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Sports Cages & Multi-Use Games Areas: Places of safety, places of harm, places of potential

A paper on the importance of sports cages & Multi-Use Games Areas (MUGAs) to children and young people, to Contextual Safeguarding, and to Child-Friendly neighbourhoods

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Places of safety, places of harm, places of potential

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If you have any comments, queries, questions or feedback regarding this document, please email luke@hackneyquest.org.uk



Preface: Hackney's cages – A (brief) love story

I love sports cages and Multi-Use Games Areas (MUGAs). Like many twenty-somethings, I've got permanent scars on both knees from the skin-skimming concrete and sandy astroturf that all the cages used to have in my childhood and adolescence, back when sophisticated synthetic turf surfaces were a distant dream. I think I've left quite a lot of my DNA on the concrete of the Gascoyne Estate cage (above) over the years. I love Hackney's cages so much that I now run a weekly quiz on Twitter where local people have to identify the location of the cage I've photographed.

It's not just me who loves cages – children and young people often regard their neighbourhood MUGA to be the best thing in their area. This was one of many interesting findings in our [Hackney Wick Through Young Eyes report](#): even young people who lived a short walk from a large park said that the cage on their estate was their favourite thing in the neighbourhood. Due to coronavirus, I'm currently doing most of my 1:1 mentoring sessions in the cages closest to where my mentees live, and it works brilliantly: being a guest in their area makes for a different, more horizontal dynamic to the usual situation, in which they travel to the youth centre to see me. Being in the cage means we can break up our discussion with physical activity, alternating between conversation and football or basketball. This ensures that the times we do talk are maximally focused and productive, and also means we're getting decent exercise - we can play pool or table tennis in the centre, but it's not the same as a proper run-around! Other young people from the estate sometimes see us playing and ask to join, and this happens even when there's a big age gap between the young person I'm mentoring and the new entrant(s). Two lads joined a kickabout I was having with an 18 year old girl recently, with her permission and encouragement. The boys seemed to know each other well, so I asked if they went to the same school. 'No,' said one of them, who was about 5 years younger than the other boy, and at least 8 years younger than the girl I mentor: 'we met here on the cage'.

In a passage about his upbringing in Rhode Island, the social theorist Henry Giroux paints a vivid picture of why the neighbourhood basketball court held such value to him and his friends. Much of the passage resonates strongly with my experience growing up in Hackney, and the experiences of the young people I work with:

For many of the working-class youth in my neighbourhood, the basketball court was one of the few public spheres in which the kind of cultural capital we recognised and took seriously could be exchanged for respect and admiration...Nobody was born with innate talent. Nor was anybody given instant recognition. The basketball court became for me a rite of passage and a powerful referent for developing a sense of possibility. We played day and night...Basketball was taken very seriously because it was a neighbourhood sport, a terrain where respect was earned. It offered us a mode of resistance, if not respite, from the lure of drug dealing, the sport of everyday violence, and the general misery that surrounded us. The basketball court provided another kind of hope, one that seemed to fly in the face of the need for high status, school credentials, or the security of a boring job. It was also a sphere in which we learned about the value of friendship, solidarity, and respect for the other.

Giroux (2012: 9-10)

Introduction: Who is this document for? What is it based on? What is the point of it?

Who is this document for?

This document is aimed at anyone who is interested in maximising the potential of cages and MUGAs for young people and for communities. More specifically, I hope it could be helpful for the people listed in the table below.

Safeguarding professionals	anyone who is involved with keeping young people safe, especially those who are engaged with the development of the Contextual Safeguarding approach
Youth work professionals	anyone who works directly with children and young people, especially detached youth workers and those whose work involves engaging with children and young people in outdoor settings
Architects and urban designers	especially those who are involved with estate regeneration, urban planning, and master-planning
Developers	especially those involved in estate or neighbourhood regeneration projects
Local authority planning and regeneration officers	especially those involved in estate or neighbourhood regeneration projects
Local and national decision-makers	especially those who are involved with policy-making in relation to planning and regeneration; safeguarding and child protection; youth services; and community safety
Housing associations	especially those who manage estates that contain cages or MUGAs
Academics and researchers	especially those who are interested in Contextual Safeguarding; Child-Friendly design; regeneration, urban design or planning; youth studies; and related areas
Young people and parents	I would love to receive emails from young people and parents pointing out flaws, gaps or mistakes in this document, so that it can be further developed with support from the real experts (or, more optimistically, it'd also be great to receive positive comments from young people and parents!)

What is this document based on? What is the point of it?

This document is based on primary research with young people (the [Hackney Wick Through Young Eyes report](#)), secondary research, and professional experience. There are a number of specific purposes behind this document:

1. **To highlight the value of cages and MUGAs**, at a time when many Local Authorities and developers are trying to extract as much value from land as possible in urban areas, thus placing all play spaces at risk; and at a time when well-intentioned concerns about green spaces and about the securitisation of urban environments can lead to misguided critiques of cages and MUGAs.
2. **To emphasise and explore the potential of cages and MUGAs**, not just for children and young people, but for whole communities.
3. **To offer guidance as to how this potential can be maximised**, specifically through the careful consideration of both Contextual Safeguarding and Child-Friendly design principles.
4. **To present a nuanced and balanced picture of the role these spaces can play in different communities** – cages are too often undervalued by those thinking about neighbourhoods, but cages can also be places of exploitation and harm – they should neither be simplistically celebrated nor misguidedly demonised.
5. **To encourage further research on cages and MUGAs**, especially research which is based on detailed engagement with people who use these spaces, and which is aimed at further developing our understanding of how these spaces can be maximally beneficial to children and young people, communities and neighbourhoods, as well as safe for all who use them.

1 The significance of cages & MUGAs to children, young people, and Contextual Safeguarding

Places of safety, places of harm

In best cases, cages are safe places awash with protective factors: they are well-lit, and parents can see everything going on in them from their windows; they are places of positive peer relationships; nurturing adults run activities on them; they are used by children and young people of different ages and genders, to play a range of different sports and games; local residents keep an eye on their upkeep and notify the council if they need safety improvements; they are viewed by everyone in the neighbourhood as valuable community assets.

In worst cases, they can be places of exploitation and harm, where adults (or older young people) know they can find vulnerable young people who may be susceptible targets for grooming. They can be dominated by a certain group, to the extent that others wouldn't dare go into them, even when empty. Some Primary-age children in our Hackney Wick study said that they didn't feel safe in their cage because they were always occupied by older male young people, and other respondents also mentioned the presence of syringes, broken glass, empty drug packages, or used condoms on their cage. A Deputy Headteacher in a Primary school expressed concerns about the cage opposite the school, as she knows that drug dealing happens there, and that it seems to be 'run' by the local "gang".

Cages can be places which help make life worth living, but they can also be places where lives are lost.



Why are cages such significant places for children and young people?

Often a bit run-down and tatty, and in many cases only situated in poorer communities, the significance of cages is too easily neglected. It's easy to wonder how differently cages would be perceived if they were more often frequented by children from wealthier backgrounds, or if we had more decision-makers who live or grew up on social housing estates, and thus better understood the usage and dynamics of cages as public spaces.

Many cages are centrally important social contexts in the lives of young people. This can be for a number of reasons: because a young person loves sport and it's the most convenient place to play; because their home isn't a happy place and the cage is the nearest place to get away to; because it's where they spend time with friends; because they're training to be a sports coach there; or because the cage is a place to mix with potential romantic partners and to peacock. They can be places where social stakes are high; where significant quantities of 'social clout' can be gained or lost. They can be consequential contexts for capital of all kinds – economic, social, and cultural – because they can be places of training or employment, places to accrue or lose social status, places to gain and exchange cultural knowledge.

Street and park spaces function as space in which to try out and practise new states of self-identity. Such spaces also allow storytelling among peers. For the young person, the street or park allows space within space - space to test out identity, to formulate and assert new self-narratives.

Robinson (2009: 513)

Cages as places for effectively engaging with young people

Young people who are disengaged with education, uninterested in any youth club, seen as ‘beyond discipline’ by their parent(s), and not known to any services, might well spend time in their nearest cage. Too often such young people are labelled as ‘hard to reach’ or ‘difficult to engage’, but – in some cases at least – their local cage could be a place to effectively engage them.

Detached youth workers have known this for decades, of course, and many are expert at maximising the potential of cages for engaging activities, rapport-building and relationship-nurturing. Interestingly, Local Authorities that have adopted Contextual Safeguarding approaches have often invested in detached youth workers as a priority (Firmin 2020: 191). Detached youth workers can meet young people where they are – literally and figuratively – and can support both individual young people and positive peer relationships. Stick a couple of great youth workers in a cage with a football and a basketball, and with a bit of a luck and plenty of patience, they can get meaningful, positive engagement started even with the most initially-reluctant young people. Or, even if they can’t achieve meaningful engagement, they will learn a lot about the dynamics of the context through observation and brief, snatched conversations. Either way, more will have been learned and more progress will have been made through this kind of approach than through more fashionable, more ‘innovative’ models of ‘intervention programme’, which too often rely upon enticing young people away from places they want to be, and naturally spend time, into places they don’t.

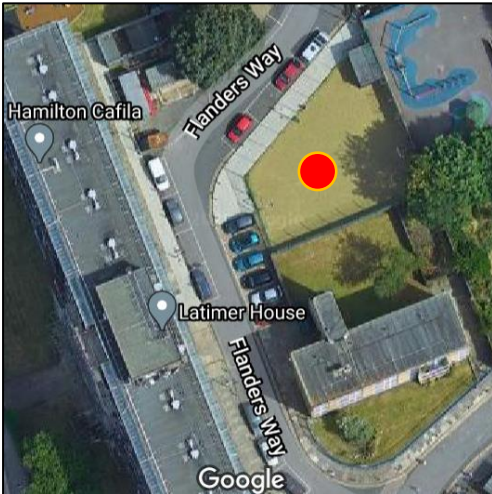
Why are cages such important locations to think about through the lens of Contextual Safeguarding?

In addition to the general points outlined above, there are a number of other reasons why cages are such important locations for Contextual Safeguarding:

- **They’re usually very public, visible spaces.** This visibility means there’s great potential to have local community guardianship over them, but also means that vulnerable children and young people can easily be ‘found’ in them (by those who wish to harm through grooming or through violence, for instance).
- **They’re often one of very few informal spaces in which young people of different ages frequently mix together.** This intergenerational mixing could lead to incredibly positive role modelling and peer mentoring, or could lead to the grooming of vulnerable ‘youngsters’ by exploitative ‘olders’. One of the most depressing findings in our Hackney Wick research was the extent to which Primary-age young people had a tendency to conflate being a teenager with being a ‘gangster’ – at worst, some of them spoke as if they thought every teenager was part of a gang, and as if they were nervously anticipating the age at which they would have to choose a ‘side’. This perception seemed to be grounded in a complex mixture of their actual day-to-day experience of their neighbourhood and widespread media narratives about gangs. Whatever the basis of their fears, we clearly need Primary children to be constantly surrounded by older young people who are supportive, nurturing, kind, encouraging, and brilliant role models. In best cases, cages can be the perfect place for this.
- **They can be places in which young people develop trusting, informal relationships with adults.** Youth workers or sports coaches can be among the most important and positive adults in young people’s lives. In informal spaces such as cages, professional or volunteer adults can craft situations in which young people feel known, listened to, and cared for, and in which adults are richly attentive to them. As Brennan and McElvaney (2020: 111) put it, all young people should have adults in their lives who are adept at ‘noticing when they are distressed, asking them about their wellbeing, taking them seriously, and taking action to protect them from harm’. Informal neighbourhood spaces can be places that adults play this role with particular effectiveness, because they’re places in which young people may feel more comfortable to express how they are than in more formal settings. This can facilitate disclosures. The more young people are actively listened to in a place, the safer it is for them (Everley 2020).
- **They can be places which help young people to feel valued by their communities, and which enhance their sense of belonging.** These can be significant protective factors for young people, as they can reduce their desperation to achieve a false sense of security or safety through risky means (Firmin 2020: 21).

2 From concrete estate-based cages to 4G MUGAs in parks: A simple typology of cages

Sports cages and MUGAs come in all shapes and sizes, and vary widely in terms of their quality, usage, and condition. In this section, I lay out a simple typology of different kinds of cages, which I've numbered 1 to 5. The lower the number, the more localised the cage's use, the more free-access the cage is, and generally the less well-maintained the cage is. I've given an example for each type of cage, to bring the typology to life. I *do not* intend to suggest that one type of cage is somehow "better" than another – they each have their own advantages and they are all valuable, as I briefly explain in my descriptions of each type.

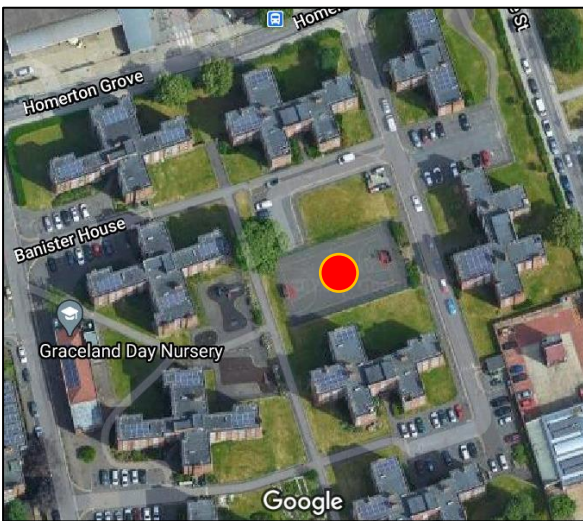


Type 1: Hyper-local estate-based

Defined by: Very localised usage; free access; often poor quality; rarely well-maintained; little or no structured provision

Example (left): Wyke Estate cage opposite Latimer House

This cage is an odd shape, and is a sandy surface, but is very frequently used, most commonly by children and young people from Latimer House. Always open, only visible from the estate. Little evidence of maintenance, but very hard-wearing and durable surface. Very unlikely to be used by anyone who doesn't live on the estate. There is no structured provision on this cage at any time – it's just used informally by individuals and groups.

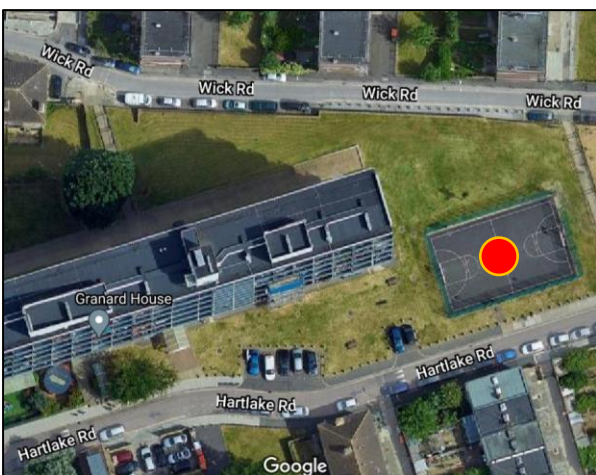


Type 2: Local estate-based

Defined by: Similar to Type 1, though slightly less localised usage and better quality

Example (left): Banister House cage

A Type 2 cage, like Banister House, is slightly better quality (e.g. a more regular shape – either rectangular or square), and is more likely to be used by people who would travel a short distance, as opposed to only people from the immediate vicinity. As with Type 1, it's always open and there's no structured provision on it, and it's only really visible from the estate, though there is a fairly well-used pathway leading to Homerton Hospital next to it.



Type 3: Estate-based

Defined by: Greater visibility than Types 1 & 2, more likely to be used by people who've travelled further, may have some structured provision.

Example (left): Gascoyne II cage

Still based on an estate, but more visible from a further distance, and used more widely, not just by people from the immediate vicinity. There may be some structured provision on them (e.g. this cage has sessions on it run by Wickers, a local charity), and they're likely to be better quality than Type 1 or 2.



Type 4: Park-based with informal usage

Defined by: Based in a park and highly visible for a considerable distance, used by a wide variety of park users, more likely to have structured sessions, often better quality

Example (left): London Fields cage

This type of cage is far less localised than Types 1-3, and so serves quite a different function – Type 4 cages are sports facilities within parks (or recreation grounds or commons), as opposed to standalone facilities within housing areas. They tend to be used for a wider range of sports (Types 1-3 tend to be dominated by football and basketball), and by a broader demographic. They more commonly have structured provision on them, and this is more often run by less localised organisations (e.g. Arsenal Foundation run sessions on this cage, and across North East London). Informal usage still dominates most of the time, though.



Type 5: Park-based with more formalised usage

Defined by: Better quality, mostly used for structured provision, far less localised usage

Example (left): Mabley Green football pitches

These cages are far better quality, mostly used by organised sports groups, and are more often locked when not booked. There may be a charge for their usage. They're used by people from a much wider area – people may travel considerable distances to use them. There may be changing facilities or a pavilion neighbouring them. They're more likely to be usable for only one sport – Mabley's cages can only be used for football, for instance. They're better-maintained, and there may be a staff member dedicated to their upkeep.

These different types of cages serve different functions for their communities, and present very different profiles of risk and opportunity. Type 1 cages are easy for local people to use at any time, and may well be a significant social space for local young people. Local residents are likely to feel a high sense of ownership over the cage. Parents might well be able to see the cage from their balcony or window when their children are playing in them. But the facts that they're open all the time, are less likely to have a diversity of uses and users, and are not visible beyond the estate, could all *potentially* heighten the risk that they become dominated by certain groups, and become used for harmful activities. Type 5 cages, by contrast, won't have the same kind of hyper-local community value and are more likely to be seen as specialist sports facilities for organised groups than informal social spaces for local people.

Of course, many cages won't quite fit this typology. You can have more specialist surfaces in estate-based cages and very simple, open-access concrete cages in parks, for instance. But the typology hopefully provides a helpful indication of the diversity of cages that exist, and – most importantly – the profoundly different value and risk profiles that different cages may carry. **This document is primarily concerned with Type 1-3 cages: those that are based in housing areas and are mostly used informally.**

3 Balancing freedom of access with diversity of usage: How can you maximise the usage of a cage by different ages & genders for different activities, whilst keeping it as open-access as possible?

If decision-makers became too risk-averse, and focused only on the hazards and potential harms within cages (rather than the opportunities they present and the value they have), they might decide to lock cages unless formally booked, refurbish extensively, and then charge people for usage. They may wish to minimise the number of Type 1, 2 and 3 cages in their area, and could perceive Type 5 cages as the only kind that can be safe and valuable (see Chapter 2 above for the typology of cages). In my view, this would be a profound mistake. As outlined above, Type 1, 2 and 3 cages can – and often do – have immense value for local residents. Cages which have to be booked for an hourly fee can only be used by wealthier people, and will not have the same community value. Each neighbourhood will benefit most from having a range of different kinds of cages, serving different purposes, facilitating different activities, and allowing usage by a wide variety of people, of all ages, genders and backgrounds.

To maximise the value and the safety of any cage, there needs to be the right balance of free access and structured use; informality and formality; community ownership and organised provision. How to get the “right balance” for each cage will depend on the needs and preferences of the local residents and users. The diagram below gives an indication of different options with regard to these questions. “Free access” doesn’t necessarily mean that the cage is open 24/7 – it may be that a responsible local person or body (e.g. a TRA) locks the cage at night-time.

<p style="color: blue; font-weight: bold;">More free access →</p>	<p>Lots of free access, low diversity of usage & users</p> <p>If a cage is generally just left open, and there is no structured provision on it, it may end up being dominated by certain local users, and by certain uses (teenage boys playing football, for instance). The free access will enhance the sense of local community ownership over the cage, but this may be restricted to a certain demographic. Most likely a Type 1 or 2 cage.</p>	<p>Lots of free access, high diversity of usage & users</p> <p>Arguably, this is the ideal scenario: the cage is open and accessible at all times, by all. It gets used by a variety of people for a range of different activities. This may or may not be facilitated by having a small number of organised sessions on the cage, to encourage certain groups to make use of it (e.g. older folk, girls as well as boys). Most likely a Type 2 or 3 cage.</p>
	<p>More structure, low diversity of usage & users</p> <p>In this scenario, the cage is mostly used for structured, organised provision. It may be that the cage has to be booked, for instance. But it has a narrow range of uses and users. This may be due to physical factors – the cage may be designed for only one sport. Most likely a Type 4 or 5 cage.</p>	<p>More structure, high diversity of usage & users</p> <p>In this situation, there is less free access – the cage may be used mostly for organised sessions, and it may have to be booked. But a variety of different people use the cage for a variety of activities. The organised sessions cover a range of different sports for different ages and genders. Most likely a type 4 or 5 cage.</p>

→ More diversity of uses and users

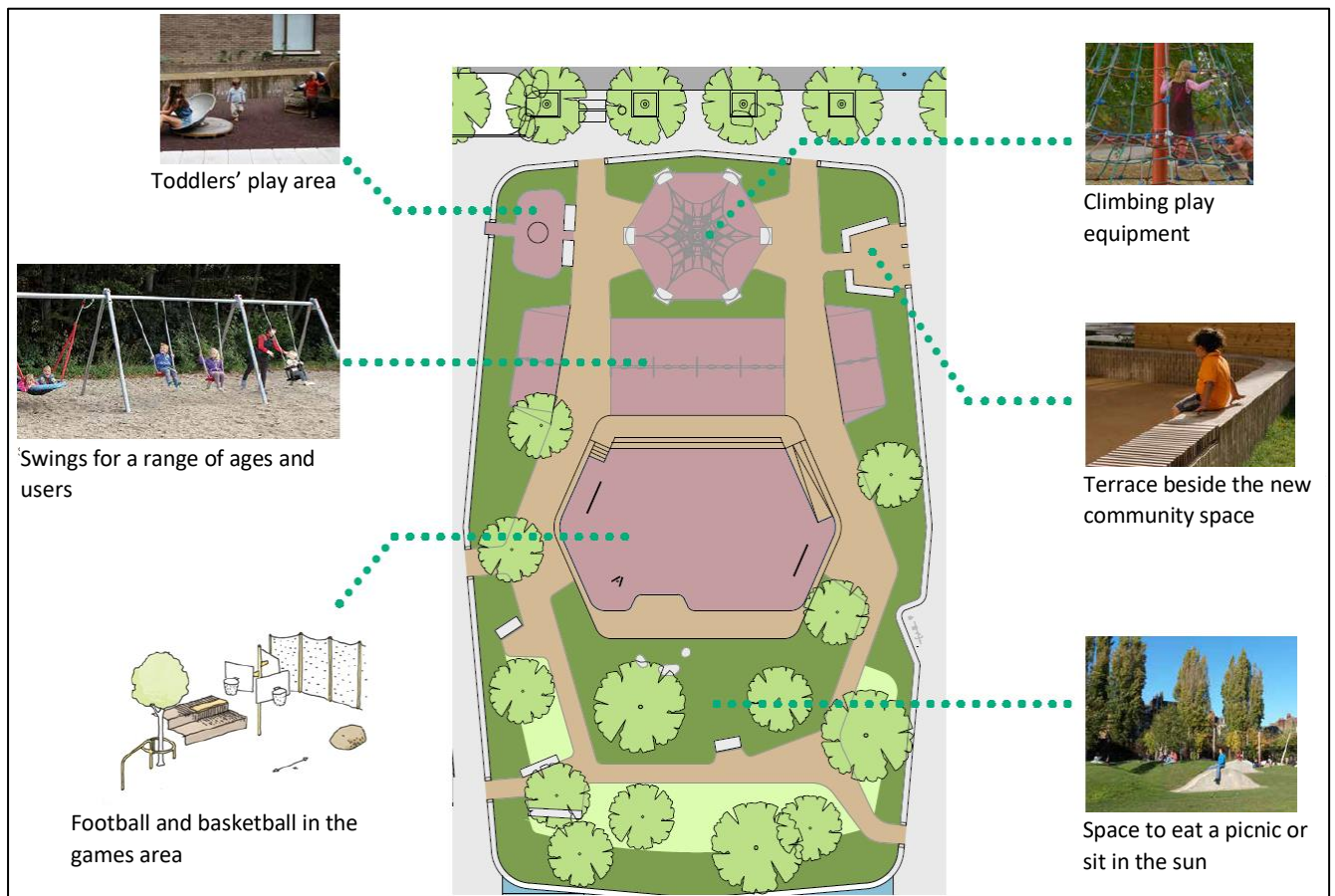


Balancing freedom of access with diversity of usage through physical design

Any space ‘has to be contended and ownership negotiated’ (Robinson 2009: 512). When it comes to the sense of ownership over cage or MUGA spaces, gender and age can be particular points of contention. Gender bias is a particular problem for all kinds of sports facilities (muf 2004: 6), including cages, which are often seen to be ‘for’ young men. They can be viewed just as places for young men to engage in active and exuberant forms of play. Even leaving aside the gendered nature of this perspective, it can also represent a hugely narrow and simplistic view of play: ‘high-energy exuberance captures only one aspect of playfulness. Much of the time is also spent talking with mates, sitting around’ (Spiegel 2011: 5).

Cages are seen as ‘legitimate’ places for young people to gather (muf 2004: 14) – especially young men. This sense of legitimacy is hugely positive, given the increasing enclosure of privatised space in cities, which too often leaves young people without any spaces to call ‘their own’, and given the need to ensure that young people have a rich sense of belonging and ownership in the places they call home. But if this sense of legitimacy is too narrow and exclusive, it can contribute to the segregation of space by age, gender and use – it can seem that cages are *only* for young men, and *only* for sport. It is thus important to broaden this sense of legitimacy to include other users and other activities, whilst also maintaining freedom of access to the space. The right kind of physical design can help to balance these different factors.

These considerations were central to muf architecture’s design for a new ‘social cage’ in the centre of Kings Crescent estate in Hackney. They undertook extensive engagement activities with local young people and carers, and ‘established design details which would make it more likely that the space could be ‘owned’ by all ages and interests’ (muf 2018). Their design for the centre of the estate (below), including both the cage and other adjacent play spaces, is intended to maximise the diversity of uses and users of the area.



muf architecture’s design for a ‘social cage’ or ‘Multi Use Games and Performative Play Area’ on the Kings Crescent estate in Hackney (from Kings Crescent Phase 3 & 4 Design & Access Statement, 2018)

4 Assessing cages through the lens of Contextual Safeguarding: A framework

This framework for assessing the safety of a cage as a social context is based on all the considerations laid out in this document, as well as the principles developed by Firmin (2020) for assessing the safety of locations.

Theme	Factor	Key question(s) about the cage/MUGA
Physical & environmental	Type	Which type of cage is it (see typology on p. 7-8)? How does this affect its risk profile?
	Lighting	Is it well-lit and visible all-year round at all times? Do any activities take place on the cage which require better lighting in order to be safe? How would better lighting affect its usage?
	Oversight, sound & visibility	Is the whole of the cage visible from outside? Is it perceived as a private or public space? Where are people inside the cage visible from? How far does sound travel from it? Who can see into the cage (e.g. residents, people walking/driving by, local businesses?)
	Location	Is the cage in a prominent, easily accessible location, or tucked away?
	Condition	Is the cage in good physical condition? Is it well looked-after, clean and hygienic?
	Access	Is the cage ever locked, or open at all times? How many entrances/exits does it have? Is it accessible for disabled people? Is it physically better-suited to certain age groups?
Usage	Age profile	How often do different age groups use the cage? Do different ages mix much? Do adults use the cage, or just young people? Do different ages use it at different times?
	Gender profile	How often do young people of different genders use the cage? Do different genders mix?
	Times of usage	When is the cage busy and when is it empty or quiet? Is the cage being used by young people during school hours? Late at night? Do different users ever conflict over usage?
	Users and activities	Who uses the cage? Is it dominated by particular groups? Does anyone avoid it? Which sports and activities happen on the cage? Can more than one activity happen in the cage safely and easily? Are the activities on the cage informal and peer-led, or run by an organisation or adult? Do any risky, unsafe, exploitative or harmful activities occur on the cage? If so, how severe and frequent are they? What data exists on this from services? What data exists on risky/harmful activities from the viewpoint of young people? If so, do they happen at all times during the day and year, or just specific times?
	Peer interactions	Do different young people engage positively with one another on the cage? Is the cage used by established friendship groups, or is it a place where 'strangers' meet? What the dynamics between different individuals and groups who use it?
	Residency of users	Do people come from far to use the cage, or is it just used by immediate locals?
Stakeholders	Young people	What do young people think & feel about the cage? Does it feel safe to them? Who is best-placed to positive engage the young people who use or live near to it?
	Services	Which services can observe or take part in activities in the cage (e.g. youth workers, coaches, refuse collectors, housing officers, social workers, police)? Has there been any prior service engagement with the cage (e.g. due to local concerns)?
	Responsible agencies	Which agency owns the cage? Which agency is responsible for its upkeep?
	Residents	How do residents feel about it? What are their concerns and hopes for the cage?
	Parents	Do parents let their children play in the cage? When? Do they watch their children in the cage? If so, how and how often?
	Organisations	Do any local organisations run activities in the cage? When and how often? Which ages and genders do they involve in this? If not happening currently, has it happened previously? Could any local organisations run new activities in the cage?
Guardianship	Potential guardians	Is there anyone locally who does or could act as a community guardian for it? If there are guardians, how effective are they? Are they trusted locally?
	Guardian's knowledge	Do guardians have any understanding of safeguarding? Do they know which issues to report or refer? Do they understand consent with regard to supervision & referrals?
	Peer guardianship	Do or could young people support the safety of the space in any way?
Wider neighbourhood context	Facilities	Are there other sports facilities nearby? What condition are they in & what happens there?
	Schools	Which schools are nearby? Do young people from these schools meet on the cage? Do school staff have any awareness of their students' use of the cage?
	Local organisations	Are there local organisations running activities for young people elsewhere in the area?
	ASB & crime	Are there reported issues with ASB and crime in the local area?
	Structural inequality and tensions	How is the area affected by forms of structural inequality such as racism or poverty? Is the area undergoing regeneration or gentrification? How do these factors influence young people using the cage, and the dynamics between them? How do these factors influence how the cage is perceived by the wider community?
	Opportunities	Are there opportunities for young people in the local area (e.g. paid work or work placements, training, music or sport coaching, etc.)?

5 How can we make a cage safer?: Action planning for safer cages

The core premise of Contextual Safeguarding is that effective work to increase the safety of children and young people cannot be restricted to addressing the risks within families or the risks affecting individuals – to build safer societies and neighbourhoods for children and young people, we have to address the risks present in all the social contexts they engage with. Making a particular context (such as a cage) significantly and sustainably safer may take considerable time and resource, and may have to involve a wide range of stakeholders. But if we are to keep our young people safe from harm, it is also entirely necessary. In this section, I outline how we can sustainably enhance the safety of cages as contexts, whilst respecting their status as community-owned assets.

Does there need to be statutory involvement in making cages safer? What's the threshold for this?

Statutory agencies may or may not be involved in the process of making a cage safer. Ultimately, this is a threshold question, which depends on two key factors:

1. The severity and frequency of harm taking place (or suspected to be taking place) on the cage
2. The existing capacity in the community for coordinating measures to make the cage safer

The greater the severity and frequency of (suspected) harm in the cage, and the weaker the existing community capacity to coordinate safeguarding measures, the more substantial the grounds for statutory intervention. As Firmin (2020: 209) puts it: 'state intervention rests on whether a safeguarding partnership has a role to play in addressing the behaviour of adults or improving structural factors that could increase safety in the context. If adults and young people in localities are already willing, able and resourced to take such action, statutory coordination should be unlikely.' The Contextual Safeguarding team in Hackney have also developed a [thresholds document](#) which includes guidance on thresholds for intervention in localities.

Bringing people together to make a cage safer

Whether or not there are statutory agencies involved, making a cage safer will require bringing together all the people who have any kind of interest or influence over what happens in the cage. Ideally this would include all of the stakeholders listed in the assessment framework in Chapter 4 above. If there is statutory involvement, this meeting could take the form of a 'context protection conference', as described by Firmin (2020), and outlined in the [Contextual Safeguarding Network guidance on planning context conferences](#). A more informal community meeting may work best if facilitated by a well-respected local organisation, such as a tenants' group, and could adopt many of the principles from the context conference format.

Whether through a community meeting or a more formal context protection conference, the first step for making a cage safer could be to explore all of the questions in the assessment framework in Chapter 4, as well as the Contextual Safeguarding team's broader [Neighbourhood Assessment Toolkit](#). Attendees may be confident to address many of the questions immediately, as they may have clear answers. Other questions in the assessment framework may require further investigation, observation or consultation, which could be undertaken by the attendees within a certain time period, or, if needed, may have to be undertaken by a third party.



Example actions for making a cage safer

Once an assessment has taken place, an action plan can be discussed and drawn up for making the cage safer. The table below gives an idea of some actions which could be considered by local stakeholders and professionals within such a plan. Where possible, local residents – including young people – could be trained and paid for their work undertaking certain agreed actions, particularly when they will take considerable amounts of time and local insight. Any work to improve a community space works best when undertaken as a ‘shared project’ between local residents and professionals (muf 2004: 7), and if professionals are being paid for their part, so should residents be. Some of the actions in the table below will be more reliant than others on the involvement of statutory services. All actions would need to be discussed and agreed by all present, even if allocated to particular individuals or groups.

Potential actions	Who could be involved?
Further assessing the safety of the cage over a set time period before a follow-up meeting, in order to further answer the questions in the assessment framework – this may involve structured observations, resident surveys, data analysis, consulting local schools, etc.	All attendees – specific actions for each
Training and paying local young people to audit the safety of the cage. Undertaking activities to engage local young people in principles of Contextual Safeguarding, using CS Network resources .	Young people; youth professionals; social care
Mapping local organisations and facilities in the surrounding area	Council officers; youth professionals
Analysing available data on activities in the cage	Council officers
Organising safeguarding and signposting training for existing guardians or adult users of the cage	Social care
Making physical changes (e.g. lighting, adding ‘roof’ netting, trimming hedges, adding seating, locks)	Council officers
Adding signage (e.g. with support numbers or info on local activities, guardian info)	Council officers
Timetabling guardianship activities (e.g. agreeing that certain residents will be informally overseeing activities at certain times) & agreeing a protocol to gain cage users’ consent for this & for referrals	Residents; young people; social care
Approaching local organisations to run activities in the cage, or local services to work in the cage (e.g. detached youth workers to include the cage in their local ‘rounds’), especially to diversify use	Residents; social care; youth professionals
Exploring possibilities for training local older young people to run activities for younger young people, either in voluntary or paid roles	Youth professionals; sports organisations
Planning events on the cage (e.g. BBQ, friendly sports competition) to bring together a wider group of stakeholders in an informal way, for a wider conversation and to establish broad community ownership & responsibility over the cage	Could involve all kinds of stakeholders outlined in assessment framework
Running informal surveying activities for young people who use the cage – e.g. running activities for young people which also allow for gathering insights from young people about the cage	Youth professionals; sports organisations
Approaching local councillors and other decision makers to lobby for refurbishment or other significant physical improvements to the cage which may carry significant cost	Residents; young people; councillors
Applying for funding to make physical improvements to the cage or to bring provision onto the cage	Residents; young people; youth organisations
Approaching organisations who run activities in a different local cage, to learn from their practice	Residents; youth professionals
Inviting residents from another local neighbourhood to share how they have made their cage safer	Residents

Dates and processes would need to be agreed for reviewing each action and the plan as a whole. As well as the assessment framework in Chapter 4, significant wider issues discussed or alluded to in this document may also need to be considered when discussing potential actions. For example:

- What is the value of the cage to different stakeholders? What affects this value?
- What is the right balance to strike between freedom of access and diversity of use?
- Which groups feel ownership over the cage? Can this sense of ownership be broadened?
- What changes are taking place to other local community spaces, and to the neighbourhood as a whole? How do different residents feel about these other changes?
- Who has power and influence in the estate and/or neighbourhood? What is the basis for this power? How is this power dynamic affecting the use, perception, and discussion of the cage?



6 Both safe & Child-Friendly: The compatibility of Contextual Safeguarding and the Child-Friendly Borough initiative, and how cages are good places to bring the two agendas together

Cages are important places for both Contextual Safeguarding and Child-Friendly design. These two separate-but-connected agendas and areas of work can be mutually reinforcing, cross-fertilising, and synergetic. Or, at worst, if misconstrued, they could lead to contradictory and fundamentally conflictual approaches to the same questions. The compatibility of the two agendas is important to consider because some areas are taking considerable steps to pursue both – Hackney, for instance, is both [a pilot area for Contextual Safeguarding](#) and a borough which has pledged to be [‘Child-Friendly’](#).

Both the Contextual Safeguarding and Child-Friendly design initiatives are intended to build on existing assets in the community; develop young people’s strengths; support young people’s agency; allow young people to live in safe, bounded freedom; and to make places better for children and young people. Despite this, if both approached in a superficial and simplistic way, there are risks that the two could conflict: unsophisticated adoption of Contextual Safeguarding principles could lead to the closure of playgrounds deemed unsafe, or more and higher fencing being used to surround places deemed risky; Child-Friendly principles, if followed in a similarly misguided fashion, could be seen to suggest that children and young people just need complete, unfettered freedom.

Arguably, the litmus test for the compatibility of these two agendas is physical design: both Contextual Safeguarding and Child-Friendly principles can affect how places and spaces are designed. It is easy to see how this could, again, cause tensions. Simplistically mis-applying the lens of Contextual Safeguarding, some decision-makers may wish to ‘design out crime’ or ‘design away risk’ in a manner which breaches Child-Friendly principles – to use a very simple example, a place might be designed to minimise access for young people, due to its perceived riskiness for them as a context, but it could be a place with potential benefits to young people’s wellbeing, socialisation, and recreation. Or, just as bad, it could be decided that formal surveillance is necessary, through statutory agencies closely monitoring and reporting on users of a cage, for instance, in way which deeply undermines young people’s sense of permission to be there, and sense of ownership over the space.

To help with efforts to avoid these pitfalls, the table on the next page highlights the clear compatibility and complementary nature of key Child-Friendly design principles and Contextual Safeguarding. The Child-Friendly principles used in the table come from the recommendations in [ZCD Architects’ ‘Child-Friendly Planning in the UK’ review paper](#).

Child-Friendly Design and Planning Principles	Compatibility with Contextual Safeguarding
<p>The rights to gather, play & participate</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Play, recreation, leisure and assembling in public space should be at the heart of what national planning policy promotes for children. 2. Children’s needs for movement and independence should be given central prominence in national planning policy. 3. National planning policy in each UK nation should stipulate that children have a right to be included in planning decision-making. Guidance should also be available to planners to help them implement this duty. 	<p>Contextual Safeguarding principles are grounded in Children’s Rights, and are all about ensuring the safety of young people within a broader vision for children and young people to live healthy, happy, flourishing lives. The agency of children and young people is central to Contextual Safeguarding: they are often best-placed to provide the richest insights into what makes a social context safe or unsafe for them. Young people helping to design safe places would clearly be in-line with Contextual Safeguarding principles.</p>
<p>Recognising children as a distinct group</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Governments across the UK should give appropriate training and weight to Equalities Impact Assessments (and equivalents) that include the specific needs of children as part of the ‘age’ protected characteristic. 5. National planning policies should explicitly acknowledge the differences amongst children and young people. 	<p>If planning at all levels accounted for the specific needs of children and young people as a distinct, diverse group, this could (and should) involve ensuring that plans and designs are made with the contextual safety of young people in mind.</p>
<p>Focusing planning towards child-friendly outcomes</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. National planning policies should endorse the design of new developments and of local and regional planning policy that aims for desirable social outcomes. Secured by Design guidance should be reviewed in light of child friendly principles to ensure alignment. 7. ‘Play Sufficiency’, as first adopted in Wales and now moving to Scotland, is a concept that can be adopted across UK jurisdictions, with Play Sufficiency Assessments and Action Plans a robust and child-centric tool for understanding children’s human rights. 	<p>This recognises the potential tension between ‘Secured by Design’ principles and Child-Friendly principles, as alluded to above. As the recommendation suggests, alignment between the two is possible, and more attention needs to be paid to squaring this circle, with Contextual Safeguarding principles as key considerations. Play Sufficiency Assessments could incorporate Contextual Safeguarding principles.</p>
<p>Learning and collaboration</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Governments should set up clear links and mechanisms for collaboration between the policy spheres of planning, early years and childcare, play, education, housing and transport. 9. Policymakers and professionals in planning should have networking opportunities with childhood and youth professionals to encourage collaboration, learn engagement skills, and to help them advocate for the rights of children. 	<p>If policymakers and professionals in planning were better-connected with childhood and youth professionals, this would provide hugely fruitful opportunities to develop and advance Contextual Safeguarding principles in a manner which aligns with Child-Friendly design ideas.</p>

ZCD Architects’ recent report on [Child-Friendly Neighbourhood Design](#) emphasises that children need *space, time and permission*: space that they feel a sense of ownership over and that they feel able to dwell in; time to do so; and perceived permission – the right kinds of signage and, more importantly, the right kind of adult or community oversight. Young people need to feel that they are free to use a space and that adults are giving them permission to do so. The report also identifies four key spatial principles for Child-Friendly spaces: *car-free, connected, overlooked, and accessible*. A space being ‘connected’ means it is a space that people naturally move through when travelling across the neighbourhood. For instance, if there are well-used local facilities neighbouring a cage, this makes it more likely that trusted adults will be passing by, supporting the permission principle. A space being ‘overlooked’ means that parents and other local residents can see into the cage easily, and ‘accessible’ in this context refers to children and young people being able to get straight to the space without crossing a road. Making spaces Child-Friendly in this way usually makes them more ‘Friendly’ to users of all ages. All of these principles align with Contextual Safeguarding – a well-designed Child-Friendly space would be a safe, positive and protective context. Cages could be good test cases for further exploring the compatibility of the two agendas, as they can be significant locations for both. A number of cages could be separately audited according to the two agendas, and the results could be compared. The possibility of blending the two sets of principles into a combined audit or assessment tool could be explored, and new cages could be designed with both agendas in mind.

7 Good practice on cages & MUGAs: Detached youth work, Badu Sports, Sports and Life Skills

As with anything, there are many existing examples of good practice when it comes to making cages and MUGAs of all kinds safe, protective, supportive, fun, positive places for young people.

Detached youth work in cages

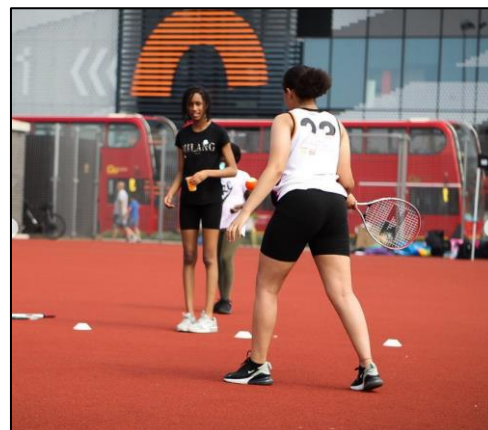


Image: Hackney Quest Instagram page

Many youth services and youth organisations undertake detached youth work in cages, and this can make a huge difference to the extent to which a cage is a safe place for young people. This photo shows a recent [Hackney Quest](#) activity on a local neighbourhood cage: Hackney Quest detached youth workers have built relationships with local young people over the last few weeks, and invited all the young people they've got to know to play football on the neighbourhood cage, to encourage positive peer relationships among them. Hackney Quest also provide wide-ranging support for young people's parents, including those they meet through detached work. As the image above makes clear, a cage doesn't need to be high-spec or even particularly well-maintained for it to be a valuable community asset: children, young people, families and youth professionals can make brilliant use of even a very basic, concrete cage. This is not an excuse for neglecting the upkeep of cages, but it is a reason to explore and develop the usage and safety of all cages, regardless of their physical condition.

Badu Sports: Training and paying local young people to run cage-based activities

[Badu Sports](#) are a very well-established youth and community organisation in Hackney. They deliver PE provision in schools, run holiday programmes, provide mentoring, and train many local young people to become paid, professional sports coaches. Many of their holiday programmes and other community activities involve making use of local sports cages – they build or further cement positive relationships with young people of all ages and genders on local neighbourhood cages. Their black T-shirts and hoodies are recognisable for thousands of local children, young people and parents: if there's an adult or young person in a Badu top, you know they will be a good role model for your child. As well as supporting children and young people, Badu provides extensive support for parents, in whatever way they need. The images below are from their recent summer programme.



Images: Badu Sports Instagram page

Sports and Life Skills: A local cage-loving young person creates an organisation to maximise the positive use of the cage on his estate

Steven Marshall is an embodiment of the potential that cages have to support children and young people's flourishing. He grew up on Mayville Estate in Islington, and loved playing football in his local cage. He trained to deliver sports coaching with the encouragement of a coach he met in the cage. As well as teaching PE at BSix College, Steven now runs [Sports and Life Skills](#), an organisation that provides a range of activities for children and young people of all ages and genders on the Mayville Estate cage and beyond. As you can see from the images below, the activities provided by the organisation vary widely. The work of Sports and Life Skills clearly demonstrates that cages aren't just for male teenagers to play basketball or football in – if well-facilitated, cages can be great spaces for all kinds of different sports and activities, for all ages, genders and backgrounds.



Images: Sports & Life Skills website

8 Opportunities when refurbishing: The case of the MUGA at the Old Baths in Hackney Wick

We based the recommendations in our [Hackney Wick Through Young Eyes report](#) on the research data, focus groups with our youth panel for the project, discussions with other local youth organisations, and initial conversations with decision-makers. One of the recommendations was for the cage behind the Old Baths building in Hackney Wick to be renovated. We said: “The disused sports cage behind the Old Baths has been a wasted facility for a long time, but wouldn’t need too much work to become fit for purpose. It would be well-used if renovated, as there isn’t much else for young people in the vicinity. A sports club or youth organisation could run informal sports sessions in this facility” (Hackney Wick Through Young Eyes report, p. 72).



The disused Old Baths cage prior to renovation (image from muf architecture’s ‘Eastway Sports’ document)

The Hackney Wick Through Young Eyes report was taken seriously by local decision-makers and power-holders, and our specific recommendation about this cage led to action: the council’s Area Regeneration Manager successfully applied for funding from the GLA to renovate the cage, and work is currently underway to refurbish the cage and to design and deliver a brand-new classroom and storage facility next to it.



muf architecture’s design for the newly refurbished cage, complete with neighbouring classroom & storage (image from muf architecture’s website: <http://muf.co.uk/diary/>)

This new cage presents opportunities for establishing best practice when it comes to safeguarding in cages, and ensuring that they are designed along Child-Friendly principles. Young Hackney could work closely with Badu Sports, Hackney Wick FC and the Wickers Charity (who will all be providing activities on the cage) to assess the cage's risk and protective factors, using the framework outlined in Chapter 4, and to assess its compliance with Child-Friendly principles, using ZCD's research.

Some aspects of the cage as a safe or risky context are immediately apparent. The positioning of the classroom facility next to the cage means that there can be guardian oversight of the cage whenever it is in use; the cage will be well-lit and well-maintained; and trusted adults from Young Hackney and all of the organisations listed above will build relationships with young people using this facility. The cage is designed to allow a wide range of different sports, games and activities, for all ages. Older people from Trowbridge Senior Citizens Club, five minutes from the cage, could use it for walking football or other age-appropriate activities.

On the negative side, if the cage were to be used whilst there wasn't anybody in the classroom building or in the neighbouring Old Baths community building, there will be no oversight over the cage, as it's tucked between those two buildings. Unlike in cages based in the middle of estates, it would not be possible for parents to supervise their children in the cage from their home windows. Access to the cage is by a narrow alleyway (to the left of the cage in the image at the bottom of p.17). This alleyway will need to be well-lit at all times, and to be overseen by local guardians. One of the most important things about cages for many young people is that they are accessible for as much of the day as possible (hence the Child-Friendly principle of 'Time' to play), so there needs to be a balance struck: on the one hand, it would be a considerable shame to lock the cage for much of the day; on the other hand, it would be difficult to put adequate safeguarding measures in place for the cage to be used unsupervised. The most important principle for this cage will be the engagement of local youth and sport organisations: if their frequent usage of the cage is facilitated, and these activities are well-promoted, the cage will become a place of real value for local young people and the community.

This newly rejuvenated facility could serve as an excellent test case for cages as locations which can be viewed through the lenses of Contextual Safeguarding and Child-Friendly design. It is important to note that it is unusual in a number of respects: it's being completely revamped (the previous cage on the site had been out of use for a number of years), it's not based within an estate, it's had a lot of investment, it has youth organisations lined up to make use of it immediately, and it has a neighbouring facility run by Young Hackney. Nonetheless, these idiosyncrasies notwithstanding, the cage could be used to test out the assessment framework drafted in Chapter 4, and to develop our understanding of how best to ensure that cages are safe social contexts, whilst staying true to Child-Friendly principles. The methodology used to research this will have to be sufficiently sophisticated to account for the various unusual features outlined above, and would ideally include a comparative element, contrasting the risk and protective factors at play in this cage with those present in other local cages.



Image: muf architecture's 'Eastway Sports' document

9 Planning for new cages: Ensuring all new cages & MUGAs are safe, Child-Friendly, tailored to their local contexts, and cared for by the community

In the context of heightened concern about childhood obesity, community safety, adverse childhood experiences, early intervention, public health, social isolation, social cohesion and social infrastructure – as well as Contextual Safeguarding and Child-Friendly planning – the need for high-quality, safe MUGAs in our neighbourhoods has perhaps never been clearer (see Chapter 10). They are hugely significant features of local communities.

It has therefore never been so important to ensure that new MUGAs are well-designed and that all aspects of their usage are carefully considered. The table below provides a short list of considerations for new cages. Many of the steps below could also be followed when refurbishing an existing cage.

Theme	Consideration
Contextual Safeguarding basics	All of the factors and key questions outlined in the draft Contextual Safeguarding assessment framework for cages in Chapter 4 of this document should be carefully considered.
Child-Friendly basics	All of the Child-Friendly design principles laid out in Chapter 5 of this document – as well as in the ZCD reports referenced – should be carefully considered.
Best practice	Consider national and international best practice when it comes to the design and activation of cages.
Consultation & engagement	<p>A range of methods should be used to consult and engage local residents of all ages about the prospective cage. This could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training and paying local residents (e.g. young people) to interview, focus group or survey other local residents, ensuring that a representative sample of residents are engaged • Running ‘user experience design’ activities (e.g. working with youth design specialists such as The Plug) • Taking local residents to see cages in other neighbourhoods • Informal community engagement events (e.g. BBQs) • Engaging with local organisations who may be able to provide activities on the cage, to ensure its design meets their needs • Following principles of collaborative rather than extractive research
Community ownership	<p>In order to maximise the effective safeguarding and upkeep of the cage, work should be undertaken to ensure that as many local residents as possible feel a sense of ownership over the space. This could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involving local residents in every stage of the design decision-making process, in a manner which gives residents of all ages a tangible sense of having made a difference to the final design • Ensuring this engagement activity takes place with a diversity of residents, of all ages, genders, backgrounds, and levels of physical health need • Opportunities for local residents to be involved in the building or decoration of the cage (e.g. murals behind goals or on basketball boards, or a Build Up project to construct part of the cage itself) • Agreeing all aspects of usage with the local community and with whichever agency will be in charge of its maintenance (e.g. times for lighting, times for lock/unlock [if lockable], availability of additional equipment, sound management) • Agreeing management principles (e.g. who will have keys [if lockable], who will manage the timetable of activities) • Local resident involvement in commissioning organisations to run activities on the cage • Support for local young people and other residents to be trained (and ideally paid) to run activities for others on the cage • Support for local residents to apply for funding to enable further improvements in and around the cage, as needed • Safeguarding training for those who might play the role of community guardians in relation to the cage

Neither Contextual Safeguarding considerations, nor Child-Friendly design principles, nor community consultations will give clear-cut easy answers to every complex design question. Inevitably, careful discretionary judgements will have to be made, but these should involve local stakeholders as far as possible. It is local people, after all, who will keep the space safe, and who will need the space to be “Friendly” to all potential users.

10 Miscellaneous misconceptions & mistakes in relation to cages & MUGAs

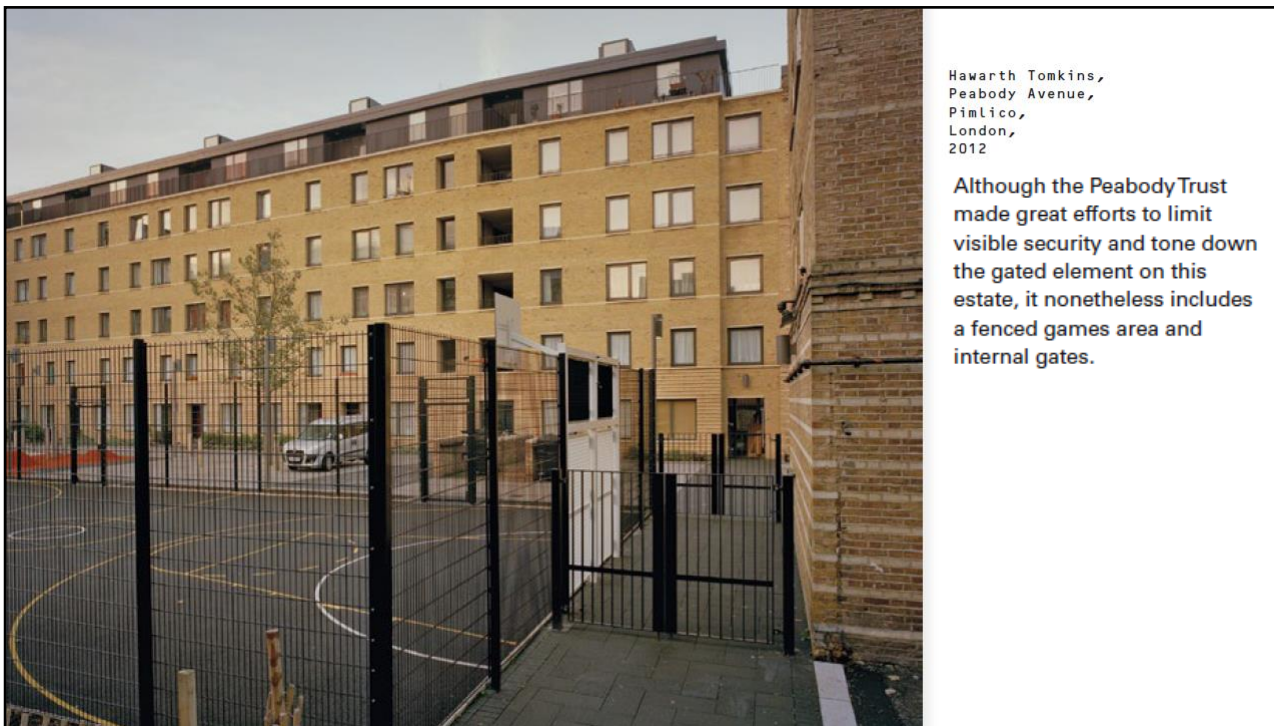
In this section, I briefly describe two common misconceptions about cages and MUGAs, and two common mistakes that are made in relation to them. All four of these misconceptions and mistakes are broadly well-intentioned, and are motivated by good principles, but I explain here why there are misguided (usually, in my opinion!)

Misconception 1: Concrete cages are a sign of deprivation and should be replaced with green space

As laid out in Chapter 1, cages of all kinds can have immense value for young people, for all different reasons, in all different ways. They should not be viewed through a deficit lens as a symbol of deprivation, and should not be generalised – as this document makes clear, different cages in different places can have very different kinds of value and usage.

The benefits of greening public space for psychological and physical wellbeing and for mitigating environmental damage are clear. The benefits of providing children and young people with opportunities for natural play are clear. But if a decision is to be made about the replacement of a cage with green or natural play space, or a new development can only include one but not the other, all of these benefits of greening need to be weighed against the value that cages can have.

Misconception 2: Cages are a symptom of increased securitisation and enclosure of public spaces



The image and caption above come from Minton (2018: 90), who uses this as an example of the ‘bleak picture’ in this country when it comes to the increased securitisation and enclosure of public space. The paper also includes images of schools surrounded by large metal fences and security cameras, and numerous photos of gated developments. Minton’s concerns about the consequences of securitisation, public space privatisation and ‘Designing out Crime’ schemes are well-founded. She argues convincingly that these processes are ‘creating a heightened sense of fear, and [are] limiting the expression of our democratic society’ (Minton 2018: 86).

But sports cages don’t fit this ‘bleak picture’. Their fences are there to enable maximally exuberant and energetic game-playing of young people. Perhaps paradoxically, cages are places that young people can be free: they can run around and play games without the risk of their ball (or any of them) running into road traffic, or disrupting someone’s picnic in a park. Their fences are about safety too, of course, but provided that principles of community ownership and multi-stakeholder engagement are followed, that doesn’t come at the cost of liberty or democracy.

Mistake 1: Cages are always the best possible thing to provide for young people

As detailed throughout this document, there are all kinds of problems that can arise in cages, and they can be sites of harm as well as places of significant benefit to young people. I certainly don't wish to downplay the benefits of other kinds of provision for young people, or suggest cages are always the best things to provide for young people.

As muf architecture (2004: 4) put it:

Don't assume that youth provision just means building mugas* and skate parks!

There is an assumption that sports provision will adequately satisfy the needs of young people outdoors. This presumes that young people's needs can be defined in terms of physical activity alone, and that this activity can only take place (or should only take place) in the youth-specific zones of mugas and skate parks. However many of the young people we met didn't, as a matter of course, talk about sports provision, many just wanted a place to sit and talk and expressed a clear desire to use a range of very different types of open space, for example the precincts of a shopping centre, an alleyway or an underpass, thereby expanding the definition of what a useable open space for young people might actually be.

*muga: multi-use games area

When considering the introduction of new play space to an estate or neighbourhood, a cage or MUGA may be perfect, given the needs and preferences of local young people. Or something else entirely may be much more appropriate and well-suited to the area. At Kirkland Walk in Hackney, for instance, PLAYLINK designed a scheme which was aimed at creating and promoting a 'playable estate', as opposed to making a specific designated space for children and young people to play (see images below). Reflecting on this, Spiegel (2011: 4) says:

A key aspect of PLAYLINK's work is to create and promote the 'playable' estate, which is nothing more than the micro or local equivalent of the wished-for child (and teenager) friendly city. This aim does not contradict a judgment that, in particular circumstances, a designated play space may serve a useful function. It is more that one wishes to dissolve the standard, rigid distinction between play space and other space.

This 'distinction between play space and other space' is sometimes necessary, helpful, or liberating. In other cases, it may be unhelpful. The need for and value of that distinction in each particular place and each specific case will need to be evaluated by planners, designers, architects, decision-makers, and – most importantly – communities.



The PLAYLINK 'playable estate' scheme at Kirkland Walk, Hackney (from Spiegel 2011: 4)

Mistake 2: Refurbishing a cage will always have good outcomes



The cage above is in Hackney, near to Pownall Road. I took this photo in October 2020. The playing surface had been refurbished a few years prior, with investment from Arsenal Community Foundation, as well as other sources. The state of the playing surface now has rendered it entirely unsafe for any sport. The cage remains open, but its usage is unclear (to me at least!), given how dangerous it would be to play any kind of sport on it – if your foot planted in one of the divots, you could easily twist an ankle, or worse.

Clearly, the refurbishment has not been successful. It could be that the artificial turf used for the playing surface was not sufficiently hard-wearing or high quality to cope with the usage it then had. It could be that it was misused or intentionally damaged by people. Whatever the case, it's quite apparent that the cage would now be safer if it just had a concrete surface. Artificial turf can be perfect for playing football and other ball sports – a considerable improvement from concrete, in most senses – but if it isn't durable, or properly installed, it can quickly become unusable.

The refurbishment of this cage was obviously well intentioned – designed to improve the playing surface for all users – but the result is that the cage is now unusable. Perhaps this could have been avoided if some of the ideas in Chapter 9 had been followed, in order to ensure that all aspects of the refurbishment were carefully thought-through. If a playing surface can only be used with a particular kind of footwear, clearly its use will need to be carefully supervised. If such extensive supervision isn't possible, it will be better for the surface to be more hard-wearing. The cage's positioning makes it most closely resemble a Type 2 or Type 3 cage (see p. 7-8 for typology), meaning that it is best-suited to frequent informal community use. If a cage is going to be used frequently and informally in an unsupervised way, it is best for its playing surface to be durable and hard-wearing.

Even worse than this refurbishment are cases in which cages have been refurbished and then privatised – made available only to those who can pay to book them. Any refurbishment has to be based on careful consideration of what makes a cage valuable to the local community (which may well be its open accessibility), to whom it is valuable, and to whom it could become valuable. Any refurbishment should ideally both enhance and broaden a cage's value.

11 How do sports cages & MUGAs fit into various common Local Authority policy priorities, strategies & agendas?

Aside from Contextual Safeguarding and the Child-Friendly Borough initiative, there are a large number of other common Local Authority policy priorities, strategies and agendas which could benefit from greater consideration of sports cages and MUGAs. The table below uses Hackney Council as an example, showing the extent to which the council would benefit from considering cages & MUGAs in relation to many of their policy areas.

Policy priority / strategy / agenda	How do cages & MUGAs fit in?
Place	When considering the importance of place to Hackney communities and thinking about place-based approaches to address certain issues, cages/MUGAs should be a key part of the conversation – they’re really important features of neighbourhoods for many people, especially young people.
“15 minute” communities	If we’re wanting to move towards a Hackney in which everything a resident needs is within 15 minutes of their front door, cages are a vital part of this, especially when it comes to having access to exercise/sport facilities on their doorstep.
Inclusive economy	If Hackney’s economy is to become more inclusive, we need work opportunities which seem achievable, appealing and accessible to our “harder to reach” groups, including young people. Community sports coaching in the local neighbourhood is very appealing to young people, and works well as an entry into the job market (see e.g. Badu Sports case study in Chapter 7 of this document).
Public health & “One You”	The “One You” programme is about affordable healthy living activities for all, using local facilities. Cages & MUGAs are under-utilised in this public health initiative.
Intergenerational activity	Evidence from the Kings Park Moving Together project and the Aging Well Strategy suggests that older and younger people benefit from intergenerational activities. Cages are good spaces for these activities to take place in a localised way, as they tend to be accessible to both groups.
Childhood obesity & active lifestyles	Cages and MUGAs are important facilities for encouraging healthy, active lifestyles in the young, and for developing sporting habits among children, but they could also be used for all kinds of activities for all ages (e.g. walking football, tai chi, etc.)
Health inequality	A significant cause of health inequalities is unequal access to facilities (e.g. wealthier people pay for gym membership). Cages & MUGAs are almost always free to use, and with the right kind of activation can be used by a wide range of people. Already, many people who don’t engage in any other forms of exercise regularly use their cage (e.g. young people who use their cage for informal kickabouts, who aren’t part of any sports clubs).
Social isolation	One key part of tackling social isolation is having well-used easily-accessible neighbourhood community facilities at which people can come together. Cages & MUGAs often fulfil this function.
Community safety	In worst cases, cages can be places of exploitation, harm, and crime. In best cases, they are places of safety for the local community, which contribute significantly to community resilience and safety.
Social infrastructure	Increasing attention is being paid to the facilities, places and organisations that count as important social infrastructure for local communities. In the recent study of Homerton by Social Life & Hawkins Brown, cages were identified as important pieces of social infrastructure.
Young Futures Commission	Through the Young Futures commission, Hackney has committed to becoming an even better place for young people to live. Given the importance of cages to many young people, and the role they can play in addressing many other issues (as highlighted in this document), cages could be a key part of this.
Adverse childhood experiences	For children who experience adversity, neglect or abuse in the home, getting out of the home into the local neighbourhood is common. Cages can be the place that many children and young people get out into. The more safe community spaces there are in children’s immediate neighbourhood, the more protection from adverse childhood experiences we can build up in their lives.
Early intervention	The principle of early intervention and early help is key to effective public health and community safety initiatives. Cages/MUGAs are great places to engage with young people who may not be known to any services, but who may be at-risk of various forms of harm, and informal cage-based activities can facilitate the kind of initial relationship-building which is vital to any form of early intervention.
Co-production	The council is committed to co-producing activities & services with local residents. Cages are fantastic places to work with the local community to deliver the kinds of activities that they want – participatory timetabling with local residents for cage/MUGA activities can work brilliantly.
Cages as council assets	In light of all the above, cages/MUGAs should be viewed as important council assets, analogous to how council-owned community buildings are viewed. They should have the investment & activation they need, in close consultation with local residents.



The Final Word: Daniel, 18, on the importance of cages for their communities

I'll give the last word to Daniel, a local Hackney resident who I've been working with since 2017. Last year, when he was 18, he said the following during a short film we made about life in Hackney Wick:

"Back in my old days, I used to be a part of this free provision where all the younger people in the community would come together, and we would be trained by older youth in the area on the cage. That was really good, it allowed us to keep fit, and to do something we loved – football. It kept the community together, and kept everybody happy. It felt like the community was all one big family. After a while, it stopped running, and the area was a bit dead. Literally dead. Once it stopped running, everybody started going back to their old ways. There was nothing much to do. I won't lie, I kind of got up to a little trouble myself. But now I'm 18, this is the perfect time to give back to the community. I know for sure that there's loads of young people my age in this area, and all over Hackney, all over London in fact, that would definitely love to give back to the community through running activities on their cage. If I was getting paid to train and teach younger people how to play football, all the things that I love, I would definitely give it a try, and I know a lot of young people my age who don't have jobs, who love football, and would love to give this a try."

References

Resources from the Contextual Safeguarding Network website

The Hackney Child Wellbeing Framework (including thresholds for statutory intervention):

<https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/assets/images/Hackney-Child-Wellbeing-Context-Framework.pdf>

Guidance on planning context conferences:

<https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/toolkit/planning/context-conferences>

Neighbourhood assessment toolkit:

<https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/toolkit/assessment/neighbourhood-assessment-toolkit>

Youth participatory engagement guidance:

<https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/toolkit/structures-and-systems/youth-participatory-engagement>

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