



# Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee

## Oral evidence: Children, young people and the built environment, HC 94

Wednesday 24 January 2024

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Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Ian Byrne; Mrs Natalie Elphicke; Kate Hollern.

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### Witnesses

**I:** Dr William Bird, CEO, Intelligent Health; Professor Helen Dodd, Exeter University; Professor Alison Stenning, Newcastle University; Dr Jennifer Wills Lamacq, DECPsy Academic and Professional Tutor, UCL.

**II:** Gemma Hyde, Projects and Policy Manager, TCPA; Alice Ferguson, Associate and Board Director, Playing Out; Harriet Grant, Freelance reporter, *Guardian*; Helen Griffiths, Chief Executive, Fields in Trust.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr William Bird, Professor Helen Dodd, Professor Alison Stenning and Dr Jennifer Wills Lamacq.

**Chair:** Welcome, everyone, to this morning's session of the Levelling Up, Communities and Housing Committee. Thank you, everyone, for coming along this morning and a particular welcome to our witnesses. We are going to have our first evidence session today in an inquiry into children, young people and the built environment. It is something that the Committee has not looked at specifically for some time, so I think that it is going to be an interesting inquiry with a lot of learning for us to do about the challenges that children and young people face and how we as a society should be meeting them. Thank you for coming.

Before I come over to the witnesses to ask them to introduce themselves, I will ask Committee members to put on record any interests they may have that may be directly relevant to this inquiry. I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association and a trustee of Fields in Trust.

**Kate Hollern:** I employ a councillor.

**Mrs Elphicke:** I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association and I employ a councillor in my office.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you for that, colleagues. Sorry that we are a little bit short on numbers this morning, but it is not our usual session. It does not show any lack of interest because I am sure that the Committee will be exploring this issue in some detail, and quite rightly so. Could I come over to the witnesses please and ask you to say who you are and the organisation you are here on behalf of today?

**Dr Bird:** I am Dr William Bird. I am a GP and chief exec of Intelligent Health. I am also an honorary professor down at the University of Exeter.

**Professor Dodd:** I am Helen Dodd. I am a professor of child psychology at the University of Exeter.

**Professor Stenning:** I am Alison Stenning. I am professor of geography at the University of Newcastle.

**Dr Wills Lamacq:** I am Jennifer Wills Lamacq. I am a child and educational psychologist and a lecturer at UCL.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you all very much for coming. I think that it is probably the first time you have been before the Committee. I can assure you before we begin that we are quite friendly really. Our job, through this inquiry, is to find out what the situation is, find out what the problems are and try to come to some solutions that we can suggest to Ministers when we actually find a Minister who is responsible for this area. That may be one of the challenges that we face going through. Dr Bird, is the built environment important to the development of children and young people?



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**Dr Bird:** Thank you for inviting us. Yes, as you can imagine, it is increasingly vital, from research that is coming through. We will be talking a lot about the play and the other aspects, but we now know that the actual environment itself, and particularly green space, has a major effect on the child, including the development of their brain and their health later. Starting with maternal, mothers who live near green space in a built environment that is well suited actually have healthier babies. They have healthier weight and less pre-term delivery.

Also, children's brains develop differently. The hippocampus is the working memory. That part is larger in children who live nearer green space, when you adjust for everything else, compared to children who live away from green space. We know that air quality also has an impact on the brain's development.

Not only that, it unfortunately gets slightly worse. The telomeres are the end of the chromosome that decide how long we are going to live and what diseases we are going to get in later life. The longer they are, the better. Children who live near green space have longer telomeres than children who live away from green space, everything else accounted for. That means that, by the time you get to 18, they have short telomeres, so they are starting with a massive disadvantage, will die earlier and will have more diseases. We find it very hard to get those telomeres to lengthen up again. We can do it but it takes time.

Children's ADHD and other mental health conditions, including depression, are all connected to that green space. We now know that the brain changes because of chronic stress. It is buffered by the green space. This seems to be far more obvious in children who are from deprived communities, where they are getting a lot of stresses from other areas. We seem to find that this reduces inequality of health. The more green space you put into an area, the fewer inequalities in the health of those children will come through.

Finally, the obvious one is obesity and physical activity. It is probably more obvious that you get that. One thing I will say is that we try to keep children clean and indoors because we think that that is safe, but actually our bodies are designed to get bacteria from the outside. Children who play out in parks, in green spaces and outdoors will pick up bugs that are absolutely essential for our development and our gut biome. Those bugs—they are the only things that can do it—will moderate our immune system for the rest of our lives. Once we have those bugs in our gut biome, they stay there. That stops chronic inflammation, so you get less asthma, eczema, hay fever and inflammatory bowel disease, and less future cancer, dementia, heart disease and all the other things connected with inflammation.

When you asked "Is it important?", I would say that it is absolutely vital. There are 2,100 children who will turn 18 today. They are now adults and



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we have lost them if they have had a really poor environment, because they do not have those health attributes to take forward.

Q3 **Chair:** I found that degree of scientific backup you have for what you were saying quite amazing. It is there, is it? Somebody says, "It is alright. Dr Bird said it was this". It actually can be evidenced from research that has been done and verified.

**Dr Bird:** There is a huge amount of evidence and the evidence base is getting bigger and bigger. It is not just the occasional study anymore. This is numerous studies saying the same thing. Of course, they have to adjust for inequalities. Is it the built environment or is it inequalities? They adjust for that. It is actually the built environment and green space.

Q4 **Chair:** I have a follow-up question. That is clearly very important for the children and their families. Is it important for the rest of society that we take account of these issues?

**Dr Bird:** We hear a lot coming through about how, when you have children who are playing and outdoors, the community benefits. I will not touch on that, but that will be brought in much later. There are those children, as I say, who are becoming adults. We now know that, if a brain, the gut biome, the telomeres and all those other things are changed, you are going to create a more robust, resilient child into an adult. Those adults are going to provide productivity for the country and the resilience we are going to need in the new world. For the children themselves, yes, they will benefit the community, which we will hear about later. Those children are going to become adults and we cannot reclaim some of that health loss that has taken place as children.

Q5 **Chair:** I suppose, in a very narrow field then, they are more likely to be economically active and less prone to having long times off work because of illness.

**Dr Bird:** Yes, absolutely.

Q6 **Chair:** Are the Government taking all of this seriously, so the issue of the built environment and its relationship to how children develop?

**Dr Bird:** No, unfortunately.

Q7 **Chair:** You can say a bit more if you want.

**Dr Bird:** When we look at the planning legislation—we are going to hear more from people are much better qualified than I am about planning—children are mentioned just once, I think, in the documents and there is no consultation with children at all. There is a thought that "that is okay for children, but actually the really important thing is the economic benefits that we are going to get from an environment", but actually the children are the economic benefits for the future. We have to take this seriously because the NHS is going to have to deal with all those consequences of children having a poor start.



Q8 **Chair:** This is all part of the prevention rather than cure agenda.

**Dr Bird:** Correct, yes.

Q9 **Ian Byrne:** Thanks for that. That was an unbelievable piece of evidence you just gave. Jennifer, I am going to concentrate on you. What do we mean by play and why is it important to child development?

**Dr Wills Lamacq:** Play is what children and young people do when no one is telling them what to do. It is how they choose to spend their time. Play is important in itself because it is an enjoyable activity. However, play is also an essential part of child development. If we want children to develop well linguistically, cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically, they must have access to play opportunities outside and additional to those that are available controlled by adults in school or controlled by adults at home.

Play opportunities need to be things that are fun, uncertain and provide an element of challenge. It is in that context that their emerging skills in those domains—cognitive, linguistic and so on—develop in lasting and meaningful ways. Without adequate play opportunities, children and young people would have more difficulty developing the skills that they need for engagement in their education, even just attending school, let alone learning while they are there, and for developing healthy social relationships.

That includes understanding the perspectives of others as well as being able to negotiate or compromise and resolve conflicts, as well as the skills that they need for self-control and regulation. That of course comes into behaviour as children but also prosocial or antisocial behaviour as adults. There is also some really interesting research—if it is all right I will hand over to my colleague, Helen, here—around the impact of play on children’s mental health. As I think we all know, mental health in children at the moment is subject to somewhat of a crisis.

**Professor Dodd:** My research has shown that, the more time children spend playing outdoors and adventurously, where they get opportunities to explore those risks and things, the better their mental health is in terms of anxiety and depression. Also, during that first covid lockdown the children who had more opportunity to play had better positive emotion during that time. That shows the resilience that comes with play.

Jen did a brilliant job of explaining what play is. One of the really key things is that it is not about adults setting up an activity for a child to do. It is about children choosing what they do and having that space to explore, be independent and make decisions for themselves. The benefits come from that independent opportunity where they can test the boundaries a little bit, where there is opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. It is that kind of aspect of play that is key in thinking about the built environment and the impacts for children’s mental health.

Q10 **Ian Byrne:** When we talk about play and about young children, it is



teenagers as well.

**Dr Wills Lamacq:** Yes, absolutely. Play looks quite different according to ages and stages of development but it is essential. In fact, we would argue that it is also essential for adults. Babies may need places to experience a new range of senses, for example. That could be in a parent and carer session in a village hall set up by somebody.

We all have a mental image of children, six or seven-year-olds, running round a park, on a climbing frame or doing imaginative play, but we also must remember that teenagers benefit from safe warm spaces where they can socialise, which is an important part of teenagers' play. We also need to think about children who are neurodivergent or children with physical disabilities, who may need inclusive play spaces and to be remembered as well. Play looks different across ages and stages, but I would say that it is equally essential for each age and stage

Q11 **Ian Byrne:** Playing devil's advocate, some may say that children and young people within schools get physical education and breaktimes in the playground. Is that not enough to keep them physically and mentally healthy?

**Dr Wills Lamacq:** PE and breaktime do not provide adequate play opportunities, no. As Helen said, a core benefit of play and development comes from those features of it being flexible, child-led and controlled, and non-directed. PE and breaktime are important in their own right, and sometimes are under threat in schools actually, but they are restricted in terms of time, space and permissions, which limit the benefits of the play.

Q12 **Ian Byrne:** That goes against what Helen said before about having that ability to choose if you are a child. You touched on warm spaces. Is there an issue with what we have seen from an austerity point of view where, certainly in my community, we have lost so many facilities? We have lost youth clubs and organised sports. Is that another issue with regards to the loss of resource within communities, or can that be replicated out in the open?

**Dr Wills Lamacq:** I will hand over to a colleague for some of that. I will just say that, on after-school activities, youth clubs and organised activities, again, they are under threat and they are cut. They are also different to play opportunities because, again, they are structured, supervised and controlled.

Q13 **Ian Byrne:** That message is coming through loud and clear.

**Professor Dodd:** We would all agree that those kinds of community resources are vital and have a really important place in terms of the offering that is available within a local community. We want there to be spaces and places for people to go when it is raining, where they feel safe and where there are different activities on offer, but we also want children to have opportunities to be independent.



Really importantly, even if we provide those spaces, if the built environment does not allow the children to get to them, it does not matter that they are available. We have to have the provision right but we also have to have the built environment right so that a young person can get themselves from home to the youth club or the leisure centre and not have to wait for a parent to be available to get in the car to drive them there. We want children to be able to access these resources and we want them to be available.

- Q14 **Ian Byrne:** It is fascinating because I am 51 now and I think about my childhood. You had the ability to go to a youth club and play football, but I grew up on a council estate on the edge of a forest and that is where we spent most of our time as well. Those options are diminishing rapidly. This is why the importance of this today just comes through loud and clear. It really does. There are probably parents watching this now. Is there evidence that children and young people would rather be inside, playing on technology, than outside with their friends? That is a question that lots of parents ask.

**Professor Dodd:** I get asked that question all the time. Actually, children and young people want a balanced diet of play. Of course they enjoy playing on screens. They are fun. How much time do we all spend on our screens? But they do not want to just do that. They want to balance it. Actually, there is research showing that, if you ask children whether they would rather play on a device or with their friends in real life, something like 86% of children will say that they would rather be with friends in real life.

**Ian Byrne:** It is fascinating. I am reading Tim Gill's research and he is saying that children would rather spend more time meeting friends face to face or playing outside than being online, but then the parents element comes into it. A quarter of parents said that they do not have enough safe spaces near their property for children to play at all. I am sure that we are going to investigate that element of it during the course of the questions.

- Q15 **Mrs Elphicke:** I represent a beautiful coastal community, Dover and Deal. During covid, the role of the coast was apparent. The role of the sea, of seaside activities and of the leisure that is provided through that natural resource was just not on the table when it came to people considering what happened during covid for people to have access to outside space. I am listening to the contributions and I am interested that this conversation, reflecting on that, feels very urban centred, essentially around playgrounds and structured places.

What are your thoughts about ensuring that we actually include in the design natural amenities and access, which are so dominant in areas like mine? Linked to that, some of the concerns about access may be, for example, about mobile access in particular places. Is there any research on that or is it all about urban cities and towns?



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**Professor Dodd:** I am really pleased that you asked that question. I live in rural Devon, so I am sympathetic to that. William did a really good job of explaining the benefits of the natural environment. Of course we want, therefore, young people—all of us—to be able to access those environments. There is research showing clear inequalities, which I am sure you are aware of, in terms of who gets access to those spaces.

We also need to be thinking of course beyond the city and the town. In those cities and towns, we want children to be able to walk and cycle around, and get to things independently. That is not always possible but things like public transport and cycle routes are really important outside of those to access coastal communities for people who do not necessarily have a car to get there. Thinking about that provision is also within this because of the benefits of nature that William already talked about.

**Professor Stenning:** I also live in a coastal community and it was enormously important during covid. There are these questions about, “What is wrong with children being able to access these green spaces, other kinds of natural spaces and blue spaces?” As Helen suggested, the question of travel and access is important, but there is also something qualitatively different and extraordinarily important about children being able to play on their doorsteps. That is within urban areas but also within rural areas.

There are often much bigger issues around road danger and fast cars in rural areas because often these are neighbourhoods without pavements. There might be green space, but it is getting to your friend’s house, for example, or finding a bit of space where you can kick a ball around or hang out if you are slightly older. There is something qualitatively different about doorstep spaces and spaces in children’s neighbourhoods, both rural and urban, compared to those beautiful and extraordinarily important but yet slightly more distant natural green and blue spaces. All are important. Ensuring that children have access safely and equitably to all of those spaces is critical.

Q16 **Mrs Elphicke:** To underline that, these beautiful spaces are where people live. This is just addressing that issue and the presumption that somehow they are distant national parks for people to reach. They are part of the coastal villages and communities.

**Professor Stenning:** No, absolutely. They are for me. For my daughter, for example, it is a mile for her to get to the sea, but she also has doorstep spaces. I would love her to be able to have safe and equitable access to both of those spaces, because they are all part of her everyday life.

Q17 **Kate Hollern:** Listening to Dr Bird on the impact this is having on children’s health is really alarming. One in eight children live in homes without gardens or balconies, and shockingly one in five in London. Where do these children play? Where do they go outside?





**Professor Stenning:** The answer is often that they do not. That is a very strong and severe response. Situations vary, of course. It is likely that some children in those circumstances will have some limited access to outdoor play opportunities. They might have access to some doorstep spaces or playgrounds. It is likely that those playgrounds will not be particularly well maintained. They might not be age-appropriate. We often see and hear stories, for example, of teenagers playing in toddler playgrounds because those are the safe spaces available. The range and quality of spaces in those kinds of neighbourhoods are likely to be limited.

We have to accept that a lot of those children do not play outside regularly. They may play out at school, so it underlines the importance of school space of course. We need to create opportunities for them to do that outside of school time. It is quite likely that those children, if there are parks, for example, within the neighbourhood or not far away, will be more impacted by busy roads, high levels of air and noise pollution, and conflict with others in those spaces as well. Even to get to slightly more distant spaces to play outside, they will be having to navigate more hostile built environments too.

Of course some, the lucky ones, will have parents who are able to take the time, and have the money, to take them, either by car or by public transport, to more distant spaces where they can play safely, but that, again, takes them out of their neighbourhoods. The children become increasingly dependent on their parents to steward and chaperone them. That returns to some of the questions that Professor Dodd raised earlier.

Q18 **Kate Hollern:** Of course, that supervised play with parents there is not giving quite the interaction that children need, as with clubs and schools. The interactions are supervised.

**Professor Stenning:** Also, if a family are taking their children to another space, which might be a wonderful and rich environment to play, they are with their family. They are not necessarily with their friends and neighbours.

**Dr Wills Lamacq:** I will add something from my perspective about equality of access to play spaces, which is thinking about children with special educational needs and disabilities. There is research from Scope that found that almost 50% of families of children with SEND have access issues with their local playgrounds. I think that one in 10 reported that they are unable to access their playground at all. They are experiencing more barriers than other families and sometimes they can get overlooked when we are considering these issues.

Q19 **Kate Hollern:** That is an interesting point, because the next question was whether a young person's gender, race or family income level affects their access to public spaces.



**Professor Stenning:** Yes, without a doubt. As William has already signified, we know that there is a relationship between children living with disadvantages and their access and experiences of play. Just as these factors shape children and young people's lives in all sorts of other ways, the uneven quality and quantity of public space and questions of mobility and access in that space are markedly shaped by race, gender, income and other markers of inequality.

Black and minority ethnic children and those from poorer households are likely to live in neighbourhoods where public space is scarcer, less well maintained, more contested and often at greater risk in all sorts of ways from road danger, air pollution and so on, echoing some of the points I have just made. They have more complex journeys to access public space, with busy and polluted roads, underserved public transport and lower levels of car ownership, for example. Those are the sorts of things that we might think about if we think about race and class.

We also need to think clearly about gender. In many ways, girls and young women are seen to be especially disadvantaged in public space. They often do not feel safe in some public spaces. Many of the common forms of play space are designed for boys. There are all sorts of debates around whether those spaces can be reframed, imagined and experienced very positively by some girls and young women. There is all sorts of very strong and varied work that looks at that in particular and looking at how girls feel in public spaces.

Alongside that, we also need to think about how boys, and especially older boys, might be treated in public space. They are often heavily policed, treated as suspicious and seen as out of place and threatening in public spaces. Young boys or teenagers are just hanging out with their friends but treated as out of place in those contexts. Obviously these circumstances intersect. Black and minority ethnic boys will be much more likely to be aggressively policed in public space than girls. Black and minority ethnic girls, for example, might have even more limited access to public space for a whole variety of reasons. These things are clearly important and intersect in quite complex and important ways.

Q20 **Kate Hollern:** Alison, your research has found that the number of spaces aimed at or available to young people and children has declined. Why is that?

**Professor Stenning:** There are a variety of reasons, as we have already started to hear. We have clearly seen cuts to council funding over the last 15 or so years. Local authorities do not have a statutory duty to provide play facilities and have a play strategy. That often means that play, alongside other spheres, is cut. We have seen the abandonment and loss of hundreds and hundreds of local authority playgrounds over the last 10 to 12 years. We have also seen, echoing and reiterating the points already made, that playgrounds are more likely to be closed in deprived areas as well.



Beyond designated play spaces, we have also seen a decline in the range of spaces available for children and young people to play in and hang out. Some of that, again, is about cuts, maintenance and safety, for example, in public space more generally, not just in playgrounds. Some incidental spaces have been lost to development, for example.

Many incidental spaces and spaces within children's neighbourhoods have been lost to the rising dominance of cars that are parked and moving in residential areas compared to, say, 20 or 30 years ago. Far more residential streets, doorstep spaces and neighbourhood spaces, and the means to move between those, are threatened by the risks of road danger and too many cars travelling too fast and taking up too much space in children's neighbourhoods. That has probably been one of the most significant impacts on the space for children to play.

**Q21 Kate Hollern:** If lots of smaller spaces are combined to make a larger space, for example a destination playground, is that not a better economy of scale?

**Professor Stenning:** No. Single, large, excellent spaces are great and can provide amazing opportunities for play in all sorts of ways, but, by definition, they require children and young people to travel further, incurring expense and necessitating parental lifts and chaperoning, so echoing those themes that we have already talked about. They become destinations rather than spaces for everyday play, activity and sociability. They take children and young people out of their neighbourhoods. They reduce opportunities for playing with other neighbourhood children

It is also likely that they will not enable nearly as many possibilities, varieties, diversities and types of play. You tend to go somewhere and do something rather than being inventive and creative, and engaging in the kinds of risky and adventurous play that Helen has talked about. They are often targeted at particular groups.

Additionally, these kinds of larger spaces lose all of the community benefits that sit alongside play in neighbourhoods and everyday outdoor play. There are the sometimes serendipitous but extraordinarily valuable connections that are built between resident parents and others; the integration and participation of children of all ages from diverse backgrounds in their neighbourhoods; the animation and liveliness of streets; and just the ordinary incidental physical activity that takes place in a neighbourhood that is playable.

**Q22 Ian Byrne:** I have a really quick one on what Alison said about accessibility. This is just a reflection. I had constituents get in touch with me because there was a gang of youths congregating within West Derby village, and they were worried about antisocial behaviour. Fair play to the police officer. When we contacted them, he went out and spoke to the young teenagers. There were about 30 of them and all they wanted to do was access a football pitch that was behind a gated academy. You think about how, if they had gone there and trespassed, they would potentially



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have been dragged into the criminality element of it and it was only because they wanted access to a football pitch. Are there any other examples of that lack of accessibility that then threatens community cohesion because of the lack of facilities? Then, potentially, you get dragged into the courts because all the children want to do is play football.

**Professor Stenning:** Yes. Children and young people should have spaces in which they are allowed to play, feel welcome and are safe to play. It is accepted that they are allowed to play in those spaces. That is critically important for these kinds of questions. If you do not provide that kind of space, conflicts will arise.

Q23 **Ian Byrne:** There is a focus in this place, rightly so, on antisocial behaviour in teenagers. Surely a key part of the solution is providing spaces.

**Professor Stenning:** Yes, absolutely. Spaces should definitely be provided for those children and young people. If there are spaces that are welcoming and supportive of all kinds of play and sociability on our streets, those more extreme examples of what is seen as antisocial behaviour are mitigated and dissipated because there are far more people hanging out and spending time playing on their streets. That is not just about children and young people. We know that, if children and young people play out on their streets, parents will also be out. Older neighbours will come out and chat. There is a stronger sense of people being on the street. Those spaces then do not become dominated by one group, whoever they might be.

**Chair:** On the issue of children's independence and how that might change over the years, we have Natalie.

Q24 **Mrs Elphicke:** I was really struck in our research briefings on Intelligent Health, William, by the information on freedom to roam through the generations that we were provided with. I now have a very clear view in my mind of great-grandad being allowed to walk his six miles to go fishing and now Ed just being able to walk to the end of his street. I thought that that really brought to life the challenge of the situation that we were talking about.

There are a couple of things in relation to that issue of independence and neighbourhoods. At the risk of asking a slightly challenging question again, the context of the responses has been about the immediate neighbourhood for the individual, and yet the concept of neighbourhood, as illustrated, was a broader geographical one. To what extent are free public transport and those sorts of issues important to the ability of young people, particularly older young people, to be able to get out and about?

**Professor Dodd:** We have been talking quite a lot about doorstep play. We want children to have immediate easy access to where they live and the space that they live in, but, importantly, we want children and young



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people to be able to travel between communities as well. If we want to live in a society where communities are connected and know one another, people need to be able to travel in between them.

At the moment, children and young people often can only travel in between them when their parent takes them somewhere in a car. If there is good public transport available, especially if that is free public transport, as you mentioned in your question, children and young people can travel between communities. It makes it easier for them maybe to get to a school that might not be close to home. It might make it easier for them to access nature, for example to go down to the beach and enjoy that natural space after school, and then catch another bus or cycle back to where they live. It is vital.

It also helps to build bridges between communities. Children are excellent at bringing communities together. Alison has already spoken about that. When children are out and they know things, their parents follow and then other people follow. If we want communities to feel connected and not isolated, and not create that tension that can sometimes exist between communities, we need good public transport links between them.

**Q25 Mrs Elphicke:** Really drilling down into that, because that is really helpful, is it the mode of transport and the supervision? We have been talking in our sessions about the helicopter parenting. Is that about transport or is that about supervision in your view? Why is independence so important?

**Professor Dodd:** Independence is so important. We have already talked about it a little bit. Imagine a young person who is going to work out how to catch a bus and get themselves to where they need to be. They are going to do something there or meet some friends; then they are going to go somewhere else and get back home independently. During that journey they learn about assessing risk, managing uncertainty and dealing with adversity. What happens when the bus breaks down or does not turn up, or the friends are not where they are supposed to be? They have to navigate those social relationships themselves, not have their parents saying, "Do not be mean to so-and-so".

They have to work that out and problem solve it themselves, and be ultimately responsible for themselves. They are making decisions and being responsible for their actions. All of those things help children and young people to develop that resilience and grow into adults who are good members of the community, good citizens, who feel connected to the place where they live and who can make that positive contribution.

Often young people get criticised for not being independent enough: "They cannot even take care of themselves". We do not give them space to practise those skills. They need to gradually be given the opportunity to practise those skills, initially just close to home. We are not suggesting that we send five-year-olds off to catch the bus around their community



by themselves, but, via the urban environment, we want to give children the opportunity to gradually have autonomy as they are ready for it.

To your question around helicopter parenting versus public transport, it is a bit of both. If there is no public transport or there are no safe routes, parents do not have a choice but to helicopter. I think that most parents would rather that their child was able to travel around, rather than having to taxi them around in the car. Linking back to where we started, in terms of mental health, there is recent evidence in England that children and young people who have a probable mental health problem are much more likely to have parents who cannot take them places to activities after school, so it links back to health. Yes, that is children's health right now, but, as William described at the beginning, those children will become adults with mental health problems if they are children with mental health problems.

**Q26 Mrs Elphicke:** Indeed, and I am really conscious of this issue on public transport. If I compare the position in the constituency I represent, there is not the free bus services for young people. In many of our villages, even where they are deprived, people are working. The children do not have the buses. They will have to pay to go to school. It is a very different setup to somewhere such as London, which is much more generously supported, so I am really interested. Thank you for that answer. William, you wanted to come in on that.

**Dr Bird:** It is just to add on to that the actual perception of the child when they go, perhaps not just on the public transport but walking and cycling. If there is a route between two areas, it is about that perception of the experience. Sometimes there can be a route there but it is on a major road. It is terrifying and anyone wanting to go on that will not do it again. The parents will not let their child go because it is too dangerous. It is about that understanding, getting it from the child's experience and asking children about what that route means to them and what would be helpful.

There is always that perception of experience. If they actually explore it and enjoy that route as well as the destination, you are far more likely to get them to be excited to explore areas. We know that, in deprivation, they just keep to the shop, the school and the house. They sometimes do not even cross the main road. It is extraordinary. The work that we have done shows how small an area families tend to stay in. They are too frightened and it is scary to go out. They just do not do it. They have everything they need there. To help people go out, yes, we should have the public transport and make those routes so much better and a better experience for everyone.

**Q27 Mrs Elphicke:** Do you think that parents are concerned about being accused of neglect or not looking after their children if they are giving them independence? Do you think that that has been a feature? I am aware that in America there has been specific legislation about how it is okay to let your child do X, Y and Z. I am conscious that, Helen, in your



research you said that the average was effectively secondary school age when people started to get independence. As a parent, that feels like it is in the right space. Is a parent's anxiety about independence coming from their own concern about being a responsible parent?

**Professor Dodd:** We have done research where we have done large surveys of parents and quite in-depth interviews of parents. It is clear from them that parents understand that independence and play are important for their children. Most parents want to be able to give them to their children but there are all these barriers in the way.

One of those things is the parent's anxiety. They are anxious that their child is going to get hit by a car trying to get along the busy road. What parent would not be anxious about their child being hit by a car on a busy road? Yes, parents are anxious, but they are anxious because the environment is not created or designed in a way that has considered children's needs.

It is not just about parents. If we design spaces that are welcoming to children and young people, and where they can safely be in those spaces, parents' concerns would be alleviated.

**Dr Wills Lamacq:** Thinking about the issue of neglect and building on what Professor Dodd said, children who are neglected and who are out might not want to be there. They do not feel safe, supported or like they have been given any information, instruction or that gradual buildup that we were talking about being so helpful. That is the key as well. It is around the child's perspective of whether they feel comfortable with the level of freedom that they have. As we have said repeatedly, when the spaces are welcoming and parents feel confident to be able to gradually allow their children increasing independence in line with their skills, that is a different issue.

**Professor Dodd:** You just mentioned the legislation in the United States. There is some work to do here in terms of that public health message—those figures that William started by telling us about—of how vital it is for children to be outdoors and that this is good for them, to try to alleviate some of that, "You are a bad parent because you have let your child out". There is some work to do to balance it.

Q28 **Mrs Elphicke:** I was reflecting on that when I heard those opening comments, thinking that it feels as if the message should be, "As a responsible parent, you should be doing this".

**Professor Dodd:** Absolutely, yes.

**Mrs Elphicke:** That was very well expressed.

Q29 **Kate Hollern:** It is interesting listening to community attitudes. As a councillor, you were constantly getting lobbied for "no ball games" signs. There were residents complaining about antisocial behaviour and police moving children on. It is really difficult to see how the trends have



changed over the years and the attitudes of communities to children playing on the street. Is the fear of antisocial behaviour new? Is it growing? How would we combat the fear of older people who say, "I do not want these children loitering outside my door"?

**Professor Stenning:** The overriding trend perhaps over the last 100 years is to corral children into fewer and fewer spaces, to move them inside and to reduce their free time. We can see counter movements alongside that, and I can mention some of those, but largely in the last hundred years we have seen the removal of children from public space based on a whole variety of concerns. Some of that is related to antisocial behaviour. Some is clearly related to concerns around the health and wellbeing of children, streets and neighbourhoods not being the right places for them, and high levels of road danger.

About, I guess, 100 years ago we saw the introduction of the Street Playgrounds Act, which designated streets as play streets for certain hours during certain days through most of our big cities: Salford, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and of course London. That was in response to rising concerns about the danger that children were in on streets, alongside concerns about what the proper place for children should be. In fact, some of that was concerned about so-called delinquency and the risks that children were at on streets from other people as well as from cars. We have seen those kinds of recurring debates. People talk about this long, slow imprisonment of children out of public space in response to these kinds of public concerns, which are well meaning but also concerning.

At various times over that 100 years we have also seen parallel attempts to secure or hold on to and maintain space for children to play in their neighbourhoods and local areas, and for them to have the right to hang out, move and play on their streets. That goes from the early play streets movement in the mid-20th century through to post-war planning initiatives, many of which sought to recognise, value and acknowledge the right of children to be on their streets, play, hang out and move in them. We have seen these parallel trends towards the increasing erosion of children's right to be on their streets, in their neighbourhoods and out and about, and then, alongside that, a whole variety of campaigns, both more radical campaigns and things such as planning and the built environment, to try to secure and maintain space for children.

Q30 **Kate Hollern:** William spoke earlier about the health benefits for children. What are the wider community benefits of children's presence in outdoor spaces?

**Professor Stenning:** They are enormous. Children's play, as Helen has already mentioned, often acts as a catalyst for community. When children move between the homes on their streets or the spaces within their neighbourhood, they do so often with parents, as we have seen, particularly for young children. We probably all have ideas and memories of hanging out in the neighbourhood playground with other young





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parents, for example. On a street, that can work not only with parents but also with other residents, older residents and residents without children as well.

In those historic examples we saw how, for example, sociability and play on streets acted as an opportunity for mothers to connect historically, when mothers were largely at home with children, sharing caring responsibility, keeping an eye on the street, comings and goings on the street, and so on. We have seen attempts to try to hold on to and replicate that over the years. I have done research particularly focused on what happens when neighbourhoods, streets and residents organise play streets, so temporary, regular closures for play on residential streets all across the UK. We have seen from the evidence that comes from the research on those kinds of interventions that play animates these communities.

It helps neighbours to get to know each other, builds friendships and support networks and facilitates the sharing of skills, tools, know-how and all sorts of other things, between not just families with young children but also neighbours without children, older neighbours, new neighbours and so on. We have evidence from that research that play on streets can be seen as one of a range of means to alleviate isolation and loneliness in communities and on residential streets for residents of all ages. Interestingly, we did some research during the pandemic as well, which demonstrated that the residents on those streets where children played out, whether that was spontaneously or through organised play streets, obviously before the pandemic, were quick to mobilise mutual support for vulnerable neighbours and to maintain levels of covid-safe sociability on those streets to keep people going.

We have also seen in research that we did during that period that, during the pandemic, children and their families experienced lower traffic, quieter streets and more time, because children were being homeschooled and parents were often working at home. There was the call to have a daily walk that we had during the first lockdown. Children and their families used those opportunities to explore and engage with their neighbourhoods, to walk, scoot and play in their neighbourhoods in covid-safe ways. They got to know and maintained contact with their neighbours. We have some very powerful stories about how children saw their friends and realised that they were still alive in this context of fear and anxiety.

Beyond that, there is the sense in which those kinds of connections enable communities, streets and sets of neighbours to develop networks of support and resilience. There is also just mundane stuff, such as borrowing a tin of tomatoes or watching a child for a couple of hours if someone needs to go out. We see that all of those things are richer and stronger on streets where children play.

Q31 **Kate Hollern:** Why would older people or people without children—



**Professor Stenning:** It is for many of those reasons. We see those residents often engaging, particularly in organised play streets. We often have examples of neighbours without children who will come out and help teach the children skills, for example fixing a bike or kicking a ball. When we have those temporary regular play streets, for example, someone has to steward the closures to make sure that cars do not drive fast down the street while the children are playing. Often people without children will take on those roles because they see the benefits of children playing on the street and the connections that are made but can do that because they do not have children.

Older people are interesting. You ask most older people and this is the experience of their environment that they would have had from their childhood. I am not going to deny that sometimes there are stories about concerns of noise, damage and so on. They are rare. In North Tyneside, where I organise play streets, we have had over 100 streets and I would have said I could count on the fingers of maybe three hands the number of serious complaints we have had over the years. By serious, I mean they have not gone away with just, "Wait and see how it goes" and then everyone generally is fine.

Largely, older people connect. They like the sound of children playing on their street. They like the connections that are made through the street. They can reminisce and teach kids how to skip and play hopscotch. Especially where there are older people who grew up on those streets, there is an enormous sense of richness, development, support and maintenance of intergenerational relationships in those contexts.

Q32 **Kate Hollern:** I think that everyone on the Committee was shocked at the impact on health. Do you think that there is enough being done to promote the benefits not only for health but for the neighbourhoods, like you discussed?

**Professor Stenning:** No.

Q33 **Kate Hollern:** If you put a note through somebody's door saying, "We want to close your street. It is going to be a play street", you would think, "What sort of reaction will I get?" It seems to me that we need to do more to promote the benefits.

**Professor Stenning:** In my experience organising streets across a borough, 80% to 90% of responses are positive. Sometimes people are very fearful that they will get a negative response, but in fact people go, "Actually, it is a few hours a month. The children are playing. They will be supervised". In the context of a play street, parents are around. They are usually at a distance but, if a ball is kicked to hit a car, responsibility will be taken. It does not happen very often. Echoing the points that were made earlier, there are enormous benefits both to the children themselves and to their wider communities from this kind of animation and playfulness on the streets. Yes, these are absolutely the messages that should be sent.



Q34 **Chair:** I have one question before I move on to the role of Government. Is there a fundamental conflict between the rights of car drivers to drive their cars and the rights of children to lead healthy and independent lives?

**Dr Bird:** We have just said that sometimes the car is the only way to get to some areas and you need the car, but the car is the biggest problem that we have in the built environment, which is making it an unsafe place. It is from not only the pollution that comes through, and even with electric cars you are still getting particulates coming from tyre rubber and other things like that, so it is not solved at all. We also know that the speed of the car and the numbers of cars actually diminish that community.

There is research going right back to the 1960s showing how the car is the single most important way of making sure that children are going to be kept away. It is too dangerous. That perception of fear from adults for their children when there are cars that are going fast or there are too many of them has, I think, been the biggest contribution. As experts here, we would say that it is a major part.

As a car owner and car driver, which I think we all are, we have to get a balance. We have to work it out. We have just heard about the research showing how children are going to become more ill and not be given the route to a healthy life if we do not do something, so we just have to sit down. The 15-minute guidance to get to green space, with a route that they can take without having to go across a busy road or something, is a key element that the Government came up with last year. It is trying to make sure that we can get that balance, but it is going to be a sit-down discussion. There has to be evidence that comes out. I think that, when people hear the evidence, it will start to help sort out this conflict, which should not really be there.

Q35 **Chair:** That is until you go on social media and people tell you there is no problem with pollution. Let us move on. We have a lot of issues this morning. Who should be addressing them? Is it central Government's or local government's job? In the case of central Government, by who and where in central Government should the issues be grappled with?

**Professor Stanning:** It is both, for sure. We have made some suggestions already. You intimated right at the start of the session that it is not clear who takes responsibility for these issues. We do not have a Secretary of State for Children separate from the Department for Education. We need to see children with a cross-governmental view, looking at all the different spheres of their everyday lives and, particularly in the context of this inquiry, in relation to the built environment. That relates clearly to this Department, but it also relates to the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and the Department for Transport, as we have just been intimating.



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I guess that many of us are asking for someone to take responsibility and to work across Government to hold in mind children's needs in their built environment. That then can be implemented or worked through in a whole variety of ways. As we have suggested, one of the most important things very early on is a clear statement of children's rights to be in their built environment, demonstrating quite how beneficial that is to children themselves and to the wider community. This is absolutely essential, vital and positive. It can be an extraordinary enriching experience for everyone who lives in these places if this is a better environment for children.

Those would be the big messages: that cross-departmental approach, with someone who has responsibility to take that on at national level, to make a clear statement and to take the lead and speak from the front, I suppose. Beyond that, there are clear issues around the planning process, the planning system, and where and how children are considered in the planning process. I know that there are experts in planning who have submitted written evidence to the inquiry.

Clearly, yes, local government has a major role as well. We have seen, as I suggested, a significant decline in the commitment to play in local authorities, often on the back of public sector cuts across the board. While local authorities have to take responsibility for this in their own communities, they can do so only if they have the support and, indeed, funding. They cannot do it on a shoestring.

**Dr Bird:** I think that you will hear from the planning team as well. Central Government can set a strategy and policy that therefore can be related then to local government to be able to implement some of that. At the moment, there is not one for children. There is not anything about that that helps local government refuse something or accept something, because there is not that guidance. We need that policy and strategy.

As I mentioned before, there is the 15-minute access to green space that has been put there. I do not know whether it is going to go to legislation. It is probably not, but that has to be kept alive and pushed forward because that will help a lot of those local communities be able to reach that green space that is so needed.

**Chair:** Thank you all very much for coming this morning and giving us some very interesting and thought-provoking evidence.

### Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Gemma Hyde, Alice Ferguson, Harriet Grant and Helen Griffiths.

Q36 **Chair:** Thank you all very much for coming. Could I ask you to go down the table and introduce yourselves and the organisations you are representing please?



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**Alice Ferguson:** I am Alice Ferguson from Playing Out. We support the national parent-led play street movement.

**Harriet Grant:** I am Harriet Grant. I am a freelance journalist and I write about play regularly for the *Guardian*.

**Helen Griffiths:** I am Helen Griffiths. I am chief executive of Fields in Trust.

**Gemma Hyde:** I am Gemma Hyde. I work for the Town and Country Planning Association.

Q37 **Chair:** I declared at the beginning of the previous session that I am a trustee of Fields in Trust, just to make sure that that is on the record in case there is any perceived conflict there. Alice Ferguson, why did you create Playing Out?

**Alice Ferguson:** We started it as parents who felt that our children were missing out on something really vital that we had all grown up with. We were probably the last generation who had grown up where playing out was a very normal part of most children's lives. It was just something that all children did and nobody gave it a huge amount of thought. We got all the benefits from that that you heard about in the first panel, all the physical activity, socialisation, friendship, mental health and feeling a sense of belonging where we lived. That was available to all children for free. It was not something that parents had to take you to or pay for. It was just there on your doorstep.

When we had our own children who were getting to the age where we had played out, we realised that things had changed very quickly and drastically for children. We did not feel happy to just accept that, so we decided to try to do something that was within our gift. We started with this play street idea that we developed on my street, me and my neighbours, and we applied to the council to get a regular road closure so that children could play out. That idea took off because we quite quickly found that parents all over the country felt the same as we did. They were also concerned that their children were not getting something very important for their health, wellbeing and development. They also wanted to do something about it. We then set up Playing Out as an organisation to support parents all over the UK and work with councils to put the policies in place that allowed it to happen.

Q38 **Chair:** There cannot be unanimous support when you embark on one of these schemes. How do you deal with the ones who say, "I do not want all this noise on my street; why can't they go and play somewhere else?"

**Alice Ferguson:** That is part of a wider problem that we heard about from the first panel. There is just not enough public understanding about the fact that children need this. It is essential to them. The odd complaint or objection to the idea of children playing out—we are only talking about maybe two hours a week or two hours a month—is symptomatic of this



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wider problem that needs to be addressed. People need to understand that, whether they like it or not, it is part of what children need.

Like Alison said earlier, it is not actually a big problem. Most people support the idea. Most people welcome it on their street. Where there are objections, usually those can be talked through and resolved.

**Q39 Chair:** Do you have to monitor the situation? If someone says, "This is going to be awful", do you go back and talk to them a few months later to ask, "Is it really awful or is it something you can live with?"

**Alice Ferguson:** Yes, quite often we have seen people do a complete U-turn. They have had the idea in their head that it is going to be awful. When they experience it, they see children outside who are really happy, healthy, enjoying themselves and making friends, and all the other neighbours enjoying that space and being in that space as well.

When they see the reality of it, people just see all this benefit. They can see it is helping to build a stronger, safer and friendlier community on their doorstep. They can see children are enjoying it and getting what they need. Quite often, we have seen people turn around and even start to volunteer to help. It happens sometimes.

**Q40 Chair:** If there were enough playgrounds or open spaces that were a 10-minute walk away, would your schemes then be necessary? Is it either/or? If one is available, do you really need your schemes?

**Alice Ferguson:** Yes. Ideally, we should not need any schemes. Ideally, longer term, all children need access to everyday play on their doorstep, and they need access to local green spaces and play spaces that they can get to easily.

There are a couple of reasons why those designated spaces do not and cannot really ever completely meet children's needs for everyday play. They also need access to the space right outside their front door. Currently, what is stopping parents from letting their children out and stopping children from having that everyday play is related to the way we have allowed the built environment to become very traffic-dominated and unsafe in other ways for children to be out there. That is what needs to be tackled and addressed.

**Q41 Chair:** You are tackling this in your community, perhaps with some support from the local authority to get road closures. Do you really need any central Government guidance on this?

**Alice Ferguson:** Yes, I would say a couple of things about that. First, in terms of the play street model, it is very simple. It is resident-led and it is supported by local authorities, but it is very dependent on the local authority getting it and feeling confident enough to put those policies in place.



We now have 100 local authorities that do have a specific play street policy. They are seeing all sorts of benefits from that for children and communities, but there are a lot of local authorities that are still cautious or reluctant to put those policies in place. We know, because councils have told us, that central Government guidance and a simplification of the legislation would hugely help them to be able to do that.

**Q42 Ian Byrne:** Can I just ask about what you are saying? Do we need a PR campaign for people to remember how they lived their lives? When you are talking, I am just thinking back. In the summer, we used to have a car park that would be a tennis court, a cricket field or a football pitch. Everybody would play out in the street on it. That was where you would go. It was a car park on the street.

People have probably forgotten how we used to utilise those sorts of areas. We are probably all of the age to be doing the moaning about the kids. Do we need a PR campaign for people to realise how lucky we were in the respect that we had that bit of freedom? It is not fair that we are blocking future generations out from that.

**Alice Ferguson:** Yes, exactly. It was something that was very taken for granted. In my childhood, like I said, nobody thought about it. Nobody has planned to get to where we are now. It has not been an intentional removal of children from public space. It is just that they have not been properly considered in policy around public space.

**Q43 Ian Byrne:** Do we need to jog people's memories?

**Alice Ferguson:** Yes, we do need to remind people that it was a very important thing for children in terms of both their health and equality. Children had access to that space, that physical activity, that everyday play and all the benefits of that for free.

**Ian Byrne:** That is what I mean. It was accepted then. It was not a big issue. If a car park now were turned into what we used to use it for, there would be uproar.

**Q44 Kate Hollern:** This is a question to Helen. In 1927, Fields in Trust first recommended setting standards for the provision of outside space for neighbourhoods to allow for different types of play. What impact has this had on the built environment?

**Helen Griffiths:** We were founded a couple of years before that. One of the drivers of Fields in Trust being founded was a recognition that there were not adequate places for children to play. The logical next step was for us to think about how to create the guidance that could help to set better conditions for outdoor sport and play.

The guidance that we have produced, which we have reiterated multiple times since the 1920s and is commonly known as the six acre standard, sets out the amount of accessible green space per head of population there should be in communities to be able to meet the needs of children,



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young people and the rest of that wider community, so that everybody has the opportunity to participate in all kinds of different elements of sport and play. That is very much in terms of both formal sports provision and informal provision of access to the kinds of spaces that we heard from the previous panel were so important for children to be able to get outside.

Almost 100 years later, it feels like that guidance and those principles are still so needed. Although that guidance exists, we are not meeting those standards. 75% of local authorities adopt the Fields in Trust guidance in their plan-making, but, in terms of what is delivered and implemented, there is a huge gap.

From our research through the green space index, we know there is only one region in the whole of England that meets the overall guidance, if we take that as a whole. There will be variations from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, and there will be areas that perform better than others, but across the board in England we are not meeting that minimum standard of green space for the number of people who need to be able to access it, especially thinking about this through the lens of children and young people.

Where we are today is only set to get worse as we look at an increasing population and increasing pressure on parks and green spaces for various reasons. Again, we have heard about some of those already in terms of both development and maintenance issues.

The guidance is incredibly helpful. It is one of the only tools that exist to guide that plan-making and think about how much space we need. It is a minimum standard that is immediately adopted as a maximum threshold. Nobody ever tries to exceed the six acre standard. As we have heard, the vast majority of places do not manage to meet the six acre standard.

It has done a huge amount to mobilise people, from the local authority through to the developer, the planner and across the built environment, to think about this and how it can be delivered, but from the headline figures and what we are seeing in practice, as I have said, there is very poor overall provision of parks and green spaces. We are not meeting the minimum standard that we should. We know that one in eight people do not have access to a private garden, and therefore access to local green space is incredibly important. We know those factors around access to green space are much more significantly felt in areas with high levels of ethnic minorities and areas of deprivation. Again, as we heard from the previous panel members, all of those issues are much more acute in terms of the lack of access to nature.

Picking up on Ian's point about a PR campaign, we are all hearing about the need for 15-minute access to blue and green space. It is a very powerful campaign. It has a lot of traction behind it. We are not hearing the same principles in terms of children's ability to have access to places





to play, which is underpinned by the amount of space that is available in communities outside of the doorstep piece.

Q45 **Kate Hollern:** Are current standards for developers and planners such as yours enough? Are they taken into account? If not, why not?

**Helen Griffiths:** They are taken into account. As I said, many local councils will make reference in their plan-making to the need to meet minimum standards of outdoor provision, but there is not enough traction for them to push developers to deliver against that.

All too often, there is a disconnect between what we are seeing in terms of local plan-making and what is being delivered and implemented on the ground. Through the design process and the planning process, there is an idea that “we are going to meet these minimum standards, and these are the kinds of spaces that are going to be delivered”, but we can probably all give examples of where the reality looks starkly different to what anybody expected to happen when they first had sight of the plan.

At the moment, there is a lack of tools available at the early stages of planning. There is a need for more guidance from central Government to force that position. Parks and green spaces are not a statutory function. That is felt very keenly in those communities. We need greater support and mobilisation in order to deliver that, and we need to make sure that we are looking at it from a long-term perspective.

This is not just about the children and young people who are using these spaces today. How are we setting that up for the future so these spaces are permanently protected and we know we have provision within the built environment for children to access those spaces?

Q46 **Mrs Elphicke:** That leads quite nicely into my segment of questions on this. When we are looking at the planning process, just reflecting particularly on those remarks, I am very interested about the extent to which we look at improving existing connectivity as opposed to saying, “There a new development. What are we going to do?”

Within the plan-making process and particularly the NPPF—Gemma, I appreciate that you have a lot of expertise in this—what more could be done to make sure that we are thinking about that connectivity of place and access to play?

**Gemma Hyde:** It is really about making sure that there is a clear vision within the planning policy that places need to be connected. It is about the local authority having that view of not only that red-line boundary where the development is taking place but also how that sits within the wider context of that neighbourhood, village or town. It is not just about what falls within the red line but that connectivity piece.

That is the view that the developer may not have, but the local authority and the planning team can have that view, thinking about the expertise within their own highways departments and things like that, to make sure



either that connections are created or sometimes that the opportunity is taken to reconnect places.

It is also about casting ahead. If we think that development may one day step beyond that, we need to make sure that the framework of connection for beyond is also thought about. It is having that wider and longer-term view about making sure places are connected.

- Q47 **Mrs Elphicke:** Clearly, within the overall local plan-making process, there is the ability for a local authority to think in that strategic way. Are there sufficient powers for the local planning authority to implement and particularly assign elements of the funding to the wider connectivity vision that you have described, specifically for access to space and play?

**Gemma Hyde:** It is a very difficult context for local authorities in terms of resourcing and expertise. Everyone is probably thinking that. Whether or not the local plan is in place is a huge issue, alongside how up-to-date it is and how much it reflects not only what exists in the NPPF at the moment but the wider things that might be locally specific or a local priority.

It is a very variable picture. It really depends on which part of the country you are talking about as to how well that is thought about and implemented. The answer is yes in some places and no in others.

- Q48 **Mrs Elphicke:** The framework is there, but it might not be being implemented, so there is a differential impact.

**Gemma Hyde:** Planners and councillors want to create great places. That is absolutely true. Sometimes we are asking them to do it with two hands tied behind their backs.

- Q49 **Mrs Elphicke:** That is a broader conversation on which we have certainly touched in Committee work. Looking specifically at that practical aspect of turning the good wishes and goodwill into on-the-ground change, there are a couple of things I want to explore.

Children are barely mentioned in the NPPF. Although family housing provision was very much part of the affordable housing consideration, I have observed that there has been a rather unattractive—I am going to put my cards on the table—creeping trend of new gated communities denying access to people who are not resident there, including in the housing association movement, and excluding the wider community.

Is there is a case for a planning presumption that you should not create a new gated or exclusionary community where you are creating a playground or open space that you are recognising is important?

**Gemma Hyde:** I would say yes.

**Mrs Elphicke:** I see lots of nods there, so I am going to open that out to the panel.

**Gemma Hyde:** This is probably more in Harriet's area of expertise.



**Harriet Grant:** Yes, there is definitely a move towards that. Interestingly, where estates are being built, a lot of children would have come from around the area. That would have been considered normal. The type of play that people had would have been community-wide.

I have seen that replaced with signs saying “only for people who live in this estate”, even where there is not a gated area. It is considered antisocial to be a teenager from another estate playing there. That restricts the way children and teenagers would naturally play together. They would not think with those sorts of barriers.

The wider point there is that we are siloing play. We are saying, “Play can happen here, and it cannot happen there”. The more that happens, the more restrictions are placed on what children can do.

**Alice Ferguson:** On the social housing side, we work quite closely with social housing providers, including Clarion, the biggest social housing provider. They are very aware that currently the norm in terms of management practices around outside space is to prevent children from using that space.

The good ones are wanting to address that and do something about it. Currently, even when suitable and safe space is available on children’s doorsteps, they are sometimes being prevented from using it. Those “no ball games” signs are still universally used in social housing. That is giving this message that children are not welcome in that space and encouraging the idea that people can complain about children being in that space, whether or not they are playing with a ball.

We think there is also a need for national guidance aimed at housing providers around how to better manage the space they do have.

Q50 **Mrs Elphicke:** We might just need some better practice from housing providers. They do not need to be told to do it.

**Alice Ferguson:** Lots of them want to do it, but they feel like they are a bit out there on their own. Some Government support would help.

Q51 **Mrs Elphicke:** Leadership is never a bad thing. Helpfully, that touches on an issue around management. Again, within the planning process we have seen the lack of adoption of roads, as well as green spaces, playgrounds and community facilities in larger developments.

This is a similar sort of question. Specifically on the management side, how can this be practically addressed so the management of spaces long term is taken into account fully for the benefit of children who might be growing up and connected to that area outside the development?

**Harriet Grant:** I will maybe give an example of what happens when people try to stand up for children. By the time it reaches me, there are reams and reams of emails, letters, calls and attempts to resolve this. No one comes to a journalist first. I am always a last resort. People do not



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want to be in the papers, particularly about their own street or their children. In fact, looking through my stories, it is noticeable how many people were scared to be named because it is such a frightening thing to stand up to your housing association.

There is no clear written rule saying that children have a right to play. People have gone to 10 different people. There is an ignorance among people running housing organisations that they can say that children can play. Often the first response is, "We have heard your children are playing. Can you make it stop?" That is quite common. They do not say, "Should we open a process and hear this and hear this?" It is just, "Could you stop, please?"

It is only the people who really push back who end up having any sort of publicity around it and then it becomes a story of an injustice. People say they feel powerless; they feel pushed from pillar to post. They say there is nothing to lean on or rely on when they stand up for children playing.

**Q52 Mrs Elphicke:** Yet we have heard that it makes so much sense. It is such an integral part of human development, human interaction and community.

Finally—I am afraid all of these are very practical—in terms of bringing forward developments, it often is the case that there will be open spaces or playgrounds designed in going forward as part of the planning process, but it will usually be one of the last things to be completed. Particularly if the social and affordable element has been delivered first or early on in the programme, there will be families living there while it is put into a housing development. In my own constituency we have a development where there are lots of people living there, but the playground for the children is some way into the future in the phasing.

Within the context of the national planning policy framework, should greater guidance be given to how and when green spaces and playgrounds are delivered within the actual development?

**Gemma Hyde:** There could be greater guidance. There are sites that do it well, but often they are the larger sites, such as where you have a master developer that can bring forward into the programme the opening up of the parks, to make sure they are there and that the community facilities are there.

When the school opens is also a huge issue for people. If the school opens before much of the housing, the school gets filled up with children from outside that area. When people move in, they cannot actually get their child into their local school. There are a lot of challenges around the phasing of development. Certainly, learning from good practice and any guidance on that would be useful.

If I could also come back to that long-term stewardship point, it is really important that, right from the very beginning, when you are planning a green space, if you are planning a park or planning to put trees along a



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street, you think about the management structure for that. Who is going to look after it? How is it going to be paid for?

We need to spend a lot more time considering more innovative community structures for the maintenance and long-term stewardship of these spaces. That is something that certainly came through in the garden city model. There are other ways of doing it that perhaps we are not exploring as much as we should be in the face of less money from central Government.

**Alice Ferguson:** On the question about whether there should be clearer guidance and standards, yes. We have seen the results of leaving things to the goodwill of housing developers and social housing providers. Unfortunately, it means a very patchy situation for children. Generally, their needs are not a high priority. They are not considered. It is really important to have national standards that make it very clear that there is a duty on any housing providers, private or social, to consider and meet children's needs for access to outside space.

**Helen Griffiths:** I was just going to reiterate that point, really. A gear shift is needed, in that we should refuse to accept the current position where parks and green space, the facility that sits at the end of the process, is at the end of the process and the bottom of the agenda.

At the moment, we are making it very clear that we do not really value it. We do not think it is important. We are not giving it the profile or priority that it needs, despite everything we have heard about how significant that element is. Until we can redress that priority and that culture shift around the profile and the place that has on the agenda, it will be very difficult to make that change.

I would completely echo Gemma's points. We are looking at such a significant decline in funding for local authorities. There has been a £350 million real-terms cut since 2010 in parks and green space facilities maintenance, which includes all kinds of play facilities. It is hardly any wonder that those facilities are in decline, have been neglected, are no longer being maintained to the level they should and therefore are also increasingly vulnerable to development.

Those small spaces in between, which are not those destination playgrounds or those well-funded multifacility spaces, are some of the places that are so important for all the things that we are talking about today. They are the things that have the least advocacy and the least championing happening for them because of that lack of accountability that has already been mentioned.

**Q53 Chair:** We will come on to the local responsibilities, and then we will follow up with some national policy issues. At the local level who is responsible for ensuring that there is enough outdoor spaces and places for children to go and play? In looking at that, how should the voice of children be heard?



**Alice Ferguson:** There is a general problem. The same problem in national Government now exists in local government. In most local authorities, there is no one who has overall responsibility for children's play or children in the built environment. In the same way, nobody in Government is responsible for that. Children are not really a consideration in Government policy outside of education at the moment. That needs to change. Ideally, local authorities need to be resourced to have somebody there who will take that responsibility.

**Harriet Grant:** When writing about these issues, I have struggled to find people who would say it was their responsibility. I wrote about playground cuts. I approached the Department for Levelling Up and was told, "It is nothing to do with us. Go to the Department for Education", but I know the Department for Education has no responsibility for playgrounds in parks. Who does? It seems like something that nobody thinks they are responsible for.

At local level, there has been what someone described to me as a total decimation of play expertise within councils. You would have had a play officer who might have had a team. They would have run play services. That has all completely gone now. There is no expertise and understanding of play and why it matters.

**Alice Ferguson:** There are some good examples where local authorities have voluntarily decided to prioritise this. Leeds City Council is probably the gold standard at the moment. It has appointed a play sufficiency officer to oversee that, but it has done that voluntarily. It has decided that that is a high priority because children's health and wellbeing is a high priority. It is not easy or possible for all councils to do that at the moment.

Q54 **Chair:** Unless a particular problem occurs, where there is a complaint about children doing something, a community demand for a new sports pitch or something, how is the voice of children fed into these processes? Is it effectively just not being fed in?

**Alice Ferguson:** It is not. Children, amazingly, are not a statutory equalities group. Nobody has to consult with them. That feels like a very clear underlying problem. Even though age is a protected characteristic in the Equality Act, that can be applied to children only in the realm of employment. In terms of planning or any environmental policy, children's voice and children's needs do not have to be considered.

**Harriet Grant:** That means they are not a priority when they are compared to the other competing interests that will come in at planning, such as cars or people who want peace and quiet. A lot of people will say, "It just did not feel like a priority when we were pushing for children".

Q55 **Ian Byrne:** This is to Gemma to begin with. Does it matter that children and young people are not included in the national planning policy framework? I did note that bats are included more than children. As



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much as I love bats, I would have thought children should have a higher priority.

**Gemma Hyde:** In the written evidence you received, probably 80% of your submissions will have pointed out to you that children are mentioned once in the framework whereas even lorry parking makes it in twice. Young people are not mentioned at all. There is not a single mention of young people.

Everything you have heard absolutely stems from this issue. There is not a central prioritisation of children and young people in the built environment. It is not flowing down from the top, and at the moment it is certainly not flowing from the bottom back up.

As you have heard, place shapes us. Where we are born, where we grow up, where we play and where we live, work and age really has an influence on how long we live and how many years we live in good health. That is linked to many things. It is linked to housing; it is linked to stable jobs; it is linked to green space and air quality.

We know that places shape us. The big question is, "What is shaping the places?" That is where the national planning policy framework should have a clear purpose. What is the purpose of planning? It should be to create places where people and the planet thrive.

Q56 **Ian Byrne:** Just for the purpose of the recommendations within the report—the Chair touched on the ambiguity of who has responsibility for this—it is really important for recommendations to come forward that install children at the heart of what we are talking about here.

I have listened to what you have just touched on now. I do not know whether anyone heard William Bird's evidence. It was staggering, was it not? It is all verified evidence about the importance of this. This is fundamentally a huge public health crisis. We laugh that children are mentioned less than bats, but it is not a laughing matter, is it?

**Gemma Hyde:** No.

**Ian Byrne:** How do we ensure, as you said, that we have accountability and that influence?

**Gemma Hyde:** A Secretary of State for Children would be a really great first step. That should be outside the Department for Education because we know education is a huge policy area that needs a lot of attention, but children's lives and all the things that touch on that are also really important.

If the Government have a stated commitment to promote, protect and realise children's rights, that should flow into everything that the Government are thinking about in a really holistic way. Having health in general and children and young people specifically mentioned and prioritised in national planning policy would be a good place to start.



That would mean that local authorities could take all of this wonderful guidance and express that locally in a way that makes sense, based around local priorities. If you have really high childhood obesity levels, and you know that because your public health team are telling you, it might be that you take that as a priority in your planning and you make sure you create places that children can be active in and think about children's everyday activity levels to help meet some of those challenges

**Q57 Ian Byrne:** I completely agree. You are talking to the converted from my perspective. It is an investment in the future of the country. That is how it should be seen. There is talk about universal free school meals. That is a conversation for another time, but the Minister for Children should be at the heart of the decision-making there.

**Gemma Hyde:** Last week, the Health and Social Care Committee launched its report from its inquiry into healthy places. These two things are completely interconnected. I would really recommend to the Committee, if you have not seen it, to take a look at that as well. It is absolutely fundamental.

It is fundamental for our society, for the NHS budget—they were looking at that angle—for the criminal justice budget and for all the things we should be thinking about, such as climate resilience. That is why somebody needs to look at it overall, not just in these piecemeal bits that are not going to help us.

**Helen Griffiths:** I was just going to say exactly that. We need to take a cross-departmental approach. That is what we are not seeing at the moment. I have had very many similar experiences to Harriet, where I have been trying to talk to multiple Departments. You get passed from place to place. It is an ongoing carousel because everybody thinks it is someone else's responsibility.

**Ian Byrne:** I have the same problem.

**Helen Griffiths:** That is what we would all really hope to see from that role: accountability and somebody who can champion this point. We absolutely need it.

**Ian Byrne:** That is a clear recommendation.

**Harriet Grant:** There is an urgency to this. It is really interesting that people bring up their own childhood experiences. When the *Guardian* did a call-out and asked, "What barriers do your children face?" we had about 200 replies. Everyone who replied remembered playing outside, but for the generation growing up now it is not normal. Most children do not. The freedom to step out and play will be a folk memory.

**Alice Ferguson:** Even though it has been talked about a lot already, it is so important to realise the level of seriousness about what is going on at the moment with children's health and wellbeing. We cannot carry on trying to deal with that with sticking plasters. We have to look at what





has fundamentally gone wrong with children's lives. They are not getting the physical activity that they need; they are not happy and healthy. The children at the poorest end of society are suffering significantly more from that. It is a very uneven situation.

**Q58 Ian Byrne:** I am going to stick with you because you have touched on the statutory elements of it. Again, it would be really good to have a clear recommendation from you and the group about how you see that working in terms of that consideration and decision-making.

**Alice Ferguson:** Do you mean making children a statutory—

**Ian Byrne:** Yes.

**Alice Ferguson:** I do not know what the mechanism for that would be. We might need to look at an amendment to the Equality Act. I am not a legal expert. We need to realise the seriousness of this issue.

**Ian Byrne:** We need to put children at the heart of decision-making.

**Alice Ferguson:** Yes, exactly. We need to use children as a lens to look at all policy-making and all policy areas, particularly around the public realm and the built environment. That includes planning, transport and housing across the board.

**Q59 Ian Byrne:** That is a very good point. I will go back to you Gemma, just to finish. If children and young people were included in the NPPF, what impact would that have on local plans? How could local authorities consider young children in policy and decision-making?

**Gemma Hyde:** We have already touched on how local plans are that local expression of planning policy. Quite rightly, it could look a little different depending on where you are.

There are ways of including the consideration of children and making policy with children. There are tools to do that. There is a childhood version of the Place Standard tool, which helps explore children's experience of their place, what they want from it and what their aspirations for their place are. There is also a youth engagement tool called Voice, Opportunity, Power, which people could use.

It would bring into thinking about the design of places what children and young people need. Really importantly, lots and lots of those things, if not all of them, are also good for everybody else. In Canada, there is this idea of an 8-80 approach. If you plan a place for an eight-year-old, it is likely to be a really great place for an 80-year-old. It is about putting that sort of thinking behind what we are doing in the design process for places.

It is not an afterthought. We are not doing something and then thinking, "What do the kids want?" It is right there and embedded from the very beginning.



Q60 **Ian Byrne:** That is a really good point. This is a question for all of you, but I will go to Harriet first. What would you like the Government to do to go towards overcoming the barriers that currently prevent children from playing outdoors and being active?

**Harriet Grant:** There has to be some sort of legislation that children's right to play is recognised. Just as an example, in New Cross they were building new homes. They took the playground, the only play space, to store construction stuff. Seven years later, it is still there. The children have nowhere to play. At every single stage there was nothing to stop that happening.

There should not have been a situation where they could have done it in the first place and it could have taken them so long to fix. People feel like there is no recourse or comeback when people do the wrong things when it comes to children. There is very little outcome if you break the rules or do not provide what you said you would, such as building a playground. I have seen developers not provide one. They just wait for the storm to blow over because they know nothing will happen.

**Ian Byrne:** That is a good point.

**Alice Ferguson:** There are some quick wins that the Government could help with. Supporting play streets nationally would be one, so removing the barriers to local authorities implementing a play street policy. Some sort of national guidance on "no ball games" signs and the management of space around social housing could also be quite a quick win.

In the longer term, we could look at how the Welsh and Scottish Governments have incorporated children's rights more fully into their law and a play sufficiency duty into their planning systems. There are already models there that we could follow. There is a lot that the Government could do, if this was understood and taken seriously, and if there was some sort of cross-departmental approach to tackling it.

Q61 **Ian Byrne:** On the different models from across the UK, Gemma, is there anything that you would highlight that this Government should maybe be looking at?

**Gemma Hyde:** National Planning Framework 4 in Scotland is a much more holistic approach to place-making. It considers health and there is a place sufficiency duty attached to that, which is very good. The Welsh have the future generations Act, which just flips the conversation. It makes sure that we think about what we are doing and the impacts of that on the built environment, as well as many other things, in terms of what that is going to mean for future children.

My only caveat to that would be that we should not forget the children we have now. The short-term actions are also really important.

Q62 **Ian Byrne:** Helen, just to finish, we have been talking on a national level. Is there any good practice in terms of what we have seen from



local authorities on protecting green spaces? Is there anything from a Fields in Trust perspective that you would like to talk about?

**Helen Griffiths:** Being able to look with local authorities and strategically identify where there is poor provision is part of what we do. It is something we have been working on in Liverpool for the past couple of years. You have been involved with that. It has been such a different way of thinking about where spaces are going to make the biggest impact on the people who need it most and how we set about a programme of activity that makes sure that we protect those spaces in perpetuity.

We need to understand where there is a dearth of provision. We have all the data and evidence to look at that in really granular detail and understand where access to green space is very poor. We need to think about what clear actions we can take in conjunction with local authorities. If a place efficiency duty was built into that assessment piece, it would be game-changing in terms of what we could deliver for those communities.

Q63 **Ian Byrne:** I just want to touch on something that really struck me before. We all have the big identifiable parks within cities, but sometimes it is a small piece of green space within a local community or a housing estate that is absolutely precious and vital.

**Helen Griffiths:** They are absolutely precious and far more vulnerable to potential development. Those spaces do not get investment; they are vulnerable to development. In terms of the freedom to roam, the space where you do something you were not intending to do and having that experience of childhood freedom, they are so important. They are absolutely not getting the profile.

**Ian Byrne:** They need to be protected.

**Gemma Hyde:** They are vulnerable. In a brownfield-first environment, those informal spaces that are not on anyone's radar as important to local children and young people, and for play, are particularly vulnerable.

Q64 **Ian Byrne:** That is where local authorities can really flex their muscles and identify spaces.

**Harriet Grant:** It is more than not being on their radar. There is sometimes a disdain for the way they are used. It is not recognised and respected when people try to point it out.

**Alice Ferguson:** It is just as important to remember that it is not just about green spaces and those designated spaces for play. Most children live on streets. That is the space immediately outside their front door. It needs to be safe and it needs to be welcoming. That has to be led by Government. Making streets safe has to be a higher priority. That would benefit everybody.

Q65 **Mrs Elphicke:** Have you had any engagement from the Children's Commissioner?



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**Alice Ferguson:** The previous Children's Commissioner published a report called *Playing Out*. The current Children's Commissioner did a big survey of children quite soon after she came into office. That is really good evidence that this is what children want.

Q66 **Mrs Elphicke:** Have you engaged?

**Alice Ferguson:** Yes.

Q67 **Mrs Elphicke:** Harriet, have you reached out to the different Government Departments? Bearing in mind that it is the legal responsibility of the Children's Commissioner to be the voice of children in Government, I have not heard anyone in the session mention the Children's Commissioner.

**Harriet Grant:** The previous one did get involved when there were segregated playgrounds.

Q68 **Mrs Elphicke:** Could the Children's Commissioner have more of a role, then?

**Alice Ferguson:** Yes, but that does not replace the need for somebody in the Cabinet who has a responsibility for that.

Q69 **Mrs Elphicke:** No, you were talking about statutory consultees and bodies. There is in fact someone. In submissions, we have had a number of comments suggesting that no one is looking out for children, including the Children's Minister. I just wanted to explore the role of the Children's Commissioner because I thought it was interesting. Does that role need to be refined or made more effective?

**Gemma Hyde:** Looking at the business plan for the Children's Commissioner, the built environment does not feature particularly highly. There is perhaps more of a role for the Children's Commissioner.

**Mrs Elphicke:** That is really helpful. Thank you.

**Chair:** Thank you all very much for coming. It has been absolutely fascinating. I have been on the Select Committee for a long time, and this has been one of the most interesting sessions I have had. The two panels this morning have raised these issues in a way that I had not necessarily thoroughly understood them.

Of course, I am also starting to regress back and think about my own experience—it was a long time ago—of playing football and cricket in the street. At that time, the only time we had to stop for a few minutes was when the ice cream van arrived because it was the only vehicle we saw all day. That was the difference. It was not all sweetness and light. I still remember taking turns to see who would go and knock on the door of Mrs Scatchard's house when the ball went in her garden.

Anyway, that was really great. There is a lot of information there for us to take account of. We are going to have an interesting time as a



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Committee pulling a report together on these very important issues. Thank you very much for coming. That has been really appreciated.