



# Lands Improvement

**Better Play in New Developments**

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## Introduction

What is play? Who plays? What does play mean for you / us? What opportunities for play should be provided on new developments? What are good play outcomes?

Why is the current system not working?

These are the questions we have been asking ourselves at Lands Improvement over the last few years, and these were some of the questions that we explored at our recent 'Better Play in New developments' workshop.

We are on a journey at Lands Improvement, a journey to learn how we can better deliver great places to live.

We started that journey by creating our vision for [Happy Healthy Places](#), backed up by our internal placemaking framework, developed alongside Create Streets.

**Core to us in developing those Happy Healthy Places are the 'spaces in between':**

“ Master Developers are “in the privileged position of being able to influence how the spaces in between are designed, delivered and activated. These spaces need to work for the benefit of the whole community and should enable the living of a healthy active life – one that adds significant additional value to a resident than that delivered simply by the bricks and mortar. We have all seen developments that don't deliver, either in part or in full, and we see that as a huge, wasted opportunity and negligent”.

Play is a vital part of that active environment. It shows that we prioritise children and gives them vital opportunities to develop – to have fun, to discover, to be physically active, to socialise, to have some freedom. It creates life and laughter, brings families together and can be the glue for the community.

**The benefits of good play are multiple:**

- Better Physical and Mental Health outcomes
- Better community cohesion
- Better value for money
- When fully integrated better ecological and climate outcomes

This paper sets out our thoughts on the current play environment in new developments, incorporating the discussions at the workshop, and on how we can do better.



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Development Director

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## OUR WORKSHOP

**Not just ticking the box: providing better opportunities for Play in new developments**

**Participants:**

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Trevor Smith (Facilitator) - Sportsmith  
Tim Gill - Author  
Helen Griffiths - Fields in Trust  
Tom Perry - LDA Design  
Jennie Savage - Public Realm - LB Tower Hamlets  
Lorna O'Carroll - Icen Projects  
Eugene Minogue - Play England  
Suzannah Walker - Make Space for Girls  
Steven Heywood - Yorkshire Active Partnership  
Steven Morton - OHID  
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## The status quo

### Equipped areas of play

The planning process is not delivering the above outlined benefits, with play currently relegated to the bottom of the planning and land use priority list, and reduced down to a tick box exercise that means that play provision is generally both unimaginative and inadequate.

To illustrate this, we have a live example, a 5,000 units development, which is required to deliver:

- 4 Neighbourhood Equipped Areas of Play (NEAP);
- 14 Local Equipped Areas of Play (LEAP); and
- 17 Local Areas of Play (LAP).

Local planning policy specifies the types of equipment that each area must provide.

In this case, a LEAP must contain:

- 1 large multiplay unit
- 1 Swinging equipment
- 1 Rotating item
- 1 Balancing item
- 1 non-standard challenging item

In essence, play provision is basically seen as pieces of kit which are then replicated numerous times across a development.

There is without doubt a role for these traditional playgrounds, but could they be providing better and more creative outcomes and are there other options?

### Narrow vision

These prescriptive approaches and requirements generally deliver for a small demographic of younger children and ignore the needs of many others such as:

- Women and girls
- Those with additional needs
- Teenagers

### Isolated thinking

A further knock-on consequence is that play is delivered in isolation

- from natural infrastructure or assets
- from other amenity
- from the needs of the community
- from where you live / your doorstep

**In the box on the right, you can see what play means to our workshop participants, but what does it mean to you, your friends, family, children, parents? Cast your mind back – what are your best memories of playing? Did it solely involve going to a playground like the one described above?**



## So why is this the planning and industry standard? What is stopping 'better' being delivered?

### Policy

Fundamentally there is no statutory policy or central framework to push local authorities and developers to do better. The National Planning Policy Framework makes no mention of play at all and this neglect filters through the rest of the planning process. Local authorities are left with a vacuum of leadership, with many simply adopting Fields in Trust's minimum standards in their local policies. These were never designed to be the definitive guide, but to give a baseline to work from. They form an important piece of the puzzle, but in essence have been hijacked to perform an alternative and more expansive role.

### Roads not streets

The bedrock of a walkable, liveable, sociable, happy healthy development is the road network, or better put 'the street environment'.

Without that all other good intentions become much harder.

True active environments and playable neighbourhoods need good street design, to remove barriers to movement and to prioritise people. Unfortunately, most developments are still being developed with outdated road design which prioritises the ease of access of the car and the bin lorry and relegates everything else to the sidelines – including play therefore being shoehorned into a small fenced spaces. Evidence shows us that children play outside more in walkable neighbourhoods.

# What should new developments be delivering? What is a better vision for play?

## Structural / cultural

Conditional thinking is ingrained in the system – play is just for young children, all play opportunities can be provided by a playground and so on. The needs of the wider demographic are not considered.

Furthermore the voices of young people are not heard or considered when designing and planning play spaces - adults (often from outside the local area) assume they know what is wanted.

## Resource

Planning resource is low and therefore a 'tried and tested' tick list is easy. It is a clear indication that a developer has delivered their obligations and there is no ambiguity. It also ensures that 'something' is delivered. This is understandable, albeit the bar is set very low. There is limited to no incentive to explore other possibilities, and no guidance on how to assess a non-standard proposal.

## Lack of integration

Play, landscape, ecology, highways, sport, climate – these are all considered separately leading to a lack of integration and joined up thinking, and therefore missed opportunities.

## Risk / reward

A tried and tested playground is seen to reduce the risk of injury to children and consequently reduces the perceived liability of the local authority. A fence, nothing too challenging and nothing unknown, equipment that meets British Standards – it all points to buying from a catalogue. No matter that by reducing this perceived risk the huge benefits that play can bring have also been minimised. In fact they have probably not been considered in the pursuit of risk reduction.

Why would a planning officer go against policy and what they've done before – why would they trust you and what's in it for them?

In other countries, for example in Sweden, design approach is moving from 'risk aversion' to creating environments that develop 'risk awareness'.

## Maintenance costs

Play areas are an ongoing cost burden and this must be taken into account when designing. However materials are often used simply based on the maintenance regime, not based on their playability or attractiveness. Similar to the above section on risk, the cost / benefit assessment has become too simplified.

## Safety

Safety in open spaces is a real problem. But is reducing provision to just closed off areas the answer?



**This all feeds down into planning permissions and s106 agreements which set out minimum standards, with play reduced down to an equipment tick list from catalogue suppliers.**

It's easy to criticise, but what should be being delivered? We proposed this question to our workshop participants.

## Breakout Session: What is your vision for play on new developments?

Produce a 10-word statement which summarises your vision for play on new developments and identify the key components that are required to deliver this vision.

3 breakout groups considered this question, with their thoughts distilled as follows:

### ➔ Neighbourhoods which give everyone freedom, opportunity, permission and safety to play

Key components:

- Free-range urban neighbourhoods.
- Inclusive – intersectional.
- Needs of children and young people designed in from the start.
- Co-design.
- Accountability to minimum thresholds.
- Good practice underpinned by research.

### ➔ Journeys of creativity and discovery from the doorstep to the horizon

Key Principles:

- Playable landscapes which deliver fun, full sensory experiences, are non-prescriptive, naturalistic (blue and green), expansive, playful and varied.
- Walkable, inspirational linkages.
- Welcoming and attractive – lighting, routes, entrances, artworks.
- Inclusive – diverse (age, gender, culture, ability), flexible, multifunctional
- Evidence-based.

### ➔ Immersive, Experiential, Imaginative, Inclusive, Open ended, Risky and Safe

Key Principles:

- Multi-layered, multi-use space that changes throughout the year and is activated by facilitators and community.

**To even come part way to delivering these visions the existing barriers as highlighted above need to be overcome.**

**There is no one answer – each development will be different, however the objectives and visions may be similar.**

# Overcoming the barriers

**Our workshop participants all agreed that policy change is needed, to ensure that play is given the focus that it deserves.**

In the meantime, however, what can developers, consultants and interested parties be doing to make improvements now?

**Here are a few ideas:**

- Streets – see our separate thought piece **Streets for People** on how we start creating places for people not cars, and set the foundation for play everywhere. This is fundamental to creating a playful environment. Yes policy change is essential, and barriers are significant, but that doesn't mean we can't do good things and strive to deliver better outcomes.
- Create a joined up **vision for play** – what are you proposing and why is it better than the status quo - obtain senior local authority buy in.
- Use the **evidence**:
  - Point to **case studies**, and go on **site visits**.
  - Undertake **engagement** with residents and particularly with children – what do they want? Co-design will lead to better results.
- Think about **all demographics** – who is being excluded?
- Ensure your **s106** agreement doesn't restrict your ability to push for better.
- **Trial** ideas in specific locations at an early stage.
- Build **trust**.
- **Make it easy** for people to say yes.



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