



The Housing and Regeneration Agency

Homes
England

Inclusive spaces and places for girls and young people

An introduction for Local Government

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OFFICIAL

Introduction

Why do we need to consider girls and young women when planning public spaces?

Provision for teenagers in parks and public spaces is usually considered in terms of a relatively small range of facilities – skate parks, MUGAs and other pitches and BMX tracks. These all tend to be dominated by boys and teenage girls are left with nowhere to go.

This isn't because girls don't want to skateboard or play football. Boys will often territorialise the space and not let the girls take part. All too often, teenage facilities consist of just one large area which lends itself to being taken over by the dominant group.

Safety is also an important consideration. Such facilities are often placed in the corner of parks and other public spaces, away from natural surveillance which makes them feel unsafe and even more inaccessible for girls. On top of this, because these attract large groups of teenage boys, they can even act as a deterrent to teenage girls using the park for leisure or even as a through route.

This absence of provision has a number of implications: for the rights of girls and for their sense of belonging in the wider community, and for councils' obligations to consider equality in their decision making. But another really important one is health. Girls are less active than boys at every stage of teenage life, but we rarely connect this with the fact that we don't give them anything to be active on. Access to nature is also proven to have a big positive effect on mental health in teenagers, and teenage girls are three times more likely to suffer from low moods and anxiety than boys.

It's also true that many boys are also not interested in the facilities which are on offer or don't feel they can access them. Furthermore, improving parks has the potential to benefit many other groups too, such as older people, adult women and other marginalised genders, and those with disabilities.

About this publication

This document accompanies the Homes England Local Government Capacity Centre Winter Learning Programme session on 'Inclusive Spaces for Girls and Young People' which took place on 31 January 2023. It has been prepared for Homes England by the charity Make Space for Girls (www.makespaceforgirls.co.uk). It is designed to help local authorities understand the key elements of considering teenage girls in planning and where to access further information and support.

Current provision

When facilities are provided for teenagers, these usually take the form of multi-use games areas (MUGAs), skate park and BMX tracks. None of these feel inclusive for teenage girls.

Skateparks

Skateboard GB estimates that 85% of skateboarders are male, and many teenage girls report that they find it difficult to access the skatepark when the boys are there. We ran a survey and 70% of girl skateboarders said some boys made them feel that they shouldn't be on the skate park. They describe harassment and how they use the park at odd times of the day to avoid it.

Skateboarding is also a minority activity – estimates suggest that less than 10% of 8-18s skateboard.

MUGAs

Although less research has been done on MUGAs, it does seem that they are dominated by boys in the same way. Many girls find the design of MUGAs intimidating because of the high fences and narrow entrances into a space which tends to be filled by boys. When we observed a MUGA over a weekend, we found that the ratio of boys to girls was 12:1.

BMX tracks

There is no data at all on BMX facilities, but anecdotal evidence suggests that they are used in a similar way to skate parks.

Because they attract large groups of boys, all these facilities can act as a further deterrent to girls using public spaces. Teenage girls see them as potential sites for harassment and so avoid the area, and research in the U.S. shows that skate parks actively deter girls from using a park.

Provision of facilities and the law

Under the Equality Act 2010, public authorities have a suite of specific legal obligations (usually referred to by the umbrella term as “the Public Sector Equality Duty” or “PSED”). This requires all councils (from the smallest parish councils to the largest combined authorities) when exercising public functions (including the commissioning and development of public areas such as parks and leisure facilities) to proactively consider the need to eliminate discrimination and to advance equality of opportunity.

The PSED requires local authorities/councils, when exercising their public functions, to consider proactively the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other unlawful discrimination;
- advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not; this involves removing/reducing disadvantage, meeting differing needs, and encouraging people to participate in activities where their participation is low; and
- foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Sex (referring to male/female) is one of the protected characteristics. Where a local authority’s/council’s current facilities for teenagers (skate parks, fenced pitches, BMX tracks) are dominated by boys and/or there is low participation in the park by girls, girls are disadvantaged.

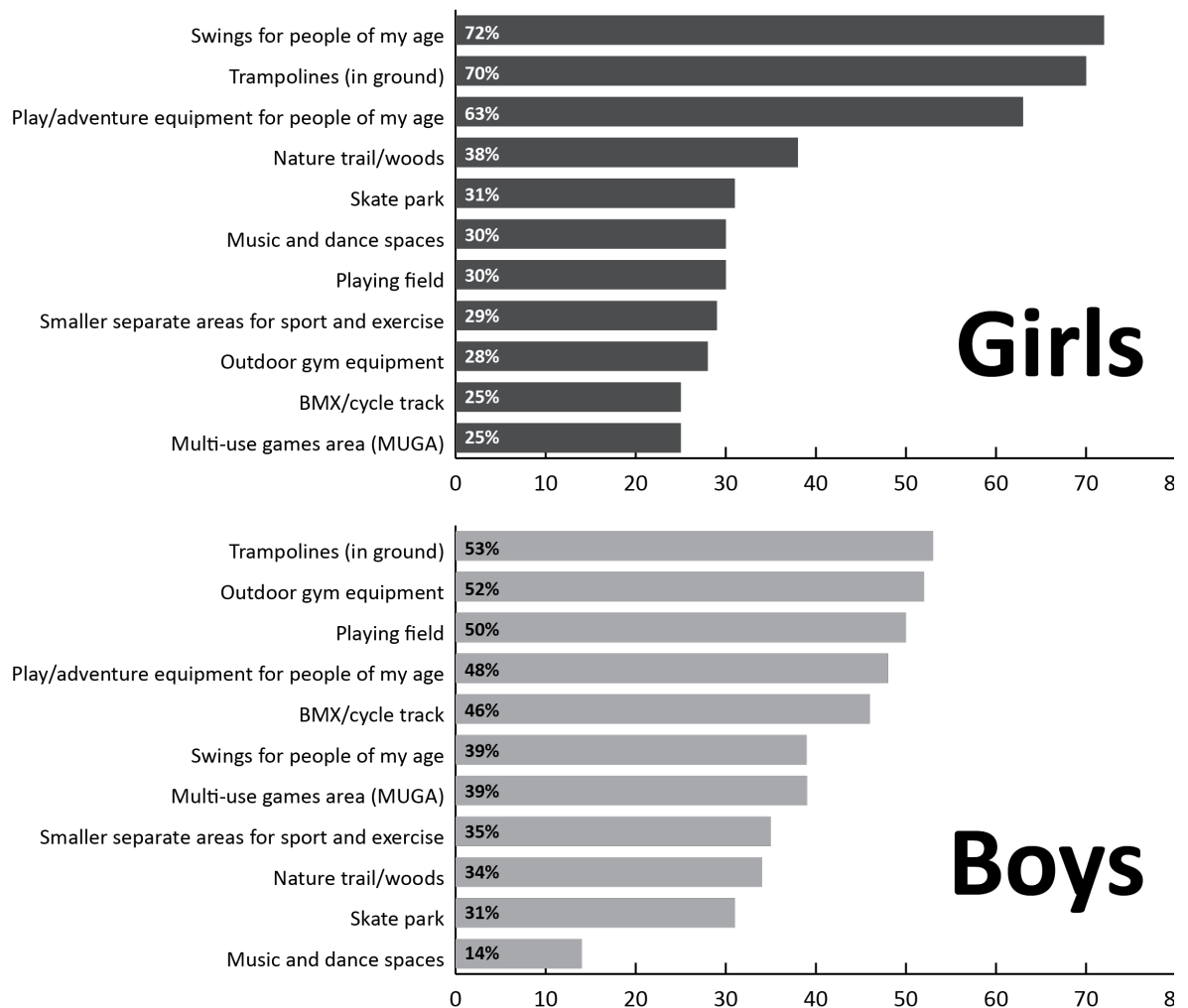
There is also an argument that the current provision in many parks puts girls at a particular disadvantage, and this cannot be objectively justified. This could amount to indirect discrimination which is unlawful under separate provisions in the Equality Act 2010.

What works for teenage girls?

Work done with teenage girls both in the UK and abroad has produced a wide range of suggestions for designs and facilities which are more inclusive for teenage girls and encourage them to use public spaces. There are details of the best examples on our website.

In 2022, Women in Sport and Yorkshire Sport surveyed nearly 400 teenagers across three schools in Yorkshire to find out what would help them be more active in parks.

What would help you be more active in your local park?



Because of the focus on activity, this list does not include social seating, which is usually high up the wish list for teenage girls. And it's also worth noting that both skate parks and MUGAs are only popular with a minority of boys.

Other facilities and design features which can make parks more inclusive are:

- walking loops around the perimeter of a park and no dead-end paths;
- seating which allows girls to face each other;
- breaking down spaces into more smaller areas so that no one group can dominate;
- outdoor gyms – but with equipment arranged more socially and not weighted for adult men;
- public toilets.

Safety

Not feeling safe is a key barrier preventing teenage girls and young women from using parks and other public spaces. Several projects are underway researching interventions and guidance and this is very much a developing area. Points to consider include:

- openness and visibility – lack of places where threats can hide;
- escape – several visible entrances and exits, no high fences;
- busyness and activation – other people in the park make it feel safer;

- layout – paths which clearly lead from one busy space to another;
- lighting – not just brightness but also contrast and warmth are important;
- access – the journey to the park needs to be safe as well.

Engagement and intersectionality

These results are of course generalisations, and it is essential, wherever possible, to involve teenage girls and young women at the very start of the process. Location, cultural and religious backgrounds and many other factors can mean that what is right for one public space will not work in another.

Case Studies

Vienna, Austria

Vienna has led the movement for gender-mainstreaming in urban design and this has included redesigning parks and public spaces so that they work better for teenage girls. A flagship project was Einseidler Park where part of the work involved redesigning the MUGA so that different groups could use it simultaneously and to make it feel safer for girls.



Umeå, Sweden

The city has focused on gender equality in public spaces, and as part of that a space called Frizon was created in Årstidernas Park, again designed in collaboration with teenage girls. It's intended to be a space to hang out, and observations suggest that it is working as a space in which girls feel safe.

Malmö, Sweden

Teenage facilities in the city's parks were being used 80% by boys so a small urban park was co-designed with teenage girls and young women. This includes a stage, a climbing wall and gymnastics bars as well as a range of different spaces, and girls are 50% of the users.



Superkilen, Copenhagen

This linear urban park was designed to be broadly inclusive, but many of its features work well for teenage girls, in particular the pedestrian and cycleway which forms the spine of the park and ensures that all areas have good passive surveillance. The design also includes a wide range of seating areas and shelter so that there is space for everyone

More information on all of these projects can be found on the [case studies page](#) on the Make Space for Girls website.



Rowntree Park, York

The Friends of Rowntree Park asked teenage girls what they wanted from parks and what the barriers to access were. They've introduced activities for both teenage girls and women which make the park feel safer and are continuing to talk to girls about improving the facilities. Their work demonstrates how even a small Friends group with limited resources can create change.

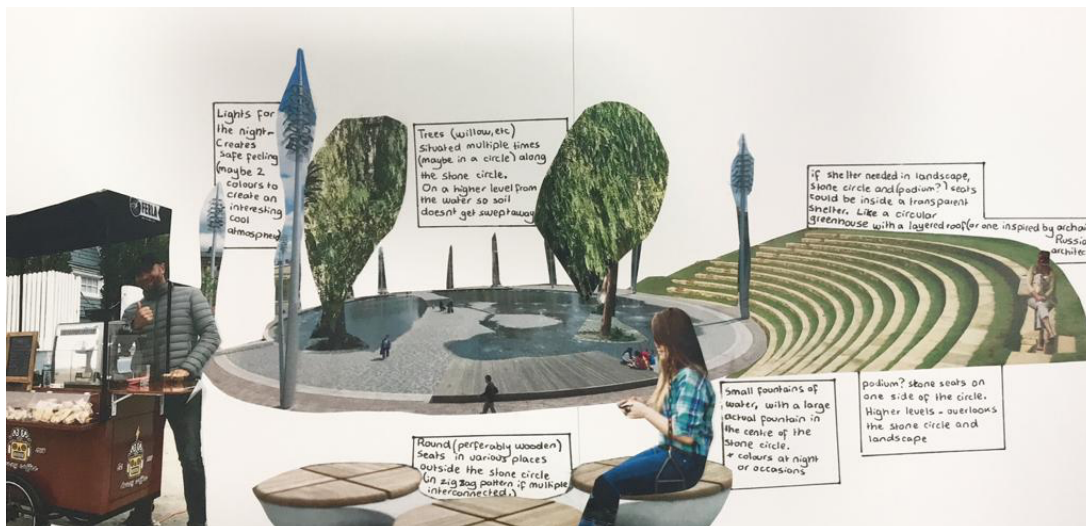
<https://rowntreepark.org.uk/do-different-genders-use-parks-differently/>

**WE WANT TO SIT
ON SWINGS BUT
FEEL BAD WHEN
SMALL KIDS
WANT THEM.**

Astley Cooper School, Hemel Hempstead

As part of the consultation for a new development by Countryside Partnerships, a series of workshops were run with Year 9 girls at Astley Cooper School over four afternoons. The sessions discussed how they currently felt about parks and public spaces and what they would like to see in the new development and provide a model for how to engage with teenage girls.

Reports on the engagement can be found [here](#).



How can councils create more inclusive parks and public spaces?

Spread the word internally

Lots of councillors and staff members can be involved in making decisions that will lead to more inclusive parks and public spaces. These may be complex teams, covering parks, children and families, sport and leisure, health and well-being and planning; and in a two or three tier structures, working with councils in the other tiers will also be key to getting change on the ground.

It's important to understand who within your council structure needs to be part of the process to make a change. And once identified give them the information they need to understand why change is needed.

Identify barriers in existing policy documents

Planning and other policy documents may create barriers. For example play and green space strategies can perpetuate the focus on skateparks and MUGAs as the only forms of teenage facility. An emphasis pitches being provided for new developments and never being removed elsewhere may result in the need for other facilities being overlooked.

Use new policies to support more inclusive spaces

Local Plans, Neighbourhood Plans and supplementary Planning Documents all have the potential to create an environment that encourages developers and communities to think about parks and public spaces more creatively.

A good starting point is ensuring these documents recognise the role that gender plays in how people can access space; and that teen play spaces do not currently serve all genders equally.

By ensuring that all new policies state explicitly that the council wants a range of outdoor facilities, to meet the needs of all teenagers, not just a minority of teenage boys, councils can help to de-risk more creative and inclusive proposals.

Use the Public Sector Equality Duty to tackle the issue

As explained above, the PSED is a legal obligation that councils must comply with, so it can be a useful tool for ensuring that the need for a range of facilities is understood, and also for getting this provision on the agenda.

Collect Data

To get change to happen, we need to understand what the problem is to start with – so just what is the gender split on a particular MUGA for example. From this base point we can then also measure which interventions are effective (or not).

At the moment, there is very little data on how teenage facilities are used, but what there is often challenges prevailing assumptions and provision. The more data we have, the easier it will be to create more inclusive spaces.

Review tender processes

Tenders can reinforce inequalities, for example by specifying a MUGA with full external fencing of a particular height, entrances of a particular type, goal posts and basketball hoops. The brief provides no scope for creating a more inclusive space. So at the start of the process, consider whether the facilities being sought are likely to benefit more boys than girls and whether this is what the council really wants.

Consider asking suppliers to provide examples of work they have done that is more inclusive. But don't take this at face value: ask for data that supports this and challenge them to show how they accommodate the needs of girls and other marginalised genders in their work. Ask them how they will show that they have delivered on an inclusive space.

Consider gender sensitive budgeting

Gender sensitive budgeting is a process that, among other things, examines how national or local government spending benefits sexes differently; and then looks at how that spending allocation could be changed contribute to gender equality. It is not about making sure that the same amount of money gets spent on boys and girls. It is about adopting a process that can disclose how apparently neutral spending may exacerbate existing inequalities.

For example if a council considers spending £300,000 on improving pitches in a local park, and 85% of the local teams are for men or boys, the budgeting assumption would be that £45,000 of this spend would benefit girls and women, as against £255,000 for boys and men. So the gendered nature of the benefit of the investment becomes clear in financial terms. This sort of analysis is useful for considering what funds ought to be allocated to facilities which are more used by women and girls.

Engage with teenage girls

Engagements about parks and public spaces often fail to include teenagers, focussing instead on Friends groups and those who are already using the space, eg. skateboarders, which can mean that the views of teenage girls don't get heard.

Councils need to specifically seek out teenage girls and spend time working with them to understand what they want and need, and what the barriers are which prevent them from using these places currently.

They also need to recognise that teenage girls currently don't see themselves as park users and so engagement requires seeking them out specifically, not relying on online services and ensuring that they feel that their input is useful and will be acted upon.

Where can I find out more?

We have collected a lot of information on the [Make Space for Girls website](#). This includes a section of information specifically for councils, as well as a [research summary](#) and specific information on the [Public Sector Equality Duty](#) and [case studies](#) of good practice, as well as advice on successful engagement.

Further information

Video: Girls in Crewe talk about how they feel that nothing is provided for them (produced by the London School of Economics)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGY0arU-U2U>

Leeds University research on how women and girls feel about safety in parks, along with an addendum in which teenage girls talk about park facilities.

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/194214/>

Research from Yorkshire Sport and Women in Sport on what teenage girls want from parks.

<https://womeninsport.org/research-and-advice/our-publications/make-space-for-us/>

There are a range of resources to help councils engage with young people, including:

Young Place makers tool kit: Tools and activities for talking to young people about the spaces in their local communities

<https://www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/young-placechangers-toolkit>

Seen and Heard: The LSE ran workshops on planning and public space with of young people in Brent, London. These produced a charter about what they wanted from public space, but there is also excellent documentation of the workshop process itself.

https://www.metrolandcultures.com/site/assets/files/1015/seen_and_heard_policy_booklet.pdf

The HerCity Tool Kit: As the name suggests, a “whole city approach” but Block 3 (Site Specific Assessment) has useful ideas.

<https://hercity.unhabitat.org/>

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