level of street play (see section 5 [b]). In Gateshead, children and young people said that making their street safer would be the single change most likely to make their play safe:



**"My mum will not let me by the roads, too busy."** Birmingham, aged nine.

**"They don't want children to get knocked over."** Birmingham, aged eight.

**"I think there should be more traffic calming."** Birmingham, aged seven.

**"I would like some traffic light(s)."** Birmingham, aged 11.

**"Shut the roads because loads of cars pass by and spoil the games".** Gateshead.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, children in other built-up urban areas such as Dudley report similar concerns. However, Blyth Valley and Easington – both relatively rural areas – also report road traffic to be a problem, suggesting that the total volume of traffic is not necessarily as important as the way it is managed in relation to children's safety.

### Improving safety and reducing fear

While specific fears need to be practically addressed, it seems fair to observe that a generalised anxiety is affecting many parents and carers.



A group of parents in Gateshead were asked how they enjoyed playing as children and how they would like their own children to play. Most said that they would like their children to play at home, even though a majority of the types of play they remembered fondly from their own childhoods were types of outdoor play. This indicates a profound sense of risk.

An obvious way to alleviate some safety fears is to make sure that children are not isolated. The presence or availability of adults is the most frequently raised way of ensuring this, although the finding in Dudley that 75% of children in Dudley feel safe playing when other children are around suggests that peer supervision should not be discounted. Adult supervision is discussed in terms of play workers, play wardens, police or volunteer parents. A lack of such supervision by appropriate adults was identified as a problem in a number of areas. In Hartlepool, for instance, 63% of children consulted felt that a lack of supervision for outdoor activities and play areas was a barrier to play. In Dudley, 86% of children said that they felt safe when adults were around.



**“We need more supervisors to scare gangsters.”** Birmingham, aged 10.

The experience of Dudley also illustrates how the issue of supervision can relate to where provision is located, as the physical isolation of some existing sites was leading to children feeling frightened and unsafe, and reducing the possibility of informal monitoring by families and communities.

While an adult presence is reassuring to most children and young people, the results do suggest ambivalence, mainly but not exclusively related to age. Children in North Tyneside said that a lack of supervision was a barrier to play, while older children said that too much supervision was a barrier. Attitudes to the police were indicative of this difference of opinion, with children and young people’s views split fairly evenly between those who welcomed a visible presence, and those who felt picked on:



**“More police officers patrolling so kids feel safe from gang violence.”** Birmingham, aged 13.

**“Police stop me from doing what I want. Most police are rubbish and they need the sack.”** Birmingham, aged 16.

In Newcastle, some older children’s unhappiness with the idea of being

supervised extended to a wish that adults would allow them to use their leisure time in unstructured ways, without being judged for congregating with friends, and without being ‘bombarded with information’ whenever they go to a youth club.

### **b) Quality**

Where children and young people are invited to comment on the quality of specific play projects, they are generally positive. The suggestion from children in Telford that its play scheme should run during other holidays, not just the summer holiday, is typical of children’s wish to expand on what they know and like. Yet children’s appetite for variety also comes out clearly in most of the consultations. It was noted in section 5 (b) that children’s enthusiasm for new experiences is not necessarily a sign that their current experience is particularly unsatisfactory; nevertheless the degree to which children and young people call for new services and opportunities indicates that there are problems, that the offer is often stale and limited. Children and young people in Blyth Valley call for more places for teenagers to gather and socialise, and say that the quality of play areas needs to improve. In Dudley, the answer most frequently selected by children as to why they do not go more often to their local play area or their local park or recreation area is ‘Boring or limited facilities’.

Children in Dudley put the problem of boring options ahead of the problem of badly maintained facilities. In other areas, however, upkeep emerges as a major concern. Indeed, it is striking how crucial the physical state of provision appears to be in shaping children’s attitudes towards it. This makes itself felt most strongly in terms of outdoor play space, where many children and young people feel discouraged by damaged and apparently uncared for areas. Perhaps their unhappiness should not be surprising in light of what they say about their enjoyment of attractive natural spaces, safe soft grass and bright colours (see section 5 [b]).

Vandalised and broken equipment is identified as a problem by children and young people in areas including Teesdale and Easington. Appearance and cleanliness are also important. Children in North Tyneside, Derwentside, Durham, Teesdale and Easington all report that graffiti discourages them from outdoor play. Almost as discouraging in most of these areas is the presence of dog dirt and litter.



**“I would like people to clean all the rubbish and graffiti off of the skate park and park.”** Birmingham, aged 10.

**“I don’t go over because the bins are knocked over and burnt out.”** Sunderland.

**“It’s not very good because there is glass lying about and my cousin played on the grass and he cut himself.”** Sunderland.

A child in Sunderland drew a picture to suggest how one of these problems could be tackled:



**“This is a shed so older ones can spray paint it so they don’t do it on the park.”** Sunderland.

### c) Accessibility

The most commonly identified single barrier to play was physical distance: play areas or facilities being too far away for children to use them as they would like to. This was raised by children and young people in Gateshead, Tynedale, Newcastle, Birmingham, Blyth Valley, Easington, Wear Valley and Teesdale. In Hartlepool, 75% of the children and young people consulted thought that they had few or no localised activities. In Wear Valley, where 44% of children said that their outside play was usually in the street, 13% said that play areas were too far away. In Dudley, 56% of children responding to the online questionnaire said that they had a playground near their house, but 30% said that they did not use their local play area more often because it was ‘Too far away’.

Inevitably, children’s sense of what is ‘local’ and ‘too far’ changes with age, and journeys that would once have appeared off-putting become more practical as children get older (5-7 year olds in Easington report problems with crossing main roads and not knowing their way around). The consultation responses do not provide a detailed account of children and young people’s widening confidence, but do show how problems change through childhood and adolescence.

Northumberland’s ‘Having a Life Survey’, on which Blyth Valley drew extensively, is a useful reminder that, although children and young people’s ability to travel and access leisure facilities usually grows with age, it may lag increasingly far behind their wishes and expectations. Approximately 65% of 5-12 year olds felt that ‘activities outside school are easy to get to and join in’, but this falls to around 45% for young people aged 12 to 18.

Responses in many areas show that distance continues to be a problem across the age range, for various reasons. The ‘What Matters to Us’ consultation with children and young people in Newcastle reports that ‘for everyone old enough to go out on their own’ public transport was a problem, with sparse services in outlying areas and full-fares for young people over 14 years of age. Cost was also mentioned as problematic in Hartlepool and Blyth Valley. In the 12 North East local authorities studied in this review, children and young people in seven of them reported the distance of play facilities as being a problem, and the problem of poor transport links was raised in a further two. This demonstrates how dissatisfaction extends across rural, urban and metropolitan areas, although the particular problems of rural children



**“Stop old people moaning about us just walking.”**

A young person involved in a play consultation

are raised in Tynedale and Castle Morpeth, as well as in Derwentside, where the youth bus is greatly appreciated. Children and young people in Hartlepool also support more mobile provision, as well as a rent a bike scheme and more regular bus services extending further into the evenings.

Children and young people in several areas report that play opportunities are not always inclusive. None of the consultation methodologies reveal the extent of discrimination, or who is experiencing it most acutely at what ages. There is no indication that discrimination is as large a barrier to children's play as safety or quality, but the reported comments of some individual children make it quite clear that racism is limiting or spoiling their experience of play.



**“People bully me because of my skin.”** Birmingham, aged five.

**“Make something special for bullies like anti-bullying or anti-racism.”** Birmingham, aged eight.

**“Racism stops us accessing the things we want to do.”** Newcastle.

Newcastle's 'What Matters Most to Us' – a consultation document with a wider remit than play – reflects on racism. It reveals the hostility being experienced by some children from the Muslim community, as well as expressing the unhappiness of some white children at the presence of racism in their city.

Disabled children express their unhappiness at accessibility problems. As noted in section 4 (d), a number of Play Partnerships ensured that disabled children and young people had opportunities to discuss their experience. This brought out some specific difficulties in the design of facilities and activities. Children and young people in Oxclose Community School in Sunderland, which has good facilities to ensure the inclusion of disabled children, identified that lack of wheel chair ramps and dropped kerbs were stopping children playing. As one would expect, the number of children and young people encountering such barriers was small<sup>9</sup>. However, individual comments show how strongly some children, regardless of disability, believe that fair access for those with disabilities is important - part of the fairness and sociability of playing. This is despite the fact that most, although by no means all, of the play consultations invited children to discuss play in terms of their individual experiences and preferences. Children at Oxclose Community School said they wanted play areas that allow children with disabilities and children with no disabilities to play together. Children consulted on the development of a new play area in

<sup>9</sup> In Birmingham, 0.8% of responses said that requiring support with specific needs was a barrier to play.

the same city reminded adults that:



**“Things on the park should be low down so people who are disabled can use them.”** Sunderland.

Finally, children say that some adults are stopping them from playing. In a few cases prohibition is planned and direct, for example through ‘No Ball Games’ signs. However, adult barriers more often take the form of disapproval. Safety concerns may, of course, underlie some of the disapproval, just as danger as well as annoyance may prompt the ‘No Ball Games’ signs. Children’s comments indicate that the reasons for adult disapproval are sometimes, but by no means always, explained. From the point of view of children and young people, their sheer presence and the act of playing are unwelcome:



**“Stop old people moaning about us just walking.”** Birmingham, aged 15.

**“You can get into big trouble. You can damage other people’s property.”** Birmingham, aged 10.

**“Children like to play outside, make noise without being told off.”** Birmingham, aged nine.

The negative attitudes of adults other than parents or carers are mentioned as barriers by children in Birmingham, Dudley, Hartlepool, Tynedale, Blyth Valley, Wear Valley, Teesdale and Easington. In Newcastle, children and young people feel that adults are too quick to make bad assumptions about them, and too keen to move them on:



**“We would have more respect for adults if they could speak to us in a way that they would like to be spoken to themselves.”**  
Newcastle

**This review has shown how adults across the country have recently made genuine efforts to talk seriously to children and young people about fun. Although difficult barriers remain, this has begun to create a sense of excitement and shared enjoyment, which holds out the promise of a better future for play in England.**

## Key learning points

- **Safety concerns are a major barrier to children's play. They are made up of many different elements, some of which relate to negative experiences, and some of which relate to negative expectations.**
- **Fear of traffic is a barrier to play in many areas, including rural or semi-rural areas.**
- **Children and young people generally welcome the idea of some form of supervision, but the preferred form of supervision is strongly age and location specific.**
- **The physical appearance of play areas and facilities is crucial to either reassuring or alarming children about their safety.**
- **Young people believe that the range of leisure opportunities available to their age group is too limited.**
- **The distance of play and leisure facilities is a problem for many children and young people, although the problem can only be usefully understood through detailed mapping across the age range.**
- **Peer racism is limiting how and where some children play.**
- **There is some evidence that non-disabled children, as well as disabled children, welcome inclusive provision.**

## Appendix

### Local authorities providing documentation

We are grateful to the following local authorities for submitting detailed documentation to the review:

- Birmingham
- Dudley
- Gateshead
- Hartlepool
- Sunderland
- Telford

Play England in the North East conducted an initial review of 17 play strategies across the region's 21 local authorities. The evidence from this exercise was incorporated into this report.

As well as accessing publicly available documentation, 11 MILLION also sought clarification from officials in some areas. We are grateful for the co-operation of:

- Blythe Valley
- Easington
- Newcastle

We are particularly grateful to the Chinnbrook Play Centre in Birmingham, which facilitated a consultation session with children to check back this review's emerging findings.





**“The 11 MILLION children  
and young people in  
England have a voice”**

Children’s Commissioner for  
England, Professor Sir Albert  
Aynsley-Green



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