

Ministers attacked over school fields sale

- Pledge to safeguard play areas broken
- £225m boost for children's activities

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A flagship government initiative to regenerate children's play and exercise areas has been undermined by the revelation that last year the Education Secretary and his predecessor personally agreed the sale of 19 school playing fields.

Despite government promises made over the past decade that playing fields would be carefully protected, at least 187 fields have disappeared. Hundreds of other pieces of school land have also been sold after being classed as too small to be playing fields.

On Thursday, ministers will launch a major consultation on children's play and announce that over the next three years £225m will be spent on 3,500 new playgrounds and 30 adventure play areas with trained supervisors.

But critics argue that selling off school fields undermines the strategy. 'We know that they are selling off playing fields,' said Margaret Morrissey, of the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations. 'What happened to the commitment in 1997 that they were going to stop the sales? We are doing our children a terrible injustice. We are blaming them for not playing out but we are not giving them the provision to do it. We have used up all the space.'

Labour's 1997 general election manifesto stated: 'We will bring the government's policy of forcing schools to sell off playing fields to an end' and in 2004 it was announced that all sales had to be signed off by the Secretary of State and the revenue reinvested in educational facilities.

Yesterday the Department for Children, Schools and Families admitted that Ed Balls, the current education secretary, and his predecessor, Alan Johnson, agreed to 19 sales last year. A further 53 playing fields across England, owned by both schools and local communities, are thought to be under threat.

Since 1998, the government has approved of at least 187 plans to dispose of playing fields - categorised as land that can be used for grass sports pitches. A much greater loss of land has occurred, with 1,331 parcels of land smaller than 0.4 hectares being sold off since 2001, and without needing ministerial approval.

Tory schools spokesman Michael Gove said: 'It is ironic that the government is selling off school playing fields on the eve of a campaign to get children to lead more active lives. The planning rules need to be changed to make it easier to set up schools and use them for education and recreation. At the moment, the government's whole approach doesn't protect what we have, or allow for expansion where it's needed.' Across the country dozens of battles are under way to try to save playing fields. In south west London residents are opposing plans to sell 5.5 acres of Barn Elm playing fields to developers who want to build a private health club.

In Barnet, north London, a petition has begun to save land meant to be preserved as playing fields.

In Duston, Northamptonshire, 50 people met last month to launch a campaign to save St Luke's Playing Field, which they argue is one of the last green spaces in the area. Similar actions have taken place in Blackpool and Reading.

It is not just a problem affecting England. In Scotland and Wales, a number of "save our pitches" campaigns have begun following threats from housing developers. Chas Cochrane, the chairman of a residents' association in Pembrokeshire, said children were upset at the loss of a green, playing area in the centre of their estate.

A major battle has been fought over plans to redevelop a west London state school because the council proposed selling off some of its sports grounds to fund it. Residents strongly opposed the plans for Holland Park school, the country's first purpose-built comprehensive which was attended by the actress Anjelica Huston and the children of the politician Tony Benn.

Kensington and Chelsea council came under so much pressure from residents and Sport England that they withdrew the original application in November and put forward revised plans with more outdoor space, a floodlit games area and an extra tennis court. However, many local residents are angry about the latest proposals because they still involve selling off part of its playgrounds.

Fields in Trust, the charity formerly known as the National Playing Fields Association, has campaigned for the protection of green spaces. Earlier this month, it warned that the threat to playing fields was still 'very real', and that they knew of 53 sites that were under threat. The association has called for a tightening of the planning laws to make it much harder for community and school fields to be sold off.

In the past six years, there has been a huge rise in planning applications on these sites, partly driven by the rise in land prices because of the buoyant property market. Ministers argue that far fewer fields are now being sold than at

any other time, and Labour claims that some 10,000 fields were sold off during the Conservative years of 1979 to 1997.

A statement from the DCSF said: 'Ed Balls announced last month another £30m investment in improving the poorest sports facilities in the network of 422 specialist sports colleges. The record capital investment means schools no longer have to sell off playing fields to pay for repairs elsewhere on their campuses.'

'Since October 1998, the Department for Education and Skills has ensured that no sports pitches that are needed by schools and their communities are sold, and where sales are allowed, all the money is ploughed back into improving sports or educational facilities.'