

19 August 2020: This guidance is based on advice from the government regarding necessary precautions to reduce the risk of Covid-19 transmission. Originally published on 30 June 2020, it has been updated to reflect latest government guidance. London Play will endeavor to update it again as government advice changes.

Play streets: a risk benefit approach in the time of Covid-19

London Play has called on local authorities across the capital to allow their residents to restart existing play streets or initiate new ones from 4th July. This is line with government guidance on public playgrounds, which were permitted to reopen on the same date.

This will provide children, who have suffered the most serious impacts of lockdown, with additional public space in which to play safely, near to where they live. It will also give adult neighbours the opportunity to reconnect, if they wish, from the safety of their own doorstep or front garden.

London Play acknowledges the continued risk the coronavirus pandemic poses to communities. But it is becoming clearer that for children, the benefits of allowing them to play together outside are beginning to outweigh the risks. Indeed, the risks of continuing to deprive children of play are significant. This view is supported by a growing number of professionals including the [chair of the British Safety Council](#).

In the interests of helping residents minimise the risks on a play street as much as possible, London Play has compiled this risk-benefit guidance and template, based on those used in professional play settings. In such settings the Health and Safety Executive recognises risk-benefit appraisals as satisfying the legal requirement for risk assessments. This approach does not seek to completely eliminate risk (which is in any case impossible); but balances the risks of engaging in activities against the benefits derived from them.

We've made suggestions of potential risk areas to consider in light of the threat posed by coronavirus, but these are not exhaustive. Your play street's risk assessment should be a working document to be regularly reviewed and updated to reflect any changes in your setting and/or government guidance. Please feel free to use the template – or not – and adapt or add to it in a way that suits your circumstances.

Gatherings were previously permitted for up to 6 people from two different households. On 17 July the government issued new guidance on gatherings, allowing larger groups to gather under certain circumstances. This included the following:

- **Groups of up to 30 people can meet for community activities, as long as these are subject to COVID-19 secure guidelines**

- **Larger groups can gather as part of events in public outdoor spaces that are organised by businesses, charitable or political organisations, and public bodies, provided they take reasonable steps to mitigate the risk of transmission, in line with COVID-19 secure guidance and including completion of a risk assessment.**

On 14 August the government said it will be introducing fines for those who facilitate or organise illegal gatherings of over 30 people.

We strongly recommend that all play street organisers carry out a risk assessment; particularly if their play street is likely to involve more than 30 people. See the template appended to this guidance.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/meeting-people-from-outside-your-household-from-4-july>

Potluck play street?

Here's a great suggestion from one post lockdown play street organiser that complements the latest guidance on social distancing and community gathering!

Let each individual household organise games/activities/ideas for the play street to run outside their own home, in line with guidelines on social distancing (use this document to help). What emerges will be the result of whatever people in the street come up with and organise. Play street organisers can then put their efforts into encouraging residents to do this. The play street will automatically have lots of socially-distanced fun and different things to do and games to play and will encourage 'ownership' of the play street by all residents not just the main organisers.

Covid-19 and play streets: the risks vs benefits

The aim of this document is to build the confidence of residents, with suggestions in how to balance the (low) risk of transmission with the considerable benefits that play streets bring to children in particular, but also to adults and the wider community. Here we set out the rationale.

1 The benefits of play streets are significant

For children: play is crucial. It is how they make sense of the world and their relationships with others. They run around and get physically fitter and healthier; but there is also ample evidence that children who have regular opportunities to play freely outdoors benefit from improved mental health, and psychological and emotional wellbeing. Through play children learn to be resilient. They need all these qualities now more than ever, as they emerge from isolation into a radically altered, post lockdown world.

For adults: contact with neighbours is good for wellbeing and the elderly and vulnerable (who have suffered isolation more than most) can be included at a distance (eg from a front door or window).

For the wider community: a play street makes use of existing public space (the street) and brings improved community cohesion, cleaner, quieter streets and better mental and physical health for both adults and children.

2 The risks of play streets are low

It is becoming increasingly clear that the risk to children (and their families) of allowing them to play together outside is low. Children [do not become infected as easily as adults](#). If they are infected, children are [extremely unlikely to become seriously ill](#) with the disease, and many are asymptomatic. The overall trend emerging from the evidence to date suggests that children have a [limited role in spreading the virus](#) – partly due to the mildness of symptoms. Also, the [risk of outdoor transmission is low](#). Reflecting this very low risk, children in Scotland and Wales are no longer required to practice social distancing.

Additionally, a play street has fewer risks associated with it than a public playground:

- Participants do not have to travel to get to a play street. It is the ultimate in local play provision;
- Participants have access to their own separate toilet and kitchen facilities, reducing the chances of cross infection; and
- There is not fixed equipment with multiple 'high-touch' points and equipment can be easily washed down in between uses.

It is important to remember that it is not possible to completely eliminate risk – of Covid-19 or anything else! And if children are themselves in a high-risk category, or live in a household with vulnerable family members, they may choose not to take part in play streets – or to take part at a distance (for example by sitting in their front window or garden). For healthy children and their families, the risks are very low.

3 The risks of (continued) play deprivation are significant

Children have been the forgotten victims of this pandemic. They have been locked up for months on end, deprived of school and any semblance of normal life with their friends. Too many are in households experiencing additional hardships as a result of the measures taken to contain the

virus' spread. They have suffered isolation, estrangement from loved grandparents and other family members, and also potentially bereavement. The impacts on their mental, social and physical wellbeing continue to be significant. Prior to the pandemic, one in 10 children and young people suffered from poor mental health. In the early phases of the lockdown, [83 per cent](#) of young people surveyed by Young Minds reported that the coronavirus pandemic has made their mental health worse. To mitigate against all this, they need to play and socialise with their friends: as normally as possible, as soon as possible.

4 The risks can be mitigated

There are two main risks in relation to Covid-19 transmission on a play street and both are able to be mitigated:

1. Surface transmission of virus – minimised by implementing cleaning regimes (equipment/hands) and reducing the number of commonly touched, shared surfaces.
2. Air transmission of virus – minimised by maintaining social distance where possible and keeping group sizes small.

Clearly, it's not practical to wash down everything at a play street after each and every use and keep children completely separate. But below are some suggestions of how you might consider reducing the small risk involved. It is not an exhaustive list; all play streets and situations are unique so you may well think of others. But it is a solid start.

Planning and consulting

Normally, planning and consulting on proposals for a new play street involve some face-to-face interactions with your neighbours. You will need to find safe ways of carrying this out. On an existing play street, you will need to find a way to agree with your neighbours about new approaches needed to manage the additional risks posed by Covid-19. Here are some considerations in both cases:

- a. Flyers: When delivering flyers or consultation letters, ensure regular hand washing and hygiene by those handling and posting them or wear gloves to completely avoid contact with letterboxes, gates etc.
- b. Door knocking: if you need to speak to your neighbours on their doorstep, knock and then stand back '1m plus' to chat at a distance. Consider wearing a mask.
- c. Meetings: Community gatherings of up to 30 are now permitted (with Covid-safe guidelines). But if you want to hold a residents' meeting, consider hosting it online or via conference call. Alternatively give people the opportunity to give feed back remotely via tear-off slips, or via a WhatsApp group or similar. During the planning discussions you might reach agreement with your neighbours on some practicalities, for example:
 - Food/drink policy: food, drinks and utensils should not be shared between households. This should be communicated to children.
 - Play equipment: how to deal with potential surface transmission via play equipment – e.g. making some equipment unavailable; minimising sharing; cleaning regimes.
 - Group play: what will be your approach to social distancing for children? Will you limit group sizes, intervene to redirect some play?
 - PPE: discuss use of masks and gloves and set expectations
 - Adult behaviour: agree to maintain social distance in line with government guidelines.

During the play street: additional considerations

Post lockdown play streets will look quite different from previously. You should not expect them to be 'business as usual'. *At the time of writing, government guidance allows community gatherings of up to 30 people when following Covid-secure guidelines.* The emphasis should be on freeing up space for play rather than on promoting 'gathering'. Measures should be taken to ensure children can play together as safely as possible together. For example:

- a. Include everyone safely. At the start of the play street parents should chat to their children to remind them of social distancing. Children can get involved – ask them to mark out 2m lines in pavement chalk to help remind themselves.
- b. Prevent overcrowding. Consider introducing a 'one-way play' system or play zones (again you can use chalk!) to avoid large numbers of children being too close together.
- c. Encourage good hand hygiene: place hand sanitisers at play equipment hot spot points; or each household has one on their front wall. Consider making it into a game. You could yell 'ALL HANDS TO THE PUMPS' or something similar at random times during the session. Remind children about hand washing at home before and after the play street.
- d. Plan and prepare games and activities that have social distancing 'built in' e.g. Grandma's footsteps, foot golf (for more suggestions please see our website. Again, let the children lead on this; they will be the most creative for social distancing games ideas. Other popular activities at play streets such as cycling and scooting are also great for social distancing – although you may want to consider limiting sharing.
- e. Remove play equipment that will encourage a lot of swapping and touching and favour single play items such as chalk to be used and then taken home by children.

5. Have fun!

Don't get too stressed with everything. Enjoy yourself and the opportunity to connect with your neighbours at a safe distance. And let the children play.

Links to additional information

Covid-19 in Children (Full Fact)

<https://fullfact.org/health/covid-19-in-children/>

Covid-19 Research Evidence Summaries (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health)

<https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/covid-19-research-evidence-summaries>

Risk vs benefit in allowing children to play (Chair British Safety Council)

https://www.londonplay.org.uk/blog_entry/3701/news/latest_play_news/latest_play_news/harm_outweighs_risk_of_closed_playgrounds

Mental health and children in lockdown (Oxford University)

<http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2020-06-16-children-show-increase-mental-health-difficulties-over-covid-19-lockdown>

Risk Rating		
Severity	Value	Probability
Negligible	1	Unlikely
Slight	2	Possible
Moderate	3	Quite Possible
Severe	4	Likely
Very Severe	5	Very Likely

Ranking of Risk (Risk Level)	
1 – 4	Low Risk
5 – 15	Medium Risk
16 - 25	High Risk

Hazard Value x Risk Value = Risk Level

Low Risk – risk can be acceptable

Medium Risk – acceptable with adequate control measures in place

High Risk – action must be prioritised and timetabled to reduce risk to an acceptable level