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NOWHERE TO PLAY

A report by the Association of Play Industries
on the state of England's playgrounds.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Research undertaken by the Association of Play Industries has revealed that local authorities across England are closing children's playgrounds. Our research has uncovered that 214 playgrounds have been closed, with a further 234 playgrounds earmarked for closure by local authorities.
- Local authorities cited lack of budget to maintain, repair or replace equipment as reasons for the closures. There is no longer dedicated funding for playgrounds from central government or grants from third sector institutions, like the Big Lottery Fund, so the provision and upkeep of play spaces falls on local authority budgets which are also reducing.
- In its battle against childhood obesity the Government should not restrict its interventions to schools or formal sports clubs, but should look at other local provision that can improve a child's activity level. The closure of public playgrounds, which take away these opportunities to be active, at the same time as we are trying to tackle childhood obesity is counterproductive.
- We need a clear and unequivocal show of support for play and activity and the benefits it brings to young people. The lost playground provision that our research has uncovered should be replaced at a minimum - but this would only be a sticking plaster. An investment of £100 million could lead to an increase in the number of playground facilities that are available for children to access across the country. We estimate that would provide over 1,600 playgrounds and play spaces which is only a 10% rise on the number that local authorities reported to be running in 2011.¹

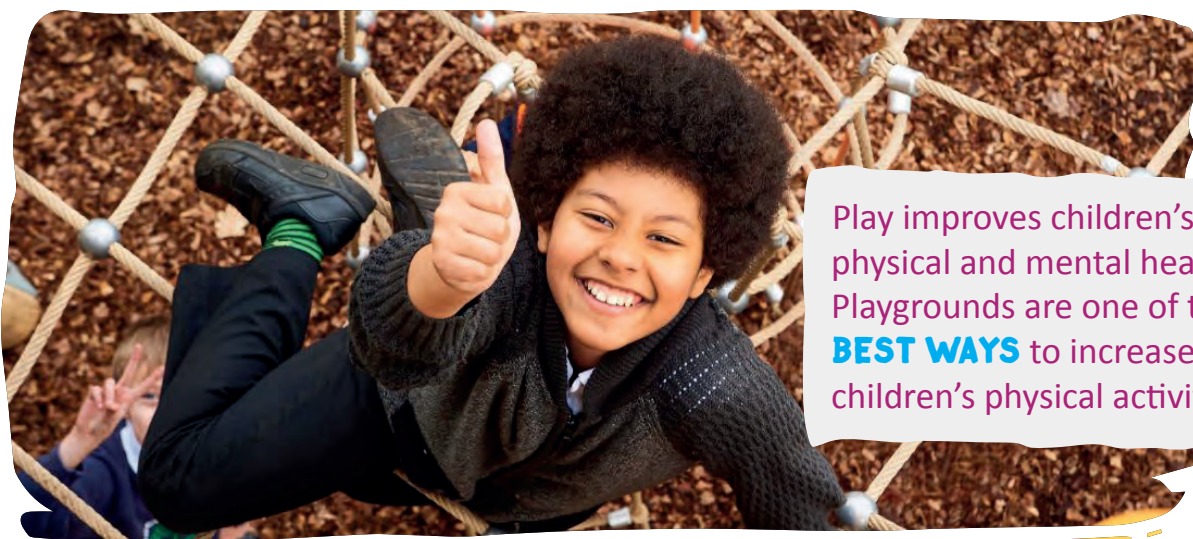
1. Fair Play for Children Freedom of information Survey on Playground provision in England 2011, www.fairplayforchildren.net/survey1.htm

INTRODUCTION

Play is vital to a child's well-being and development through their formative years. It is through play and activity that children learn to engage and interact with the world around them. Much has been written about the benefits of play on children's happiness, physical activity, cognitive skills, social and emotional learning, and it is now seen as fundamental to a happy childhood.

The Children's Play Policy Forum found that play improves children's physical and mental health as well as their emotional well-being, and that playgrounds are one of the best ways of increasing children's levels of physical activity.² Playground equipment motivates children to get moving and also importantly provides the opportunity for children to learn to socialise while playing with one another.

Having had a lot of focus - both academically and in terms of public policy - around a decade ago, the issue of play has fallen down the political agenda since the financial crisis. The Association of Play Industries is keen to ensure children continue to have access to the free play opportunities that they need to develop, be active and have a happy childhood. Whilst play and activity may not be high up on the political agenda, we want to make sure it does not fall off completely. We believe that it is vital that free and accessible playgrounds and play spaces are available even in a time of economic tightening.



Play improves children's physical and mental health. Playgrounds are one of the **BEST WAYS** to increase children's physical activity.

2. Children's Play Policy Forum, *The Play Return: A review of the wider impact of play initiatives*, July 2014, www.playscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Play-Return-A-review-of-the-wider-impact-of-play-initiatives1.pdf

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PLAYGROUND PROVISION

In the 2000s there was a lot of focus on play.

At the beginning of the decade 'Best Play'³ was published by the National Play Fields Association (now Fields in Trust) and the Children's Play Council which brought together research and practice to show what play provisions should look like. This publication acted as a benchmark for good quality play and helped to set the tone for the debate around play provision for the next 10 years.

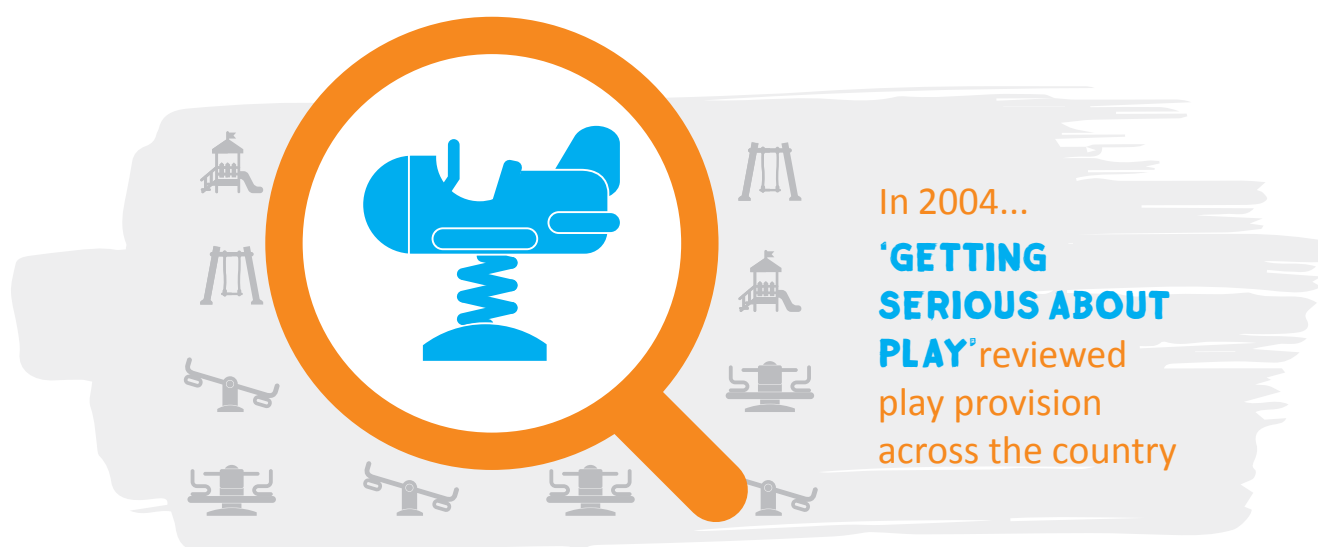
In 2001, the Government announced that £200 million would be provided from the New Opportunities Fund - a funding stream from the National Lottery - to improve children's play opportunities.

In 2004, Frank Dobson's review into children's play - 'Getting Serious about Play'⁴ - looked into the disparity between play opportunities and provision across different parts of the country, and provided recommendations of how the £200 million of promised lottery money should be spent.

In 2006, the Big Lottery Fund launched the £155 million Children's Play Initiative to develop play provision across England and support innovation

and new ways of providing children's play. The largest part of this initiative was the £123 million Children's Play Programme which was aimed at improving or developing play provision. This programme ran for five years, funded a total of 1,466 individual play projects and was described as a "major development contract to create the infrastructure, support, guidance and training that would help local authorities in planning for play across their area".⁵

The Government then launched their own National Play Strategy in 2008 - and alongside this made £235 million available through the Playbuilder and Play Pathfinder programmes. This investment was aimed at providing 3,500 new or improved play spaces and 30 new adventure playgrounds by 2011. The funding was distributed across all 152 top tier local authorities: 30 of them were designated as Play Pathfinder authorities, receiving £2.5 million to develop a new staffed, adventure playground and create or renew around 25 other public play areas. The remaining authorities received £1.1 million Playbuilder funding to develop at least 20 public play areas.⁶



3. NPFA & Children's play Council, *Best Play: What play provision should do for children*, September 2000, <http://www.playengland.org.uk/media/202623/best-play.pdf>.

4. Fair Play for Children, *Getting serious about Play*, 2004, <http://www.fairplayforchildren.org/pdf/1327038013.pdf>.

5. ECORYS, *Children's Play Programme Evaluation - Final report to Big Lottery Fund*, November 2011, <http://www.api-play.org/upload/public/Ecorys-childrens-play-evaluation.pdf>

6. SQW, *Play Pathfinder and Play Builders Programme Evaluation*, May 2013, p.27.

However, this direction of travel - and public investment - reversed in the face of the financial crisis. In response to tightening public finances this emphasis on play became less prominent and much of the resource available was pared back. In 2010, the Department for Education reviewed the last year of Playbuilder and Pathfinder budgets (2010-11) to identify potential savings that could go towards tackling the deficit. Of the remaining Play programme budgets that went to local authorities the Department removed the ringfence and scrapped targets for the number of play facilities that local authorities had to provide.⁷

Without dedicated funding streams from central government or specific grants from third sector institutions like the Big Lottery Fund, the provision and upkeep of playgrounds and play facilities falls on local authority budgets - which since 2010 have been decreasing.

Accounting for a quarter of all public spending⁸, local government budgets were identified by the Coalition Government as where savings should be found. The National Audit Office estimate that the real terms reduction in central government funding to local authorities between 2010-11 and 2015-16 was 37%.⁹

We are also in the middle of the biggest reform to local government finance in living memory: rather than central government collecting in locally raised business rates and redistributing them to local authorities in the form of a grant, by 2020 councils will retain 100% of locally raised business rates and the central government grant will be phased out.¹⁰

We are currently in the transition phase where the central government grant to local authorities is decreasing but they have yet to gain full control over locally raised business rates. For many councils this means their finances are squeezed and there is uncertainty around financial planning.

In the recent past, central government funding for new playgrounds has stopped, third sector funding streams for new playgrounds have ended and local authority budgets, which cover the maintenance of playgrounds, have been heavily reduced. Understandably, local authorities have been prioritising funding on areas where they have statutory duties, but this raises the question about what has happened to discretionary spending on playgrounds.



PLAY AFTER THE FINANCIAL CRISIS...

37% CUT in government funding to local authorities means spend on playgrounds significantly reduced.

7. *ibid.*, p.2; *BBC News*, 11 August 2010, .

8. *Hansard*, 23 January 2013, Col 584W

9. NAO, *The impact of funding reductions on local authorities*, November 2014, www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Impact-of-funding-reductions-on-local-authorities.pdf

10. *Hansard*, 25 November 2015, Col. 1365

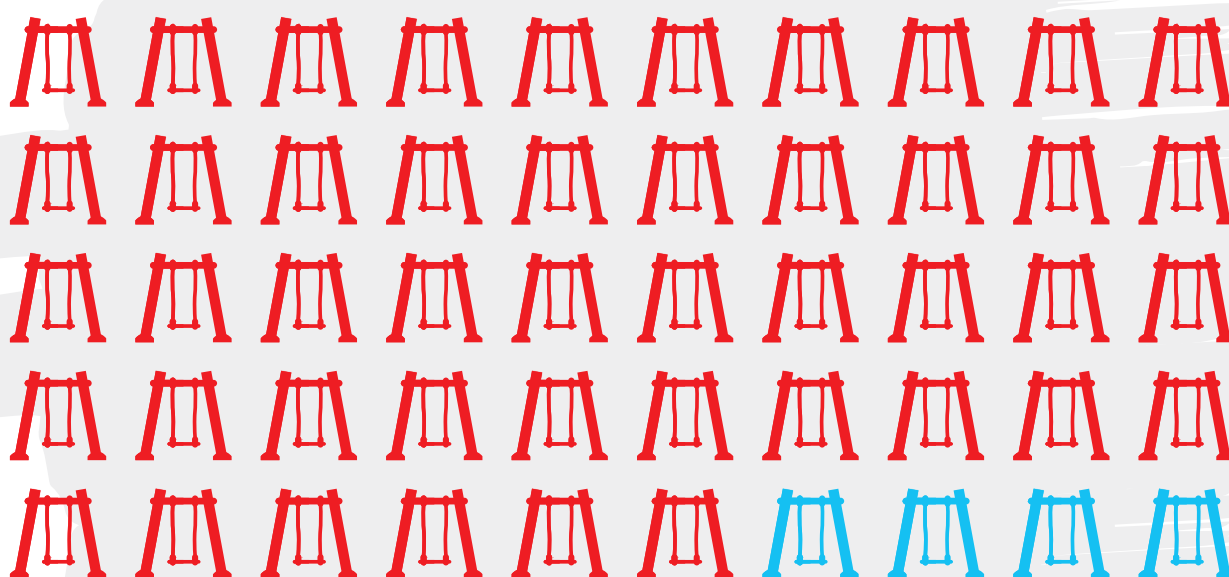
WHAT NOW FOR PLAYGROUND PROVISION?

The recent report by the Communities and Local Government Select Committee on Public Parks highlighted the difficult choices that councils have faced with reductions in local authority budgets.¹¹ It cited the *State of UK Public Parks 2016* report which showed 92% of local authority parks departments have experienced budget reductions in the past three years and 95% of parks managers expect there to be further reductions in the next three years.¹²

The Select Committee also highlighted work by Britain Thinks which showed, in the context of these decreasing budgets, most people think

that neighbourhood children's playgrounds should be the priority for funding - with 56% of all respondents selecting playgrounds as one of their top two priorities for funding.¹³

However, despite this level of public support, it is not clear what is happening to playground provision in this country and what decisions local authorities are making in this regard. After a decade of investment in playground facilities followed by seven years of much more restricted funding, what has been the effect on the number of playgrounds available in which children can play and be active?



92%

of local authority parks departments have experienced **BUDGET REDUCTIONS** in the past three years

11. Communities and Local Government Select Committee, *Public Parks*, 30 January 2017, www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmcomloc/45/45.pdf

12. Heritage Lottery Fund, *State of UK Public Parks 2016*, p.7, www.hlf.org.uk/file/22227/download?token=sBYAhYdc8GLa41Ao7lgT1kmXcP_yew6SwhnnbH-s0Ug%20%20

13. Britain Thinks & Heritage Lottery Fund, *State of the UK's Parks II - Public Survey*, 30 June 2016, p.6, www.hlf.org.uk/file/21437/download?token=DUGE2bF0Emy3lIlIagdan8KBVWmuyj8KI-RYHpWusXOE

CURRENT PICTURE OF PLAYGROUND PROVISION

When looking at the current picture of playground provision across England we are faced with one large problem - data. There is not a comprehensive data set on playground provision, or even an accurate and up-to-date top line number of playgrounds in England. This is, in part, due to the diverse number of bodies that provide and maintain playground facilities - schools, local authorities, parish councils and housing associations to name some of them.

In 2011, FairPlay for Children undertook a survey of 326 English local authorities to establish the number of play areas specifically managed by councils. From information provided by the 300 authorities who responded, 16,135 local authority playgrounds were recorded across England and a further 5,265 provided by parish councils and other bodies, such as housing associations were reported.¹⁴

But, given that parish councils are not subject to Freedom of Information Act requests, this latter number represented the playgrounds that local authorities knew were run by parish councils rather than a complete assessment.

In 2014, Children and Young People Now published the results of further Freedom of Information Act requests showing the impact of reduced local authority budgets on play provision. This research revealed that one in three councils had removed some staffed or unstaffed play provision since 2010 - and that on average 2.4% of an area's total play provision had been lost. Of the 155 councils that had provided information, 48 had closed unstaffed play facilities, 38 authorities had closed between 1 and 4 playgrounds, 7 authorities had closed between 5 and 10 sites and 3 local authorities had closed more than 10 play facilities.¹⁵



1 IN 3 COUNCILS have removed some of their play provision since 2010.

14. Fair Play for Children Freedom of Information Survey on Playground Provision in England 2011, www.fairplayforchildren.net/survey1.htm

15. *Children and Young People Now*, 7 January 2014, www.fairplayforchildren.org/pdf/1391892104.pdf

OUR RESEARCH

To try and get an accurate and up-to-date picture of local authority playground provision in England and how it is changing, the Association of Play Industries put in Freedom of Information requests to 326 local authorities.

Each authority was asked to provide information on playgrounds and play facilities that they were responsible for in their local authority areas - whether any had been closed in the last two years, and whether they were expecting to close any in the next three years.

We are grateful to the 283 local authorities who responded to our request. The results were very concerning.

- In the 2014-15 financial year, 28 local authorities reported that they had closed a total of 112 playgrounds.
- In the 2015-16 financial year, 37 local authorities reported that they had closed a total of 102 playgrounds.
- In the 2016-17 financial year, 30 local authorities reported that they were planning to close a total of 80 playgrounds - with a further 73 local authorities unable to confirm their plans.
- In the 2017-18 financial year, 19 local authorities reported that they were planning to close a total 103 playgrounds - with a further 96 local authorities unable to confirm their plans.
- In the 2018-19 financial year, 11 local authorities reported that they were planning to close a total of 51 playgrounds - with a further 99 local authorities unable to confirm their plans.

Between 2014 and 2016,
65 local authorities
closed a total of



214 PLAYGROUNDS

Between 2016 and 2019,
60 local authorities
plan to close a total of



234 PLAYGROUNDS

OUR RESEARCH HAS UNCOVERED THAT 214 PLAYGROUNDS HAVE BEEN CLOSED WITH A FURTHER 234 PLAYGROUNDS EARMARKED FOR CLOSURE BY LOCAL AUTHORITIES.

Whilst the figures that we have uncovered are shocking, what is more concerning is the additional number of playgrounds that could have already closed or be at risk of closure. If a local authority failed to reply to our request, or future plans to close play areas were not revealed, they will not be captured in this research.

As an example, North Hertfordshire District Council recently stated that they can no longer afford to maintain 13 play areas and have called on community groups to take over responsibility for their ownership and maintenance. However, in response to our FOI request they claimed they had no plans to close any playgrounds. If there are more cases like this, the true number of playgrounds that have closed or are at risk of closing could be even higher than the 400+ we have exposed already.

When it came to the reasons why local authorities were closing or planning to close playgrounds, they commonly cited:

- Lack of budgets to maintain, repair or replace equipment
- Equipment outdated, obsolete or reaching the end of its useable life or beyond repair
- Vandalism, anti-social behaviour or community concerns

Despite a lack of consistent data gathering, this research comes on top of other work carried out by Children and Young People Now, and taken together these studies show a strong downward trend in play provision by local authorities since 2010. Whilst we do not have a figure of how many playgrounds or play spaces are currently run by local authorities, this research suggests it is well below the 16,000 recorded by Fair Play for Children in 2011. What is clear from the research is that without any intervention this downward trend will continue and playgrounds across the country will be closed.



WHY DECLINING PLAYGROUND PROVISION IS BAD FOR THE COUNTRY

Having established that the number of playgrounds in England are declining, it is important to consider the effect that this might have.

Investment was poured into play and the development of play spaces in the 2000s to “create, improve and develop children and young people’s free local play spaces and opportunities throughout England, according to need”¹⁷ and “transform local areas into innovative and adventurous play spaces” for children.¹⁸

This was carried out against a backdrop of academic literature which considered the health and well-being effects of play and activity on children and how it affects their development. A literature review carried out by Play England said: “Play is fundamental to children’s happiness and well-being, and the evidence shows that it is also influential in their health and future life

chances. If children’s opportunities for play are restricted there are likely to be profound effects on their life experience in general and more specifically on their physical and mental health”.¹⁹

Previous work by the API has highlighted the negative impact on children’s health and well-being that comes from declining provision of play spaces. To recap here:

- Increasing levels of sedentary behaviours which continue into adulthood and rising obesity.
- Fewer opportunities for children to develop physical, mental and social abilities.
- An increase in child alienation and antisocial behaviour as children are left to “hang around”.²⁰

“If opportunities for play are restricted, there are profound effects on children’s **PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH.**”



17. Big Lottery Fund website, www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/global-content/programmes/england/childrens-play

18. SQW, *Play Pathfinders and Playbuilders*, p.2

19. Play England, *A world without play: a literature review*, January 2012, www.playengland.org.uk/media/371031/a-world-without-play-literature-review-2012.pdf

20. API, *State of Play - A report into the future of UK play provision and the Playbuilder legacy*, July 2011, [www.api-play.org/upload/public/Consultation/API state of play report WEB.pdf](http://www.api-play.org/upload/public/Consultation/API%20state%20of%20play%20report%20WEB.pdf)

CHILDHOOD OBESITY

Concern about levels of childhood obesity is decades old, but still the numbers are going in the wrong direction. Between 1995 and 2003, the percentage of children between 2 and 10 who were overweight and obese rose from 22.7% to 27.7%.²¹ The most recent National Child Measurement Programme (2015-16) found that over one fifth of reception children were overweight or obese, and by year 6 this had risen to over a third. The prevalence of obesity had increased on the year in both reception and year 6. Obesity prevalence was higher in boys than girls and prevalence for those living in deprived areas was more than double that of those living in the least deprived areas.²²

Recent research into childhood activity from the Gateshead Millennium Cohort Study showed that, contrary to the often held belief that an adequate amount of childhood activity gives way to inactivity in adolescence, “physical activity is in decline in most individuals of both sexes by age 6-7 years in the UK”.²³

The Government published its first Childhood Obesity Strategy in Summer 2016, and it acknowledges the scale of the problem - “with nearly a third of children aged 2-15 overweight or obese, tackling childhood obesity requires us all to take action”.²⁴ The strategy also lays out the cost of not tackling this huge problem: “reducing obesity levels will save lives as obesity doubles the risk of dying prematurely...obese people... are more likely to be living with conditions like depression.... the NHS in England spent £5.1 billion on overweight and obesity-related ill health in 2014/15.”²⁵

It is clear that the Government understands the problem of childhood obesity and the risks it poses to future health and well-being, as well as national finances and productivity. We completely back the Government’s aim to help all children enjoy at least an hour of physical activity every day and support the measures they are taking to increase activity in primary and secondary schools.

However, the adequate provision of playgrounds outside of schools and in local communities will enable children to be even more active. One Canadian study found that “children with a park playground within 1 km [of their home] were almost five times more likely to be classified as being of a healthy weight rather than at risk of being overweight compared to those children without playgrounds in nearby parks.” It concluded that “availability of certain park facilities may play a more important role in promoting physical activity and healthy weight status among children than availability of park space in general.”²⁶

Whilst the Government is right to encourage activity in schools, it should not forget the benefit of free play spaces that encourage children to be active outside of school hours. The closure of public playgrounds, which take away these opportunities to be active, at the same time as we are trying to tackle childhood obesity is counterproductive.

Children with a playground within 1km of their home are **5 TIMES MORE LIKELY** to be of a healthy weight than children who are not near a playground.

21. Cited in SQW, *Play Pathfinders and Playbuilders*, p. 41

22. NHS, *National Child Measurement Programme - England 2015-16*, 3 November 2016, <http://content.digital.nhs.uk/searchcatalogue?productid=23381&q=national+child+measurement+programme>

23. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 13 March 2017, <http://bjsm.bmj.com/content/early/2017/02/05/bjsports-2016-096933>

24. HM Government, *Childhood Obesity - A Plan for Action*, August 2016, www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/546588/Childhood_obesity_2016__2__acc.pdf

25. *ibid.*, p3.

26. Journal of Community Health, *Places to Play: Association of park space and facilities with health weight status among children*, May 2008, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10900-008-9104-x>

WELL-BEING

Play England's literature review into the effect of a lack of play on children's lives cites a 2011 study carried out by Nairn and IPSOS Mori which compared the lives of children in the UK with those in Sweden and Spain. The review states "the research indicates that children in the UK had fewer opportunities for fun outdoor activities compared with the other two countries and that this was a significant contributor towards poor well-being in the UK."²⁷

A recent report by the APPG on a Fit and Healthy Childhood into play highlighted the shocking statistic that in the UK, approximately 20% of children experience mental health illness and studies show that this is rising. The report goes on to say "without adequate access to play, the authors maintain that children are deprived of the opportunity to develop important emotional

skills, leading to an increase in anxiety levels, depression, and feelings of hopelessness, narcissism and even suicide."²⁸

We all want our children to be happy and healthy. This is an area that the Government has shown a keen interest in, with the Prime Minister announcing that every secondary school in the country is being offered mental health first aid training and a review of children and adolescent mental health services.²⁹ We know that more play and activity is not the only response to mental health problems, but its benefits are of such significance that we urge the Government to look at every opportunity to improve the well-being and development of children.

20% OF CHILDREN suffer mental health illness. Without access to play children can't develop important emotional skills.



27 Play England, *A world without play*, p.5.

28. APPG on a Fit and Healthy Childhood, *Play*, p.52, [www.api-play.org/upload/public/news-stories/APPG-Play Report141015.pdf](http://www.api-play.org/upload/public/news-stories/APPG-Play%20Report141015.pdf).

29. No10. Press Release, 9 January 2017, www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-unveils-plans-to-transform-mental-health-support

HOW DO WE STOP THE DECLINE OF PLAYGROUND PROVISION?

The need for play spaces and playgrounds to help reduce childhood obesity and encourage happy children has not diminished, and yet we have seen the funding and provision of these facilities decline. The research we have undertaken shows that councils are actively closing playgrounds in their local areas, meaning that fewer children will have free access to opportunities to play and be active.

As the central government grant to local government is set to be replaced by locally raised revenue by 2020, uncertainty around funding for play provision is likely to continue until the end of the decade. It is likely that the downward trend in playground provision will continue and accelerate.

The simplest way of stopping this decline in playground provision is to invest in upgrading existing structures and providing new ones. Our members advise that, whilst there is obviously a wide range of facilities available and no one-size-fits-all approach to play facilities, the average playground cost for a local authority is approximately £60,000.

To replace the 214 playgrounds that have been closed over the last two years would require investment of only £12.8 million, and to save the 234 playgrounds earmarked for closure would require a further £14 million. This means that an investment of less than £27 million would replace the lost playground provision that our research has uncovered.

There may be some who will ask why more investment is needed in facilities that so recently had a huge cash investment in them.

Whilst the Big Lottery Fund investment of £155 million and the Government's Playbuilder and Play Pathfinder investment of £235 million were indeed significant, they were not solely for the provision of play spaces or physical infrastructure. We need to probe further and discover exactly how much of this funding was spent on physical infrastructure like playgrounds.

Evaluation of the Big Lottery Fund's Children's Play Programme - which did not state the number of additional play spaces they wanted to provide through the investment - found that from the £123 million, around £60 million was capital investment. At the time of the evaluation - November 2011 - the Big Lottery Fund was missing a significant amount of information, with over 200 projects not returning data. From the information they did have they could see that their investment had provided 111 fixed playground developments, 10 sets of mobile play equipment and 8 disability-specific assets. But the majority of the capital funding was spent on acquiring freehold property, and only £1,896,795 was spent on 'equipment'.³⁰

The Play Pathfinders and Playbuilders programmes aimed to deliver 3,500 new or improved play spaces and 30 new adventure playgrounds. However, the interim evaluation report for the programme sadly does not include information on the additionality of playground or play space provision; this was going to be in the final report³¹ which was not produced as the national evaluation of the play programme was ended early.³² A parliamentary question answered in March 2010 showed that 1,152 of the 3,500 playgrounds had been delivered by that time.³³

30. ECORYS, *Children's Play Programme Evaluation*, p. 42

31. SQW, *Play Pathfinder and Play Builders Programme Evaluation*, May 2013, p.93.

32. *ibid.*, p. 107.

33. *Hansard*, 29 March 2010, Col. 752W

So whilst play provision did receive impressive investment from both the Government and third sector bodies ten years ago, the majority of that money was spent on assets and services that go beyond the subject of this report - playground and play spaces provision.

What this research makes clear is that if no interventions are made the number of playgrounds and play spaces in this country will continue to decline. Given the effect this could have on the physical and mental well-being and development of our children, we at the API must make noise and work to prevent this.

We completely support the Government in their plans to get children active for at least an hour a day, and plans included in the childhood obesity strategy to improve and extend activity in schools will hopefully begin to tackle the

problem. But we also strongly encourage the Government to look outside schools and formal sports clubs at other local provision that can improve children's activity levels and recognise that free play opportunities have a key role to play.

The replacement of the lost play provision that this research has revealed is an important first step. However, it cannot address the scale of the problem adequately, given that our research is unlikely to have captured the full extent of playground closures across England, and the continued downward trend in playground provision. Those 'hidden' playgrounds under threat of closure, or the help that local councils require with the maintenance of existing structures, could well be at risk in the future.

If the Government wants to stop the closure of playgrounds and make the provision of free play opportunities part of their plans to tackle childhood obesity, then investment to expand the number of playgrounds and play spaces is key. An additional investment of £100 million could lead to a sizeable increase in the number of facilities that are available for children to access across the country. We estimate that would provide over 1,600 playgrounds and play spaces which is a 10% rise on the number local authorities reported to be running in 2011.³⁴

This investment would be a clear and unequivocal show of support for play and the benefit it brings to young people.

Additional **£100M** to reverse the trend =

1,600 PLAYGROUNDS



34. Fair Play for Children Freedom of Information Survey on Playground Provision in England 2011, www.fairplayforchildren.net/survey1.htm



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The voice of the UK play sector, the Association of Play Industries (API) is the lead trade body for businesses supplying both indoor and outdoor children's play equipment.