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# Children's playgrounds: 'inadequacies and mediocrities inherited from the past'?

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## ABSTRACT

This Viewpoint considers why children's playground provision has changed so little in the UK over the last century despite radical changes in our understanding of children's geographies, considerable research into play space design and committed advocacy that has promoted children's more equitable access the city. It argues that the equipped playground has become increasingly embedded in to social, political and professional attitudes relating to the provision of public space for play. This history continues to have an enduring influence on the present-day management and maintenance of more than 26,000 children's playgrounds and the £86m spent on them each year.

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## Introduction

The children's playground is a ubiquitous feature of villages, towns and cities in the UK, seemingly the obvious and accepted public space for play. However, campaigners have long argued that the form and function of such spaces have not kept pace with our understanding of – or aspirations for – modern childhood (Shackell et al. 2008; Gill 2021). Interdisciplinary research findings, policy recommendations and sustained campaigning have promoted alternative visions for urban play, but they have largely failed to make a widespread difference to play provision or the wider city landscape. Despite considerable advances in our understanding of children's spatial agency (Woolley 2015) and playful needs (Ball et al. 2019), the design of public playgrounds in the UK today has changed little since the early twentieth century. Despite attempts to promote more adventurous, creative and naturalistic play opportunities, playground provision remains dominated by manufactured playground equipment, much as it has done since the 1930s. How can we account for the remarkable stickiness of this specific vision for the playground and its place in the urban environment?

In this Viewpoint piece, I argue that the previously overlooked history of the children's playground can help us to understand the present-day barriers to more widespread change. Such barriers include a long history of central government disinterest and conversely an emphasis on optional and local provision; dispersed responsibility across every tier of local and regional government; and the enduring involvement of commercial equipment suppliers in shaping visions for public play space. As a result of these historical themes, the equipped playground remains firmly embedded within political, professional and social conceptions of the ideal place for children's public play. The preliminary findings of a survey exploring the quantity and cost of present-day

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playground provision will be shared at the end of this Viewpoint, highlight the ongoing complexity associated with ownership and management responsibility. This in turn makes it difficult for research and associated policy recommendations to directly affect widespread change, presenting a significant challenge for children's geographers and campaigners.

## A brief history of the playground

In briefly considering the history of the children's playground, we shall see that it has long acted as a site of both scholarly and public debate about the place of the child in the city. For some, the playground is an established and necessary feature of the urban environment, albeit with considerable scope to improve its design, layout and prominence. In 2022, several articles were published in *Children's Geographies* which examined attempts to create more inclusive and accessible playgrounds (Moore, Boyle, and Lynch 2022; Wenger et al. 2022). The playground has also been shown to be an important component in creating and legitimising playfulness among children and adults beyond the conventionally delineating boundary fence (Pitsikali and Parnell 2019).

The recent interest in the playground in this journal continues a long running debate about the design, layout and necessity of dedicated places for play. As early as 1937, the noted town planner Thomas Adams called for playgrounds to be planted up with trees and shrubs and railed against the money wasted on 'repulsive-looking fences' (Adams 1937, 26). From the 1940s onwards, influential and high-profile interventions in the debate about play provision have today achieved almost iconic status. Marjory Allen's 1946 *Picture Post* essay is often associated with the start of the adventure playground movement in Britain, but she produced many subsequent publications advocating for better play space design more generally (Allen 1946; 1962; 1964, 1968). Although critical of existing playgrounds, neither Adams nor Allen questioned the principle that dedicated public play space was necessary. In the intervening decades, there has been considerable design guidance for adults seeking to create better public places for children to play and seeking to legitimise children's place in the urban landscape (for a flavour see Dattner 1969; Wuellner 1979; Heseltine and Holborn 1987; Shackell et al. 2008; Hendricks 2017; Pitsikali, Parnell, and McIntyre 2020).

In contrast, mid-century critics of modern city planning, including Jane Jacobs and Kevin Lynch, questioned the underlying assumptions which had previously justified the creation of dedicated spaces for play. Although grounded in her experience of cities in the USA, Jacobs' work was highly influential internationally and formed part of a wider questioning of whether playgrounds were necessary at all. She argued that it was a 'nonsensical ... fantasy that playgrounds and parks are automatically OK places for children, and streets are automatically not OK places for children' (Jacobs 1964, 91). In the UK, a wave of sociological research and anarchic writing in the 1960s and 1970s also questioned assumptions about the purpose of the playground and children's wider place in the city. For radical writers and scholars, there was a sense that children were waging a war against grown-ups and their expectations about where and how children should play (Ward 1961; 1978; Thompson 1975).

Furthermore, in the 1960s sociological and geographical studies of the urban environment increasingly found that playgrounds were often at most incidental to children's lives. For example, Vere Hole's study of play on urban housing estates, using observation, time lapse photography and film, found that playgrounds acted much like a neighbourhood pub did for adults; the playground was one of many places where children socialised with friends and played, but it was far from the only place where this took place (Hole 1966). In mapping children's experiences of the urban environment, scholars working in the 1970s and 1980s emphasised the extent to which children used and played in a variety of spaces beyond the playground boundary (see, for example, Moore 1986). Since then, children's geographers in particular have consistently challenged the assumption that playgrounds are all that is needed to meet the playful requirements of public childhoods (Murnaghan 2018).

However, while the equipped playground has often been presented as the antagonist in debate about play provision, a more detailed exploration of its history highlights a more complex story. One of the early enablers of the equipped playground, the philanthropic business owner Charles Wicksteed (1878-1931), had originally set out to create a fun and exciting place to play, free from the regulations, gender segregation and structured exercise that were common to the 'children's gymnasiums' of the late nineteenth century (Winder 2023). In the public park and playground that he created at the centre of his garden suburb in Kettering, Wicksteed did away with officious park keepers and restrictive bye laws, encouraging children and adults to enjoy playing together in an expansive, naturalistic parkland setting. He ensured lasting public access to the playground and sought to guarantee future financial sustainability by establishing a charitable trust to own the site and endowing it with shares in his company. A keen inventor, he developed robust play equipment, loosely based on amusement park rides, that would allow children to use his products, including the Jazz Swing and Joy Ride, however, they wanted. In Wicksteed's view, indestructible equipment set in a large park freed children to be themselves, to play how they wished, in close contact with the natural world (in a curated form at least) and away from the perceived and life-threatening dangers of streets.

However, as interwar councillors, park administrators and architects sought to replicate this vision by installing Wicksteed's products in thousands of playgrounds, his values rarely accompanied the equipment. In the 1920s and 1930s, the number of playgrounds increased rapidly as part of a wider investment in public leisure facilities. Small and large play spaces were laid out with manufactured equipment, with little input from children and virtually no space left for other playful activity, planting or amenities. Newington Recreation Ground in Southwark provides a notable example from the 1930s, where the 1-hectare playground included 45 swings. But this was not an isolated example and playgrounds were increasing dominated by commercial equipment, including giant strides, seesaws, rocking horses, merry-go-rounds and ocean waves. Early suppliers included Wicksteed & Co from Kettering, as well as Spencer, Heath & George in London and Bayliss, Jones & Bayliss in Wolverhampton.

In 1970, sociologists Anthea Holme and Peter Massie published their survey of children's playground provision at that time. Reacting against the equipped playground, they felt that much needed to be done to avoid repeating the 'inadequacies and mediocrities inherited from the past' (Holme and Massie 1970, 27). They found that many play spaces were uninspiring, unimaginatively designed and often lacked any stimuli for play, acknowledging that the location and design of playgrounds had not kept pace with shifting understandings of childhood nor research into the experiences of children. As we have already seen, this was not the first critique of the equipped playground. But it did highlight the extent to which playground provision in 1970 had generally changed very little in 40 years, despite the active work of pioneering campaigners such as Marjory Allen, the landscape architect Mary Mitchell and sociologist Margaret Willis at the London County Council. In the half-century since then, and despite the work of children's geographers and others, the form of the playground has remained largely unchanged.

In part this is because responsibility for play space provision has remained fragmented and dispersed. Dedicated public places for children's play have been demarcated since at least the late nineteenth century, with more sporadic, mid-nineteenth-century examples too. However, in this long history, the provision of playgrounds has rarely been a concern for central government and has never been a statutory responsibility for local and regional authorities. The 1859 Recreation Ground Act may have empowered local authorities to provide playgrounds for children but, as we shall see, few did so at the time. Twentieth century town planning legislation, notably provisions for Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy obligations, have enabled municipal authorities to insist that housing developments include designated space for play. However, playground provision remained at the discretion of local government.

At the same time, central government has largely maintained a longstanding disinterest, with very little guidance or advice given to local providers. When central government has become

involved in debate about play provision, it has invariably endorsed conservative notions of playground design. In relation to playgrounds on new municipal housing estates, the Department of Environment and Welsh Office joint circular 79/72 stated that ‘all play spaces shall be furnished from the items of play equipment shown in the following list’, a shortlist which comprised generic manufactured equipment including the swing, slide, climbing frame and see saw (Department of the Environment and Welsh Office 1972). Archival records show that behind the scenes, officials had worked directly with equipment manufacturers to develop the circular and its list of equipment. The very brief interlude provided by the Playbuilder programme, from 2008 to 2010, was one of the few moments when central government advice and funding was broadly aligned with the notions of childhood promoted by advocates for children’s play and the research findings of children’s geographers. However, in 2010, both central government funding and design advice were withdrawn.

Instead, playgrounds have always been a non-statutory, optional and locally provided amenity, with very little central coordination. For much of its history, the playground has depended on the enthusiasm of individual philanthropists, councillors and council officers, and has been grounded in the assumption that adults knew the best ways to provide for children’s play. The earliest promoters of public play provision in Britain were invariably philanthropists and charitable groups working at a local level, often before effective local government structures were in place. Park advocates in Salford and Manchester included gymnastic equipment for children in public green spaces created in the 1840s. Later, the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association and its philanthropic supporters created children’s gymnasiums in garden settings in the poorest parts of late nineteenth century London. In the 1920s and 1930s, municipal government significantly expanded the provision of facilities for public recreation, including playgrounds. As part of mid-century attempts to create more rational towns and cities, planners, architects and housing specialists selected and designed spaces for play in cities across the country. Today, town planners designate specific sites – often labelled Local Equipped Area for Play or Neighbourhood Equipped Area for Play – to meet the perceived needs of children, further reinforcing equipment as the dominant marker of public space for play.

At the same time, this process continues to reinforce the pattern of fragmented responsibility for the creation and design of playgrounds across various tiers and departments within regional and local government, who have in turn relied on the apparent expertise of equipment manufacturers to guide them. In many ways, there is nothing inherently unusual about this. For instance, early park superintendents routinely purchased products and expertise, including plants and flowers from commercial nurseries or benches and greenhouses from specialist suppliers, to help them create public and private green spaces (Floud 2019). However, this dispersed responsibility presents a significant problem for those seeking to improve the design of public play spaces or create child friendly cities more generally. A lack of centralised information means that little is known about how many playgrounds there are in the UK, who owns and maintains them or how much is spent looking after them. Without this data, it is difficult for campaigners to effectively target their advocacy and hard for children’s geographers to have an impact beyond the academy.

## The playground today

As a first step towards answering some of these questions, a pilot project has collected data in relation to playground provision from county and district councils, metropolitan and unitary authorities, London boroughs, one government department and a sample of town and parish councils. Using the Freedom of Information Act (FoI), over four hundred public bodies were asked to provide information in relation to playgrounds in their area. Although the use of FoI requests has some drawbacks, these were significantly outweighed by the benefits for this small, independent pilot project (Savage and Hyde 2014). For the pre-pandemic 2019/2020 financial year, the request asked: how many children’s playgrounds were managed by the authority and how much was spent on them, including inspection, maintenance, repair, replacement and the creation of new playgrounds.

Over 380 responded to the request for information and the results confirm the quantity of playground provision and its complex ownership and management structures.

Responses show that there are at least 26,573 publicly funded children's playgrounds in the UK, owned and managed by all tiers of regional and local government, from large counties and London boroughs to very small parish councils. In Scotland, there are over 4500 playgrounds, the equivalent of one playground per 1200 residents, while in Wales (1896) and Northern Ireland (970) there is approximately one playground per 1800 residents. Over 18,400 playgrounds in England represent one per 3000 residents. In some parts of the UK, all tiers of local and regional government provide playgrounds, including in Dorset where 86 playgrounds are managed by 29 organisations, including a unitary authority, the Ministry of Defence, town councils and parish councils. In other parts of the country, only the lowest tier operates play spaces. For example, in North Kesteven, Lincolnshire, neither the county nor district council own playgrounds and they are instead managed by town and parish councils and voluntary organisations. As might be expected, there is considerable variation in the number of playgrounds provided in each local authority area. More surprisingly, the single public body that provides the most playgrounds in the UK, at 563, is the Ministry of Defence, presumably in connection with the provision of homes for service personnel. At the other end of the scale, some parish councils operate just one playground and spend a few hundred pounds each year maintaining it. In total, the reported annual amount spent on children's playgrounds was over £86 m. However, over 30 authorities (around 9%) reported that they do not hold detailed data on playground costs and so the total public spend is likely to be higher.

These findings represent a first step towards understanding existing provision and thinking about the ways in which it can be improved in response to changing knowledge about the way that children play and experience the urban environment. Children's geographers could do much to expand the scope of these preliminary findings, to analyse patterns and variations within the data, explore detailed case studies, and assess the quality of existing provision. However, even this cursory analysis suggests that the number of playgrounds and the amount spent on them demands further investigation.

## Conclusion

Despite advances in our understanding of childhood and play, and radically altered experiences of childhood, the public spaces set aside for children's play seem rooted in the past. Children's geographers have often been at the forefront of challenging the assumption that playgrounds can singularly meet children's playful needs and promoting alternative visions for play space provision and design. However, longstanding central government disinterest and dispersed responsibility at local and regional levels remain significant features of playground provision today. They also remain major barriers to widespread change, particularly given the enduring involvement of equipment manufacturers in shaping playground norms. Moving beyond the playground to create more genuinely child friendly cities requires an awareness of the historical values embedded in both the principle and form of playground provision. It also demands new strategies to overcome the barriers to change and a renewed focus on sharing research findings with far wider audiences. In these tasks, children's geographers have a vital role to play in promoting more diverse and accessible accounts of children's playful place in the urban environment.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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