

18 July 2024

Sir Keir Starmer
Prime Minister
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Prime Minister,

**Every Child's Need for Everyday Play:
Meeting request to discuss 'Pathway to Play' campaign**

Congratulations on your recent election win and new role. We are excited to hear of your plans to deliver change and focus on preventative measures as a key driver in improving the country's social, economic, educational and health outcomes. As Chair of the UK Association of Play Industries (API), the lead body in the play sector, I am writing to request a meeting with you to discuss how we can support you in prioritising universal access to community play opportunities for all children.

The Critical Importance of Playgrounds

Our [Pathway To Play campaign](#) highlights the urgent need for policy recognition of the value of outdoor play and free-to-use public play spaces. Research indicates a dramatic reduction in children's outdoor play compared to previous generations. We firmly believe that high-quality play facilities play a crucial role in tackling the nation's physical inactivity epidemic, childhood obesity and rising mental health issues.

The Case for Outdoor Play

Outdoor play is an essential aspect of childhood, a basic need like sleep, nutrition and education. However, the misconception that outdoor play is a 'nice to have' rather than a necessity has led to significant policy oversight in providing enough dedicated play spaces. The consequences are dire: children spend more time indoors, tethered to screens and missing out on vital physical, emotional and social development opportunities.

The Role of Public Playgrounds

The largest study of play in Britain, conducted by the University of Reading, revealed that public playgrounds are the most common places for children to play. However, our research highlights a concerning trend of playground closures due to inadequate funding. According to research by Fields in Trust, 1 in 3 children in Britain (2.3mn) don't have access to any nearby playgrounds. Local authorities, struggling with budget constraints, have been forced to close hundreds of playgrounds in recent years, further limiting children's access to essential play areas.

We are calling on the government to make a commitment to:

- Conduct a national audit: assess the quantity, quality and location of public playgrounds
- Ensure long-term sustainability: provide dedicated funding for the installation and upkeep of free-to-use community play spaces
- Increase physical activity levels in schools: integrate outdoor learning into the National Curriculum and fund school play spaces and equipment

Addressing the Decline

The decline in playground provision is stark. Our reports indicate a 44% decrease in spending on play facilities from 2017/18 to 2020/21. Recent research by the Guardian shows a £350 million reduction in park budgets over 11 years, leading to deteriorating and inaccessible playgrounds. This trend is contributing to the shift

Association of Play Industries

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from outdoor play to indoor screen time, with parents expressing concern over their children's increasing screen usage and declining physical activity.

The Need for Equitable Access

There is also a significant disparity in children's access to public play areas across the UK, with some regions having nearly five times more children per playground than others. This inequity particularly affects urban areas and disadvantaged communities, where playgrounds are often the only opportunity for outdoor play.

Inclusive Playgrounds for All

Moreover, many playgrounds are not accessible to disabled children, further excluding them from the benefits of outdoor play. Research by Scope indicates that almost half of families with disabled children face accessibility issues, emphasising the need for inclusive playground equipment and designs.

A Call to Action

We are facing an inactivity epidemic among children, with alarming rates of obesity, Type 2 diabetes and mental health issues. Recreational screen time has replaced outdoor play, contributing to these health challenges. Investing in high-quality, accessible public playgrounds is a relatively modest measure that can yield significant health benefits for children.

Meeting Request

I have attached our latest report, [Every Child's Right to Everyday Play: The Case for Playgrounds](#) and hope you find this useful. As you will know, the cost of prevention is often significantly lower than the cost of cure. I am hoping that I can appeal to the economic logic of allocating a (relatively small) amount of government funds to the provision of public play spaces. In a relatively small timeframe, this investment would pay significant dividends.

We would greatly appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to discuss how we can work together to prioritise outdoor play as a non-negotiable aspect of childhood development. By investing in public playgrounds, we can ensure that all children, regardless of their background or location, have access to the benefits of outdoor play.

Thank you for considering our request. We look forward to the possibility of discussing this important issue with you in more detail.

Yours sincerely,

Amanda Gummer

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