

Green Party Motion on Enabling outdoor play and community belonging

'Playing outside, learning everywhere: the importance of outdoor play for children, families and communities'

Dr. Penny Hay, Professor of Imagination at Bath Spa University

I'm speaking today about the vital role that outdoor play has in supporting the physical and mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Bath and North-East Somerset - those moments when children's eyes light up because they are so engaged in playing and learning, following their fascinations.

Play is fundamental to children's healthy development. Welcoming, safe public places to play are essential for every child.

Extensive research shows that outdoor play strengthens children's physical health, emotional resilience and social development. Creative, cultural and nature-based activities also improve mental health, reduce stress and anxiety, and build confidence. Yet outdoor play has declined by 50% in just one generation. This is happening alongside a growing crisis in young people's mental health - a profound change we cannot afford to overlook. If we create better opportunities for children to play in real life, they will likely spend less time online.

Playing outside in nature is not an optional extra; it is a foundation for children's wellbeing and learning. The recent report *Everything to Play For*, from the Centre for Young Lives, reminds us that play is how much of children's development takes place - how they understand the world, solve problems, build motor skills and stay healthy and happy. Enabling children to play outdoors is both a public health priority and a community priority.

Outdoor play also nurtures imagination - a vital human capability - giving children the freedom to invent, explore and create their own possibilities in relationship with the natural world. Imagine if we co-created the conditions for curious, creative learners across generations.

Our approach in Forest of Imagination is rights-based and child-led. We treat outdoor play as a core entitlement, placing children's voice and agency at the centre. Through creativity and ecological thinking, we transform public spaces into welcoming, nature-rich, multi-sensory environments - places where children can explore, belong, and where their eyes are shining.

This motion is asking for BANES to take a first step towards a thoughtful, coordinated, cross-council approach to play, shaped by the voices of children and developed in partnership with local organisations. What we're asking for is simple: to ensure more children are playing outside, more often, in places that feel safe, welcoming and alive with possibility.

We have already seen, through Forest of Imagination and Playful Green Planet, how creative, ecological, community-led experiences can transform public spaces and support children's wellbeing and connection with nature. This motion allows us to embed that work within our wider place-making, climate and wellbeing ambitions.

This motion asks us to take this responsibility seriously, and to act. By supporting it, Councillors can help ensure that Bath and North-East Somerset becomes a place where every child has the time, space and genuine freedom to play, explore and flourish.

Thank you.

References

[Forest of Imagination](#)

[Playful Green Planet](#)

[Everything to Play For, Centre for Young Lives](#)

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