



URBAN TRANSPORT GROUP

Evidence submission to Levelling Up, Housing and
Communities Committee

**Children, young people and the built
environment**

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Urban Transport Group (UTG) is the UK's network of city region transport authorities. UTG represents the seven largest city region strategic transport bodies in England, which, between them, serve over twenty million people in Greater Manchester (Transport for Greater Manchester), London (Transport for London), the Liverpool City Region (Merseytravel), Tyne and Wear (Nexus), the Sheffield City Region (South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority), the West Midlands (Transport for West Midlands) and West Yorkshire (West Yorkshire Combined Authority).
- 1.2. Our wider associate membership includes Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, Nottingham City Council, Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, Tees Valley Combined Authority, West of England Combined Authority, Translink (Northern Ireland) and Transport for Wales.
- 1.3. We are a thought leader in urban and local transport policy, bringing together stakeholders across the transport sector to advocate for policies that deliver affordable, trusted, green transport networks that enrich and connect people and places.

2. Response

The experiences of children and young people of their built environment

- *How do children and young people experience outdoor spaces in towns, cities and rural areas across the country? For example, their streets, estates, villages, neighbourhoods and parks?*
- *How do these experiences vary across income, race, gender, age?*
- *How easily can children and young people travel to outdoor spaces and schools? How has this changed over the years?*

- 2.1. The freedom of children and young people to move and play independently and safely outdoors has been eroded over generations. Research by the University of Westminster¹ compared young people's independent mobility in 1971, 1990 and 2010 and found a large reduction in freedoms.
- 2.2. They found, for example, that by 2010 only 25% of primary school children were allowed to travel home from school alone, compared to 86% in 1971². In 1971, 55% of children under 10 were allowed to travel alone to places other than school that were within walking distance compared to almost no children by 2010.
- 2.3. The research found that traffic danger was the strongest factor affecting the granting of independent mobility. These fears are not unfounded – 1,747 child pedestrians or cyclists

¹ <https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/item/98xyq/children-s-independent-mobility-an-international-comparison-and-recommendations-for-action>

² <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/primaryeducation/9798930/The-decline-of-childrens-right-to-roam-just-one-in-four-primary-school-pupils-are-allowed-to-walk-home-alone.html#:~:text=Download%20our%20app-,The%20decline%20of%20children's%20right%20to%20roam%3A%20just%20one%20in,to%20a%20report%20published%20today.>



aged under 16 were killed or seriously injured in 2022³. As pedestrians, significantly more children and young people are killed or seriously injured than any other age group.

- 2.4. A key factor in the erosion of children's 'right to roam' has been car-centric planning which has allowed vehicle traffic to dominate (traffic in the UK has doubled since the 1980s⁴) and contributed to reducing the range of essential services and amenities available within walking distance of where people live, including parks and other safe, green spaces to play.
- 2.5. Too frequently, housing and other developments have been designed around cars and the assumption of access by car. Research published by Transport for New Homes in 2018⁵ found that new residential developments continue to be built without adequate consideration for active travel and public transport access as well as failing to provide local services within walking distance.
- 2.6. This encourages sedentary, indoor lifestyles and too often means that opportunities for play and leisure outside the home are confined to private gardens or organised activities accessed via car.
- 2.7. This situation fundamentally changes the experience of childhood compared to previous generations. It also reduces the opportunities available to those children living in households without a car (22% of all households, rising to 40% of those in the lowest income quintile⁶) who may find very little in the way of play and everyday freedoms available on their doorstep but are unable to travel further afield.
- 2.8. An evidence review conducted for the Government Office for Science on mobility and access inequalities highlighted that *'Public transport service limitations, combined with largely unregulated land-use development are driving a mobility culture that most advantages already highly-mobile and well-off sections of the population, while worsening the mobility and accessibility opportunities of the most socially disadvantaged in the UK.'*⁷

The planning system

- ***How well are children and young people's needs currently met by the planning process in terms of policy and guidance?***
 - ***How are children and young people's views and voices heard, considered and acted upon in the planning system if at all?***
- 2.9. Children and young people's needs are not prioritised in the current planning process. Children receive just one mention in the National Planning Policy Framework and no national guidance on child-friendly design and planning exists. Children are not defined as a statutory equalities group in terms of considering their needs or ensuring they are involved in decision making. Transport policy frameworks have a similar deficit.

³ DfT statistics RAS0202

⁴ <https://playingout.net/why/the-problem/>

⁵ Transport for New Homes (2018) Project Summary and Recommendations

⁶ DfT NTS0703

⁷ Lucas, K. et al (2019) Inequalities in Mobility and Access in the UK Transport System

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/784685/future_of_mobility_access.pdf



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- 2.10. There would, however, be huge benefits in putting children at the heart of spatial and transport planning - places that work for children tend to work for everyone, including bringing wider benefits to public health and the environment.
- 2.11. Children should be considered a statutory equalities group in the planning process and should be meaningfully involved in local planning decisions. Child Impact Assessments could also become a standard part of the planning process. Similar provisions should also be extended to transport planning, using a 'child lens' to ensure streets promote the safety of the youngest and most vulnerable users.
- 2.12. As well as producing national guidance on child friendly planning for the built environment and for transport, Government should explore cost-effective, equitable ways to enhance the capacity and expertise of local authorities in this area and to secure additional capital and revenue funding to support high quality delivery (including through developer contributions).

Best practice and evaluation

- *Where are the examples of policy and good practice that are improving children and young people's experiences in the built environment, either directly or indirectly, in the UK or internationally?*
 - *How are these outcomes measured? For example, through economic or health and wellbeing indicators?*
- 2.13. The previously mentioned research by the University of Westminster⁸ found that the best initiatives were those focused on transforming urban environments to enable children's independence and development, as part of wider programmes of social, environmental and economic development. Rotterdam and Vancouver were highlighted as notable success stories.
- 2.14. Tim Gill's book 'Urban Playground'⁹ also includes multiple and diverse examples of cities around the world that have implemented child-friendly planning and design. Gill notes that, with the partial exception of London, British cities are notable by their absence.
- 2.15. There would be huge value in learning from international best practice.

Cross Government working

- *How does the relationship of children and young people with the built environment overlap with policy areas beyond the work of DLUHC, such as public health, transport, policing and net zero?*
 - *Are government departments working together to address children and young people's needs in this respect?*
- 2.16. Planning and design of the built environment is fundamentally linked to the ability to deliver sustainable transport, public health and net zero goals. The way the built environment is planned and designed affects the extent to which children and young people can play and travel in a way that is safe, healthy and green, including the extent to which they can choose to walk, scoot, cycle or wheel.

⁸ <https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/item/98xyq/children-s-independent-mobility-an-international-comparison-and-recommendations-for-action>

⁹ Gill, T. (2021) Urban playground: How child-friendly planning and design can save cities



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- 2.17. The ability of children and young people to use active travel has huge implications for their health and wellbeing and for the achievement of net zero.
- 2.18. Opportunities for everyday outdoor play and mobility are critical to children’s physical and mental health and wellbeing. Children and young people need a variety of safe, accessible, welcoming and stimulating spaces within easy walking distance. If key local services – schools, shops, clubs, leisure centres – are not within walking distance, children cannot reach them independently. Instead, they must rely on lifts from parents and carers (if available) or upon public transport (if available or permitted). Both options limit children’s opportunities to be physically active and disadvantage those living in households without a car in terms of what activities they can access.
- 2.19. In England, only one-fifth of children aged 5-15 meet official physical activity targets. Active travel is one of the easiest ways for people to be physically active every day. Almost a quarter of children would like to cycle or scoot to school, but only 4% actually do¹⁰, with traffic danger the primary barrier. To address this, planning policy must encourage spaces and places that put people first, rather than allow vehicles to dominate.
- 2.20. As well as promoting health, built environments that put children first are also places that support sustainability and the achievement of net zero, not least through the transport choices they enable.
- 2.21. Children’s mobility and outdoor play expert Tim Gill highlights these connections: *‘child friendly neighbourhoods look and feel a lot like sustainable neighbourhoods. They are light in traffic. They have plenty of trees and shade, and easily accessible, green, public open spaces... They are free from harmful pollutants... The services, shops and facilities that families need every day are close at hand, and easy to get to on foot and by bicycle, with good public transport connections to those destinations that are further away and less essential.’*¹¹
- 2.22. A coordinated, cross-departmental approach is needed, with children at its heart, recognising the connections between planning, housing, levelling up, public health, transport, decarbonisation and clean air. This joint work should recognise that children have the right to independent mobility, to access outdoor space and play and to be a visible and valued part of public life.

¹⁰ <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/our-blog/news/2021/september/survey-reveals-just-2-of-uk-pupils-currently-cycle-to-school>

¹¹ Gill, T. (2021) Urban playground: How child-friendly planning and design can save cities (p.30).