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Designing play into urban environments: strategic-level challenges and best practice in Bradford and Tower Hamlets, UK

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ABSTRACT

Children have a fundamental need to play and be physically active for their health and wellbeing. Cities, enacted through both built environment and strategic policies, have the potential to enhance or restrict urban physically active play. But cities have densification pressures, and space and infrastructural support for children's outdoor play are often a low priority. As part of a project scoping ways to 'design-in' physically active play in two urban areas of England, we report on the strategic challenges and opportunities that shape urban children's outdoor play. Policy analysis and fieldwork capturing the views and experiences of policy stakeholders representing public health, play, greenspaces, inclusion, corporate strategy, and urban design in Tower Hamlets and Bradford demonstrates both the extent of barriers to improving playable spaces and some ways to shift the policy mindset. Recommendations concern the need for effective alignment and coordination across policy areas; to establish cross-departmental collaboration; the development of a robust local evidence base; and the importance of ambitious and motivated stakeholders.

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Introduction

Engaging in regular play and physical activity is vital for children's development, offering extensive benefits ranging from improved physical health to enhanced social skills and mental well-being (Berk *et al.* 2006, Gray 2013, O'Malley and Thivel 2015, Carson *et al.* 2017, Russell and Stenning 2021). Current densification of the built environment, coupled with the lasting impact of lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, means that urban children's wellbeing and physical health is at risk from lack of outdoor play and physical activity (PA). Policymaking in cities plays a crucial role in articulating the needs of its citizens, particularly those who are minoritized through age or disadvantage, often through visions or missions. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets [LBTH], for example, states as part of its 'vision' that 'every child and young person has the best start in life' (Tower Hamlets London Borough Council 2022); this is echoed in Bradford Council's Plan: 'We will help our children to have the best start in life by improving life

chances' (City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council 2019). One critical element of the 'best start' is the habit of being physically active, and for young children, this is most commonly through regular and outdoor play. Councils recognise this through the provision of playgrounds, green spaces, and other facilities, but evidence suggests that children's physical activity (PA) levels remain inadequate. For example, more than half of children in primary school do not achieve the recommended amount of moderate to vigorous PA (Sport England 2023) associated with optimal health and wellbeing. One marker of inactivity is obesity levels among children aged 11 years: at 26% in Bradford and 28% in TH, compared to 23% in England Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2023, rates remain stubbornly high in the two urban areas of focus in this paper.

While in principle, evidence leads to policymaking (Milotay 2018), and the concept of a 'best start' for children is grounded in sound evidence of the wider determinants of health (Strategic Review of Health

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Inequalities in England post-2010 (2010), in practice, policymaking and its implementation is inherently dynamic and subject to political pressures (Milotay 2018). In 2010, the central government abolished the national play strategy that had stimulated the production of local play strategies to promote, support, and facilitate outdoor play opportunities. Once these local strategies came to an end, the expectation from the government was that responsibility for outdoor play would pass on to local communities and volunteers as part of the Big Society programme (Ross 2012). At the same time, local authority budgets were reduced by 40% over the years 2010-2020 (Institute for Government 2020), so freedom to promote non-statutory areas of policy was curtailed. Despite this, some local authorities have pursued strategies designed to improve children's play and PA opportunities to promote their health and wellbeing.

In this paper, we report findings from data collection with policymakers and practitioners in TH and Bradford carried out as part of the NIHR funded Play in Urban Spaces for Health (PUSH) project. The project aims to scope the conditions for implementing a school-based intervention in which school staff regularly take three- to seven-years-old inner-urban children to specific local sites to engage in free play. Inspired by the Forest Schools movement, where immersive regularity of visits to natural green spaces improves social and physical skills (O'Brien and Murray 2006), the project theorised that similar principles could be applied to urban and not necessarily 'green' sites, which might be patches of land destined for regeneration. By consulting with schools, children, parents, and community organisations, PUSH aims to explore how best to introduce a larger scale programme that can be evaluated. The PUSH project is nested within the UKPRP funded (2019-2025) ActEarly programme, a collaboration between universities, the Bradford Institute for Health Research and local authorities to find ways to improve life and life chances for children growing up in Bradford and TH (Wright *et al.* 2019). The data explored in this article was used to provide an understanding of the contextual factors that influence the provision of play

opportunities in Bradford and TH, in preparation for the second phase of the PUSH project which will aim to implement the play intervention described above.

While our two urban places have striking similarities, particularly around the high proportion of South Asian residents and the extent of child poverty, they are also very different. Demographic features of both places compared to the national average are shown in Table 1. This provides an important backdrop to the ways in which play is conceptualised in public policy; for example, the lack of access to designated play spaces disproportionately affects economically disadvantaged, ethnic minority, and migrant families (Allport *et al.* 2019), of which both Bradford and TH have proportionally more than the national average.

By comparing how play is accounted for in the local policies of Tower Hamlets and Bradford, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on urban design for children, offering insights into how cities can overcome barriers and leverage facilitators to create more inclusive, engaging, and health-promoting environments for their youngest residents.

Literature review

Outdoor play in urban areas can improve both children's physical health and mental wellbeing through providing opportunities for physical activity (O'Malley and Thivel 2015, Carson *et al.* 2017, Russell and Stenning 2021) related to the avoidance of chronic diseases in adulthood (Bailey *et al.* 2013). Furthermore, play can support the development of social and cognitive skills (Gray 2013), enabling children to deal with real-life stressors (Berk *et al.* 2006), and may have helped children to deal with the stresses of COVID-19 related lockdowns (Russell and Stenning 2021). However, 70% of children and young people aged 2-18 years are not active enough to maintain their health and wellbeing (Steene-Johannessen *et al.* 2020) which invites further examination of how local and/or national government, through policies and their implementation, can support children's physical activity.

Table 1. Demographic features of Bradford and Tower Hamlets.

	Bradford	Tower Hamlets	England
Population ^{1,2}	546,400	310,000	5,598,000
Population density (people per football pitch) ^{1,2}	11	112	3
Residents born in England (%) ^{1,2}	80.1	51.5	83.2
Non-white ethnicity (%) ^{1,2}	38.9	60.6	18.3
Median age ^{1,2}	36	30	40
Rates of child poverty (%) ³	39.3	47.5	30.8
Childhood obesity levels (%) ⁴	26	28	23

Evidence suggests that the built environment has the potential to improve children's health and well-being through enabling access to high-quality play opportunities. Child-friendly urban design has been shown to increase the time spent in outdoor play (Lambert *et al.* 2019) and to facilitate active travel (Audrey and Fisher 2015, D'Haese *et al.* 2015). Children's physical activity is linked to the accessibility and proximity of activity-promoting destinations (e.g. play, sport and recreation facilities) and public open space and social space (Ortegon-Sanchez *et al.* 2021). Well-designed public space that permits play can promote the development of community ties and social networks, both for adults and children (Worpole and Knox 2007), and, by increasing visibility of children and promoting community cohesion, is important for democracy (Hart 2002). However, existing spaces do not necessarily align with children's self-reported needs for play (Hörschelmann and Van Blerk 2013, Bishop and Corkery 2017) and may be influenced by attitudes which consider that play should be restricted to designated areas such as parks as a means of 'getting children off the street, away from bad influences and under the control of known socialising agents' (Hart 2002). In particular, the perspectives of children with disabilities are often not considered, leading to designated play spaces that are less inclusive (Morgenthaler *et al.* 2023).

Policy that explicitly recognises and plans for children's need for play and PA in urban areas is therefore crucial. In the UK, however, the commitment to play in planning and policy varies. A review of child-friendly planning in the UK noted that 'children are currently most visible through their absence' (Wood *et al.* 2019, p. 6), although acknowledged that this varied across UK nations and local authorities. A lack of coordination between (local) government departments can lead to a fragmented approach to the different aspects of children's lives in policy, delays in policy development and implementation, and insufficient monitoring data for evaluation (Byrne and Lundy 2015).

Competition for space in urban areas is a major challenge for both the development and use of playable spaces. The demand for housing, with over 1.8 million UK families residing in overcrowded conditions and one in eight households lacking a garden (Russell and Stenning 2021, Gemmell *et al.* 2023), often leads to public space (including playable space) losing out to the need to build more homes. Furthermore, factors such as traffic and air pollution mean that it may be unsafe for children to play outdoors even where suitable places exist. These

challenges disproportionately affect economically disadvantaged, ethnic minority, and migrant families, who are more likely to make up the population in these dense urban areas. For example, Somali migrant mothers in Bristol cite inadequate housing, poor access to outside play spaces, and a lack of the knowledge and language skills needed to access services in the UK as barriers to using play spaces (Allport *et al.* 2019).

Despite these challenges, evidence points to several factors that support designing-in children's play in urban spaces. Well-designed housing that includes input from parents, communities, and children can promote existing spaces as places where children can play and parents can connect with each other (Bornat and Ivan-van der Kwaak 2025). Analysing successful examples of play-friendly urban spaces from other cities provides useful information about what works in practice (National Association of City Transportation Officials 2020). For example, Wales' Play Sufficiency Duty (PSD) recognises play as a fundamental right for children following Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989) and is a legislative requirement that obliges local authorities in Wales to assess and secure sufficient opportunities for children to play within their local areas (Wood *et al.* 2019). Studies examining the impact of the PSD indicate positive outcomes in improving the quality, accessibility, and diversity of children's play (Russell *et al.* 2019). Policy alignment at the national and local levels ensured that the importance of play was recognised, supported by the involvement of 'committed individuals who had the motivation, passion, experience, knowledge and authority to instigate, inspire and maintain partnership working' (Russell *et al.* 2020). An organisational culture that was open to possibilities and responsive to opportunities that arose was essential. A consistent and dedicated source of funding was recommended to ensure commitment to the PSD, and research on specific neighbourhoods was recommended to ensure that the needs of local children were sufficiently addressed.

If the benefits associated with play, such as improved public realm, align with initiatives in other areas, such as the economy, sustainability, housing, and crime, local authorities may be further incentivised to implement child-friendly planning and policy. For example, Rotterdam has invested significantly in child-friendly planning and design, as the municipality views this as a means of attracting and retaining families as an economic goal; and Ghent considered a child-friendly city as one where green spaces, clean

air, and fewer cars would contribute to environmental targets (Gill 2019). Design that engages and connects all stakeholders across local authority departments, such as transport, parks, health, and housing, is key, as they can provide local context and detail on their own usage of public space (National Association of City Transportation Officials 2020).

Ensuring that plans are long-term and sustainable, including for maintaining designated play spaces, is crucial. At the design stage, creating opportunities for play in existing infrastructure rather than creating new parallel structures is likely to support long-term maintenance (Hassinger-Das *et al.* 2018). Initial community engagement and the involvement of all stakeholders is likely to support effective measurement and maintenance of child-friendly spaces (National Association of City Transportation Officials 2020).

Methods

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and approached via email. They included a diverse range of policymakers and practitioners whose role influenced children's play and physical activity, nine from Bradford and seven from TH. This included those involved in urban planning and regeneration ($n = 6$), public health ($n = 3$), and children and family services from local authorities and community organisations ($n = 7$) across Bradford and TH. Quotes from interviewees are labelled according to the local authority for example, B1 is Bradford participant 1. Exact job roles have not been provided alongside participant labels as these roles are unique enough that participant anonymity would be compromised.

Semi-structured interview guides were developed (Appendix 1), and online interviews were conducted between April and September 2023 by ER and AS to explore the perceptions of participants regarding barriers and facilitators to play in urban areas. Topics explored in the interviews included participants' knowledge of policies that reference play and physical activity and their implementation; the importance that was placed on play and physical activity in their role; any relevant recent projects implementing borough policy; and current barriers and facilitators to designing in play and physical activity into urban spaces.

Each participant was interviewed once for approximately 60 min. Interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were imported into NVivo to facilitate thematic analysis. Codes were developed collaboratively by the research team through an induction process as we familiarised

ourselves with the data, and the interview data was coded by three researchers. The final thematic structure was reviewed and agreed upon by the research team, with any discrepancies being resolved through discussion.

Searches of publicly available policy documents were conducted at the same time, forming another strand of the work for the PUSH project, aiming to provide an overview of where play is positioned in local policy. Where relevant, these have been included with interview findings to provide context.

Ethical approval for the research was given by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee (REC1787 (March 2023)). All participants were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence via written information sheets. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

Findings

Structural constraints impacting play policy

Financial and staffing constraints

Financial challenges formed a key backdrop to the development and implementation of play policy in both Bradford and TH. External factors including inflation, the cost-of-living crisis, and an extended period of austerity had left Bradford local authority with a financial shortage. One participant described how '*... the public sector's budgets up here have halved. We're in year 14-15 of... what was announced as a 10-year austerity program, we're still in it. It's getting deeper*'. [B5] Priority was given to funding statutory services and immediate needs, such as the police and housing benefits, over play. One participant described the '*hierarchy of needs around pure survival, you know, cost of living crisis, climate change*' [B12]. For example, insufficient funding had compromised the ability of the local authority to develop and maintain designated play spaces in Bradford. There was '*a recognition of a lack of green space in that area and the need for it [but] just no money to do even the most basic stuff*'. [B12]

TH council has also faced significant financial constraints, although according to one participant, maintenance of designated play spaces had been managed well by the Parks department despite budget challenges. Again, a lack of funding led to play being deprioritised. One participant described how a potential solution to this was to use funding for

sport for children's play, explaining how '*public health has done well to put funding into projects that are about physical activity, so we can turn it into play. A lot of that [funding] is sport*'. [TH5] Another participant suggested that including play in policy would alleviate funding constraints long term, referring to an example from Hackney, another London borough. The play lead there had conducted a '*cost analysis*' that funding play would '*avoid additional costs elsewhere*', through the provision of food and support for parents. She explained that:

If a child was coming to an adventure playground, having some food, you know, chatting to adults, bit of support for the family elsewhere through safeguarding, it was maybe keeping some kids out of care and supporting the family. [TH1]

This was echoed by another participant from TH, who felt that designing-in play was '*a sensible thing to do in a borough where child obesity rates are some of the highest in the country*', as it would alleviate some of the '*financial pressure*' on public services, as increased opportunities for play would lead to better health outcomes for children [TH6].

In Bradford, limited workforce capacity meant that staff were less able to influence planning applications and other play projects. Participants reported difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified and experienced professionals, leading to a loss of project-specific knowledge.

We're taking [landscape architect] students straight on from university with no experience. It's, we're taking people in, but ... it takes our time away to train them and to nurture them and, we can't do everything. [B3]

... baby boomers all about to quit, and there is nobody underneath with the skill set. [B3]

It was felt that overstretched departments were therefore limited in their ability to address inequality in relation to children's health and wellbeing, due to insufficient staff capacity and funding, despite there being some presence of play in policy.

... every child should have somewhere to play within a certain distance, you know, there's stats there. But what, what are we doing about that? Nothing because we don't have the funds. We don't have the manpower, but actually we've got the policy stuff there. We should be doing it. [B4]

A general labour shortage was also perceived to be impacting upon the ability to deliver playable space projects, resulting in part from the effects of Brexit and

the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant described how manpower had dwindled in recent years:

There's less people, you'd have six people working on those sites, an average site in the scheme, you've now got two. Genuinely it's quite shocking. [B3]

Housing density and competition for space

In TH, a housing shortage meant that land in the borough was often preferred for the construction of new homes rather than community or designated play space. One participant described the '*pressure to build housing*' that led to a '*constant kind of challenge between building up housing and keeping enough like green and open space and amenity space and play space*'. [TH4]. Another participant felt that this pressure on public space was exacerbated by a lack of clarity over land ownership, describing a '*patchwork*' of council stock, private landlords, and housing associations that were responsible for development and community spaces [TH1]. This posed a challenge for the identification of suitable sites for the development of designated play spaces.

Evidence base

In both TH and Bradford, robust local evidence to support the development and activation of outdoor spaces was lacking. Participants in Bradford suggested that evidence of impact on children would support requests for funding and gain community buy-in. Demonstrating that an increase in outdoor play would lead to better academic performance or health and wellbeing outcomes would be a '*way of getting different communities on board*'. [B11] Another participant explained that having such data would be instrumental in writing bids and creating projects involving play [B4]. At the time of the interviews, an evaluation of the impact of co-produced designated play spaces on children's use of parks and physical activity was being implemented by an external organisation, however it required significant staffing resources and training, making it potentially unsustainable. The need to evaluate play street interventions was also highlighted.

Unlike in Bradford, some participants in TH felt that there was a lack of examples of good practice of how to design-in play from a policy and strategy viewpoint. This was described as the '*imagination challenge*' by one participant [TH6], who felt that this was a key barrier to designing in play and physical activity. It was suggested that a facilitator here would be learning from other London boroughs.

Implementation factors

Policy alignment

The positioning of play in policy, including plans, visions, and strategic documents, influenced the designing-in of play in both boroughs. In TH, policies across several departments referenced play. The most prominent was the multi-sector Tower Hamlets Play Charter, which set out a borough-wide '*commitment of principles around what we wanted to see in play*', [TH3] according to one participant. The Play Charter was viewed as a facilitator by several participants. For example, it enabled support from a more senior level for the childhood healthy weight broader strategy, as it positioned play and physical activity as a strategic priority. However, the Charter lacked specific aims and objectives, or funding, for increasing the volume and quality of play opportunities. One participant described the Charter as nothing more than '*a collection of catchphrases*' [TH1] without a concrete plan. A similar sentiment was acknowledged by another participant.

Regarding wider policy, at the time of the interviews play was only briefly mentioned in the Tower Hamlets Local Plan, for example, policies requiring tall building developments to include high-quality communal open spaces and play areas and promoting the enhancement and expansion of child play spaces in school extensions and new educational facilities (London Borough of Tower Hamlets 2020). Play was referenced in other policies, such as the Tower Hamlets Parks and Open Spaces Strategy (London Borough of Tower Hamlets 2017), a partnership with Sport England, which acknowledged the need for open spaces while identifying barriers to play, such as rapid population growth and design challenges. We found little evidence in the public realm of examples of how these policies and plans were enacted, such as project documentation referencing these policies, and there was little reference to specific policies in interviews.

According to participants in TH, several play-related projects were taking place in the Department of Public Health. In public health policy, as well as in the Play Charter, play was viewed as a means of addressing the borough's child healthy weight targets. In some ways, this acted as a facilitator by attaching play to an existing important policy priority. However, situating play primarily as a means of tackling childhood obesity may contribute to a lack of understanding and consensus across departments around the meaning and implementation of quality play. In several policies, play was often used interchangeably or in conjunction with physical

activity, leading to concerns that the benefits of play itself were not recognised or valued. Several participants highlighted the need for a clear definition of quality play with evidence of its value to guide decision makers and developers in the designing-in of quality playable spaces for children:

I think a lot of time play gets sort of confused with physical activity and they use the terms interchangeably. So although play is mentioned in some of these strategies, I don't know how deeply they understand what it is that we that we're saying. [TH3]

In Bradford, play is more present in policy and strategy. The Core Strategy Development (CSD) plan (City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council 2017) and Local District Plan 2020–2038 (LDP) (City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council 2019) both refer to the importance of play and daily activity for children's health and well-being. The Bradford Economic Strategy 2018–2030 viewed increasing opportunities for play as part of a strategy of ensuring sustainable economic growth which would meet '*this generation's needs without compromising those of future generations*' (Bradford Economic Strategy, 2018–2030). Many of Bradford's Local District Plan key principles for healthy places specifically relate to opportunities for play. This includes increasing and improving urban greenspace and green infrastructure, requiring a variety of activities and uses for all ages and abilities, and the support of a robust maintenance strategy. Providing appropriate and varied play opportunities for different ages is also supported through the Healthy Cities Integrated Action Plan and the Playable Spaces strategy, which aim to ensure that designated play spaces address any inequalities of provision, are sustainable and achieve positive health outcomes for children, and that play spaces for young children are close to home. Creating a child-friendly environment with high-quality spaces to play and be physically active is a priority within the Children and Young People's strategy 2023–2025 (City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council 2022) and the district's physical activity strategy (Active Bradford 2024). The principle of play is referenced in 'Homes and Neighbourhoods – A Guide to designing in Bradford' stating that housing developments should provide '*a variety of safe and accessible play spaces and facilities which are soft, green, inspiring and educational*' (Planning and Transport Strategy 2020). THE SEND accessibility strategy for children and young people refers to play-based activities which support tactile learning for visually impaired children. The Transport policy supports the principle of outdoor

play through creating safer streets and facilitating active travel.

Bradford interviewees described the city's commitment to play across departments, reflecting the emphasis on play in policy. One participant described how the consideration of play was '*in people's DNA*', and another explained how play within placemaking was central:

So the environments that we create, whether they're working with schools, or looking at inner city areas, and, you know, providing better environments, whether it's just something really simple like just walking to school, or, you know, identifying a plot of land and improving it for wider community. Everything that we do, delivers on the city's plan and its aspirations as a district to have better lives for its citizens. So, you know, placemaking is at the heart of that, really. [B4]

However, interviewees in both TH and Bradford reported that competing priorities within and between departments could hinder play in local policy. In TH, funding constraints often placed play initiatives below other areas, such as housing or crime. One participant identified that practical issues such as having safe routes for police may conflict with play space development because play is not a statutory requirement that must be considered across departments. In Bradford, despite the presence of play in many policy areas, a historical lack of focus on children's play led transport and housing developments to prioritise moving vehicles and housing density over playable space.

So we've got highway standards, for example, which are all about ... ensuring safety for pedestrians and vehicles - but they are based on making sure there's enough space for vehicle movements and to accommodate all the vehicles that are there, and being enough spaces to park. And that raises challenges around trying to incorporate child play space as well. [B2]

The standard house builders just think about where cars go and they've got a set way of doing things which is not to see the street as a play space, but to make sure that there's enough car parking spaces. And that is that is paramount in their mind to the extent that sometimes where people walk is, is not as important as where they drive and especially storing the cars. [B9]

In TH, political controversies were undermining play as a policy agenda. Low-traffic neighbourhoods, schemes which limit motor vehicle traffic in residential streets (Dudley *et al.* 2022), were facing significant opposition from some borough residents, including

the mayor, in favour of policies supporting motorists. Several interviewees felt that this opposition was misjudged and that it would negatively impact projects designed to make the borough more child-friendly in the future, such as '*school streets*' and '*play streets*'.

My personal opinion with all this fighting about the low traffic neighbourhoods, including one round the corner, which the new mayor is adamant he's going to rip them all out, completely flies in the face of improving the borough for children. [TH1]

There's quite a lot of discussion at the moment about our school streets and a kind of feeling or belief that, there's a good proportion of residents that aren't supportive of some of the road closures that we've introduced. I guess that's a conflict around kind of the right for car users to drive where they'd like, versus kind of closing roads to support play. [TH3]

Despite these challenges, interviewees in both areas identified key facilitators to implementing play through policy. In TH, the Play Charter Working Group, a network of professionals working in play within and outside of the council, has been key in addressing the fragmentation of play policy and services. Projects have included the development of Play Streets in collaboration with London Play and an inclusive play project to increase accessibility of play spaces for children with SEND, both of which included elements of community consultation. This collaboration represents a key facilitator in linking play professionals across the borough. Collaboration between departments was also viewed as a key facilitator in Bradford to promote play and physical activity and mitigate the effects of competing priorities.

More collaboration ... [between] the departments that hold the land, like assets, estates, public health, you know, working together because there's a lot of work going on in public health and economic development in estates, but need to just make sure it's all linked and connected and that everybody's on the page. [B4]

The drafting of the new Local Plan in TH, under development at the time of the interviews, was viewed as an opportunity to address the current plan's lack of attention to play, which would '*affect the design of our borough in the future*' and that therefore '*getting that right is really important*'. [TH3] Several participants underscored the need for a long-term vision for play strategies, requiring sustained commitment of local policymakers to ensure adequate quality play provision, something they felt was currently lacking. Furthermore, enlisting the support of local elected

officials and senior figures in the council was described as an essential facilitator for raising the profile of play.

Policy levers in planning and development

Planning and development were key areas where the use of policy levers and regulation was identified as a means of mitigating the effect of competing priorities. A need was identified in TH to require developers to prioritise the quality of playable space over quantity; developers were under pressure to achieve certain targets for housing, and this may have led to a lack of attention to community amenities. A participant from the urban design team of LBTH explained that delivering enough housing on its own was not sufficient, and that development must include other facilities such as playable spaces to support communities.

Space and housing will always win, you know, and then each time we build more housing, where do the children, and you know, parents and then elderly people and you know, anybody that wants to meet their neighbours? Where do they do that? [TH1]

For designated play spaces specifically, this pressure sometimes caused them to be put in places that participants felt were inappropriate, such as on rooftops or next to polluted roads. These spaces were described as '*token*' play spaces that developers felt the need to '*fit in*' without considering the quality of the play produced by these spaces. One respondent questioned developers' commitment to quality play:

When [developers] show something as play space, is it play space or are you just showing it as play space to hit a quantum? [TH2]

A further barrier was that incidental play areas, which provided opportunities to play when travelling through or around developments, were not counted as play space under planning regulations. They were therefore not counted towards developer targets for play spaces. However, one participant thought that developers would continue to implement incidental play as it '*was just good design*'. [TH2]

Similarly, in Bradford, planning policy stipulated the amount and type of playable spaces needed for new housing developments. However, it was not easily enforceable. Participants felt that profit from maximising the number of new homes on a site often took precedence over the construction of safe and appealing playable spaces. Plans for playable spaces were therefore often either downgraded or omitted, especially for developments in more

deprived communities. One participant felt that developers often viewed these spaces as 'nice to haves' or 'extras' instead of recognising their importance [B5]. Another respondent described how this could disproportionately affect lower-income neighbourhoods:

It potentially puts an extra cost on developers, or it potentially takes up more space, so potentially affects the amount of homes you can get on the site. In parts of Bradford, particularly the parts where we need these sort of spaces the most, in the urban neighbourhoods, those are also the areas where economic viability of development is most marginal and vulnerable. [B2]

Currently, Bradford's public health team play an important role (where staff capacity permits) in reviewing planning proposals at the pre-application stage to '*shape things as early as possible*', supporting applicants to include playable spaces that are safe and of suitable quality. One participant described the elements of play spaces that they would look for to support applicants:

... thinking about all age play, centrally located, so it's got good surveillance, parents feel competent in it, it's linked to social space within developments as well, so the parents can have somewhere to sit and watch. So those are the sorts of comments that we put in at pre-application stage when we hope we can actually influence that so that there is ... the right kind of provision and it will be used and become a key feature. [B5]

An example of a positive development of the use of policy levers is Bradford's current development of a design code following the introduction of the National Model Design code (2021). This aims to deliver better quality spaces to improve health and wellbeing outcomes, with play and 'placemaking' as a focus. This has involved the transport, public health and active travel teams as well as external housing developers. Unlike the planning guidance for designing high-quality homes and neighbourhoods, the codes are intended to be mandatory for housing developments to provide opportunities for safe, inclusive, high-quality play, with 'doorstep play' spaces for young children, 'play on the way' features for toddlers along active travel routes and social 'spaces for girls' on larger open spaces. They will also ensure that the maintenance of spaces is planned and budgeted for.

Despite the lack of similar plans, strengthening play in planning regulations was identified as a facilitator that would also support designing-in quality playable spaces in TH. One participant felt that current design policies needed to '*go further and actually challenge developers on what good play ... we should be saying*

within those policies that public realm should be designed for all, but in a way that can encourage play'. [TH2]

The role of key stakeholders

Alongside the presence of play in policy, key stakeholders have been instrumental in designing in play and physical activity despite the challenges faced by both areas. In TH, the recent appointment of a programme manager for play within the Public Health department, whose role is to increase the play offer and decrease health inequalities in the borough, has acted as a key facilitator to promote play through alignment with departmental priorities across the borough. One participant described the collaborative and flexible nature of this position:

You've always got to try and use what you're doing and try and fit it in with the strategies and what is important to the mayor and whatever their priorities are. So it's always a good idea to go through their documents and find out what it is they're trying to do and see where you can ... work play in ... So it's about just trying to find the right hooks because within the council, things change pretty rapidly all the time, so there could be a new strategy tomorrow that comes out with something else, but it's about staying flexible and making sure that we think about play and the way it can fit into there. [TH4]

In Bradford, many participants expressed strong beliefs about the importance of creating safe spaces for children to play to support their health, wellbeing and development. For one participant in particular, their motivation and drive influenced their ability to overcome challenges around funding and to make a difference to the local community. She described the need to '*look at the positive*', and expressed that '*I don't let the fact that we don't have money stop us from working on things*'. [B4] Her use of policy was key; she explained how she tried to '*use policy to enforce why we need to do something. You know, a lot of things I get involved in, it's not my job, for example, it's not our job. But actually, it is our job, because if we're trying to create a prosperous district, it should be something that we're working on*' [B4]

Many participants had the knowledge to make urban spaces playful, including moving away from traditional play equipment to enable less prescriptive play and playable travel routes, such as: '*... climbing nubbles and stuff like that just to help and, or a little tree swing or, you know, just really kind of basic stuff, a bit of hopscotch on the floor*' [B1], '*... soft perma-graphics on tarmac, just patterns on the tarmac that*

encourage children to play, or maybe variations in the routes, with elements to climb on or walk on' [B2], or '*an intriguing boulder that's got a really nice design sandblasted into it. Children exploring it and jumping on and off it*' [B5]. This knowledge was key in their promotion of play.

The voluntary sector and the community outreach arms of housing associations played an important role in the delivery of play in both TH and Bradford. In TH, one participant described how the Play Association Tower Hamlets (PATH) worked with LBTH to develop a play policy in 2005. PATH was disbanded due to financial constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic and the policy abandoned, and this participant felt that LBTH had been '*particularly resistant*' [TH1] to developing a new play strategy. However, the Play Charter Working Group has begun to fill this gap in recent years. The group was identified by several participants as a facilitator due to its ability to bring the council and the voluntary sector together.

External organisations have played a key role in the delivery of play in Bradford as well, through providing funding for the development of public spaces, improving access to spaces, or creating safer streets. Examples of this include funding from Sport England (through the Local Delivery Pilot JU:MP, focused on children's physical activity), Active Travel England, and Transforming Cities (provided through the West Yorkshire Combined Authority). Where funding is allocated to address issues of climate change through urban regeneration, the landscaping element has considered play within the design.

In partnership with Bradford Council's landscape design team, knowledge, funding, capacity, and expertise from external organisations have enabled policy for the development and activation of community-led playable spaces in built-up urban areas of Bradford. For example, the JU:MP programme within Born in Bradford⁵ influenced the recent children and young people's strategy through ensuring play and physical activity was embedded at the same level of importance as tackling child obesity, and connected organisations engaged in children's play. One participant explained how partners, such as JU:MP were able '*to deliver, to agitate, to path find and to do what we can't do*', and described how this had resulted in '*physical changes... from street level, to large parks and green spaces*'. [B3]

Other examples include design guidance from Make Space for Girls, a group which campaigns for parks and public spaces to be better designed for girls and young women (Make Space for Girls), being

incorporated into the Bradford Design code, with the local police being involved in developing this. National organisations such as Play England and Playing Out were influencing the piloting of initiatives such as 'play streets' and 'school streets' with the aim of learning from these to subsequently develop policy.

This partnership working has enabled two-way knowledge transfer and capacity building. Knowledge shared by local research institutions through partnerships enabled professionals involved in planning to highlight the importance of supporting children's play in business cases: '*when I'm talking to somebody about money, and about investing in a space ... I can use those statistics, I can tell them the difference it will make to their lives*'. [B4] One participant felt that input from partnership organisations shifted the focus of the local play strategy away from traditional playground in parks to children's right to play in all outdoor spaces: '*so I think that then broadened the discussion away from just equipped play to thinking more broadly about play so open play, natural play, you know, child's right to play*' [B5]. The partnership has worked both ways; one participant described how working together to design and deliver new play spaces had upskilled a community engagement worker from an external organisation, enabling them to influence other green space projects.

Discussion of strategic-level challenges and best practice

Both TH and Bradford faced substantial challenges to designing play into urban environments. Over the past decade, budget reductions resulting from prolonged austerity have heavily impacted the ability of local authorities to prioritise and maintain playable spaces. In both boroughs, the lack of funding had led to a deprioritisation of play in favour of more immediate needs, such as housing and policing. Where play was included in policy, it was sometimes as an add-on to other areas rather than as a priority in its own right. Particularly in TH, there was a lack of alignment and coordination between different council departments which dealt with play, resulting in fragmented approaches to policy development and implementation.

Despite these challenges, some key facilitators have emerged. The alignment of play initiatives with public health goals has proven effective, particularly in TH, where the role of the program manager for play within the Public Health Department has been instrumental in promoting play in the borough. The positioning of this role within Public Health suggests that the borough may primarily consider play as a health issue.

Whilst the role of play in other policy areas, such as housing and education, should not be ignored, this position has proven instrumental in coordinating professionals both within and outside the council. Whilst Bradford is working towards becoming a '*better district for children and young people to grow up in*' (City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council 2024), through its Child Friendly initiative, the role of the programme lead is diverse, and not solely focused on supporting children's play and physical activity.

Strong collaboration between departments and external organisations has also been a key facilitator in Bradford, with entities, such as Sport England and Active Travel England providing essential funding, capacity, and expertise for community engagement through the JU:MP project, enabling the development of playable spaces that also meet broader planning and public health objectives.

Both the barriers and the facilitators to the development of quality play provision for children in Bradford and TH align with those identified in previous research. The literature highlights several barriers, such as financial constraints (Russell *et al.* 2020), competition for space (Russell and Stenning 2021, Gemmell *et al.* 2023), and lack of coordination between government departments (Byrne and Lundy 2015), which are consistent with the findings in both cities. The presence of motivated stakeholders and the integration of play into public health agendas are significant facilitators identified in the literature and have also been crucial in promoting play on a strategic level in Bradford and TH. The role of external organisations in providing funding and expertise, as well as strong community involvement, aligns with the National Association of City Transportation Officials (2020) on the importance of partnerships and community engagement for successful play initiatives. Recent research on child-friendly cities identifies a lack of staffing, expertise, and a local evidence base as barriers to the development of child-friendly cities (Cordero-Vinueza *et al.* 2025).

Limitations

Several limitations of this research should be acknowledged. The research focused on policy and practice in Bradford and TH, meaning that the findings may not be generalisable to other localities. Snowball sampling was used, meaning that participants were often known to each other. Whilst this has advantages in finding participants, it may mean that some perspectives have been missed. This could lead to an incomplete understanding of the policy landscape and the factors

influencing playable space design. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that the dynamic nature of policy-making, which is often subject to political pressures and changes in priorities, means that the findings represent a snapshot in time. Future changes in political leadership, economic conditions, and public health priorities could significantly alter the landscape of urban play space design.

Recommendations for good practice

Findings from this research provide evidence that can support good practice in the integration of playable spaces in policy in other localities. Effective integration of play into urban environments requires alignment and coordination across several policy areas. In both Bradford and TH, there were instances of the inclusion of play in public health, urban planning and development, and green space policies. However, a lack of a national driver and statutory regulation around child-focused built environments and provision of play likely impacted the implementation of these, with the responsibility falling to those ambitious and motivated key stakeholders. National statutory guidance could help overcome the current issue of prioritising space for homes over play within housing developments. This would complement Bradford's design code (under development) which will seek to introduce mandatory requirements for new developments, including the provision of a range of high-quality and inclusive opportunities for play.

Additionally, the lack of a unified approach may lead to fragmented efforts. One of the core recommendations of the Children's Alliance Plan for Play, a report making the case for an increased presence of play in children's lives, is to establish cross-departmental collaboration '*to examine ways in which Inter Departmental working and policy alignment where appropriate can involve play as a tool to facilitate social cohesion and improve mental and physical health outcomes for the increasingly diverse communities in the UK*' (Clark *et al.* 2023). The Play Charter Working Group in TH is a welcome example of this which has begun to connect practitioners and policymakers working in play across the borough. Other localities should ensure that different bodies both within and outside the council are aligned in their efforts to increase play provision in policy and its enactment.

Second, the development of a robust local evidence base is key to ensure that play is treated as a priority. Collecting data on the current provision of playable spaces, and the use and outcomes of designated play

spaces can provide valuable insights into inequalities in access, what works, where improvements are needed, and the benefits for children's health and wellbeing. This could help alleviate concerns over funding; evidence from other boroughs suggests that adequately funding children's play and physical activity supports long-term economic outcomes. Evidence from other boroughs could also alleviate the concerns of drivers around the closure of streets for children's play, thus increasing political will for this type of scheme.

The knowledge and ambition of key stakeholders in Bradford has been instrumental in moving away from traditional playground designs that typically come with high maintenance costs. It is therefore important that those involved in planning and urban design receive appropriate training to allow them to reimagine how built environments could be more child-focused and incorporate low-cost, low-maintenance playable elements.

The expertise and capacity of external partners to support the creation of new and improved co-designed play spaces in Bradford has limited sustainability, and there is a need for educational and professional development pathways of those involved in planning and designing the built environment to incorporate meaningful and participatory approaches for engaging children and young people in projects. Project timescales must also allow for sufficient on-going community involvement.

Recommendations for future research

This study contributes to current understandings of the interplay between policy and practice in the field of children's play in urban design. It reaffirms the need for a child-friendly perspective to underpin planning in cities. The systems approach undertaken, with evidence gathered from both written policy and key stakeholders working across diverse fields related to play, calls attention to both the multi-factorial responsibilities to implement opportunities for children's quality play in urban spaces, and the very important role of embedded policy implementation, across all local authority departments, with constant iteration through policy priorities. Future research could usefully investigate the mechanisms by which play can be implemented through policy, with more robust local evidence needed to support the development and activation of outdoor spaces. Research that promotes the involvement of children's own voices in the development of policy that concerns them is essential.

Notes

1. Office for National Statistics 2023b.
2. Office for National Statistics 2023a.
3. Stone 2023.
4. Local Authority Health Profiles (2023).
5. JU:MP is a Sport England funded Local Delivery Pilot in Bradford focused on improving children's physical activity through taking a 'whole systems approach': focusing beyond individual behaviour, and influencing policy, local organisations, and the built and social environment which enable and hinder children's physical activity behaviours.

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Appendix 1. Interview topic guide

Local authority policy

- (1) Can you please tell me about your role within the Local Authority/your organization?
- (2) We are really interested in the extent to which play and physical activity are thought about during policymaking. Can you give me any examples of that?
- (3) How would you assess the importance of play and physical activity in your department's policies/policies relevant to your role? Explore relevant local policies and LA priorities and role of department/unit in the play and physical activity space.
- (4) Can you tell me about your role in implementing the borough's play and physical activity priorities?
- (5) We are developing the idea of integrating play into the built environment in urban areas, so 'designing-in play'. Do you think this idea aligns with local policies? Explore relevant policies/work of the department.
- (6) What might the barriers be?
- (7) Are there evidence gaps in relation to children's outdoor play?

- (8) What do you think should be done in relation to policy, if anything, to ensure all parts of the council promote play and physical activity?

Implementation of policies

- (1) [Taking one of the key policies mentioned above]. How is this currently influencing children's play and physical activity?
- (2) What would you say are the borough's achievements in relation to promoting play and physical activity in the last few years?
- (3) Can you talk me through one project done at scale? How was it successful in designing in play and physical activity in built up environments. Who were the key actors involved, roles and relationships, implementation and decision-making process, time taken to implement policy, evidence of impact.
- (4) What are some of the current challenges to designing in-play and physical activity into urban spaces in Bradford/Tower Hamlets?
- (5) What characteristics/features of an urban space are important for designing in play in built-up areas to promote play and physical activity?