



Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee

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

Monday 25 March 2024

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 25 March 2024.

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Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Mrs Natalie Elphicke; Kate Hollern; Tom Hunt; Andrew Lewer; Mary Robinson; Nadia Whittome; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 114 - 183

Witnesses

I: Joanna Averley, Chief Planner, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; and Dr Jeanelle de Gruchy, Deputy Chief Medical Officer.

II: Lee Rowley MP, Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; and Joanna Averley, Chief Planner, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Joanna Averley and Dr Jeanelle de Gruchy.

Chair: Welcome, everyone, to this afternoon's session of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. It is our final evidence session, with two panels this afternoon, to look at our inquiry into children, young people and the built environment, which so far has been very interesting for Committee members and I hope for other people watching. We perhaps do not always consider children, how policy relates to them and how what we do affects them. We do not always ask them what should be done in terms of their lives. There are lots of questions around that that we want to explore this afternoon.

Before we begin, I will ask Committee members to put on the record any interests they have that may be relevant to our inquiry. I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

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



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kate Hollern: I also employ a councillor in my constituency office.

Tom Hunt: I employ two councillors in my constituency office and I sit on the Ipswich town deal board.

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

Andrew Lewer: I am a vice-president of the LGA and I am on the Northampton Forward board.

Chair: That's our interests declared. I will come to our two witnesses. Can I ask you to introduce yourselves and to say who you are as well?

Joanna Averley: Good afternoon, everyone. It is good to be here. My name is Joanna Averley. I am the chief planner in DLUHC, the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities. I am the senior urban planner in Government.

Dr de Gruchy: Afternoon, everyone. I am Jeanelle de Gruchy. I am deputy chief medical officer for England and I lead the office for health improvement and disparities within the Department of Health and Social Care.

Q114 **Chair:** Thank you both for coming this afternoon. When we say to people that, as politicians, we are going to look at play, they probably look at us a bit gone out and think, "Isn't that something that just happens? Why do you need policies? Why do you need MPs to get involved in having a look at it?" Is children and young persons' play something that has to be taken seriously or should we just think, "They get on with it, don't they"?

Dr de Gruchy: Play is really important. I would probably frame it as being physically active, interacting and developing skills of interaction. That is really important.

If I may just frame it, it is important for you to talk about it because children and young people make up a third of the population. We are talking about a lot of children and young people in our population. I would look at it from the lens of health. How does this contribute towards their health? It does. Being physically active really does over their life course. Starting young—play is part of that—is really important. Being physically active and interacting with others sets up behaviours that will hopefully stay with them over a life course.

The environment and socioeconomic factors are really important in terms of how much children are physically active and how much they play. Issues around that, particularly around deprivation, will also impact on that. There can be quite a lot of inequalities in that.

There have been improvements in terms of children's health. Compared to other high-income countries, there are some metrics that have improved. I was looking at road traffic accident mortality. Hopefully that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

is not because kids have stopped playing in the streets; hopefully it is due to other road traffic measures, but that is positive.

However, there are real negative trends that we need to be concerned about, such as rising obesity, physical inactivity and air quality. Where children play, where they are physically active, how they interact, how they get from where they live to schools, parks and so on is really important. The inequalities in terms of how they do that will impact on the way in which they start life and how they go on, their health both immediately and later, and their life expectancy, in fact.

Joanna Averley: On the planning system specifically, as we know, the planning system aims to deliver economic, social and environmental objectives. The planning system and the national planning policy framework are very clear that the aim is to support strong, vibrant and healthy communities. We will come on to describe what some of those things are and how they are manifested through both how a local plan is prepared and how individual decisions are made. I am sure that is something that we will come to in questions.

Just extending Jeanelle's point, as the health evidence would show, the way you start life can set a certain pattern in terms of health. That is why the Government have adopted levelling-up missions, one of which is to reduce the gap in healthy life expectancy in the population across the country. For women, the gap between the worst and best performing parts of the country is 12 years. There is an objective to narrow that down to five years by 2035. Those habits start in early life. How they play through to the full length of a healthy life is important.

Q115 **Chair:** Just to follow up, Dr de Gruchy, you have done some research about obesity and the really awful level of obesity in children leaving primary school. One in three children is regarded as overweight. Is that down to a lack of facilities for play or active travel, which are the sorts of things that perhaps historically children would simply have done? Did we learn anything about the value of open space during covid? Have we now just forgotten about it? Was that short term—"We needed it during covid, but we have moved on now"? Are we ignoring the lessons that we learned?

Dr de Gruchy: There is a lot in that. There are a lot of things that are interconnected. The built environment is really so important in terms of the way we are physically active and how active we are, as well as the food that we have access to.

If I can take one example—you mentioned covid—we know that toddlers and young children who go into play areas develop skills there. Those skills will stay with them for life. From covid, we have seen a reduction in motor skills in two and two-and-a-half-year-olds, which is quite dramatic really. Because they were in the house, they were not able to get out to play, to see others or to experience life.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Starting from that really young age, you can see how children need to be able to feel safe in their homes and be active in their homes. If you have overcrowded homes, cold homes or any other problem with homes, it starts really young. There needs to be something about the safety of the home and, when they go out, how they go to school. Are they going through neighbourhoods that are safe? Are there lots of fast food advertising or takeaways? Are there lots of convenience stores with sweets and so on? How they get to school is important. The school environment is also important: whether they are able to play, whether there are green spaces for them to interact with, and whether they can socialise safely in green spaces and in parks after school.

All of that is really important in terms of the environment that we want for our children. Some of those things are not right, which is why you see poor outcomes in terms of overweight and obesity levels rising, as well as the big inequalities within that.

On that, if I could just give you the inequalities figures, in reception the rate of obesity is double for those in the most deprived areas compared to those in least deprived areas. There is something in the environment that is really contributing to that rising level. Obesity levels are problematic for all our children and young people, but there is that inequality. By the time they are in year 6, that has widened even more. In terms of obesity, in the most deprived areas 30% of year 6 are obese compared to 13% in the least deprived.

There are some really stark inequalities, which then sets them up for problems and issues at the time but also a poorer outcome in terms of long-term health conditions and a lower healthy life expectancy, which, as Joanna says, the Government are committed to addressing.

Q116 Chair: Joanna, do you want to add anything to that? Do you want to talk about how your officers work together? One of the things that we are beginning to find out in our inquiry is that joined-up Government is not always a given in trying to address these issues.

Joanna Averley: I will tell you about one very specific piece of policy and then another more wide-ranging piece of policy that is really starting to have impact. It is important to say that within DLUHC we set the framework for local government to adopt and implement policy at a local level both within the preparation of local plans and in individual development management decisions.

Speaking specifically to access to healthy food, a very good example is the work done with the TCPA, Sport England and others about healthier food environments. In that, there was a very specific way of helping local authorities to think through how to provide an appropriate evidence base to manage the number of fast food outlets that may be near or within the walking catchment of a school in order to discourage children from making poor health choices in terms of what they are eating in and around school.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

It is quite a difficult thing to manage. You need a certain amount of evidence, particularly at planning appeal. This is something where different agencies got together to provide a template for local authorities to provide appropriate evidence when coming up against decisions. That is just something very specific, but it particularly speaks to the obesity point.

The other thing that is very telling—this is showing real dividends in terms of how people are thinking about the design of places in totality—is the active design principles that have been prepared by Active Travel England, which is an ALB of the Department for Transport, again in partnership with Sport England. There are 10 principles. To us this might seem very sensible, but sometimes it is really important to record a set of expectations and ambitions for designing a place or managing an existing place. That is what we are all about in terms of planning, particularly the key elements of public health.

The high-level principle is promoting activity for all. There is a very simple principle that, if you design for a child, you are pretty much designing for anybody in terms of mobility, distance walking, ability to stop and rest, and so on.

This is about supporting active travel and turning on its head how we design for places. It is designing for people walking and cycling first and then putting the car in its rightful place in terms of the built environment. That is about having communities that are walkable, that connect up with different travel modes, particularly public transport, that are safe, that have good signage and lighting. It is about mixing and co-locating uses. It is about having multifunctional public space so you can both play and rest there. You might even be dealing with environmental issues within a public space, whether that is shade or sustainable urban drainage.

It is about having streets that are designed with people in mind. That means providing activity infrastructure, such as access to sport facilities and the like or just a playground; having active buildings inside and out so people can comfortably move through a building; and maintaining high-quality flexible spaces and activating spaces through different events and so on.

Those are principles. What we have been looking at, and what is very present in the planning system, is how those come to light in terms of individual decisions. In particular, the national model design code draws those issues to the fore when looking at how you design public space, streets and new housing environments, and how you incorporate play. In particular, section N1 is about providing a network of high-quality green open spaces with a variety of landscapes and activities, including play. These principles are laid out in the national model design code. It is a very user-friendly document that provides both diagrams and a really good checklist of things to think about.

Chair: We will come on to those details about the codes in due course.



Q117 **Andrew Lewer:** There will be general agreement with what you say about the accessibility of play areas and green spaces for people, particularly when there is a new estate or an expansion to a community going on.

I am slightly unsettled by your reference to managing evidence in terms of trying to come up with ways of saying that fast food outlets should be stopped or trying to find evidence to prove they are necessarily leading people to making bad decisions for their health versus the concept of parental responsibility and children being educated in terms of their health, and therefore public health, to make sensible decisions for themselves. You described it as managing evidence to suggest that, if someone walks past three fast food restaurants rather than one, they will perform a bad decision.

Given limited resources and that philosophical difference, should the emphasis be more on green spaces and accessibility for people to be able to make sensible decisions for themselves?

Joanna Averley: It is a very particular issue about fast food takeaways. It is a very pointed piece of policy to make sure that, when local authorities are trying to manage a significant number of fast food outlets near a school, they have the ability to do that. The broader piece is about how the entire environment and neighbourhood functions for children and young people, whether they have access to green space, whether they have safe streets, and whether young people feel comfortable walking down or cycling along those streets. It is the totality of the design of the place that has to work.

That is just one very specific aspect. The evidence is important when, for example, you are considering a scheme that is going to planning appeal and where the evidence has to be put forward.

Dr de Gruchy: We have an issue when children in more deprived areas have five times the number of fast food takeaways in their area than children in more affluent areas. When I was a local director of public health, we certainly had issues where the overweight and obesity in children was in areas that had a much higher concentration of unhealthy food through fast food takeaways.

Q118 **Andrew Lewer:** Is that cause and effect? Is the fact that lots of them happen to be there leading those children to choose to do that more or is it that the children in that area are choosing to do that more at the moment? Should we be saying, "If our education system was better in terms of people's focus on their health and positive decisions, that would not happen", rather than, "If they were not there, they would not make that decision"?

Joanna Averley: The planning system has to weigh up different things. In national Government, we set the overarching framework for the planning system. It is very much at the discretion of local authorities to act, if they feel like there is a problem with the proliferation of fast food.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The whole point would be whether that is connected to evidence of a problem of unhealthy eating leading to obesity.

We are not prescribing this at a national level and saying that something has to be done. It is about giving options to local authorities to make the case, if they think that is something that they need to do.

Q119 **Mary Robinson:** This is slightly moving on from that, but it is around the same points. Jeanelle, those comparators with covid, what happened there and the impact on young people were really interesting. A lot of young people were at home with parents and so on, but there was also the encouragement and the opportunity to be out and about more. Yet we saw young children starting school who were not able to use a knife and fork or go to the toilet. You would think that these were just really commonplace issues around raising children.

How do you place the two comparators, in terms of health and safety and the wellbeing of children, of being at home, inside or maybe online, and being outdoors?

Dr de Gruchy: It depends very much on your house and your housing environment. We want our children to have a secure house that is not crowded, is not cold and damp, and does not have mould in it. We want them to have space and the ability to play and be physically active. Ideally, they would have both an immediate garden or green space on the doorstep in which they can run around and a green or blue space that they can access. All of that is really important.

Different communities experienced covid differently. You will see a difference in terms of that impact. For parents who were working from home there might have been a different interaction with their children than parents who had to go out and leave their children there, if they were not going to school or daycare. That was probably a difference. There were inequalities in terms of children's experience and the ability for parents to provide that added extra that kids need in terms of connecting with others.

Q120 **Mary Robinson:** I suppose this moves us on to parents being able to open the door and children being able to go out and play. That was the childhood that I had. What are the cultural issues that are stopping that? Have we changed in the way we view and perceive children going out on their own or a couple of young children not being supervised by adults? Has that changed?

Joanna Averley: Invariably it has. Access to technology changes behaviour, doesn't it? Like you, I would have been told to go out into the street and not come back until 5 pm. That was the habit of childhood. Entertainment is packaged differently and it is accessible in a different way. That does play out.

At a national level, it is about providing the framework to help local authorities make the right choices and have the data at their fingertips to



be able to plan for their communities and their neighbourhoods. One thing that has been quite powerful in that regard is the work that Natural England has done on the green infrastructure framework. There are many elements to that, but one of the really powerful things is the mapping of the provision of green space and parks, both formal and slightly less formal, out of which you can establish where there is a deficit or a lack of provision for communities. That work is set alongside a set of standards, which basically amalgamate lots of different standards for play, access to play and green space that have been used over the country. It proposes optional standards to be used at a local level and has very practical how-to guides.

The one thing I want to mention is the digital mapping, which enables local authorities to analyse the provision within their communities and the catchments that relate to it. On that basis, 100 public spaces were funded through the levelling-up parks fund. Those communities were identified and £9 million was committed to those projects. That is about connecting information and data to communities and then hopefully impacting on the real-world experience of the children who live there.

Q121 Mary Robinson: Much of what we do seems to be about getting adults fitter and healthier. We are recognising that there is a problem and trying to deal with it. You have talked about the importance of setting those behaviours early in life. I constantly find public health campaigns around being a healthier adult and what I should be doing. Do we need to have public health awareness and campaigns for children? Do we need to help parents and professionals to encourage outdoor play?

Dr de Gruchy: In the Department of Health and Social Care, OHID is doing quite a lot in terms of children, particularly young children, with the Start for Life programme, the family hubs, and working with parents and parenting skills. That is in 75 local authorities. Those are the most deprived areas.

There is certainly work going on to support parents to learn those skills. These are environments where they learn how to play with children and how children need to play with each other and experience different ways of growing and learning through play and being physically active. There is more that can be done, but focusing on those very young children is very cost-effective because it is so important in terms of their life experience.

Q122 Mary Robinson: Anecdotally, I see a lot in the press about the importance of five a day for children and how we feed our young children, nutrients, and so on. We see it a lot in schools, but I am wondering whether we are doing enough on activities, outdoor play and the importance of fresh air. Do we need to do a little bit more on that particular element?

Dr de Gruchy: This afternoon I came from the national physical activity taskforce. That has brought Government Departments—DCMS, DFE, DLUHC, DHSC and others—together with arm's length bodies, including



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Active Travel England, Sport England, the partnerships and others. This is national Government and local government, but there are a lot of other partners as well. It requires a real whole-society look at what we are doing and what kinds of environments we are providing for our children. I come back as well to inequalities. Some of our children are not able to experience that real best start in life.

What are the different Departments doing? There is a lot going on. Quite a bit of energy and effort has been put into different ways to try to increase the physical activity. I was talking about nought to five-year-olds, but we were talking about school-age children and we will be talking about adults as well. There is renewed energy and focus on the children's age group.

Q123 **Mary Robinson:** So much of the conversation at the moment is about banning smartphones, children not using the internet, fast food advertising and all of that. Are these sticking plasters in comparison to what really needs to be done, which is to address the issues in the built environment?

Dr de Gruchy: The built environment is incredibly important. In terms of your question about screen-based activities, the UK chief medical officers did look at this in 2019. They did an evidence commentary on the evidence in terms of screen-based activities in children and young people's mental health and psychological wellbeing. It was primarily about mental health as opposed to being physically active. It stated that we do not have sufficient research or the research is insufficiently conclusive to support evidence-based guidelines on optimal amounts of screen-based activity. There is research around the positive as well as the negative. To your point, there is something about the environment in terms of how physically active we are.

Chair: We need to get through all our questions. If we could have slightly shorter answers, that would be really helpful. It is really interesting information. We want to make sure we get it all in by the end of our session.

Q124 **Andrew Lewer:** Joanna, first of all, in 2009 you were deputy chief exec of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, CABI. The commission produced guidance on designing and planning for play. It is quite an interesting document. What happened to that guidance at the time in terms of how it is used now? Who produces guidance like that now?

Joanna Averley: I did not expect to go back to 2009 and CABI, but I am glad you did. There was a lot of work done when I was at CABI. My colleagues were working on everything from "Start with the Park", which was this idea about how you plan for public space very intentionally, to aspects of play.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

A lot of this policy now flows from the national planning policy framework, which is very clear on the role of public space, and the national model design code, which is there in the absence of a design code at the local authority level. It is really important to note that that is a material consideration when considering planning applications. To my mind, it is a very good summation of all the guidance that has gone before. It points to all of those key issues that both somebody promoting a development and somebody making a decision on it should have at the forefront of their minds. We are seeing that being brought through.

What is currently in policy, particularly in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act, is that every local authority will be expected to prepare a design code for its own area. That can pick up some of those policies very specifically. There is a very strong framework within chapter 8 of the national planning policy framework for promoting healthy and safe communities, and that is then flowing through. As I mentioned, in the work on the green infrastructure framework, there is very good evidence of where there might be a need for a particular focus on increasing provision in an existing area and then playing that through in terms of what you might expect of a development as it comes through the system.

Q125 **Andrew Lewer:** On a similar theme, there was not as much reference to play, children and young people in the building for a healthy life toolkit as we might have expected, given that it came out of the healthy new towns programme, which had quite a lot of reference to that in it. What happened?

Joanna Averley: The Healthy New Towns programme looked at 10 particular areas that were undergoing change. It was addressing the issue of how you design at a bigger scale, more than just an individual housing scheme of a few hundred units—much bigger than that. Building for a healthy life came out of building for life, which was a set of standards developed in about 2002 and onwards, and is used in particular by Homes England and colleagues to consider whether schemes coming forward, particularly for funding through Homes England, are meeting the appropriate standards.

It is important to set that alongside any design code that emerges at local authority level or, in the absence of that, the national model design code.

Q126 **Andrew Lewer:** The building for a healthy life toolkit and active design guidance are areas for discussion at the moment, as it is expressed. Should it be more than that? As a broader question, is this a question of detailed guidance or is it a reflection of the fact that planning permission and building is so constrained at the moment that there is no opportunity for people to develop at a scale that allows for a decent amount of play space in there anyway?

Joanna Averley: The policy in the NPPF is very clear. The NPPF references the national model design code and makes it a material aspect



in making an individual permitting decision. To my mind, there is a very strong framework that directly references the green infrastructure framework as a way of establishing supply where there is a lack of space and where you should be thinking about that in terms of development.

As local authorities are doing pre-application work and considering individual applications, it is for them to play that through both in the preparation of their local plans and in the individual decisions. As schemes come through, there is inevitably a set of balanced choices to be made. The design and layout of the actual neighbourhood itself is often one of the most important aspects to making the place a success and making it attractive. As is evidenced, that also sustains the value of the place itself, the homes and the development.

As we walk around our cities, we all see places that have invested in the built environment and the public realm in particular. That is creating the very glue that is holding a place together and creating that value. Mayfield in Manchester is a very good example with a very significant amount of play space in the public realm. It is Manchester's first big public space and park for 100 years. It is coming before the development and it is creating the very glue around which significant commercial and residential development will happen. You can see projects, on both an urban regeneration scale and a more suburban scale, that are taking these principles through.

Andrew Lewer: That is helpful. Thank you.

Q127 **Mrs Elphicke:** This is a huge topic so I am going to try to keep us reasonably focused, if I may. We have just been hearing a bit about the NPPF and its role in relation to public space. Thank you for that, Joanna. I am mindful that at the moment we hear more about bats in the NPPF than we do about children, who are nearly absent. Is that the right balance?

If I may just give you a brief example, in my constituency we have a development that famously has what we call a bat playground as well as a bat hotel. I have another development in Walmer that has gone into administration. The children's playground has not been built. The whole of the first stage of the development is there. There are children playing in the streets with roads that are not finished and paving stones that are dangerous. Who knows whether the playground will survive the next building round?

In setting those priorities, are you sending a clear enough message in the NPPF to make it as easy as possible for children to have great lives?

Joanna Averley: The NPPF is very clear in its intent and on the role of public space and play. Ministers ultimately will make the choices about the balance and weight to be put into the NPPF, but it is a policy that is designed for everyone in the community and it definitely intends to do that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

It talks about healthy and safe communities, but also about environmental protection and enhancements, and dealing with climate change. It always has to deal with quite a number of issues across the piece. It does tend to talk about community rather than different age groups in the community and so on.

What is important is that the words expressed in policy, the pictures that might be in the design code and the standards that might flow from that then follow through into decision making. Ministers are very conscious of the need to push continually for quality and beauty. By “beauty” we mean all aspects of the built environment—the landscape, the buildings and the very design and layout of a place—being of the quality we should and can expect. For that reason, for example, the office for place is going to support the preparation of design codes. The NPPF is very clear in terms of expectations of quality.

When it comes to a scheme delivering on the ground and following through, local authorities can take enforcement action. It is very much at their discretion to do that. If something is not taken forward or not delivered, a local authority can take action. That is very much at the discretion of the local authority.

Q128 Mrs Elphicke: Could I just press you on that? I appreciate that, as you have said, there is a lot in it. That is the point. That is why we have to specify children, isn't it? You talk about the environment—you have talked a lot about the environment in this session—but it is not about provision for everything, is it? It is about provision for specific groups; it is about provision for children.

Why is it not more front and centre? Is it going to be in these new national development management policies? Surely, if you do not set those priorities, they will not be a priority within all these judgments that have to be made. That is what we are seeing on the ground, is it not?

Joanna Averley: It is an absolutely fair point. As we prepare national development management policies—we have started the provisional work on that—it will be for Ministers to decide exactly that balance of priorities and what issues to bring to the fore in terms of policies. As I am sure you know, there will be a set of nationally held policies that will—

Q129 Mrs Elphicke: You are advising them. Would it not be sensible to have children and young people specifically front and centre within the NPPF and the other policies? Jeanelle has very helpfully set out the objectives. If you want to achieve these objectives, how are you going to do it without saying, “This is what matters”?

Joanna Averley: As I mentioned earlier, if you design for young people or people with mobility issues, you are designing for everyone. It is a very healthy test to take, as professionals. If you design for a young child or an old person, both may only be able to walk for 100 metres; both may need to sit down and rest; and both may have a certain attitude or a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

certain consciousness of road safety and things like that. That is a very good lens through which to design for everyone.

You are asking me a question beyond that, which is about whether there should be specific mention of children and the needs of children within the NPPF. We do not say a lot about different groups. We tend to talk about the built environment in which we function, operate and live out our lives. It is genuinely the right question to ask, which is whether we should talk about individual groups in society within the national planning policy framework.

Mrs Elphicke: That is the question I am asking. What is your view?

Joanna Averley: At the minute, policy does not tend to do that. It tends to talk about the built environment itself.

Mrs Elphicke: What is your view on this? You have done this for years.

Joanna Averley: My reflection would be that if you list one group, you end up listing about 30.

Q130 **Mrs Elphicke:** Is this not critical? You list bats. Why are we not listing children? You have mentioned a child who might like to toddle and rest. What about those that in previous generations, we have heard, would run for miles—and now are being constrained by 15 or 20-minute cities and parks? Should we be defining specifically what matters to create really healthy fantastic childhoods?

Joanna Averley: We should, but in doing that you are not just designing for one age group; you are designing for all.

Q131 **Mrs Elphicke:** Children are less important than—

Joanna Averley: It is not that they are less important. It is that a successful public space will meet the needs of all age groups.

Q132 **Mrs Elphicke:** We know they are less important than bats, so I will move on from that. If I may just follow up on this question of enforcement that you have mentioned, is there not something, again, in the requirement to bring forward some things before others? You mentioned the Manchester example. Was that something that has been grant-funded or supported publicly in any way?

Joanna Averley: Yes, it received levelling-up funding to enable it to come forward.

Q133 **Mrs Elphicke:** I thought it might have. If we are looking at the generality of developments, why could it not be specified in order to make it easier for local authorities to make sure that the playground goes in at a really early stage when those first families are in place and that the roads are levelled so children do not fall over and hurt themselves while the development is being finished? Is there more you could do in your Department?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Joanna Averley: The way that a development flows through depends on the scale of the development. Some developments might be a few thousand homes. The play space or the green space may come in in different phases, depending on where it is located in the development. It is really important that local authorities follow through on these commitments in terms of conditions and the other aspects of a scheme as it comes through.

What you are highlighting is that residents have bought into a new development with an expectation of what is to come. It is important that local authorities feel enabled to do that, which is why they have enforcement powers.

Q134 **Mrs Elphicke:** Just to be clear about my question, I was not suggesting that residents had bought into it. These provisions are essential for the safety, wellbeing and development of children. This is not, "I am going to have a nice shrub at the end of my road". This is about something that is part and parcel of the wellbeing of the children who are within that community, yet people are moving into houses without those facilities being in place.

It is the case that there will be priority for social and affordable housing to come forward, for example? In those instances, or indeed in any instances, could the Department do more to make sure playgrounds and other safe spaces for children are brought forward at an earlier stage?

Joanna Averley: I am genuinely not trying to obfuscate here, but each scheme has its own phasing and each scheme will be delivered in a certain order. For example, if you are delivering quite a dense urban development, the public space may come at the very end, because it is your work site before you then finish off.

Mrs Elphicke: You have no view. You expressed a very clear preference in the case of Manchester that you thought that was a really good model.

Joanna Averley: Yes.

Mrs Elphicke: I am just keen to understand why it is good for Manchester but not good for Walmer in Kent.

Joanna Averley: Manchester is an interesting example. With Government funding, the scheme was able to bring forward the public realm first, which has created a really strong brand for this new quarter to the city. You are asking me whether it should be a condition of any development that the public space goes in first.

Q135 **Mrs Elphicke:** That is not what I am saying. I am asking whether there is more that you could do in terms of the guidance and the conditions that you have set out for the local planning authorities to make sure they have the tools to prioritise in the right way. If they can prioritise, they can enforce. You have said they can enforce, but do they have the right guidance?



Joanna Averley: That will come mostly through individual negotiations in an individual scheme through section 106 agreements. They are for the very particular physical form of the development.

Q136 **Mrs Elphicke:** With respect, that is not the question that I am asking. I am not asking about whether developments get decided on an individual basis. Very specifically, what is your role in making sure that children are prioritised, as bats are prioritised currently, and, where playgrounds are part of the necessary conditions of a development, that those are prioritised as being delivered in a way that makes a development that is being done in phases a safe place for children? I am surprised that you do not feel central Government have a role in that.

Joanna Averley: Central Government absolutely have a role. There is national policy, which talks about the importance of play and green space provision; the policies that should be adopted within a local plan, which is locally owned; and how those decisions then follow through in terms of individual development management decisions, which is particularly strong in the national model design code as a precursor to locally adopted design codes.

The national policy is very clear on the role of green space and play, and on making the design of the street comfortable for children, both for active play and for moving around their communities. That is very clear. That priority is absolutely clear. You are moving towards asking a question about what happens if a developer does not then deliver.

Mrs Elphicke: No.

Joanna Averley: Okay, you are not. My apologies. That was a misunderstanding.

Mrs Elphicke: You said very clearly that you thought it was down to local authorities, so you have given us your answer on that. I know we are going to ask about design codes. That probably leads on to that.

Q137 **Kate Hollern:** It does indeed, Natalie. Thank you. Why do the national model design code and the national design guide not cater for children? You spoke about it in very general terms and you said it is down to local authorities, but why do these codes not have that built in?

Joanna Averley: Apologies—it does. It does make it very clear within the national model design code that children’s play, the provision of play and the provision of green space should be there. It references, as I mentioned, Natural England’s green infrastructure framework, which basically analyses digitally where there is a lack of provision for green space, on the back of which of the levelling-up parks fund moneys were given out. Those are material issues that can play through into development management decisions at the moment.

The national model design code does directly talk about green space, play provision and the design of healthy streets and safe streets.



Q138 **Kate Hollern:** That does not seem to have been followed through in what we see happening on the streets.

Joanna Averley: The national model design code was issued in the summer of 2021. It is therefore for local authorities to apply that in real terms as they look at individual schemes. We are doing a lot of work at the moment on the preparation of area-based design codes and local design codes with local authorities so they can then adopt those policies for themselves at the right level of detail and specificity for their individual local areas, particularly reflecting the character of their places: whether they are mid-density, low-density, historic or more contemporary settings. That work is flowing through in all the considerations that are applicable to that particular local authority area or community.

Q139 **Kate Hollern:** It appears that you are telling me that the focus is on children and young people by design. I am afraid that certainly does not follow through. Like Natalie, I have a number of new estates in my constituency. The role always seems to be passed to local authorities. If you sit on a planning committee, there appears to be more emphasis on profit and putting as many houses as possible on a parcel of land. What you think is in there is probably not being read with the same importance by local authorities or even developers.

Joanna Averley: I genuinely think that the national model design code is very clear and explicit, and gives very clear guidance on the issues that should be playing out in terms of development management decisions and the design of schemes before you even get to a planning application. As I say, the NPPF makes it clear that it is a material consideration in planning applications and it talks to all the issues you have been raising around the table.

There is a question as to whether, as you say, that is then taken up by the decision-maker and applied, but we do see schemes coming through where the national model design code is referenced as having been used to consider the scheme that is in front of decision-makers.

Kate Hollern: What more could you do to place more emphasis on this? Could you perhaps impose more conditions to ensure it happens? It is not happening in a number of cases.

Joanna Averley: In the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act, local authorities will be mandated to prepare an area-wide design code for their local area. They can use the national model design code as a starting point, as a menu of issues that they should address. Those codes are intended to be very clear in terms of expectations and then to feed through into decision making. In the absence of that, the national model design code can be used as well as the national design guide. With the setting up of the office for place, the objective is to make sure that local authorities are encouraged to do so and are supported with other aspects of training and best practice exactly on this topic.



Just as an aside, we are doing lots of work in terms of capacity and capability in planning authorities. One of the organisations we fund, called Public Practice, is offering to bring people into local authorities, particularly with a range of skills. One of the skills shortages is urban design and placemaking skills. We are helping local authorities recruit from the private sector back into the public sector specifically for these kinds of skills to enable both local authority officers and members to be well advised about some of these issues.

Q140 Kate Hollern: I am afraid that the national headline and the reality are poles apart. When a planning application comes to councils, a developer can walk away because it will not make enough profit on the site. There is a huge disconnect between the vision and the reality. Based on that, should the London plan's 10 square metres of play space policy for new housing developments be adopted and enforceable nationally with a ban on play spaces segregated by tenure?

Joanna Averley: The London plan housing design guide is a very good example of a locally adopted set of requirements specific for London, as prepared in the London plan. As you say, the expectation and requirement for five square metres of private outdoor space, which in London is commonly in the form of a balcony, is a really important thing. That has been adopted for London. It will be for Ministers to decide on the policies that should be adopted for the whole country. That standard specifically is particularly relevant when you are doing medium and high-rise development where people might not have access to private space on the ground floor because they are living at a higher density.

The other thing that is really quite interesting in terms of the London plan and the supplementary guidance—I wanted to highlight it, and this seems like a good opportunity to do it—is the public London charter, which is really interesting work about influencing existing public spaces as well as new spaces. Some parts of the city are privately managed and owned, such as King's Cross, Canary Wharf and many of what you would have formerly considered civic environments.

The London plan design guide for housing design standards also references the public London charter, which talks about people signing up to places being welcoming, open, with unrestricted use, community-focused, free of charge and that their use is welcomed in our urban environments. That is a very important aspect. In relation to the spaces within London's developments, there are places like Elephant Park and other schemes, which have very intentionally designed the environment for children in terms both of play and how they move around the development. There are some good examples.

I am not saying that everywhere is getting it right by any stretch of the imagination. We see many schemes coming forward that are not of the right quality or do not have the right scale of provision in terms of children, play and green space. That is why the national model design



HOUSE OF COMMONS

code was adopted and why emphasis was very strongly put into the NPPF updates just before Christmas in terms of this wider set of issues.

Q141 **Kate Hollern:** In your role as the chief planner for DLUHC, should you be advising Ministers that the play space policy for new housing developments be adopted and enforceable nationally along with a ban on segregating play spaces by tenure?

Joanna Averley: I think you are referring to the Lilian Baylis school scheme, which was a very particular case. Do you know about that?

Kate Hollern: No, I am talking in general. Should developments have children's needs as a main focus? Rather than passing on the responsibility for enforcement to councils, which they cannot do—it cannot be done—should it be in the advice that developments need to demonstrate that they have considered open spaces for children?

Joanna Averley: Developments currently have to consider open space. Invariably, children use open space. I am not saying this to obfuscate the question. The point is that children and play space are already considerations in the national model design code. This is already material to planning applications. It is already in policy.

Whether it delivers the results is a secondary question. That is a question about how people are designing schemes and whether people are making decisions on the basis of the policies that they can draw on to get the outcomes that they desire. This goes to your point, which is about whether we see it coming forward in the schemes that happen on the ground.

The reality is that the quality of schemes that come forward through the planning system are not necessarily at the standard that is prescribed and advised in national policy. That comes down to individual local authority decision making. As you rightly say, sometimes viability is a consideration; sometimes affordable housing is a consideration. These are all things that should be considered in the round at the point of decision.

Kate Hollern: I will take that as a no, but I will leave it there.

Q142 **Mrs Elphicke:** Just very briefly, if I may follow up, Joanna—there are some puzzled looks going around the Committee over this. It would be helpful to finish this segment, if I may. We have the NPPF. There is one mention of children; the whole subject of children is not high up in the NPPF. You are now putting great weight on the design code. When I look at the beautiful new multicoloured design code wheel of a well-designed place of climate, community and character, "safe, social, inclusive" is what it says in the headline about public spaces.

The Committee might have got the impression from what you have been saying that children are a focal point of this new work, but that does not seem to be the case in the actual design code. I am just wondering



whether it is slightly overstated. It is a consideration in the whole piece on planning. It does not have the same status as a specific statement on children of the type that the Committee is exploring today, does it?

Joanna Averley: Currently, a local plan has a higher status in the system than the NPPF. What we are doing in terms of updating policy and the national model design code is elevating those national policies to the same level as the local plan. That provides an opportunity.

Q143 **Mrs Elphicke:** I know we have other things to cover, but the overall impression that was given is that this is all sorted because somewhere down in the deep bowels there is some guidance that loosely touches on children and may allow people to have a space to talk about children. What we are trying to get to the heart of in this session is that children and young people matter and they should be a central part of the planning process. They should not be an afterthought. They are not in the headline. They are not in “climate, character, community”. They are not in the next bit of the wheel. They are not in “public space in nature”. They are not in the inner bit of the wheel. They are somewhere else. They are not on the wheel. Our children and young people are so important that they should at least have a slice of the pie, beyond the wheel.

Joanna Averley: I completely agree with everything you are saying. It will be a question for Ministers, ultimately—I advise; they decide—as to whether or not they are on the wheel or whether they are in the policies.

The national design guide is almost like a set of 10 guiding principles. The national model design code bring that to life with a series of really navigable sets of issues, considerations and diagrams so a local authority can say, “Okay, how do I bring these principles and words to life? What do I look at in the design of a street? What do I look at in the design of a play space to make sure it is good for children? How do I think about different sizes of play space in a neighbourhood?” It is all those sorts of things. It is very much at the centre of the policy.

Q144 **Chair:** I have two quick follow-ups to Joanna Averley and then I have one for Dr de Gruchy. You just mentioned the new wording in the NPPF. There is not one additional mention of children in that wording, is there?

Joanna Averley: No, I do not think there was.

Q145 **Chair:** We have a situation where you are saying that we have the design codes, that this is the way local authorities should treat children’s need for play and other needs in the built environment, and that it is down to local authorities both to agree planning applications along those lines and to make sure that they are delivered. As the chief planner, do you ever review whether that is happening in practice?

Joanna Averley: We have not done one during my tenure.

Chair: How long is your tenure?



Joanna Averley: It has been three and a half years. It depends on what we are interested in. If we are interested in housing quality in schemes, that was done by the Bartlett School at UCL a while ago against the building for a healthy life standards. That was the third iteration of the housing quality survey.

We are also very involved in the Housing Design Awards, which finds those schemes that are delivering on a broad set of objectives.

Chair: Might it be a good idea to have a review?

Joanna Averley: It is always a good idea to check on practice in real time and see whether things are shifting.

Chair: Is that a yes?

Joanna Averley: Yes.

Chair: Excellent, so that is something that we can put to the Minister. We can say, "The chief planner has said you ought to". I will see whether he agrees with you.

Joanna Averley: I will be sitting beside him, so we will see.

Q146 **Chair:** I know, yes. Dr de Gruchy, I want to look briefly at what is happening in Scotland and Wales. Scotland has national planning policies, which specifically talk about the role of planning in supporting the population's health. In Wales, there is a place sufficiency duty.

Is there anything that England could learn from the requirements in the devolved Administrations' policies about creating healthier lifestyles and certainly more healthy opportunities for children in particular?

Dr de Gruchy: I am not hugely familiar with the Scottish and Welsh situations, but there is something, as we talked about earlier, about how we ensure, across Government, that we are looking at the impact of policies on health and how we can improve health and wellbeing for the population over time.

Certainly, Joanna and I work closely together and share best practice in terms of how the planning work that she does impacts on health. Our teams in DHSC and OHID are certainly involved with Joanna's department and Active Travel England. They are supporting active design, as you have been talking about already. They are supporting directors of public health in local government to work within local government, with their planning departments and so on, to try to improve the policy so you have improved health outputs or outcomes.

Joanna Averley: As a very quick example of that, when we were drafting the national model design code, we borrowed a colleague from OHID, who came and helped us on the health elements of that code. The dialogue about what policy should be and how it can be impactful from a health perspective is something we are commonly working on.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Thank you both very much for coming this afternoon and giving us a lot of information on a lot of issues, which we will reflect on. Indeed, Joanna, we will be reflecting with you a little bit further in a minute.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lee Rowley and Joanna Averley.

Chair: Welcome, again, to the Minister—a frequent visitor to us on a whole range of subjects. Thank you for coming this afternoon, together with your chief planner, who has already given some evidence to us at the earlier session on this very interesting issue of children and the built environment. It is one we have not explored as a Committee before, and we are finding some interesting issues to look at.

Minister, first of all, are you as unhappy as we are that you are sat there by your ministerial self this afternoon without a colleague from another Department?

Lee Rowley: I fear I may not be able to answer all your questions.

Q147 **Chair:** We were told before by the permanent secretary that your officials in your Department were liaising with officials in DFE, and you are working together on looking at the issues of this inquiry. That has not happened, has it?

Lee Rowley: We have a very big work plan in the Department, so I am focused on the key elements of the work plan. We are always very keen to support the Committee and that the work can be done. We work very closely with different Departments at official-to-official level. I am very happy to be here.

Q148 **Chair:** Have your officials actually been talking to officials in DFE about this particular inquiry?

Lee Rowley: I am sure we have; no doubt we have, in order to try to arrange today. I talk with Ministers on a pretty regular basis—David and others—on a variety of subjects. Has this historically been something that I have been focused on? The answer is no, because I have a large work plan that I am having to focus on instead.

Q149 **Chair:** We understand that, but we also understand that the issue of children, their health, children's play and how they respond to the built environment is not just the responsibility of one Department. You have very significant responsibilities, but children looks a bit like the Department for Education. Play might be the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Children's health might be something for the Department of Health. It is cross-Government, but it seems that Government across Government have not got their act together.

Lee Rowley: How would you define getting their act together?

Chair: At least talking to each other might be a start.

Lee Rowley: As I say, I am always happy to talk. The challenge for many people—including people on this Committee—is not just talk but



HOUSE OF COMMONS

action. There is finite resource in the Department and finite ministerial resource. We focus on the priorities that we put forward.

Q150 **Andrew Lewer:** Aside from the day-to-day politics of the Conservative Government and who is talking to who, do you think there is a philosophical and practical problem that Departments inevitably focus on the policies that are right in the middle of their remit, rather than the ones that may have a broader socioeconomic benefit but overlap with other Departments?

Lee Rowley: I am sure they do. In fact, I know they do. I have been a Minister for a couple of years now. I am probably straying a little bit further from the brief, but my observation is that Government are trying to do an awful lot at the moment. There is a significant amount of work across all remits and all types, and whoever is in Government will have to recognise that there is only so much capacity and there is only so much that can be done. That is not an indication of the positive or negative, or the importance or otherwise of this topic. It is simply that there is a set of prioritisations that needs to happen. Over the last 30 years, as a broader principle, Government have not been focused enough. They need to be more focused.

Chair: More focused on children, for a start?

Lee Rowley: Government should do some things well, not lots of things badly. That is not what is happening at the moment, but that is the risk of where it could go if we are not careful. We will all take different ideological and philosophical viewpoints about that, but I start from a pretty robust place: Governments across the west are trying to do too much, and they would be better off focused on a smaller number of things and doing them as well as they can.

Q151 **Chair:** With that philosophy, given children and young people are around 20% to 25% of our population, what is your Department's role towards them? How do you see that in broader terms?

Lee Rowley: My role as Planning Minister is to make sure that all aspects of the planning system work for everybody in society as best it can, from the day they are born to the day they die, no matter where they come from. There is obviously a significant importance that we consider young people. For a period of time, they will not have a voice; they are of minority age, and it is obviously important that we nurture the next generation.

The planning system as a whole seeks to be as user neutral as possible, while recognising the importance of accommodating various parts of society where it can. Do I think that there is a massive focus needed in the planning system on one particular part of society? No, probably not, because you could make that case for everybody. You could make that case for disabled people. You could make that case for certain types of people, certain geographies, certain backgrounds, certain ethnicities, and then all you end up with four years later is a whole heap of documents



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that have probably not moved us on a long way. I am an advocate of universality where possible.

Q152 **Chair:** Are children not slightly different in their needs, requirements and what we should be giving them?

Lee Rowley: Yes, which is why I said that there is an argument that that is absolutely considered, because children do not have a voice and because it is very important that we nurture the next generation. By the same token, my philosophy is universality where possible. The national planning policy framework and the like seek to be as universal as possible.

Q153 **Chair:** But children are not the same, Minister. Children cannot get in a car and go where they want to go. They are going to have different lifestyles from adults, different requirements and different interests, so they cannot be universally treated like everyone else.

Lee Rowley: I have not said that.

Chair: Oh, sorry, I thought you had.

Lee Rowley: I accept that children, being of minority age, are not able to express themselves and that we have a duty to nurture the next generation, but for me, as an overarching principle in the hierarchy, the principle of universality supersedes where it can.

Q154 **Tom Hunt:** Minister, we have heard from many experts who have given evidence to this Committee that children are rarely, if ever, considered in policy and decision making related to the built environment. Is there any legal duty for public sector decision-makers to consider children as an equality group? If not, should there be?

Lee Rowley: Sticking closely with my brief of planning, there is a broader equality conversation that can be had with other parts of Government, but there is reference within the national planning policy framework that consideration needs to be given. It is ultimately for local authorities to decide how to interpret that and then how to execute it. In any system where there is effectively a monopolist—and the state is a monopolist, as it sets the framework—you have to rely upon the state doing the right thing. Sometimes it does and sometimes it does not.

Q155 **Tom Hunt:** Do you know whether the newly announced engagement of communities on low-traffic neighbourhoods includes consulting children and young people?

Lee Rowley: I do not know. Again, my preference is for universality in these things. It is important that we take into account all parts of the community where we can, including those—not just children, but others—who may find it difficult to interact and may not be able to do so, but I would be reluctant on a personal level to go into a place where we start mandating that.



Q156 Tom Hunt: Just today, the Children's Commissioner has published a report, "The Big Ambition". The most negatively answered question—only 22% of children and young people who took part in the survey agreed with this—was whether those who were running the country listened to what they had to say. I understand your view that it is not something the Government perhaps ought to get overly involved in, but it just concerns me that only 22% of children and young people feel that the Government listen to what they have to say. In their mind, it is probably the council and the Government, or just the Government, but either way that is a slight concern.

Lee Rowley: There was a poll last week that suggested that a Labour MP who did not exist had an approval rating of X. There is a requirement to contextualise the numbers in some of these reports, but it is an important point that there is a need to make sure children's voices are heard. You would hope within a system of around 350 councils and 200 or so local planning authorities that there was enough space for local authorities to bring forward best practice and for it to be copied.

My reticence to fully agree with some of the direction of the questions today is not a reflection of my interest and desire to ensure that children—in the same way as adults, older people, people from a particular part of the country or disabled people—are accommodated in this, which is absolutely vital. It is simply that the question in front of me is one about whether to mandate that or not, and I would be reluctant to do that.

Q157 Tom Hunt: If it is a big failure or something is clearly not working, whatever the policy issue, central Government will look to get involved. Just in terms of young people and children having an opportunity to shape the environment in which they live, do the Government have any data or understanding about roughly the proportion of young people who engage in the planning process, in local plan formation and in consultations?

Lee Rowley: No, we would not have that. That would be entirely down to the relevant local planning authorities to determine how to do that.

Q158 Tom Hunt: What level of alienation would be acceptable or not acceptable for the Government to intervene? If young people are feeling increasingly alienated from their environment, at what point would the Government intervene?

Lee Rowley: I have no plans to intervene. I do not mean to dodge your question. From multiple levels, as Members of Parliament we will have seen elements of our local plan that were done well and elements of it that were done poorly. I have seen that in my locality. I am sure you and others have done so.

I am a massive advocate of the broadest consultation and discussion that is possible within the local plan formulation and through the process, because it is so frustrating at the end of the process when people in other



HOUSE OF COMMONS

parts of local plan realise that something is in there that they did not expect, and so on. As public servants we can all see the challenge of that.

There are obviously obligations within the national planning policy framework for a broader group of people to be considered. I would hope that would be the case, but ultimately it would be very, very challenging for a Government of any colour—not speaking for colleagues on the other side—to start genuinely putting in place thresholds, mandates or numbers about where people felt involved or not involved, because if we do that kind of atomisation it quickly ends up in a challenging place.

Q159 Tom Hunt: I have been a local councillor myself. I have been on a planning committee. I understand the process, how councillors and those on the planning committee are engaged with when it comes to developments, and how those councillors can influence what is in a particular development. We have heard in one of our sessions that the average age of a councillor is about 65, or probably north of that.

My concern with that situation is that you have a load of people on that planning committee who might have all the best desire in the world to make good decisions, but frankly there is just a lack of young people on councils. There is a lack of even middle-aged people who might have children. If you are putting all the power in the hands of local councils to ensure that young people have a voice in the planning process, does it concern you that the make-up of our councillors is in no way representative of wider society when it comes to age?

Lee Rowley: I know Joanna wants to come in in a second. I do not disagree with your characterisation that parts of our local government are not necessarily representative of society as a whole, in the same way that parts of our central Government and parts of this place are not. That is a perpetual challenge to try to resolve. I would not advocate mandating any of that, but it is something that we all should have at the forefront of our minds.

I know you and the Committee know this, but it is worth saying that the national planning policy framework is clear that in local plans consideration needs to be given to wellbeing, how things interact, transport links, and all of those things that will be at the forefront of considering young people. That has to go through a soundness process with an inspector representing the Secretary of State. The framework should get to a place where that has been considered.

I was looking at my own—North East Derbyshire’s—local plan just before I came here, because it is a very interesting set of questions that you are asking. There is reference there, all the way from the importance of younger people in terms of skills and the built environment, down to individual playground types, to specifically some play equipment in a particular area. That got through the soundness test.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Within individual planning applications, you would hope that local councillors or officers would take an interest in this. I do sense it is better than when I was growing up, 20, 30 or 40 years ago. How I can evidence that is a challenge, but my sense is that it is better locally and nationally. There are checks and requirements in the system. The question would be how you mandate moving forward, as opposed to encouraging and supporting best practice.

Joanna Averley: Just to come in on the point about engagement of communities across the local authority area, the Department is funding quite a lot of work with digital planning. Just to explain where that makes a difference, it is about using technology to get to a much broader set of voices in the community, because traditionally the engagement in the preparation of a local plan, or even a major planning application, is actually pretty low compared to what it should be.

Digital engagement, whether that is the software and an app, or how you reach out to young people and society at large and say, "This is of importance to you as a community—engage", is showing real dividends and is showing that more voices come forward. You do therefore have a much broader set of perspectives on the change that might be coming forward, such as delivery of more housing, delivery of more play space and things like that. Through that investment, we see that you get a broader set of perspectives and a broader conversation, which is really positive.

Q160 **Tom Hunt:** That is good to hear. I have seen examples locally on some key local issues of the traditional consultation method, where young people are highly engaged in it. I remember one example when I was campaigning to get a local cinema in my area. The consultation results would have you believe that it is a hugely popular idea. My concern is this slight tension in not wanting central Government to get overly involved and leaving it in the hand of local councils.

I take your point about local council officers, but councillors ultimately play a crucial role in the planning process. They sit on the planning committees. It is just unhealthy when you have the age profile that we have on planning committees. How can we expect decisions to be made? What do a Government do about that? Could there be a strategy to try to change the make-up of councillors? Might it actually involve some decisions that are not that popular, for example paying better allowances so it is more manageable for people to balance being a councillor with another job they may have to do?

I accept that it is difficult, but of course the reality is at the moment that in lots of local council areas we have a lot of people of a certain age doing it who are retired. There may be a few people like me who did it when they were 22, because I was very into that sort of thing, but how can you make being a councillor not even attractive, but manageable for somebody who is not a massive politico but just wants to do something for their local community? They do not want to make money out of it;



HOUSE OF COMMONS

they just want it to be manageable. That is a whole different issue. I know the Chair has done some work on that before.

Lee Rowley: That is a very fair question. It is obviously broader than what we are talking about today, but as somebody who became a councillor when I was 25—I am another one of those unusual ones—I know it is a perpetual challenge.

Q161 **Kate Hollern:** The last Labour Government did a play policy, and that is because it is really important. It reduces antisocial behaviour and brings about better health outcomes and a better neighbourhood. Why do you not feel as though it is your role to put more emphasis on young people, rather than just pass it on to councils? As Tom said, there is a fair mixture of them. In your role, you can remind councils and developers that children have to be a focus in any application or any proposed development.

Lee Rowley: Rightly or wrongly, Kate—you may take the view that it is the wrong decision—I have made a choice that my focus and my priority is going to be on speeding up the planning system.

Kate Hollern: Not children.

Lee Rowley: That is not what I said. I will choose my words. My focus is on speeding up the planning system. The reason for that is that the big, existential question that is facing the planning system at the moment is that it is slowing down in all areas. That does not help either the provision of play spaces, to the point that is being talked about here, or provision for young people. It does not help the underlying fair point that you are making, which is about making sure that this provision is sufficient. It also does not help younger people to get the houses that they need in the first place. I know through other sessions and other discussions that you share my desire for that to happen.

I have been very candid with you, but my focus—not my sole focus and not the only thing I will do; hopefully I am capable of doing more than one thing at once—is absolutely on speeding up the planning system. As a Minister, it is important that I own that so you are clear where I am focusing, because I hope that it will deliver greater benefits than if I were to distribute myself too thinly.

At the same time, it does not mean that this is an unimportant area of policy. It is quite the reverse, but in some areas of my portfolio I need to respect the devolution settlement. This is an area where I think local councils can lead best.

Kate Hollern: So short-term gain for long-term pain.

Lee Rowley: I am not sure that is the case. Maybe my locality is an exception, but it has been run by your party for much of my lifetime. In my locality it is without question that provision for younger people of all sorts—play, equipment, transport and the ability to get around—has



HOUSE OF COMMONS

improved demonstrably since I was a child. That is under Governments of all parties. The trajectory is positive. How we do that is down to our philosophical views about what to do and where to focus.

Q162 Chair: I might have a different view about public transport, but I generally take the point that if consultation is going to happen it is down to local councils. That is fine, but where Government require consultation, such as low-traffic neighbourhoods, Government are saying to councils, "You must go back and consult about how they are progressing and what impact they are having". Given that the impact of low-traffic neighbourhoods can be very different between children and motorists, do you think, where Government are saying, "You have to consult", Government ought to be saying, "And you have to consult all these groups"?

Lee Rowley: I have honestly not considered it specifically on low-traffic neighbourhoods, because I have not really been involved in it over the past four or five months. To try to answer your question directly, there is obviously a case to do that, Chair, and you have indicated the reason why. My concern is that there is always a case to do lots of things in isolation, and in aggregate they end up being extremely problematic and slowing the whole system down.

Chair: We might follow up in due course.

Q163 Mohammad Yasin: We heard from agencies with concerns that an over-restricted environment designed to prevent crime and antisocial behaviour can prevent social behaviour and children's play. Do you think that reducing antisocial behaviour by designing out crime, such as removing benches from the park, can lead to removing positive social behaviour?

Lee Rowley: Forgive me if I misunderstand the question. Do I think that designing out antisocial behaviour and supporting children are in tension? Is that the point you are making?

Mohammad Yasin: If you over-restrict it and try to tackle antisocial behaviour, it will stop the kids coming out and playing. The kids with good behaviour will be affected as well and they will not come out to play. Do you think there is a risk of this policy?

Lee Rowley: Yes, it sounds like it. There is always a balance to be struck in any public policy. I have seen issues, as I am sure you have in Bedford, where things have moved too far in the wrong direction for good reasons. Things have been taken out or been changed, and all that happens is that it does not remove the problem; it moves it along.

Mohammad Yasin: Can you give us an example?

Lee Rowley: I remember, back when I was a councillor there was a big discussion—this was many years ago and I do not remember the discussion wholly—about whether, in some parts of central London where



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I was a councillor, we should be allowing people to sit down, because in the evenings that might encourage people to sleep there or create issues with crime.

I was always a bit unconvinced about that level of formality in terms of trying to work that one through, because whenever I went to look at these things—it did not happen that often—it was very unique to the individual location. Many years on, that is one of the reasons why I am reluctant in parts of this discussion to have a very strong central view, other than that it should absolutely be considered by those who have the responsibility locally.

As the MP for North East Derbyshire, I know that there are certain areas in my patch where removing antisocial behaviour will not be achieved by taking out benches or the equivalent, but equally, in other parts, that might be a reasonable thing to do. It is the local area and those people who know it best who would ultimately lead that conversation, and who are most likely to get to the best outcome that works.

Q164 **Mohammad Yasin:** How do you ensure you are not criminalising normal childhood and young people's behaviour such as hanging out in groups in public places?

Lee Rowley: I hope we would not be. Have you heard any examples of where that is the case?

Mohammad Yasin: It can happen, where you have good young people and young people with not-very-good behaviour playing in the same park. If somebody complains about it and the police arrive, they might take all of them together. How will the Government make sure that does not happen with the good young people?

Lee Rowley: I do not know if we can. In the example that you are highlighting, Mohammad, it is a question about the operational decisions of what police do or do not do. As long as the overall contours of design of that public space do not actively promote—I am not sure what the definition of "actively promote" is—or inadvertently encourage poor behaviour, it would ultimately be for the management of that public space and the local powers that be to try to regulate that. I say this from a probably relatively similar viewpoint to you. I would like young people to be out more. I would like young people to be socialising more.

Q165 **Mohammad Yasin:** It is very important to tackle mental health for young people.

Lee Rowley: Yes, exactly. Some of the challenges we have are the atomisation of society and the retention of younger people in their bedrooms, meaning that they are not developing the necessary skills.

To your point, we should encourage this. I am not sure how you mandate that through the planning system. The closest you can get, which I am supportive of, are appropriate design codes in a particular area and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

national design codes. I am sure you are familiar with those. There is lots of good practice within those design codes about how to design places like this.

Q166 **Mohammad Yasin:** Why are Government focusing on designing out crime, which detracts from the lack of action we have seen on restoring true neighbourhood policing, which would allow children to have a normal childhood safely?

Lee Rowley: What is your definition of neighbourhood policing?

Mohammad Yasin: Police on the streets and police walking around, as it used to be under the Labour Government before 2010.

Lee Rowley: We are doing politics now, are we?

Mohammad Yasin: It is not about politics. It is a fact.

Lee Rowley: It is not a fact.

Mohammad Yasin: It is a fact.

Lee Rowley: Chair, I will take your guidance. If you want me to get extremely political, I am happy to do so, but statements like that cannot be left without some kind of comment.

Chair: You have not left it.

Lee Rowley: Excellent—I will leave it there.

Q167 **Mohammad Yasin:** I will move on. How do you guarantee that families are not threatened with eviction from their homes, especially if the complaint has come from a next-door neighbour? This policy can put neighbours against each other. How will you guarantee that families do not get evicted as a result of complaints from their neighbours?

Lee Rowley: My experience as a constituent MP is that it is very difficult for evictions to happen in the way you have described. I have far too many examples of where real bad behaviour is happening and where we cannot get evictions. I have never seen what you described in my patch.

Mohammad Yasin: It is not going to happen.

Lee Rowley: I am not saying it is not going to happen. That will be down to many individual areas and many different organisations. That is both the beauty and the problem of a decentralised system, but it is one that we all respect and we all recognise is the least worst. It is the best way to deliver this. My personal constituency-based experience with evictions is that the real problem cases are much more difficult to move on than the risk of people being evicted for reasons that would not stand up to the average man on the omnibus.

Q168 **Mohammad Yasin:** Do you think there would be less antisocial behaviour if children were involved in decisions about their neighbourhood? Do you think it can work better if children are involved in



policy?

Lee Rowley: It would be great for that to happen. Best practice would suggest that that should happen. It is down to individual councils precisely how they want to do it, whether they go into schools or whether they interact through some other means, either online or offline. Involving children is a very sensible thing to do.

You have to make sure that you involve the broadest range if you are going into that, because, as we know, consultations and discussions can often be crowded by those of any age who speak the loudest. It would be very sensible to incorporate and respond to the views of the broader section of community. Again, I have to say, as a caveat, that it is for our colleagues in local government to decide precisely how to do that, depending upon the local area and the local approach.

Q169 **Mohammad Yasin:** Do you know any councils that are involving young people?

Lee Rowley: There is lots of stuff historically, like members of the Youth Parliament, youth councils, and interactions with schools. As an elected representative, I am sure you go into schools on a very regular basis, just as I do. I was interacting with some schools this morning before I came down to London. There are many ways to do it, and I hope that, in aggregate, allows a significant voice for young people to be heard.

Q170 **Kate Hollern:** What has been the impact, if any, of levelling-up funding for children and young people within the built environment?

Lee Rowley: As in the levelling-up funds that the Government have allocated since 2019?

Kate Hollern: Yes.

Lee Rowley: I would not necessarily know the full answer to that. That would be more my colleague, Levelling Up Minister Jacob Young. Trying to answer your question properly, I would expect that it will accelerate in the years ahead, because, as you know, a substantial amount of this funding is still being spent at the moment. I can see that locally as well as nationally.

Using my own experience, I can see a significant amount of levelling-up funding going towards being supportive of the community at large—the universality—but also specifics. I can see leisure centres being transformed in my part of the world. I can see new train stations being proposed, which would improve public transport. I can see new upgrades to parks, which would help young people.

I know this is not a North East Derbyshire advert, but Sharley Park Leisure Centre in Clay Cross will be the best leisure centre in the area this time next year. There will be a King George V Park upgrade in Staveley.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We all have examples of that. That all comes from the towns fund in this instance, which my constituency was very lucky to benefit from.

Q171 **Kate Hollern:** I accept what you are saying. There should be some real benefits, but I am not quite sure how you are actually going to measure it. On the levelling-up evaluations, how are you going to take the views of children and young people into account? You just listed a whole host of possibilities for the future involvement of young people. How are you going to evaluate it?

Lee Rowley: I used two examples there of town deals. In one—to give credit, this was run by your party—Chesterfield Borough Council significantly involved local secondary schools. It had lots of discussions about how to do that. In the other town deal that I am involved in, there were some interactions with local schools as well. That was a good example. I do not agree with everything that has happened in my town deals, but that was a good example of where there was interaction, where it was positive, and where it did have an impact on what was being delivered.

I would expect, given that a lot of the town deals have a five-year or six-year timeline, that that would have been replicated in town deals. There is the levelling-up parks fund, which similarly has a more direct relationship with improving play space and open spaces for young people. I would hope that some of these long-term levelling-up partnerships that have now come out—which are over a decade—will give them the space to be able to think through for every part of local society so that support can be given throughout. You are right, though, about the challenge of evaluation. It is a challenge to evaluate.

Q172 **Kate Hollern:** Yes, of course it is. It is interesting that you recognise the benefits, and you recognise in particular that a Labour council has done an excellent job on it. That takes me back to the previous session, as to whether there should be more guidance from the top for councils that do not do as well as that Labour council, but we will move on.

You spoke again about the benefits in parks and different things. What is your plan for the long-term maintenance of those facilities to make sure it is not a two-year, three-year or four-year benefit?

Lee Rowley: You are absolutely right that there is very little point of doing up an area of our town, city or locality for it to then fall into disrepair within a few years. It is the responsibility of local authorities as the accountable bodies underneath all of these to make sure that the things coming forward both deliver in the way that they are proposed to deliver—on time, to budget, et cetera—and are sustainable for the long term. Many of them will be, because if you are upgrading leisure centres then there is a time-honoured and long-standing process that allows their continuity. You have to make sure that there is sufficient support in the locality for parks, and that they get the right level of support for the long term.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

In the national design codes, there are suggestions about how you minimise the problems that both you and Mohammad have rightly talked about, so crime, making sure they are overseen and reducing the propensity for those things to happen. To some extent you can do it in design, recognising the tension and the balance that needs to be struck. It is then for local authorities to make sure they have the funds to support it going forward.

Q173 Kate Hollern: Of course, that has been part of the problem with a lot of facilities, particularly play facilities, since 2010. Local authorities have not had the resources to replace and maintain, which is why so many have fallen into disrepair. The evidence shows an increase in antisocial behaviour, which of course puts additional burden on the police. I know you said earlier that you are working on the here and now—short-term gain for long-term pain—and this is another example. Money has been invested, but there is no guarantee to maintain that investment in the future.

Lee Rowley: Let me just respond to that in two ways. I am sorry for deviating into politics, but you all tempt me too much. We would not have to have made the decisions that we have made since 2010 if the overspending had not happened in the decade before that, but that is a discussion that we have had many times before. It is a salutary lesson for Governments of all parties that you can neither abolish the economic cycle nor drive up debt-to-GDP ratios to a point where you have to take very difficult decisions.

Broadly, I do not accept your characterisation about short-term gain for long-term pain. All of the work that we are doing in the Department at the moment is about trying to ensure that the planning system has a strategic focus for the long term, but we cannot denude local authorities of agency.

It would be incorrect of me to accept the contention that central Government are just there to fix everything that local government has; otherwise there is no point for local government—you saw off half of your Committee's name. Local government has agency. It has a necessity to take decisions in a thoughtful, competent, careful manner, and then to execute them over the long term for the good of their society. If they are not able to do that then they should definitely be voted out, but the question is why they were in it in the first place.

Kate Hollern: I was in local government for a long, long time and I have always seen it as a partnership working between national and local. I have seen that national provides the support, advice and part of the resources to deliver for the good of local communities. Unfortunately, what we seem to be experiencing is a diktat from the top that has not considered the unintentional consequences of decisions that have actually created a lot of the social problems we now have.

Lee Rowley: What is the diktat, Kate?



Q174 **Kate Hollern:** It is anything the Government come out with. "Councils must do this". Where are the resources? You said earlier that you put investment in for levelling up to provide some facilities, but there is no maintenance going forward to make them sustainable. You have a nice headline, "We have invested whatever amount", but nothing to say what is going to happen to that facility in five years. It is a constant battle.

Lee Rowley: Just so I am clear, this is exactly the point about public policy: not only should central Government hand out capital to change local areas, but they should also hand out perpetual dowries to make sure that they work for our lifetimes, our children's lifetimes and our grandchildren's lifetimes? How much RDEL do you want to hand out with all of the capital, just so I am clear?

Kate Hollern: Well, if we could go back to the same levels of funding per head as we had in 2008 or 2009, it would perhaps be okay. A number of places, not just my area, have had their budgets cut in real terms by 23% on average. It is great to get a bit of levelling-up money, but if you do not have the resources to maintain that and keep it then it is actually a waste, isn't it? It is for Government to adequately fund local authorities and it is important that Government give local authorities responsibility, because they deliver well in the main, but it is also important to give them the resources to deliver that. Perhaps that is a conversation you and I can have separately, because I need to move on.

Chair: Yes, getting back to the precise subject of the inquiry would be helpful.

Q175 **Kate Hollern:** One of the recommendations of the Competition and Markets Authority market study of the housebuilding sector was to take back public amenity spaces from the housebuilders and developers into the hands of local authorities. Do local authorities have the capacity to maintain these spaces for the benefit of children and young people?

Lee Rowley: We are considering the CMA report at the moment, so forgive me that I cannot give you a full answer to that, but my Secretary of State and the Government will come out with further information going forward. It is for local authorities to negotiate how they want to approach these things.

I realise that we are slightly straying from the brief, but, while local authorities have had a challenging time at points over the last few years, it is important that we recognise that there is £65 billion in that system. It is a significant amount of money and there are quite a number of local authorities with large reserves in the background. It is always important that we reflect that, without taking away from the broader point that I know the Chair will probably be very keen for me to acknowledge—that there are challenges in the system—which I accept.

I have a lot of sympathy with the underlying point that you are making. There has been a move on some of these freehold estates over 20 years that I am not sure most people would necessarily be in agreement with.



That is a set of decisions that have been taken either by commission by the developers or by omission by local authorities. They were being taken when there was lots of money in the system, pre-2010, and they have been taken post-2010, when—to your description, although not mine—there may have been less money in the system. One of the things that we are trying to do through the leasehold Bill is make sure that there is greater clarity about who is paying for what. We have also said that we will consider this area further, and we may have more to say about that in the Lords.

Q176 **Kate Hollern:** Given the healthy financial position of housebuilders highlighted in the CMA report, should they be using that profit to provide more and better spaces for children? We have previously discussed this. They had about £3.9 billion in profit; £1.8 billion went to shareholders. Should some of that money be spent to invest better in services for children and young people on a new development?

Lee Rowley: I am not here to defend the developers, quite the reverse. The developers have had quite a challenging time from my Secretary of State. They are currently at £3 billion and counting on remediation, and rightly so. They will now resolve more than 1,500 buildings, which they caused.

To your point, the developers are going to develop in a way that is determined by local councils, local planning authorities and local councillors sitting on those planning authorities. I have lots of sympathy with your point that we need to make sure that, when new developments come forward, they are done in a way that works for the local community who will live there for many generations to come. It is for our colleagues in local government to make sure that they are conditioning and approving in a way that balances off the need to get things built in the right place, but also to bring the right services with them.

Q177 **Kate Hollern:** Finally, should more strings be attached to the sale of public land that would benefit the health and lives of young people? They tend to get public land fairly cheaply. Should more strings be attached to that?

Lee Rowley: Is there an example that you can give me of where that has happened? Is there a specific example of public land being sold off very cheaply?

Q178 **Kate Hollern:** No, I do not have one, but I am sure we can get you some. It is quite common for councils to say, "That will bring the houses that Lee Rowley wants in quickly", and land is negotiated providing the developer builds to some sort of level. Perhaps it is something you should consider: that if local authorities are being generous with land to developers then there should be more strings attached to what should be included in that development site.

Lee Rowley: It is ultimately down to local councils and developers to have that conversation. There is a balance that needs to be struck. From



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the previous conversations we have started in this Committee there is a viability challenge at the moment—about building houses in general. Unless we as a country, you as a Committee and I as a Minister are starting to have a much deeper conversation about population growth, which is ultimately driving this demand, then we have to build more houses. We have to build them in the right places, with the right services and with the right infrastructure, but we have to build more houses. There is an imperative to do that.

I want houses that are in the right place, with the right services and the right amenities, and it is ultimately for our colleagues in local government to make sure that happens. I do not know the answer about what is best in Bedford, Blackburn, Burnley or Northampton South. I hope I do know what is roughly best in North East Derbyshire, but more broadly we have to accept that decisions will have to be made locally. Yes, I want to see that, but I also have to ensure that more houses are built and to create systems that will encourage that, because that is a necessity, given our population growth over the last decade.

Q179 **Chair:** Just to make a very political point to respond to one or two others, in the first 10 years of the last Labour Government public sector debt actually fell, and it only increased when the international financial crisis hit.

Lee Rowley: Of course, Chair, you will accept that the previous Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath overspent every single year from 2004 onwards, many years before.

Chair: He still kept the public sector debt down. That was not a bad achievement.

Lee Rowley: He still overspent. I remember that my Keynesian economics suggested that you had to pay down a significant amount of public sector debt, which had risen from 27% in the 1930s, between 1997 and 2008.

Chair: We can probably have that argument going on.

Lee Rowley: I look forward to it.

Q180 **Andrew Lewer:** I wondered if both of you had picked anything up from the approach that other countries have taken to young people and the built environment. It is much more common to see children walking and cycling—alone or in groups without adults—in other countries. I wondered whether that was just a purely cultural phenomenon, or whether there was something about the built environment that encouraged that to happen.

Lee Rowley: There probably is. I am going to defer to Joanna on this one. I have talked with Joanna and the team about some of it, and they showed me examples of places like Austria and Belgium. I know from



your previous role you will probably have seen a significant amount of that.

Joanna Averley: What is always fascinating is that it is a combination of both. If we think of the Netherlands, which is obviously a cycling nation, the infrastructure is there to support cycling but there was probably never a drop in cycling as we would have seen in the UK, although it is rising again in many of our cities. It is about, culturally, whether this pattern of behaviour in terms of choices towards active travel was sustained, or whether it dropped to a level where the road space basically went over to cars.

There is lots going on, following the publication of "Gear Change" and the set-up of Active Travel England, to start to move that dial back again. In Manchester, Chris Boardman and others are doing quite a lot of work on that, as they are also in London.

There are other examples that are fascinating. If you go to Japan, there is a general sense of safety in the community. Very young children travel independently on public transport. Again, that is quite cultural, but Japan is also fascinating because they are also very comfortable with the degree of surveillance. It is a society that is quite accepting of that and is very strong in terms of public behaviour, what is an acceptable level of surveillance, and looking out for others in the community. For example, if you are in Tokyo, it is a very, very detailed and comprehensive public transport system.

It is a combination of both: the built environment, how we have shaped it over the last years—and sometimes how we are trying to retrofit it for walking and cycling—and sometimes also just cultural norms and whether they have been consistent or are shifting back towards walking and cycling.

Q181 **Andrew Lewer:** One cultural phenomenon seems to be the proliferation of "no ball games", particularly with social housing estates: "Don't play here. Don't make a noise". I wondered whether there is any shift in planning views or DLUHC. I take Lee's point very much. I do not want central Government saying, "You are not allowed to have no ball games signs here. We will send a Government inspector to this site to make sure your signs are the right size", and all that, but I wonder if there is much on the mood music about ball games and play.

This also goes back to the Chair's very sensible point about DFE and DLUHC crossover and its importance within this. Lee, you are right: when I was an , we used to go on these visits with the Education Committee. In places like the Netherlands, they do not have two-and-a-half-metre fences all the way around their schools, even if they are right in the middle of a city or a town, because they regard it as everybody's job to look after their children, rather than fencing them off and forgetting about them. I wonder if there are any thoughts about planning in that respect as well.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lee Rowley: We probably all have examples. I certainly do in my previous council patch, where there was large-scale social housing in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, whereby basically all the ground around it is dead space. It is almost impossible to use. There are no facilities around it. There is no formal play and the like. We have to move away from that. That level of design, which we are all working through in different parts of the country, just has not worked. That is one of the reasons why there is a lot of regeneration going on.

I am not an expert in this, but a lot of the design codes help create a framework that encourages new development in that direction. I went to see Woodberry Down Estate in Hackney, which is a 20-year to 30-year programme of regeneration. The step change in thinking about this is demonstrable, not just in good projects where there has been a lot of work by the council and by the master developer there to do that, but elsewhere.

There is definitely a move in the right direction here, but ultimately it is for local authorities to try to catch this, because we want to move away from the “no ball games” culture to where it is integrated properly so that you do not have to ban things because otherwise problems will happen in the area. Yes, there is more to do, but it has moved in the right direction.

Joanna Averley: This is anecdotal, but I can think of two examples of urban schools where an expansion of the school actually used a little bit of the local park. The quid pro quo was much better facilities for the community, and when the school did not need them after 3.30, they were open to the community. It is a win-win—for the school in terms of provision for more formal education, but also for the community in terms of better sports and play provision. You can get it to work, and that is about being creative in the design process for schools, for example, and dual use of the landscape and facilities that sit around a school, as well as sometimes within the school.

Q182 **Andrew Lewer:** We need to make it work in terms of having a greater level of preparedness to see an overall benefit versus a specific disbenefit. If you fence your school off then you do not worry that, where there is an issue, you get blamed because that child has been abducted or X thing has happened, whereas no one gets the credit if that entire community is better because the children are part of it and everybody interacts with it.

Lee Rowley: This is beyond my scope here, but on a personal level I have a lot of sympathy for the point you are making. In the 1990s when I was at secondary school, it was an open site; I go back there now, representing the constituency a few hundred metres away from it, and it is now entirely closed. It is nothing to do with the school. It is a brilliant school, but that is just a general move across the country. That is something we probably all need to reflect on.

Andrew Lewer: Design is at the heart of it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q183 **Chair:** As a philosophical point, we have talked about the different ways that different countries deal with these issues, and the differences in approach in Austria, the Netherlands or Germany. It is the culture. Do you think it is Government's job, Minister, to try to change, or at least influence, the culture?

Lee Rowley: Wow. Let me try to break that one down. I definitely think it is Government's job to understand what is going on elsewhere in the world, and it is something that Governments do not do well enough. For other areas of planning policy, Joanna and I have interacted with other countries, and I want to do that in more detail. I will absolutely take away some of the points that you have made on this. We are also trying to do it on nationally significant infrastructure projects. We are trying to get a meeting with somebody in Norway on Teams to understand some of the things that they are doing there.

It is absolutely our role to understand what other countries are doing. I even accept that it is certainly the role of central Government to set out exemplar best practice to work through and to highlight where things are done well. I hope the codes do that. I hope the national planning policy framework goes some way towards doing that. It is very philosophical, because changing culture is a very difficult thing both to define and to execute, but culture changes. The question is whether Government lead it or not.

Chair: Or even encourage it.

Lee Rowley: This is probably one for down the pub, Clive.

Chair: Are you buying the pint?

Lee Rowley: I will buy on this occasion, yes.

Chair: It is an interesting issue, because it is clearly one of the differences when you look at just travelling to school and the infrastructure we have, but also how people deal and respond to that. It is a challenge that we all get in our constituencies on a regular basis. Minister and Joanna, thank you for coming and giving evidence to us this afternoon.