



## Play in Urban Spaces for Health [PUSH]: Designing play into urban environments for health and wellbeing

### What we already know

- Urban children's well-being and physical health are at risk from a lack of outdoor play and physical activity
- Child-friendly urban design has been shown to increase time spent in outdoor play
- Child health in urban areas shows distinct disadvantages, suggesting that successful interventions to raise levels of physically active play are needed, especially for young children

### What PUSH brings

Play in Urban Space for Health (PUSH) is a place-based research project that aims to improve physical activity levels among young children through outdoor play within urban settings. A feasibility study was conducted in two contrasting but comparable urban local authorities -**Bradford** and **Tower Hamlets** -to develop and explore a whole-systems outdoor play intervention. This involves primary schools regularly taking children aged 4 to 7 to a dedicated urban space for unstructured, active play, to create habitual behaviour.

### Key findings from our research in Bradford and Tower Hamlets



Policy environments support active play initiatives, particularly in high-density areas where many families lack outdoor space.



Regeneration sites near primary schools offer potential for integrating play into urban spaces, aligning with local authority priorities.



PUSH is a feasible and promising intervention for improving children's health and wellbeing, with strong support from Schools, Families and Community groups

### Recommendations to improve children's access to play

1

**Prioritise play** in urban planning – Integrate play-friendly spaces into regeneration projects, ensuring accessibility for all children, including those with special needs.

2

**Embed play** into the curriculum – Align play initiatives like PUSH with learning objectives to enhance acceptability and maximise educational benefits.

3

**Support school** led play interventions – Provide resources and guidance for schools to incorporate off-site play while addressing concerns.

4

**Address barriers** in high-density areas – Develop innovative solutions to create play opportunities in areas with limited green space. Change community attitudes to outdoor play.

# Barriers and Facilitators to Play in Urban Areas



## Barriers to play



Structural and financial constraints, austerity, workforce shortages, competing policy priorities, enforcement challenges, and balancing quality vs. quantity in play spaces



Concerns over time constraints in the school day and safety risks of taking children off-site



Safety concerns (crime, dog attacks, poorly lit areas), lack of diverse and stimulating play spaces, poor maintenance, and limited accessibility for children with SEND.  
Insufficient capability to engage in and support child-led play.  
Community intolerance of children playing out and making noise

*"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."*  
Tower Hamlets Stakeholder

*...from three o'clock, it's teenagers' space, the benches are their space, the corners are their space. You fear, I won't take my children there past a certain time, especially in the winter, because they're in groups. They're loud and there's fights"*  
[Parent]



## Facilitators to play



Cross-sector collaboration, integration of play into broader policy strategies, and external funding enabling community-focused initiatives.



Strong alignment with school ethos, anticipated benefits for children's health, social skills, and engagement, and greater acceptability when integrated with the curriculum.



Urban spaces that are easy for families to access, and are designed to support and encourage inclusive and safe child-led unstructured play.  
Community support for play, community ownership and 'policing' of outdoor spaces.

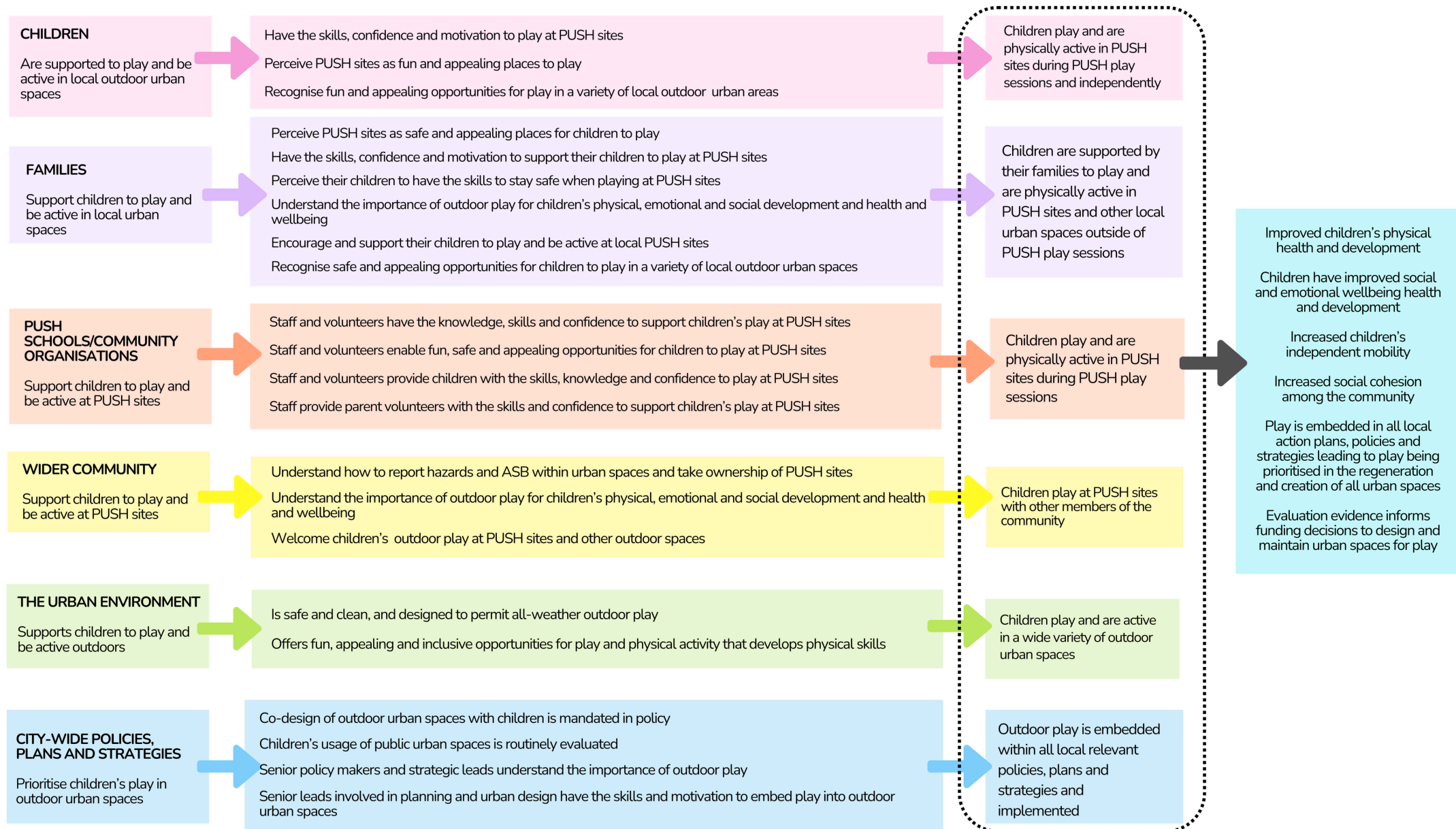
*...that opportunity [PUSH] would undoubtedly then impact on how they interact with each other in the classroom and how they're able to apply themselves to their work or projects together"*  
[Headteacher]

*I think they miss the range from five to 10 year olds, ...I just find there's nothing for children at that age, nothing.. It doesn't have to be a swing and a slide..., they can just use their imagination."*  
[Parent]

# PUSH Intervention Theory of Change

We used a systems-wide approach to explore how play can be better supported in urban neighbourhoods. This meant listening to children, families, schools, community residents, and policy teams.

Bringing their experiences together with existing evidence, we created a Theory of Change—a visual map showing how the right conditions, resources, and relationships can lead to healthier, more active lives for young children.



Creating lasting change through PUSH requires collaboration across a wide network of people and organisations. Schools play a central role by embedding regular outdoor play into the school day. Local authorities - particularly departments for planning, regeneration, and children's services - are essential for designing and maintaining accessible and playable urban spaces. Parents and carers support the intervention by encouraging children to participate and shaping what works locally. Community organisations help connect families to local spaces and activities. Together, these actors can build the conditions for sustainable, equitable access to play in urban areas.

### Data Sources

16 policymakers and practitioners	
16 community residents	22 parents and carers
18 school staff from local primary schools and forest schools	20 children aged 5–11

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