



Nottingham Trent  
University

School of Social Sciences

Commons Levelling Up,  
Housing and Communities  
Select Committee:  
Inquiry into Children, Young  
People and the Built  
Environment

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**Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee:  
Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment**

**Written evidence submitted by: Professor Carrie Paechter and Dr Michael Keenan, Nottingham Trent University; Dr Lyndsey Stoodley, independent academic; and Chris Lawton, Skateboard GB.**

**We are happy to provide oral evidence if required. Please contact Professor Carrie Paechter on [carrie.paechter@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:carrie.paechter@ntu.ac.uk) for further information.**

## 1. Executive Summary

Our submission is based on research carried out as part of the project, Girl Skateboarders: active girlhood, alternative sports, and urban space, conducted July 2021-January 2023, funded by The Leverhulme Trust and led by Professor Carrie Paechter at Nottingham Trent University.

- Young people who skateboard experience urban space differently. Specifically, they use the urban environment for play, instead of, or in addition to, more conventional activities.
- Playing in the urban environment in this way is beneficial for children and young people's mental health.
- Children and young people who skateboard feel excluded from many urban spaces due to features that are explicitly 'designed in' to prevent skateboarding.
- Feelings of exclusion are exacerbated by both gender and age. Young women skateboarding in urban environments get considerably more hassle than young men.
- Pushing skateboarding out of central urban spaces means that official urban, suburban and village skateparks, and informal street skateboarding spaces, are often located in more peripheral areas that are less safe for girls, young women, and younger children and teenagers. This increases risks to them, perpetuates exclusion and strengthens unhelpful and unjustified media associations between skateboarding and crime and anti-social behaviour.
- Many skateparks also lack basic facilities, such as toilets, in the vicinity, also due to their marginality to central urban and village spaces. They are frequently unlit or poorly lit, making them unsafe a good deal of the time.
- Many skateparks have not been designed with beginners in mind, discriminating against girls, who are more likely to be developing their skills, while also more likely to use official skateparks due to the problems they encounter when city skating. This is despite

the clear statement in the Skateboard GB and Sport England '*Design and Development Guidance*' (July 2020) for skateparks that new facilities should incorporate the needs of users at all levels of skill and experience *and* be designed through meaningful consultation with the user community. Such consultation, however, frequently fails to take place in publicly funded skatepark projects across the UK.

- The location of official skateparks away from central areas also means that travel to them is less convenient or safe. Some local skateparks are located at the end of dark pathways or away from local bus services.
- Attempts to design children and young people's active play (skateboarding, rollerblading, scootering) out of urban or village centres ignores their right to take part in communities on their own terms and prioritises the preferences and concerns of adults.
- While skatepark planning processes sometimes involve young people, these tend to be teenage boys, rather than either young women or younger children. The use of expert/professional skateboarders (rather than, say skateboard coaches) as planning consultants can lead to skateparks that are unsuitable for beginners. Planners also prioritise deep bowls and vert ramps, rather than more inclusive flatground spaces, which tend to be prioritized by users of all levels of skill and experience when they are meaningfully engaged in the design process.
- The recently opened Tramline Spot in Nottingham, a well-lit, central, skateable space, has the potential to be an example of good practice in including children and young people in playful wheeled activities in the city centre. More than 200 young people (including students at the adjacent Nottingham College City Hub) were actively engaged in the design process between autumn 2019 and summer 2022, with the skateboarders themselves fundraising for both the capital costs of the skatespace and the collaborative design process.

- **We recommend that:** urban, suburban and village planning should be inclusive rather than exclusive, as at present; skateboarding and other playful wheeled activities should be permitted in central urban, suburban and village areas; children and young people should be encouraged to have a playful and creative approach to the urban environment; skatepark planning and design should take much more account of safety of access and use for all ages, genders, and abilities.

## 2. Submission

Our submission is based on research carried out as part of the project, Girl Skateboarders: active girlhood, alternative sports, and urban space, conducted July 2021-January 2023, funded by The Leverhulme Trust and led by Professor Carrie Paechter at Nottingham Trent University.

### ***The experiences of children and young people of their built environment***

Our research suggests that young people who skateboard experience urban space differently from many of the rest of the population. This is particularly true of those young people who are street or commuting skateboarders, i.e. who use their skateboards in streets, squares, and other urban spaces, whether for transport to and from school, college or work, or for play. Our research suggests that, due to problems experienced when skateboarding in these locations, fewer young people use them for skateboarding than would like to. This is a missed opportunity both for the good custodianship of urban spaces (encouraging the presence of committed, active users who have a strong sense of ownership of given spaces) and for policy priorities such as Active Travel and Active Ageing. Skateboarding is a uniquely adaptable mode of transport (a skateboard can be readily carried on trains, buses and trams, can be taken to work or study with limited implications for storage, and can therefore be a strong option for multi-modal transport planning). It is also relatively easy to stop and/or steer a skateboard, making them potentially safer forms of urban micro-mobility than e-scooters etc.

Specifically, young people who skateboard use the urban environment for play, rather than, or in addition to, other, more conventional activities. This gives them a radically different perspective on the built environment, as they constantly scan the urban scene for suitable play opportunities, including skateable spaces and surfaces, and think about street furniture in terms of its potential for use in tricks as well as for

more conventional uses such as sitting. In this way, child and youth skateboarders treat the urban environment as a potential creative play and exercise space. We have qualitative evidence that using the urban environment in this way has positive benefits for children's and young people's mental health.

Skateboarders of all ages are also acutely aware of the ways in which urban spaces are designed to exclude them, for example through the use of skate stoppers and other aspects of urban design that are inserted by planners and architects in order to 'design out' skateboarding in urban spaces (one facet of what is often referred to as 'hostile architecture'). This has the effect of making children and young people feel excluded from many town and city spaces. This experience of exclusion is exacerbated by the amount of what appears to be the public realm, but which is actually privately owned, with security guards preventing skateboarding in what might otherwise be popular spots. This experience of exclusion from public spaces is also likely to be felt by others wanting to participate in wheeled play in urban environments, such as inline skaters and children and young people using non-electric scooters.

### *The effects of gender and age*

These effects are all exacerbated by gender, and, to a lesser extent by age. Because skateboarding is not treated as a reasonable way of interacting with or traversing the city, young women and girls generally get more hassle when skateboarding in public spaces, including attempts to trip them or grab their boards, and sexualised comments. This makes them less likely to use skateboards for play or commuting in urban environments.

Furthermore, the locations of official urban, suburban and village skateparks, and of informal street skateboarding spaces, tend to be in peripheral areas that are less safe for girls, young women, and younger children and teenagers. Many official skateparks are located at the

edges of urban areas or on the outskirts of towns and villages, and are frequently placed so that they are not overlooked by local housing. This is contrary to the recommendations provided in the Skateboard GB and Sport England *Design Development Guidance* (July 2020), which clearly stipulate that skateparks should be located in well-connected, clearly over-looked spaces, with good lines-of-sight to locations where other people are likely to be (such as roads, pathways etc.), and should not be located in peripheral or otherwise problematic locations. The guidance also stipulates that skateparks should be well lit and, at the earliest stage after construction has been completed, should have a sustainable programme of activities – coached beginners’ sessions etc., both to improve accessibility to beginner skatepark users and to instill good role-modelling and other socially desirable factors. Despite Skateboard GB’s efforts in this space, activity programming rarely occurs at public skateparks unless it is a result of user community-led activism and fundraising.

This makes these spaces much less safe for all but older male teenagers, especially as most publicly accessible skateparks are not well lit, particularly at night. Due to their distance from central areas, there is also a lack of basic facilities, such as toilets, near to most outdoor skateparks. Informal skateboarding spaces set up by local skateboarding communities are even more likely to be sited in marginal areas such as waste ground, which makes them unsafe for girl, young woman, and child skateboarders. Some less well-lit or well-managed public skateparks also attract other users, by whom woman and younger skateboarders may feel, or be, threatened. This perpetuates feelings of exclusion. Locating skateparks in areas that already experience crime and anti-social behaviour not only increases the risk of skatepark users becoming the victims of both, but also strengthens unhelpful media associations between skateparks and youth crime.

Many local skateparks have not been designed with beginners in mind. This discriminates against girls, who are at present more likely to be beginners (though this is changing) and against younger skateboarders.



These groups are also more likely to use official skateparks than young men, due to the hassle and general lack of safety elsewhere mentioned above. There is a strong tendency for local planners to favour the more visibly exciting bowls and vert ramps over flatground spaces with smaller ramps, ledges, and short step sets. The latter, while remaining challenging for experienced skaters, allow beginners to develop their skills in relative safety. Furthermore, our research suggests that girls like to have some flatground skatepark areas which not central to the main skateboarding space, so they can practice without the intense observation that comes from being a relatively rare woman skateboarder. Such spaces are not frequently available in public skateparks, limiting girls' access further.

### *Ease of travel to outdoor spaces*

Our research suggests that there can be significant problems in travelling to public skateparks and other skateboarding spaces, and that this is once again gendered and varies with age. In particular, the location of these spaces away from central areas, whether city, town or village, can make them less safe to access, or less accessible by public transport or on foot – and, as discussed above, young women are less likely than young men to travel using a skateboard. Even when a local skatepark is reasonably well placed in other ways, sometimes problems of access occur due to poor local planning decisions, such as the only approach to a well-lit skatepark being along an unlit, or badly-lit, path, with little policing or other security.

### **Child and young person skateboarders and the planning system**

There is a tendency for planners at all levels to place outdoor provision for young people to the edges of the urban or suburban public sphere. This is particularly evident in the location of skateparks at the edges of communities, rather than in the heart of them, where it would be safer for children and young people, especially girls and younger children, to participate. Attempts such as these to design children and young people's active play (skateboarding, rollerblading, scootering) out of

urban or village centres ignores their right to take part in communities on their own terms and prioritises the preferences and concerns of adults over those of children and young people.

While planning processes for new skateparks do often involve consultation with young people, including skateboarders, those consulted tend to be the young white men who still dominate the sport, and/or expert or professional skateboarders. There is also an unspoken assumption in much local planning that it is boys and young men who need to be kept occupied and out of trouble, so that they and their concerns are prioritised when designing such amenities as skateparks. In a recent example (Ruddington skatepark, Rushcliffe Country Park, completed in 2021), purposive inclusion of women and girls in the design process was a result of user community activism and fundraising, and occurred with some opposition from and conflict with the Local Authority, despite it resulting in design features that appeal to a much wider range of users than is usually achieved.

There seems to be little attempt by planners to reach out to young woman skateboarders, or to pre-teenage children, or to consult those who teach skateboarding to children and young people. The result of this is that some local skateparks are in effect impossible for beginners to use, due to lack of flat practice space with few or no obstacles, or ramps and bowls that are too high or deep for those in the early stages of their skateboarding practice to negotiate safely. They can also be challenging for experienced older skateboarders (male and female) who need more 'warm up' time than younger skaters due to ageing and injuries, with the majority of public outdoor skateparks lacking sufficient flatground space for warm-up and lower-risk practice valued by even highly experienced, 'competent' skatepark users.

## Example of good practice

A potential example of good practice, which is currently being studied by a PhD student supervised by Carrie Paechter at Nottingham Trent University with Chris Lawton of SkateNottingham and Skateboard GB, and Timothy Heath of University of Nottingham, is the new Tramline Spot in Nottingham. This is a skateable space designed and partially funded by local skateboarders, in conjunction with Nottingham City Council. It provides a comparatively safe space for playful wheeled activities in the city centre. Located underneath the tram viaduct in the centre of Nottingham, it is partially covered, lit 24 hours a day, near to bus and tram routes and on an increasingly used pedestrian route between the train station and the city centre. Located between the Nottingham Contemporary building and the new Nottingham College City Hub campus, it is served by community police as well as having College security staff available when necessary. The space is also adjacent to a basketball area and extensive outdoor seating, making a flexible and welcoming urban area for children and young people. The Tramline Spot itself is designed to be multi-use. It has a small but useable flatground area, low ramps (some of which can be moved around the space for variety), short stair sets and curved and straight ledges for grinding. Opened at the end of 2022, it has been used by the local skateboarding organization SkateNottingham for beginners' classes, and has also hosted woman and girl only sessions, all of which have been funded and programmed by the skateboard community themselves (rather than being a result of terms of use agreements with the municipality). To date it appears to be well used by local skateboarders, rollerbladers and others, and is one of only two UK examples cited in the *Skateparks: Waves of Concrete* coffee-table hardback book celebrating excellent skatepark designs worldwide (Andreu and Melloni, 2023)

## Recommendations

- Urban, suburban and village planning should be inclusive rather than exclusive. In particular, the use of architectural and design features to ‘design out’ skateboarding and similar pursuits should only be used when there are significant safety risks.
- Skateboarding and other wheeled playful activities should be permissible in urban and other areas alongside more conventional activities such as shopping and recreational walking. This makes skateboarding and similar activities safer and more accessible for young women, girls, and children generally.
- Children and young people should be encouraged, rather than discouraged, to have a creative and playful approach to the urban environment.
- When designing skateparks, careful consideration should be given to: location in central rather than peripheral areas; that they should be overlooked by housing and on frequently policed routes; lighting; safety of approaches; having safe toilet facilities nearby; accessibility by public transport and safe walking, particularly from schools and housing; including women, girls, younger children and skateboard coaches in the planning process; incorporating flatground areas and low obstacles as well as, or instead of, bowls and vert ramps; having some areas of a skatepark that are more secluded (though still safe) for more private practice.

## References

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