

Children's Play Advisory Service

MANIFESTO

Much for so many for so little

All the political parties promise to spend money and ignore massive benefits which could be achieved for little or no cost.

By “no cost” we mean “no outlay”, i.e. spending virtually no money at all in short or long term. This is different to interest groups who argue that spending money in the short term will save money in the long term.

Children's Play Advisory Service

The Children's Play Advisory Service advises local authorities run by a variety of political parties. Our advice is independent and impartial.

The recommendations are based on research at over 70 areas of housing in England and Wales, consultations at over 30 play areas and assessments of thousands of play facilities.

Rob Wheway MSc. MEd. MCIMSPA. MCMI. FRSA
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Children's Play Advisory Service
8 Carthusian Road, Coventry, CV3 6HA
t 024 7650 3540 e whewayr@gmail.com w www.childrensplayadvisoryservice.org.uk

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Our headline issues are below with explanations and proposals on the following pages:

Healthy and Neighbourly

We are damaging children's physical and social development by letting the car dominate residential roads. Obesity and less ability to take responsibility are the results for children. Less neighbourliness the result for the community.

Valuing Honesty

Police are retreating from the "Lost property" function yet it gives an opportunity to promote and value honesty, particularly to children.

Enabling Street Parties

Have happened regularly for at least 60 years so why has no government taken a "can do" approach and issued guidance to make them easy to run?

Better Deal for Cyclists

We want to encourage a healthy lifestyle so let's make them easier to use by making integral long-lasting lights a legal requirement.

Removing Litter

Children today are more environmentally conscious than were their grandparents. The culprits are the supermarkets who insist on throwaway bottles and cans. Bring back the deposit.

Mediation

Why go for "asbo" style punishments when most young people are reasonable and capable of reaching compromises with neighbours. Better than turning them into criminals.

Foreigners are Friends

We are probably the best connected country in the world so why is the usual rhetoric 'Britain alone against foreign countries' (therefore foreigners). What damage is being done to children's understanding of "foreigners"?

Poor Governmental Management

Successive governments concentrated on service delivery for "customers". A classic case of paying for outputs (how many provided) rather than measuring outcomes (how much achieved) which is poor and costly management.

Successive governments have also put too much reliance on those "stakeholders" who deliver paid-for services who, funnily enough, recommend their paid-for solutions as the answer to whatever problem.

Healthy and Neighbourly

We are disabling our children both physically and socially. Lack of fitness is caused by children not being able to play out by their homes as they used to do every day for countless previous generations.

Lack of social development and personal autonomy is increasingly seen in our young adults. This is not surprising. When children play out they learn to take make rules, take turns and reach compromises. They also learn how to organise and take responsibility.

This is all free of charge without parental instruction or supervision by other adults.

The cause is the domination by the car of residential roads. As the roads have become more dangerous parents have increasingly kept their children indoors. A reasonable response to a real risk. But crucially where traffic speed is limited by design then children are more likely play out as they always have/

Animals in zoos have sufficient space to run around outside of their houses. We know their physical and mental health suffers if they cannot run around outside their houses. Zoo animals have more protection from being restricted than we afford our children with the inevitable results.

The harm extends to the adults as well. Where children can play out there is more neighbourliness. They talk about “keeping an eye out” for each other’s children. They are more likely to talk to each other.

All political parties subscribe to neighbourliness whether it be “Big Society” “Working Class Solidarity” “Community Action” or similar but they ignore what would cost little to implement.

Legislation, recognising the problem, is already in place - Street Playgrounds (not Play Streets as is thought) were included in the Road Traffic Regulations Act of 1984. The name needs to be changed to “Home Streets” as they are not playgrounds and are for the whole community not just children. Their purpose should be changed to “To enable healthy lifestyles and encourage neighbourliness”

They are much less costly to implement than Home Zones. Minor amendments to existing legislation is all that is needed. We would have to get used to driving carefully for the last 50 or 100 metres to our homes.

Valuing Honesty

Rather than solely thinking of catching criminals after the event we should be encouraging honesty. It is a backward step for the police to retreat from the lost property service as many are doing.

A better approach would be to have Lost Property at the heart of the high street similar to the current charity shops run by volunteers but with a uniformed presence.

Where people (often children) do bring something in and it gets returned to its rightful owner there should be an opportunity for a letter or voucher of thanks to be sent. This should be done at the point of the retrieval where cards and pens would be readily available. The name and address of the child needn't be given but a letter of gratitude or card could still be sent. Also reward vouchers sponsored by local businesses could be considered.

In addition a letter could be sent to a child's school and read out in assembly so that children could see that honesty is valued.

The uniformed presence would emphasise that the police are there to support honesty not just catch criminals (an after-the-event action). Items could be sold to help pay for the service. Low value items should be sold within a week or so to limit problems of storage.

It is quite likely if there was a uniformed presence at the heart of the high street which was primarily for lost property and sales it would also be easy for people to walk in and give information to the police without having the more daunting prospect of going into a police station.

Enabling Street Parties

Street parties are a regular feature when there are important national events to be celebrated. Most people of retirement age will have experienced street parties from 1953 onwards (the Queen's Coronation).

They are an happy example of neighbourliness and citizenship which all parties say they wish to encourage.

These are known predictable and are part of our heritage and give opportunities for community action. It is an indictment of successive governments that none have had the wit to prepare a simple document setting out the simple do's and don'ts of having a street party.

An authoritative document of no more than 2 sides of A4 could encourage people to celebrate events in their communities without the problems that the last round of street parties encountered.

Better Deal for Cyclists

We want our children to have healthy lives and pollute the atmosphere less so cycling is an important part of this.

It would be a simple matter to require all standard bicycles to be fitted with integral lights. With modern technology it should be easy to guarantee that these would last

for 5 or 10 years. There is enough wobbling, rotating and braking to power a modern system.

Those who think it can't be done should remember that British cars couldn't have integral radios as part of the deal until the Japanese did it and because they did it in every car it cost very little extra.

We also should ask ourselves how many times car drivers would fail to have correct lights if they had to have cheap, easily breakable plastic lights fastened to their cars which would easily break and keep dying because there weren't batteries in them. We need the same approach to bicycle lights as we have for car lights.

The law could be changed so cyclists could turn left even when traffic lights are on red (where it's safe to do so). A similar thing happens in the USA.

Where roads are wide enough cyclists should be allowed to go straight across the top of a T junction. Having given the improvements to cyclists it would be reasonable to be much stricter with cyclists who cycle recklessly in pedestrian areas or ignore red lights completely.

Removing Litter

I inspect hundreds of playgrounds each year and very many have broken bottles or some drinks cans lying around. The easy thing to do is to blame the children yet children are much more environmentally conscious now than when I was a child.

I was very aware that if I found a bottle it could be taken back to the shop and exchanged for money so most bottles found their way back to the shop. What has happened is that supermarkets decided they would have "throw-away" bottles and funnily enough if you create something that is "throw-away" people throw it away. The supermarkets quickly realised that they would get the blame if they continued to call them "throw-away" so they started to call them "non-deposit" or "non-returnable". They therefore avoided the problem and left local authorities with the cost of cleaning up.

What we need to do is to bring back the deposit on all drinks containers and we would find that the majority would then find their way back to the shops.

Whilst we are at it things like batteries could easily be returned to shops. As most supermarkets have a points reward system it would be a very simple task to say that if you took batteries back to the shop you would be awarded points for being green. Again not a complicated or costly thing to do.

Mediation

Children and young people play/hang out in areas of the public realm. These may be on the roads themselves or on patches of green space or even flat areas of tarmac or concrete. This has always been the case and the adults of today will have

done the same when they were children. As was always the case they will sometimes appear to be a nuisance or appear to be threatening, however the vast majority are just ordinary children and have as much right to be in the public realm as any other age group.

Sadly the attitude to young people is often one of being punitive as things like ASBOs indicate.

There should be a policy of mediation where, by bringing the children and those who may feel worried about them together and talking things through, reasonable agreements can be made. This is surely a much more positive approach than going straight to applying sanctions for actions which are certainly not criminal.

There are people such as playworkers or youth workers who, with a small amount of training, would have the necessary skills. The process would cost no more and probably less than the imposition of legal sanctions. It would also be more about encouraging neighbourliness and encouraging people to reach sensible compromises.

Foreigners are Friends

The current debates about Europe and about immigrants are nearly always expressed in terms of Britain standing out alone against everyone else.

I cannot help but worry about the effect this is having on our children as it gives constant reinforcement that “foreigners” are to be feared and distrusted.

This is strange as we are probably the best connected country in the world.

We are members of very significant international organisations and in a position to play a leading role. We are in:

- The United Nations (with a seat on the Security Council)
- also the World Bank and International Monetary Fund
- The Commonwealth
- The European Union
- NATO
- Council of Europe
- World Trade Organisation
- And many many more

The Scouts and Guides movement was started in our country and is now the biggest membership youth organisation in the world.

We started and laid down the original rules for the biggest international sports organisations:

- Football
- Cricket
- Rugby

We also provided the inspiration for the modern Olympics.

Our language has become the international language.

We are therefore one of the best connected countries in the world and yet for the last few decades we have increasingly talked as if we are standing alone against all other countries.

Children can differentiate between myths and fables and know that there is a large element of “pretend”. However the news is perceived to be facts and when our political leaders appear to speak with authority then what they are saying appears to be how the world is. Surely the message we should be giving to them is that it is better to work with all our friends in other countries rather than constantly appearing to suggest that we’re the only country that is right and that all the others are wrong.

The suggestion that we leave the European Court of Human Rights because we don’t like a few of the decisions is a case in point. It’s a bit like Manchester United deciding to leave the football league because it has had a couple of dodgy refereeing decisions against it. If there is a problem with the European Court of Human Rights then it will be a problem for other countries as well and so we should work with them to sort it out.

The same approach can be seen in the EU where the attitude is one of us standing alone against the rest of Europe. If there are things wrong with the European Union then it is certain they will be wrong for other countries as well. Whether we stay in or come out we will still need to work with other countries

My concern is by this constant repetition of the idea that we are standing alone we give to our children the idea that all foreign countries and therefore foreigners are antagonistic towards us and should be treated with distrust. This cannot be healthy for our children.

Poor Governmental Management

Successive governments have relied on treating the public as customers. As everyone knows customers need services and services are what you pay for.

When Government wants something done therefore it calls in the stakeholders for advice. These are primarily organisations who have got services to offer that they hope will be paid for. They are not usually people who want to see free solutions.

The approach to childhood obesity is a classic illustration of this. Government are happy to listen to people who will offer stomach stapling, drugs, intensive fitness regimes, expensive therapies and similar. When the Chief Medical Officer for England suggested that children needed pills to prevent rickets she was encouraging stakeholders to get Government contracts when there was a free alternative. If children were able to get out and play they would get sufficient sunshine to prevent rickets.

As far as children's play is concerned both Government and local government have gone down the classic route of looking at outputs rather than outcomes. Rather than look at how children can play out and have a healthy childhood they have counted the number of facilities. The result is that play facilities are provided to meet targets and this means that playgrounds are provided in places where it is predictable that they will not be used. Playgrounds are very popular with children if they are in the right location but in the wrong location they can be a serious waste of money.

Rob Wheway
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