# Focus on play

## Play and active travel

**This briefing is for local authority transport, planning, highways, public health and play teams, as well as elected members. It considers how active travel can support children's right to play, and how a strong focus on play can help create walking, wheeling and cycling routes that work better for children, families and communities.**

The briefing supports the Play section of the Placemaking chapter of the *Active Travel Act Guidance*, which encourages a 'Play on the Way' approach. 'Play on the Way' is an approach that advocates for integrating play, in and around walking, wheeling and cycling routes.



## Why play and active travel belong together

Having opportunities to play is a vital part of a healthy and happy childhood. It contributes to children's physical, mental, social and emotional wellbeing and supports their sense of connection to the places where they live. When active travel guidance is implemented with children's play in mind, it can help create neighbourhoods where children are visible, feel welcome and able to enjoy everyday opportunities to play.

Children's opportunities to play are shaped and influenced by the design and management of the public realm. Traffic levels, vehicle speeds, pavement quality, safe crossings, lighting, seating, green infrastructure and access to informal spaces all impact on whether children can go out, meet friends and play close to home.

Children consistently report that outdoor spaces, streets and local neighbourhoods matter to them. Some children describe walking around, spending time with friends, exploring, making dens and using streets or open spaces as part of their everyday play. Others describe barriers, such as fast traffic, feeling unsafe, parked cars, inaccessible paths and adults' concerns. Active travel policy has a direct role in reducing these barriers.

Welsh Government's *Active Travel Act Guidance* provides an important opportunity to think about children's everyday freedom to move around their communities and make the most of their opportunities to play. Welcoming and accessible streets help children stay connected to the places that matter to them. They create incidental opportunities for play and social connection. Bringing planning for play and active travel together can support healthier, more inclusive and more connected neighbourhoods for children.

## International and national play policy

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises every child's right to rest, leisure and play. Children also have the right to express their views in matters that affect them. These rights apply to the whole public realm – not only to designated playgrounds.

As an indication of the significance the United Nations places on children's play it published a General Comment on Article 31. This is an official statement that elaborates on the meaning of an aspect of the UNCRC that requires further interpretation or emphasis. The General Comment notes that children should have: 'an environment sufficiently free from … traffic and other physical hazards to allow them to circulate freely and safely within their local neighbourhoods'.

The General Comment stresses that public planning must place a priority on the creation of environments which promote the wellbeing of the child. To achieve the necessary child-friendly urban and rural environments, consideration should be given to:

'Road traffic measures, including speed limits, levels of pollution, school crossings, traffic lights, and calming measures to ensure the rights of children to play safely'.

In Wales, section 11 of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 places a duty on local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities. The statutory guidance notes that 'in assessing for and creating play friendly communities, local authorities should work to ensure that children are able to move around their communities to play; to walk or cycle to open spaces, play or leisure provision; to visit family and friends or to attend school, without risk of harm'.

The Play Sufficiency Assessments (PSAs), completed by every local authority, considers all factors that contribute to children's access to play or moving around their communities, including:

- traffic calming
- play streets/temporary road closures
- safe walking and cycling routes
- public transport provision
- shared spaces
- parking.

These factors should be assessed for:

- the number of 20 miles per hour (mph) limits in residential areas, their effectiveness in allowing for children to safely play outside and the potential for increasing the number of 20mph limit areas to promote play opportunities.
- the local authority's provision of safe walking and cycle routes and potential for increasing these. This should align with the proposals that are set out in the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013.
- processes for arranging temporary road closures being straightforward and information on these being readily available.

The Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013 requires local authorities to plan and improve networks for walking and cycling and to promote active travel journeys. Taken together, these duties provide a clear opportunity to plan better for children. Planning for transport and play should help children move around, meet others and play close to home. A play, and therefore, child friendly approach, checks not only if a route meets a technical standard, but whether children can use it confidently.

## What children gain from a 'Play on the Way' approach

- **More freedom and independence:** safe and easy to navigate routes can expand the area children are able to explore and use.
- **Everyday physical activity:** walking, wheeling, cycling, rolling and playing along the way build movement naturally into daily life.
- **Connection and belonging:** children meet friends, neighbours and familiar adults, helping them feel part of their neighbourhood.
- **Confidence and resilience:** navigating local routes, making choices and responding to manageable challenges support confidence and competence.
- **Access to play:** connected routes make it easier to reach parks, open spaces, schools, community facilities and informal places to play.
- **A healthier environment:** reducing traffic dominance can improve air quality, reduce noise and make streets more pleasant for everyone.

## What gets in the way?

Children's ability to travel actively is shaped by more than infrastructure. As the *Active Travel Act Guidance* notes, a Ministerial Review of Play considered common barriers:

- speeding traffic, high traffic volumes and unsafe or inconvenient crossings
- disconnected routes that stop before reaching schools, play spaces or neighbourhood destinations
- pavement parking, poor lighting, overgrown vegetation and uneven surfaces
- routes that do not work for disabled children, wheelchair users or families using buggies
- fear of traffic, strangers or criticism of children spending time in public space
- adult-led timetables that leave little time to pause, explore or play
- a focus on the school journey alone, rather than the full range of journeys children make
- limited involvement of children and teenagers in transport and place-making decisions.

## Considerations for creating play-friendly active travel

To make active travel more play friendly, those planning and delivering schemes should ask how proposals will improve children's everyday access to the places and people that support their play. This includes schools, parks, staffed playwork provision, childcare, libraries, community centres, friends' homes, streets, green spaces and informal places where children gather.

- Use Play Sufficiency Assessments and children's engagement evidence when developing Active Travel Network Maps and prioritising investment. Some suggestions:
  - Use local PSAs and action plans to identify where traffic, poor crossings, disconnected routes or inaccessible spaces restrict children's play.
  - Work with partners to involve children and teenagers in decisions about active travel routes, school streets, crossings, speed management, lighting and public spaces.
- Recognise streets as social spaces as well as movement corridors, especially in communities with limited access to gardens or formal play areas.
- Ensure routes are inclusive for disabled children, younger children, teenagers, parents, carers, buggies, wheelchairs and mobility aids.
- Support interventions such as slower speed environments, school streets, filtered permeability, playful walking routes, temporary street closures and access to school grounds outside teaching hours.
- Work across departments so that transport investment also contributes to play sufficiency, public health, community cohesion, climate action and children's rights.

## Creating play-friendly active travel

**The Play section of the Placemaking chapter of the Active Travel Act Guidance reinforces that walking, wheeling and cycling is integral to creating inclusive, accessible and well-connected places rather than as standalone transport options. The principles below apply that place-based approach through a children's rights and play lens.**

### Start with children's everyday lives

Map the journeys children actually make – to school, friends, family, shops, parks, sports, youth provision and informal meeting places. Include evenings, weekends and school holidays, and recognise that children may choose varied or playful routes rather than the shortest one.

### Design connected networks, not isolated schemes

Routes should link homes with the places children value. Safe crossings, low-traffic streets and links through green space can make the difference between a route that exists on a map and one children can genuinely use.

### Make inclusion fundamental

Involve disabled children and families from the outset. Consider gradients, widths, surfaces, resting places, tactile information, sensory needs and the interaction between people walking, wheeling and cycling. Avoid designs that create new barriers.

### Allow time and space to pause

Children need places to stop, sit, talk, watch and play. Planting, changes in level, natural features, robust street furniture and small areas of open space can add interest and play value without prescribing how they must be used.

### Reduce traffic danger at source

Lower speeds, fewer vehicle movements, clear sight lines and convenient crossings support children's freedom more effectively than expecting children to manage hostile conditions. School Streets and other traffic-management approaches can help when they are planned inclusively and monitored carefully.

### Balance benefit and risk

Good design should not remove all challenge or uncertainty. Children benefit from judging speed, distance and movement within environments where serious danger has been reduced. A balanced approach protects children while respecting their growing independence.

### Listening to children

Children are experts in how their neighbourhoods feel and function for them and their opportunities to play. Engagement should be accessible, creative and connected to real decisions. Useful approaches include accompanied walks or wheels, route mapping, photography, model-making, street audits and pop-up activities in places children already use.

Ask children where they go, where they avoid, where they meet friends, what slows them down and what would help them feel more welcome. Include children of different ages and backgrounds, disabled children, children who do not currently travel actively and those living in rural or traffic-dominated communities.

Engagement is not complete until children are told what happened next. Decision-makers should explain what will change, what cannot change and why.

## Play streets: creating space on the doorstep

The Active Travel Act Guidance play section also discusses play streets. Play streets – sometimes called street play – temporarily restrict through-traffic on a residential street so that children can play freely close to home. Volunteer stewards manage the closure points, while residents who need access are guided in or out at walking speed when the street is clear. Parents and carers remain responsible for their own children and the emphasis is on free, unstructured play rather than organised activities.

Play streets can help children become more active, build confidence and get to know their neighbourhood. They can also help adults meet their neighbours, strengthen community connections and demonstrate how streets can function when people, rather than traffic, are given priority.

Although a temporary play street is not an active travel route, it can support the same wider ambition: safer, more welcoming neighbourhoods in which children can walk, wheel, cycle, meet and play. It can also offer a practical way for residents and decision-makers to experience a low-traffic street and build support for longer-term change.

### Making play streets easier to organise

Local authorities can enable resident-led play streets by adopting a clear policy, offering a simple and accessible application process and coordinating highways, play, housing, public health and community teams.

Practical support may include reusable signs and barriers, clear guidance for stewards, help with communicating with neighbours and opportunities to trial a session before committing to a regular programme.

Processes should be proportionate and inclusive. Authorities should consider how children and families living in flats, on busier roads or in communities without an established resident network can also benefit. Play streets should complement – not replace – long-term work to reduce traffic danger and create permanently accessible, child-friendly neighbourhoods.

### Resources to support play streets policies

- **Opening streets for play** – Play Wales' toolkit for local authorities and partners in Wales, with practical tools and templates to support resident-led street play.
- **How to organise playing out sessions on your street** – a Play Wales manual and supporting materials for parents and residents.

## Focusing on the journey

**Play-friendly active travel creates places where children can be active, build relationships and feel that they belong. Well-designed active travel environments can support playful, sociable and healthy childhoods. Slower streets, safe crossings, direct walking and wheeling routes, accessible paths, green infrastructure and welcoming public spaces all help children and families to feel that their neighbourhood belongs to them.**

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