

Royal Institute of British Architects

Response to Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee inquiry: children, young people and the built environment January 2024

The Royal Institute of British Architects is a global professional membership body driving excellence in architecture. We serve our members and society in order to deliver better buildings and places, stronger communities and a sustainable environment. Being inclusive, ethical, environmentally aware and collaborative underpins all that we do.

RIBA welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee's inquiry on children, young people and the built environment. This is a salient time to examine the role that the built environment plays in improving young people's quality of life. The changes to the planning system and planning policy that will result from the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act are some of the most significant reforms that will come into play for a generation.

For the purpose of this response, we will define the category of children and young people as up to the age of 25.

We have long been clear that our homes and places must not only meet the needs of their current inhabitants but should also be built and maintained with the needs of future generations in mind. It is imperative that the Government takes an integrated and cross-departmental approach to build quality, sustainability, safety and accessibility into every aspect of our built environment.

As such, RIBA recommends that the Government:

- Encourages the implementation of a cross-government approach to examining the needs of children and young people and their access to and experience of the built environment.
- Examine how local plans can promote meaningful engagement with young people in planning systems, considering diverse needs and accessibility.
- Assesses how reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework can ensure that national planning policy is inclusive of young people's needs and interests.

RIBA 
Architecture.com

Incorporated by Royal Charter
No. RC000484
Registered Charity No. 210566
VAT Registration No. 232 351 891

Royal Institute of
British Architects
66 Portland Place
London, W1B 1AD, UK

Charlotte Watson
Senior Policy Advisor
charlotte.watson@riba.org

The experiences of children and young people of their built environment

How do young people's experiences of outdoor space vary across income, race, gender, age?

Socioeconomic and demographic factors are very likely to have an impact on a person's experience of, and relationship to, space and place; and the way that they move through and interact with the built environment. This includes often complex, hard to define ideas of belonging in and entitlement to space.

Some examples of taking these factors into account in relation to the built environment include designing public space to allow young people safe places to congregate without fear of being mistaken for criminals and ensuring regeneration projects do not serve to exclude young people from existing communities.

The way that gender interacts with use of space has long been examined, including in a report by the Mayor of London on how to improve young people's ability to exercise "independent mobility"ⁱ in their built environment. This report notes that "girls, particularly teenage girls, are more likely to have restrictions placed on their mobility freedoms", citing research that shows 80% of users of public facilities for young people are boys and young men. These perceptions have a clear impact on gendered equity in terms of access to and experience of outdoor space.

Further, inaccessible design choices in the built environment have an impact on disabled people, including disabled young people. We welcome the Government's recent decision to mandate a minimum accessibility standard in line with Part M4(2) of the Building Regulations for all new homes, but we know that this will not go anywhere near far enough to create a fully inclusive environment for disabled people. As we outlined in our [response](#) to the Committee's recent inquiry on disabled people in the housing sector, the housing and disability sectors must be involved in future work in this space to ensure meaningful and comprehensive improvement.

We must be inclusive and deliberate about the way that we design and maintain our built environment to facilitate genuine belonging and equity. We recognise the role that the planning system plays in this, and though by no means the whole solution, one key element of ensuring positive outcomes for future generations is expanding the routes by which people from all demographic backgrounds and circumstances can undertake a career in the built environment sector.

The planning system

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

There are currently no references to young people, and two references to children, in the entirety of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) – one in the context of delivering a sufficient supply of homes, and one in the context of the classification of flood risk vulnerability for children's homes. More prominent consideration should be given to the specific needs and preferences of young people in planning policy and guidance.

We have long advocated that existing national planning guidance can do more to consider the current and future needs of a range of demographics, including young people. For example, in our 2023 [response](#) to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' consultation on reforms to the NPPF, we noted that when considering housing supply, planning guidance should consider changing patterns in terms of demography to ensure that proposed development will meet the projected needs of the current and future population of any given area.

The need for such considerations can be illustrated in, for example, new housing developments being brought forward where many of the homes are three- and four-bedroomed. These dwellings may not meet the needs of an increasing population of younger residents, on lower incomes and often without children, coming into an area. This is not conducive to the creation of mixed communities, which can serve to encourage interaction between people across many age ranges.

How are children and young people's views and voices heard, considered and acted upon in the planning system if at all?

Accessible and inclusive participatory engagement in the planning process is vital to not only ensure that development meets the needs of those it serves, but also to encourage support for high-quality, well-designed development.

As we noted in our 2019 report, '[Ten Characteristics of Places Where People Want to Live](#)', public consultation often occurs too late in the design process to enable the input of local people. This is equally as applicable to children and young people's involvement. Such lack of meaningful consultation can lead to resentment towards development, with development being felt done to, rather than with, existing communities. As a result, people can often feel that they will not benefit from new development in which they have no stake or that will not meet their needs.

There is a pressing need to ensure that the needs of children and young people are met through the planning system and process. There are numerous barriers to embedding participatory practices in the planning process in terms of youth engagement. For example, consultative activity that only takes place in school hours, material that has not been adapted to be accessible to younger audiences, and facilitation activities that have not been designed to be inclusive of young people will all act to preclude them from involvement in the planning process.

Without the input of children and young people in the planning process, it is not a given that their needs and preferences will be met. The outcome and user satisfaction of infrastructure which is principally designed for young people, such as play space and facilities, or mixed-use infrastructure which is used by young people – such as green space – would greatly benefit from early input from its primary user groups. We recommend that, to try to rectify this lack of input, examination is given to how local plans can be utilised to facilitate the meaningful engagement of young people in the planning system. This would allow involvement in a way that is locally specific, considering the needs of young people in a targeted way. This should be in addition to the inclusion of specific guidance on space for children and young people on a national level, such as through the NPPF.

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?

There are existing examples of good practice which are having a positive impact on young people's experiences of the built environment. [RIBA West Midlands is currently working with Birmingham City Council](#) and the Birmingham Youth City Board to bring youth voice to decisions about the future of the built environment. This is a particularly vital initiative given that Birmingham is the youngest city in Europe, with 40% of the population being under 25.

This work will see young people, alongside RIBA and Birmingham City Council, take part in a number of events exploring their built environment. This will include site visits, reviewing forthcoming development plans and looking at interesting concepts in place, such as art within architecture. Features of this initiative, such as continuity of engagement with young people and tailored activities, are crucial in facilitating ongoing and active involvement.

In terms of best practice in planning policy, the London Plan stipulates that London boroughs should "prepare Development Plans that are informed by a needs assessment of children and young person's play and informal recreation facilities... and produce strategies on play and informal recreation facilities and opportunities."ⁱⁱ This explicit recognition of the importance of prioritising children and young people's needs throughout the planning process is a commendable step forward.

Further to this, Public Practice has created a practice note to outline how to proactively involve young people in the planning process. Creating long-term partnerships with schools and other educational establishments, integrating engagement activity into the wider curriculum to demonstrate relevance, and evaluating and using young people's existing knowledge of an area are some of the key mechanisms suggested to enable engagement.ⁱⁱⁱ

An example of this is RIBA's [National Schools Programme](#), which aims to help children explore and understand the built environment, its impact on people and communities, how it is shaped and developed, and why good design is important. In doing so, the programme empowers children to develop their thoughts on architecture and make their voices heard, as well as providing a foundation on which to build further understanding of and involvement in the built environment.

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

Increased and meaningful participation at appropriate stages of the planning process, the inclusion of children and young people's needs and interests being explicitly included in planning guidance, and greater attention being paid to young people's experience of the built environment at the level of national policy are all vital metrics.

There is a clear role for economic and health and wellbeing indicators in outcome measurement for children and young people's experiences of the built environment. A mix of quantifiable and

qualitative measurements could be a way to assess experiences of the built environment. Examples of these could include the proportion of children that have access to green space and play space within close proximity to their home, and how the environment creates conditions for children and young people to be outside after dark. Such an approach allows for young people's lived experience to be taken into account alongside externally quantifiable indicators.

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?

A cross-government approach is key to ensuring that many aspects of built environment policy are cohesive, and this is the same for those regarding children and young people. Given the significant health consequences of some of these policy areas, as outlined below, joined-up, cross-government working must be accelerated.

The role of the built environment as a determinant of health inequalities is widely accepted, with the 2020 update to the Marmot Review^{iv} noting that “the unequal distribution of poor-quality built environments contributes to health inequalities in England” on a variety of levels. Community interactions, physical access to loved ones and to core amenities, as well as exclusive design practice and underinvestment in the built environment, all have a noticeable public health impact.

Accessible public transport and improved integration of active travel into transport policy is also vital for young people to be able to fully participate in and benefit from their immediate, and wider, environments. We have continuously raised the need for transport infrastructure to be improved, allowing for greater access to green space, greater mobility for all demographics, and lesser reliance on personal car use.

The facilitation of walking and cycling infrastructure on a much wider scale has the potential to help level up across the country. Young people may have less disposable income for public transport use and no access to other methods of transportation, so walking and cycling can be a cheaper option.

Research has shown that children in London are at risk of developing a number of chronic conditions related to poor air quality, such as asthma and high blood pressure,^v while RIBA's 2021 [‘Built for the Environment’](#) report notes that addressing poor indoor and outdoor air quality has a number of benefits for both physical and mental health. In terms of net zero, this shows that there is a clear health impetus to reduce personal car use and reliance on modes of transport which emit high levels of pollution, which must be undertaken in a cross-governmental manner in order to make long-lasting, holistic change.

There is also a clear role for cross-departmental working to deliver a long-term, well-funded National Retrofit Strategy, which would positively impact young people's experience through improving the quality of their homes. Warmer homes provide a better environment and reduce health problems. Inadequate heating can exacerbate health problems such as pneumonia, asthma, and arthritis, and can even lead to premature deaths. Investing in energy efficiency can minimise risks to health and

wellbeing, at the same time, reducing pressure on health services. In England alone, it is estimated that the cost to the NHS of health conditions made worse by poor housing is £1.4 billion each year.

Such a strategy must consider how to improve the energy efficiency of our homes, but also address how our buildings must adapt to a changing climate, including overheating. A whole house retrofit approach can help to avoid adverse effects, including moisture building or unexpected overheating.

There is also a cross-departmental approach needed to tackle climate threats such as flooding and fire, which are liable to impact children and young people. In terms of flooding, [RIBA research](#) found that 1 in 6 homes in the UK are at risk of flooding – a number that is expected to double by 2050.

With regards to risk from fire, [research conducted by Zurich Municipal Insurance](#) found that schools are twice as likely as other types of commercial buildings to suffer a blaze. The average school posed a fire risk 1.7 times greater than non-residential buildings.

Sprinklers are important for asset protection and help to ensure the continuity of education for children if a fire occurs. Severe fires have the potential to devastate the lifetime development of a whole generation – fire safety measures which have the potential to mitigate this should be a priority. The impact of a significant event like fire could have wide ranging and long-term psychological effects, especially when the community is displaced, which far outweighs the financial implications.

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

We are keen to see an uptick in cross-departmental working to address the needs of children and young people in the built environment. There is clearly much crossover between the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) with regards to the previous question and we do hope that further opportunities for collaborative work will be undertaken.

In terms of existing good practice, the Department for Education (DfE) has been undertaking Government Soft Landings for some time, taking a proactive approach to ensuring the performance of public sector buildings meets the desired outcomes. It is positive to see lessons learnt carried forward to ensure schools are designed to support students’ experience.

The need for greater cross-government working on a number of the issues raised in response to the previous question goes beyond addressing the needs of children and young people alone. A comprehensive and collaborative approach between government departments is integral to reaching net zero, building sustainable and accessible places and making improvements to public health and national infrastructure such as transport.

It is important that opportunities are created for children and young people as part of the green transition. As we build a better and more sustainable future, we must ensure that policies are developed which provide the right education for children, as well as boosting green skills and jobs.

ⁱ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/ggbd_making_london_child-friendly.pdf

ⁱⁱ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/the_london_plan_2021.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.publicpractice.org.uk/resources/planning-with-young-people>

^{iv} <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>

^v <https://www.london.gov.uk/New%20review%20shows%20harmful%20health%20impacts%20of%20pollution%20before%20birth%20through%20to%20old%20age>