

# Play Profile - Burnt Oak, London



Reclaiming Play in Cities





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# Foreword



**Dr. Wei Yang**

*President of the Royal Town Planning Institute*

In 1898, Sir Ebenezer Howard, first Honorary Member of the Royal Town Planning Institute, asked “[...] is not the welfare of our children the primary consideration with any well-ordered community?”. His seminal book ‘To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform’ – from which that quote is taken – was stimulated by an observation of the detrimental effects of London’s rapid urbanisation on the access to healthy and affordable homes and amenities for all. The book was in a sense a manifesto for the then nascent town planning discipline and it is inspiring to find a concern with the well-being of children at its heart.

Over the last 120 years, the ideas of 19th century British social reformers have been developed and then crystallised into legislation thanks to the efforts of activists, policy makers and professional planners. British planning now ensures that shares of land value uplifts are used to benefit communities. By enhancing tenure security as well as services and infrastructure provision, these contributions play a key role in improving outcomes for many children and are a conduit for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the UK and the right to play enshrined therein.

Not dissimilar to the challenges in 19th century London, today’s pressure from global urbanisation increasingly puts a premium on the provision of essential amenities and services in global urban areas, for which children can pay a hefty price. This can result in dramatic shortfalls, particularly where local governments and planning services are critically under resourced and lack appropriate powers.

Even in London today, according to the Greater London Authority, one quarter of all children are living in income-deprived households. Planning should break the siloes that hamper policy formulation from considering a community’s specific circumstances, spatially coordinate efforts and support cities in gathering the resources to act. What becomes available through land value capture should be put to the best possible use and we, as planners, will continue to campaign for more dedicated investment in the provision of affordable housing and play-friendly inclusive communities.

Play should not be a secondary thought here. The ability of cities to respond adequately to the play needs of children – across the household, school, community and city levels – is a litmus test for their ability to be truly child-friendly in all respects.

Assessing what makes a community play-friendly is then critical. The Royal Town Planning Institute is delighted to have collaborated with Arup and the Real Play Coalition to support the creation of the Urban Play Framework, and to test it in the community of Burnt Oak in the London Borough of Barnet. The findings for Burnt Oak are presented in this report.

I hope the Framework can be applied as an international toolkit available to a wide range of communities and cities that want to strengthen their commitment to play and children’s rights so that we can together plan the world we need.



**Jerome Frost**  
*Global Cities Leader, Arup*

Ove Arup set the built environment on a trajectory to social usefulness. A private and public sphere that considers people's needs, integrates diverse professions, and ultimately, shapes a better world. Ove's approach – grounded in honourable and quality work – invites a rich combination of altruism and skill. A convening of architects, designers, engineers and planners; each valued for their own unique contribution. A committed humanitarian and an advocate for inclusion, I fear how Ove would react to one of the built environment's great failures of the past decades. The erosion of children's play by the edges, lines, spaces and structures to which he gave so much thought, time and energy.

It is said that children are an indicator species; where there are children, there is excitement, health, learning, opportunity. Often, children are unexposed to the status quo or the 'rules of the game' – much less so than adults, anyway. This paves the way for unfettered creativity that pushes the boundaries on what we know and practise. Cities are a great example of this. Incorporating children's ideas into city planning is shown to create friendlier, greener and more inclusive spaces. Furthermore, child-friendly space can boost the economic value and long-term viability of the urban environment. The message is clear: child-friendly cities are cities that work better for everyone.

However, the things that children value most in cities are too easily pushed aside. Pressure on available space, together with overzealous regulations – made visually apparent by ubiquitous 'No Ball Games' signs – is edging

children out of the urban realm. Child's play, and the immense learning potential it brings, is the greatest victim. Play poverty is on the rise, as is the number of children living low-play lives. At the same time, children are excluded from conversations about their surroundings, at a time when their needs and perspectives should be front and centre of these conversations. If children really are an indicator species, it is clear we can do better.

Play is about much more than building playgrounds. It requires a cultural shift, a combination of time, space, and facilitation. Efforts to encourage play must infuse all urban systems and occur at all levels of society. It is this that most excites me about the pioneering work of the Real Play Coalition, and now, the Urban Play Framework. Arup is thrilled to have collaborated with as esteemed an organisation as the Royal Town Planning Institute, to create a step-change in how play is assessed, understood, and supported in cities.

It is my hope that this report, developed with the support of Barnet Council, can set an influential precedent. So much inspiring work is going on in the child-friendly space, and Arup is proud to contribute our expertise. Together with our other work on child-friendly cities, we look forward to using the Urban Play Framework to shape a better world.

# Executive Summary

With the support of Barnet Council, UNICEF UK and the Real Play Coalition, Arup and the Royal Town Planning Institute applied the Urban Play Framework in the ward of Burnt Oak in the London Borough of Barnet to undertake a comprehensive play assessment.

The aim of the study was to understand how various urban systems impact children's play experience in the selected community, according to the dimensions of the framework, to support the development of recommendations towards ensuring a play-friendly environment.

The play assessment presents Burnt Oak as an area with mild to severe material, structural, civic and governance obstacles to optimal play, but also one with significant opportunities for improving play conditions through built environment interventions and investments. The mix of challenges and opportunities that Burnt Oak's children are confronted with is reflected in the mixed views we heard from engaged stakeholders. The prevailing general feeling was that conditions for play were not optimal; but that positive action to better support play was possible; that this could broaden the impact of existing initiatives and enhance how play infrastructure can serve the wider local social development.

In Burnt Oak, **Facilitation for Play** is primarily well-served at the school level in Burnt Oak, with teachers and curricula from Nursery onwards employing play as a key method of instruction and educational staff generally recognising the importance of play in learning outcomes. As with many schools nationwide, this enthusiasm for leveraging play in the curriculum sometimes stands at odds with the prescribed time and methods needed to accomplish National Core mandated subjects.

The economic deprivation of Burnt Oak, on the other hand, often means that livelihood considerations can place pressures on caregivers that preclude easy access to or cognitive bandwidth to optimally implement play facilitation knowledge and strategies.



Overcrowding of housing units combined with high deprivation index in the ward and caregivers' concerns regarding outdoor independent play are other key challenges to establishing an optimal mindset for play choices.

Despite a wide array of dedicated play spaces, a lack of officially organised play mentoring or other organised opportunities was cited by many research participants as a missed opportunity for more effective widespread play facilitation. Current policies place a burden on new housing for the provision of playable and play space in common areas and in the public space around new buildings, sometimes with financial responsibilities for maintenance placed on residents. According to both focus group and interview participants this can deter developers from providing playable space as part of new schemes.

In Burnt Oak, **Time and Choice for Play** exists in a state of tension. On the one hand the area is well-supported via Council and private services, including Early Years and Primary Standards teams that underline play as a developmental necessity; primary schools which offer parenting skills sessions, and two Children's Centres providing development coaching for young children and parents alike.

There is also a relatively large amount of options for organised play. On the other hand, this is constrained by the ability of caregivers to pay for these activities, and of the organisations to meet the demand for affordable options. The economic circumstances of many residents generate an amount of cognitive overhead that

meaningfully interferes with play as a choice or priority in the home, particularly play between caregivers and children.

Children are less likely to gain the cognitive and skill-building benefits of independent exploration; the health issues associated with overuse of digital play experiences become a risk, and even social development may be affected by a reduced range of play opportunities and interactions.

Our research identified a variety of **Spaces and Facilities for Play** in Burnt Oak. There have been considerable investments in play both in the public realm (e.g. with the redesign of parks) and in indoor infrastructure for play (e.g. with the refurbishment of a school and the construction of Unitas and the Greentop Centre). Children and caregivers' reported experience in these play spaces is generally positive. However, these interventions have so far missed an opportunity to address key concerns regarding safety in the public realm, issues around connectivity and accessibility, and the lack of social cohesion, all of which affect play conditions.

Informal play opportunity areas in Burnt Oak include 'pocket parks', cul-de-sacs, and common areas on estates. Research participants emphasised the value of spaces like these in terms of enabling 'street play' which brings together communities and some new developments have spaces suitable for this type of use. However, a culture of 'quiet streets' - exemplified by widespread No Ball Games signs - might be an obstacle to this.

In the community, pervasive concerns about safety and antisocial behaviour is a key challenge as it influences caregivers' choices and hampers children's ability to use public space to play or to participate in play activities outside the home. This has disruptive follow-on effects across a number of aspects of play conditions.

We identified several opportunities for improving conditions for Play in Burnt Oak, in particular to enhance facilitation, time and choice, and spaces and facilities for play.

- › **Championing play** among municipal officials, community leaders, and urban practitioners involved in Barnet's growth. Clearly communicating the social, health and educational benefits associated with a robust play culture can ensure that as Burnt Oak grows, play doesn't get left behind.
- › By **coordinating physical and policy interventions and outreach efforts**, there is the opportunity to build a true sense of community cohesion and to embed a culture of play in the community, and to establish a sense of ownership around future interventions.
- › **Use digital play as a bridge to physical play.** Digital play and experiences can be used to springboard Burnt Oak children's existing familiarity with digital tools and platforms into greater engagement with the outdoors.
- › The **Barnet Local Plan** presents a key opportunity to expand the existing approach to provide affordable and safe options for play in indoor facilities and address the public realm.
- › **Leverage transit & mobility systems** by building opportunities to learn through play and communicating play to travellers through interventions at stops, thus activating travel time for play.
- › **Improve the network of spaces connecting** Burnt Oak's public and play areas is a key step towards activating a culture of play in the community.

**No matter the play-based intervention promoted, the key element is community engagement. If the potential users of the intervention are not merely 'consulted' but actively engaged from initial scoping through implementation, the benefits for the community increase well beyond the scale of the intervention itself. Mutual communication, interaction between neighbours, and a durable sense of ownership over the eventual intervention can yield significant intangible positives, self-policing, decreased anti-social behaviour, and community cohesion among them.**





# The Power of Play in Cities

Research shows that play helps foster children's learning and holistic development, including social, emotional, cognitive, physical and creative skills. Yet play is struggling to find a place in the lives of many children today, and low-play lives and play-poverty are seen across all strata of society and socio-economic levels.

New challenges linked to rapid urbanisation and urban lifestyles, have impacted children's ability to play and thrive in urban communities globally, with vulnerable children hit the hardest. This affects not just their childhood but the rest of their adult life.<sup>1</sup>

The Real Play Coalition was formed in 2018, to unite organisations who believe in the power of play for optimal child development. Arup, IKEA (Ingka Group), National Geographic Partners, the LEGO Foundation and UNICEF joined knowledge, skills and resources to change perceptions and practices around the value of play, by promoting play-based opportunities, influencing behavioural change, and mobilising policymakers, urban practitioners, and educators, so that by 2025, 500 million children will have benefited from the power of play.

The work of the Real Play Coalition's partners aims to generate the evidence and knowledge to support city authorities, urban professionals, development actors, and communities to better understand how the built environment can support children's diverse needs and abilities and provide for their optimal development. It also aims at creating guidance on how to design and implement play-based strategies, urban policy and practices that encourage diverse play experiences in cities.

Arup champions the power of design and planning in creating prosperous places and vibrant communities. RTPi's support builds on the institute's commitment to mainstream child-friendly planning in the policy in the UK<sup>2</sup> and promoting healthy and age-inclusive communities in Britain and internationally, particularly as part of the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Arup and RTPi have partnered to support the Real Play Coalition to mainstream the adoption of learning through play concepts in practices and norms across cities, by influencing change across individuals and institutions responsible for decision making and planning at the city level.

In cities, barriers to play are complex and numerous. Global urbanisation trends are reducing accessible open spaces for play: community spaces, family-friendly parks, and play areas are often the first casualties as cities adopt unsustainable forms of development. Urban lifestyles are also changing, with a growing prevalence of insecurity and parental risk aversion, the increasing role played by



technology in our lives, and a recurring time-scarcity problem, each of which impact children's experience of the city.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the needs and challenges of children often go unheard in urban decision-making and planning.<sup>5</sup>

There is to date a limited base of evidence on the state of play in cities around the world, and particularly on the role of the built environment in enabling and constraining access to play opportunities. City authorities and professionals such as housing developers, planning officers, engineers, and development experts often have difficulty understanding how their work and the built environment as a whole relates to children's needs, specifically to learning through play.<sup>6</sup>

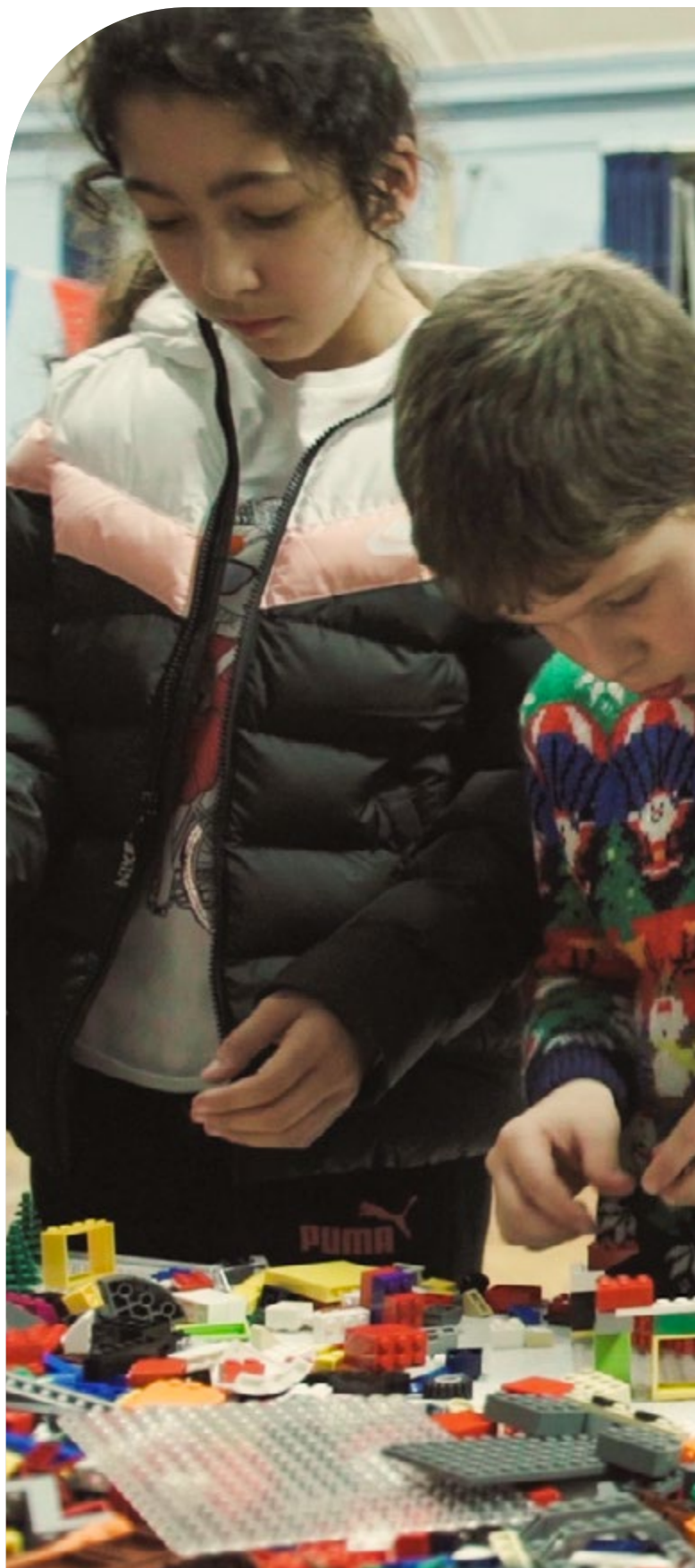
Very little guidance exists on designing neighbourhoods that encourage children's independent mobility and free play. In addition, limited evidence of the economic benefits of designing for play contributes to diminished political will, constrained commercial interest, and minimal effective guidance on how to plan, design and upgrade neighbourhoods to encourage children's free play.<sup>7</sup>

Play is often seen as an activity confined to playgrounds or children's facilities, but the whole built environment can offer a critical play and learning opportunity for children. In reality, play permeates all aspects of a child's life, in a wider variety of locations and environments than adults often suspect. Cities can offer critical opportunities to better realise the potential to learn through playful experiences.

**Landscaping, planting and community art installations, for example, can offer children considerable play value. Play areas can be embedded in the way we design and plan for public space, transforming the way to school into a learning opportunity, or polluted and unsafe sites into vibrant assets. A combination of formal and informal play solutions can cultivate a greater sense of place, allow fuller play experiences, and reap substantial benefits for children, their families and their communities.<sup>8</sup>**

These opportunities can harness children's innate curiosity through play, learn and practice the relational skills that enable our communities and society to be adaptable, sustainable and flourishing. As children grow, opportunities for playful engagement with their environment help build physical, emotional and social resilience<sup>9</sup>, crucial factors for wellbeing throughout their entire lives.<sup>10</sup>

This report presents insights from the work undertaken by Arup and the Royal Town Planning Institute in the ward of Burnt Oak in the London Borough of Barnet, where the Urban Play Framework was applied to undertake a comprehensive play assessment with the support of Barnet Council, UNICEF UK and the Real Play Coalition. The aim of the study was to understand how various urban systems impact children's play experience in the selected community, to support the development of recommendations towards ensuring a play-friendly environment. The findings have been used to identify some opportunities to improve the play experience in the study area.





# The Urban Play Framework

The Urban Play Framework was developed by Arup for the Real Play Coalition, in collaboration with the LEGO Foundation and the support of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI).

The Urban Play Framework provides a structured, granular and holistic method to understand how various urban systems relate to a child's learning through play experience, by assessing the challenges and opportunities surrounding play in a given urban context; and to help support, prioritise and design play activation interventions. The Framework is also intended as a tool for ongoing outcome assessment, to measure the long-term impact of specific play activations.

The Urban Play Framework assesses three Dimensions critical to ensure a play-friendly environment for optimal childhood development.

## **FACILITATION FOR PLAY**

This dimension seeks to understand if adults' important role in boosting children's learning and development through facilitated play is actively supported by caregivers, teachers, community members, and city authorities.

## **TIME AND CHOICE FOR PLAY**

This dimension seeks to understand if children have adequate time and choice to engage in stimulating and developmentally rewarding play within the target community.

## **SPACES AND FACILITIES FOR PLAY**

This dimension seeks to understand if children have adequate space to be able to undertake a range of play types; and if they have access to a range of toys, creative supplies, materials and equipment for play.

Children's living conditions within the target community, including their fundamental needs for shelter, healthcare, and nutrition are assessed across these dimensions. These conditions are central to enjoyable and developmentally rewarding play.

Each Dimension consists of four Goals, reference standards for "what good looks like" as regards play in the location assessed. Each Goal considers four Factors, which are discrete situational, relational, material and infrastructural elements that collectively contribute to enable optimal play conditions.

The goals are assessed at four urban scales:

### **THE HOUSEHOLD LEVEL**

Play conditions in the home, involving children, their caregivers, and their family members.

### **THE SCHOOL LEVEL**

Play conditions in the school, involving children, educators, caregivers, and family members.

### **THE NEIGHBOURHOOD LEVEL**

Play conditions in the local neighbourhood, its streets, spaces, and facilities, involving children, caregivers, and community organisations.

### **THE CITY LEVEL**

Play conditions across the city as a whole, involving planners, decision-makers, government officials, policy, strategy, and budgets.

The knowledge and evidence generated through the application of the Urban Play Framework can be used to influence and support activities to improve the wider play experience in cities. In particular, the framework can support governments, development partners, urban practitioners, and citizens in exploring actionable ways to address the causes and effects of low play in cities; and to design and promote play-based interventions to make cities more playful and inclusive for optimal child development.



# Burnt Oak Play Profile





# Approach

With the support of Barnet Council, UNICEF UK and the Real Play Coalition, Arup and the Royal Town Planning Institute applied the Urban Play Framework in the ward of Burnt Oak in the London Borough of Barnet to undertake a comprehensive play assessment. The aim of the study was to understand how various urban systems impact children's play experience in the selected community, according to the dimensions of the framework, to support the development of recommendations towards ensuring a play-friendly environment.

The profile of play conditions in the ward of Burnt Oak draws upon desk-based historical, socio-economic, material and cultural research performed in advance of site visits, as well as in-depth field research conducted between September 2019 and January 2020.

Several qualitative methods were adopted for the fieldwork to document as thoroughly as possible the material, systemic and policy conditions influencing how local children play. It also investigated how local stakeholders perceive such conditions, contribute to shaping them, and act within them. The following methods were used for the field research:

- › **Transect walks**, to map and assess site materiality, access and hazards.
- › **Formal KIIs** (key informant interviews) with key stakeholders including academic experts, built environment professionals, elected officials across the political spectrum and educators to better understand the environment for play and systemic approaches to play optimisation.
- › **FGDs** (focus group discussions) with Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) staff and volunteers, and council staff to examine local opportunities and challenges surrounding play.

This background research culminated in **two (2) workshops with children (0-5 and 6-12)**, caregivers, local educators, and play workers from the community to map, create around and analyse the local play environment and local issues affecting play. Activities in these workshops included trust-building exercises using LEGO bricks; participatory mapping exercises and group discussions to identify challenging play areas and opportunities throughout the settlement as well as traffic patterns, sites of material or safety concern, and existing play spaces and initiatives.





## Overview

The play assessment shows Burnt Oak as an area with considerable challenges to optimal play, but also one with significant opportunities for improving play conditions through built environment interventions.

The mix of challenges and opportunities that Burnt Oak's children are confronted with is reflected in the mixed views we heard from engaged stakeholders. The prevailing general feeling among focus group participants was that conditions for play were not optimal. However, views were expressed that positive action to better support play was possible; that this could broaden the impact of existing initiatives and enhance how play infrastructure can serve the wider local social development.

Despite the hardships experienced by low-income members of the community, Burnt Oak children and caregivers reflected a welcoming and diverse community animated by the energy of many newcomers. They showed openness to share issues, discuss their experience and come together around their children to improve their prospects in life, their development and how they play.

Burnt Oak presents mild to severe material, structural, civic and governance obstacles to optimal play; at the same time, the area holds key opportunities to enhance play through considerable investment coming to Barnet as part of London's projected urban growth.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

According to Greater London Authority data, the population of Burnt Oak in 2020 is projected to be 19,400, placing it among the 10% most populated wards in Greater London.<sup>11</sup> As part of a wave of growth across London, Barnet's population is expected to grow by 20 to 30% by 2036, potentially passing the half million mark

from today's 390,000. By 2025, Barnet is projected to have 100,000 children and young people.

In many respects, Burnt Oak and the neighbouring ward of Colindale stand out when compared with most of the Borough. Burnt Oak is characterised by a significantly younger population than both the Barnet and London average: almost a fourth (24.9%) of the Burnt Oak residents were under 15 in 2015<sup>12</sup> and almost 30% (29.5%) were under 19 in 2018.<sup>13</sup> In 2015, Burnt Oak was the third "youngest" ward in Barnet after Golders Green and Colindale, with 5,457 people aged 0-19.

The ward is the second most diverse in Barnet, with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) representing more than half of the population (53.5%).<sup>14</sup> Almost 20% (19.3%) of the households in Burnt Oak do not speak English as their first language. While the majority of the population is Christian, the ward has a higher proportion of Muslims (18.4%) and a significantly lower Jewish population (1.2%) than the borough average (respectively 10.3% and 15.2% at Barnet level).<sup>15</sup> Burnt Oak also features in the top 10% wards in London for number of residents not born in the UK, with the three top countries of origin of foreign-born residents being Romania, India and Afghanistan.

Burnt Oak is a relatively deprived area of London, and together with Colindale, it presents the highest rates of unemployment in the Borough at 8.1% and 8.4% respectively. 13.3% of the households in Burnt Oak are experiencing 'fuel poverty'.<sup>16</sup> This economic deprivation often means that livelihood considerations can place



pressures on caregivers that preclude easy access to or cognitive bandwidth to optimally implement play facilitation knowledge and strategies.

### **SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT**

Historically a suburban area, the London Borough of Barnet covers 86.74 km<sup>2</sup> in the northern outskirts of Greater London at the border with Hertfordshire, where the urban fringe gives way to the protected rural areas of the London Green Belt. The play profile focused on the ward of Burnt Oak, an area of 206.7 hectares, located at the western edge of the Borough.

Known as Red Hill before the 1860s, Burnt Oak maintained a suburban character until the 1920s, when the Burnt Oak Tube station opened (1924) and catalysed new developments by the London Corporation and private developers. By 1931, the area was already densely urbanised, hosting a population of 21,545<sup>17</sup> with most of the present urban fabric already in place.

Key infrastructures cut across Barnet in the general direction north-south - radiating from central London - and include the A5 road, the M1 motorway, two branches of the London Underground system, and the East Coast Main Line national rail service.

The majority of Burnt Oak is composed of housing estates, the biggest and oldest of which is the Watling Estate, occupying roughly 50% of the ward's built-up area. Built in the 1920s, Watling originally comprised 4,034 dwellings and is characterised by suburban blocks

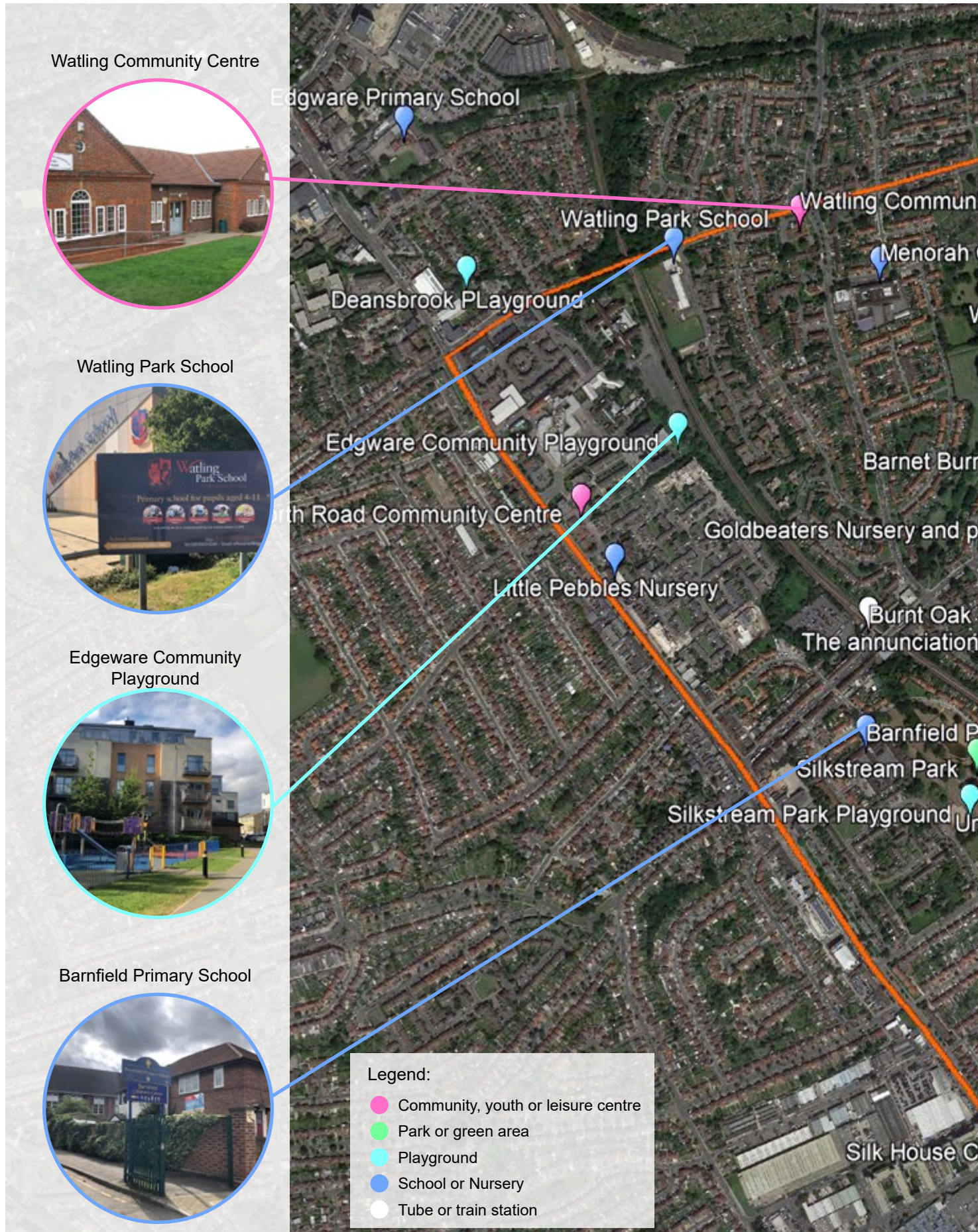
of short terraces and semi-detached two-bedroom cottage houses.

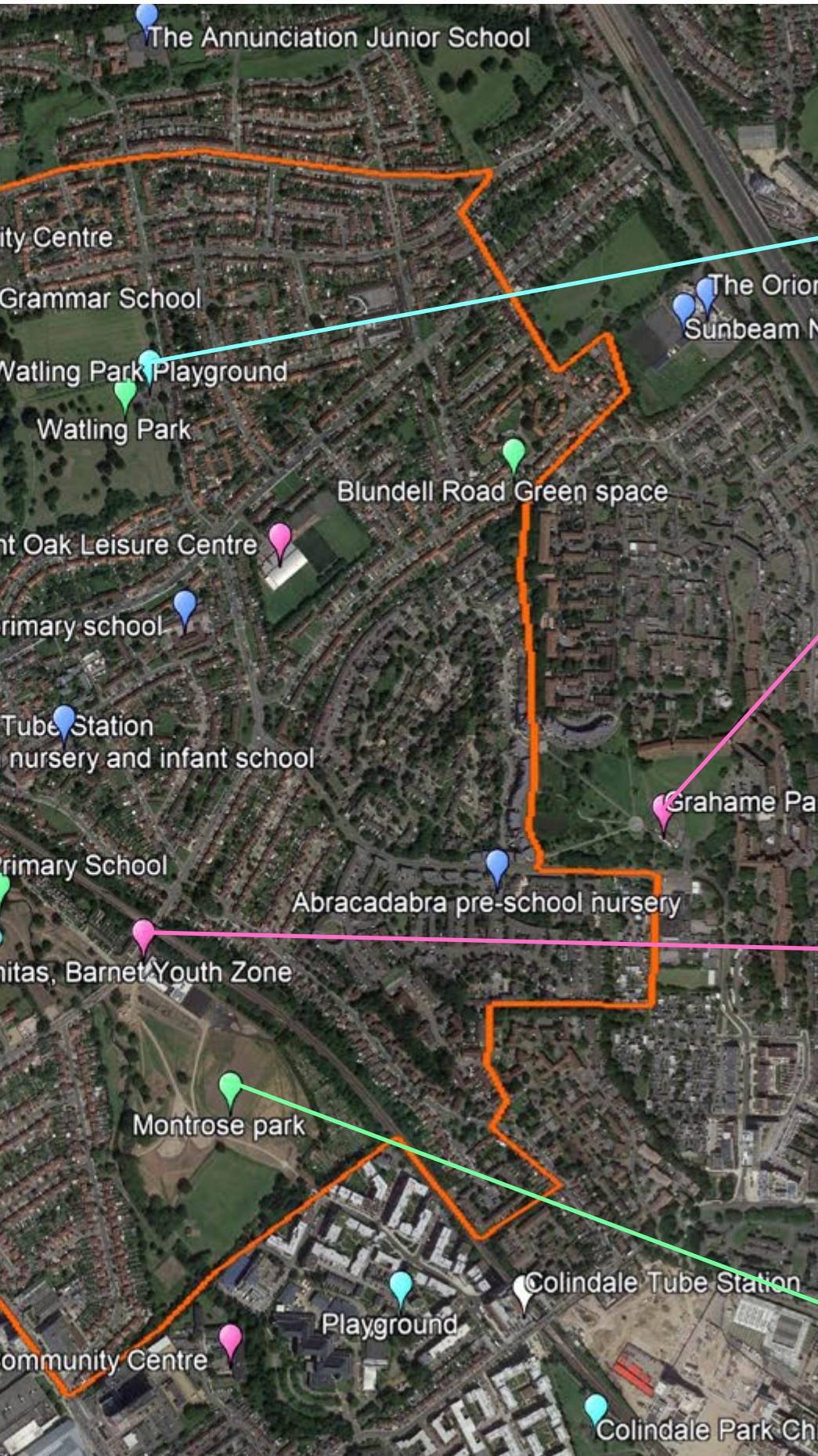
In 2007, in recognition of its architectural value, the Watling Estate Conservation area was established, with restrictions on new construction and on changes to the built environment, which has put constraints on home extensions and imposed strict rules on the height of new building - including those relevant to play, such as the community leisure centre.

More recently, redevelopments have been undertaken in parts of the ward, such as in the north-west of the ward, with schemes around Fortune Avenue and Cameron Crescent in 2006 and with the ongoing regeneration of The Croft site, near Edgware Community Hospital.

Barnet is rapidly changing. Tens of thousands of new homes are being built, altering the Borough's suburban feel and redefining community dynamics. Significant regeneration and new construction is already happening in Colindale; new infrastructure - including play infrastructure - is expected either to fall within Burnt Oak boundaries or to positively affect the ward. The Council expects 17,000 new residents to move into new developments in the neighbouring ward of Colindale by 2040.<sup>18</sup>

Mapping Play in Burnt Oak visualisation





Watling Park Playground



Grahame Park Youth Centre



UNITAS Youth Zone



Silkstream Park



# Facilitation for Play in Burnt Oak

This dimension of the Urban Play Framework seeks to understand if adults' important role in boosting children's learning and development through facilitated play is actively supported by caregivers, teachers, community members, and city authorities.

## WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE:

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### HOUSEHOLD LEVEL

This means that balanced and responsive play facilitation is understood and provided by caregivers.

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### SCHOOL LEVEL

This means that play-based learning is encouraged through school curricula and teachers.

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### NEIGHBOURHOOD LEVEL

This means that play facilitation is supported by institutions and individuals throughout the community.

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### CITY LEVEL

This means that play facilitation and knowledge support is enabled throughout the city by governance and leadership. It also entails that caregivers and children participate in decision-making and planning.

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## FACILITATION FOR PLAY AT HOUSEHOLD LEVEL

Factors assessed at the household level examined if caregivers understand play as a developmentally critical activity and whether they spend adequate quality playtime with children. These factors also analysed if children's agency and mindset are supported in order for them to play to their full potential, and whether caregivers have a good work/life balance and have access to steady livelihood and learning opportunities.

The economic deprivation of Burnt Oak often means that livelihood considerations can place pressures on caregivers that preclude easy access to or cognitive bandwidth to optimally implement play facilitation knowledge and strategies. The cultural variety inherent in a 'melting pot' community such as Burnt Oak often means that a number of households rely upon traditional educational approaches and expectations, which can devalue facilitated play as a learning method.

Burnt Oak is characterised by social deprivation, low income and unemployment. Compared to both Barnet and London average, it has a higher proportion of elementary occupations, low-skills and service jobs. This is consistent with the under-representation of LEV4+ qualification among Burnt Oak residents, compared to both the London and Barnet average.<sup>19</sup>

Burnt Oak has an average Multiple Deprivation Index (MDI) of 28, the highest in Barnet and one of the 30%

highest in London.<sup>20</sup> This deprivation especially impacts children – with an Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) of 0.2, second highest in Barnet after Colindale, meaning that one child in five within the ward is living in a poor household.

The cost of childcare in Outer London for children under 5 ranges from 33% to 31% of the median salary for 50 hours; and around 17% for 25 hours. For children above age 5, the costs are more moderate: 7% for an afterschool club, or 9% for a private childminder.<sup>21</sup> The high cost of childcare - particularly for children 0-2 – means that hard pressed households might only be able to afford childcare for just one child or be better off financially with one parent at home rather than at work, which can impact households' access to livelihood opportunities.

Barnet Council, in association with the local Jobcentre and other agencies, has established the Burnt Oak Opportunity Support Team (BOOST), a service for adult education, skill building and advice on access to benefits that targets the local community.

There are different degrees of awareness of the value of play for developing skills. Both interview and focus group participants highlighted how cultural differences exist about the value assigned to unstructured and imaginative play across different communities. Caregivers tend to focus on academic achievement - a trend that has increased over the last 15 years, according to interview respondents. Parental concerns about safety in the public space are significant obstacles to outdoor play.



## FACILITATION FOR PLAY AT SCHOOL LEVEL

Factors assessed at the school level examined if schools embed play in curriculum, and whether teachers understand the importance of learning through play. These factors also analysed whether play facilitation and knowledge resources are available for teachers.

Facilitation for Play is primarily well-served at the school level in Burnt Oak, with teachers and curricula from Nursery onwards employing play as a key method of instruction and educational staff generally recognising the importance of play in learning outcomes. As with many schools nationwide, this enthusiasm for leveraging play in the curriculum sometimes stands at odds with the prescribed time and methods needed to accomplish National Core mandated subjects.

Play is an important part of the school curricula in Burnt Oak, from nursery onwards, and schools promote the value of an active lifestyle, which can include play elements. Particularly in primary schools, active lifestyle and leisure are a focus of the educational approach which encourages personal responsibility, health and character building together with academic achievements. However, interview respondents recognised a countervailing pressure from both national curricula and caregivers to focus time on 'core' mandated subjects and develop literacy and numeracy.

Schools work together with local organisations to ensure that children have access to local available opportunities to be active and healthy, such as a weight management and healthy food programmes which have play elements. One of the local Children Centres has a sensory room

which the local Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) makes available for children with disabilities in weekly drop-in sessions. The recently refurbished Orion school or the local Leisure Centre, which have larger premises, keep sport and play opportunities separated. However, they provide good quality infrastructure for sport, soft play, and gymnastics - which can include play elements for younger children. One of the local Children Centres, located within the premises of a primary school, has a dedicated sensory room for young children.

Council's services, such as an Early Years and Primary Standards team and Children and Families Services, deliver training to school staff or provide support to some caregivers, addressing play as a development opportunity for children. However, they do not normally cover play in parks and public spaces.



## FACILITATION FOR PLAY AT NEIGHBOURHOOD LEVEL

Factors assessed at the neighbourhood level examined if caregivers have regular opportunities to undertake playful activities with children, and whether knowledge resources and support services are available for healthy, nurturing parenting. These factors also assessed if social services and welfare programmes are available, and whether community groups and social networks promote play for children and caregivers.

Despite a wide array of dedicated play spaces, a lack of officially organised play mentoring or other organised opportunities was cited by many research participants as a missed opportunity for more effective widespread play facilitation.

The research found that some caregivers have limited opportunities to engage children in play, and that cultural factors might influence how they see play as a key asset for children's development. Constraints on caregivers' time, linked to long working hours, were reported as a key challenge, and so were the lack of resources and energy to engage in play for the most vulnerable ones. Another issue was social isolation - where caregivers do not have good networks of friends and family within the community.

Our research did not identify the presence of a significant number of play mentors or playworkers supervising play in the public realm. There are play staff in schools and

play centres but a lack of facilitation in other play spaces such as parks. The Council's involvement with the local VCS does not seem to address play facilitation in parks at the moment.

However, formal playgrounds provide benches for caregivers to watch children play, and at least in two cases out of the three play areas analysed there were good sightlines from surrounding houses allowing the community to have 'eyes on the street', with some caregivers potentially playing that role informally.

Our research found a fairly large number of social and community organisations offering opportunities for play, including support for caregivers to socialise with their children and vital support to play for vulnerable children.

The two Children's Centres servicing Burnt Oak are meant to improve development outcomes for children 0-5 and build parenting skills. They host a number of courses for parents including first aid and childcare. Primary schools, such as Orion and Goldbeaters support children and parenting skills on specific topics, such as informing on screen time, advising on the choice of online content and games, educating on online risks, and conducting road education. The VCS and Barnet Council run support programmes for persons with disabilities, age 0-25, that include play elements. These programmes are delivered in Burnt Oak and the wider Borough.

With constrained resources, Council programmes have tended to safeguard key family services for the most vulnerable, such as persons with disabilities aged 0-25 - which can include play aspects. However, budget cuts have affected these services as well, and restrictions have been put on eligibility criteria for some services relevant to accessing play. Council programmes don't have much capacity to address vulnerable caregivers' social isolation and their time to play with children - e.g. encouraging them to socialise and share childcare duties. This, however, has been discussed in KIIs and FGDs as a key opportunity to enhance community support for play.

As part of their “family-friendly Borough” vision, the Council consults with and involves the local VCS as a key actor in the delivery of social and welfare support. However, this does not always have adequate resources to meet the demand.

Caregivers, however, may have reduced access to online information about both the value of play and about initiatives in the ward. Conversely, easy access to

technology for children might have a direct influence on play patterns according to interview respondents. Caregivers reportedly see indoor play on devices as a safe alternative to independent play outdoors. A survey of caregivers conducted in two primary schools indicates that some children may not leave the house for entire weekends and can spend up to 13 hours a day on devices, with concentration affected at the beginning of the week.





## FACILITATION FOR PLAY AT CITY LEVEL

Factors assessed at the city level examined if there are public policies and guidelines that facilitate and support the creation of playful environments, including through the participation of caregivers and children in decision-making and planning; and whether public communications campaigns and budgets include the promotion of play-friendly initiatives and interventions.

Current policies place a burden on new housing for the provision of playable and play space in common areas and in the public space around new buildings, sometimes with financial responsibilities for maintenance placed on residents. According to both focus group and interview participants, this can deter developers from providing playable space as part of new schemes. A lack of resources at Council level is a key challenge, with delivery, communication and engagement around play affected.

The UK Play Strategy 2008-2011 classified Barnet as one of 122 “Play Builder” councils with £700k dedicated resources for projects and to build new play areas prioritising deprived areas identified via the 2011 Infrastructure Plan – including in Burnt Oak. One of the projects addressed accessibility to play opportunities using buses.

Today, with a decrease in dedicated funding, planning is responsible for much of the play provision via the contributions from new developments. These are subject to negotiations and follow priorities in the London and

Local Plan. According to interviews and focus groups, play will be prioritised in the Barnet Local Plan, which is being drafted. Encouraging play and active mobility is also in Barnet’s Core Strategy.

However, meeting housing targets and specifically affordable housing requirements might take priority over play provision. The Greater London Authority can intervene or block developments if they don’t provide enough housing or affordable housing units and this can result in tension regarding the allocation of developer contributions. Of relevance to this study is the burden this places on planners to ensure that they provide adequate play facilities.

While consultation happens at a strategic level when drafting plans and strategies, there might be a lack of capacity to both expand engagement and to coordinate across Council departments on policy and programme implementation.

A lack of resources at Council level is a key challenge, with delivery, communication and engagement around play affected. VCS organisations are committed to making information available via non-digital means - e.g. posters -, however, that can be resource intensive. The Council recognises that there is “need for a communication effort” on their part to valorise play.

# Time and Choice for Play in Burnt Oak

This dimension of the Urban Play Framework seeks to understand if children have adequate time and choice to engage in stimulating, and developmentally rewarding play within the target community.

## WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE:

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### HOUSEHOLD LEVEL

This means ensuring that children have adequate time and choice to play at home either with caregivers, siblings or peers and alone. It also entails caregivers having adequate time and knowledge to engage in play activities with children.

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### SCHOOL LEVEL

This means schools provide adequate time and choice for a variety of play types. Schools can often provide an important opportunity for regular, secure play.

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### NEIGHBOURHOOD LEVEL

This means that a play-supportive culture is established and promoted in the community, by local residents and/or civil society organisations. Opportunities and avenues exist for community members to engage in and support play in public spaces.

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### CITY LEVEL

This means that adequate time and choice to play is enabled by governance and leadership. It also entails that city authorities are informed about the benefits of play, and support programmes to improve access to and quality of a diverse range of play modes for children in their homes, schools, and neighbourhoods.

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## TIME & CHOICE FOR PLAY AT HOUSEHOLD LEVEL

Factors assessed at the household level examined how much time and choice children have to play either with caregivers, siblings or peers and alone, what obstacles stand in the way of their time & choice for play. It also entails caregivers having adequate time and knowledge to engage in play activities with children.

There is a wide perception and evidence that children have limited time for unstructured play, particularly outdoors. On the other hand, there is a relatively large amount of options for organised play. This, however, is constrained by the ability of the most vulnerable caregivers to access these activities, and of the organisations to meet the demand for affordable options. Overcrowding of housing units combined with high deprivation index in the ward and caregivers' concerns regarding outdoor independent play are key challenges to establishing an optimal mindset for play choices.

Our research identified a wide perception that children have limited time for play, and less time than in the past for unstructured play, particularly outdoors. This was identified both within Burnt Oak and as part of a larger trend in London and the UK. This perception aligns with a 2015 report from Natural England which highlights a general decline in time spent in natural environments - including urban parks - by children, with London scoring below the national average for number of visits to parks over the previous year.<sup>22</sup>

Factors limiting unstructured play include:

- › Caregivers' perceptions about crime and road safety, and their risk-adversity combined with limited number of play spaces considered 'safe', reduces caregivers' willingness to let children play independently and engage in outdoor 'messy play'.
- › Carers not valuing unstructured play and prioritising formal activities such as after school clubs and lessons, reinforced by peer pressure from other parents. This was sometimes associated with cultural factors.
- › Amount of homework and time spent at school. In Burnt Oak many children are dropped off at school for breakfast and picked up at 6PM, leaving little time of daylight for play, especially in winter. This problem is exacerbated when children have a longer commute to school.
- › Increasing amounts of time spent on electronic devices and other indoor activities, reinforced by caregivers' perception that this is safer than outdoor play - especially when work commitments mean caregivers cannot supervise. However, this kind of indoor play may also impart some of the benefits of outdoor unstructured play.<sup>23</sup>
- › The scarcity of time for play can be exacerbated by limited places in local primary schools resulting in longer commuting time to school, which may be influenced by a loose enforcement of school catchment areas to increase parental choice on school education. Similarly, the absence of secondary school means longer commute times for parents, when they opt to take their older children to school. Families with children of different ages may also end up having to take multiple journeys to different schools and after school activities, further decreasing the amount of time available for play.

A key challenge for children to access play spaces independently is linked to connectivity issues - both in terms of active travel opportunities and public transport - and to the location of play infrastructure, perceived as far from residential areas. The lack of equipment catering for different ages as well as the lack of cycling lanes, of continuous pavements in some places and of traffic reduction measures were mentioned as issues by caregivers and children.

The level of education and unemployment emerging from the demographic profile of the community gives an indication of the quality of the jobs and partly explains a reported lack of time to engage in play with children.

54% of the active residents of Burnt Oak work in other parts of London (mainly in Brent, Camden, Harrow and in Central London - Westminster and City of London), and only 12% of Burnt Oak residents works locally, in Burnt Oak or in the neighbouring wards of Hale, Edgware, Colindale or Mill Hill. Therefore, long commutes, particularly by bus, emerge as a key challenge. While slower, buses are less expensive than rail transport, and are therefore preferred by the low-income population.

Despite good connections with central London and the wider urban area, commuting by Underground can be financially burdensome and can take over one hour of travel time in each direction. A Travelcard Zone 1-4 would cost 219.4 / month. Barnet has the highest proportion of low-income population traveling by bus in London along with the Borough of Waltham Forest.<sup>24</sup>

Kills suggest that the large proportion of primary caregivers in work makes it challenging to dedicate time to play. After work, the commuting, the school run and other commitments there is often little time left to play. Children engaged referred to a lack of play time. This may be influenced by caregivers' cultural perceptions on the importance of play and their role in it, including their presence to monitor children's play in the public realm.

Children in Burnt Oak have a relatively large amount of options for organised play. However, this is constrained by the ability of caregivers to pay for structured play activities and the ability of the organisations running these to meet the demand for affordable options. Our research also found that some activities are only accessible to older children (over 11), and restrictions can be in place even for some activities for vulnerable categories, such as children with disabilities. Children and caregivers considered the opportunities for outdoor structured play - such as play groups in parks - unsatisfactory. Caregivers and parents also raised a concern about the absence of organised activities catering jointly for caregivers and children that would allow them to spend more quality time together.

Children and caregivers showed an appreciation for both the Unitas and the other structured play opportunities. Unitas - one of the recent key investments in play - offers organised play opportunities that are affordable for most. However, fees to access Unitas were raised as an issue for the most vulnerable families. The VCS, the Leisure Centre and local schools complement the offer of structured play and leisure opportunities in after school hours, namely with after school clubs.

There are a number of economic and social barriers to carers enjoying nurturing and loving interactions with children. Poverty is reported to have an effect on the quality of the time spent by caregivers with children, with long and flexible shifts leaving little energy to play.

Engaged children and caregivers referred to school homework as one of the main issues affecting the time dedicated to play. Interview respondents evidenced a growing social pressure on parents to involve the children in extracurricular activities, further reducing the time available for free play. This resonates with the breadth of after-school clubs that are offered by schools and other organisations.



Families with many children and extended families may cause overcrowding in poor housing with consequences on mental health. In some cases, these factors may compound with other exceptional factors of deprivation, such as the status of refugee or the inability to work, affecting caregivers' mental health and their disposition to play with children. The high cost of childcare is reported as being an issue, with the burden of care disproportionately placed on women. The increased use of electronic devices was also linked to fewer positive interactions.

All these factors combined are key challenges to establishing an optimal mindset for play choices. Key indicators on children's wellbeing, mental health and conduct disorders are provided by Public Health England at Borough level. The percentage of school pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs (school age) in 2018 in Barnet was 2.61%, slightly higher than the London (2.41%) and the national average (2.39%).<sup>25</sup> Interview respondents highlighted similar issues in Burnt Oak school pupils. Critically, hospital admissions as a result of self-harm for 15-19 years old in 2017/18 in Barnet were the highest in London.<sup>26</sup>





## TIME & CHOICE FOR PLAY AT SCHOOL LEVEL

Factors assessed at the school level examined how much time and choice for a variety of play types is provided in the school environment (both in formal and informal education), including for regular and secure play, as well as the type and quality of this play.

Primary schools offer several after-school activities for their pupils, but these activities are focused on organised and structured play (including sport) and free play is not mentioned as a focus.

The School National Curriculum in England for Stages 1 and 2 refers to structured role-play as part of the development of verbal skills.

There is a strict policy in at least two primary schools of not allowing screen time, which is reportedly well received by children and is seen as encouraging social interaction and active play. The prevailing attitude towards play on devices is to not encourage it or encourage 'serious [digital] gaming' which is not child-led - e.g. a game on times tables.

The programme of one of the four public local primary schools partly encourages organised sports over play. Two more schools stress being physically active and healthy as a focus, and see play as an element of this, but not necessarily child-led. Interview respondents suggested that this approach (play as an element, but not necessarily child-led) might also extend to the substantial offerings of weekly classes and clubs outside school hours, which also involve creative activities - for example dance and art. All primary schools, in fact, offer several after-school

activities for their pupils, but these activities are focused on organised and structured play (including sport) and free play is not mentioned as a focus.

In some cases, the after-school activities are paid. This can be an obstacle, especially for large families who might be deprived or low income. Focus group participants mentioned targeted interventions in Burnt Oak making activities free and accessible, particularly to relatively deprived children and caregivers. This included some free childcare for 2-4 year olds, which enables children to be entered into organised play activities.



## TIME & CHOICE FOR PLAY AT NEIGHBOURHOOD LEVEL

Factors assessed at the neighbourhood level examined whether and to what degree play is established and promoted by the local residents and civil society organisations in the neighbourhood; and whether opportunities and avenues exist for community members to engage in and support play in public spaces.

Burnt Oak's community does not have a strong culture of outdoor play, in particular due to safety concerns. Examples of community-led play initiatives common in other parts of London, such as play streets, were not reported in Burnt Oak. There are play staff in schools and play centres but a lack of supervision in other play spaces such as playgrounds and parks.

There was a general feeling that Burnt Oak's community does not have a strong culture of outdoor play, in particular due to safety concerns. For example, there is a common perception among both caregivers and children that gangs operate in parks or that roads are too dangerous.

Moreover, the research outlines that the attitude towards outdoor play might be related to cultural factors. Partial segregation between communities, social isolation of some caregivers or recent immigration are also factors that can inhibit a positive attitude towards play.

However, we found evidence of self-built play infrastructure in a cul-de-sac street, which testifies of a community culture welcoming play in parts of the ward.

Public events like a summer festival and bonfire night, which saw the participation of school staff, pupils and caregivers, were described as events that bring together communities, and interview respondents highlighted the need to build a sense of community across many new residents and different groups.

Examples of community-led play initiatives common in other parts of London, such as play streets, were not reported in Burnt Oak and some KILs were not aware of them. Lack of access to information and a variety of different means - other than online - to make information available and engage communities better was felt to be an issue, in particular for newer residents. Focus groups participants agreed that there is "need for a communication effort on the part of the Council to valorise play".

According to one key informant, the cost of hiring a space to run activities can be a barrier for community groups. Faith-based organisations seem to be the type of community groups with better infrastructure and resources, because of their ability to use spaces they own (e.g. church premises) to hold community-led events. However, the faith connotation can pose issues for some potential users.



## TIME & CHOICE FOR PLAY AT CITY LEVEL

Factors assessed at the city level examined the degree to which local authorities enable adequate time and choice to play through city-wide policies, planning, and monitoring processes. It also entails that city authorities are informed about the benefits of play and support programmes to improve access to and quality of a diverse range of play modes for children in their homes, schools, and neighbourhoods.

In Burnt Oak, Time and Choice for play exists in a state of tension. On the one hand, the area is well-supported via Council and private services, including Early Years and Primary Standards teams that underline play as a developmental necessity. On the other hand, at least one housing management organisation in the area encourages a culture of 'quiet streets', reinforced by 'No Ball Games' signs in the public space.

Following the UK Play Strategy 2008-2011, there has been considerable funding for play provision by Councils which was tied to the formulation of local play strategies. National organisations producing evidence around play were also established (e.g. Play England). As a result a "play culture" was introduced in some local governments, such as the Greater London Authority; which is reflected in the London plan's dedicated guidance for play provision - which applies to Barnet. In Burnt Oak, the construction of the Unitas' indoor youth play facility. was selected to meet the objectives of the Barnet Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

Coordination between the Council services for safeguarding children and those overseeing parks and outdoor play opportunities is envisaged at strategic level - as part of the Barnet Green Spaces Master Plan - but, at the moment, not in the implementation of programmes.

The participation of children happens at a strategic level, for example for the Barnet Children's and Young People's Plan. However, both interview and focus group participants refer to missed opportunities to include children and key stakeholders in designing new policies. Some interview respondents and focus group participants are unaware of the Council's participation in the UNICEF Child-Friendly Cities initiative and suggest that "it's hard to know Barnet's strategy on children".

Some of the main actors in the local VCS, such as the Barnet Young Foundation, are membership organisations gathering charities, community groups as well as caregivers and are consulted by the Council on programme delivery. For example, the Barnet Parent-Carer Forum, is a voluntary group for parents and caregivers of children with special needs. Community facilities, such as the Burnt Oak Leisure Centre, is run by a social enterprise company and consults parents in deprived areas in designing courses about active lifestyle and play activities with equipment on site.

Focus groups raised that the fact that information on Council's services is mostly made available online can pose issues in terms of accessibility. Caregivers with limited access to the Internet or low digital literacy might be hampered in their ability to take part in consultations, influence decisions, or more in general be informed about the offer of services and activities.



# Spaces and Facilities for Play in Burnt Oak

This dimension of the Urban Play Framework seeks to understand if children of different abilities have safe access to adequate play spaces, playable environments and infrastructure for different play types; and if they have a variety of different toys, creative supplies, materials and equipment for play.

## WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE:

### HOUSEHOLD LEVEL

This means ensuring nurturing home environments with stimulating materials for a range of play types. This entails both home materiality and the dynamics of child-caregiver relationships and interactions; the availability and quality of space and equipment for a range of different play types; and the accessibility and adequacy of healthcare facilities and healthy nutrition.

### SCHOOL LEVEL

This means ensuring safe, accessible and playful education facilities supporting learning through play and a range of play types.

### NEIGHBOURHOOD LEVEL

This means ensuring healthy, playful and well-serviced public spaces and facilities for a range of play types.

### CITY LEVEL

This means ensuring a safe and connected network of playful spaces and mobility options.



## SPACES & FACILITIES FOR PLAY AT HOUSEHOLD LEVEL

Factors assessed at the household level examined the safety and quality of both home materiality and the dynamics of child-caregiver relationships and interactions; the availability and quality of space and equipment for a range of different play types; and the accessibility and adequacy of healthcare facilities and healthy nutrition.

In Burnt Oak, small housing units, overcrowding and limited availability of communal play areas are reported as the main issues hampering a healthy and playful home environment. Financial barriers are considered an obstacle to healthy lifestyles, including access to age appropriate nutrition.

Overcrowding in many homes due to a shortage of affordable housing reduces physical space available for play, compromises both caregivers' and children's focus and mindset for play. Barnet shares London's shortage of housing, and particularly of affordable housing, with the average house price doubling over the last three years.<sup>27</sup> The ward also stands out for the high proportion of socially rented housing (35%) and the low proportion of home ownership (38%), when compared to Barnet and London (57% and 48% respectively).

Interview respondents and focus group participants expressed concerns over the effects of overcrowding on the physical and mental health of both children and caregivers, and on parenting styles around play, leading to a reduction of quality play - for example by encouraging the use of electronic devices in order to keep the children

quiet in the house. In addition, in affordable and social rental units, external spaces, gardens and communal areas might be considered unsafe, not adequately fenced or used for purposes that are not compatible with play (e.g. as deposits).

These issues can be amplified in some of the high-rise estates (5 floors or more), such as the Grahame Park Estate, where overcrowding can compound with poor maintenance, social deprivation, isolation and a perceived lack of safety, as well as the lack of a private outdoor space for some of the units. This can affect children's play directly, amplifying the perception of risk on the part of caregivers and limiting children's ability to play independently in common areas. In some estates, there are no or few structures or equipment for play in communal areas. Developer contributions to play provision from new developments play a key role. However, some of the new play areas provided on the site of new developments are not easily accessible to non-residents, such as in the case of the Edgware Community Playground close to the Edgware Community Hospital.

While toys can be accessed by many, poverty can limit caregivers' ability to buy age appropriate toys that can support development and encourage meaningful play. Livelihood considerations can take priority over expenditure on items perceived as secondary, such as toys. Some free community-led playgroups, such as that at the Annunciation Church, make toys accessible for free during play sessions at their venue. Other organisations, such as the Leisure Centre or Homestart Barnet, organise free sessions with play equipment in some of the most deprived areas of Barnet, including some estates in Burnt Oak.

According to people interviewed, a high number of children in Burnt Oak primary schools use the National School Breakfast Programme, designed to support children that lack access to appropriate nutrition. Schools and community facilities - such as the Burnt Oak Leisure Centre - hold self-referral educational programmes on nutrition for families and children, targeting children 4 -13.

In terms of accessible and affordable supply of fresh and healthy food, Burnt Oak used to have a weekly market in the Town Centre which key informants report was shut down around 2015 due to excessive costs for the Council and dwindling numbers of people using it. Many opportunities to access fresh produce are located further away from the residential areas - namely on the A5 road. Caregivers also reported a lack of food retail and drinking fountains near play spaces.







## SPACES & FACILITIES FOR PLAY AT SCHOOL LEVEL

Factors measured at the school level explored the quality of play space and play equipment within local schools, and wider school safety conditions and accessibility, and whether school assets can be used for out-of-school play.

Burnt Oak has private and public nurseries, childcare and preschool services including those provided by local primary schools and Children's Centres. The quality of these is mandated by national legislation and actively monitored by the Council. However, demand exceeds the offer and high standards can have an impact on costs. Supplementary childcare is available as part of other services. Safety is considered an issue on routes to school, due to anti-social behaviour and road safety.

Burnt Oak has four state primary schools, Goldbeaters and Orion (under joint management), Woodcroft, and Barnfield, which were graded Good to Outstanding in the latest Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspections. This offer is complemented by other private and faith-based schools, such as the Menorah Grammar School and Annunciation Infant and Junior school. There are no secondary schools in Burnt Oak, which KILs highlight as a key issue for older children and teenagers, who are forced to commute long distances.

The Early Years Provision mandate the presence of outdoor space in childcare and education facilities as a requirement. Schools appear to provide good equipment for a diverse range of play types. This seemed to be good even where the space is limited, with multi-use game areas as an alternative to full-fledged sports court, which might encourage diverse modes of child-led play as well as sport. Both Woodcroft and Goldbeaters Primary

Schools are good examples of making optimal use of limited space offering opportunities for different types of play, including formal play equipment structures, multi-use game areas, permanent markings on the ground to encourage play.

Further services are provided by community groups, such as the Annunciation Church which holds periodic free play groups, or community facilities, such as the Burnt Oak Leisure Centre, which holds weekly affordable play sessions.

The Council also reports challenges in finding sites for future planned schools that are big enough to accommodate sufficient outdoor facilities for both sport and play. Multi-use game areas are seen as an alternative to full-fledged sports court, which might encourage unstructured child-led play as well as sport. Interview respondents lamented the lack of resources for opening school facilities to the community after school hours, including for play sessions.

Safety was considered an issue on routes to school. Interview, focus group and workshop participants all demonstrated concerns that children on the way to school could face anti-social behaviour, such as alcohol-drinking and loitering. Other concerns focussed on road safety.

The spatial assessment found measures to regulate cars stopping and parking around schools but poor traffic-calming measures across the ward and few streets that were bicycle-friendly. The continuity of pedestrian connectivity seemed compromised in certain points; some local throughways sidewalks were incomplete and pedestrian crossings were placed several hundred metres apart. Engaged children and caregivers expressed concerns about the walkability of the area, referring to issues regarding safe cycling, safe pavements and traffic-calming measures. The only street with signs indicating children playing identified in our transect walks, was also

the only street with permanent interventions of informal play infrastructure, built by community members using natural elements and wood.

The research found that the availability and accessibility of after school facilities has been challenged by austerity. Cuts to funding to public services from 2010 levels<sup>28</sup> has led to a decrease in the overall offer of those, which – according to key informants and focus groups - can include shorter working hours of Council-run services and a restriction on eligibility criteria to access them.

One of the main areas affected by these service cuts is access to development opportunities for children. There are two dedicated Children's Centres servicing Burnt Oak (one hosted at Barnfield Primary and one just outside the ward's boundary near Grahame Park), meant to improve

development outcomes for children below 5 and support their families with building parenting skills. These have decreased their service offerings as a result of dwindling resources.

Children aged 10-16, on the other hand, cannot access the Burnt Oak library independently due to a lack of supervising staff. The recently built Unitas Youth Zone, was reported as a good place for children to go and enjoy a good variety of indoor play, particularly in the late afternoon. However, the opportunities to extend this approach to the neighbouring public parks appeared limited. In a similar vein, the Greentop Centre built on Grahame Park was considered a good facility for play, however the high fence around its outdoor playground did not appear to encourage play in the wider public park and surrounding community.





## SPACES & FACILITIES FOR PLAY AT NEIGHBOURHOOD LEVEL

Factors measured at the neighbourhood level explored the quality of public spaces, green areas and facilities within the neighbourhood, and their wider quality and safety conditions, and accessibility. They also examined the accessibility of the local pedestrian environment for children and those with disabilities, and whether the environment itself exhibits characteristics of playfulness either unintentionally or by design.

The community is well-served with both formal and informal individual play spaces at a variety of sizes, offering a diverse range of activity options, but the lack of a truly accessible, safe and playful network of mobility options connecting these spaces with residential areas inhibits local children and caregivers from taking full advantage of them. Antisocial behaviour in public spaces is a key concern of caregivers, who are very reluctant to allow a significant degree of independence as concerns children's use of parks and public spaces.

The ward has significant provision of parks, including the historic Watling Park, and the Silkstream and Montrose parks which are under renovation. However, these are perceived by many to be unsafe. Our research identified a variety of public spaces, green areas, and formal play areas in Burnt Oak, and general positivity from children engaged, though also some concerns about availability and quality.

Designated play areas include:

- › Barnfield Children's Centre is a 'one stop shop' for families of children under five to access a range of Community Services and play sessions, though apparently some activities have been scaled back in recent years.
- › Uitas Youth Zone is a major state-of-the-art new play space for 8-19 year olds just outside Burnt Oak but targeting children from the ward. It is considered a safe space attracting up to 200 children at a time with lots of activities.
- › The Greentop Centre, a recently refurbished day nursery, which also provides after school activities.
- › Wingfield Children's Centre offers children's services alongside adult learning opportunities, though there was some feedback that the space isn't ideal for children.
- › Fairway Children's Centre provides parenting and health services with occasional play sessions.
- › The Burnt Oak Leisure Centre which offer activities including sports and soft play.
- › A number of parks, some of which have fenced play areas for children. The contiguous Montrose and Silk Stream Parks, which have a skateboarding park, were under significant renovation works at the time of the assessment and are expected to improve local play conditions. Another play area assessed in Watling Park had a variety of equipment which appeared in good condition. A lack of organised activities, especially in parks, was cited as a missed opportunity. The Council has reportedly been using a single supplier of play equipment, which was linked to a lack of diversity across playgrounds built in the past.

Informal play areas in Burnt Oak include 'pocket parks', cul-de-sacs, and urban game spaces on estates.

Klls emphasised the value of spaces like these in terms of enabling 'street play' which brings together communities, with some new developments offering spaces to this purpose.

In the more recently built estates, such as in the Adastral Estate, there are green areas, not designed as play-safe areas, lacking formal play equipment and sightlines. The perceived lack of safety around the Adastral and Grahame Park Estate was reportedly one of the reasons to relocate children's infrastructure (e.g. the Greentop centre) here. However, this is also where we observed informal play infrastructure .

The high perception of risks in the public realm has an influence on the patterns of usage of streets and parks, with concerns expressed in focus groups focusing on youth gangs, knife crime - and to a lesser degree on road safety.

Antisocial behaviour in public spaces is a key concern of caregivers and is perceived as stemming from poverty and possibly conducive of more serious offences, such as knife crime and gang violence. Some of the children's centres have reportedly been vandalised, and caregivers complained of litter including broken bottles and dirty needles on residents' doorsteps. Strict parental rules on independent roaming are a key safeguarding mechanism for children at community and household level.

There are mixed views on the accessibility of play areas. Focus group participants and caregivers reported that there are accessible and inclusive spaces, but most also cited barriers. A major barrier to accessibility was considered to be lack of public transport options, parking and road safety. Some reported it is hard to get around Barnet in general. This was an issue where play spaces were considered as far away from residential parts of the ward. For example, a survey of children at Orion Primary quoted in interviews showed that some children there consider Unitas too far to use.

Safety from traffic on route to the parks and schools was also considered an issue. The road network in Burnt Oak is not friendly to pedestrians, bicycles and children when compared to other parts of London. These issues can compound with other safety concerns to create a perception of the public realm as a hostile environment.

Access to play spaces can be particularly difficult for children with disabilities and some focus group participants and caregivers felt that these were not appropriately catered for. In focus groups, ideas to make the design playgrounds more adventurous were celebrated by some but were considered a potential barrier for some children to engage. Lack of changing spaces was also an issue for disabled young adults. Finally, unaffordability was mentioned as an issue to access some paid play spaces.

A lack of awareness of available spaces and opportunities for play was also identified as an issue. Barnet council lists children's centres on their website and there are other efforts to get the word out. However, this might not reach some caregivers. Digital illiteracy can hamper access to vital information on social and support services only available online.

In general, the public realm in Burnt Oak appeared adequately maintained and the cleanliness of most streets good. However, there are pockets of poorly maintained public realm, particularly in secluded areas within the North Road Estate and Adastral Estate.

Focus groups indicate that the quality of public space, and particularly parks, in Burnt Oak has improved over the last ten years, with investments from Government funds and the Council and from new developments' contributions (such as the ongoing interventions on key parks). However, engaged children and caregivers complained about local poor maintenance and cleanliness in key play spaces, such as around playgrounds. Children and caregivers also highlighted a lack of sufficiently serviced

spaces in parks, such as lack of drinking fountains and options to buy food, and of organised activities in parks, which were seen as challenges for caregivers to spend extensive time in there with children. The interventions in Montrose Park are expected to address some of these issues.

Neglect is visible in parts of the Town Centre, with litter in loading and unloading areas in the back alleys. Close to the Underground station, the area of the former Burnt Oak weekly market is now an unguarded parking lot, which attracted antisocial behaviour and led to the closure of a public stairway over safety concerns according to a key informant interview.





## SPACES & FACILITIES FOR PLAY AT CITY LEVEL

Factors measured at the city level explored which policies and measures the city government put in place to advocate for and provide safe child- and family friendly play spaces and mobility options. They also examined the safety, reliability, connectivity, and both child- and caregiver-friendliness of the local environment with respect to wider public transit networks.

Despite lower levels of crime compared to the London average, Burnt Oak remains unsafe relative to Barnet as a whole.<sup>29</sup> Key informants said that budget cuts have led to a decrease in policing and patrolling. Currently the Metropolitan Police has three police officers on the Burnt Oak Safer Neighbourhood team, including one Police Community Support Officer.<sup>30</sup> Public policies have focussed on early intervention, prevention and restrictions on activities in the public realm with awareness campaigns and programmes encouraging positive behaviour. Despite limited resources, interview respondents agree that one of the Council's key priorities has seen to improve safety for the community "and that does not leave much space for play or fun".

Prevention measures were adopted - for example adhering to the national Make your Mark campaign - to promote positive behaviours in the public realm and raise awareness - which saw the participation of over 4,500 young people and children across Barnet.<sup>31</sup> The Police programme 'Secured by Design' - aimed at improving security in the built environment with dedicated design guidance, which was used in the area. The Council has

encouraged the local Voluntary & Community Sector (VCS) to address safety in public spaces with action days and grants that involve communities in "improving parks", however these do not have a focus on encouraging play.

According to Transport for London, the ward is one of the three best-connected wards in Barnet, with high accessibility levels particularly around Burnt Oak Underground Station, on the Northern line, which serves most of the ward and where most buses stop. However, the transport infrastructure is reportedly not used much by children independently. Focus group participants reported that active travel options for children, such as cycling and walking, are perceived as unsafe by caregivers, with differences across communities and cultural factors reportedly playing a role in active travel preferences.

There is a general lack of measures to limit traffic speed - such as speed bumps and speed limits - reportedly less than in other parts of London. The area around the High Street is considered busy and car-orientated. Engaged children and caregivers expressed concerns around cycling lanes, safe pavements and traffic-calming measures.

Streets do not incorporate playful elements per se, even though there are policy provision in this regard at city level, via the London Plan. Space conducive to active modes of transport and that is friendly for all age groups has been introduced as part of new developments around the ward, particularly in Colindale.

Unlike some other parts of London, community-led recurring temporary street closures - such as play streets - which allow informal children's play have not been attempted in Burnt Oak - with administrative costs for closure seen as a challenge. Interviews highlighted that play streets need to cater for the needs of their specific community in order to be successful and need their buy-in. One-off street closures for street festivals have been attempted successfully elsewhere in Barnet and have included play elements.

Barnet Council still has 11,000 tenants and 4,000 leaseholders across the Borough, mostly managed by Barnet Homes, the Council's arm's length housing management organisation.

In the areas managed by Barnet Homes, 'No Ball Games' signs in the streets can be very common, and a key informant suggests that – while they have been put up by the housing management – they might have been encouraged by residents and reflect a culture of quiet streets. However, engaged children and caregivers complained about their presence.

Statutory services, such as family services, are prioritised while others, such as support to play in general, might be particularly affected in future cuts. Maintenance is reportedly one of the areas worst affected. The cuts in Council staff means that servicing play opportunities (e.g. working hours), administration of programmes and coordination across departments can be affected. Scarce maintenance is also considered an obstacle to independent play, particularly in the common areas of housing estates and blocks of flats.

According to both focus group and interview participants this can deter developers from providing playable space as part of new schemes. Effective investment in new infrastructure can still happen through mobilising private capitals, such as in the refurbishment of the Orion Primary school (contributions from developments) or Unitas (direct private investment).

In general, the approach to play provision and infrastructure has been that of investing in indoor infrastructure - such as the refurbishment of the Orion primary school, the Unitas centre and the Greentop Centre - with less attention to the network of routes connecting these to point of interest and residential areas.

Other concerns were raised about the effect of new developments and regeneration on community cohesion, with residents displaced either temporarily

or permanently. The presence of a relatively transient community in some parts of the ward was thought to hamper the development of a sense of belonging in the home and within the community and impact the culture around play.

Barnet's Local Plan Integrated Impact Assessment Scoping Report - January 2019 indicates that Climate Change will have significant impacts on the Borough, particularly on the health and well-being of residents, for example in connection with increased heat and flooding. Wider impacts are expected on biodiversity and ecosystems.<sup>32</sup>

The Barnet Joint Strategic Needs Assessment assesses NO<sub>2</sub> and PM<sub>10</sub> concentration to be generally within EU limits in the Borough. However, modelled annual mean concentrations of NO<sub>2</sub> in Barnet for 2013 show that EU limits were exceeded around the main junctions - such as in the Burnt Oak Town Centre - and along main infrastructures - such as the A1 motorway and the A5.<sup>33</sup>

# Opportunities for Play in Burnt Oak

The research findings were used to identify several opportunities for improving conditions for Play in Burnt Oak, in particular to enhance facilitation, time and choice, and spaces and facilities for play.





# How to enhance Facilitation for Play

## CHAMPION PLAY

The waves of population and development growth projected to affect Burnt Oak and Barnet as a whole over the next decade offer an opportunity to champion play in the Council, local community and development firms associated with the borough's expansion. Changing the culture of play in the community and continuing to raise the priority assigned to play will be a gradual process, particularly given new financial challenges faced on both fronts due to the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic.

For example, cultivating a network of Play Champions across municipal officials, community leaders, and urban practitioners involved in Barnet's growth to clearly communicate the long-term fiscal case and medium-term social, health and educational benefits associated with a robust play culture can ensure that as Burnt Oak grows, play doesn't get left behind.

Initiatives to champion play can be designed as an outgrowth of existing VCS initiatives in interaction with community leadership. In fact, investment from private developments in infrastructure should be balanced with further resourcing for the local voluntary and community sector to provide play activities for the most vulnerable children as another key opportunity to enhance play.

Activities could be expanded to include the wider community by designing initiatives and events that are open to all and create a sense of ownership and trust across caregivers, children and other stakeholders.

Our research highlights the success of the existing community events and the potential of programmes and grants that address security and safety in the public realm involving community groups and young people in "improving parks". However, these do not specifically support play activities as an opportunity to enhance

the use of public parks or streets. Engaged children and caregivers however expressed a desire to see more organised activities in parks.

Enhancing these types of programmes to address play – as well as creating new ones – would be a key opportunity to positively address safety by encouraging children and caregivers to be in the public realm.

## COORDINATE INTERVENTIONS & OUTREACH EFFORTS

While interventions are ongoing and long term effects are not easy to predict, some of these interventions have thus far failed to have a positive and visible influence on play opportunities in their immediate surroundings, for example encouraging independent play in parks; or follow-on effects further away, such as encouraging children and caregivers' active travel.

The local voluntary and community sector (VCS) is a key actor in delivering for vulnerable and hard pressed children and caregivers in the community and enjoys a relationship of trust and cooperation with the local Council. Although the VCS is very active, gaps exist in the sector's remit or outreach, including effectively involving caregivers and children that are hard to reach and identify, such as recent immigrants or working poor who don't claim benefits.

Our research suggests these engagement and outreach gaps are a key challenge to the resilience of the community which might hamper the development of their social capital and limit mutual support and a sense of belonging. By coordinating interventions and outreach efforts, there is the opportunity to build a true sense of community cohesion and to embed a culture of play in the community, and to establish a sense of ownership around future interventions.

# How to enhance Time & Choice for Play

## USE DIGITAL PLAY AS A BRIDGE TO PHYSICAL PLAY

Many research participants indicated that alongside the general increase in hours spent on screen-based or digital activities occurring nationwide, children in Burnt Oak rely upon screen-based entertainment even more heavily as a compensation for overcrowded internal spaces and a public realm perceived as unsafe for independent mobility.

There is a reflexive response to digital play in educational and play circles as inherently negative, destructive, or at least 'less than' physical or real-world play, and to be sure, excessive screen time and resulting decline in physical activity has serious health consequences. We are, however, in the midst of a quiet revolution in digital experiences that bridge the screen with the outside world – the worldwide phenomenon of Pokemon Go, and the successful use of Minecraft in UN-Habitat initiatives to co-create play areas, being two examples.

As an extended component of existing council or VCS outreach strategies, digital play, including Augmented Reality experiences, can be used to springboard Burnt Oak children's existing familiarity with digital tools and platforms into greater engagement with the outdoors. If safety is an overriding concern, such initiatives could be undertaken within the auspices of a community gathering or outdoor festival, to ensure adult supervision.

## LEVERAGE THE BARNET LOCAL PLAN

Urban regeneration in the area has provided and is expected to continue to provide significant opportunities to invest in play infrastructure. The review of the Barnet Local Plan will be a key avenue to mobilise resources coming from new developments and partly direct them to support play. Existing strategies already identify Burnt Oak, together with other wards, as focus areas for intervention.

The Local Plan presents a key opportunity to expand the existing approach to provide affordable and safe options for play in indoor facilities and address the public realm. This move should have the potential to lead to a true integration of play opportunities into the broader connected built environment, address connectivity and active travel and improve children's experience of local play conditions.

Furthermore, and critically, an effective Local Plan would be a significant opportunity to comprehensively address issues around housing - particularly overcrowding - and the effects that these can have on play at the household level.

# How to enhance Spaces & Facilities for Play

## LEVERAGE TRANSIT & MOBILITY SYSTEMS

Burnt Oak is well-served by a number of bus and rail systems, which see a significant daily or weekly ridership. This mobility network can be leveraged at two levels to enhance the local culture of play.

In the short term, visual activities for children, play coaching for parents, and digital links to further resources can be deployed in both stations and on vehicles to support Council, VCS or private developer initiatives towards enhancing a community culture of play. This public information campaign could be used to build skills, alert riders to safe routes to public amenities they may not realise are close by, or even, if carefully designed, function as learning games for children of various ages spread throughout the transit network.

In the longer term, opportunities to build learning through play experiences can be embedded into the physical network itself; a small child-friendly area next to a bus stop with counting or letter games moulded into colourful vandalism-proof concrete shapes, or a rest area for parents in a rail station with a variety of surfaces for children to explore nearby as just two examples.

## IMPROVE THE NETWORK OF PUBLIC AND PLAY SPACES

Improving the network of spaces connecting Burnt Oak's public space and play areas is a key step towards activating a culture of play in the community. This can be as simple as paving a section of pavement from a residential area to a public space so that it is continuously passable for pedestrians, scooters and bicycles or adding lighting and new lane widths to an existing street to make it perceptually safer for non-motorised travel.

No matter the physical intervention, the key element is community engagement. If the potential users of the mobility intervention are actively engaged from initial scoping through construction to unveiling, the benefits for the community increase well beyond the scale of the intervention itself. Mutual communication, interaction between neighbours, and a durable sense of ownership over the eventual physical build can yield significant intangible positives, self-policing, decreased anti-social behaviour, and community cohesion among them.

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The Real Play Coalition is a global non-profit coalition created in 2018 and includes UNICEF, National Geographic, Arup, IKEA and LEGO Foundations. It has the ambition to change perceptions around the value of play, mobilize decision makers, influence behavior change, and eliminate the play deficit for children, for their development and optimal well-being. The coalition seeks to support the adoption of learning through play concepts in norms and practices in all cities of the world, focusing on the most vulnerable and marginalized contexts in both developed and developing countries, influencing change in individuals and institutions responsible for decision making and planning at the city level.

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