

## Councils accused of worsening obesity crisis by not reopening children's play areas

Health charities warn that youngsters who have spent prolonged periods indoors during lockdown need playgrounds to burn off calories

By Yohannes Lowe, Sunday Telegraph, 11 July 2020, 12:24pm

Councils are at risk of worsening Britain's obesity epidemic by refusing to reopen children's play areas over safety concerns, health charities have warned.

Just under half of parish and town councils (48%) reopened their outdoor play areas on the permitted date of July 4, according to a survey of 5000 by the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC).

Many local authorities are still considering how best to adhere to the Government's social distancing and hygiene guidelines before making playgrounds publicly available again.

However, experts have warned the delay could aggravate [Britain's childhood obesity epidemic](#), which sees an estimated 1 in 3 children classed as overweight or obese by the time they start secondary school. The public health crisis is largely attributed to the lack of exercise and poor dietary habits of a growing number of youngsters across the country—especially children in the most deprived areas.

Those at greater risk of rapid weight gain now need to be allowed to burn off energy with friends in playgrounds, the British Obesity Society (BOS) say.

“There has been an absolute disregard for children's health,” Paul Evans, vice-chairman of the BOS, told *The Sunday Telegraph*.

“Children are getting fatter as a result of the lockdown as they have been snacking and gaming more at home. The pandemic will continue to worsen the obesity crisis and the reality is that with playgrounds not opening, children are not getting the two hours exercise that they usually got per day from school.”

“We should not be prioritising going to restaurants and pubs, while not allowing children to go outside and having the space to be active. It is insane,” he added.

The comments come amid widespread concern about the effect the pandemic is also having on the mental health of youngsters.

Barnardos, Britain's biggest children's charity, said [its research showed the vast majority of its frontline workers had seen a rise in psychological trauma](#), including from social isolation, among children during the lockdown.

Play associations are calling on councils to urgently reopen outdoor play areas, as they criticise them for being too cautious in their interpretation of Government guidelines.

The regular cleaning of “high traffic touch points” such as monkey bars, along with the installment of safety signs and management of queues are among the measures suggested by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government.

Mark Hardy, chair of the Association of Play Industries, said: “Rising rates of mental health problems and increasing screen dependency means that access to playgrounds is more important than ever.

“But local councils may have been put off due to the rather intimidating guidance issued by the Government. If they take a more pragmatic approach to reopening, there is no reason why the vast majority have to remain shut.”

Limited staffing resources, hygiene concerns and liability fears are the main reasons why many local authorities have not reopened their outdoor play areas along with their parks, according to the SLCC.

Newcastle City Council, for example, is awaiting safety advice from Public Health officials before it reopens the 69 play areas it is responsible for.

Smaller councils, such as Barnet in Greater London, reopened their play facilities last week after embarking on a “thorough cleaning programme” of their recreational equipment.

Rob Smith, the CEO of SLCC, added: “All evidence suggests that there are significant rewards physically, emotionally and socially through play and the well-being of their community is always at the forefront of local town and parish councils.

“A great many members have raised concerns that the current government guidelines on reopening playgrounds present significant challenges to their councils in terms of their practicality and the resources required.”