

National Assembly for Wales - Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Inquiry into physical activity of children and young people

Fields in Trust

1. Fields in Trust Cymru is the only charity which operates throughout Wales to safeguard playing fields, recreation grounds and parks. We legally protect individual spaces as well as campaigning for better statutory protection for all kinds of outdoor sites. We also produce guidance on the provision of outdoor sport and play spaces.
2. Founded in 1925, our mission is the same now and as it was then: to ensure that everyone – young or old, able bodied or disabled and wherever they live – should have access to free, local outdoor space for sport, play and recreation.
3. Regarding this inquiry, Fields in Trust would like to emphasise the role of recreational open space in facilitating physical activity. A lack of and access to such space can be a barrier to increasing physical activity levels.

The importance of recreational open space for physical activity

4. Recreational spaces provide a free and accessible place for play, sport and healthy physical activity.
5. The role of play as a physical activity and a precursor to all subsequent physical activity needs to be recognised as children learn physical literacy through play long before they participate in any sporting activity. When it comes to where they play, children and young people have repeatedly said they prefer to play outdoors in safe but stimulating places (National Assembly for Wales, 2010; Little Voices Shouting Out, 2015; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2016).
6. The Welsh Government's 'Fairer Health Outcomes for All' produced in 2011 stated that "*One of the most important environmental assets in communities is its green space. Proximity to, and time spent in the natural environment impacts on factors such as perceived general health, blood pressure, mental health and the rate of recovery from illness. There are also indirect benefits, such as encouraging physical activity, social contact and integration, children's play, and improving air quality. Access to green spaces is unequally distributed across society with poorer social groups having in general lower access. More equal access to green space can therefore play an important part in reducing inequities in health.*"

7. New research from Fields in Trust (Green Spaces for Good, Forthcoming) demonstrates a direct and statistically significant link between publicly accessible parks and green spaces and health and well-being. Based on new analysis of existing data, as well as new primary data (sample size 4,033) Fields in Trust has established, for the first time at the UK level, a link between an individual's use of parks and greenspaces and an improvement in health and well-being (covering General Health and the four ONS wellbeing questions - life satisfaction, sense of worth, happiness and anxiety).

This new research also highlights links between park usage and demographics; parks and green spaces are particularly important to families who are twice as likely (33%) to be users of parks than non-users (18%).

8. Fields in Trust conducted research (2017) into the users of newly opened Centenary Park in Rugby Warwickshire where there had previously been no accessible green space in the locality. The research shows that three times as many local people visit parks daily than before it opened, with 60.2% visiting once a week or more. Over 60% of park visitors reported feeling happier and better about themselves. Crucially more than two-thirds of respondents said the most important reason for visiting the new park was for physical activity. This data reinforces the view that local green space is vitally important for creating more active communities; an ambition which requires all kinds of formal and informal recreational space to be accessible. The Centenary Park case study demonstrates that despite the lack of traditional formal sports facilities the majority of respondents cite physical activity as the primary reason for visiting.

Securing sufficient recreational open space

9. In Wales, Fields in Trust protects 277 parks, playgrounds and playing fields in perpetuity totalling over 3,000 acres of formal and informal recreational land. Fields in Trust uses charity and contract law to establish binding agreements and commitments with landowners to protect valuable public recreational land for the long term. We work in partnership with landowners including sports clubs, private individuals and local authorities to achieve this protection.
10. All recreational spaces receiving funding from the Welsh Government and its various agencies should be protected in the long-term safeguarding facilities and the investment made by the public purse. Grant conditions usually include protection for 10-15 years but Fields in Trust believes this period should be far longer and with its 90-year experience as a guardian of playing fields and other spaces it will be happy to assist.
11. Fields in Trust has offered guidance for practitioners on open space provision known as the Six Acre Standard (6AS) since the 1930s. The 2008 version titled 'Planning and Design for Outdoor Sport and Play' is referenced by the Welsh Government's Technical Advice Note 16: Sport, Recreation and Open Space and is widely used by local authorities to help secure sufficient provision of recreational open space. The guidance was updated this year under the title 'Beyond the Six Acre Standard' and is available as an online resource at the Fields in Trust website in both Welsh and English language versions.

12. Fields in Trust welcomed the Welsh Government's 'Play Sufficiency' legislation. Section 11 of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 places a duty on local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their area. Fields in Trust's guidance is a useful tool in helping authorities comply with this legislation and secure sufficient play opportunities.
13. Beyond play opportunities however, there is no requirement for local authorities to provide outdoor spaces which are vital for sport and physical activity. There is disparity between areas where parks and open spaces have been secured in perpetuity – for example by a Deed of Dedication with Fields in Trust and others where no such safeguard is in place. Fields in Trust believe recommends appropriate provision of outdoor green spaces with a sufficient area for play, sport and recreation maintained to an agreed standard and available to all communities.
14. School facilities are a massive untapped resource and could address a shortfall in play and sport provision. Mechanisms should be explored to require schools in areas of shortfall to open up their facilities to the community.
15. Despite their clear value and benefit, our parks and informal recreational spaces are facing increasingly challenged futures. The Heritage Lottery Fund (2016) report 50% of park managers have sold parks and green spaces or transferred their management to others over the past three years. This is expected to increase to 59% of local authorities over the next three years; austerity measures have hit parks and playgrounds hard, councils are struggling either to maintain them or avoid the temptation of releasing their capital receipts to plug deficits elsewhere. Fields in Trust therefore calls for sufficient funding and resources to be made available to preserve and maintain our outdoor spaces.

Conclusion

16. Recreational spaces contribute to the health and wellbeing of our communities particularly our children and young people but they are undervalued and underfunded. The adequate provision, access to and funding of recreational space has a major influence on the physical activity levels of our children and young people and therefore Fields in Trust urges the Committee to explore the recommendations outlined above to help ensure our children and young people have the best chance of being active and healthy.
17. The provision of sufficient outdoor recreational spaces and green spaces will play an important role in helping public bodies achieve the objectives of the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) Act 2015.

References

Children's Commissioner for Wales (2016) *Beth Nesa? What Next?*
<http://www.childcomwales.org.uk/en/what---next/>

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