

Children's own experience of their built environment

A report to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee presenting the results of a consultation with children and young people on their experience of their local built environment

Introduction

1. Pupils 2 Parliament is a longstanding charitable project working with schools to gather pupils' views and experiences for submission to Parliamentary Select Committee inquiries and Government consultations.
2. The project consults pupils independently, and reports pupils' views without selection or bias. Issues and questions are put to pupils neutrally, and without adult leading on any particular response.
3. The Clerks of both Houses of Parliament have given permission for the project to use the term "Parliament" in its title.
4. The consultation with pupils for this report was designed jointly between the staff of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and the Pupils 2 Parliament project.

The children and young people consulted

5. This report amalgamates the individual views of 111 children and young people across five schools in different parts of England. The schools comprised four primary schools and one secondary school. One primary school was already involved with the Pupils 2 Parliament project, and four were picked at random solely for the purpose of this consultation from lists of schools across England.
6. The children and young people's views were gathered through an online survey, using both rating and open-ended questions developed with the Committee's staff to gather pupils' views and experience of most relevance to the Committee's inquiry on the

experiences of children and young people on their built environment.

7. The five schools were located in Craven Arms (Shropshire), Runcorn, Gloucester, Southampton, and Bognor Regis.

The localities in which the children and young people live

8. Most of the children and young people live in urban areas. 41% described where they lived as in or on the edge of a city, and 38% as in or on the edge of a town.
9. 19% of the children and young people described where they lived as in or on the edge of a village. Only one described where they live as out in the countryside. One lived in a hotel or hostel.
10. None lived on a military base or on a houseboat, which were the other two categories offered in the relevant survey question.

How much the children and young people like the area around where they live

11. We asked the children and young people to rate how much or little they like the area around where they live, using a five point scale (*I like it a lot – I like it – In the middle – I don't like it much – I don't like it at all*).
12. Three quarters (75%) of the children and young people liked the area around where they live, answering that they like it or like it a lot. 7% said they didn't like it much or at all. 18% rated their liking of the area as being "in the middle". The median rating was "I quite like it".

What the children and young people like most about the area around where they live

13. Without making any suggestions or giving any options, we asked the children and young people what they liked most about the area around where they live.
14. The ten most frequently aspects they liked about their locality were, in descending order of frequency:
 - i. Having nearby parks

- ii. Having nearby places to play or socialise together
 - iii. Having good neighbours
 - iv. The locality being quiet or peaceful
 - v. Having nearby natural landscape or coastal features (such as a forest, stream or beach)
 - vi. Having friends living nearby
 - vii. Having shops nearby
 - viii. Living near nature
 - ix. Living near to school
 - x. Having quiet and safe roads
15. For many, it was the people in the neighbourhood, rather than the built environment itself, that made somewhere a good place to live. "I like how our community is nice to each other", "everyone looks out for each other", "fun, caring and nice neighbours". For many others, having friends living nearby was a powerful positive. In short, "the best thing is the people".
16. Parks and fields for play, activities and socialising, were very valued attributes of a location. This was even so when a child knew that a very serious crime had been committed in their local park. Many liked the play and sports equipment and facilities in local parks – but many also wrote of having open fields nearby. For one child, the best feature of the area was that "there is a big field in front of my house".
17. Peacefulness and proximity to nature were common themes. "The best thing about my area is peace and nature". "I get to see lots of animals and nature". Very many liked close wide open spaces, and there was also mention of liking an area because of its good air quality.
18. Road safety made a difference to liking an area for many children: "not many cars, so it is perfect for cycling".
19. Nearby shops were often liked, and included both nearby shopping centres and corner shops. "The corner shop near my house."

20. There were clear personal preferences for the nature of a preferred locality – some liked “lots of people”, but others preferred “nobody around so it is quiet”. Some preferences were idiosyncratic – liking the area because of the local football team, or “because it is where I was born”, because of the trees, or even for one, because there are lots of local cats. For one, the lack of local big building projects was a positive.
21. Many told us that they liked where they lived because of its access to places they liked or wanted to visit, often sports or play facilities, or a nearby town or city. “A lot of things I like doing and I can get to them easily”.
22. For some, having a range of different, safe and attractive walking or cycling routes in the locality are a positive feature, particularly for making frequent journeys such as that from home to school.
23. For a few, living in a cul-de-sac was an ideal location. One wrote “I live in a cul-de-sac so I have friends that I can play with on the road, also there is a park and shops right next to my house”.

What the children and young people dislike most about the area around where they live

24. We also asked the children and young people what they thought were the worst things about the area around where they live, again without offering any options list or suggestions. Here are the top ten things they most frequently disliked about an area, again in descending order of frequency of listing:
 - i. Litter
 - ii. Lack of facilities for children and young people
 - iii. Distance to shops
 - iv. Expensive food outlets
 - v. Smell (eg from rubbish and for one school, a local abattoir)
 - vi. People and crowding
 - vii. Distance to friends, school and facilities
 - viii. Noise

ix. Busy roads and traffic

x. Local crime

25. Litter and general rubbish around the environment was widely seen as the main negative about the children and young people's local built environment. Many listed graffiti as a related issue.

26. These were often linked to the built environment being generally 'run down' and badly maintained, and the impact this has on children and young people: "the environment isn't good and there's lots of rubbish", "it's got a lot of litter, so much that you can barely see the beautiful nature by our shops ... some broken play areas so we can't play, and lots of graffiti, also uneven paths so you trip over", "the worst thing is the state my area is in – it's quite unpleasant to see, also it's unsafe sometimes to walk my dog because of the amount of litter everywhere and the amount of smashed glass on the ground".

27. The litter problem was not unique to urban areas, but also spoilt the rural environment for some: "in the forest there is quite a lot of litter and I even once found a trolley in the river. So it ruins the experience of nature".

28. Lack of local facilities was a key issue for many, who reported their local area as "boring". "There's nothing fun" for children and young people. Football is a common pastime for children, but as one put it, "I really like football, but there is no fields around".

29. Children and young people saw the lack of facilities exacerbated by poor maintenance, referring to broken play equipment, and worn out and dirty skateparks. There were negative references to broken and uneven paths in local parks. Some referred to local parks generally as being "old" and in a bad state.

30. Poor maintenance also extended to local roads: "all the rubble and filth on the pavements and roads", "the roads have massive holes in them".

31. It was worse if lack of facilities coincided with a poor quality of environment, litter and lack of maintenance: "town itself is quite run down, dirty and not many attractions for locals to do on a daily basis".

32. One pupil wrote of a the link between lack of local facilities and the development of local crime, itself a 'worst feature' for many: "there isn't a lot around especially for kids, teens and young adults, and I feel this makes it easier for younger children to get involved in drug crime and other petty crimes – illegal activities are easily accessible".
33. Some were critical of what they saw as poor quality building in their area: "building work is also quite lousy", "lots of not very nice houses".
34. The frequency with which pupils referred to some other people as the worst aspect of their area, shows that other people can make or break the environment for children and young people.
35. Some saw local people as friendly and supportive, while what others disliked most about their area was crowds, crowded housing (especially "flats packed together" with poor sound insulation), vandals, and 'scary's people who children felt were watching them or following them. Some living locations were felt to increase fears of people – such as living near a pub.
36. Noise of many different sorts and sources featured strongly in what children and young people most disliked about the area around where they live. This could be noise from traffic, from crowds, from dogs barking, from traffic (and especially motorbikes), from noisy neighbours, from gatherings of older young people, and from nearby venues such as pubs and in one area, a holiday camp described as being very noisy at night.
37. Pupils were also very conscious of negative environmental impacts of some local building developments – such as a crowded and poor quality housing estate which had been built over local fields, so removing valued play areas. They also described building projects which spoilt or diverted local streams and waterways, negatively affecting wildlife and destroying a formerly valued natural feature of the area.

How safe the children and young people feel in the around where they live

38. We asked the children and young people to rate how safe they felt outdoors around where they live, on a five point scale (*very safe – safe – in the middle – unsafe – very unsafe*).
39. Fewer than half the children and young people (43%) said they feel safe or very safe outdoors in the area around where they

live. Over one in ten (11%) said they feel unsafe or very unsafe. 46% said they feel “in the middle” between safe and unsafe. “In the middle” was also the median rating for all those consulted.

What makes children and young people feel unsafe around where they live

40. The children and young people told us – without any prompts, offered choices, or suggestions – what (if anything) makes them feel unsafe in the environment around where they live.
41. Only two responded to say that there is nothing that makes them feel unsafe around where they live. All the others identified one or more things that make them feel unsafe.
42. Here are the ten most frequent factors that make the children and young people feel unsafe around where they live (in descending order of frequency):
 - i. People around where they live
 - ii. Lack of lighting, and dark areas
 - iii. Crime and the fear of crime
 - iv. Danger on the roads
 - v. Being alone or going out alone
 - vi. Gangs
 - vii. Young people older than themselves
 - viii. Hearing about crime and dangers to children on the news
 - ix. Vaping and smoking
 - x. Bullying by other children and young people.
43. By a huge margin, the presence or behaviour of other people made children and young people feel unsafe, rather than physical characteristics of the built environment. 63% of all the children and young people spontaneously listed the presence or behaviour of other people as causing them to feel unsafe, compared with only 15% who quoted the most frequent physical characteristic of the built environment (poor lighting and dark areas). Even when

describing the built environment, a common reference was to large numbers of houses nearby, because this involves large numbers of people who are strangers and a potential threat.

44. Very many just said that 'people' made them feel unsafe. More specifically, the key factors were people in large numbers, strangers, people smoking or vaping, 'scary' looking people, "creepy people staring", people around them or walking past them at night or when the child is alone, and people who watch them or follow them. There were specific gender references to men, but none to women.
45. Places where people "hang around" in groups were felt to be threatening and unsafe for many children and young people. This could be outside pubs, in urban areas, or in particular parts of parks.
46. One problem was that children and young people are unsure of who might be living around where they live. One quotation illustrates this: "I don't know if people who live near me are good or bad".
47. There were age references to old people 'hanging round' in groups and to young people older than themselves. "Teenagers who make children feel slightly unsafe as they can be angry and are much bigger than us. But I don't mind teenagers who are well behaved".
48. Some teenaged respondents recognised the issue of play and social areas that mix age groups, and argued for different areas equipped for different age groups: "nowhere for [us older ones] to go that doesn't cost money or is filled with little kids - and our presence makes them feel nervous".
49. Fear of potential kidnapping or attack by strangers, especially in the dark or when out alone, featured largely among the pupils' responses. This was made worse by suspicious behaviour of some other people, such as following behind them, "adults looking at us", or even "being filmed by both random people and people from school". It was also made worse by seeing fights, seeing people taking drugs, and by people setting fires locally (including setting fire to abandoned cars). "Sometimes some dodgy people walk around my neighbourhood and knock on doors at night". "People walking around with weapons like mini-knives".
50. Fear of other people was described as worse in some areas of the built environment. Lack of street lighting, dark areas, and dark alleys, made the fear of other people and of potential harm or

kidnap much greater. "Many streetlights don't work and there are also darker areas at night". "A lot of people at night that hang around. Some drink and smoke. There's no lighting in the alleyways".

51. Many pupils identified clear child danger spots in their built environment – both for actual incidents, and for the fear of potential harm. An example was "the tunnel I walk through to get to and from school is usually covered with graffiti and there is lots of litter on the ground and teenage groups swearing and bullying".
52. Crime and the fear of crime featured strongly in the pupils' lists of what makes them feel unsafe around where they live. Children and young people were very aware of local crimes that had taken place – including break-ins, people going missing, assaults, rapes and murders.
53. Their fears for themselves were made worse by hearing and seeing coverage of recent local crimes in the media – "hearing stuff on the news and scared it could happen to them". Awareness and fears of crime were increased by hearing police sirens or seeing police working locally.
54. One pupil, typical of others, wrote of crime coverage on the media increasing their fear of "shady people living around or kidnappers. This is because I watch the news hearing about kidnappers and killers".

What makes children and young people feel safe

55. We asked pupils to tell us what specifically made them feel safe around where they lived. Again, we offered no choices or suggestions, so this list is again the pupils' own list. Here are their top ten factors, listed in descending order of frequency:
 - i. Being in a place where there are lots of people
 - ii. A park
 - iii. A playground or sports ground
 - iv. In their own or a friend's garden
 - v. Near to school
 - vi. On local streets where they know the neighbours

- vii. Being in a group with others
 - viii. In open fields
 - ix. On a safe road
 - x. In a forest or woodland
56. It is clear from the pupils' answers to this and earlier questions that being among other people can be a two-edged sword – either a protecting factor or a potential threat, depending on the circumstances. Being with a friend or group of friends, or a family member, is a clear protective factor, as is being somewhere where other people around are either known, or are parents with their own children.
57. Some places with lots of people were seen as safe – particularly shops and supermarkets. Parents, and particularly parents out with their own children in parks or play areas, are seen as both safe and potentially helpful if you get into any sort of difficulties. "Places where adults with children are present."
58. However, crowds of unknown people engaged on unknown 'random' things rather than all involved in a single everyday activity such as shopping, are seen as more risky. Groups of people of any age group just 'hanging about' are seen as especially risky, as are gatherings of the same age group (for example, groups of teenagers older than you, and groups of men, young or old).
59. Although there were references to men being more risky, there were none to women being more protective. The safest and most protective were any people who are seen to be parents and people already known to be 'ok'.
60. The safest parks and playgrounds or sports grounds were those where there are other children and young people, and parents with their own children, where anything that happens can be seen by others: "the park during the day so it's packed with parents and children so dodgy stuff can't happen".
61. Somewhere close to a 'safe' building was seen as relatively safe. Being near to one's own school was the most frequently listed, but others listed were police stations, shopping centres, and areas overlooked by many houses: "grass area that is in a built up area so there are houses around and people around to keep an eye". Dense local housing was seen as risky because of the

potential for 'bad' people living close by, but areas overlooked by many houses were seen as protective.

62. Being alone was seen as essentially risky, and going about with others to places where you will be with others, were seen as especially safe: "when I feel most safe with going out is bringing someone and not just being by myself", "even in safe places I would prefer an adult or friends to be around me".
63. One of the schools was near to a forest, and it is perhaps interesting that forests and woods were seen as relatively safe places, even if some could otherwise be daunting: "the woods make me feel safe because there are trees and fresh air and not many people", "forests feel safe and comforting for me but I have heard that some forests can be overwhelming".

How easy the children and young people regard their journey from home to school

64. Pupils rated the ease of their journey from where they live to their school as *very easy, easy, in the middle, difficult or very difficult*.
65. Almost three quarters (74%) rated their journey as either easy or very easy. Only 5% rated the journey as difficult or very difficult, and 21% rated it as in the middle between easy and difficult. The median rating for all those consulted was "easy".

Means of travel from home to school

66. The children and young people told us how they had travelled from home to school on the day of the survey (or if they had not attended that day, the last time they went in to school).
67. The majority (59%) walked to school. 39% were taken to school by car. Only 4% had cycled to school, and 3% had ridden a scooter to school.
68. A further 3% had travelled to school by public bus. None of the children and young people in the consultation groups had travelled by school bus.
69. 9% had used more than one means of transport to school on the day in question.

Where children and young people spend time outdoors

70. We asked children and young people to indicate from a list of options which sorts of places they choose to spend time outdoors around where they live, either alone or with friends of their own age. They were not restricted to any specific number of options.
71. The top ten places they most like to spend time outdoors are (with the percentages of children and young people selecting each one in brackets):
- A public park (41%)
 - Their own garden (38%)
 - A friend's garden (32%)
 - Immediately outside their house (32%)
 - A playground (31%)
 - Along a street or road (20%)
 - Somewhere with a sports pitch or court (20%)
 - A bike track or skate park (15%)
 - The grounds of their own school (14%)
 - Woodland (13%)
72. 12% said they like to go to the centre of their city, town or village.

How often children and young people spend time outdoors

73. We asked how often the children and young people spent time outdoors, playing or socialising (depending on age).
74. Just under a quarter (24%) spent time outside playing or socialising every day or most days. 44% did so on some days. 31% said they hardly ever, or never, spent time playing or socialising outside.

Availability of good outside spaces

75. 57% of the children and young people told us that there are enough good outside spaces accessible to them around where they live (responding either "yes – *lots of them*" or "yes – *but not many of them*").
76. 28% told us that there are "*not really enough*" or "*there aren't really any*" good outside spaces accessible to them around where they live.

Accessibility of good outside spaces

77. 67% of the children and young people said that the journey from where they live to the nearest good outside space is easy or very easy. Only 5% said that the journey is difficult or very difficult, and 27% said the journey is 'in the middle' between easy and difficult.
78. Overall, the majority of the children and young people considered that there were sufficient and accessible outside spaces around where they live. Where there was dissatisfaction, this was more to do with the range of good spaces for their age group, than with the accessibility of their nearest good outside space.

Walking and cycling by children and young people around where they live

79. Almost a third (32%) of the children and young people we consulted said they often walked or cycled on their own around where they lived. 43% often walked or cycled with one friend, and 14% did so with a group of friends.
80. 40% said they usually walked or cycled locally with an adult, and a quarter (25%) usually did so with a brother or sister.
81. 5% told us they 'don't really' walk or cycle around where they live.

How areas are changing for children and young people

82. Just under a third (30%) of those we consulted said that their local area wasn't really changing much at all. Where the area was undergoing changes, 37% told us that the changes were making the area worse for children and young people, compared to 22% who said the changes were making the area better for them.

How far building works and changes meet the needs of children and young people

83. Pupils also gave their assessment of how far the needs of children and young people were actually taken into account in any building works or changes being made in the local area.

84. 28% said that the needs of local children and young people did not seem to be taken into account much or at all. 23% thought that their needs were being taken into account, a lot or a little.

What outdoor spaces should be planned for children and young people in new developments and redevelopments

85. We asked what children and young people would want planners to include in plans for new housing developments and in changing, improving or redeveloping existing housing areas.
86. These are entirely spontaneous proposals from children and young people, with no adult suggestions or survey lists to choose from. As such, they constitute powerful planning advice about outside spaces in the built environment.
87. The top ten proposals for inclusion are, in descending order of frequency of proposal by individual children and young people:
- i. Parks, including open spaces and quiet areas
 - ii. Playgrounds, with a good range of play equipment suitable for different ages
 - iii. Sports facilities, for (in descending order of number of proposals) football, swimming, basketball and rugby
 - iv. Safer outdoor areas
 - v. Natural areas – public gardens, wooded areas, areas with flowers, and paths to explore
 - vi. Skate parks
 - vii. Pleasant sitting areas, including benches and tables
 - viii. Nearby shops (including corner shops)
 - ix. Accessibility to open fields
 - x. Provision of good sized back gardens

88. Parks come out top of the outdoor facilities wanted by children and young people. They need to be accessible from home, and have even paths in them to enable access by disabled children ("smooth and flat surfaces to ensure that people like my sister don't get anxious when they are walking outdoors"). They need bins to counter littering and for dog dirt, and to have big open spaces and quiet areas, together with natural features.
89. As some put it, "a big place to play", "just somewhere where kids can be kids", "just more places to hang out", "green spaces with actual flowering plants, trees and bushes so that young people have a place to relax that connects them more with nature". Parks should be "nice places to go with your family that are not extremely expensive".
90. Activity and play areas are seen as essential, able to be well supervised by parents, with a range of equipment including equipment suitable for different age groups: "adequate playgrounds for younger ones, outdoor spaces for older teens to stop them hanging around the younger children's parks", "somewhere where there is loads of space but is yet enclosed and has many different activities to do", and including "benches and sheltered seating, tables for drawing outside, lots of trees and greenery, a drinking water fountain – places that are a bit private without being unsafe".
91. There was also a plea for the needs of young carers looking after younger siblings to be catered for – play areas where both a toddler and an older caring sibling could play near to each other and be safe.
92. Many wanted the area in which they live also to have places to be in touch with nature: "beautiful nature", places that are "safe and let the children embrace the nature around them, give them something to study or admire". Such places could be supplemented by "more things to encourage people to be environmentally friendly because there is lots of littering and not much nature around our area".
93. A mix of play, open and quiet spaces was referred to by many children and young people: "a lot of space to run around and have fun in ... a playground, some quiet places to sit in and a place to meditate" – including an "adventure (area) for power-minded children".

94. Parks need to be maintained and kept updated with new play equipment, rather than 'old' and with little usable range of unbroken equipment: "new parks because the same equipment over and over again gets boring". They need to be kept clean – "I would love to have unpolluted playgrounds".
95. The importance of having a range and age-differentiation of equipment and facilities was stressed for both play areas and sports facilities in parks, as was safety with ease of adult supervision and presence of parents with children for support of children alone or with friends if they get into difficulties, and for general protection of areas from undesirable adults. Overall there should be "something for EVERYONE", places to make and socialise or play with friends, and "newer parks for children that love to experience happiness" .
96. The importance the pupils gave to good sized back gardens as play areas also deserves to be taken into account in planning and developing the built environment, as should large grass play areas enclosed by houses and so protected by the presence of known neighbours and parents generally ("green spaces – safe fun areas").

Finally ...

97. Finally, two pupils wrote their own specifications for planning environments that are child and young-person friendly, reproduced here verbatim:

"space for different ages / loud and quiet spaces, because me and my friends just like chatting with not much noise but other people like running around to have fun so everyone would be happy if different people had different spaces".

"a park near so that the children and dogs can run around free, an outdoor playground and medium sized skatepark for all the teens and kids to have fun. Make the park so it's big enough to tire out the dogs, and add some built in football goals so children's football teams can play and have fun. These changes will bring more people round to get outside instead of playing on devices and being antisocial".

I am grateful to the Heads, staff and pupils of the five schools who took part in the research for this report.

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