

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Ghostly future looms for London playgrounds



Overgrown, decaying and haunted with the hopes of politicians past, is this the playground of the future? London Play's biggest survey of councils in the capital for a decade finds that while many are building new playgrounds, funding for their preservation and maintenance is simply not keeping up.

Three quarters (25) of London's 33 local authorities responded to London Play's survey and the vast majority (88 per cent) say that children's play is seen as a priority for their council. However, a third of respondents also admit that play facilities provided are not adequate for demand.

Most report they are building new public playgrounds. But revenue budgets, which fund staff to manage and maintain play areas, are static or falling. More than two thirds of respondents said that revenue over the next three years is likely to either decrease or stay the same. With inflation currently running at more than 10 per cent, future neglect seems almost certain.

“Play is a high priority, but we have limited resources to manage and maintain the current facilities.”

Council survey respondent



There are also questions about the quality of some new playgrounds. London Play’s recent campaign to find the capital’s ‘saddest’ playground not only yielded images of dilapidated and neglected older playgrounds, but also brand-new playgrounds that were painfully tokenistic. As one resident in Greenwich commented: “It’s staggering to think that this [pictured left] is the play area given to kids by the borough that proudly hosted the 2012 Olympics Gymnastics.”

Chair of London Play, Melian Mansfield MBE, said: “Opening a new playground is usually seen as a positive thing. But if there is no money to maintain it, or it is replacing adventurous play with less exciting play – or worse, it is nothing more than a token effort – then the benefits to children and the community become questionable.”

“Neglected playgrounds become a magnet for antisocial behaviour; families stay away and litter, dog mess and graffiti take over.”

Melian Mansfield, London Play

Meanwhile, more than a quarter of London's local authorities are planning playground closures in the next three years. The capital has suffered the loss of six staffed adventure playgrounds since the outset of the pandemic, bringing the total to around 70, down from 82 just a decade ago. Most adventure playgrounds in London are run by independent charities, but they remain highly dependent on local authority grants or contracts making them very susceptible to cuts.

Councils are undoubtedly in a difficult position. Over the decade to 2020, London boroughs' 'spending power' fell by over a third; this year they face a £700m funding gap on top of £400m last year. In Wales – and now in Scotland too – play provision is a statutory duty for councils. But not in England. Play is inevitably in the sightlines when cuts are needed.

“The overall picture is perhaps not as dire as feared, given that we are emerging from a pandemic, in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis,” says Melian. “It is heartening to find that London councils see play as a priority for them. But until central government makes play provision a statutory duty, and funds it properly, it will continue to be highly vulnerable to cuts. Play is not just ‘nice to have’. It is vital for children’s health and happiness, and it is their right, under article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This has been ratified by the UK but must be enshrined in legislation to ensure it is upheld in practice.”

Notes to the editor

1. London Play promotes children's right to play, campaigns for more and improved out-of-school play services for children and young people across London, and supports play work in the capital.
2. London Play is grateful to [Trust for London](#) for supporting our [Communities United for Play](#) initiative which enabled us to carry out this vital survey.
3. Thanks to all our other funders which as well as Trust for London include Garfield Weston, the Mayor of London, The National Lottery Community Fund and The Royal Parks.
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www.londonplay.org.uk
phone: 0203 384 8510 - email: info@londonplay.org.uk

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