

A Natural Thing

Supporting outdoor play on housing estates in Hackney



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“Play is supposed to be a natural thing, but unfortunately it’s no longer organic... you have to give up a lot of yourself for the child to have play.” Parent

“My mum says not in the street because first there’s cars and there’s bad people on the street and because... like, I can’t have anyone to play with me.” Girl aged 8.

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1 Summary

This project looks at how to expand outdoor play opportunities on housing estates in Hackney. It is based on new work with children and families who live on housing estates in the Borough, and builds on existing initiatives in Hackney.

Concern has been growing in recent years about the health and well being of children in the UK, with child obesity and low levels of physical activity high on the list of public health concerns. Outdoor play is recognised as having health and well being benefits, and is an emerging focus of public policy and public health activity.

Hackney has a unique combination of characteristics that justifies a focus on outdoor play on housing estates. It has amongst the worst levels of child overweight/obesity in London, the highest proportion of households living in social housing in the capital, a high population density, a low proportion of green space, and a high proportion of flats/maisonettes. Moreover, the proportion of children living in Hackney is projected to grow.

Unpublished research suggests that in some estates children play out of doors frequently, whereas in others children rarely play out. Hackney is also undergoing rapid demographic and physical change. This creates both opportunities and challenges in relation to the design and use of public space and amenity space on housing estates.

Hackney funds support for play streets, and is now seen as a trailblazer. Whilst take up has reached most parts of Hackney, it has had a limited impact in housing estates, in Hackney and elsewhere. These experiences led HPA to commission this project and report.

To explore the views of local adults and children, the project carried out a survey of 104 parents (almost all living on Hackney Homes estates) and three focus groups of Hackney Homes residents: two with adults (mostly parents) and one with children aged eight and nine. It revealed that parents living on estates in Hackney want their children to play out. And while a significant proportion do not let their children play out, many do. But they are fearful about what might happen, and unhappy with the options for their children. Children are fearful too, and aware of threats and problems in their area. But outdoor play is important to them.

A complex picture emerges of parents' attempts to find time and space for play. Parents want help, and there is an appetite for action. But there is an absence of initiatives that might help.

Key findings from the survey

- 74% of parents surveyed said their child would like to play out more.
- Over half of parents say that there are not suitable places for their children to play out. This figure is significantly higher for boys (69%) than girls (45%).
- Over 20% of parents said their children rarely or never played in nearby parks and playgrounds.
- 50% of parents said their children never played in the street.
- Girls are more likely than boys to never play out, both in nearby streets, and in nearby parks, playgrounds or ball parks.
- The greatest parental concern is danger from strangers. Traffic, gangs/drug-dealing, dogs/dog mess and bullying are also major concerns.
- Parents have strongly positive attitudes to 'Playing Out' sessions in streets, with nearly 90% supporting the idea and around half of these saying they would be willing to help.

Action has been taken on some estates. But this activity is limited, isolated, and poorly documented. A new approach is needed, which recognises that different estates will need different interventions.

Hence the key recommendation is that **Hackney Play Association should take forward a new project, with support from Hackney Council/Hackney Homes, that develops, pilots and evaluates initiatives that are co-created with adult and child residents** to get more children playing out on housing estates. The project should engage residents of all ages, emphasise experimentation and sharing emerging good practice, build on the successes and lessons of Hackney's approach to supporting street play, and explicitly address older young people.

The other recommendation from this report is that **children's play opportunities should be an important part of the design brief when estates are being redeveloped and redesigned**. Estate regeneration programmes should not work against children and families' choices and options, but should instead be seen as an opportunity to improve outdoor play opportunities and expand children's freedom to play and get around their neighbourhoods.

2 Introduction and background

2.1 Aim of project

This project looks at how to expand outdoor play opportunities for children living on housing estates in Hackney. It is based on new survey work and focus group discussions with children and families who live on housing estates in the Borough. It also builds on the experiences of existing initiatives in Hackney.

2.2 Background and context

Concern has been growing in recent years about the health and well being of children in the UK, with child obesity and low levels of physical activity high on the list of public health concerns. Outdoor play is recognised as having health and well being benefits, and is an emerging focus of public policy and public health activity¹.

Hackney has a unique combination of characteristics that justifies a focus on play on housing estates. It has amongst the worst levels of child overweight/obesity in London, the highest proportion of households living in social housing in the capital, a high population density, a low proportion of green space, and a high proportion of flats/maisonettes. Moreover, while the proportion of children under 15 is close to the London average, this population is projected to grow by around 10% by 2027².

Hackney has the second-worst levels of child overweight and obesity in London for 11-year-olds, and the sixth worst for 5-year-olds³. It is the third most densely populated borough in the capital, with the 5th highest levels of child poverty⁴ and high levels of overcrowding⁵. It has a comparatively low

¹ Chief Medical Officer (2013) *Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer 2012, Our Children Deserve Better: Prevention Pays*

² Hackney Council (2014) *Child Poverty Needs Assessment 2014 Annexe 1: Borough Demographics*

³ Public Health England, National Child Measurement Programme web pages <http://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/national-child-measurement-programme>.

⁴ [London Datastore](#), Greater London Authority

⁵ Greater London Authority (2014) *Trends in overcrowding*

proportion of green space⁶, which is concentrated in some parts of the Borough at the expense of others, with some areas highly deficient⁷.

For Hackney residents, living on estates is very common. Over 45% of Hackney residents live in social housing: the highest proportion in London. Moreover 80% of residents live in flats/maisonettes: the sixth highest proportion in London⁸.

Table 1: Characteristics and challenges in Hackney

	Ranking out of 32 London Boroughs (excluding City)
Child overweight/obesity at age 11	2 nd highest
Child overweight/obesity at age 5	6 th highest
Population density	3 rd highest
Children in poverty	5 th highest
Overcrowding	6 th /7 th highest
Proportion of green space	8 th lowest
Proportion living in social housing	Highest
Proportion living in flats/ maisonettes	6 th highest

(see text for references)

Hackney is also undergoing rapid demographic and physical change, with high rates of redevelopment and regeneration. This creates both opportunities and challenges in relation to the design and use of public space and amenity space on housing estates.

Turning to Hackney children's experiences of outdoor play, while empirical data is limited, it calls into question conventional wisdom that children no longer play out in their neighbourhoods. A short, unpublished preliminary observational study by ZCD Architects looking at play in six different Hackney

⁶ [London Datastore](#), Greater London Authority

⁷ Hackney Council (2008) *Social Spaces: A Strategy for Parks in Hackney*; Hackney Council Policy Team (2013) *A Profile of Hackney, its People and Place*.

⁸ [London Datastore](#), Greater London Authority

estates in 2014 found that in some estates children play out of doors frequently, whereas in others children rarely play out⁹.

2.3 Recent initiatives to improve outdoor play in Hackney

In 2012 Hackney became the first London Borough to adopt regular, 2-3-hour long resident-led road closures for play. Residents were supported from the start by Hackney Play Association (HPA) and Playing Out. This initiative reflects growing interest in street play initiatives throughout the UK, in part as a result of the work of Playing Out, the not-for-profit organisation working to support street play.

Hackney is one of only a few councils to fund support for play streets, commissioning HPA to help residents get started and to help them sustain sessions. Hackney Council, working in partnership with HPA, is now seen as a trailblazer in this area.

As of February 2017 the Hackney Play Streets initiative had over 40 active streets and schemes¹⁰. The growth and success of the initiative is in part thanks to an effective three-way partnership where residents take the lead, HPA provides practical support and Hackney Council streamlines the bureaucracy involved.

Take up has reached most parts of Hackney, including some disadvantaged areas¹¹. However, it has been more challenging to get sessions going on estates, and once they start, harder to sustain them¹². These experiences, which chime with those in other active cities such as Bristol, led HPA to commission this project and report.

3 Methods

At the heart of this project is a detailed exploration of the views of residents of Hackney's housing estates (adults and children). Views were sought in two ways: through a questionnaire survey for parents, which was targeted at Hackney Homes residents, and through three focus group discussions (two with adults who live on various Hackney Homes estates, and one with children who attend a junior youth club on one of Hackney Homes' larger estates).

⁹ Dinah Bornat, ZCD Architects, personal communication

¹⁰ Hackney Play Association (2017) *Hackney Play Streets Progress Report 2017*

¹¹ Gill, T (2017) *Hackney Street Play Initiatives in Disadvantaged Areas: Experiences and emerging issues*; Play England (2017) *Why temporary street closures for play make sense for public health*

¹² Gill, T (2014) *Hackney Street Play: Evaluation Report*

Our survey was carried out in Spring 2017 and completed by 104 parents with children aged 2 – 16. Parents were asked about where their children play out of doors, the barriers they face, their worries, their views on play streets, and some background questions about themselves and their children.

The survey findings shaped our focus group discussions, which took place in October 2017. The focus groups explored in more detail residents' views on two key topics: the barriers that stop children from playing out on estates, and how to overcome those barriers. 19 adults and eight children (all aged eight or nine) took part in the focus groups.

Appendix 1 gives more information about focus group participants and methods, while Appendix 2 gives more details on the survey methods and results, and the questions asked.

4 Findings

The overall picture from our survey and focus groups is of high unmet demand for better play opportunities on estates, and significant concern and action by parents. As already noted, other research shows that children in Hackney do still play out. Our survey confirms this, but also reveals that those who do face significant barriers, with over half of parents saying that there are not suitable places for their children to play out. This figure is slightly higher for older children (60%) than younger ones (51%), and significantly higher for boys (69%) than girls (45%).

Overall, nearly 75% of parents surveyed said their child would like to play out more. In fact, parents and children paint a complex picture of their attempts to find time and space for play, the barriers they face, their worries and concerns and their ideas for improving things. The rest of this section picks out the key findings from our survey and focus groups.

4.1 Many children play out, but patterns of activity vary widely

The parents' survey asked about a range of outdoor spaces in and around estates: parks and play areas that were on or nearby estates, ones that were further away (more than 15 minutes' walk), nearby streets, and other places like adventure playgrounds. Children do play in each type of space, but their patterns of activity varied. Girls are more likely than boys to **never** play out, both in nearby streets (for oldest children, the figures are 64% for girls and 32% for boys) and in nearby parks, playgrounds or ball parks (where the respective figures are 16% and 2%).

Not surprisingly, **nearby parks and playgrounds** are the most important locations for play. Over half of parents surveyed said their children played in them a few times a week or more. However, a significant minority – over 20% - say their children rarely or never played in these locations.

One good thing is there's a park really close to my house and I don't even need someone to take me (boy).

My mum won't let me ride on my bike around my house, but does allow me to play out (girl).

My mum and dad won't let me go outside by myself because it's dangerous (boy).

When they get to about 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, they're out there [in a small playground in the middle of the estate] and everybody keeps an eye on them (parent).

Private gardens are less important: 37% of parents said their children played in them a few times a week or more. This is likely to reflect a lack of access, given the high proportion of families living in flats.

The last time I played in the back garden - we had a swimming pool because this was in August. I was really hot, so I went in the swimming pool and swam (boy).

Similarly, **parks and playgrounds further away** are less important, with 34% saying their children played in these a few times a week or more. **Other places to play** such as adventure playgrounds are even less frequently used; only 15% of parents said their children played in these places a few times a week or more. These findings are also likely to be related to ease of access.

We found Evergreen Adventure Playground, which has a lot of nature, there's the tadpoles and that's really a nice place, but it's so far, you have to literally walk so far away to get there... so I just feel like for Hackney there's a lot of green space but it's quite far to get to. Our nearest park, big park, is Hackney Downs and we still have to walk 20 minutes to get there (parent).

Turning to **street play**, again a significant divide emerges. Over 20% of parents said that their children play in nearby streets a few times a week or more. However, 50% said their children never play in the street.

I play out in a street that's not really a street – it goes round in a circle and there's no cars coming. I think the reason no-one plays on the streets is because there's always loads of parking (boy).

My mum usually lets me play outside in the park, but if I ever play outside on the street she says I have to be with my brother or my sister (girl).

Well, my family wouldn't really allow me to play on the street, but would usually let me play in the park. 'Cause my mum says it's too dangerous 'cause there's cars and that stuff (girl).

The fact there are no cars on my street brings my community together because the children go out, the parents meet each other (parent).

I'm not playing on the road. The little one who's four - who does listen - might accidentally throw the ball and go and fetch that and there's a car, you know, that split second. I'd rather go to the park (parent).

4.2 Parents' concerns include strangers, traffic, and troublesome behaviour

Our survey explored parents' worries and concerns on a selection of issues. The greatest concern is **danger from strangers** (with 90% very worried or worried about this).

My mum and dad won't let me play outside because... sometimes there are just bad people walking around (girl, 9)

My mum says not in the street because first there's cars and there's bad people on the street and because... like, I can't have anyone to play with me (girl).

I always tell mine don't talk to strangers, you don't know who they are, don't talk to them (parent).

One focus group participant, however, was not so worried about the threat from strangers.

I'm not worried about stranger danger because if we were to look at it now, walk up the street, everybody's a stranger in the street, you don't know who's good, who's not good, you don't know, you can't tell (parent).

Traffic (83% very worried or worried), **gangs/drug-dealing** (80%), **dogs/dog mess** (80%) and **bullying** (78%) are also major concerns.

Where I live in my estate there's these bad boys that smoke and I think they take drugs as well. Me and my friend, we're always... well, most of the time always talking about them. And yesterday I was coming home from youth club and I saw two of them chasing a man (girl).

A lot of the older boys sit there in the park and smoke marijuana... Unless a group of mums are there sitting down with their children to play - and it's literally just down there... I feel I have to be with my child (parent).

Hackney Downs has a dedicated playground area which is fantastic. But then in the summer, we just saw young boys in bandanas, brawling and with knives... it's the first time I've ever seen it, but that left an indelible memory in my head (parent).

In our focus groups, some felt a lack of cars made a big difference to the way that outdoor spaces were used and enjoyed by children and adults.

"We have [a village] because we have no cars. We have lots of supportive local people from different classes. The environment we live in brings us together (parent).

We live on an estate with no cars and we've got like a football pitch and a green space... I think we're lucky because we live on an estate where there's a lot of green space (parent).

Litter (63%) and **neighbours complaining** (52%) are less of a worry for parents who responded to our survey, though hostility from neighbours was discussed by both parents and children in our focus groups.

One bad thing is our neighbour because we share a garden. So when we play, she'll always open the door and close it, and they... tell us to go home (boy).

I have a child. I find the sound of children screaming and playing joyful to my ears. But others view it as a nuisance and that was the problem that this woman had was that these children were screaming at 7-8 o'clock (parent).

We've actually had residents complaining to us because the children are playing in these courtyards and wanting to build and put up trees and shrubs and fences so the children can't play there anymore! Obviously we've rejected every single request (parent and Tenants' and Residents' Association committee member).

Parents of boys are more worried than parents of girls about gangs/drug dealing (89% vs 73%), bullying (87% vs 69%), and neighbours complaining (66% vs 44%). When a weighting is applied to take into account the degree of worry, the strongest worry overall is from parents of boys concerned about gangs/drug dealing; over 68% of boys' parents are very worried about this.

Not so much with the girls, definitely with the boys. When my boys were smaller gangs was one of the main worries I had (parent).

Around 40% of parents said their children didn't have friends nearby, suggesting that a significant minority of families experience a degree of **social isolation**. **Time** is also an issue: nearly half of parents said that they faced time pressures in supervising their children. And some children face competing demands for their time from parents.

I'm, "Mum, can I please play outside?" but your mum's, "No, go do your chores" (boy).

One of the biggest problems I have with play is that when it's only one parent's responsibility to organise play it's a problem because traditionally or culturally it's the mum's job (parent).

Parents' worries are interrelated, and can take the form of a generalised anxiety about the world outside their front doors – and also a concern about what others might think, especially if the worst happened.

I'm very, very, wary of letting them out...very, very wary and I think maybe my fears sort of impact on them because what you see happening... (parent)

Sometimes my husband can be quite snobbish, so he will say things [about] mixing up with those children and to be honest there's nothing wrong with those children (parent).

If one day you have to call the police because you can't find them, the police will say to you where did your child go to. You can't just turn round and say I don't know, because you're responsible for them (parent).

4.3 Play street initiatives are viewed positively

Our survey showed strongly positive attitudes to **Playing Out sessions** in streets, with nearly 90% of parents supporting the idea and around half of these saying they would be willing to help. Adults and children in our focus groups also generally responded positively to the idea (which was discussed after a showing of the Hackney Play Streets video). Some were very enthusiastic.

I think this idea gives children the chance to play and have the freedom that they want without cars interrupting (boy).

I'll give it 10 trillion because the kids are just having their freedom and they can play wherever they want without anyone disturbing them (boy).

I think it's a great way for children to express themselves. And it's also a great way to build up the community... to bond and to let everyone know that you're part of the community and you're friends. Maybe after a few hours I think they will bond as a community (boy).

It's a kind of little glimpse of what life could be (parent).

I'm going to do it tomorrow... I'm going to do it because you give me inspiration (parent).

It doesn't only benefit the kids, adults as well, you'd find yourself chatting and making friends yourself (parent).

However, some expressed doubts about the initiative.

I've actually seen [playing out sessions] go for and against. So it originally started off, lovely people threw them together and they ran with it. And I've also gone to ones where you threw them together,

constructive people, oil and water, they just couldn't mix because they were just so miles apart (parent).

If you live on a massive estate you don't think you're going to get the backing to close off that whole area. And furthermore it's a bit daunting if you decide that you're going to. You want somebody to say if you're going to do that we're going to be here to support you and help you. You will never take on that challenge on your own because you're just like, I'd like to do it, but who's going to help me and who's going to support me? (parent).

The Hackney Play Streets video prompted a lot of constructive debate about practicalities of the sessions, and the challenges of setting them up on estates.

What if one person doesn't recognise and a little child goes wandering off? And then everyone panics? (boy).

The kids get bored quick. If they ride up on their bikes, say I could do that for 10 minutes, I want to go home (parent).

[My son] is going to say he'd rather be on the computer or playing his game. He would look at it and say there's nothing out there for me. So it was more for primary and infants (parent).

When the idea came out it was based on road closures, so I think it came to residents as if it was people that actually lived on streets... Estates never looked at it like that (parent).

5 Wider discussion

5.1 Finding space and time for play is a complex business

The twin findings already noted from our survey - that over half of parents said their children played out regularly in nearby parks and playgrounds, but over half felt that there were not suitable local places – suggests a degree of **compromise and discomfort** about allowing children to play outdoors. Our focus groups fleshed out this picture.

I play out, but I have my brother and my sister. Because my mum always says I'm not allowed to go outside because of the bullies and because of the danger on the street (boy).

Play is supposed to be a natural thing, but unfortunately it's no longer organic... you have to give up a lot of yourself for the child to have play (parent).

If you say you're going to the park with your friends, you go to the park with your friends - but I'm phoning him every minute (parent).

What I said to my son is that you're not going out without a purpose. You're not going to be a street child where you're just out there on the street, because if you're on the street, you have to be going from A to B (parent).

My son's seven and if there was a park - I'm surrounded by three estates - if there was a play area in there, I don't know how comfortable I'd be about my son just going out like we did back in the day, where you could just go out outside your house and play (parent).

We have to teach them things how we would want them to be, and recognise the danger and still let them go out. My kids one day will be, I don't know, at around 10 or something I want them to go out to the park and be confident to go out (parent).

Sometimes, the **arrangements are dependent upon intricate negotiations** and agreements with friends, siblings, other family members and neighbours.

I think the last time I played out was last Saturday. One of my neighbours from upstairs came down and she let me play with her son outside in the park. Our mums came with us (girl).

He [13 year old son] asked me if he can play out with his friends so I said 'what are you going to do?' He said on his bike, just in the area and I give him a time. I will phone him and he will say oh can I have half an hour more and so okay then, go on (parent).

My son meets his old school friends and they go across the road to Islington and they're playing the football coach there. During the holidays it could be every day, even if it's just for half an hour (parent).

They're 9, 10, 11... the little ones that are playing and a lot of them have got older sisters. My older daughter will go down because she's friends with the little one's older sister so there's a lot of supervision going on - but with the kids without the parents. We pop out onto the balconies if we hear anything that sounds like a scream or something like that, but it's quite nice where I am, so there's not been any trouble (parent).

I'm a bit funny about my children going out because I'm just thinking unsupervised, they're young, their age, but when I see her son out and with the grandchild, I then say okay it's now time for the tots to come out now. Because the older boys are going to give them chance to play around, and then after a while they come in, let them have a chance, and take it in turns (parent).

These arrangements can be highly sensitive to key details about the immediate surroundings, the other people involved and the possible outcomes.

My daughter, she's nine, I don't usually let her downstairs without her sister. The girl next door, she's got a sister the same age as my older one, so they usually all go down, but just recently and because it's quite small, if the little girl next door goes downstairs, she'll come and get my daughter and they'll go down together and they'll take their scooters down. Sometimes I'll send my older one down just to hover around and make sure she's okay. I always say to her, now sometimes that encourages others to come out because the other children downstairs see them out and they'll come out (parent).

Technology and screens were mentioned by a number of focus group participants. While technology was not a major focus of this project, it is an unavoidable factor that complicates the picture and makes decision-making harder. Some participants made links between the offline and online worlds in terms of risks.

There's another little demon in the room which is social media and the fact that you may have active parents, but they're finding that children are now less creative (parent).

You learn to marry the two... it's a balance (parent).

There's a lot more that they're exposed to, going online exposes them to a lot of stuff that we weren't exposed to, so they've got a fear of their own as well now (parent).

5.2 Parents and children have mixed views about their neighbourhood

As already noted, over half of parents in our survey said that there are not suitable places for their children to play near home. In our focus groups, adults and children were invited to make some wider **observations about their neighbourhoods**. A number of children and adults had positive things to say, especially about the sense of community and how people of different cultures and backgrounds get along.

There was a girl that came to me, she was two months new for this country, she's Polish. She asked me to play there. Since then I... go to play with her or we stay at each other's house (boy).

I get a good salary and I'm a middle class person, and I live next door to people in council houses who are not middle class people and who have had a very different life experience from me. But it doesn't matter because the environment that we live in brings us together (parent).

I live in a small block so I know all my neighbours and we're all friendly... I've lived there for 20 years so everyone's - I know them, and there's not many people that you have any animosity with (parent).

You went through a bad patch with the gangs on it and all that. But as years have gone on and we've had the youth club coming to this, the

police working on the estate... practically most of the people that were causing the trouble, they've grown up now and a new generation of kids has come along, they're more respectful (parent).

We've got a massive diversity where we are... The family next to us are Muslims, there's some Orthodox Jewish families... and there's some families that are Jehovah's Witnesses, and everyone, I know it sounds really clichéd, but everyone's so tolerant (parent).

Some commented on how Hackney has changed over the years. There were mixed views about the change in demographics.

I've had meetings with people in my area where you've got people who have lived in the community for a long time and people that have just moved into the community and we try to all come together, but sometimes class and things get in the way (parent).

This exchange between two parents in one focus group shows that these changes can dramatically affect the image of a neighbourhood:

- We don't do the Murder Mile strip.

- That's where I live - I live very close to there and you'd be surprised, it's completely different now; if you haven't got the money you can't buy a house to live there.

The **built form of estates** was felt to be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, lack of through traffic in some estates led some to the view that road danger was less of a fear. On the other, some felt that outdoor spaces can feel anonymous and uninviting, especially in large estates, with many spaces having no clear ownership and low levels of social use. Participants recognised that **estates vary enormously in terms of physical design and outdoor spaces**.

What makes somewhere suitable - maybe we need to look at those factors. So what makes space unsuitable, because a space is a space, a park is a park, it depends how you use that space. Maybe there are other things that are preventing the areas from being suitable; like the fact that they're deemed unsafe or that there's traffic running through them (parent).

One parent made the point that playgrounds and play equipment are not needed to create good places for play.

I asked my son, he's 22 now, what he liked about playing out in the flats where we lived, and he was like I'd have preferred bigger bushes, so not to have them so trimmed because they couldn't hide behind them when they were playing hide and seek. So all of his memories of having fun was hiding behind the sheds or being on the grass or rolling

down a hill or being under a bush. He had no kind of special attachment to equipment as such (parent).

5.3 Positive action is being taken on some estates

Our focus groups revealed an **appetite for action** to improve opportunities for outdoor play (a visioning activity generated lots of energy and ideas). Several adults gave **examples of collective action** on their estates.

We're fortunate on my estate because we went out of our way to create a safe space for kids. So we've got a lovely green space, which was going to be a car park, which luckily at the final hour we managed to get them to stop. We created it basically into a safe space, so it's a gated area. And we made sure that we thought about visibility. We've got nice dense foliage now so that people from the outside cannot just stay and look in. We've got quite a lot of green, an edible garden, two purpose built barbeques and large fixed picnic benches and tables. We have an agreement that we make all the residents sign. They can hire it out to have birthday parties for their children. We've had a couple of weddings in there (Tenants' and Residents' Association (TRA) Committee member).

On some estates, TRAs have played an important role – they can be helpful and an effective force for change. But some focus group participants felt that **more work needed to be done** to ensure that families are represented and engaged, and that their issues are a higher priority.

Each time that something is implemented across an estate, when you do your research you find out that actually it's had a lot to do with the people that have lived in the area as opposed to the local authorities having to enforce that (parent).

The TRA is supposed to be doing the niceties for the people on the estate and most TRA's are good at doing outings and bits and pieces, but they tend to forget about the children. And to me a once a year trip to the seaside is not enough, so we need to do more. So we should be getting the TRA to be more involved in facilitating play (parent).

Participants felt that Hackney Council and Hackney Homes have a role in supporting such initiatives – and that in recent years, cuts had made this support less likely to be forthcoming.

I'm not a community worker in training; I just do it because I care about my community. Nothing that the council does says yes or how can we help, how can we engage your estate residents, can we get you some translation services so you can engage (parent).

5.4 Outdoor play is about fun, freedom, socialising and independence

The adult focus groups explored attitudes and understandings about the significance of outdoor play for children. **Fun, freedom, socialising and becoming independent came through strongly** as benefits.

Having fun (parent).

Going outside, being with people (parent).

Having independence, making friends (parent).

I think play is vital and it should be time that a child has to be themselves with their peers or adults (parent).

Where they feel free enough to act within boundaries, but be themselves (Tenants' and Residents' Association Committee member).

Falling off the swing and busting up your knees and coming home, mum... that's what we used to do (parent).

Relationships without you looking, learning pecking orders, it's important for when they're adults because not everyone bursts into the world and is in charge, you have to learn how to do that (parent).

However, playing out was not seen as a universally good thing. Some focus group participants raised worries about possible bad influences.

Swear words and whatnot (parent).

Following people, other kids, you know, mimicking their behaviour (parent).

Wanting to be part, to be included in a group that you don't want them to be included in (parent).

5.5 Young people are a focus for concern, and generate mixed feelings

Both our survey replies and focus groups revealed some **problems and concerns around young people** in public space. As already noted, our survey showed high levels of concern – especially from parents of boys - about gangs and drug-dealing.

On the one hand, people recognised that young people's needs and interests may be different from younger children, and are not well addressed.

Once your child gets to 12, 13 there is very limited stuff in Hackney for them (parent).

When my son goes outside with his friends, they're up in the trees because there's nothing there. The playground is for little kids, so there's nothing there, so they might just go up and sit in the trees - and I'm thinking get down (parent).

But on the other, their presence was sometimes seen as a problem. In some cases, efforts to improve facilities for younger children have led to the exclusion of older young people.

On our estate, we've got a nice little playground in the middle of where we live and we've asked for signs from the Council: residents only, under 12s. If we see children or adults in the playground smoking, there's no ball games, we will go out and say excuse me.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

Parents living on estates in Hackney want their children to play out. And while a significant proportion do not let their children play out, many do. But they are fearful about what might happen. And they are unhappy with the options for their children.

Children are fearful too, and highly aware of specific threats and problems in their area. But outdoor play is important to them. Their appetite for it is evident, they can give detailed accounts of their neighbourhoods and where and when they play out, and it features in their lives on a weekly if not daily basis.

Negotiations and decisions are complex, and fraught with difficulties. Parents - and supportive residents - want help: they do not feel they can do it all themselves. There is an appetite for action. But there is an absence of initiatives that might help.

Action has been taken and improvements have been made on some estates, which could provide useful case study material. But this activity has been limited and modest in scope and poorly documented, with no attempt to share experiences or learn and transfer lessons.

By contrast, Hackney Play Streets is an ambitious, scalable, well-supported model for action that has been shown to be effective. It is familiar to many, and its vision - reclaiming space for play through bottom-up collective action supported by local organisations and the Council - is popular. But on estates, both the physical spaces and the social relationships between residents are different from conventional residential streets. This is why the play streets model, in its current form, it has had limited impact on estates.

A bolder, more comprehensive approach is needed: one that builds on the successes of Hackney Play Streets and that recognises that different estates will need different interventions.

Hence the overarching recommendation from this report is that **Hackney Play Association should take forward a new project, with support from Hackney Council/Hackney Homes, that develops, pilots and evaluates initiatives that are co-created with adult and child residents** to get more children playing out on housing estates.

The project should:

- Build on the successes and lessons of Hackney's approach to supporting street play, and in particular its three-way partnership between residents, Hackney Play Association and the statutory sector;

- Engage parents, children and young people and other residents to harness their energy, and knowledge of their area;
- Have a strong emphasis on experimentation and sharing emerging good practice;
- Explicitly address older young people, whose situation and concerns are often ignored or downplayed.

The second recommendation from this report is that **children's play opportunities should be an important part of the design brief when estates are being redeveloped and redesigned**. While it is beyond the scope of this project to explore in detail the subject of estate-based redevelopment and regeneration, it is clear that programmes are having an impact on the availability, accessibility and design of outdoor spaces on housing estates. It will be important to ensure that estate regeneration programmes do not work against children and families' choices and options. Instead they should be seen as an opportunity to expand children's freedom to play and get around their neighbourhoods.

Appendix 1: Focus groups

Three focus groups were organised; two for adult residents and one for children. They took place in October 2017 in community venues in Hackney.

Adult participants were recruited via Hackney Homes. The promotional material stated that our focus groups would look at play, and that it was open to people with or without children. Participants were offered an incentive of £30 in cash. Adult residents were asked background questions about their age, gender, ethnicity, working status, tenancy type, ages and numbers of children. They were also asked whether or not they lived on a housing estate, the type of property they lived in (low rise/high rise/house/maisonette) and whether or not their local area had play areas. Adult participants were selected so as to ensure that most – but not all – were parents with children aged 2 – 16 (the age group that was the focus of the questionnaire survey). Both sessions lasted around 3 ½ hours. One (which had 11 participants) took place in the morning, and the other (with eight participants) was held in the evening.

The children's focus group had eight participants, all of whom were eight or nine years of age. They were recruited from The Edge Youth Project, which is located in the Woodberry Downs estate (one of the larger Hackney Homes estates, and the focus of a major regeneration programme). Their focus group session lasted just over one hour, and took place at The Edge during a youth club session.

The author of this report was present at all three focus group sessions – mostly as a passive observer - and took contemporaneous notes. Hackney Play Association's Play Streets Project Manager was also present at all three sessions. Audio recordings were made, and the resulting verbatim transcriptions were the source material for the quotes in this report. Some quotes have been edited for clarity, without changing the sense.

Appendix 2: Survey

Sample size and composition

Respondents to the survey were recruited in 3 ways. Surveys were distributed online to Hackney Homes residents via email and via the Hackney Playing Out Facebook page, and also distributed in hard copy to parents at three schools, resulting in 30 returns. Online respondents were offered the incentive that if they stated their email address, they would be entered into a prize draw for a £50 Marks and Spencer voucher.

A total of 104 people replied. About 75% of replies were online, and 25% on paper survey forms that were distributed with help from schools. Not everyone replied to every question. However, in most cases at least 95 people replied. In the analysis below, the numbers responding to each question is only given if it is less than 95.

The survey questions are given in section 5.6 below. They were initially drawn up by HPA staff and the report author. They were discussed and refined with input from officers from LBH and Hackney Homes, and also took into account feedback from a pilot. The survey questions are set out at the end of this appendix.

In the questions about their children, respondents were asked to respond only about children aged 2 – 16. They were then asked the same questions about 2 children in this age group: their oldest and their youngest child. Those with only one child were directed to skip the second set of questions. 56 respondents answered questions about both their youngest and oldest children.

91 answered the question on type of home. Of these, 60% lived in flats on a housing estate, while another 13% lived in flats in a single apartment or house. The total of 73% in flats is somewhat lower than the population figure for LBH of 85% flats/maisonettes (the comparison figure for households with dependent children may be different, but is not readily available).

92 answered the question on tenure type. Of these, 45% were in social rented housing, 14% private rented, 9% shared ownership and 32% owner/occupiers. These figures are close to those for the LBH population (45% social rented, 23% private rented, 30% owner occupiers).

94 answered the question on gender, and of these 85% were female. This is likely to reflect a greater involvement by mothers in outdoor play opportunities

for their children, and the fact that around 50% of households with children in LBH are headed by lone parents - usually mothers¹³.

89 answered the question on race/ethnicity. Of these, 40% were white, 24% black/black British, 12% Asian or Asian British, 10% mixed background and 13% other. Compared to the LBH population there were more black/black British people, fewer white/white British people and more other. (Figures from LBH Facts & figures booklet 2016: white or white British 55%, 6.5% mixed background, 11% Asian or Asian British, 23% black or black British, 5% other).

In terms of the age of the oldest child there was a fairly even spread across the 2 – 16 age range (24% were aged 2-4; 21% aged 5-8; 26% aged 9-11 and 29% aged 12-16). There was also an equal gender split.

In terms of the age of the youngest child, not surprisingly more were aged 2-4 (36%) and 5-8 (50%) than for the older age ranges. There were also more boys (61%) than girls (39%) – though given the low numbers in the sample, this difference is not likely to be significant.

For most of the questions on children's playing out and parental attitudes, there was little difference between the pattern of answers for the oldest and youngest child. However, there were more differences between the answers for parents of boys and girls. Significant age and gender differences are noted.

Around 6% said their child had a disability (six children in total). This is slightly higher than the figure of 4% for LBH children as a whole¹⁴. All six disabled children were male, but with a low absolute number of disabled children neither the gender split nor the divergence from the LBH population are likely to be significant.

Results: playing out

56% of oldest children, and 54% of youngest children play a few times a week or more in nearby parks/playgrounds. However, 20% play only a few times a year or not at all in nearby parks, playgrounds or ball parks.

47% of children do not play out in streets in or near their estate – but 23% do play in these locations a few times a week or more.

¹³ Hackney Council (2014) *Child Poverty Needs Assessment 2014 Annexe 1: Borough Demographics*

¹⁴ Hackney Council (2014) *Child Poverty Needs Assessment 2014 Chapter 4 Risk: Disabled parents and Disabled children*

Girls are more likely than boys to never play out, both in nearby streets (64% of oldest children vs 32%) and in nearby parks, playgrounds or ball parks (16% vs 2%).

Results: statements about barriers

74% of parents say their child would like to play outside more. Only 14% disagree.

61% say there aren't suitable local places for their oldest child, and 51% say there aren't suitable places for their youngest child. More parents of boys say this than girls (69% vs 45%).

75% of parents say their children's time is not an issue. However, 50% say their own time pressures are an issue.

40% say their youngest child does not have friends locally to play with (for the oldest child, the figure is lower at 33%).

Results: worries

The greatest worry is danger from strangers (with 90% very worried or worried). Traffic, gangs/drug-dealing and dogs/dog mess are also major concerns, with 80% very worried or worried. Bullying is also a concern for 78%. Litter (63%) and neighbours complaining (52%) are less of a worry.

Parents of boys are more worried than parents of girls about gangs/drug dealing (89% vs 73%), bullying (87% vs 69%), and neighbours complaining (66% vs 44%). When a double weighting is applied to take into account the degree of worry, the strongest worry overall is from parents of boys concerned about gangs/drug dealing; over 68% of parents of boys are very worried about this.

Results: views on play streets

93 answered. Of these, 43% liked the idea and would be willing to help; 45% liked the idea but would not be able to help, 4% did not like the idea and 7% said they were not relevant because traffic is not a problem.

Survey questions

1. How old is your oldest child who is aged between 2 and 16?

Choose from: 2 – 4 / 5 – 8 / 9 – 11 / 12 - 16

2. What is this child's gender?
3. Is this child disabled?
4. How often does this child play or socialise outside in the following local places in their free time? Please give an average over the last 12 months or so.

Choose from: A few times a week / A few times a month / A few times a year / Never

- In a private garden
- In parks, playgrounds or ball parks in my estate or within 5-10 minutes walk
- In parks, playgrounds or ball parks further away (15 minutes walk or more)
- In streets in or near my estate
- In other outdoor play facilities – eg adventure playground
- Other (please say any other place, and how often - eg "Woodland, a few times a year")

5. Here are some statements about your oldest child aged between 2 and 16. Please say how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

Choose from: Agree / Disagree

- He/she would like to play/socialise outside more often
- He/she does not have time to play/socialise outside because of other activities
- I do not have enough time to supervise him/her outside
- There are not enough suitable places for him/her to play/socialise outside locally
- He/she does not have friends locally to play with

6. How worried are you about the following issues when this child is playing/socialising outside?

Choose from: Not worried at all / A little worried / Very worried / Not applicable

- Traffic
- Neighbours complaining
- Bullying
- Gangs/drug-dealing
- Danger from strangers
- Dogs and dog mess
- Litter

7. How old is your youngest child who is aged between 2 and 16?

[Choices as in Q. 1 above]

8. What is this child's gender?

9. Is this child disabled?

10. How often does this child play or socialise outside in the following local places in their free time? Please give an average over the last 12 months or so.

[Choices as in Q. 4 above]

11. Here are some statements about your youngest child aged between 2 and 16. Please say how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

[Choices as in Q. 5 above]

12. How worried are you about the following issues when this child is playing/socialising outside?

[Choices as in Q. 6 above]

13. What type of home do you live in?

Choose from: House / Flat in part of a house / Flat on a housing estate

14. Do you own or rent your home?

Choose from: rent / own / shared ownership

15. What is your gender?

16. Please describe your race/ethnicity

Choose from: Asian or Asian British / White or White British / Mixed background / Black or Black British / Other ethnic group