

Embedding Better Spaces for Teenagers in Local Plans and Policy

Why policy matters

The design of parks and public spaces doesn't begin when construction starts. It begins much earlier, in the policies, strategies and guidance that shape planning decisions.

Local Plans, Parks and Green Space Strategies, Play Strategies, Supplementary Planning Documents and design guidance all influence the type of facilities that are delivered in new developments and existing public spaces.

If these documents don't consider the needs of teenage girls, opportunities to create more inclusive parks can be missed long before a project reaches the design stage.

Review existing policies

A good place to start is by reviewing the policies and guidance your organisation already uses.

Ask yourself:

- Do our policies recognise that parks are used differently by different groups?
- Do they acknowledge that teenage girls are often underrepresented in parks and public spaces?
- Do they encourage a range of facilities and experiences for teenagers?
- Or do they unintentionally reinforce existing patterns of use?

Many play and parks strategies still assume that teenage provision primarily means skateparks, MUGAs, Bike tracks and sports pitches.

These facilities are valuable, but research consistently shows they are often dominated by boys. If policy only promotes this type of provision, it can unintentionally limit opportunities for other young people.

Move beyond the same

Developers often propose MUGAs, skateparks and pitches because they are familiar, widely accepted and considered the safest planning option.

Local policy has an important role in encouraging a broader approach.

Rather than asking:

"Does this development include teenage provision?"

consider asking:

"Does this development provide opportunities for a diverse range of teenagers?"

Policies should encourage a mix of facilities that support:

- socialising
- informal recreation
- adventurous play
- climbing
- swinging
- nature connection
- movement without competition
- places simply to spend time together

Sports facilities remain an important part of that mix, but they should not be assumed to meet the needs of all teenagers.

Involve young people in policy

Many planning consultations simply don't reach young people. Local Plans are lengthy, technical documents, and traditional consultation events are rarely designed with teenagers in mind.

If councils want policies that reflect young people's needs, they need to create opportunities for young people to contribute through methods that work for them.

This might include:

- schools
- youth groups
- youth councils
- community organisations
- targeted engagement projects

Meaningful engagement with teenage girls and gender diverse young people helps ensure that policy reflects lived experience rather than assumptions.

Be explicit

Good policy should clearly state that parks and public spaces should meet the needs of all teenagers.

This means recognising that:

- MUGAs and skateparks may form part of the solution.
- They are unlikely to meet the needs of every teenager.
- New developments should provide a wider range of opportunities for socialising, informal recreation and active play.
- Design should consider how different groups experience public space.

Being explicit gives developers confidence to propose more varied and inclusive designs.

Learning from others

A growing number of organisations are already embedding these principles into policy and guidance. Examples include:

Chelmsford City Council

Major development proposals that provide or improve parks and public spaces are encouraged to have regard to the design advice and resources produced by Make Space for Girls.

Basildon Local Plan

References engagement work exploring how public spaces can become more inclusive for teenage girls, young women and gender diverse young people.

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Design Guide

Highlights the importance of teenage spaces appealing to a wider range of young people and suggests facilities including swings, hammocks, climbing, outdoor gyms and more open MUGAs.

Transport for London's Sustainable Development Framework

Recognises that designing parks to better meet the needs of teenage girls, trans and non-binary young people improves equality, health and public space for everyone.

Scottish Government

Both the Play Vision and Action Plan and the Play Sufficiency Guidance recognise the importance of creating public spaces where girls feel safe, welcome and able to play.