

UK COVID-19 Inquiry: Module 2 - Rule 9 Request to Playing Out Reference: M2/R9R/PO/TJS

Please provide the following information:

- 1. A brief overview of the history, legal status and aims of the organisation or body. Please explain whether the work of the organisation or body is UK wide, or is instead confined to England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland only.**

Playing Out began as a community project in 2009 and was incorporated as a CIC in 2011. It is a not-for-profit community interest company with a voluntary Board of Directors.

Our organisational purpose is to enable children to play out safely in the streets and estates where they live, for their health, happiness and sense of belonging.

Towards this aim, over the past 12 years we have developed and supported the resident-led 'play street' model now adopted by over 1,400 street communities across the UK (involving 21,000 adults and 42,000 children). 92 local authorities have so far developed play street policies based on our model and we have worked with Government to clarify the legal basis for this. Alongside this we campaign for children's right to play out where they live, both directly supporting parents and lobbying for policy change (e.g. for safer streets and more child-friendly housing estates).

We work across the UK (and internationally) and have links with organisations and local groups in all four nations but our main focus and reach is England.

- 2. A brief description of the group(s) which the organisation or body supports or represents.**

- a. Children. All children and particularly those facing economic or other disadvantage. This group is our main focus. In particular, we represent and support children's need and right to play outside near home, for their health, wellbeing, social interaction, development and belonging in community.
- b. Parents and residents. Alongside children, our work involves supporting and learning from parents and others who support children's right to play out.

Towards this, we also work directly with community groups, local authorities, housing associations and other organisations across the UK (mainly England) with an overlapping interest in children's wellbeing / health / physical activity / play, the built environment and community.

- 3. A brief overview of the work of the organisation or body in supporting or representing the relevant group(s) between January 2020 and Spring 2022 as it relates to the response to Covid-19 of (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive.**

Our work supporting and representing children and parents during the pandemic includes:

- From very early in the pandemic, bringing together a group of organisations and experts in children's rights, play and health to co-ordinate activity around the impact of the Govt pandemic response for children.
- Responding to queries from local authorities in England who faced great confusion over how to interpret UK Government rules and messaging about playgrounds and outdoor play.
- Responding to queries from parents and residents wanting clarification of rules around children playing outside.
- Responding to particular instances of children being wrongly prevented from playing outside or reprimanded for doing so, due to misinterpretation of the (very unclear) rules, including by police and other authorities.

- Putting out regular, up to date information (on our website and via social media) on how UK Government rules and messaging impacted children and access to outdoor play.
- Highlighting differences in the four national Governments' approach to children and outdoor play
- Playing Out led the campaign asking the Prime Minister to acknowledge that playing outside was exercise during lockdowns. We gained significant national media coverage including all the main papers, Sky News and the BBC. This resulted in a partial response and clarification from the Government around children's outdoor play.
- Calling for UK Government rules and messaging to recognise and support children's right to play outside in England, as they were allowed and encouraged to do in Scotland and Wales.
- Co-ordinating open letters and public campaigning with other national organisations and experts with shared interest in children's rights and wellbeing
- Leading an "OKtoPlay" public awareness campaign, communicating to parents and others that children's outdoor play was permitted under the rules in England, following verbal confirmation from Government representatives (whilst it was not clear in official rules and messaging).
- Working with Just for Kids Law and CRAE to challenge the Government on legal grounds of discrimination against children, particularly in relation to the "1:1 rule" that in practice allowed adults to meet a friend outside but prevented children from doing the same.
- Regular communication with the Children's Commissioner's office at a policy level, feeding into Anne Longfield's calls for Government action on children and outdoor play during the pandemic and feeding into Rachel de Souza's "Big Ask" survey of children.
- Putting out press releases and responding to media interest in stories about children's lack of access to outdoor play during the pandemic.
- Gathering real-time qualitative evidence of the direct impact of covid regulations and messaging on children's access to outdoor time/play in order to support our calls for policy change.
- Highlighting the particular impact of regulations on children and families facing disadvantage and lack of access to space.
- Collating a body of academic research on the longer-term impact for children's mental and physical health and their personal and social development.
- Working with Save the Children UK on a 'Summer of Play' campaign in 2021 to raise awareness of children's need to recover from the impact of lockdowns. <https://www.summerofplay.co.uk/>
- Working with the Royal Psychological Society on their "Let the Children Play" campaign when schools began to cut play time in favour of academic 'catch-up' post-covid. <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/let-children-play>

Some of the other organisations and experts who we worked or jointly lobbied with during the pandemic are listed below. Many of these also conducted their own research and lobbying and/or were working directly with impacted children and families. In particular, the national play organisations for Wales, Scotland and NI will have more information on the pandemic responses of their respective governments and the impact for children's play, health and wellbeing.

Play England <https://www.playengland.org.uk/> Chair: Anita Grant anita-grant@Name Redacted

Play Scotland <https://www.playscotland.org/> Chief Exec: Marguerite Hunter Blair

marguerite@playscotland.org

NI Playboard <http://www.playboard.org/> Contact: Alan Herron Alan.Herron@playboard.co.uk

Play Wales <https://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/> Director: Mike Greenaway mike@playwales.org.uk

London Play <https://londonplay.org.uk/> Director: Paul Hocker paul.hocker@londonplay.org.uk

Ludicology <https://ludicology.com/> Contact: mike@ludicology.com

Prof Alison Stenning, Newcastle University: alison.stenning@newcastle.ac.uk

Prof Wendy Russell, University of Gloucestershire: wrussell@glos.ac.uk

Tim Gill, Rethinking Childhood: tim@rethinkingchildhood.com

Adrian Voce, Playful Planet: adrian@playfulplanet.org.uk

Prof Helen Dodd, University of Exeter: h.dodd@exeter.ac.uk

Dr Sunil Bhopal, Academic clinical lecturer in paediatrics, Newcastle University: sunil.bhopal@ncl.ac.uk

4. A list of any articles or reports the organisation or body has published or contributed to, and/or evidence it has given (for example to Parliamentary Select Committees) regarding the impact on the group(s) which the organisation or body supports or represents of the response to Covid-19 by (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive. Please include links to those documents where possible.

17 April 2020 Contributed to research paper by Professors Wendy Russell and Alison Stenning, showing why outdoor play is important for children's wellbeing during the pandemic and making recommendations. Sent to DCHLG and Children's Commissioner. <https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/alisonstenning/files/2020/04/Improving-Safe-Access-to-Street-Space-for-Childrens-Play-and-Physical-Activity-FINAL.pdf>

23 April 2020 Received email from Children's Commissioner's office saying, "I'll also be using the information you've provided to help shape our response to this select committee inquiry looking at the unequal impact of lockdown on specific groups, including children". We didn't see the response. <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/328/women-and-equalities-committee/news/145780/coronavirus-covid-19-inquiry-launched/>

4 August 2020. Further research paper published by Wendy Russell and Alison Stenning: Children, play and community on streets during and after the coronavirus lockdown <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23748834.2020.1795386>

11 Jan 2021 Submitted written evidence to Joint Committee on Human Rights (response to call for evidence on The Government's response to covid-19: human rights implications of long lockdown) <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/855/the-governments-response-to-covid19-human-rights-implications-of-long-lockdown/>

Extract from this submission:

Lockdown – in particular the rules and guidelines relating to England – has seriously and unnecessarily impacted children's right to play, with serious consequences for their health and wellbeing, particularly during a time when both schools and after-school activities are closed.

Whilst both Welsh and Scottish governments have explicitly recognised the crucial importance to children of being able to play outside with friends in their lockdown rules and guidance, there has been a distinct lack of consideration or mention of this in the rules and guidance for England.

Whilst 'exercise' is a permitted reason for leaving home, there is no clarity in the rules that outdoor play counts as exercise for children, or that adults may be outdoors to supervise children playing. This has meant that many parents have lacked confidence to allow children outside at all – and those that have done so have risked being fined or criminalised.

Further to this, whilst the rules in England currently exempt children under-5s from being counted in the 'rule of 2' (people meeting outdoors), this does not extend to children aged 5-11, as it does in Scotland. In practice, this means that any child over the age of 4 who is still too young to be outside unaccompanied has been prevented from having any social contact at all during lockdown.

We and others have been calling for all this to be considered since the first lockdown in April and yet nothing has changed for children. Last week, a letter co-signed by many experts and organisations on this subject was sent to the Prime Minister. We are waiting for a response. Playing Out, 11 Jan 2021.

19 Jan 2021 Published further research findings from Wendy Russell and Alison Stenning <https://playingout.net/blog/researching-playfulness-on-residential-streets-during-lockdown/>

28 Jan 2021 Submitted written evidence to Lords Select Committee on National Plan for Sport and Recreation <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/21900/html/>

December 2021: Contributed to Children's Alliance (APPG on a Fit and Healthy Childhood) report on Children's Physical Health, including impact of pandemic response. Key policy recommendations included: "Future Government responses to pandemics/other emergencies to include a focus on children to include provision for children's play in all policy recommendations" <https://childrensalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Physical-Health-of-Children-and-Young-People-Report-Dec2021.pdf>

5. The view of the organisation or body as to whether the group(s) it supports or represents was adequately considered when decisions about the response to Covid-19 were made by (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive. Please also explain the reasons for the view expressed by the organisation or body in this respect.

a) The UK Government

Our overall view is that the UK Government did not come close to adequately considering children in its covid response decision-making. Others will have much to say about this in different policy areas including, but not limited to, education. We will focus on our area of interest/expertise: Children's access to outdoor play (space, physical activity and social interaction).

Play - underpinning children's mental wellbeing, physical health and development - is a right under the UNCRC, to which the UK Government is a signatory. <http://ipaworld.org/childs-right-to-play/uncrc-article-31/un-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child-1/>

The Welsh Government upholds this right in its [Play Policy](#) and the Scottish Government has enshrined children's right to play outdoors every day in its national Health and Social Care Standards: "As a child, I play outdoors every day and regularly explore a natural environment" (HSCS 1.32). Despite the requirements of the Charter and firm evidence of the importance of outdoor play for children's health, wellbeing and development, the UK Government currently has no such commitment.

Perhaps reflecting this, the UK Government's covid response did not appear to consider children's need for play, physical activity and social interaction, where both the Welsh and Scottish Governments did. There also appeared to be no balancing of the risk/vs harms for children in decision-making.

Some specific ways decisions did not consider children:

- All rules, guidance and messaging were geared towards adults and prioritised adult needs/activities
- No clarity about outdoor play for children in rules or official messaging; no clear advice to public, local authorities or police – resulting in confusion, vastly different interpretations and responses and ultimately many children being prevented or discouraged from playing outside
- Children were discriminated against by the 1:1 rule in England (which allowed any adult to meet one friend outside but effectively prevented children aged 5 and above from doing so if they needed adult supervision to go outside).
- Counting children aged 5 and over in the 1:1 rule also meant single parents were unable to meet up with a friend (as they would need to have their child with them)
- Grassroots sports clubs remained closed whilst pubs - and even schools - reopened
- No apparent consideration of spatial inequalities for children – assumptions made about access to gardens or formal play areas
- No recognition that children can play outside of playgrounds e.g. in streets and public space

- No attempt to prioritise play and social interaction as part of covid recovery and “catch up” for children when schools re-opened

This is all despite the fact that from early on and throughout the pandemic, many organisations, experts and academics were raising concerns and providing evidence of likely harm for children. When concerns were raised, there was a lack of any adequate response from Government - approaches were either ignored, dismissed or passed around from department to department - adding to the sense that children’s wellbeing was very low priority, with nobody in Government seeing it as their responsibility.

As well as all the efforts we and close allies made to raise concerns and offer recommendations (see below), other organisations were also sounding the alarm from early on.

This UN report from April 2020 predicted: ‘Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims’: <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-brief-impact-covid-19-children>

The Play Safety Forum published a paper on ‘Covid 19 and Children’s Play’ on 17 June 2020. <https://playsafetyforum.wordpress.com/covid-19-and-childrens-play/> stating:

“It is concluded that the current UK interventions need to be urgently reviewed because:

- *the benefits to children of playing outside bring a host of social, emotional and physical rewards. These have long been undervalued and at this time appear to have been completely ignored. Consequently, children are suffering harm;*
- *the evidence is that the risks posed by COVID-19 to children playing in outdoor spaces is very low;*
- *proportionate decision-making requires that trade-offs between the risks and benefits of safety interventions are part of the decision process. The evidence summarised below is that current UK policy is much more harmful to children than beneficial.*

An update in September 2020 said, “Whilst I believe that some progress has been made for children, I remain very concerned that the positive role of play has not been properly recognised and supported, particularly in England. For the sake of children’s wellbeing and recovery from this pandemic I would urgently request our UK and National Government in Westminster to recognise the value of children’s play and support its implementation”.

Academics and experts were calling for play to be prioritised for children’s mental wellbeing early on in the pandemic and on return to school: <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=play-first--supporting-childrens-social-and-emotional-wellbeing-during-and-after-lockdown.pdf&site=271>

A parent-led petition clearly asking govt to relax the 1:1 rule for children was rejected by the petitions committee on the grounds that “It’s not clear what the petition is asking the UK Government or Parliament to do”: <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/573194>

Evidence of low transmission risk of children playing outside

“Outdoor transmission is a minimal risk, so it makes sense for the government to lift restrictions on outdoor socialising first. In fact, Scotland has allowed under-12s to play in small groups outdoors since July. This would be an easy win for England and other countries, too” Prof Devi Sridhar, chair of global public health at the University of Edinburgh. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/22/england-covid-roadmap-lockdown-experts-view?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

Safety of outdoor play: <https://playsafetyforum.wordpress.com/covid-19-and-childrens-play/>

Sage advisor on why children outdoors are v safe: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/20/ban-on-outside-sport-can-end-top-scientist-urges-johnson>

Outdoor transmission almost non-existent: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/19/how-the-beach-super-spreader-myth-can-inform-uks-future-covid-response?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

Scotland difference for children and no increased transmission: "It's wonderful here," said Devi Sridhar, professor of global public health at Edinburgh University, who sits on the Scottish Covid advisory committees. "Today, children are playing football, tennis, sledding in groups. If you put rules in place you have to give leeway where we can and we know kids transmit less. We have seen no clusters in children and our numbers are coming down." <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/feb/14/paediatricians-call-for-covid-rules-to-ease-so-children-can-play>

Evidence of harmful impact of UK Govt pandemic response for children

Impact of lack of clarity in rules around play:

(Quoted in press release 18 Jan 2021) One parent from Central London, said, "my children have been told off for playing football in the park during lockdown and the police stopped my daughter and her friend climbing a tree. We don't have much access to outside space other than the parks. I've encouraged the children to go there alone so that they maintain their independence and their fitness levels so it's really frustrating when they are policed so closely for bothering no one and doing no harm".

On Playing Out's Facebook page, one parent said that in the first lockdown, "I was watching my children paddle in the river near my home when a police riot van pulled up alongside me and sent me and my children home. They said I can only be outside to exercise. But how can young children and adults exercise together? It's impossible... young children play to exercise and they need supervising. It 100% needs clarifying so this type of thing doesn't happen again!"

Police threaten to report parents to social services if their children are playing out: <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/police-threaten-report-parents-social-17985089>

Clearly, it's the most disadvantaged children who suffered the most from Covid 19 restrictions. Children without gardens, less access to public space or to bikes and formal 'exercise'. Children whose parents were afraid of being judged or even fined for taking them out to play in busy public space close to home. <https://playingout.net/blog/playground-closures-just-tip-of-the-iceberg-for-children/>

Impact of 1:1 Rule for children:

"My son Jamie (aged 8) has been completely withdrawn from his peer-group, isolated and has become very quiet. Adult contact and company is just not enough - he needs other children. His sleep has been affected - he has developed shadows under his eyes and looks unwell. Had the rules allowed and encouraged children to play outdoors - especially with other children - it would have made a huge difference to his wellbeing. It is very difficult to persuade a child that age to go out for a walk every day with a parent, whereas they would jump at the chance to play outdoors with a friend." (Aleksandra, London)

"My five year old daughter is an only child and she has been badly affected by lack of socialising with other children since lockdown. Her behaviour has become challenging, which was not so before lockdown. She's much more easily frustrated and struggles with sharing and listening, which used not to be problems for her. She is far less cheerful and motivated than she was before this isolation. She especially looks for videos or games with other children to watch or pretend, which she used not to do. Her sleep has also become disturbed. Not being allowed to play with other children even outdoors is damaging to her." (Daisy, Devon)

"My son (aged 8) has really suffered in this lockdown. He has not seen his friends since the last day of term before Christmas (18th December). He is currently in one of the age groups that has no rights to meet friends as he must be accompanied by an adult which immediately takes the group above the rule of two. Nursery aged children do not

count towards the rule of two and a teenager would be able to meet one friend but as we have complied with the law, he has been very isolated. In Scotland, there have been rules which allowed children play outside together which seemed so much more sensible, kind and compassionate. He has become irritable and sad often crying with frustration and having tantrums (which he has not done since he was a preschooler). He has missed his friendly greatly and his sleep has become affected with bed-wetting and wakings. As a parent, there is only so much you can do, as young children need their friends and play in the fresh air." (Frances, Surrey)

"Our 10 year old is an only child. The last few months of lockdown have been incredibly hard from a mental health perspective. Normally sporty and very outgoing, we've seen our child become anxious, withdrawn and depressed. The lack of social interaction has not only impacted confidence, but also resilience, emotions run high. All. The. Time. We are all exhausted by the inability to connect with friends outside." (Zoe, Bristol)

"Being trapped indoors for so many months of the year will have had a devastating impact on so many children in BSI3, where many families are in flats with no gardens, there are huge challenges relating to poverty including health, and where school and social contact is a vital support system. Over the last two weeks we have been at the school and met parents one by one, handing over art packs we bought for children at home. Unlike the more affluent area where we live (which is busy with children and parents outside, and many people looking healthy and active) we saw no children at all outside or in the green spaces. Parents said that collecting the art pack was one valid reason they could take their children out, as if they did not feel this was the case otherwise. The serious impact of isolation and time indoors was very evident on many children who were either subdued (even though we had not seen them for so long) or who looked very different. Parents too spoke about how hard it was for them. Examples included children as young as 5 having to be on screens all day for learning; a family of 7 inside together all the time (aged nursery to Y11); and one child (Y7) with autism who had become so fearful he had not left his bedroom or computer for months. To the parent's horror, he has developed pressure sores (bed sores in effect) from being hunched over the device in his room. This devastating snapshot of children's lack of activity, time outdoors and any social contact with others and the damaging impact of it all is just the tip of the iceberg - the bit that can be seen in a playground, delivering art packs. We know there is so much more to come in terms of children's physical and mental health when we see them. And it is all the more appalling because it didn't have to be this way." (Shani Ali, Irrelevant & Sensitive South Bristol)

Quotes from Twitter, Feb 2021:

To clarify, I have a 2yr old, 5yr old and 8yr old so if I meet up with one adult for a coffee on a bench, I can't take my children with me?

Our son has not met friends to play since pre-Christmas free-for-all, so would benefit from dispensation for minors to play outdoors once they mix in classrooms next month. 5 weeks is a long time when you're in Primary School Mr Johnson. if a child has SEN can the parent go out with them? Rachel Helsby, Reading

So depressing. My 5yo daughter has not been able to play with another child since 18 December. I am increasingly concerned about her mental health. Irrelevant & Sensitive

I've seen that the rule of six will be brought back in - this will mean that although six adults can meet up two families with two parents and two children still won't be allowed to meet. Yet again adults before children. I&S

I was disappointed to c fines- parents £200 Sussex who allow grps children mix outside. How can they stop their children even if they want to? I am not political I want children happy. Fining already potentially struggling parents 2 set an example is wrong I&S

My 5 year old hasn't seen another child since December. It's hard to measure the impact exactly but I think she has become far less resilient and I put that down to only being around adults & not peers. I&S

My happy sociable 7 year old has developed chronic anxiety since the start of this - and all he wants is to see his friends, to race around the playground non stop and for life to feel more normal! I&S

My 7 year old hasn't seen anyone since December 16. He has started to withdraw and become moody and aggressive. He's angry with me and his mam because he's an only child and has no one to play with! I am soooo worried about him its unreal! I&S

I have an 8 year old who like yours hasn't seen any other children since mid December. He sits having literal conversations with him self about football (not just talking out loud but having a discussion) in lieu of being able to chat to his friends. I&S

My 8 year old coped remarkably well until Christmas, but this term has become very withdrawn and it's heartbreaking. I&S

Physical activity and health:

Youth Sports Trust Survey showing children were not getting outside or physically active during lockdown – and parental concern about this: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/mar/05/survey-shows-uk-parents-concern-over-covid-effect-on-childrens-activity>

Bradford academic study showing 'one in three children have been rarely leaving the house': <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-56222926>

Experts 'deeply concerned' about the impact of Covid-19 on children's physical activity levels <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/55664539>

Sport England report showing overall PA levels fell – sport activities but also 'active play' fell by nearly 11%, (when potentially, with different messages and guidelines from govt it could have increased, as walking and cycling both did): https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2021-01/Active%20Lives%20Children%20Survey%20Academic%20Year%2019-20%20Coronavirus%20report.pdf?2yHCzeG_iDUxK.qegtIGQdOmLiQcgThJ

BMJ article: "Impact of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on movement behaviours of children and adolescents: a systematic review" <https://gh.bmj.com/content/7/1/e007190>

BBC article quoting experts. "Covid: The devastating toll of the pandemic on children" <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-55863841>

Mental health/isolation:

Young minds survey: <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/#covid-19-january-2021-survey>

Sarah Cowdrey (child psychotherapist): "There has been a surge in mental health conditions during the pandemic, as recent research by Young Minds has shown. Anxiety is one of the most common difficulties, amplified by feelings of isolation, loneliness [and] uncertainty... There's also sadness about the loss of friendships and playtime. It's been devastating for children who don't have siblings in particular."

Lancet article on mental health impact of covid on children: "More than a quarter of children (aged 5–16 years) and young people (aged 17–22) reported disrupted sleep and one in ten (5.4% of children and 13.8% of young people) often or always felt lonely". [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(20\)30570-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(20)30570-8/fulltext)

Playfirst call for summer of play: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/feb/13/call-for-summer-of-play-to-help-english-pupils-recover-from-covid-stress>

Film made by children from Room 13 Hareclive: <https://vimeo.com/user63529715>

a) The Scottish Government.

In terms of considering children's need for outdoor play, physical activity and social interaction there was a stark difference from the UK Government's approach. From July 2020, children under 12 were exempt from social distancing rules outside and actively encouraged to play outside together for their mental and physical wellbeing. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said,

"We want to help children enjoy these summer holidays a bit more. We also know the clinical risks of Covid, particularly for younger children, appear to be relatively low although we will never be complacent about that. And we know that for as long as there are restrictions on the number of households we can meet, families will find it difficult to balance the social needs for children and adults. Understandably, you all don't want to see the same people everyday.

Bearing that in mind, I'm announcing today two further changes to our rules to allow for a bit more interaction between young people and these changes will both apply from tomorrow. For children who are 11 years old or under, we're removing the requirement for you to physically distance with other people when you're outdoors. That will allow you to play more normally with your friends, which I hope you will enjoy. I'm sure this move will also be appreciated by your parents and carers". <https://www.playscotland.org/first-minister-nicola-sturgeon-announcement/>

b) The Welsh Government

The Welsh Government did not relax social distancing rules for children but did recognise the importance of outdoor play for children – including in streets and public space – and did provide more clarity on the rules around outdoor play for children: <https://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/news/1472-cyfnod-clo-lefel-rhybudd-4-a-chwarae-plant->

- 6. Whether the organisation or body raised any concerns about the consideration being given to the group(s) which it supports or represents with (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive, when the Government(s) and/or Executive were making decisions about their response to Covid-19. Please provide a list of any such correspondence or meetings with the UK Government, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and/or the Northern Ireland Executive, including the dates on which the body or organisation wrote or such meetings were held, to whom the correspondence was addressed or with whom the meeting was held, and any response received from the UK Government, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and/or Northern Ireland Executive addressing such concerns.**

Playing Out raised concerns with Government from very early on in the pandemic – and throughout. We also co-ordinated joint letters and approaches with other organisations. A timeline of these approaches and responses from Government follows. All original letters and documents can be supplied on request.

18 March 2020 We emailed Children's Commissioner (CC) Anne Longfield to ask for support in calling on Govt to consider children's access to play during pandemic. She was supportive and ongoing dialogue - emails and meetings - followed throughout the pandemic.

20 March 2020 We co-signed open letter to govt alongside other play organisations and experts, calling for clarity/guidance on outdoor play <https://www.playfulplanet.org.uk/blog/government-should-issue-guidance-on-childrens-play-during-the-coronavirus-crisis>

Sam Coates (Sky News) picked up on our letter and posed the question directly to Name Redacted (deputy CMO). She gave a helpful response but there was no change to the official guidance: <https://twitter.com/samcoatessky/status/1241097600884973569?s=21>

Govt (MHCLG) responded on 25 March, saying “[we] recognise and appreciate the importance of play to children’s physical and cognitive development, but given our present circumstances, Government’s response right now must focus on preventing the spread of Covid-19; protecting the most vulnerable in society and offering support to those impacted by social-distancing, including companies and employees”. <https://www.playfulplanet.org.uk/blog/government-responds-to-open-letter-inviting-play-sector-to-help-monitor-the-impacts-of-covid-19>

April 2020 Playing Out fielded multiple enquiries via text, phone, email and social media from parents and residents asking us for clarity on the rules about children playing out. It was evident that there was much confusion around the rules regarding children playing outside and a need for clarification from Government. (original documents available on request).

17 April 2020 We emailed the Children’s Commissioner saying, “New police guidance published today below. Again, zero mention of children or families being outside and what might be ‘reasonable’ there”. This guidance is no longer online but it provided police with guidance on what constituted a ‘reasonable excuse’ to leave home during lockdown, giving specific examples of adult-type exercise such as running and yoga, but with no mention of children or play. We know that - presumably as a result of not understanding that play constituted exercise - police did reprimand, send home and possibly even fine parents and children for being outside in family groups playing in parks and public spaces. <https://www.college.police.uk/What-we-do/COVID-19/Documents/What-constitutes-a-reasonable-excuse.pdf> (no longer available online)

20 April 2020 We published a blog post setting out why the UK Government needed to clarify rules around children being outside during the first lockdown: <https://playingout.net/blog/clarity-needed-on-children-being-outside-during-covid-19/>

20 April 2020 Despite reduced traffic volume during lockdowns and the need for people to walk in the road to maintain social distancing, speeding and road danger increased unchecked in residential streets, further reducing children’s ability to be outside safely and to benefit from the outdoor exercise rule. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/increase-in-speeding-incidents-on-uks-quiet-lockdown-roads> We noticed and shared good practice from other countries, including the US, where some cities implemented emergency ‘pedestrian priority’ on a majority of residential streets. <https://playingout.net/blog/open-up-streets-for-socially-distanced-exercise-and-play/>

May 2020 We launched a petition asking the Transport Secretary (Grant Shapps MP) and Secretary of State for Local Government (Robert Jenrick MP) to address the issue of unsafe streets (with a number of suggested actions), supported by other organisations including: Living Streets, Brake, Roadpeace, 20 is Plenty, British Cycling, and many local campaign groups. <https://www.change.org/p/make-our-streets-safe-for-social-distancing>. The petition (coincidentally, we assume!) was only out for a few days gaining 1,700 signatures, before the issue was partially addressed by the UK Government announcing its Active Travel Fund for local authorities to make streets safer during and post-covid, so although broader Government action on this was needed (e.g. national speed limit / public messaging about the need for considerate driving / direction to police), we didn’t continue to promote it. The comments on the petition site do act as a record of how the issue impacted children and families, for example: “I have noticed the increase in unsafe driving. Many people do not have an outdoor space to play and slowing cars or creating roads that are a shared space is important for our young people to grow and flourish”.

14 Jul 2020 Children's Commissioner wrote to Chief Scientific Advisor Sir Patrick Vallance (informed by PO), asking him to ensure children's needs were fully considered and calling for UK government to follow the Scottish Government's approach in exempting children from social distancing outdoors.
<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/07/13/putting-children-at-the-heart-of-scientific-advice-on-covid-19/>

Our blog post about this: <https://playingout.net/blog/childrens-commissioner-wants-distancing-dropped-for-children-outdoors/>

Nov 2020 Playing Out supported the Telegraph's 'Keep Kids Active' campaign, calling on Government to prioritise children's access to grassroots sport and physical activity during lockdowns. Sports clubs and other spaces for children's activity stayed closed well after pubs, restaurants and even schools were re-opened. There appeared to be no public health rationale for this.
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/2020/11/02/telegraph-launches-keep-kids-active-campaign-unacceptable-lockdown/>

Article by Anne Longfield for 'Keep Kids Active': <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/2020/11/06/want-government-think-draw-new-guidelines-quickly-enable-childrens/>

This article quotes Playing Out: Alice Ferguson, of the Playing Out campaign group which supports the Telegraph campaign to give children's organised sport a reprieve, says the impact of the last lockdown on children "especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds" was "immense and unacceptable and mustn't be repeated". She is in favour of the Government aligning itself with Scotland by lifting limits on "informal outdoor play for children during lockdown, alongside more formal sports and organised activities" for children under 12. "Outdoor play in parks, streets and public space is the most accessible, natural way for children of all backgrounds and abilities to be physically active," she says. "It also, of course, has lots of other benefits for children and is important for their mental as well as their physical health" <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/11/14/playgrounds-across-england-third-busier-usual-research-reveals/>

5 Jan 2021 Playing Out co-ordinated an open letter to Boris Johnson PM, cc'd to ministers Gavin Williamson, Vicky Ford, Matt Hancock, Oliver Dowden and Robert Jenrick. This letter was co-signed by 22 other organisations and experts. Original responses available on request. <https://playingout.net/blog/dear-pm-outdoor-play-is-essential-for-childrens-health-and-wellbeing/>

Press release linking to letter: "Campaigners call for outdoor play to be formally recognised as a "reasonable excuse" for children to get outside during lockdown", with quote from Anne Longfield saying, "We must learn from some of the mistakes that were made during the first lockdown, when children's needs and rights were side-lined for too long, including the vital importance of safe outdoor play for children's health and wellbeing. It is welcome that playgrounds are being kept open, but guidance needs to make very clear that outside play is allowed. We need government to act now, particularly to protect the needs of the most disadvantaged children and those without any private outdoor space." (full press release available on request)

Telegraph covered the letter: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/2021/01/05/keep-kids-active-campaign-five-point-plan-address-national-activity/>

Government response:

4 February 2021 – email from Rob Halfon MP (Education Select Committee). Not directly responding to the issue/request.

26 February 2021 – Letter from Penny Mordaunt MP (Paymaster General). Not directly responding to the issue/request. Conflation of "play" and "playground".

No response from any of the original addressees.

We also encouraged parents/individuals to directly write to MPs about the issue sharing their personal experience, which resulted in questions being asked in parliament.

18 Jan 2021 Co-signed open letter asking councils to keep playgrounds open and clarifying UK Government guidance.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/609a5802ba3f13305c43d352/t/60a381ebff4662023cae3dc/1621328364135/Letter-for-local-authorities-on-playgrounds.pdf>

18 Jan 2021 Put out **press release** about impact of pandemic response for children's outdoor play:

<https://playingout.net/blog/playground-closures-just-tip-of-the-iceberg-for-children/>

Media coverage included:

19 Jan 2021 – Telegraph Sport <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/2021/01/19/campaigners-voice-concerns-policing-children-keeping-active/>

26 Jan 2021 Launched #OKtoPlay **social media campaign** – in lieu of official government clarity and messaging, sharing message to parents/public that play is exercise and that outdoor play within family groups is therefore allowed under lockdown rules. https://twitter.com/search?q=%23oktoplay&src=typed_query

30 Jan 2021 – Telegraph <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/01/30/plea-childrens-play-designated-essential-exercise-lockdown/>

8 Feb 2021 - BBC Newsround - includes a response from "A Government spokesperson", saying "We recognise the importance of exercise to the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of children, which is why playgrounds have remained open during the national lockdown and outdoor exercise is permitted." Not addressing the need to clarify that play is exercise and implies that children can only play in playgrounds.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/55812556>

11 Feb 2021 – inews including Govt spokesperson quote: <https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/rules-childrens-play-lockdown-should-made-explicit-campaigners-868800>

11 Feb 2021 – Sky News <https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-government-criticised-for-over-zealous-rules-on-children-playing-12214656> - Interview with Playing Out and response from Matt Hancock MP <https://twitter.com/SkyNews/status/1359769641678237696>

11 Feb 2021 – Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/11/ministers-backtrack-on-advice-only-children-without-gardens-can-play-outside>

14 Feb 2021 – Observer <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/feb/14/paediatricians-call-for-covid-rules-to-ease-so-children-can-play>

Feb 2021 Contacted inews who put questions to Government at the daily lobby briefing to journalists. This email summarising the exchanges demonstrates the confusion around the rules and messaging even within Government:

"Downing Street has rejected Government advice that playgrounds should primarily be used by children without access to outdoor space at home.

The Prime Minister's official spokesman said: *"It's reasonable for any families to take their children to the park and to use playgrounds."* His remarks came after a statement issued by the Cabinet Office highlighted Government advice saying otherwise.

The Government spokeswoman had said: *"Playgrounds are primarily for use by children who do not have access to private outdoor space, and while parents, guardians or carers are allowed to take children to a playground for exercise, they must not socialise with other people while there."*

"We have been asking people to stay at home. One of the reasons why people are allowed to go outside is for exercise not for socialising. We're clear that children going to playgrounds or the park to play for exercise purposes is fine."

Q: The rules seem tougher for kids? *"We have exempted from the rules the ability for a person from one household to exercise with a person from another. But the important point is people can take their children to the park or the playground for exercise purposes. We recognise there may be more than one child or family at a playground playing, but where that is the case people should try and keep to the 2m rule. We accept that's not possible for children, but we are asking adults to maintain the 2m rule where they are in those sort of circumstances."*

5 Mar 2021 MPs asked Qs in parliament (prompted by letter-writing above)

<https://www.playfulplanet.org.uk/blog/parliament-asks-government-to-clarify-rules-on-childrens-play>

5 Mar 2021 CRAE/Just for Kids Law and Playing Out wrote to Government highlighting potential unlawful discrimination against children in covid rules and messaging.

https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/FINAL_Campaigners-call-on-Prime-Minister-to-allow-children-to-play-outside-together-as-they-return-to-school.pdf

Media coverage of this letter and the issues raised included:

Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/mar/10/boris-johnson-urged-to-allow-children-to-play-together-in-england>

Telegraph: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/03/11/need-look-outside-see-no-ones-obeying-ban-kids-playing-friends/>

Eastern Daily Press: <https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/health/call-to-lift-ban-on-children-mixing-norfolk-7820778>

BBC Newsround: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/56335816>

and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/56360441>

Children and Young People Now: <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/coronavirus-restrictions-discriminate-against-children-campaigners-warn>

The Justice Gap: <https://www.thejusticegap.com/campaigners-call-on-pm-to-allow-amend-lockdown-regime-to-allow-children-to-play-outside/>

Govt responses:

8 March – email from officials at DHSC. Not directly addressing the issue or questions raised.

16 March – Letter from Vicky Ford MP (Children’s Minister). Not directly addressing the issue or questions raised.

1 April – letter from Nadine Dorries MP (Junior Health Minister). Addresses the issue but does not concede any need to revise rules or guidance. *“equality impacts have been considered in all COVID-19 legislation, including of the impact on children”* and that, *“We recognise the importance of exercise to the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of children and we have always been clear that play is a form of exercise”*.

May 2021 Co-signed letter coordinated by London Play to the “catch up tsar” Kevan Collins, urging a prioritisation of play as part of children’s play alongside academic “catch up”. The letter said, *“We are concerned that too much of the emphasis around children’s post-pandemic recovery is on increasing time spent in formal education... We strongly believe that for children, opportunities to play freely and socialise informally with their friends will be central to any meaningful recovery”* and offered to help with developing a plan for this.

July 2021 Supported the British Psychological Society’s “Let the children Play” campaign which stated, *“Many UK schools have now shortened or even dropped afternoon break-times, replacing them with extra teaching time instead. Given the reduced teaching during lockdowns, more schools may find it tempting to lose that break. But there’s evidence that this would harm children’s wellbeing”*. <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/let-children-play>

Sept 2021 Co-ordinated a final open letter to Government (co-signed by other orgs/experts) urging a prioritisation of play for covid-recovery and children’s future wellbeing: <https://playingout.net/blog/want-to-level-up-and-improve-childrens-lives-let-them-play-out/>

7. A brief summary of the views of the organisation or body as to any lessons, if any, that can be learned from any consideration which was given to the group(s) that the organisation or body supports or represents by (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive when they were making decisions about their response to Covid-19.

The lack of consideration of children in the UK Government's pandemic response reflects a deeper underlying problem – children are simply not considered in policy and decision-making outside of Education. And even within Education, there seems to be little consideration of children as “whole people” – of their physical and mental wellbeing, social and emotional development, rights or existence as citizens.

This was starkly apparent both in the Government's pandemic decision-making and in the way they responded to concerns raised by children's organisations and experts. The fact that nobody within Government has responsibility for children outside of education was very clear from the way ministers – including the Children's Minister¹ – deflected concerns about children's wellbeing, play, social interaction etc. on the basis that it was not in their remit. Even the Children's Commissioner for England – who also shared and raised our concerns - did not seem to be listened to by Government.

This lack of consideration of children outside of education was also reflected in the original terms of reference for this inquiry, as set out in this article:

https://www.bmj.com/content/376/bmj.o785?ijkey=4413eecd740530727c18f2222199c5e6849e1ac3&keytype2=tf_ipsecsha

So the first thing that needs to change is this: a fundamental recognition that children - 25% of the population - have specific needs and rights and must be considered at the heart of all Government decision-making, not seen as 'extra' or confined to specific policy areas. The clear harm done to children through the lack of this consideration in the Government's pandemic response should at least serve as a powerful lever for change. A Cabinet Minister for children, with play and mental/physical wellbeing in their remit, would help to ensure children are fully considered across Government policy, both in general and in any future pandemic.

In this context, specific lessons that could be learned include:

- Children - including their health and wellbeing - must be a key consideration in any Government response to future pandemics
- There must be greater understanding of the importance of social, outdoor play for children's mental and physical health and development.
- Rules and messaging should ensure children can play outside together, with proper consideration of inequality of access to space (e.g. lack of private gardens or safe outdoor space) and different circumstances (e.g. lone parent families)
- This should incorporate an understanding that children play and exist in streets and public space - not just home, school and formal play spaces
- Children can easily become scapegoated if messaging is not careful – e.g. children playing out seen as 'dangerous' to others and 'illegal'

¹ Extract from a reply from Children's Minister to an MP: “With regards to outdoor play during the period of national lockdown, I can understand why you have written to me however, I should explain that the Department for Education is not responsible for providing policy and guidance on the reasons for leaving home during lockdown. If Mr Murray requires more specific advice on this matter, I would advise you to contact Ministers at the Department for Health and Social Care on his behalf.”

- Government messaging needs to be clear and unambiguous. It should consider how messages are received by different groups/demographics and that not everyone is equipped to confidently interpret or 'bend' the rules²
- Engage with experts and those representing equality groups, including children – listen to them. They know the impact that rules and messaging are having on the ground
- Base decisions on evidence – emulate good practice from other govts
- Balance risk with benefit in decision-making³
- Much more consideration needs to be given to the importance of creating safer streets as useable public space, especially for children, both during any future pandemic and more generally.
<https://www.thedeveloper.live/opinion/opinion/stop-the-traffic-and-make-uk-streets-into-public-spaces-during-lockdown>

The new Children's Commissioner, Rachel de Souza, came into post as lockdowns ended and conducted a national survey of children's views - The Big Ask - which we fed into. This found that, *"they want to be outside – to be in open spaces, and play"* and *"They want community. Denied friendship during the pandemic, this generation of children have thought hard about bonds beyond family"*.
<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/the-big-answer/>

Playing Out, November 2022.

² In response to our campaign for clarity about outdoor play in the rules, on 11 February 2021, Health Secretary [Matt Hancock](#) told Sky News, "of course going to the park with your kids to play rugby is not only allowed but perfectly reasonable and totally fine". The fact that this was not a universally shared interpretation of the rules was ironically highlighted by the fact that the then Health Secretary had recently been criticised in several tabloids for doing exactly that: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/13783963/matt-hancock-self-isolating-again-days-after-being-spotted-in-london-park/>

³ Play Safety Forum report, July 2021: *"Risk benefit approaches are designed to support balanced, thoughtful decision-making, and should be promoted in government guidance. Rather than taking a narrow, exclusive focus on infection control, guidance should explicitly highlight the benefits of outdoor play, and ensure that decision-makers take into account these benefits, and the potential side-effects of control measures. Experience and evidence so far show that in general, keeping children's play facilities open is a proportionate and reasonable response"*.