

Playing outside no longer an option



- 1 A national debate has been sparked in the Netherlands after a council ordered a primary school playground to be shut. Residents in apartments near De Buut primary school had complained that its pupils regularly exceeded a 70-decibel limit, which applies across the country for residential areas and is enforced by local councils. Official readings reached 88 decibels. The De Buut school playground has been used by children for 40 years. It was reduced in size during building works two years ago to make room for apartments to be built opposite.
- 2 The school's director, Janneke Colsen, said the school had been told to close the playground by the end of the month or face a €10,000 (£9,000) fine for each infringement of the ruling, despite making repeated efforts to satisfy local residents. "It's a bizarre situation," she said. "And it is absolutely unfair to the children. They should be allowed to go outside and be given the chance to move more."
- 3 Colsen told local media outlets: "We have moved the musical and other activities inside, the opening times of the field have been limited to eight in the evening and various structural changes have been made. But apparently we have not done enough."
- 4 The row has led to reflection over city planning in a country that prides itself on using its space to the maximum. The Netherlands has one of the highest rates of urbanisation in Europe. More than 75% of the population live in urban areas. Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht have grown faster every year since 2008 than the Netherlands as a whole.

- 5 Noël Vergunst, a local Green councillor, defended the decision to close the playground during a council session by explaining that officials had a duty to investigate complaints and “the noise measurement showed that the noise standard was considerably exceeded so we had to do something”.
- 6 Erik Roelofsen, the director of the Dutch Foundation against Annoyance by Noise, believes the apartments were built too close to the schoolyard. He said: “Municipalities must continue to think about spatial planning. This field is built in on three sides, the sound can hardly go away.”
- 7 More than 4,000 people have signed a petition demanding a rethink by the council, which is expected to look again at the issue in coming days. Rudmer Heerema, who raised the issue with the Dutch education minister in parliament, tweeted: “You go to live next to a sports field where children enjoy sports and then you file a complaint against noise ... A solution must be found for this. Children must be able to exercise.”

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