



# Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee

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

Monday 26 February 2024

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Ian Byrne; Mrs Natalie Elphicke; Tom Hunt; Andrew Lewer; Mary Robinson; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 70 - 113

### Witnesses

[I](#): Tim Gill, Researcher and author of 2021 RIBA book, Urban Playground; Dinah Bornat, Co-Director, ZCD Architects.

[II](#): Jo McCafferty, Director, Levitt Bernstein; Jonny Anstead, Founding Director, TOWN; Sarah Scannell, Assistant Director Planning, Birmingham City Council.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Tim Gill and Dinah Bornat.

**Chair:** Welcome, everyone, to this afternoon's session of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee. This afternoon we have a second session on the inquiry we are doing into children, young people and the built environment, looking at how the planning system, development and provision of facilities are geared up or not geared up to the needs and interests of children and young people. Before I come to our first panel of witnesses—we have two panels this afternoon—I ask Committee members to put on record any interests they have that may be directly relevant. I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

**Mohammad Yasin:** I am a member of Bedford town deal board and employ a councillor in my constituency office.

**Tom Hunt:** I am a member of Ipswich town deal board and I employ two councillors in my office.

Q70 **Chair:** Thank you for that. Welcome to both witnesses. Would you like to introduce yourselves, say who you are and who you represent today?

**Tim Gill:** My name is Tim Gill. I am an independent researcher, writer and consultant. All my work focuses on children's outdoor play and mobility. I used to work for what is now PlayEngland, but I went independent nearly 20 years ago. Among other things, I am the author of a book called "Urban Playground: How Child-Friendly Planning and Design Can Save Cities", which draws on the experiences of a number of cities in making their built environment more child friendly.

**Dinah Bornat:** I am Dinah Bornat. I am an architect and I run a practice called ZCD Architects in London. We have six employees. We are architects and designers. We do lots of different types of housing and regeneration, and our expertise is around child-friendly planning. That is for design and engagement with children and young people.

Q71 **Chair:** Thank you both for coming this afternoon. What are the key issues you have identified from your research over many years, looking at these particular challenges around children and young people, and what they have or have not been provided with? What are the key issues you would like to draw out for us at the beginning of our discussions today?

**Tim Gill:** I want to flag up the importance of mobility in all of this. How do children get around their neighbourhood? When you talk to almost anybody about neighbourhoods, housing, built environment and kids, you will often immediately get drawn into conversations about playgrounds—"Yes, we need more play areas." I am not saying play areas and play facilities are not important, but the evidence from the science about how you get more children out and active is pretty clear. The most important



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factors influencing what makes neighbourhoods places where children can go out, spend time outdoors and play are to do with mobility and transport. They are to do with children being able to walk easily around their neighbourhoods and, crucially, being safe from the threat of traffic. That is a really clear finding from places all around the world.

The other finding I want to share is about how we get change. The cities and countries that are most effective in making neighbourhoods work better for children really see children as a prism or a lens for the whole of the planning system. It is a strategic question that is taken seriously. A focus on children both makes concrete what good places look like—they are walkable, compact, green and welcoming—and helps build consensus and a long-term, robust vision about what good places look and feel like.

When we think about children, we cannot help but think about the whole of their lives. You heard a lot in the first hearing about all of the bad stuff that happens when planning does not work for children and it casts a shadow over their whole life. If we can get that right and get the different stakeholders who shape neighbourhoods to think about children strategically from the outset, then we can build a stronger long-term consensus, and one that is less at risk of being pushed hither and thither by short-term economic considerations or other factors. It helps to consolidate a vision.

***Dinah Bornat:*** I have been working in this area for about 10 years. We started doing some research about 10 years ago because we were very interested in this idea that Tim talks about of child-friendly design. The question that we asked was, “What does that mean in terms of architecture, urbanism, planning and layouts?”

The first thing that we did, with the support of Homes England, was a piece of work looking at 10 housing estates across England. Homes England was concerned with how its housing developments were performing. It wanted to know whether the layout of the development was working from a social perspective, because the investment in new developments is not just about numbers. It is about getting the layout right so that people enjoy where they live, feel they can lead healthy lives and so on.

For that piece of work, we did what are called observational studies. I got researchers to stand in open spaces in housing estates and count how many people were using the spaces. We discovered that there was a really big difference in terms of the different kinds of layouts. The biggest finding, from our perspective, was that spaces that worked well not only worked for children—children would be outside using the external spaces for hours—but also worked for adults. There is a really strong link between good social use of space and use by children.

When that worked really well, there was one particular thing in place. There was space outside your front door or outside your back door where you could tumble out of your house, go and play, and meet friends. That



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was the determining factor. It is what we basically call doorstep play. It is what a lot of us might have had when we were younger, when the cars were not there, and it is what works for children. We did over 250 hours of observational work. We then built on that and started to talk to residents. The conversations we had with residents, particularly with children and young people, really chimed with that.

We have a mapping system now that you can use. You can use it at a very early stage for capacity studies that developers carry out. Essentially, it looks for good layouts, and that direct accessibility is the key tenet. On top of that, you need to think about the whole strategic layout of the space, the way those spaces might be connected to other spaces, whether they are car-free and whether they are overlooked. We did find, like Tim says, that distinct play areas were not particularly popular. The play equipment was not the determining factor about whether children went out at all. It was really about whether there were spaces for them to play with their friends.

Like Tim says, it is this idea that they could move around and call on friends. I can come to this in a bit. That built strong communities. In fact, you could have this conversation with anybody you know. You can ask them to describe the spaces that they grew up in or live in now, and you will find a really strong connection between this idea of doorstep space and access to countryside or the ability to walk to school. It starts with that first stepping stone outside the front door. Unfortunately, it is not how a vast majority of the developments are laid out.

**Q72 Chair:** We will perhaps come on to explore why not, but I have one simple question. Are these issues you have just described, which might seem self-evidently true to people listening, not taken account of simply because adults are selfish?

**Dinah Bornat:** That is probably true. There is also a lack of conversation in this area. One of the easiest ways to get people thinking about childhood is to not think about children today, your own children or other people's children. It is to think about your own childhood. It turns out that all of us, if we did play out as children, hold on to that memory so strongly. I do workshops and stuff, where I offer them some money for that memory and they say, "You are not buying it off me. It is so central to who I am as a human being that I would not let go of it."

I pose the question, "Why not give that to this next generation?" and the penny drops. It is that penny drop moment, where they go, "Of course, but I thought it was playgrounds and so on." It's like, "No; it is what you had. It is that experience, to be able to be free." That is what children are looking for today. If you ask them, they are more interested in playing out than they are in their mobile phones. You just need to ask.

**Tim Gill:** I would agree. It is not so much selfishness as having lost touch with some things. Once we remind ourselves of our childhoods, we reconnect with those emotions. In particular, it is about the importance of



feeling that you have a stake in the community that you live in, that you have a claim over the people and places beyond your home and school, and that you can explore and gradually spread further afield. With grown-ups, those emotions can recede because they are crowded out by our more pressing concerns. That is a different thing than selfishness. It is the loss of an emotional connection, but you can rebuild those connections in adults.

**Q73 Chair:** Talking about connections, let us move on quickly to Government. What connections have you had with them? It is interesting; when the Permanent Secretary spoke to us recently, there did not seem to be much connection within Government about these matters. It is probably “pass the parcel” when it comes to which Department is responsible. Probably many are responsible, but it was a pretty stark admission that she did not know whether DLUHC and the Department for Education had been talking to each other about these matters. Is that a concern? Is that your experience?

**Dinah Bornat:** Yes, it is really concerning. Like I said, I was connected to Homes England at the beginning and I was really encouraged that it wanted to help carry out that study. I should say that Homes England did not commission it—it was paid for by the NHBC—but Homes England did help make it happen. Since then, there has been no real interest. I have not seen what the Permanent Secretary said, but this connection is needed across Departments.

Did you say the Department for Education? It is also the Department of Health, the Department for Transport, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. All of these are interconnected issues. I work on development projects where highways and health impact assessments are required at a local level. Those connections need to be made. The fact that the conversations are not being had at a national level seems crazy. Government really does need to get involved.

**Tim Gill:** That has certainly been my experience. A huge problem right now, as Dinah said, is that there is no obvious lead Department or lead unit for this topic. Having served a few months in the civil service back in the day on secondment, looking at children’s play in the early 2000s, I know how important it is to just know who I go to and who I can ask. That is a problem.

There is some interest within some non-departmental public bodies, such as Homes England. Sport England is becoming quite interested in children’s outdoor play as part of its active lifestyle brief and active partnerships work. I have had some contact with it on that, but it is often dependent on one or two individual officials. It is not strategic, it is not embedded and it is very at the whim of that person and their superiors, as to whether anything gets seen through. We really need a clarity about who within Government—not just at a political level, but at the level of officials and agencies—is tackling this issue.



Q74 **Chair:** In terms of political responsibility, the Town and Country Planning Association has previously suggested that we should have a Secretary of State for children. Is that necessary? Would that be a solution?

**Tim Gill:** We talked about that. It is a good idea and it is kind of scandalous that there is not one, but my hunch is that the problem with children and the built environment is a level or two down. It is about having someone within DLUHC or within the Office for Place who is closer to the action and to how planning policy gets shaped. Yes, a Secretary of State for children gives you a route back up into Cabinet, but you still need those links in the chain of command to reach into the Government Departments and agencies that really have an influence on housing and neighbourhoods.

**Dinah Bornat:** I would agree with that. Having somebody in DLUHC would send a very strong message. I am concerned, when I see the latest permitted development suggestions, that the needs of children are being completely ignored. It is frightening, really, to think that we are putting children in housing and accommodation for long periods of time that would not pass normal housing design guidance.

I do not know whether you know this—because even our industry is not fully aware—but when you count the standard sizes for temporary and emergency accommodation, babies are not counted. They are physically not seen as a person. Effectively, you can house a single parent in a room that is big enough for a single person, but they have their baby there with them, with no space for a cot and nowhere to crawl around. Just on a really simple level, the damage that must be causing that child, that parent and that family in the short term and in the long term is profound.

We are rushing through permitted development legislation without thinking about the impact that it is having on children in the here and now, and in the long term. We would not be so quick to talk about these things if we did not have the thought of children and babies in our mind's eye when we were doing that sort of thing.

Q75 **Mary Robinson:** I am intrigued by the discussion around the way people used to play and the way that they play now, and the work you are doing in scrutiny. Many years ago, people felt safer and children felt safe being out and able to roam. To what extent have you looked at the perception and the reality of safety in your work?

**Dinah Bornat:** That is a really interesting question, because we do need to look back at some of the housing policy of previous decades. In the 1950s and 1960s, there was quite a strong emphasis on housing standards and sizes under Parker Morris, which was then scrapped. As you might know, more recently, those things have crept back in. In London, we have the "London Housing Design Guide".



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What the UK was really famous for—and still is—is the adventure playground movement and playable landscapes. There was a very positive attitude towards children being let outside to play, although there have always been concerns about safety. That is definitely not a new issue. Those concerns have changed, and, with cars, that is a very real issue, but there was definitely a much clearer consensus from national Government that these were important parts of housing layouts.

Where we are now, we have sort of lost sight of that a bit. We have some very prescriptive standards around play equipment and playgrounds. There are issues that now concern parents with liability and having their children unsupervised. Really, a lot of the conversations are not really common sense. Most people would agree that the idea of children being outside as often as they can be, in the natural landscape, playing, exercising and doing all those things, is a good thing, but we do not seem to have worked out how to do that, to still allow that to happen and to keep them safe.

There are things like the creep of this idea of anti-social behaviour, which is often levelled at teenagers—who actually just want to play outside as well and are prevented from doing so—or the secure-by-design measures, which really go against the natural way that children might move around and play. The conversation just does not happen together. We get very worried about safety, but without thinking about what that means for our own freedom. We need to have this conversation together. We need to think about challenges with “No ball games” signs and all of that. We really need to unpick it from the child’s perspective.

**Tim Gill:** If I could take the point on, there is actually quite a good news story around safety and perceptions of safety on the very specific topic of playgrounds and playground design, which is a topic I have been deeply immersed in for well over 20 years.

In short, the story was that, around the late 1990s, there was a huge focus on safety in playgrounds, almost to the exclusion of every other question and to the point where even playground safety experts were saying, “We are building playgrounds that are so monumentally boring that any self-respecting child will go and play somewhere else.” Things had got to a very bad state. Those of us in the industry, of whom I was one, realised that this was not good, and we had some tricky conversations. When you have child safety organisations in the room, alongside play workers and designers, it takes a while, but we reached a position where we argued for a balanced approach. You cannot just treat safety in isolation. You have to think about child development and the value for children of giving them some freedom.

Not only did we get that consensus, but a few years later we got the Health and Safety Executive to issue a statement in support of it. That is the key that has unlocked that topic and stopped that pendulum from swinging any further. The 2012 high-level statement from the Health and



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Safety Executive has opened the door not just to better playgrounds but, for instance, there are creative programmes running in schools now, in school playtimes, almost like the old adventure playgrounds from the 1960s and 1970s. School leaders are okay about that. Of course, they are worried about liability, litigation and parents' concerns, but what helped them to make that step into allowing children to have more freedom in playtime was that leadership from the Health and Safety Executive.

There is a really valuable lesson there. We do not always have to follow the culture or the debates around safety. It is possible to help to shape those debates.

**Q76 Tom Hunt:** It is an interesting point that you made about memories of play and how important they are. I moved around quite a lot when I was growing up and I seem to remember living in this one place for a very long period of time. I was reminded that I only lived there for one year, but it felt like I lived there for about three or four because that was where I played the most. That just struck me, when you said that. It opened my eyes to how important this inquiry is, in a way, which is very helpful.

What does good and effective engagement of children and young people look like in practice, when considering the built environment?

**Dinah Bornat:** We have been working in this area for a while now. It is really good to hear what you just said about your childhood. I will come in a minute to similar conversations that I have had with people, but the best engagement starts at a policy-making level, at a local plan-making level—a strategic point where you are really trying to listen to local children and young people about how they are using their local area. Which bits work—like you just described—and which bits do not work? You have to get under the skin of that. It is very rare that we see that kind of work happening and being embedded into local plan-making.

After that point is when the development industry comes in. They need to start engaging with children and young people before they start drawing any plans up, before they start deciding where the housing is going to go or where the schools are going to go, depending on the size of the project. Local people have worked out that box-ticking engagement does not work. Actually listening to people's lived experience, and listening to children and young people's lived experience, is eye-opening, in terms of working out how a space works.

It would be interesting if you spoke to your parents about their experience at the time, but what we hear from young people is that they are really engaged in their local area. In fact, we have a young person who has come along with us today, who was really keen to witness this inquiry. We have been working with them at Earl's Court, where we have a group of people ranging from 14 up to 80. We are working in an intergenerational group and I can tell you now that the adults really enjoy





having the young people there, listening to their needs and their wishes. That has been really transformative for everybody involved.

Another project we are working on is reaching out to parents and carers of under-fives and listening to their needs. They are often really isolated. They feel like, at that point of their lives, they barely have an opportunity to get together with other people. I am really encouraged in this area. We have had a big impact, considering the size of our practice, and there are awards now around really good engagement with young people.

I go abroad and I talk about the work that we do. In a way, the UK should be proud of some of the engagement work that has come out of our democratic process. You would think it is all going on in Scandinavia and Holland, and there are some good examples that Tim will talk about in a minute, but I am really proud of the engagement that happens in the UK. We need to not rely on good developers. There are plenty of good private developers, as well as local authorities, that want to do this, but there are not enough. There are, unfortunately, plenty of not very good developers and house builders who are not interested at all. We should be positive about it.

**Q77 Tom Hunt:** It is interesting what you said about local plans and the importance of local plans, if we are going to engage young people in influencing local plans. I have been on a planning committee before in a district and, frankly, the average age of the council and the planning committee was well into the 60s. I was by far the youngest person on that planning committee. It was quite a while ago and I was very young. It just strikes me that, actually, if we are going to do that effectively, it really places a lot of influence in the hands of councillors and local authorities.

There is a bit of a challenge when it comes to getting younger people to stand to be councillors. I am not suggesting that we have eight-year-olds as councillors but frankly, in some areas, you would be struggling to get a parent of somebody that age to be on the council.

**Dinah Bornat:** We have the deputy youth mayor for Hammersmith and Fulham here and we do not have anyone else from the panel. We have one person who has come along from the public realm inclusivity panel at Earl's Court, and she happens to be 17. If you get it right, you would be surprised by how engaged and interested young people are.

I can tell you the thing that we do—and we do this with adults as well—is that we pay people. It is not about endorsing planning applications and getting consent. It is about valuing people for their time. It is about research and understanding. In this room today, I am being paid for my time, as I am sure all the other adults are. If you are doing that with communities, they need to be paid for their time, as well. Actually, it is a tiny, tiny amount of money, and it shows that you care about having them there and that you value their time. That completely changes the emphasis in the room. Certainly, the democratic process is not about



paying people off. That is completely different, but it is about the engagement and how you do care. We do not find young people hard to reach at all, in that situation.

**Tim Gill:** Can I also just make a plea to figure out ways to get the adult decision makers to hear directly from children and young people, to actually be in the same room and to have conversations? It is one of the things I have learned from talking to Dinah about her practice. The generations are growing apart, to a degree. There are various social changes that mean young people are not spending so much time with older people and vice versa. There are sometimes those gaps in understanding and experience.

Walkabouts are an amazing way to have older people hearing young people say what it is like to live in their neighbourhood. I am very happy to be here in this meeting, but meetings are kind of dull. Never mind 17; if you are 11, they really are dull. Having the mayor or a politician out, walking around your neighbourhood with you, just for an hour, is not dull and opens up huge potential for rich conversations and breaking down some of those barriers between the generations.

Q78 **Tom Hunt:** There has been a recent study done by Grosvenor of 500 young people between the ages of 16 and 18. It said that 89% had never been asked their views about their local built environment. Only 8% said they had ever taken part in a formal, public consultation. It is concerning.

I remember when I was trying to get a cinema opened up in the area where I lived, because there was nothing for young people to do, and it was a real struggle. I knew young people wanted a cinema in the area, but we had all this opposition from older people, who were more used to how to influence these sorts of things. Letters started coming into the traditional local newspaper, which all the councillors read, and battling against that was quite difficult.

Is there something beyond the traditional, stuffy, public consultation that engages young people and makes them feel they are able to shape those sorts of decisions?

**Dinah Bornat:** We have written a toolkit on how to do it, with Grosvenor, because it commissioned that piece of research for that. It was funded by Sport England and partly by Grosvenor, but also with the support of the TCPA. It is a really simple, step-by-step toolkit with five workshops. "This is how you start, this is how you work through the process and this is what you get out of it in the end." There are definitely techniques you can use to get out of the stuffy meeting situation, for sure.

**Tim Gill:** The other thing I just want to make a plea for around engagement—and I hope this is obvious—is that we cannot rely on children and young people to come up with all the answers. We cannot rely on the participation process alone to tackle those knotty issues,



whether it is about where the cinema goes, cars, parking or green space. We need that adult expertise and commitment alongside bringing in the voices of children.

**Q79 Tom Hunt:** I have two quick final questions. First, young people may be neurodiverse; is that an important aspect of this?

**Dinah Bornat:** Yes. They are really good at having conversations about neurodivergence, around disability, around gender, and understanding that there are a lot of young people out there who feel even more left out, ostracised and vulnerable. They might be victims of crime. The conversations that we have with younger and older people—adults and so on—are much more about inclusivity these days. It is really encouraging that the younger generation are quite keen to have those conversations.

**Q80 Tom Hunt:** The final question is connected to the points you were making at the start. Do you think that having a built environment that encourages and facilitates better relations and stronger relationships between young people—because it encourages them to play and spend time with each other—has a knock-on effect in terms of encouraging better relationships between adults, maybe because their kids play with each other, families meet and so on? Yes, it is about young people, but if we are failing on this it is not just bad for young people: it feeds into wider societal problems.

**Dinah Bornat:** Yes, absolutely. When you go to places where children are able to play out, you will hear from parents who will say, “That is where I met the neighbours. When our children started playing outside, that is when I got to know everybody. Now we are on a WhatsApp group. Now we know where the kids are when I am worried about where they are.” You hear children saying, “This is where we bonded is a community. This is where I got to know other children from other estates, so I feel less scared about walking around locally.”

It is about familiarity. It is about engendering a sense of belonging. If we come outside our front doors—and children are a bit of a glue for playing together—we get to know each other. As the children grow older, you are less fearful of them. You only have to talk to young people. They will tell you that they are just as interested in their neighbours as they are in their friends. They want to know their neighbours. Some of them will say, “This is where we check in on our neighbours and make sure they are okay.” There is a real sensitivity, need and desire to be part of a community when you are growing up.

**Tim Gill:** In the first hearing, the people from Playing Out, the campaign that promotes street play sessions, brought out those connections and how that happens. You can almost see it unfolding through the course of sessions—certainly in the ones that I have attended—with people discovering those neighbours, adults discovering connections with each other, shared interests and that network of contact.



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I will also make one other point. Not everybody wants children outside their house. Sometimes children do irritating things. Children have always done irritating things. We all did irritating things when we were kids. That is not a bug in community life. It is a feature. We need to value the fact that one of the things that helps children to learn how to get along with each other, and with the other adults in their community, is by making mistakes. I am not talking about major crime here. I am just talking about that learning that you get when you do something a bit stupid and have to figure out that you have done that.

Those interactions are particularly with adults beyond the parents. Parents, of course, have a role—I am a parent myself—but it is that gritty rubbing along that I can remember from my own childhood. It is not always rosy, but it is a really important, formative part of growing up to be a responsible, connected person. That is really important to hold on to. It makes you realise that the goal is not the elimination of irritation. The goal is to have communities where people can resolve their differences, not where those differences do not exist. That goes between the generations as well as in other respects.

**Q81 Mary Robinson:** Dinah, if I may come to you to look at policy and policy decisions, what planning interventions have been employed in the past to address the needs of children and young people? What lessons can we learn from them?

**Dinah Bornat:** I mentioned a bit before about the approach to play within the housing standards of the 1950s and 1960s; look at the much-maligned modernist estates of that period. Now, if you imagine the long periods of time that people have lived on those estates and if you talk to residents—some of them who grew up there and have had children and grandchildren—you often find that, when it worked, it worked really well from a play perspective. There are often issues with crime, poverty and management, but those are alongside some really successful and strong communities, where children effectively benefited from a positive attitude towards play.

The lesson that can be learned is that we must recognise and understand what was—and is—happening in those places when they did work, so that when we do regeneration projects and create new planning policy, we do not just get rid of the bits that work for children.

We also need to look again a bit at this idea of secure by design, which is a police initiative. Margaret Thatcher was a very big supporter of secure by design and this idea that you can design out crime by effectively, in a lot of instances, gating and fencing everywhere. That makes it very difficult for children to play outside.

We need a much more nuanced conversation about the quality of play that children have, about what was built and how people are using it, and about what might be being built now and how people are using it. We



have lots of places that we can go to for evidence. We have lots of history that we can look at, but very little seems to be done in that area.

**Q82 Mary Robinson:** Of course, many years ago, people would live on terraced streets or in two-storey housing. Tower blocks and so on were built with great open spaces in between them. Was that a mistake? Is it actually to do with the way that we build?

**Dinah Bornat:** Being a Londoner, I am quite familiar with what we call the mixed estates. Quite often, what you see when you walk around London are estates that were laid out with tower blocks, with linear blocks that might be lower with what you call deck access on them, and with terraced housing, so rows of maisonettes. The idea behind those mixed estates was that children were not in the towers. They were in the lower blocks and they were in the maisonettes. As you probably know, over the years, with the right to buy, the tenure changed. Also, you cannot decide where people move into. Really, children are often moved into tower blocks and often there are overcrowding issues. Those were not really designed for children.

There are a lot of really good estates that were built on a higher density, low-rise model. It is not just about tower blocks. Yes, they were deliberately laid out to allow this free play to happen and there were playgrounds. Sometimes they were in the wrong place. We need to learn where those wrong places were. Like I said, a lot of the deliberate decisions have been slightly changed.

**Mary Robinson:** Deliberate decisions are not always the best ones.

**Dinah Bornat:** It is an endless learning that we need to do in this area.

**Mary Robinson:** They call it organic, do they not?

**Dinah Bornat:** Yes.

**Q83 Mary Robinson:** What about the here and now, then? Is current planning policy hindering the objective of improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people? I note that the NPPF mentions children once. They say there is more mention of bats, newts and lorry parking. Is that relevant?

**Dinah Bornat:** With my hat on as an architect, I can give you examples where I have sat as an adviser on a design review panel. That is when local authorities, local planning departments, ask us to come in and help give design advice to schemes that are in pre-application stage. Often, you might be having a conversation about a play street, for example, that might be designed into that development, but you are told by the highways officer that the refuse lorry cannot make more than one turn on that site. His—it is often a man—word is absolutely final.

That lovely play street that you have just conceived of, with trees and places for children to play football, needs to have a bin lorry driven



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through it as often as the bin lorry company needs to do that. You find planning officers' hands are tied in that situation. They cannot go against the highways officer's concerns or demands, and therefore it becomes a sea of tarmac that may or may not be used for play.

No is the answer, simply. We just do not have strong enough local policy that makes people sit up and think about what children's needs are. It is not really about lots more rules; it is about elevating children to that point where we might sit in the room and say, "Before we talk about the bin lorries and before we talk about the parking, how are children going to get around this estate? How might they move around without crossing a road? Now let us think about the rest." That, to me, is the way we need to prioritise their needs.

**Q84 Mary Robinson:** We touched on this earlier. In 2018, following news stories of play spaces segregated by tenure, planning policy was changed. Were the changes effective?

**Dinah Bornat:** Yes, because that went into the London plan. Now, if you ever sit in a planning meeting, and you are looking at the play strategy and layout of play, everybody will say, "No segregated play space." Everybody knows that really clearly and it cannot happen. That has changed the way that we might put an application together, so there is no gating and fencing.

What was interesting about that was that it was a real-life story and people could really connect with it. This goes to what you were saying before, Tom, about our real lives. It is really obvious stuff, is it not? A developer I know says, "Just use very simple terms: can a child cycle around this development without crossing a road?" Think about it from the point of view of the eight-year-old or the 14-year-old. It is about the power of making those connections back to lived experience and I would say that that was a really effective change in policy, yes.

**Q85 Ian Byrne:** It boils down to a couple of reflections on the fantastic evidence you have given. That intergenerational conversation is massively important, because when I speak to people who are my age—I am in my 50s now—about their life experiences growing up, they talk about how treasured they are. Then we speak to children about how lucky we were and it sparks in people's minds, both from a young perspective and from an older perspective, when they realise what we actually did, how lucky we were and how different it is now for the children.

Those conversations are massively important. I am going to try to do a couple in my constituency specifically on that, just to start that conversation rolling. That then can flow into planning. You have a 50-year-old planner suddenly thinking about what their childhood was like. How lucky were they? How much freedom did they have? You also have to invest in the children and listen to them. I was at Wembley yesterday and it would be remiss of me not to say that the faith that was placed in



the youngsters on the pitch reaped dividends.

**Chair:** You couldn't avoid that, could you, Ian?

**Ian Byrne:** That is just a reflection on how important it can be. I had to do that—he's a Chelsea fan. *[Laughter.]*

Tim, on the international examples, I was fascinated by your evidence. I want to touch on the children's lens and how that is utilised abroad. I have seen some of the examples of Barcelona and Canada, and we can look on our own shores to Scotland and Wales, which are doing things better. From that perspective, can you explain what that is?

**Tim Gill:** Really, this is about the rationale. Why is it that some countries—you mentioned some—and some cities and towns, as well, have taken seriously this idea of making their built environment better for children? There are three broad rationales. There is the obvious one, which is about children's health and wellbeing. It is also about children's rights. Some countries take children's rights more seriously than we do. That is one cluster.

There is a second cluster that are interested in children because of the links with sustainability. What does a sustainable neighbourhood look like? It is compact. It is green. It is easy to get around on foot or by bike. It looks a lot like a child-friendly neighbourhood. There are some cities and countries that have latched on to that connection.

Then there is the third—and, in a way, perhaps the most interesting—group of cities, which really take a hard-nosed economic view of this question. Japan is the incredible shrinking country right now. The population is dropping off a cliff. Japanese politicians and civil servants are really interested in how they can turn that around. One of the things they are looking at is how to make it nicer to be a child, to give children a better quality of life and also, of course, to help parents. There is a whole load of stuff around that. They have realised that a city or a country that cannot make a good offer to children and families is a place with a bleak long-term future.

Those are the three rationales, but the really interesting thing is that some cities and countries are talking about two or even all three of those. They are seeing win-wins—or even win-win-wins—by joining the dots between demographics, sustainability, and health and wellbeing. That highlights that we should not see the economic imperative as opposed to an imperative around health and child wellbeing. Properly understood, especially looking at the long term and the need to build a collective vision, they are going in the same direction.

Maybe the best example is Tirana. I do not suppose Tirana often gets a mention as a beacon of good practice, but it is an amazing city. It is a wonderful city to visit, but it was a broken city in the aftermath of Albania's communist collapse and the chaos that ensued. The mayor of Tirana, initially almost by chance, realised that talking about children and



building up children as a symbol of the future of the city was a way to transcend some of those really deep political and sociocultural divisions. He and his team are running programmes on playgrounds, cycle lanes, city parks, an urban forest, school streets. A lot of it gets drawn back to, “We are doing this for our children,” and it is part of what makes Tirana a city with a future and a city that has hope, placing this focus on children. It is incredible to see.

**Q86 Ian Byrne:** You have sort of answered the questions, really. It is really interesting—we should go to Tirana, by the way, to see that, because that sounds fascinating. From a UK national policy and legislation perspective, how far are we lagging behind places like Tirana and other nation states?

**Tim Gill:** You have Wales and Scotland. As I understand it, they are a bit outside of your terms of reference in this Committee, but we want to learn from what is happening. In both of those devolved Administrations, there is some serious attention being paid to this topic. In Wales, there is a process called play sufficiency. Every local authority has to look at what it is doing for children’s play and figure out how to improve children’s opportunities for play.

In Scotland, there are various planning reforms, including focus on children’s participation, and linking back to the UN convention. I know that is also a hot topic. Leaving aside Wales and Scotland, in England that vision and political conversation is just not happening. There are some interested agencies that we have mentioned already, but we have not left the starting block. I really hope that this Committee will play a part in being a catalyst for those conversations to happen, because we need it.

**Q87 Ian Byrne:** Just touching on catalysts, I have seen some of the work both of you have been doing with the mayors—the London Mayor and Andy Burnham, who is featured in one of the books as well. Are the devolved powers a potential catalyst, where we could actually see things happen?

**Dinah Bornat:** London is a bit of a beacon internationally in terms of having the London plan. It has a whole section on play and informal recreation. There is a space standard of 10 square metres per child for new developments. It can be very, very hard to achieve on a high-density development. I say that with all the will in the world, working on these developments. It is very difficult to do, but this focuses the mind.

Where we have got to now in London is the next level, which is that it is not just about spaces. It is about what kind of spaces, where they are and how you get to them. The conversation now, because the policy is in place and has been in place for a good 14 years, since 2008, is more nuanced. We do have other pressures within the London plan. We should not rest on our laurels. We need to do more. We need to see where that is being delivered or not being delivered, and we need to look at what it





is like 10 years down the line. Yes, we should be encouraged by that, but that does not let the Government off the hook.

**Q88 Ian Byrne:** I look forward to the recommendations that you make. To finish, Tim, you touched on the importance of this. Sometimes this subject is brushed to one side. You see council budgets slashed. How do we get it politically right to the top of the agenda? You touched on the elements before. We even talk about an obesity crisis. That is the wellbeing of the country. That is future generations. That is what the country is going to look like in decades to come if we do not solve the problems now, and that was heard in the earlier panel as well, before your good selves. It is about how we shape the importance of this subject, make it a political hot potato and make it really relevant in decision makers' minds. Hopefully you can help with that with some recommendations.

**Dinah Bornat:** It is the vision for housing. We need a vision for what housing looks like throughout this country, and this session paints a really good picture for what it could look like for everybody, for future generations, because, quite frankly, houses in a sea of tarmac—and that is what you see from the train and from your car, when you go around the country—are failing. They are completely and utterly failing for children.

**Tim Gill:** It is one of the few things that everybody seems to agree about. No matter where you are on the political spectrum, you agree that the housing that we are delivering is—I will just use the word—mediocre. A new vision is really needed. I have said it before. This is complicated stuff. Speak to any planner. Planning is almost the definitive wicked issue, because there are all these different factors coming into play, different points of intervention and priorities. It is always politically tough.

Having a way of overcoming some of that complexity and navigating it, and maybe, through the other side, getting some kind of consensus, or at least some starting points, is really valuable. I would say this, wouldn't I? Talking about children, because you are thinking about a whole life and how children's lives can pan out, and because we rightly take some collective responsibility for children, has real power in figuring out how to make planning work better.

**Q89 Chair:** We ought to do things better, but how do we know, once things have been done, whether they really are better? How do we evaluate them properly?

**Dinah Bornat:** It is an interesting question. We talk about it in architecture quite a lot. We talk about post-occupancy evaluation and it is very rarely done. There are lots of reasons for that. What is interesting is that, when you look at evaluation and at studies, they are almost always adult focused. They are asked of adults, about adults' needs.



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I did, this morning, just check in on what is called the annual resident satisfaction survey that is carried out by the major house builders, written by the Home Builders Federation and the National House Building Council—the NHBC, which funded that first piece of research—and the questions that are asked of residents in new developments are really interesting. Really, it is just focused on the quality and the design of the home itself. It does not stretch to anything about the neighbourhood. It is about, “What was your experience like when you bought a house?” It is a bit like you are buying a fridge or a washing machine—“Did the phone get answered quickly when you called them?” It is bizarre.

When you look at new developments for sale, the image that you always see is one of a happy person living a great life. Very often, there are children playing outside. That really speaks to us because, deep down inside, that is what we are buying. We are buying health and happiness. We are not really that bothered, it turns out, about whether we have a south-facing garden, compared to whether it is a neighbourhood that children can play out in. I know that, because I got that question squeezed into the UK Green Building Council’s study of 3,000 people. It turned out that if you ask that question, it is really important. We just do not ask it.

Even more interestingly, that was even desirable for people who do not have children, because it is a description of a good place that we all recognise. We do not ask those questions and so, essentially, the house builders are patting themselves on the back and failing at the same time. We could do a lot more on evaluation that could really help us.

There are some really good examples. There are schemes outside London. There is Port Loop in Birmingham. There is a scheme that we worked on in Buckinghamshire. There is Goldsmith Street, which won the Stirling Prize. Lots of these developments are built with the idea of children being able to play out and they are really well loved by the residents.

**Tim Gill:** On that note, if I could just mention one scheme that might be worthy of the Committee’s attention, that is Chobham Manor. It is quite high profile, as one of the first parts of the Olympic site to be developed. Just a year ago, there was a really detailed post-occupancy evaluation. It did just speak to the adults, but two things were interesting. First, that development, Chobham Manor, was designed as a child-friendly development. It is unusual in that it was, upfront, a really important part of the goals of the scheme. Because there was a strong public hand in it, it saw that through.

Secondly, to back up what Dinah said, the evaluation was very positive. In particular, what leapt out to the evaluation team was that the development has a linear park running through the centre of it. The feedback and the analysis of what the residents were saying was that it was the beating heart of the development. It was where kids played.



There were allotment spaces there. People who did not have children valued it just as much as those who did. The whole development scored higher than the London average in terms of people liking it, wanting to stay there and saying they would stay there more than five years. Families with children particularly valued it.

I cannot remember if it came up in the first hearing, but I will steal this idea from Enrique Peñalosa, the former mayor of Bogotá. It goes to this idea of children being an indicator species. It is not just a slogan: it is actually a real statement about what makes neighbourhoods good places.

- Q90 **Chair:** It is all very good, and there are some good examples, but is the reality that developers, architects and planners do not do this as a matter of course? They do not go back and say, "This is what we have built. This is what we helped develop." They do not go back and check whether people actually like living there, particularly children, do they? Do they actually follow the NPPF, and the Government's ambition to create a healthy, inclusive and safe place? Or is that just the occasional example you can give us rather than the regular?

**Dinah Bornat:** No, they do not. Our industry and our profession has been asking for it for years. In all fairness, it is quite a hard question to ask, because they shy away from comparing themselves to each other. In some respects it would be a really good place for Government to start doing proper independent research and actually looking at it, rather than expecting them to mark their own homework. We should be doing it as a country, and checking what we need and what we want; otherwise, there is a tendency to fall on whatever whim is in place. We do not. We should, but perhaps in a different way.

- Q91 **Mary Robinson:** Should there be a requirement on developments over a certain size to conduct post-occupancy evaluations?

**Dinah Bornat:** I have come round to thinking that I am not sure whether we can keep asking them to do that and keep failing to get it. What we need are really good and well laid out places. Maybe we need to just do more research about what that is, demand that they do that, and build really good examples so that they can feel encouraged to do it and confident that it works.

**Chair:** Thank you both very much for coming and giving the Committee a lot of interesting information and evidence, which I am sure we are going to reflect on. It is going to be quite an eye-opening inquiry for most of us, bringing new issues to light. Perhaps they should not be new issues, but they are clearly issues that have not been well addressed in the past. Thank you very much indeed for coming to meet with us this afternoon.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jo McCafferty, Jonny Anstead and Sarah Scannell.



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Q92 **Chair:** Thank you very much for coming. Could I ask you to begin this session by introducing yourselves and who you are representing today?

**Sarah Scannell:** I am Sarah Scannell. I am an assistant director of planning. I currently work at Birmingham City Council, but I am here representing an interested party as a professional planner.

**Jo McCafferty:** I am Jo McCafferty, an architect and a director of Levitt Bernstein architects. We have 120 staff across two studios in London and Manchester, and we are architects, urban designers and landscape architects, which is particularly relevant for this topic today. I have worked in housing, particularly over the last 25 years working in the UK and Ireland, but I also advise lots of local authorities and private developers on housing design and quality standards. I was lucky enough to be co-author of an edition of "The Housing Design Handbook", which is guidance that features a lot of case studies with regard to exemplary housing in the UK and Europe.

**Jonny Anstead:** I am Jonny Anstead, co-founding director of TOWN. We are an SME housing developer. We built a scheme called Marmalade Lane, which has been featured by the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, and fairly extensively through good guidance practice notes nationally and at local levels. I am also the chair of the Quality of Life Foundation, which is a charity that promotes wellbeing and healthier placemaking in the built environment, with a focus on research and post-occupancy evaluation in particular.

Q93 **Chair:** Let us get back to good schemes being highlighted. Jonny, the reality is that developers seem to face challenges that they cannot overcome, do not manage to overcome or will not overcome in building better environments for children and young people. Is that a fair description?

**Jonny Anstead:** It is definitely the case that developers find it difficult to build good urban environments full stop, including for children. I wanted to start off by putting this in the context of a much wider quality issue that we have nationally, which is about children. With children being the indicator species, it makes sense that they would be at the receiving end of a wider problem of quality.

The 2020 housing design audit for England, which was a piece of work undertaken by the Place Alliance, found that new housing development across the country was overwhelmingly mediocre or poor in a large extent. It identified a lot of particular problems, which included design of highways, the layout of bins and parking, a lack of character of place, particularly including green spaces, problems around the design of streets, and a lack of walkability. It is no coincidence that those are all the same kinds of issues that we are talking about in determining whether a place is good or not for children. So first, it is part of a much wider problem.



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From a developer's perspective, there is a problem in that very, very little is expected of us through the planning system. We are generally encouraged to think about the needs of children as a tick-box activity. As you will be aware, the policy requirements on us through a planning application will principally be around the incorporation of local areas of play or local equipped areas of play, which have the effect of reducing the needs of children down to the provision of a small playground with a fence around it. That is very convenient for developers in that it is very, very cheap, it takes up very little space, you can buy it off the shelf, and it is easy to incorporate within a very standardised housing estate layout. It does not really require us to do anything different. It really falls short of what is required in terms of actual outcomes for children. It does not really do very much.

All the things that have been talked about around safety, mobility, the freedom to move around independently, cultivating relationships with your peers from a young age, growing in independence and having your needs met in different ways as you progress through your childhood are clearly not going to be met by a three-by-three-metre playground with a ride-on toy. It is so far from the reality of what is going to make a difference. A big problem is that there is a reductive approach where we are made to think—and it is convenient for us to think—that that is basically meeting the needs of children.

For those of us who for whatever reason do wish to do more—I should point out that doing more is a voluntary thing; often we are not required to do more, but we as a company do try to think about it in a more thoughtful and considered way—we hit real challenges. Some of them have already been mentioned today. The things that we would look to do might be around reducing the impact and the dominance of cars in a neighbourhood and creating safer streets where children can play, where there is a sense of independence, and where there might be surveillance, but children have, from quite a young age, the ability to play out on the doorstep and to do all those things that have been talked about through this inquiry.

When we promote those sorts of ideas, we hit the various technical challenges that have been hinted at today. One is that the waste collection authority may find it challenging because it may mean a slightly more difficult or unorthodox way of collecting refuse. In other words, it might need to be communal refuse solutions rather than wheelie bins outside every home. Another might be that the local highways authority may find the approach irregular because it may conflict with the prioritisation of cars, which is the principal interest for the local highways authority. The path of least resistance is to create a layout that is very, very good for refuse and very, very good for highways. In doing so you create an environment that is very, very poor for children.

As a development company, we are stubborn and mission driven, so we sometimes push for what we consider to be a better outcome for people,



including for children, but I can totally understand why a lot of companies and other developers would not. It is not an exaggeration to say that we are encouraged to think more about bins and cars than we are about children in the way that we approach our projects.

**Q94 Chair:** Can or should developers be incentivised to look after the needs of children, to predict what they are and to try to find out what they are, rather than having the current situation where they seem to be ignored?

**Jonny Anstead:** Developers should definitely do more and be made to do more through incentives or through regulations. Being really honest, this is tied up with the structure of the house building industry. This is something for you to consider in the context of whether carrots or sticks are the appropriate approach. You have a house building industry that is principally made out of volume house builders. The top 10 companies develop over 50% of our housing stock annually, and that model is driven by short-term profit and cost control.

We need to do a lot to change that cultural approach. We need to see more examples of good practice. Marmalade Lane is a scheme that we have been involved with, as well as Goldsmith Street, but unfortunately you can count those examples on one hand. We need to see more examples being brought forward in order to set a sea change in the industry.

**Q95 Chair:** You say you have to get away from being simply driven by profit, but we have had evidence at previous inquiries and know that if a developer does not make 20% return on capital, the house does not get built. That is why we often get slow buildout on a site, because at some point the amount you can get for that property falls below the 20% level and so it does not get built for some time. That is the model. How do you change that model? That is a pretty fundamental thing. It is not just about asking a few children what they like; it is a whole change to the model, is it not?

**Jonny Anstead:** That is the problem that we are facing. Only today the Competition and Markets Authority has published a report into exactly this in house building, which has said there is not enough quality, there is very little innovation in the sector, and the sector is building out in a way that suits its own methods of production more than responding to the real needs of consumers. It is true that your starting point is not a fully, correctly functioning market. Yes, it is a problem.

With all that being said, a lot of the things that we are talking about do not necessarily need to cost that much more. There are different ways of thinking about the way space is used. At Marmalade Lane we have slightly changed the way that parking is laid out. We have put parking to the edge of development and put it into a shared parking area. That has actually freed up space. Purely from a commercial point of view or an economics point of view, we have reduced the amount of space given over to car parking from around 36% to around 12%. That is actually



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cheaper to lay out. There is less tarmac and there is less hard surfacing. It is a different way of doing things; it is not necessarily a more expensive way of doing things.

**Jo McCafferty:** If we talk about some more examples of good practice, building on Jonny's point, another aspect of context is the fact that only 6% of new homes in the UK are designed by architects. You can see from that figure alone that the design profession and those with expertise are not really involved in those projects very much. Therefore, looking again at the involvement of young people, and the requirement and the desire of all of us to involve young people in that, that is even less. We are talking about the best practices of such a small percentage overall.

As we have just been touching on, and Dinah and Tim before us said, there are examples of good practice, and we just need support to build more of those. For example, as a practice, we have been working on an estate in Poplar for the last 12 years. There, the whole design team have been engaged with almost 100 children, working with 100 children from two local schools, and really rethinking how the new development can work there for children and young people.

The thing that Jonny is touching on is this issue that some of it does not cost very much. Some of it is just attention to detail. The wonderful thing about working with children and young people is that they really get both the strategy and the detail. They understand the importance of the position of a gate or pairing of an entrance, so that you can meet your neighbour and play out in the mornings easily but your parent can also watch you from the kitchen window.

They understand that detail and they want to talk about it, but they also understand the importance of strategic aspects of design that probably do not cost much money but just need to be thought about in the design process. An example of that would be where the cycle routes are, where the pedestrian routes are, and how we can remove car spaces from right outside an area of place so that, as Diana was describing earlier, you can directly run out of your front door into that play area and into that play space, and meet your friends, and go and call on your neighbour without crossing too many roads. Those things do not cost much money but they need a really different approach to design thinking.

It also requires real teeth in the planning process for everyone to think about things in that way. I can certainly say that, having worked in housing for the last 25 years, I can count on this hand the number of times that I have been asked about the experience of children at a pre-app meeting or a design review panel for the design that I am putting forward. It never happens, and it certainly never filters through to a planning committee. It is so absent from that conversation, which is why we need policy to change that.

**Sarah Scannell:** At that juncture, it is probably right that the planner comes in and starts talking about the reality of it. Why are we not talking



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about it? You have heard a bit already about the importance of the local plan.

**Chair:** We are going to come on to local plans in a minute.

**Sarah Scannell:** It does come down to what it is that, as a society, we are requiring of our local authorities. What policies do we want people to bring forward? How do we engage with that? How do we get young people to contribute to those processes? I am happy to go into talking about local plans now if you want.

**Chair:** We will come back to that.

Q96 **Ian Byrne:** Jo, how can architects design good built environments for children and young people if, as you said, they do not listen to them?

**Jo McCafferty:** That is such a powerful question. It is by listening. It is about involving children and young people in the design process. It is not just to think in terms of what they might need going forward, but it is also from the get-go, to really understand the spaces and the environment that they currently live in from their perspective. That is not only the external space, but also the buildings they use, how they use them, and how they might fail that community or how they work well. It is about deeply listening and understanding the space, the community and the neighbourhood from their perspective. That is the first thing to do.

Building on that, it is about thoroughly understanding their needs in the design of the new proposals from that conversation. You open up that conversation onsite with young people and with children using different methods. There are lots of toolkits around. Earlier, Dinah described the “Voice, Opportunity, Power” toolkit from ZCD Architects. We have used it a lot, and it is really powerful, just to unpack that listening process a little bit more. How that works is that essentially you ask a group of young people of different ages—so you can take primary school children, secondary school children, in a mix or separately—and ask them to score the spaces in their local neighbourhood with a red, amber or green rating. They score the spaces that they feel great and really safe in, and the spaces that they feel deeply uncomfortable in. It starts drawing out a conversation as to why that is, where they play, where they meet their neighbours, where they meet their friends, and what their route to school is.

You then take that same scoring system and you go to a new development, somewhere possibly close to where they live or a little further away, and you do the same thing again. That is really powerful, because it then starts a conversation about, “What place might you feel comfortable in, in this new development, or if your environment is going to be redesigned?”





From there, that group of young people create a manifesto for their new neighbourhood. We have talked about that a lot in planning discussions recently. I mentioned that those conversations were not happening at the pre-app meetings. We put that manifesto on the table, saying, "This is what a group of young people living in this area want for their environment." It wakes everybody up in the room. There is nothing more powerful than the anecdotal that is fed through the lens of childhood.

**Q97 Ian Byrne:** That is all absolutely fantastic but, as the Chair said, the systemic framework we have now is not open to that, is it? What recommendations would we need to get what you are talking about hard-wired into the system and change the culture, so that the houses that are getting built now are future-proofed and they have what we need and, more importantly, what children need?

**Jo McCafferty:** It has to be a planning requirement so that, when you put a planning application in, you have to set out and give evidence of what process you have gone through with children and young people in that neighbourhood. It has to be very detailed. You have to set out the questions you have asked, the responses you have got, and what the manifesto is that forms part of a landscape architect's brief at the beginning of a project.

It is about securing that through the planning process and making sure not only that that evidence is looked at by the planning officers who are reviewing an application, that it goes to a design review process for the DRPs that are reviewing those, and that it is discussed at committee, but also, in terms of the planning conditions, that there is a requirement for that ongoing dialogue with children and young people to happen.

**Ian Byrne:** So it is hard-wired throughout the system.

**Jo McCafferty:** Absolutely, and that point about how to hard-wire post-occupancy evaluation, and going back and checking whether something is working, has to be hard-wired into those planning conditions.

**Q98 Ian Byrne:** Are there any good examples of architects working with children that have improved the design of a housing scheme or a public space?

**Jo McCafferty:** There are lots. I know I would say this, but we are working on lots. Lots of other great people are too, but across the country there are not. I can pinpoint examples. I talked about our work in Poplar. What has been really interesting there is that we were talking about strategic things and detail at the same time, so it has shaped the positioning of buildings and how open spaces, play areas and movement patterns are all stitched together and connected.

It is not just a discussion around the design of play equipment in a specific ringfenced area. The impact is much bigger on the design, such as where the cores are into a housing development, how people come



and go from their homes, how front doors are organised and how close to each other they are, and the height of a boundary wall. All of those things can be impacted from that conversation.

**Q99 Ian Byrne:** Is this a class issue as well? For estates that cost more money, would the children be listened to or would that be factored in more than, say, for a council housing estate that is being built, if we were lucky enough to get one built?

**Jo McCafferty:** That is a really, really good question. It is interesting. If you give an opportunity for children to be involved in a process, they will come. Dinah said this earlier. There is a thirst from young people and children to be involved in this process. You are pushing an open door, but you have to value young people's time in that process. As was mentioned earlier, one way of doing that is paying them for that time.

**Q100 Ian Byrne:** Jonny, is it a class issue?

**Jonny Anstead:** We are pretty consistent, across most housing, in not doing what Jo has described. Nationally, I am not sure we are better in one context versus another. We are pretty consistent. That is a positive, I suppose. We have been doing some of this work as well, going into schools, working with a not-for-profit called BlockBuilders to do Minecraft-based consultation, which is great. Kids from year 5 to year 9 are planning an urban regeneration project in Wolverton, Milton Keynes.

There is huge benefit all round, because they get excited and it is interesting. They think about it in a totally different way. Their thinking is far less pre-empting what they think adults must think about. They do not arrive at the things that adults hard-wire to immediately, which is very restrictive. They start off with a very expansive perspective on what is possible; they look at a street and say, "We would like it to be great for play, and have water down it and trees." Adults would never say that, because there is a sense that, "This is what a road is and this is what a street is."

Also, it means that we can engage with wider community through that process. Their parents become involved in the process, so it helps with that wider sense of participation. It would be good if it was a requirement for that type of thinking to be added into what is already a requirement in the statement of community involvement, to specifically say that you should have been talking to young children.

**Q101 Ian Byrne:** As a developer, you would not have any problem with it being hard-wired into the plan.

**Jonny Anstead:** From our point of view as a developer, this is something that we believe in. We are a profit-with-purpose developer. We are committed to doing this anyway, but we are often at a disadvantage in situations where others would take the path of least resistance and do as little as possible. From our point of view, it is an advantage if there is a level playing field and requirements of various sorts are baked into the



process, because it means that other SMEs who are quality driven can compete more effectively, not just us.

**Sarah Scannell:** From my experience, the examples of this being done very well go from the big developer with a multimillion-pound investment to an HRA who might be developing a social housing site. I do not think it is a class issue. It is much more systemic.

Q102 **Andrew Lewer:** Sarah, when local authorities are creating their local plans, how do they typically account for the needs of children and young people, and how do those that are better at it do so? What is the difference? As a little personal aside, have you noticed unitary authorities that have children and young people's responsibilities being any better at this, or is that not really a factor?

**Sarah Scannell:** When we talk about the local plan, we are talking about what it is that is required in a local plan. You have to look at the NPPF. As you have heard already today and from the last session, on the whole there is very little evidence about where children are spoken about. In local plans, children are considered at a very high level. Are there enough school places for them? Are there enough doctors? Do they have the right size house? It very, very rarely goes into the detail of the qualitative assessment that we are talking about here and that we need to see.

While there are some pockets of really good examples of that, that is where the local authority has taken it upon itself to go hard on an issue and have a policy that is particularly about requiring a qualitative or a larger assessment. Most of the time where you see it, you see it perhaps as a quantum of space per house or per child that is required to be created. There are very few examples where there is a qualitative aspect to that.

Really importantly, it comes to what is written in stone about how you consult on the local plan. This stretches wider than this topic, but there are no minimum requirements for engagement. There is no requirement for an authority to demonstrate that a certain amount of people in any protected characteristic have commented or been engaged on local plan development. What we are missing there is a real genuine understanding of what people in the whole of a space want.

Q103 **Andrew Lewer:** Do you think local authorities only ever do things if people in Whitehall tell them that they must do so, rather than being local elected members who might want to take some initiative themselves?

**Sarah Scannell:** The development space at the moment is extremely tight. You are seeing developments come through that are only barely viable most of the time. As we have talked about, this profit is difficult to get. We are pretty confident that it is difficult to get development through. As someone who is assessing planning applications, when you come to a planning space what you have is the right to assess the things



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that are at the top of the list. At the moment, that is a big list. We have steadily been adding to the planning requirements over 20 years, so it is quite a big ask.

At the moment, you are seeing things at the top of the list like affordable housing, zero carbon, biodiversity net gain and nutrient neutrality. They are all the hot topics. To get to the level where we are talking about designing stuff from a children's perspective, we need that to be written in the NPPF and to be translated to local plans, because at the moment there are so many other things that the planning system is trying to fix.

Q104 **Andrew Lewer:** You are reading my mind there, because I was going to say that I am a little unsettled by ideas of post-planning analysis, especially special requirements for this and that, given that we are always hearing that we do not have enough planning officers, there are viability problems and there is a massive housing shortage.

You have already said that planning officers have a very limited scope to assess these particular needs of young people that we have talked about, rather than the broader strategic issues of school places and so on. Therefore, within the system we have, this is looking difficult to do without placing additional layers of process that we have spent 20 years doing, as you correctly say. Is your conclusion in terms of planning policy that our whole approach to planning and what planning is needs to change, rather than just adding yet another layer to an already overloaded system?

**Sarah Scannell:** We are at a moment in time in the planning regime. We are looking at a new process that we do planning within. There is an opportunity to capitalise on that. You have heard people give evidence about the national model design code, which looks at how we will change how we plan places. That takes a step away from just looking at policies on a page, and looks at how they translate to the physical presentation of it.

Things like how we plan for children and young people in a design space will come to policy quickly, because it could be in the national model design code. There are parts in it already, but it needs to be enhanced with a qualitative assessment about the space that exists already and how new places will be designed to allow children and young people to move adequately between the places that they go. It is about what we want from that scheme, rather than, "You need five square metres per unit to make it work."

We also have the development management policies, which we are told are going to be part of the new planning regime and which set policies across the country. It would be an easy win to make one of those policies that there is a children and young people approach to how we are planning new developments.

Q105 **Andrew Lewer:** Would children and young people's needs in planning



policy be enhanced by some inclusion of that for local members in planning committees, or would it just be one of those required sections in the planning application that you flick through before you get to what the application is itself? Does it actually need a bigger change than that?

**Sarah Scannell:** Having the vision in the NPPF is key to ensure that it is not just a tick-box. It is about changing the dial so that, when you are looking at schemes, the first thing that planners are asking you at pre-app is, "How have you designed this to be future-proof?" Ultimately, designing it for children and young people means that it is designed for the future population of our country. This is fundamental stuff that should be happening, but is not, because of all the other things that we have piled in.

At the moment, people who sit on planning committees are considering the things that are in their inbox and what their commitments are. They are affordable housing, zero carbon, and the other things at the top of that list. We need to get the perception of children and young people, and the way that they experience design and place, to be at the top of that list.

Q106 **Andrew Lewer:** It is a distinction between fighting for two or three other things—ageing population, net zero and so on—and redesigning a system so all of these things follow through. In terms of where we are now, but perhaps also some reflections on what a better system would be, what changes in planning policies within our current framework do you believe would require developers to do better? There is also that wider piece about changing the way we do things.

**Jonny Anstead:** It is about working within what is plausible or possible within the system that we have. A tangible example is that we are currently working on a development proposal for Hartree, which is a planned urban extension to Cambridge with 5,500 homes. We are master developer alongside LandsecU+I. As master developer, we have a long-term vested interest in the quality of that place over the next 20-plus years. We have a huge interest in making sure that the quality is there. We are preparing a strategy there, which is all about creating a place that is child friendly and that passes the tests that we have been talking about.

As I have said before, we are doing that off our own bat. Finding the starting point for such a piece of work is not all that easy, because there is no national framework or statement around what good practice looks like. There is a lack of guidance. We have started by looking at the UN convention on the rights of the child and translated that into tangible things that can be done. What impact do those top-level aspirations have on street layout, safe movement of children, mobility, and all those other things?

What would be easier for us is if, at a national level and then cascading down into a local level, there was a sense of what good looks like in



terms of creating a place that is good for children. It would mean that would become an easier task for us and for any developer looking at it to be able to put together a justification of our proposals, almost like a checklist, to say, "Here are our proposals. Here is how, following a national framework, this meets the needs of children." That could easily be co-ordinated with design codes. If you get that right at the national level, it seems to me that at local level it could be adapted to local circumstances, bearing in mind that places are all different.

Having some consensus around what the starting point is and what the overall objective is would help developers to start with a degree of certainty that this is encouraged by Government and it is important, that we have an understanding of what is required, and that we are all going to be measured in the same way and there will be an easier route through planning by doing these things well.

Q107 **Andrew Lewer:** I am biased, because I am chairman of the all-party group for SME house builders, but is there a concern that you will lose some of your USP if everybody is required to be good, rather than you being able to say, "I really know what I am doing here and can give you a quality product"?

**Jonny Anstead:** From a citizen's point of view this agenda is incredibly important. In preparing for this session I was drawn to the World Health Organisation's social determinants of health, which point to the built environment, homes and early childhood as being two of the 10 social determinants of health, which are basically the things that drive people's health and wellbeing as a nation that are not about interventional medical care.

It seems to me that, as a sector, we as developers have an incredibly important role to play, because what we do for good or bad is going to determine people's health and people's wellbeing, not just today but for decades and generations to come, because what we build has a habit of sticking around for many, many years. We have to see that as being a national imperative. This should be raised up the agenda. Speaking from a business owner's point of view, cultivating a general expectation that things should be better is no bad thing for companies that are trying to do a good job.

**Jo McCafferty:** Just building on what Jonny said, there is a specific aspect that we have not really covered but it is important for everyone to know. With regard to play provision within housing, the focus of policy is around designated play and areas for designated play activities. We can probably have a very long conversation about what that might mean, but essentially a lot of it, as has been described in this discussion, is around quantum of play space.

Something that we constantly come up against as architects and designers, across the board, but particularly working in high-density developments, is that playable landscape—so appraising a whole



development from a play and opportunities perspective, which is hopefully coming from a much better engagement process with children and young people—is never given value in the planning process in terms of quantum. You can design the most fantastic development with lots of playable landscape and opportunity for play, but without specific designated play, and it will not count for anything.

If there is one aspect that can help a much more joined-up conversation about creating better opportunity for young people and children in housing development, it is that shift in thinking and in placing value on playable landscape, as well as specifically designated play. That is a relatively small shift in policy but would have a really big impact.

**Sarah Scannell:** There are hooks in our existing system that, if emphasised and given the right focus nationally, can achieve all our aims. The NPPF talks about active communities that are engaged and that have great walking routes. Active travel is a focus. The national model design code does say that design in a play space has to be done in conjunction and in consultation with communities. It is about having that vision and that strong, clear narrative that these things will be taken to the next level. These hooks in the NPPF do exist, but we require detailed and qualitative analysis to accompany planning applications going forward.

Q108 **Andrew Lewer:** That requires detailed, quality analysis, and we are short of housing. Jonny, you made a point about health determinants; there is no better health determinant than having a house, rather than having incredibly detailed policies that mean we do not do very many of them but they are really good if we do. How do you square that circle?

**Jonny Anstead:** I understand the tension and the challenge that you are faced with, but we should not be in a position where we are offering people a bad house or no house at all. It is not fair. It is not a sensible way to be looking at housing provision nationally. We have to get to grips with the fact that we do need to provide houses, but the houses that we need to provide have to be good, and the neighbourhoods that we have to provide need to be good as well.

There is a risk that we buy into a narrative around, “This is all very hard. You cannot have decent housing. You are lucky that we are providing housing at all.” That is the wrong way of looking at things. We should be saying, “We need to have both. We need to have the quantity of housing, but we also need to make sure not just that it is in the right place, but that it is very good and that it is set out in neighbourhoods that support people’s health and wellbeing.” That should be a bare minimum.

**Andrew Lewer:** I think squaring my circle is that the current system is not delivering both of those desirable things. I have heard a bit of that from you as well.

Q109 **Tom Hunt:** I touched upon this question earlier on. I know it is a slightly sensitive topic, but I have been on a planning committee myself and I



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have never heard this mentioned at all. I was on a planning committee for about a year and a half to two years. My dad is actually a chair of a planning committee, and he is 78. He is an elderly chap and chairs the planning committee. It just strikes me that there is perhaps not as much diversity as we would like when it comes to councillors. Age is a particular challenge.

One of the dangers of this is that when it comes to planning applications, things are perhaps seen from one perspective—that of homeowners or of people who might own multiple homes. As an officer you will do your role, but so much of it is down to the individual councillors on the planning committee. Do they prioritise this over something else? When they are approached by developers, do they raise it? Do they not? This goes beyond just this one issue, but is the simple reality that if we had councillors who were more diverse, particularly when it comes to age, this would be prioritised more by them?

**Jonny Anstead:** When you asked the question earlier I jotted down the stats about what you were describing. There was some research done by the Intergenerational Foundation, which is all about establishing better fairness between generations. It established that the average age of a councillor in the UK is 60, which is exactly what you said, that under-35s in local decision making are less than 5%, and that under-25s are not even registered. They are not enough to be counted.

Exactly what you have just described is a huge issue, where you have decision makers who are from a single demographic or have something in common, which is that they are much more likely to be homeowners, to be car drivers and, frankly, to have less long to live. I do not mean that in any negative way; I just mean it is literally the truth that young people who have a vested interest in the longer term not being adequately represented means that you are going to have skewed decision making.

That is a hard one to solve. It is an observation that that is the case. If we are here talking about how we change democratic processes, then I would say you need to get more young people and more diversity into decision making, because then it means that when proposals are put forward they are going to be considered from an array of perspectives.

**Jo McCafferty:** One of the real benefits of the youth engagement process we have just been talking about with young people is not only the impact that they have on their environment and shaping it, but also their exposure to those conversations about the built environment and the importance of it, and their exposure to the professionals working in that arena. Therefore, if you want to build the future councillors of tomorrow, involving those young people in shaping their environment is a really great place to start.

There are also lots of emerging design review panels that are bringing in younger people and that are appraising proposals. They are involved in a discussion about other proposals elsewhere in their neighbourhood or





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their borough. It is part of that educational piece. It is not going to happen overnight, but that is a really good place to start.

**Q110 Tom Hunt:** You are saying that doing something positive and engaging young people, not necessarily just through planning committees, gives people a sense of control and of involvement in the process. It is exciting. It gets people interested in the careers that we need people to be in, around construction, development, architecture and so on, but it also helps to cultivate more interest and more of a sense of participation, which maybe helps to solve some of the issues that you are talking about.

**Jo McCafferty:** Yes, and a sense of agency.

**Q111 Mary Robinson:** I am staying slightly outside the remit. We are focusing on new developments and planning policy. We are looking into the future, but the fact of the matter is that most of our estates and so on are already built. To what extent are the things that we are talking about now relevant for any councils or planners or anyone involved in urban regeneration schemes? Should they also be putting the focus on how this is going to work for children and young people?

**Jo McCafferty:** In terms of existing stock, yes, absolutely. We are working on a number of projects. On one down at Thamesmead, where we are working with Peabody, we have really rethought how external space works around existing housing, and it has had a huge impact. Not only has it improved the access to open space of the people living in those homes but, as we also know, there is a lot of discussion at the moment, for all the right reasons, about the retention of existing buildings. When we are looking at building stock and what we can do with that in terms of retrofit, there is also an opportunity to start appraising the landscape and the plan opportunities that sit around it.

The benefit of the work that we have been doing at Peabody is also that that has fostered a sense of stewardship over that space that did not exist before that. The benefits are manifold. It is not just in the physical aspects of the built environment, but it is in terms of those conversations happening within a community and people owning that housing stock and placing value in that process. It is also, for the future, about that housing being managed better and the local community having stewardship over it. It is a real opportunity to do that better, and to do it with very focused engagement with the children and young people living in that housing.

**Chair:** We did an inquiry into councillors in the Committee and found out some of these concerning challenges a few years ago. It is probably not surprising that when you get councillors' allowances at the level they are, they are a little add-on for a pensioner, but they do not replace loss of earnings for someone who is of working age. That is a real challenge.

**Q112 Mohammad Yasin:** I also used to be a member of the planning committee at my local authority. When we received applications for new developments, the first question that came to mind was, "Do you have



parking?" It hardly mentioned the needs of children and young people. There should be balance. Of course we need new homes and we need parking, but we also need to meet the needs of young people if we want them to live a healthy and long life. We need air quality. We need an area where young people can play. If you want to live a healthy, long life, that is the way.

There should be a very clear national planning policy framework purpose and guidance for local authorities, because a lot of councillors probably do not know what the policy is, if there is any. What can national policy do to support better local planning for children, young people and the built environment?

**Sarah Scannell:** We have touched on many of those points already. As you said, if you do not have a very strong mandate in the NPPF, it will not translate to local plans, or it will not translate to all local plans. That is the absolute starting point. There has to be a greater emphasis on children in the NPPF, and it has to translate to local plans. You will then start to see policies coming through local plans. There is an opportunity in planning reform to really tackle that, and to take it and say, "We are developing new ways of developing our planning policy, developing new ways of talking to our communities about planning, and trying to get people more engaged in a positive spin."

There is an absolute win in saying that when we come to look at schemes, particularly large housing schemes, there has to be a lens on how they have been designed to take account of young people, and therefore the wider determinants of health and all the preventative approach things that we know are going to help councils in the long run.

This is about much more than just a planning policy: it is about creating spaces that work in the future. By having a very strong vision in the NPPF and following that through in local plans so that the inspectorate is required to ask questions about it, you will then see straight away that planning policies are in place so that when developers come to planning pre-applications, for example, those discussions are framed around, "How have you approached this scheme in relation to how it works for young people and how it works in the long term?"

Q113 **Mohammad Yasin:** What is the best way to better integrate young people and children in the built environment policy?

**Sarah Scannell:** As my colleagues have touched on, it is a really fascinating place for children and young people to become part of. If you can capture and hear what they want to say about their place, you get value added to anything that you are doing. My proposition is that we have a requirement in the NPPF to do consultation with a certain number of people, and that is tested at inquiry, and that there is an emphasis on going into schools and the local planning authorities actively seeking out young people to hear their views, and to understand and test their planning policies with. When you get developers coming forward with



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large schemes, in the design access statement there should also be a requirement that asks, "How have you engaged with young people in the area?"

**Jonny Anstead:** Beyond planning, if I was to leave you with a thought, it is not just about planning. Planning is one tool. So much of this conversation has been about planning, but it is not the only tool. There is also an opportunity in public land and public grants. We know that a lot of subsidy goes into the house building sector, and land is sold every day that is one way or another public land and ends up becoming private land. If we are trying to stimulate a sea change in the way that developers think about things, it would be a great first step for Government to look at the way that they sell public land and to place more requirement around this kind of agenda on those sorts of projects.

The more that we see projects like Goldsmith Street, Marmalade Lane and some of the other projects that have been mentioned today coming forward, we can see that there is a real demand for those kinds of places among members of the public. Parents of children will vote with their feet and buy a home or choose to live in a home because it gives a really lovely, good urban environment that their children can thrive in. That then helps the sector as a whole, because it starts to build evidence that people will pay a premium or they will stay for longer in homes where children are prioritised.

That would not be a surprise, because we all know that people would say that their children are their most important thing, but at the moment that does not always feed through to purchasing decisions. That is not necessarily because people are selfish, as we mentioned earlier. It might be because there is not enough diversity in the housing offer for people to choose differently from what there is available to them.

My suggestion or my plea would be to look at the tools that are available to see if we can stimulate housing that really does do what we are talking about and helps to provide evidence that it is more valuable, is more beneficial, and creates better social value outcomes for everyone.

**Jo McCafferty:** I echo the views of my colleagues. Jonny has been talking about beyond planning and the other tools, but the process to get there and to incentivise everybody to prioritise young people and children's futures and the quality of their built environment is so important in how we design.

I know there has been lots of discussion and anxiety about adding extra policy and adding more demands on a very long list, as we have all discussed, but in lots of situations those other things are quite easy to do if you are designing with children and young people in mind. You can create a really well-organised and sustainable environment where you are achieving your biodiversity net gain because you are prioritising pedestrian routes and play space within the centre of a development, and it is not car dominated with lots of tarmac. Those things are not in



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tension and can work together. The big thing that needs to happen is a readjustment of the hierarchy of priorities and children. Young people should be at the top because they are the future.

**Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. On that note, that probably summarises quite a lot of what has been said to us about the way children probably are often not considered at all, but ought to be considered first and foremost in many of these issues. Thank you all very much for coming and giving evidence to the Committee today. We will be reflecting on that and coming up with a report, having considered all the evidence, in due course.