

## **Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee Inquiry: Children, young people and the built environment**

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### **Key points**

- Children and young people's physical and mental health are in serious, long-term decline, significantly exacerbated by poverty and inequality.
- Children want to be outside and active, playing with friends, walking/cycling to school (and parents want this too) but face many environmental barriers.
- Government policy to date has not addressed some of the root causes of this – and in some cases has added to the problem.
- Everyday outdoor play and mobility = healthier, happier children.
- The key factor enabling this is a safe, accessible, welcoming & stimulating outside environment.
- Child-focussed built environment policy could transform children's lives, health and well-being.
- A co-ordinated cross-departmental approach is needed (planning, housing, transport, public health).
- Examples of good practice exist in UK and internationally.
- Effective, evidenced low-cost policies could be enacted almost immediately.

### **Q: How do children and young people experience their built environment and what is the impact of this?**

- I. For decades, public policy in England has failed to create places that support children's healthy development and wellbeing. Traffic-dominated neighbourhoods, low quality housing layouts, inadequate

facilities, and poorly designed housing estates, along with a lack of parks and green spaces and other accessible high quality natural spaces, have harmed children's health, and undermined their quality of life.

2. Economic deprivation<sup>1</sup> and racial inequality<sup>2</sup> are both significant additional factors compounding children's lack of access to outdoor play, physical activity and greenspace. There is also evidence to suggest girls spend less time outside playing than boys.<sup>3</sup> The impact of this on children's mental and physical health - including all the statistics below - is also far worse for those already suffering from inequality and disadvantage.
3. The Royal College of Paediatrics says children's health in the most disadvantaged communities is "a terrifying picture", adding, "Paediatricians cannot be any clearer on this point; child health is in crisis and rampant health inequalities can no longer be ignored."<sup>4</sup>
4. The built environment plays a significant role in children's (lack of) access to outdoor space, play, active travel and physical activity.
5. In terms of streets, parental concern about traffic danger<sup>5</sup> is the main reason children are not given 'licence' to play out near home or to walk/cycle to school<sup>6</sup>. This concern is based in reality – in 2021, 1,665 child pedestrians/cyclists (0-15) were killed or seriously injured on the streets. Children in the most deprived 20% of areas are six times more likely to be injured on Britain's roads than those in the least deprived 20%.<sup>7</sup> The evidence is clear that slower speeds where children live would save lives and give children more freedom.<sup>8</sup>
6. Children are also prevented or discouraged from using other 'doorstep space' – for example on housing estates – due to both a lack of safe, accessible or suitable space *and/or* lack of permission to use the space outside their homes. 'No Ball Games' signs and culture are still prevalent in social housing schemes across the UK.<sup>9</sup> Access to play space on mixed estates is sometimes segregated according to tenure.<sup>10</sup>
7. Where children have designated outdoor spaces locally - parks, playgrounds and sports areas - these may be difficult to get to independently due to traffic danger and are often unsafe or in bad repair<sup>11</sup>. Playable outdoor space is also being rapidly lost to development and children are often excluded from public space e.g. through anti-skating measures or 'mosquitos'.

## Key statistics

- 1/5 of UK population are under 18
- Children spend far less time outside than they used to
- Children play on their own street far less than they used to (80% in 1970s - 22% in 2022)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-childrens-report-mene-2018-2019>

<sup>2</sup> <https://playingout.net/blog/playing-fair-how-does-race-affect-childrens-access-to-outdoor-play/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://urbanspringtime.blogspot.com/2022/05/girls-in-public-space.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/news-events/news/health-outcomes-continue-worsen-uk-children-say-leading-childrens-doctors>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/dec/07/man-arrested-after-boy-seven-dies-in-folkestone-crash>

<sup>6</sup> Shaw, B. et al (2015) *Mobility: an international comparison and recommendations for action* University of Westminster

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bmj.com/content/379/bmj.o2862>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.20splenty.org/duty\\_of\\_care\\_mandates\\_20mph](https://www.20splenty.org/duty_of_care_mandates_20mph)

<sup>9</sup> <https://playingout.net/play-streets/info-for-councils/housing-and-playing-out/>

<sup>10</sup> Grant, H. and Michael, C. 'Too poor to play: children in social housing blocked from communal playground' *The Guardian*

<sup>11</sup> API-Play (2022) *#Equal Play: Every child's right to Everyday Play'*

<sup>12</sup>

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/609a5802ba3f13305c43d352/t/64ca676f4c818d6700d320ae/1690986358314/Street+Play+Report+July+2023+Final2.pdf>

- Children walk/cycle to school far less than they used to (86% in 1970 - 25% in 2010)<sup>13</sup>
- 1,665 child pedestrians/cyclists (0-15) were killed or seriously injured in 2021<sup>14</sup>
- 24% of children would like to cycle or scoot to school. Only 4% actually do so.<sup>15</sup>
- 30% of UK children live in areas with unsafe levels of fine particulates<sup>16</sup>
- Only 21% of children in England (5-15) meet official targets on physical activity (1hr/day)
- A quarter of children now leave primary school clinically obese, with economic disadvantage doubling the impact.<sup>17</sup>
- The poorest 20% of children are 12 times more likely to experience poor health outcomes by the age of 17<sup>18</sup>
- The UK has the second lowest life satisfaction of 15-year-olds across all OECD countries.<sup>19</sup>
- Children themselves consistently say that they want to play outside more in their local area.<sup>20</sup>

**Q: How well are children and young people’s needs currently met by the planning process in terms of policy and guidance?**

Short answer: not at all.

8. Children are only mentioned once in the National Planning Policy Framework (in connection with assessing housing needs) and there is no national guidance on child-friendly design and planning. Children are not considered a statutory equalities group either in terms of considering their needs or consultation/involvement in decision-making. The impact of this is all of the above.

**Q: Where are the examples of policy and good practice that are improving children and young people’s experiences in the built environment?**

9. These are mostly outside the UK. Germany, Norway, and Sweden all have relevant national policies and/or guidance, and at the municipal level, the cities of Barcelona, Freiburg, Ghent, Paris, Pontevedra, Rotterdam, and Tirana (amongst others) have all taken forward ambitious programmes.
10. A handful of relevant child-friendly initiatives have been taken forward by the Mayor of London, and in a few English local authorities, including Leeds, Hackney, and Newham. Unlike England, national governments in Wales and Scotland have relevant policies in place. Some housing associations, architects and developers are also starting to lead the way in developing child-friendly spaces but this needs more support from national policy.

**Q: Are government departments working together to address children and young people’s needs in this respect?**

Again, short answer: no.

11. The UK Government was heavily criticised for its performance on children’s rights in the latest [Concluding Observations from UNCRC](#) and children’s rights charities have said, “too often decisions are made without proper consideration of how they affect children”.

<sup>13</sup> <https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/item/8z178/children-s-independent-mobility-a-comparative-study-in-england-and-germany-1971-2010>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/reported-road-accidents-vehicles-and-casualties-tables-for-great-britain>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/our-blog/news/2021/september/survey-reveals-just-2-of-uk-pupils-currently-cycle-to-school>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.unicef.org.uk/publications/child-health-breath-of-toxic-air/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://digital.nhs.uk/news/2021/significant-increase-in-obesity-rates-among-primary-aged-children-latest-statistics-show>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(23\)00029-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(23)00029-4/fulltext)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/publication/pisa-2022-results/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/the-big-answer/>

12. In order to start creating an environment that meets children's need for outdoor play, active travel, physical activity, community and connection with nature, a co-ordinated cross-departmental approach is needed. Relevant policy areas include: housing, planning, local government, levelling-up, public health, transport, policing and climate/clean air.

**Government policy to address this could include:**

Quick/immediate:

- i. Clarification of national play streets legislation and procedural guidance so that all local authorities are encouraged to support resident-led temporary play streets
- ii. Review and new guidance on measures that restrict children and young people's opportunities to play and socialise in public space (eg No Ball Games signs, 'mosquitos', anti-skating measures)
- iii. Requirement for all registered housing providers to develop a proportionate, balanced approach to outdoor play following existing best practice

Medium-term:

- iv. Revising National Planning Policy Framework to include requirements for planning applications to meet children's need for safe, accessible outdoor space on their doorstep for active play and social connection.
- v. High quality guidance on child-friendly planning to sit alongside NPPF
- vi. Requiring that children are considered a statutory equalities group in the planning process.
- vii. Requiring that children are meaningfully involved in significant local planning decisions
- viii. Child Impact Assessment as standard part of planning process
- ix. A Play Sufficiency duty on all local authorities
- x. A coordinated cross-dept approach to restoring children's access to outdoor space, play and mobility (involving DLUHC, DfT, DHSC, DCMS, DEFRA)
- xi. 'Child-lens' approach to transport policy ensuring safe streets in residential areas and around schools
- xii. 20mph default speed limit where children live, learn and play
- xiii. Public health and physical activity strategies prioritising children's free outdoor play

13. Whilst none of these recommendations require any specific funding commitment, Government should also explore cost-effective, equitable ways to enhance the capacity and expertise of local authorities, and to secure additional funding for high-quality delivery (both capital and revenue) through developer contributions and other mechanisms.

**Conclusion**

14. Children's needs in the built environment have been ignored by Government policy for too long, resulting in enormous damage to their health, happiness and wellbeing - and incalculable cost to society. This now needs to change. The positive impact of prioritising children's needs in this area could be enormous. Many organisations and experts would gladly contribute to developing a new Government policy approach to children and the built environment, ensuring children can safely access the space outside their homes and across their wider neighbourhoods, giving them the free play, social contact, freedom, healthy development and physical activity they need and benefitting society as a whole.