

Written Evidence Submitted by Dr Anna Bocking-Welch (University of Liverpool), Prof. Richard Huzzey (Durham University), Prof. Cristina Leston-Bandeira (University of Leeds) and Dr Henry Miller (Northumbria University)

[CBE 022]

Submission to Children, Young people and the Built Environment Inquiry

Children and Young People's Activism for Better Outdoor Spaces: the Historical Context

Dr Anna Bocking-Welch (University of Liverpool), Prof. Richard Huzzey (Durham University), Prof. Cristina Leston-Bandeira (University of Leeds) and Dr Henry Miller (Northumbria University)

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Who We Are

We write this evidence as four academics with expertise in political studies of public and engagement and the history of public campaigning. For the past three years we have been carrying out research on the history of petitioning as part of the UKRI-funded project 'Petitioning and People Power in Twentieth-Century Britain'.¹ In this submission we draw on our research into how children and young people have used petitioning to try to change the built environment. Our research uses extensive analysis of historical local newspapers and archival collections to build a picture of how young people's needs and desires have changed over time and how they have sought to engage with schools, and local and national governments to shape outdoor spaces.

Summary

The evidence below addresses the *experiences of children and young people of their built environment* and *planning system* elements of the inquiry.

- Historical research into children and young people's petitions in the twentieth century can help us to understand **what children want and how they have sought to get it**. Many of the issues that children today raise about their streets, estates, villages, neighbourhoods and parks have historical precedents even if contexts vary and change.
- The things children ask for in their petitions emphasise that **we should think about their needs and desires holistically**. Children have often requested playgrounds and purpose-built play equipment, but their petitions also indicate a much wider range of desires, including for spaces that are means to the ends of independence, socialising, and risk-taking.

¹ AHRC Research Project AH/T003847/1, <https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FT003847%2F1#/>

- Children and young people have engaged in political activism to try to shape the outdoor spaces that they used. Historical examples of petitions illustrate **children and young people's desires to be part of the planning process**.
- Petitioning typically takes place because children do not see other avenues for participation. The regular occurrence of petitions points to children's exclusion from existing systems. The appeal of petitioning as an accessible strategy may offer **clues about how to involve young people in the planning process**.

Evidence and Explanation

How do children and young people experience outdoor spaces in towns, cities and rural areas across the country?

1. The things children ask for in their petitions emphasise that **we should think about their needs and desires holistically and not assume that 'one size fits all'**.
2. Paying attention not only to *what* children ask for, but *why* they ask for it can offer insights into what it is about different types of outdoor spaces that appeals and how they can be tailored to children's needs. For example, children petitioning for a 'big American swing on which about six children can play at once' in 1951 explained that it would 'save a lot of quarrels'.² Children asking for a derelict site to be preserved explained that they liked watching snails.³ **Any attempts to collect children's perspectives on outdoor spaces that does not ask why children want particular facilities may miss an important part of the picture.** Similarly, focusing exclusively on easily measurable outcomes may miss seeing things from children's perspectives.
3. Improved traditional playground provision alone is not likely to meet children's needs and desires. Two recurring themes that emerge from petitioning are **a desire for wild spaces** and for **places that young people can play and socialise separately from adults**. For example, in 1966 children sought to prevent Camden Council from building housing on disused railway land in Kentish Town. They argued that the wilderness on the railway land was better than their next nearest park space, Parliament Hill Fields, because 'you can do what you like there' and because the Fields were too far away.⁴ Children and young people's petitions indicate that they often seek to avoid confrontation with adults. In 1949, for example, because complaints had been made about roller-skating in Bridlington, children petitioned to rope off a portion of the sea front where they could skate without disturbing others.⁵ These requests sit within a longer history of the criminalization of street play which limits behaviours children can perform in urban settings.⁶

² 'Children petition town for swings' *Sunday Mirror*, 14 January 1951, p. 2.

³ *Freedom*, 26 February 1966, p. 2.

⁴ *Freedom*, 26 February 1966, p. 2.

⁵ *Western Morning News*, 13 October 1949.

⁶ Krista Cowman, 'Play streets: women, children and the problem of urban traffic, 1930–1970', *Social history* 42, no. 2 (2017): 233-256.

4. Petitions also emphasise desires for **usable outdoor space in close proximity to where children live and/or attend school**. As discussed in the next section, this is closely tied to safety concerns.
5. Children and young people's desires and needs for outdoor spaces are not static. They are shaped by wider cultural trends and therefore **change over time**. In the 1960s, for example, roller skating was very popular and many young people sought dedicated flat spaces to skate. In the 1990s the popularity of skate boarding and inline skates led to demands for ramped skate parks. This may point to the benefit of **flexible and multi-use spaces that can adapt to changing trends**.

How easily can children and young people travel to outdoor spaces and schools? How has this changed over the years?

6. From the 1950s onwards, a lot of the activism about children and young people's experiences of outdoor spaces has centred on their safety, particularly when travelling to and from school or playing on the streets outside their homes. Dangerous traffic is the most common complaint and proposed mitigations typically included new road crossings or restrictions on traffic in residential streets. Petitions connecting safety to play show that recent campaigns for play streets such as those coordinated by the charity Playing Out are part of a longer tradition of local activism.
7. Safety-focused campaigns were more likely to be led by parents than by children, indicating that the concerns may not be shared equally by children and young people. Parents' safety concerns do, however, limit children's ability to move independently.

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

8. The history of children and young people's petitioning illustrates some of the ways they are excluded from planning processes. Petitions often come about because other avenues of consultation or engagement with the planning system do not exist or are not sufficiently accessible to encourage participation.
9. Petitions have a number of key features that have made them a particularly popular mode of political action for children and young people. Our research shows that petitions are an accessible and flexible mode of engagement. They are familiar to children, straightforward, low-cost, and typically jargon free. Signatures on children's petitions are typically collected locally, often on foot. Petitions have often been used by marginalised communities and by those who lack the social capital to navigate more complex systems. **Efforts to more proactively involve children and young people in the planning system should take account of why petitions are so popular. Planning systems could include different routes to consult with the public, some of**

which are more suitable for young people, such as following a less bureaucratic approach, enabling more informal forms of consultation, actively encouraging young people to share their views.

10. Petitions can be reactive or proactive. Reactive petitions typically respond to a proposed change (eg plans to build on a site that children use as a play space). Proactive petitions typically identify an as yet unaddressed need (eg for a playing field, for a safe road crossing). To capture children and young people's changing needs, **planning systems should seek to hear their views and voices in relation to both of these categories. There could, for example, be more visible and/or proactive approaches to collate young people's views on their environment as they see it, rather than only in reaction to plans to change.**
11. Adults, particularly parents and teachers, have historically played a key role in facilitating children's efforts to shape their physical environments. They often initiated petitions or helped to organise press coverage of the campaign. Their ability to do so effectively relies on their own social capital. In some campaigns involving children it is challenging to disentangle parental influence from children's agency, however. In some cases, children were used as photogenic mouthpieces to support adults' objectives. **Efforts to involve children and young people in the planning system will need to support children to have meaningful agency in the process.**

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