

Children, young people and the built environment Inquiry.

BACCH/BACAPH responses to Inquiry questions.

The experiences of children and young people of their built environment

The built environment should enable children to grow, live and learn and become responsible adults who contribute to society and parent their own children well. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child outlines the many ways that the well-being of children should be promoted and protected with services being provided, when needed, to maximise their future potential. The concepts of promotion and protection run through the requirements of a built environment that meet this commitment.

The needs of children evolve rapidly through childhood resulting in different expectations of the built environment at different stages and levels of maturity. The newborn requires a secure and safe home while the adolescent also requires a safe external environment, including transportation and places in which to socialise.

The importance of the design, planning and use of indoor and outdoor space cannot be overstated as generally the world, to date, has been designed by adults, for adults, with the needs of children being secondary, this Inquiry is therefore welcomed.

Inquiry responses.

- How do children and young people experience outdoor spaces in towns, cities and rural areas across the country? For example, their streets, estates, villages, neighbourhoods and parks?

Urban Areas:

1. **Playgrounds and Parks:** there is considerable variation in the quality of provision, maintenance and accessibility to child friendly play spaces in urban environments. There should be easy access to outdoor play space, suitable for all ages especially in conurbations where there is a high density of families. Access to a natural environment has been shown to significantly improve the health of people of all ages and there is an emerging evidence this is equally true for children. Engagement with the natural environment should be encouraged within the school curriculum.
2. **Traffic:** the presence of busy roads, high speed of vehicles, significantly influences where and how children can play safely. There should be “safe routes to school” so that children can walk, cycle or scoot; there are secondary advantages of not using parental transport in reducing air pollution around schools.

3. **Air Quality:** Children are more susceptible to the health impacts of air pollution for a number of reasons, including the fact their lungs are still developing, their rate of inhalation is higher than adults, and their height means they are at increased proximity to car emissions. Children and young people with asthma are susceptible to air pollution which can trigger acute exacerbations leading to higher rates of hospital admission and increased morbidity and mortality. Air pollution also negatively impacts neurodevelopment and cognitive ability.

Good urban design can improve air quality in a number of ways including by reducing or separating motor vehicles from green space, utilising green space for climate change mitigation and a physical barrier. Indoor air pollution can be improved by designing homes that are thermally efficient, well ventilated and affordable to heat and ventilate so reducing fuel poverty and also reducing mould spores. Reference [Chief Medical Officer's Annual Report 2022](#)

4. **Cultural and Recreational Facilities:** recent years have seen a significant reduction in recreational facilities for young people, including sports facilities. Consideration should be given to using school facilities for indoor and outdoor out-of-school programmes.
5. **Community safety:** it is essential that residential areas for families are designed in a way that reduce the likelihood of crime and disorder so that families feel safe at home and in their localities. Ideally the local environment will support community events and activities to create a neighbourhood where people know and support one another.

Rural Areas:

1. **Natural Surroundings:** children living in rural areas have greater access to the natural environment but it is more difficult for young people to socialise due to lack of facilities or local transport systems. It is important to invest in community and outdoor spaces to enable young people to feel part of their local communities.
2. **Road safety:** while traffic density may be less compared to urban environments, often traffic speed and limited visibility in rural areas creates a hazard for young people, particularly those who are walking (without pavements) or cycling (without cycle lanes) as a form of local transportation.

- How do these experiences vary across income, race, gender, age?

Equity of access. Areas of poverty and high deprivation are significantly disadvantaged in terms of quality of housing, access to local transport, access to the natural environment, leisure facilities and a built environment that engages children and young people. This is particularly true for families from marginalised groups and where there is a disabled individual.

References: PHE <https://analytics.phe.gov.uk/apps/covid-19-indirect-effects/>

ONS . <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/accesstogardensandpublicgreenspaceingreatbritain>

- How easily can children and young people travel to outdoor spaces and schools? How has this changed over the years?

Access to rural transport has diminished significantly in recent decades with the loss of local regular bus services, simultaneously the cost of public transport has also increased, having a significant impact particularly on those families on low incomes.

It is important for new housing developments to invest in local schools, community and green infrastructure as an integral part of their design. Likewise creating safe spaces to walk or cycle to schools and local retail outlets is important to encourage active travel as well as reduce carbon footprints. Programmes aimed at providing financial support to buy bike/scooter are important in the context of high child poverty rates as are schemes like Bikeability/cycle training schemes and "walking bus" initiatives etc.

There has been significant investment in traffic calming infrastructure in recent decades which has resulted in a reduction in road traffic injuries. However, there is still a peak of injuries at times of going to from school so further work is required to reduce these injuries while at the same time maintaining active transport options.

There has been a significant change in social relationships and education/learning, particularly in the last decade with children and young people now being "digital natives" communicating online rather than in person. The long-term benefits and dis-benefits have yet to be fully appreciated. The impact on transportation and community infrastructure requirements requires careful thought.

The planning system

- How well are children and young people's needs currently met by the planning process in terms of policy and guidance?

Positive Aspects:

1. **Incorporation of Child Impact Assessments:** it is essential that a child and family impact assessment is undertaken with any significant community development. Reference: [Health Impact Assessment in spatial planning - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-impact-assessment-in-spatial-planning)
2. **Child-Friendly Urban Design Initiatives:** local developments should incorporate evidence-based recommendations from the existing literature in their planning and implementation.
3. **Community Engagement:** children and young people should be consulted and able to participate in significant local planning developments, and this is likely to require specific engagement strategies to involve young people. There is increasing evidence that young people are particularly interested in creating a carbon free future for themselves and their own children.

Challenges .

1. **Inconsistent Implementation:** implementation of national guidance varies across regions and local authorities.
 2. **Limited Resources for Play Spaces:** Local Authorities have experienced considerable cuts in resources throughout the last Parliament and rarely prioritise investment in children's services including recreational areas.
 3. **Affordability and Housing Stability:** this is a major issue with those having least resources paying the greatest proportion of their income on housing. Significant investment in well designed and constructed social housing is an important investment for future generations. There is ample evidence that poor housing has a significant impact on the health and well-being of individuals. Insecure housing negatively impacts the physical and mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, and can lead to increased behavioural problems and reduced educational attainment. Likewise, cold and damp housing that is unaffordable to heat can also impact the mental and emotional health, physical health, and education of children, thus affecting future employment prospects and perpetuating cycles of financial insecurity for the next generation. Reference: NIHR Exploring the impact of housing insecurity on the health and well-being of children and young people: a systematic review.
 4. **Marginalised groups.** Like children it is essential that marginal groups are not further disadvantaged by built environment proposals that do not appreciate their distinct needs. Gypsy, Traveler and Roma communities, disabled people and recent immigrant groups experience inequalities in relation to where they live, housing tenure and housing quality. It is essential that specific needs are identified and met during the planning and design process and that marginalized groups are involved and given a voice.
 5. **Unhealthy food environments.** Hot food takeaways, especially around schools, are associated with higher calorie intake and larger portions and areas of deprivation tend to have a higher prevalence of this type of establishment. There is a clear policy lever within the National Planning Policy Framework and the Planning Practice Guidance for Local Planning Authorities to create healthier food environments for children and young people. Through the development of local planning policy to prevent Hot Food Takeaways opening close to primary and secondary schools, and in areas of high childhood obesity, local areas can reduce the exposure of children to unhealthy food environments.
- **How are children and young people's views and voices heard, considered and acted upon in the planning system if at all?**

Generally children and young people are insufficiently engaged with local community development including the built environment. A number of strategies could be used including consultation through workshops, involvement of school councils, youth groups and through local digital platforms. More innovative approaches would include design competitions, advocacy programs and participation of young people in planning infrastructures.

Best practice and evaluation

- Where are the examples of policy and good practice that are improving children and young people's experiences in the built environment, either directly or indirectly, in the UK or internationally?

Generally designs that are family friendly have advantages for all members of the community including those of an older age. Indeed there is interesting research on facilitating interactions between different members of the community in terms of health gain. Specific programs from an international perspective include

1. **Playful Learning Landscapes:** aim to transform everyday places into fun, engaging learning opportunities that extend education into the public realm this is particularly important for low income communities.

<https://www.brookings.edu/collection/learning-landscapes/>

2. **Child-Friendly Urban design:** adopt child-friendly urban planning and design: to make the public realm of cities – their streets, squares and parks – more accessible, welcoming and engaging for children of all ages.

<https://cities4children.org/blog/why-child-friendly-urban-design-matters/>

3. **Safe Routes to School:** The principle of safe routes is well established and Local Authorities are adopting safe routes to school as part of urban air pollution reduction strategies. Street closures in urban areas has been part of London's improving air quality initiatives.

<https://greenschoolsireland.org/saferoutestoschool/>

<https://www.saferoutespartnership.org/safe-routes-school>

<https://airqualitynews.com/headlines/simple-measures-cut-air-pollution-in-london-schools-by-half/>

Portland Citywide Design Guidelines: The city of Portland has implemented design guidelines that emphasize creating neighborhoods that are safe and enjoyable for children.

<https://www.portland.gov/bps/doza/documents/portland-citywide-design-guidelines-2021/download>

4. **UNICEF's Child-Friendly Cities Initiative:** is a UNICEF-led initiative that supports municipal governments in realizing the rights of children at the local level using the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as its foundation.

<https://www.childfriendlycities.org/what-is-the-child-friendly-cities-initiative>

5. **Singapore's "Biophilic City" Concept:** Singapore has been exploring the City in a Garden—a green oasis comprising an interconnected network of verdant streetscapes, gardens, parks, nature reserves and vertical greenery.

<https://knowledge.csc.gov.sg/ethos-issue-19/growing-a-biophilic-city-in-a-garden/>

6. **Designing safe spaces for girls.** Make Space for Girls has been co-designing public parks and spaces with girls and young women, West Yorkshire Combined Authority has produced design guidance.

<https://www.makespaceforgirls.co.uk/>

<https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/policing-and-crime-news/making-parks-safe-for-women-and-girls/>

7. **Children's 20-minute neighbourhoods.** Sustrans has reviewed the evidence and the Global Designing Cities Initiative has developed guidance.

<https://www.sustrans.org.uk/our-blog/research/all-themes/all/children-s-20-minute-neighbourhoods>

<https://www.sustrans.org.uk/media/11797/susr2114-children-s-20-minute-neighbourhoods-v20.pdf>

<https://nacto.org/publication/designing-streets-for-kids/>

- **How are these outcomes measured? For example, through economic or health and wellbeing indicators?**

Evaluation of the impact of the built environment on either environmental or human health is a complex subject. Long-term prospective comparative studies are required to develop a robust evidence base. With this evidence base in place it is then possible to measure the structure, process and output elements of the built environment. Proxy measures may be available to document the benefits for human or environmental health, but without robust comparative measures it is impossible to document the impact of changes to the built environment on human health.

Potential measures could include:

1. Physical Health: physical fitness, levels of overweight/obesity, respiratory function
2. Air Quality: Measures relating to fossil fuel consumption: indoor and outdoor air quality measures.
3. Specific toxins: lead, moulds, radon.
4. Temperature and ventilation: levels of insulation, ventilation, fuel consumption.
5. Injury and injury prevention measures: both at home, road and community.
6. Crime and antisocial behaviour measures.
7. Mental health and well-being measures.

8. Access to green spaces measures.
9. Noise levels.
10. Social well-being measures including community engagement.
11. Access to recreational facilities measures.
12. Measures of fuel poverty.
13. Measures of housing affordability, overcrowding and Housing stability.
14. Measures relating to access to healthcare.
15. Quality of schools and educational resources.

Cross Government working

- How does the relationship of children and young people with the built environment overlap with policy areas beyond the work of DLUHC, such as public health, transport, policing and net zero?

There is a huge overlap between the policy areas considered by the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities with other government departments. It is one of the reasons for calling for a Minister for Children and Families in order to have some oversight of the overlaps and potential omissions in central policy development. Overlap includes:

1. Public Health:

- **Physical Activity and Obesity Prevention:** maximising the opportunities for active travel and the positive impact on physical and mental health.
- **Air Quality and Respiratory Health:** reduction in fossil fuel pollutants and their impact on cardiorespiratory health.
- **Net zero:** reduction in climate change gases and reduction in extreme weather events and the health consequences.

2. Transport:

- **Road safety:** reducing traffic related. Injuries
- **School transport:** promoting sustainable school transport options to reinforce environmental and health benefits.

3. Policing and Safety:

- **Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED):** CPTED principles focus on designing spaces to enhance safety and reduce the risk of crime.
- **Safe Public Spaces:** creating a sense of safety and security.

4. Net Zero and Environmental Sustainability:

- **Net zero building materials:** to reduce the environmental impact of the construction of new infrastructure.
- **Preserving and regenerating Biodiversity:** both to absorb carbon dioxide and produce a better environment for human health.
- **Energy-Efficient and energy generating Buildings:** increasing insulation and producing sustainable energy for warm and secure homes.

Cross-Cutting Themes:

1. **Equity and social Inclusion:** policies addressing the built environment should simultaneously improve equity and reduce climate change.
2. **Community engagement and participation:** the community planning process should engage communities to maximise participation particularly for children and families in order to sustain the principles of civic responsibility, inclusion in decision-making and community empowerment.
3. **Resilient cities:**

Planning for resilient cities involves considering the impact of the built environment on community well-being, especially in the face of challenges such as climate change. Policies that promote resilient urban planning benefit the health and safety of children and young people.

- **Are government departments working together to address children and young people's needs in this respect?**

A holistic and cross-sectoral approach is essential to address the diverse needs of children and families while contributing to broader policy objectives related to productivity, health, sustainability, safety, and community well-being. In turn this requires collaboration and coordination across different government departments. Government departments should mirror the systems integration policy proposed for local services as outlined in the NHS Long-Term Plan. The NHS LTP introduces the concept of population health management to tackle health determinants of which housing, environmental health, transportation and education are all key elements relating to the built environment.

Background information (not included in the response)

Trends:

Technology impact: The prevalence of technology can influence how children interact with outdoor spaces. Digital devices may compete with traditional outdoor play, especially in urban and suburban settings.

Inequality in access: There is often inequality in access to high-quality outdoor spaces. Deprived urban areas, for instance, may lack well-maintained parks and recreational facilities.

Community Initiatives: Across all settings, there are community-driven initiatives aimed at enhancing outdoor experiences for children. This can include community gardens, play schemes, and efforts to improve local parks.

Parental influence: Parental attitudes and behaviors play a significant role. Parents who prioritize outdoor activities and have the means to facilitate them contribute to positive outdoor experiences for their children.

Decline in physical activity: there are concerns have been raised about a decline in physical activity among children. Factors such as increased screen time, changes in transportation patterns, and a shift in recreational activities may contribute to reduced exercise.

Screen time and sedentary behaviour: the rise of digital technology has led to increased screen time among children, which is often associated with sedentary behavior. Sedentary lifestyles can contribute to health issues, including obesity.

Urbanization and built environment: Changes in the built environment, such as increased urbanization and reduced access to safe outdoor spaces for play, can influence children's exercise patterns. Lack of suitable spaces for physical activity may contribute to a more sedentary lifestyle.

Physical Education in schools: Changes in school curricula, including potential reductions in physical education time, could impact children's opportunities for structured physical activity during the school day.

Transportation patterns: Shifts in transportation patterns, including increased reliance on cars and reduced active commuting (walking or cycling to school), may contribute to decreased daily physical activity levels.

Concerns about obesity: The decline in physical activity is associated with concerns about rising obesity rates among children. Lack of exercise, coupled with changes in dietary patterns, contributes to this public health issue.

Potential impacts of the built environment

1. Air quality:

- **Issue:** Poor air quality in urban areas, often due to traffic emissions and industrial activities, can lead to respiratory problems and exacerbate conditions such as asthma.
- **Impact on Children:** Children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of air pollution, which can hinder lung development and contribute to respiratory issues such as asthma.

2. Green spaces:

- **Issue:** Insufficient access to green spaces and natural environments may limit opportunities for outdoor play and physical activity.
- **Impact on Children:** Limited exposure to nature can affect mental well-being, contribute to sedentary behavior, and impact physical health.

3. Urban design and safety:

- **Issue:** Poorly designed urban spaces with limited pedestrian-friendly infrastructure and unsafe road conditions can pose risks to children.
- **Impact on Children:** Safety concerns may limit outdoor play and physical activity, affecting both physical and mental health.

4. Noise pollution:

- **Issue:** High levels of noise in urban environments, including traffic noise, can lead to stress and sleep disturbances.
- **Impact on Children:** Noise pollution may negatively impact children's sleep quality and overall mental well-being.

5. Access to recreational facilities:

- **Issue:** Unequal access to recreational facilities and parks can contribute to disparities in physical activity opportunities.
- **Impact on Children:** Limited access to safe and well-maintained play areas may hinder opportunities for active play and exercise.

6. Housing conditions:

- **Issue:** Inadequate housing conditions, such as dampness and lack of heating, can contribute to respiratory issues.
- **Impact on Children:** Poor housing conditions may lead to health problems, including respiratory infections, and can affect overall well-being.

7. Active transportation:

- **Issue:** Lack of infrastructure to support active transportation, such as walking or cycling to school, can contribute to sedentary lifestyles.
- **Impact on Children:** Insufficient opportunities for active transportation may affect physical fitness and contribute to health issues.

8. Social environment:

- **Issue:** Urban planning that does not prioritize social spaces may limit opportunities for social interaction among children.
- **Impact on Children:** Social isolation can impact mental health and hinder the development of important social skills.

9. Access to healthy food:

- **Issue:** The availability and accessibility of healthy food options can vary in different urban and suburban environments.
- **Impact on Children:** Limited access to nutritious food options can contribute to poor dietary habits and impact overall health.

10. Climate change impacts:

- **Issue:** Climate change-related events, such as heatwaves or extreme weather events, can have direct and indirect effects on the health of children.
- **Impact on Children:** Heat-related illnesses, changes in infectious disease patterns, and disruptions to food and water supply can affect children's health.

11. Policies and interventions:

- **Positive Steps:** Implementation of policies that prioritize child-friendly urban planning, sustainable transportation, and green infrastructure can positively impact children's health.

Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach involving urban planning, public health initiatives, and community engagement. Sustainable and child-friendly urban development can contribute to the overall health and well-being of children in Europe. Efforts should focus on creating environments that support physical activity, promote safety, and enhance the overall quality of life for children and for families in the future.