Staffed adventure playgrounds: a crucial component of local play provision

A (further) submission to the Commission on Play

London Play, May 2025

Somerford Grove Adventure Playground, Haringey

The interim report from the Commission on Play alludes to the difference between adventure playgrounds and a typical 'local playground' and commits the commission to finding out more about adventure playgrounds in advance of publishing its final report. This submission from London Play seeks to contribute to this evidence base and further, make a strong argument that the final report should include and recognise **staffed adventure playgrounds** as a distinct and vital component of the 'play ecosystem' (infrastructure and services) in any given locality – which is **separate and additional to standard public playgrounds.**

1 Introduction

London Play is a charity with a vision of a capital city where all children have the freedom to play outside daily near to where they live. A key focus is promoting, protecting and supporting London's remaining 72 staffed adventure playgrounds, because we understand the vast benefits they bring to children and communities in some of the capital's least affluent areas. We also understand the perilous state in which many exist after years of austerity. The capital has seen at least 12 staffed adventure playgrounds close in the past 12 years and we are acutely aware that the future of several more currently hangs in the balance.

We are extremely concerned at the trend to replace staffed adventure playgrounds with standard fixed-equipment playgrounds, which, as the evidence we submit here shows, fill a very different role in the overall play ecosystem.

A period of what could be viewed as 'managed decline' often precedes the decision to replace an adventure playground with a less challenging, unstaffed, fixed equipment playground – or even worse, pay-to-play (as happened in Battersea). The 'new' playground is then inevitably promoted as a wonderful investment and a great thing for the community – rather than acknowledging the tragic permanent loss that it actually represents.

The most recent example of this is Frederick's Adventure Playground in Southwark which was initially closed in 2019 due to the discovery of asbestos in the soil. It remained closed throughout the pandemic and until November last year when it was reopened as an unstaffed, fixed equipment standard playground described as reflecting the council's "commitment to investing in high quality play spaces that support the health and wellbeing of residents."

The commission's interim report does note that adventure playgrounds are 'particularly effective in encouraging children and young people into natural spaces'. We agree this is the case, however it is only a very small part of the hugely important role they play in children's lives.

We welcome the commitment made by the commission to hearing more from adventure playground practitioners and understand that a number of meetings and visits have now taken place. Practitioners no doubt have made a strong case for those adventure playgrounds that already exist to be protected and supported; and for new staffed adventure playgrounds to be established in areas where they are most needed.

London Play has been working since the interim report was published to collect views from London adventure playworkers on what they would like to see in the final report. We have also directly consulted the children who play at London adventure playgrounds – whose voices should be front and centre in any consideration of what is needed to support their play.

This brief report summarises our findings which we trust will be useful to the commission in developing its final publication.

2 Voice of adventure playworker practitioners

In April 2025 London Play convened a focus group of 23 adventure playworker practitioners to discuss the commission's interim report and what we hope would be included in relation to staffed adventure playgrounds in the final version. The following points were agreed:

1. Supervised play spaces and in particular, **staffed adventure playgrounds**, are a unique and crucial part of the overall play ecosystem that public authorities should provide for young people, especially in densely populated urban areas.
2. **Adventure playgrounds are distinct** from fixed equipment public playgrounds typically found in parks or on housing estates in local areas. Their unique offer includes:
    - catering for an **older age group**, 6-15yo (typically under-served for play);
    - providing for a **wider variety of activities and behaviours** than is possible in unstaffed fixed equipment playgrounds – including challenging physical play giving children the opportunity to learn to assess and manage risk;
    - the **presence of staff: highly skilled playworkers** who are experts in facilitating an environment that constantly changes in line with children's needs/wishes, and which supports the highest quality and variety of play types. Also in interpreting and responding to children's play cues, and many other skills;
    - providing **an environment where children are safe** from antisocial behaviour, bullying, dogs and crime which are major barriers to independent play in unsupervised settings (as noted in the commission's interim report);
    - **being inclusive and welcoming** for children of all abilities, backgrounds and circumstances; and
    - being the only settings which are **wholly child-centred** and support play in its purest and most beneficial form: ie any children's behaviour that is freely chosen, intrinsically motivated and performed for no external goal or reward;
3. **A trained and nationally recognised professional play workforce is essential** to the existence of high-quality play environments and to uphold playwork principles, centering the needs of children.
4. Playworkers at staffed adventure playgrounds play a key role in **advocating for play** with parents and the wider community; promoting the value of play and what high quality play provision looks like.

London Play recommends that staffed adventure playgrounds are recognised and promoted as 'Centres of Excellence' for play: places crucial to thriving childhoods and where children can develop skills that will equip them for a rapidly changing, uncertain future: including (but not limited to) resilience, independence, self-knowledge, adaptability, creativity, collaboration, respect, acceptance and understanding of the world around them.

We also recommend that play workers at adventure playgrounds are recognised and promoted as local 'Ambassadors for Play': seen as the go-to experts for parents and carers, schools, community groups, and anyone who lives or works with children, to offer guidance and support on developing an environment, culture and ethos that supports the highest quality of child-led play experiences.

3 The voice of children

London Play is strongly committed to including children's voices in all our work. To this end, during April 2025 we asked more than 120 children attending adventure playgrounds what they thought was most special about their playgrounds, and what they see as the main differences between staffed adventure playgrounds compared with standard fixed equipment play provision of the type typically found in parks or on housing estates.

The responses were collected from children ranging in age from 6 to 15 years at 16 different adventure playgrounds. Questions were open ended to ensure that we did not influence their answers, so we have used wordclouds to highlight the key themes emerging.

3.1 What's the most special thing about your adventure playground?

FIG 1: What's the most special thing about your adventure playground?

As seen in the wordcloud above, the themes emerging in the words of children clearly support those agreed by playworkers in the focus groups. Below we give some verbatim quotes contributing to the four most dominant themes:

- **Fun, freedom and the variety and quality of the play experience**

Children often referred to the excitement and variety of play opportunities available including risky, challenging play, building using tools, and quieter, creative opportunities.

"*Here you can actually build, whatever you want. Whereas in other playgrounds adults have built it for you and say: 'now you play with that'.*" (child at an Islington adventure playground)

"*Here, [if] you want to do something – you do that something. In the park, [if] you want to do something… hmm let's see if you are allowed to do that thing? No!*" (child at an Islington adventure playground)

"I come here because it's very fun and adventurous. And like, very, it gets messy, but then it's fun at the same time, and it's just like, really good. So that's why I like coming here." (11 y/o girl)

"We can do crazy things like make mess." (12 y/o boy)

"If you want to, you could roast marshmallows here on Friday, on the fire. (9 y/o girl)

- **An inclusive environment where strong and diverse friendships thrive**

Children see the adventure playground as a place where they can make friends and be accepted for who they are. They are free to access and children are free to be themselves. No one is left out, and diversity and difference is valued.

"I can have a better chance to meet new friends. And, also a time and space where I can be with other people instead of like my other friends." (10 y/o girl)

"It's really great for people who struggle making friends, like I struggle with making friends and I've made so many friends. Almost everyone here knows me." (12 y/o girl)

"It's somewhere where I can play with my disabled brother and be safe." (8 y/o boy)

"I have grown up here, so it feels like my second home." (11 y/o boy)

"I like coming to adventure because I feel free." (13 y/o boy)

- **A place of safety**

Because of the presence of staff, children (and their parents) feel safe – from bullying, crime and antisocial behaviour; and in meeting basic needs of warmth, shelter and food.

"[Here] feels more safe. Like there's people looking around and looking after you and if anything like bad happens you always have someone there." (10 y/o boy)

"A playground in the park, there wouldn't be as much stuff to play with. Yeah. And also here there's toilets. And there's like poo in the park around." (7 y/o boy)

"This area is not safe with too many gangs of older kids and knife crime. When I'm in the playground with the workers my family know I am safe and they don't worry." (12 y/o boy)

"So if ever you're cold, there's a building so just go over there and it's nice. And in winter we have a fire so if ever you're cold you just go over there, so nice, nice." (12 y/o girl)

- **The presence of staff – people, workers**

Playworker staff were repeatedly referred to as trusted adults who are pivotal in creating the fun, safe, inclusive environment described as what makes adventure playgrounds uniquely valuable. Their focus is only on meeting the needs of children, as decided by children themselves.

"We get to make besties with the playworkers." (10 y/o girl)

"The workers take good care of us and look after us if we are hurt or need something." (8 y/o girl)

"Whether it's bulldog in the football pitch or rainy day painting, it's all due to the workers fantastic efforts to make everyone feel welcome and making sure everyone feels comfortable with something that they can enjoy." (13 y/o boy)

3.2 Why won't your parents or carers allow you to go unaccompanied to a local playground in the park or housing estate?

Over half of the children surveyed (52 per cent) said that while their parents or carers were happy for them to be on their own at the adventure playground, they would not allow them to go unaccompanied to a local standard playground in the park or on an estate.

When asked the reasons why, safety, supervision and catering for additional needs were the dominant answers as shown in Figure 2, below.

FIG 2: Why won't your parents or carers allow you to go to a playground in a nearby park or housing estate unaccompanied?

"I can only go to [name provided] adventure [playground] my mum will not let me play out on my estate because it's not safe." (10 y/o boy)

"Daddy said he knows the adventure playground is very safe for us when he is at work." (8 y/o girl)

"Because I am too young." (10 y/o girl)

"My son cannot go to the park unattended because of his learning disability." (parent of 14 y/o boy)

It is abundantly clear from these responses that a fixed equipment playground in a park or on a housing estate is in no way equivalent to – or a replacement for – a staffed adventure playground when it comes to enabling access to play. Largely because of safety concerns, children are often simply not permitted out to play in unsupervised spaces and instead are kept indoors.

This evidence supports the findings in the commission's interim report which notes that crime and antisocial behaviour is ranked by nearly half of all adults as their biggest concern about their local area.

3.3 What do you think makes an adventure playground different from a standard playground in the park or on an estate?

Finally, answers to this more general question broadly mirrored those above. As Figure 3 below shows, fun, friends and safety were the dominant themes here as was presence of staff.

FIG 3: What do you think the main differences are between an adventure playground like this one, and a standard playground in the park or on a housing estate?

4. Conclusion

The final report from the Commission on Play must make clear that staffed adventure playgrounds are a crucial element of play provision in any given locality, which are distinct to – and different from – standard, fixed-equipment playgrounds in parks and housing estates. They offer children a wider variety of high-quality play opportunities; and are inclusive and safe. These conditions are made possible by the presence of skilled and experienced staff.

London Play was delighted to see the level of public discourse on play prompted by the interim report and look forward to the final report building on this positively. We support the recommendations made so far. The recommendation to adopt a National Play Strategy underpinned by play sufficiency legislation and ringfenced funding for play would potentially transform decision-makers' attitudes and create real change for children. Likewise, the recommendation to reestablish a skilled and sustainable play workforce is crucial to ensuring play and playwork is given formal recognition of its importance.

Today's existing staffed adventure playgrounds and the skilled workforce that upholds these spaces and promotes and protects the ethos that underpins them could play a pivotal role in implementing these and future recommendations from the commission. But we need to act fast to prevent further shrinking of the sector and enable them to fulfil this potential. Adventure playgrounds should be reimagined as Centres of Excellence in play, with workers becoming Play Ambassadors, building awareness in political and public spheres about the vital importance of play to health and wellbeing – not just of children today, but also the society of tomorrow.

Thank you for spending the time to read our contribution. We are happy to provide further details or answer any questions, please contact fiona.sutherland@londonplay.org.uk

APPENDIX 1: ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND CLOSURES

London adventure playground closures since 2013

1. 2013: Battersea Park AP Wandsworth
2. 2013: Kimber Road AP Wandsworth
3. 2013: York Gardens AP Wandsworth
4. 2015: Stonebridge AP Brent
5. 2016: Florence Hayes AP Enfield
6. 2018: Kilburn Grange AP Camden
7. 2020: Frederick's AP Southwark
8. 2020: White City AP Hammersmith and Fulham
9. 2021: Burgess Park AP Southwark
10. 2021: Leyton Square AP Southwark
11. 2021: Surrey Docks AP Southwark
12. 2022: The Limes Waltham Forest

At the time of writing London Play is aware that the future of several staffed adventure playgrounds is in doubt, particularly in light of the expected end of HAF (Holiday Activities and Food) funding in 2026.

APPENDIX 2: LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

London Play acknowledges and thanks all the children and/or playworkers at the following London adventure playgrounds and organisations, whose responses and contributions helped shape this submission.

- Awesome CIC, Islington
- Barnard Adventure Playground, Islington
- Coldharbour Adventure Playground, Greenwich
- Cornwallis Adventure Playground, Islington
- Dog Kennel Hill Adventure Playground, Southwark
- ELHAP, Redbridge
- Glamis Adventure Playground, Tower Hamlets
- Hackney Marsh Adventure Playground, Hackney
- Homerton Grove Adventure Playground, Hackney
- Islington Play Association, Islington
- Lollard Street Adventure Playground, Lambeth
- Make Do Play, Islington/London
- Marble Hill Adventure Playground, Richmond
- Martin Luther King Adventure Playground, Islington
- Max Roach at Loughborough Community Centre, Lambeth
- Mint Street Adventure Playground, Southwark
- Pearson Street Adventure Playground, Hackney
- Somerford Grove Adventure Playground, Haringey
- Stewarts Road Adventure Playground, Lambeth
- Three Corners Adventure Playground, Islington
- Triangle Adventure Playground, Lambeth
- Waterside Adventure Playground, Islington