

Children and town planning: Creating places to grow

When children and young people grow up in a quality built and natural environment it can have a positive impact on their health, well-being and future life chances. Good town planning should aim to meet children's needs as part of an inclusive and integrated society. To do this effectively children should have a say in what these places look like. They should be actively engaged in the plan-making and design process. One of the aims of this advice is to expand the scope of what is currently understood as planning for children, beyond planning for play, towards a more inclusive approach that encompasses all aspects of children's lives, highlighting the importance of the sustainable location of development for independent and sustainable mobility.



Around 20% of the population in the UK and Ireland is aged under 16. Many thousands of children live in poverty and 21% list 'not having enough money' as one of their top three worries. Around 1.3 million children (over 10%) in England lived in overcrowded housing in 2019, 20% of homes failing to meet the Decent Homes Standard. Children play outside for an average of four hours a week, compared to an average of eight hours when their parents were children. Almost 2.7 million people in the UK also do not have a publicly accessible local park or green space within a ten minute walk of their home. The ability to access greenspace is being further constrained with the loss of school playing fields. 250 school playing fields were disposed of between 2010 and 2021. The impact of the quality of the school environment has an impact on the ability of children to learn. It is estimated to be a variable of around 16%. Children care about their environment. 40% of school children agree that more people walking, cycling or scooting to school was the best way to tackle air pollution near their school.



Children have been severely affected by the lockdowns imposed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The long-term impacts on children's health and development have not yet been fully assessed.

We have published new advice on how town planners can plan child-friendly places. It summarises expert advice, outlines key planning policy and focuses on good practice through a series of case studies.

What does a place designed for children look like?

The RTPI has developed a set of design principles to use when creating child-friendly places. They can be applied to many settings - urban or rural, new development or existing settlement.

Welcoming – places are designed to help children develop a sense of belonging. There are a variety of cues to indicate they are welcome, including signage, design and layout. There are opportunities to socialise through play and gathering.

Local – everyday services (schools, shops, play areas etc.) are located safe, walkable, distances from homes. The principles of the 15-minute city/20-minute neighbourhood apply. Having local access to services fosters independence of movement as children grow.

Engaging – children and young people are involved in the design of the places where they live, travel and visit. Their needs have been met because they have been consulted.

Sustainable – places are built using the principles of sustainable development, they are high quality, adaptable and built to last. They engage and promote children and young people's understanding sustainable design. They are built to adapt to and mitigate against climate change.

Play – places are designed with a variety of opportunities for play. At home with the provision of outside space, as part of a journey as an integrated part of neighbourhood design and in designated play areas. Play space is provided at a variety of scales and suitable for a range of ages and activities. The design of play spaces is fun, imaginative and responds to the local context.

Green – children and young people have free access to greenspace and nature near their homes. It is provided at a variety of scales, from doorstep greenspace through street trees, to pocket parks and play areas and sports fields. There is a mixture of managed and natural spaces.

Inclusive – places are designed to cater for diverse communities. They are built to accommodate the needs of children terms of their age, gender, ethnicity, ability, income and culture etc. There are opportunities for intergenerational interaction. Spaces are flexible and multi-use and can be used for play, socialising, rest, learning, and other activities.

Confidence – places are designed to give children and young people (and their parents and guardians) the confidence to use them. They have natural surveillance, are well maintained and risk assessed. Housing provision is affordable and well located. Traffic is minimised and there are safe walking and cycling routes.

The full version of the advice is available for free on our website:

www.rtpi.org.uk/practice/2021/july/children-and-town-planning-creating-places-to-grow/