



# PlayAction Guide

## MOBILE PLAY

Mobile Play Projects form a unique contribution within the generality of play provision in the UK. Known widely as Play Buses, they have enabled provision for children where none otherwise might have been possible.

This is true in more than one sense. They can and do serve communities where there is no other alternative, but a mobile project can also be a trail-blazer, deployed into an area to help prove a need, serve a community and pave the way for permanent provision.



### WHAT IS A PLAYBUS?

The typical UK Play Bus is a double decker, 'retired from active service', converted from passenger carrying into an equipped space suitable for children's play activities. It will have a heating system, power supply (often a separate or on-board generator), perhaps a kitchen, storage space, maybe a toilet.

The interior will be made welcoming to children, and practical for staff and volunteers. The exterior is usually covered by an attractive design, so that the impact is colourful. There will also be requisite safety features such as fire extinguishers.

### WHERE CAN THEY WORK?



Play Buses have been used in a wide variety of play settings, including under-fives work - many have served as playgroup and parent and toddler bases, sometimes free-standing and at other times linked to an existing fixed-site provision such as a community centre.

They also are deployed to work with school-age children in out-of-school contexts, providing in communities where nothing else has been developed. Likewise, there are youth buses, acting as centres in communities where provision is needed. Sometimes, the barriers put up by community halls to use by children and young people, or the lack of flexibility (not to mention hire charges) lead to a mobile solution.

It has to be said that a play bus has been greeted by a grandparent on an estate: "It's very good, but I don't think I'd like a play centre here all the time. You know, it's like my grandkids - lovely to see them, but peaceful when they've gone." The Bus arrives, stays for a short while, the children enjoy themselves, and then the Bus departs. This factor has endeared Play Buses to many people! [But there's always Moaner-in-Chief who can Moan for Britain, who has been known to call the



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Police just two minutes after a play bus arrived for its first-ever session at a site, despite a lot of community consultation ....]

## REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS

As with all activities involving children aged under 8 years, where this is the case and sessions are for more than two hours and for six or more days in a year, the facility must be registered under the Children Act 1989 by local social services. Criteria for registration relate to e.g. suitability of staff, space, ratio of staff to children, health and safety issues etc - see Fair Play's Guide on the Children Act and its publication '**Child Protection in a Playwork Setting**'.

## WHO RUNS THEM?



Play Buses and their ilk are run by voluntary play bodies, local authorities, health authorities etc, and supported from a wide range of funds - local authority, Lottery, government, trusts, companies, panto horse derbies etc etc

They are staffed by both paid and volunteer workers, who should all be experienced, checked for suitability, and pretty robust! Drivers need not be HGV/PSV - a clean normal licence is required, with a minimum stipulated amount of training with an approved instructor, and insurance clearance

is not usually given for anyone under the age of 25 years.

## PROS AND CONS

### The advantages of a Play Bus:

- **attractiveness to children:** one hardly needs an advertisement to children when one has a large, nine ton, brightly-coloured vehicle running around;

- **flexibility of deployment:** a Bus can be put into an appropriate context to meet need; when needs change, deployment can be changed;

- **ownership of the facility where play is provided** - many groups running activities in somebody else's centre experience many obstacles

- **also a sense of ownership by children** - the space, in their own neighbourhood, is palpably theirs.





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## Disadvantages:

- Finding spaces to work in can be difficult, due to parking pressure;
- Poor weather can be a trial, especially snow;
- most buses being 'retired' they can be temperamental, and run up maintenance costs - initial selection is most important
- Sites can be difficult to control where used on an open-access basis
- The space where they operate being often public, behaviour may be more difficult to control.

However, such challenges as they do face, the Play Bus has come to occupy a respected and special place in the gamut of UK play provision.

## A NATIONAL NETWORK



There are some 200 such projects in this country, and a National Playbus Association whose role is support of and help to the network of mobile projects. The NPA, which has a regional structure, does not only deal with children's play - its remit extends to all types of community mobile project, including health buses, counselling projects and other imaginative uses.

NPA provides publications, including its journal, *Bus Fare*, training events, and regional networking.

The NPA gives advice e.g. on selecting a suitable vehicle, on conversion issues, and on all aspects of mobile project operation. NPA also offers services such as low cost insurance, grants, health & safety, and driver regulations.

There are also playbus projects in other countries - in Germany they are often known as SpielMobiles, and in Italy the counterpart of the NPA is ALI PER GIOCARE [[click here to contact](#)].

## WHAT ELSE IS MOBILE?

The term 'mobile project' is not confined to the double decker bus conversion of popular image - single deck buses can operate e.g. in rural contexts where low trees and bridges offer obstacles to tall vehicles. Also, a small van can transport equipment to locations, both indoor and outdoor. A flatbed lorry has been used to bring in playground/adventure-style equipment to areas, and someone is bound to develop the bright idea of a mobile paddling pool .... Large vans/small lorries can be used e.g. for youth community media work, incorporating a small recording studio.



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## PLAYBUSES AND AGENDA 21

In environmental terms, the Playbus represents a good example of recycling, though older models may need action to control their emissions as regulations tighten. The Agenda 21 issues of mobile play are coming to the fore very much these days. The PlayBus could feature significantly in future Home Zone projects, which aim to create safer environments by enabling residents in streets to petition for removal of priority for vehicular traffic to share this with pedestrians - "the car as guest not master" syndrome. Where lack of open space has become an issue, due to lack of foresight when many estates were being developed with an eye to cutting costs (rather than looking to the future, especially of those who would live in them), the Home Zone offers a new form of open space. In this regard, the PlayBus could become a powerful tool not only to enhance children's play opportunities but also in community development.

## PLAY VALUE PLUS



The Playbus also may have another, overlooked attraction - that of working with other forms of play provision. Experience has shown that a play bus visiting two or three adventure playgrounds can enhance the work of such projects, by bringing in new resources and ideas, equipment, special programmes etc. This also applies to after-school clubs and summer playschemes. It has been shown that this can develop a distinct, hands-on training aspect.

The future of mobile play in the UK should be bright, given the success of the movement in the past twenty years. Above all, the uniquely attractive qualities of the Play Bus suit it to ready access into communities with a premium on 'play value'.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

**The National Playbus Association [NPA]:** 93 Whitby Road, Brislington, Bristol, Avon BS4 3QF  
Tel: 0117-977 5375. Fax: 0117-972 1838

## PUBLICATIONS

The National Playbus Association has an excellent list of practical and useful publications associated with mobile play provision. You can also get in touch with members of Fair Play running mobile facilities via the Fair Play address etc below.

**Child Protection in a Playwork Setting:** published by Fair Play for Children from the address given: £10 [£7 members] Also a Guide on Child Protection, Guide on The Children Act: from Fair Play - send 3 x 1st class stamps (do not affix) plus self-addressed large (C4) envelope to Fair Play, Freepost, Bognor Regis PO21 1YX. or visit Fair Play's web site at: <http://www.arunet.co.uk/fair-play/>

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