



# DESIGNING PLACES FOR CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Guidelines for Child Centred Planning, Design and Stewardship  
for the Built Environment in Northern Ireland

## FOREWORD

I am pleased to introduce the Designing Places for Children and Young People document. It is critical that our built environments are inclusive of our children and young people. Good and inclusive places not only improve health and wellbeing and boost economic activity but they make our children and young people visible and recognise their role as active participants in the lives of our towns and cities. It is therefore important to design our places in such a way that ensures our built environment takes into account the needs of all people recognising that different age groups may have different requirements. Child's rights compliant design guidelines can help to create functional and enjoyable places that cater for all people's needs.

This document is about creating good built environments for children. The built environment has a particular important influence on a child's health, particularly through its impacts on air quality, levels of physical exercise, and mental health and wellbeing. By working to make our built environment more child friendly we can achieve healthier, sustainable, and people-centred places where people of all ages have a place.

The guidelines contained in this document provide advice on various aspects to consider when designing our built environment in a way that improves the quality of life for children and young people, such as safety, connectivity, sustainability and use of public places. This publication can be a valuable resource for facilitating the transformation of the built environment into places that accommodate children of different ages and capabilities. While planners and developers have a crucial role to play in this transformation process, it should be recognised that the placemaking process also requires active involvement from a wide range of stakeholders including children and young people themselves.

The document comes at a particularly challenging time as we consider how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected our children, young people, and their families. Of the many lessons this experience has taught us, it has highlighted the importance of access to outdoor spaces in which to walk, cycle and play. This guide now presents a key reference for all those tasked with the recovery process, helping to ensure that we 'build back fairer', especially for our children.

I commend Belfast Healthy Cities for offering a practical guide and support to ensure well-designed places that are inclusive of children and young people. I would also like to recognise their collaboration with the Ministerial Advisory Group for Architecture and the Built Environment and their Expert Advisor James Hennessey for compiling this document.

I trust this publication will support Northern Ireland's path to a healthier and more prosperous future for all.

**Koulla Yiasouma**

*Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People*

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Belfast Healthy Cities is a partnership organisation providing a platform for intersectoral collaboration to improve health and improve wellbeing for the Belfast population.

Belfast has been a leading city within the World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network since 1988. As part of the commitment to roll out the WHO European Healthy Cities Network programmes, Belfast Healthy Cities has been promoting the concept of Healthy Urban Environments to policymakers in Belfast and across Northern Ireland. A key role for Belfast Healthy Cities is to support partners in the city by providing evidence, capacity building and piloting new approaches and ways of working to improve health and wellbeing and reduce health inequalities. The Ministerial Advisory Group for Architecture and the Built Environment promotes the highest quality of places for all those involved in using and shaping them such as developers and decision makers including those in councils, government departments, housing associations and the community. The Group undertakes its roles in a number of ways including briefing and design workshops, design reviews, consultation responses, site visits, symposiums, position papers, research, advising and working with government departments and district councils.

This document was written by James Hennessey of the Ministerial Advisory Group for Architecture and the Built Environment in Northern Ireland. (DfC). Together with Belfast Healthy Cities, they would like to thank all those who contributed to the research for this document, including the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), Department of Education (DE), The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Belfast City Council, Eastside Partnership and Cork Healthy Cities.



## CONTENTS

Foreword .....	1
1. About this Publication.....	4
2. Context .....	8
3. Definition of the Child .....	14
4. Places Fit for Children .....	18
5. Design Principles for Child Friendly Places .....	22
6. Urban Planning and Design Interventions for Child Friendly Places .....	30
7. Case Studies.....	40
Selected Bibliography.....	52

## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

We often take for granted the way in which our towns and cities are laid out and run. After all they have mostly evolved over many generations and are required to balance a myriad of pressing needs from housing to transport, industry to retail. But who are cities for? The answer to that question is clearly 'everyone'. Yet beyond that simple answer lies a complex challenge for urban planners and designers. How do we create and maintain sustainable urban places that work for 'everyone' in our society?

*a priority*

*socialisation* "I think it's really important to make cities better for children, because it'll bring more people into town, *footfall* they can make more friends and people might go "ooh, I'll go into this shop." Some kids might not *economics* have gone to a park because they are too busy on their iPad or something, so it gets them out the *fitness & mental health* house. When I go into town I usually cover my mouth because I don't like breathing in people's smoke. And *air quality* I think they should make parks better for all children. *inclusivity* I mean, more parks need monkey bars for older kids like me. I know, you could make a big, big climbing frame for really old kids to go on at night."

*physical development*

*teen provision*

Aoife, aged 9



This document focusses on one especially important section of our community – children. While together they comprise almost one third of the global population, children and their needs have up until recently, rarely been given special attention in planning and urban design processes. Unlike adults, children may not be given a choice of places to frequent or avoid, placing an additional responsibility upon decision makers. Furthermore, a growing body of research has linked the quality of our urban environments to levels of mental and physical health, to investment and city economies and to environmental sustainability.

This document is produced by Belfast Healthy Cities in collaboration with the Ministerial Advisory Group for Architecture and the Built Environment (MAG). While it considers the topic of child friendly places from a uniquely Northern Ireland standpoint, it draws upon international research and offers recommendations of relevance to other cities and towns beyond this jurisdiction.

It is aimed at all those with responsibility for the planning, design and management of cities, towns and villages, including those working in central and local government, private organisations and the community sector. It should also be read in conjunction with “Engaging Children and Young People” by Belfast Healthy Cities, which summarises how children can be better involved in the processes of planning and design<sup>1</sup>.

This document examines the requirements of children within the built environment, with a focus on strategic planning and the public realm. It then provides an overview of planning, design and management interventions at a range of scales, from international and national policy to the detailed design and stewardship of spaces. Finally, it concludes with case studies, examining best practice which has begun to emerge.





## CONTEXT

**A steadily increasing and welcome body of international guidance is now appearing on the topic of urban planning and design for the child. A catalyst for this was the establishment of the Child Friendly City Initiative in 1996 by UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund) and UN Habitat. This stemmed from recognition at the Habitat II international conference that *"the wellbeing of children is the ultimate indicator of a healthy habitat, a democratic society and of good governance."*<sup>2</sup>**

The ethos of the Child Friendly City Initiative is to assist countries and municipalities on the implementation of the UN Convention on Rights of the Child (1989), further strengthened through the Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015). The United Kingdom is one of 35 countries actively participating in the Initiative through six local authorities, including Derry City and Strabane District in Northern Ireland. While the term 'city' is used, the principles of the initiative and in turn, this document are as applicable to towns, village and neighbourhoods. In addition to the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities and Communities Handbook which set out the benefits of becoming a Child Friendly City, the key reference of most direct relevance to this document is "Shaping urbanization for children: A handbook on child-responsive urban planning."<sup>3</sup> Written in 2018 it provides a comprehensive resource for urban planners, setting out the arguments for child friendly planning and a range of necessary interventions at various scales.

The independent Bernard Van Leer Foundation is another active driver of research on this subject. Its Urban95 initiative poses the powerful question: "If you could experience a city from 95cm – the height of a 3-year-old – what would you change?"<sup>4</sup> In providing financial and technical assistance to partnership cities around the world, the Foundation has commissioned several useful references. These include Gehl Institute's "Space to Grow" which also proposed 10 principles "... that support happy, healthy families in a playful, friendly city"<sup>5</sup> and The City at Eye Level for Kids, providing global case studies aimed at "urban planners, architects, politicians, developers, entrepreneurs and advocates for children and families."<sup>6</sup> This includes a section summarising the work of Belfast Healthy Cities.

The global engineering consultancy Arup has also published an influential report in its "Cities Alive" series introducing several child friendly design concepts useful to this paper<sup>7</sup> and in 2020, The Global Designing Cities Initiative published "Designing Streets for Kids."<sup>8</sup> Finally, published at the time of writing, Tim Gill's book "Urban Playground" provides a welcome and timely resource on "How Child-Friendly Planning and Design Can Save Cities."<sup>9</sup>

2. <https://childfriendlycities.org>

3. Shaping Urbanization For Children (UNICEF, 2018)

4. Urban 95 (Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2017)

5. Space to Grow (Gehl Institute, 2018)

6. The City at Eye Level for Kids (Dananburg et al (Eds), 2019)

7. Cities Alive: Designing for Urban Childhoods (ARUP, 2018)

8. Designing Streets for Kids (The Global Designing Cities Initiative, 2020)

9. Urban Playground (Gill, T, 2021)



While a growing body of such guidance exists at the international level, it has apparently still to 'filter' down to national and regional policy and design guidance in Northern Ireland. However, much scope exists to build upon commitments made within Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, the work of the Northern Ireland Children and Young People's Commissioner (NICCY), the Children and Young People's Strategy<sup>10</sup> and local Community Plans. In addition, there are a number of spatial plans and strategies that could be used to promote child-friendly environments, including the Strategic Planning Policy Statement, the Living Places guidance document and Local Development Plans that are currently being taken forward by Councils.

**Outcomes of the Children and Young People's Strategy, 2019 - 2029**



The diagram on the following pages provides a summary of how the promotion of child friendly environments delivers upon the strategic policy outcomes of both central and local government.





# CHILD FRIENDLY PLACES FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

DRAFT PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT	ANTRIM & NEWTOWNABBEY	ARDS & NORTH DOWN	ARMAGH, BANBRIDGE & CRAIGAVON	BELFAST	CAUSEWAY COAST & GLENS
Prosperous Economy	Health & Wellbeing	Fulfilled Potential	Community Pride	Prosperous Economy	Health & Wellbeing
Environmental Sustainability	Connected & Vibrant	Health & Wellbeing	Resilient	Welcoming & Inclusive	Best Start in Life
Equal Society	Prosperity	Safe & Secure	Safe & Respectful	Fulfilled Potential	Independent Living
Healthy Lives	Potential	Prosperity	Enterprising	Healthy	Safe
Fulfilled Potential	Support	Pride	Skilled & Equipped	Vibrant	Positive Relations
Better Jobs			Visitor Choice		Landscape
Safe & Respectful			Creative		Growth
Caring			Heritage		Sustainability
Shared & Diverse			Place		Economy
Attractive					Attractive
Connect					Driven
Youth					Skilled

# CHILD FRIENDLY PLACES FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

DERRY & STRABANE	FERMANAGH & OMAGH	LISBURN & CASTLEREAGH	MID & EAST ANTRIM	MID ULSTER	NEWRY, MOURNE & DOWN
Prosperous Economy	Health & Wellbeing	Best Start in Life	Business Growth	Prosperous Economy	Fulfilled Potential from Start
Cultural Destination	Independent Elderly	Vibrant Economy	Entrepreneurial Culture	Diverse Economy	Health & Wellbeing
Skills & Education	Community	Fulfilled Life	Visitor Destination	Vibrant & Competitive	Prosperous
Sustainable Environs	Best Start in Life	Resilience	Infrastructural Development	Connected Infrastructure	Environmental
Infrastructure	Economy	Safe	Fulfilled Potential	Enhanced Environment	Community
Fulfilled Life	Connected		Long Lives	Affordable Housing	
Children	Heritage		Balanced Worklife	Skilled & Qualified	
Safe	Place		Active	Best Chance in Life	
			Health Equality	Entrepreneurial	
			Independent Elderly	Long-life	
			Life-long Learning	Health	
			Educated	Caring	
			Skilled	Safe	
			Supported	Diverse	
			Safe	Equality	
			Community		
			Assets		
			Valued		
			Access		

## PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT & COMMUNITY PLAN OUTCOMES

- Direct reference to children
- Indirect reference to children
- No reference to children



## DEFINITION OF THE CHILD

**A child is defined in most countries including the United Kingdom, as a person under the age of 18 years old - but it is important not to generalise.**

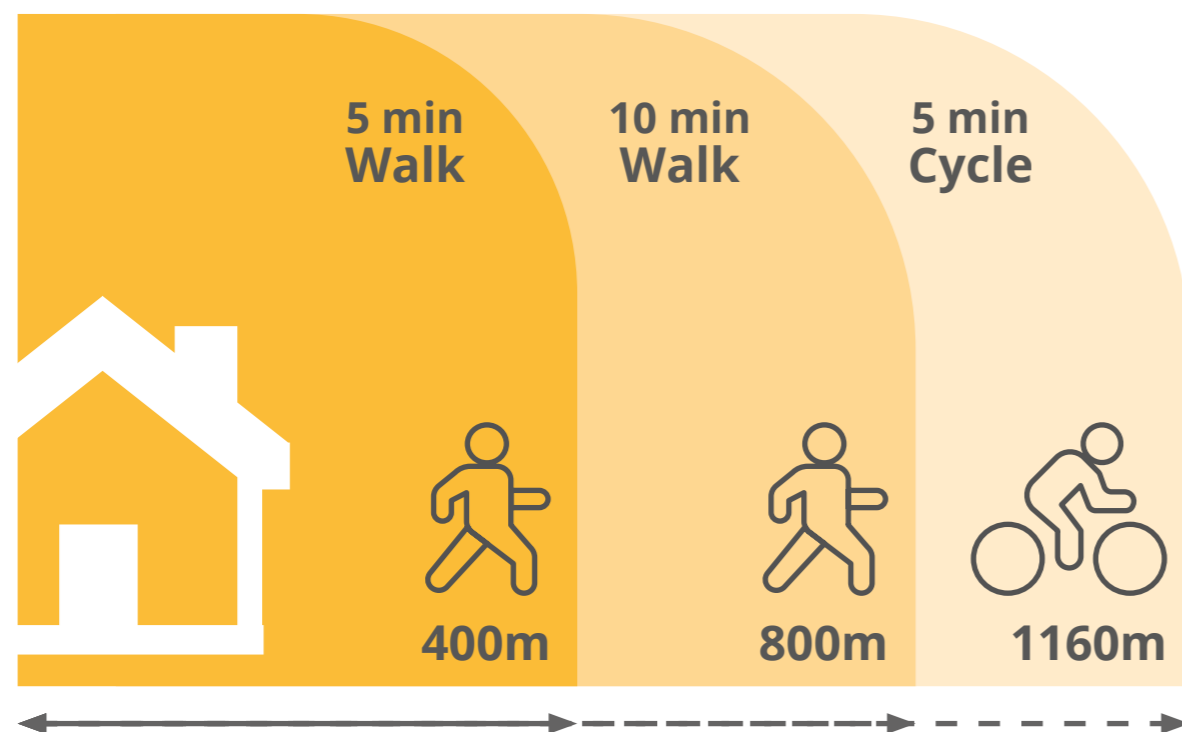
The immense physical, cognitive and socio-emotional changes that take place through childhood mean that designing urban places for 2 year olds is a very different exercise to designing them for 14 year olds. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the needs and welfare of carers and parents of children (including those who are pregnant), children with learning and / or physical disabilities and children who observe specific cultural or religious customs.



For planners and designers this complexity should be not viewed as a deterrent, but an inspiration for creative thinking that results in truly inclusive environments. For paediatricians and public health experts, work is needed to further assist the planning and design community in fully understanding the implications of these developmental stages. And in the case of children and young people with disabilities, allied health professionals, community and voluntary organisations and of course their parents and carers, present an invaluable source of expertise. The design of any child friendly place must also involve meaningful engagement with children themselves.

Within the spectrum of child development, it is also informative to consider milestones. The Shaping Urbanization for Childhood publication places emphasis on the physical milestones of crawling, walking and cycling.<sup>11</sup> It must also be recognised that in the United Kingdom, the distances children are generally allowed to travel alone have reduced greatly in the decades since the 1960s. In one study, researchers found that grandparents were permitted to roam several kilometres as children, while the 'home range' of their grandchildren was less than 100 metres.<sup>12</sup> An onus is therefore placed of creating safer places and routes, and providing for those who may be accompanying them.

### Development within a Walking and Cycling Catchment



11. Shaping Urbanization For Children, (UNICEF, 2018)

12. Decreasing experiences of home range, outdoor spaces, activities and companions: changes across three generations in Sheffield in north England. Children's Geographies 13(6): 677-691 (Woolley, H. and Griffin, E., 2015)



## PLACES FIT FOR CHILDREN

**In designing places for children it is necessary to facilitate the range of activities they are likely to encounter in the built environment, either through choice or more likely, through necessity. Often formal play areas are the only provision that specifically cater for children. However, a whole spectrum of outdoor activities beyond play involve children and therefore require consideration by urban planners, designers and managers.**

### PLAYING

Play is an essential part of childhood development, contributing to the physical, mental and social growth of a child. Cities are therefore required to accommodate play in both a formal and an informal capacity. Play areas formally provide for play and normally consist of a series of play equipment pieces targeted at specific age ranges. They tend to be found in large parks and neighbourhoods, but less so in other key urban areas such as city centres. Natural play involves the use of natural materials such as logs, boulders and plants to present play opportunities. Play is not however, confined to designated play spaces. For generations quiet residential streets have doubled up as the venue for street play, as do other open spaces such as parks and squares. School grounds also have a special role to play in the life of a child and require design attention accordingly.



### MOVING

Much of a child's time in the city is spent moving from A to B, be it between home and school or to other destinations such as libraries or leisure centres. Up until mid-teens children rarely travel unaccompanied, meaning that the choice of destination, route and transport mode rests with adults. For those travelling independently, all under the age of 17 are reliant on walking, cycling or public transport, necessitating safe and accessible infrastructure. During school term time, the weekday urban movement of children tends to be focussed on busy commuting periods, unfortunately bringing them into contact with the dangers associated with heavy traffic and air pollution.



### SOCIALISING AND RELAXING

The public realm of our towns and cities provides space for socialising and even relaxing. 'Recreational' spaces such as public parks, are largely provided for this purpose during opening hours, although vary in their size, amenity and suitability. Socialising of course takes place across our city spaces throughout the day and evening, from street corners to squares and riverfronts. Such social activity positively contributes to the animation of urban areas. Terms such as 'antisocial behaviour' and 'loitering' however, point to the nuanced perceptions of activities in the public realm that are deemed acceptable, often affecting teenagers and their use of the city.



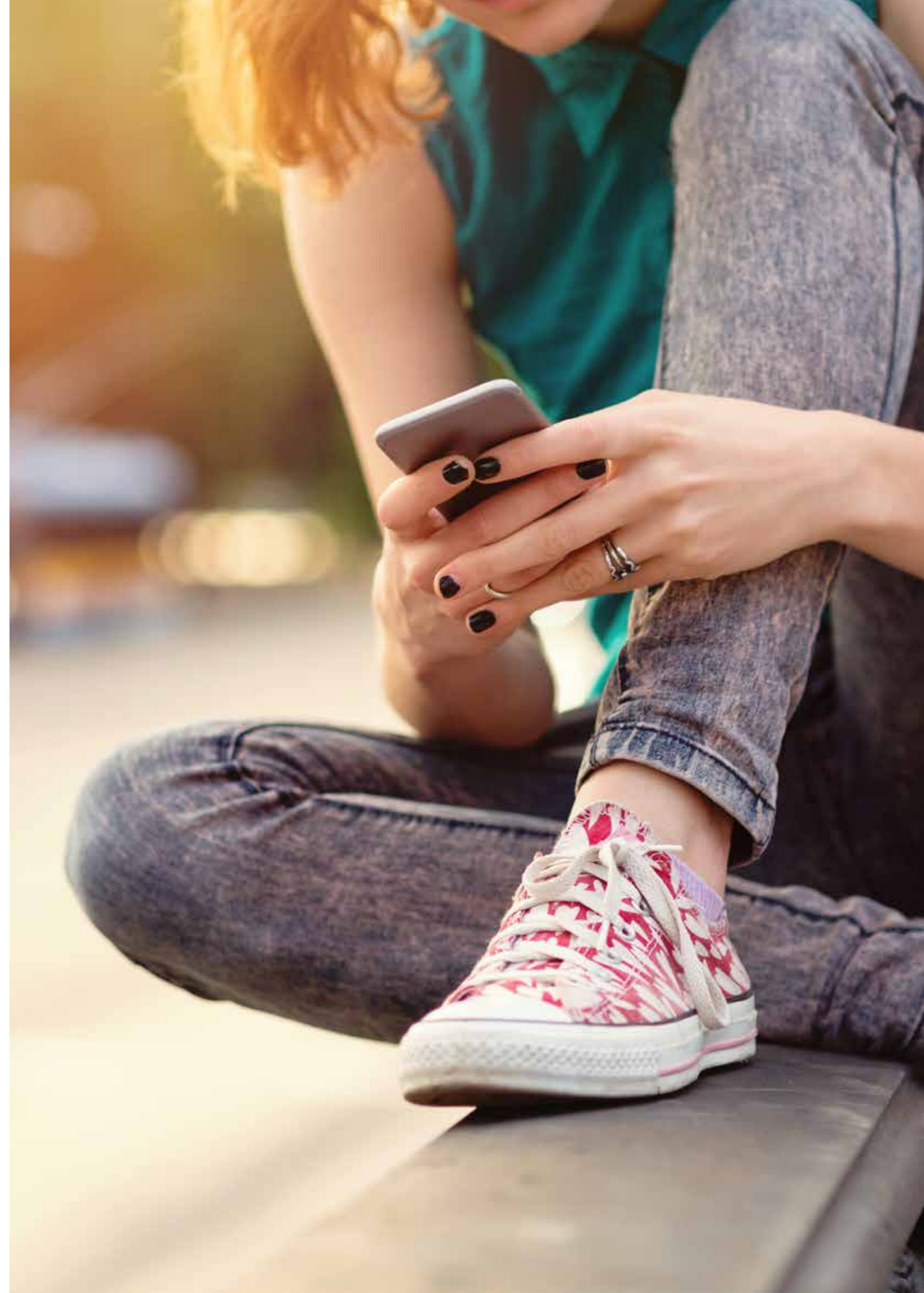
### LEARNING AND VISITING

Cities have a role to play in contributing to the learning experience and knowledge development of children, as well as welcoming visitors, be they international tourists or local day trippers. Provision for children in this context can often be difficult to find, occasionally taking the shape of interpretative information panels or public art. Child focussed or child friendly events are another important means by which children are welcomed to the city. Another invaluable source of learning comes from the natural world. The smallest of urban green spaces can provide countless opportunities for children and young people to engage with the natural environment around them.



### CONSUMING

Our town and city centres are focal points of commercial activity, with the retail and hospitality sectors catering for children and their families. Nearly all shops are likely to receive children in some capacity, be they a targeted customer segment (e.g. confectionary, toys or children's clothing) or frequented by families or adults accompanied by children (e.g. supermarkets). While some larger shops provide play space for children, this remains relatively unusual. Coin operated rides are found in most shopping centres and occasionally small play areas can be found. The gradual rise of a 'café culture' in the United Kingdom and Ireland has expanded the number of hospitality outlets now proactively welcoming children, although still to a lesser extent than most European countries.





## DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR CHILD FRIENDLY PLACES

**What does a child need from their built environment? There are certain aspects of an environment that are particularly important to children and young people. There is now increasing evidence of the environmental factors that influence health and wellbeing. The built environment has an important influence on a child's development, particularly through its adverse impacts on health challenges that affect children disproportionately, such as obesity, asthma, unintentional injuries and mental health and wellbeing. There are also moral and ethical responsibilities for providing suitable environments for children. Understanding these is an essential requirement of urban planners and designers.**

### SAFETY

The safety of children is of course of paramount importance. While improving, road safety remains a major hazard to urban children. Consequently, volumes of traffic and the speeds at which it travels is directly linked to the safety of children. Footpaths, crossing points and especially cycle lanes are not always safe for children to use. Other risks in the public realm such as trips, falls and play have also reduced, in part spurred by the threat of litigation. However, in play area design a debate exists regarding appropriate levels of safety. Play areas can be 'too safe', with risk taking acknowledged to be an important component of play and child development. Finally, air quality has a major bearing on the safety of children and their risk of contracting illnesses and conditions, ranging from reduced lung capacity and asthma to heart diseases and cancers.

### SECURITY

Crime and antisocial behaviour are common concerns relating to the public realm, especially after dark. While levels of criminal activity are influenced by many complex and inter-related factors, certain environmental conditions affect levels of crimes such as theft and personal attack. Programmes such as the UK police's Secure by Design initiative, highlights how architecture and urban design can contribute to making places safer.<sup>13</sup> Critically, perceptions of security are as important as actual level of security. Whether or not a place 'feels safe' has a tremendous bearing on how often they are frequented, while also affecting land values and investment decisions.

### SHELTER

In our climate wind, rain and cold weather impact upon the urban experience, especially in winter and during the hours of darkness. Yet through the design of the built environment such impacts can be mitigated, so increasing the usability of outdoor areas at different times of day and the year. The awnings found on our traditional shopfronts are one such example.

## SPACE

Unlike adults, younger children have a tendency to run and skip, as much as they walk. This, combined with the value of play, means that children need space. Public spaces, be they parks or squares, therefore provide an invaluable environment for children in which to play and exercise. Similarly, pedestrian streets open up many more opportunities for children to let go of their parent's hand. Conversely, urban places with little public space deny children of such opportunity.

## SOCIABILITY AND INDEPENDENCE

Social interaction and responsibility are essential parts of a child's development, integral to family life and the formation of friendships. Furthermore, a built environment can and should enable greater independence from adults as appropriate. It is therefore vital that public spaces promote and sustain social interaction and independence. Seating, gathering spaces and lighting all have a specific role to play in this regard.

## STIMULATION

Children often respond to different aspects of the public realm. Parents of toddlers will be familiar with the challenge of 'entertaining' their children, while parents of teenagers will be as familiar with expression 'I'm bored'. Good planning and design can and should contribute to the stimulation of children, improving their experience and consequent relationship with specific places. Colour, textures, sounds and smells can all be harnessed by a designer to the benefit of those experiencing the place in question.

## FRIENDLY PLACES FOR ALL CHILDREN

Inclusivity is a critical feature of child friendly places, ensuring that they can be safely accessed, used and enjoyed by as many people as possible. The Design Council<sup>14</sup> describes Inclusive Environments as:

*"Welcoming to Everyone - Responsive to People's Needs - Intuitive to use - Flexible - Offer Choice (when a single design solution cannot meet all user needs) - Convenient (so they can be used without undue effort or special separation and so that they maximise independence)".*

The requirements of children and young people with disabilities or special educational needs are an especially important area of consideration. A diverse range of issues present themselves within the broad spectrum of these terms and expert advice and engagement with user groups should always be sought. Yet some useful high level points for early consideration in the design process are as follows:

## PHYSICAL ACCESS

Navigating urban areas with walking aids, a wheelchair or a buggy can be a very challenging experience. Accessibility is integral to the design of movement routes, allowing adequate and unobstructed routes, manageable gradients and appropriate surface materials.



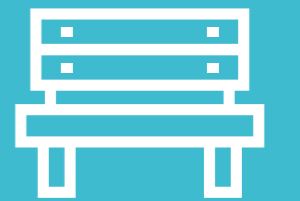
## SENSORY STIMULATION AND RELIEF

Many conditions impact upon the sensory experience of the city. For those with reduced senses design can engage with touch, sounds and even smell. For those with heightened senses, for example through autism or ADHD, the provision of quiet spaces is vital.



## COMFORT AND WELLBEING

The availability of facilities such as communal seating, accessible toilets or changing facilities can 'make or break' the ability of some users to access an urban space or area. Such provision must therefore be taken very seriously and integrated with the overall design approach.



## TECHNOLOGICAL AIDS

Recent advances in digital technologies and 'smart cities' are beginning to offer solutions that help users experience the city, from mobile navigational apps and hearing loops to interactive artworks and water features.





In Northern Ireland another vital aspect of inclusivity is overcoming issues of sectarianism and racism. While great progress has been made since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, tension and division remain an unfortunate reality for some, often those living in lower income urban areas. Older children and teenagers can be particularly vulnerable to verbal or physical abuse in public spaces, posing them harm, affecting confidence and limiting independence. Simple solutions do not exist. However, concerted and sustained efforts to change this unacceptable situation must be a priority not only for those in governance and service provision, but also for the planners and designers of neighbourhoods, buildings and spaces. Shared facilities set within lively, safe and accessible environments as described in this report, have therefore a crucial role to play in the context of Northern Ireland.

### CHILDREN, NATURE AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Rising global temperatures and a rapid decline in biodiversity have at last begun to focus the minds of governments and local authorities across the world. An unprecedented existential challenge is set before us to change the way our societies and economies function, so to reduce and reverse the harm being caused to our planet.

Children and young people are now central to this global movement, articulated by the young campaigner Greta Thunberg as *“We deserve a safe future. And we demand a safe future. Is that really too much to ask?”*

Inspired by such role models and informed through the school curriculum and initiatives such as EcoSchools, children and young people have a growing awareness of the natural world and desire to participate in climate action. This presents some highly important questions for those involved in the advancement of child friendly places in Northern Ireland and further afield.



### How can we make our cities, town, villages and neighbourhoods more environmentally sustainable for current and future generations?

A major effort is now required to reduce the environmental impact of urban places for the sake of our children and young people. This necessitates a wide range of interventions, including a modal shift from private cars to public transport, cycling and walking; development of neighbourhoods and amenities within a walkable catchment; and employing design and construction techniques that minimise their impact on resources and the environment. Furthermore, climate adaption will require us to mitigate against impacts such as increased storm events, flooding and urban warming.



### How can we provide more opportunities for our children and young people to engage with nature and participate in its recovery?

Access to green spaces becomes an increasingly important requirement for our children and young people, not only for those living in built up urban area, but also rural communities with little public access to the surrounding countryside. Once access is established, formal and informal opportunities must then be found for children to learn, play and care for the natural environment around them.







Dynamic and creative spaces



Safe places for people not cars



Somewhere to gently explore

Lois de Vries



Adventures with nature



Routes to cycle safely



Making space for fun



Activating urban lakes and rivers



Playing close to home



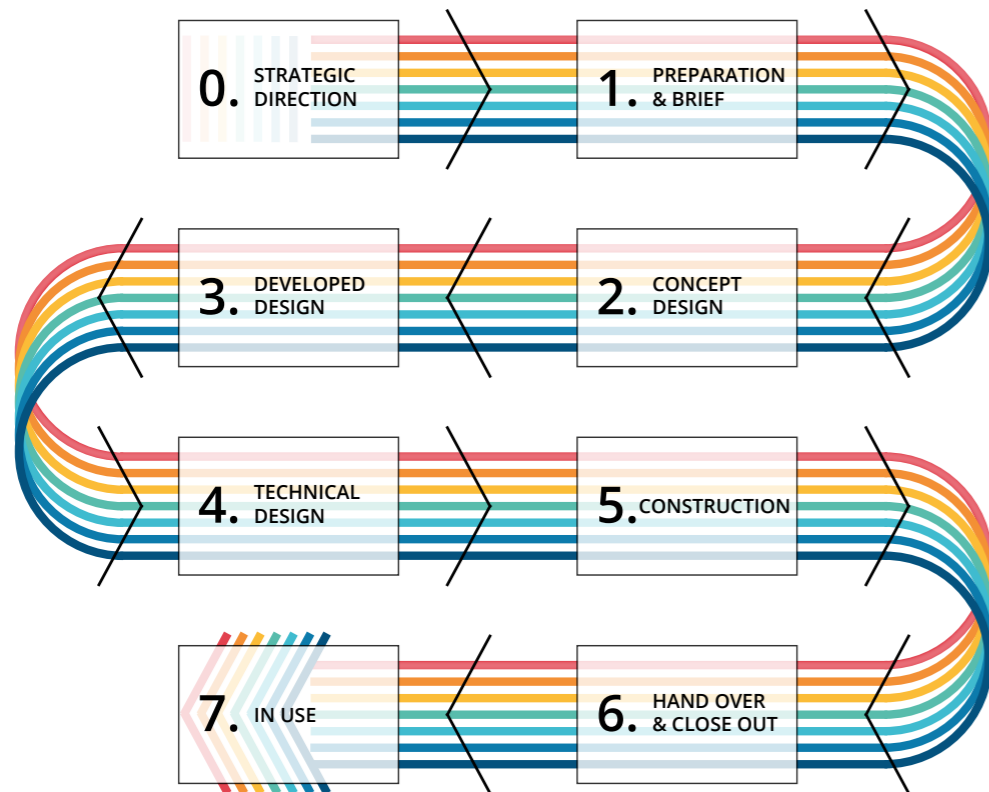
### 6A. WHEN AND WHERE

The integration of child friendly principles to planning and urban design must take place at all stages and scales of development. Of the diagrams on the following page, the first illustrates the 8 stages of development as formalised by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), from strategic direction (or policy formation) and the briefing of design teams, to technical design and construction<sup>15</sup>. The second diagram shows the scales of necessary intervention, from international and national policies, to neighbourhood planning, site layouts and detailed design.

Urban Stewardship is the management and maintenance of our cities, towns and villages. According to "Living Places: An Urban Stewardship and Design Guide for Northern Ireland", stewardship has traditionally been considered as a separate process to planning. However, the decisions made about how we care for our spaces and places have a major bearing on their quality. Therefore, local authorities, land owners and estate managers have a crucial role to play in making our spaces and places child friendly<sup>16</sup>. Stewardship and the creation of child friendly places is not simply an exercise in town planning.

The following section summarises a wide range of possible urban planning, design and management interventions at each of these scales.

### The Stages of Child Friendly Design and Construction



### The Scales of Child Friendly Policy and Delivery



### 6B. INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL POLICY

The need for child friendly urban places has begun to register more highly on the international stage. This stems from UNICEF's promotion of the Convention of Rights of the Child, its establishment of the Child Friendly Cities Initiative and more recently, a commitment to fulfil Sustainable Development Goals in the face of an ever-worsening climate emergency.

The United Kingdom and neighbouring Republic of Ireland are both signatories to UN Conventions and are therefore obliged to adopt their principles through policy and legislation. As planning in the UK is a devolved matter, policy pertaining to child friendly cities is mainly the remit of the Northern Ireland Executive and its fellow administrations in Scotland and Wales and of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in England.

At present in Northern Ireland there are no specific national policies that relate to child friendly planning and design. Mentions of child orientated planning are broadly absent from the Regional Development Strategy, Strategic Planning Policy Statement (except in reference PPS8) and the Architecture and Built Environment Policy for Northern Ireland. PPS8 – Planning Policy Statement 8 on Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation does place an emphasis on provision for children and young people, noting the right to play in the UN Convention on Children's Rights.

A key point of reference in Northern Ireland is the Children and Young People's Strategy, 2019 – 2029. A requirement of The Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, it provides a cross departmental framework for improving the well-being of children and young people. This outcome based strategy (see p10) marks an important step forward for the Northern Ireland Executive and covers many themes strongly linked to those addressed in this document. Yet while the strategy recognises that "Our health and wellbeing is directly affected by the quality of the environment around us,<sup>17</sup>" it stops short of elaborating upon the many links between children and the urban environments in which they live.

The broader need for inclusivity is more prevalent in Northern Ireland due largely to Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, in which age is a category in the duty of equality of opportunity. The establishment of child friendly cities therefore falls under all our responsibilities to make Northern Ireland and fairer and more equal society.

#### CHILD FRIENDLY CITIES, FINLAND

One of the most developed national approaches to Child Friendly Cities is to be found in Finland, leading to 13 municipalities being formally recognised as child friendly. Ten 'thematic building blocks' are used to assess progress on a two-year cycle, with regular impartial input from UNICEF.



## 6C. REGIONAL AND CITY PLANNING

The planning of our regions and cities is fundamental to shaping places that successfully serve the needs of our children and young people. At the time of writing all local authorities in Northern Ireland are preparing Local Development Plans, thus presenting the ideal opportunity to integrate child friendly planning policies and principles to their approaches. These build upon commitments made in their respective Community Plans, most of which make specific reference to the needs of children and young people (see p4). 'A Plan Fit for Children' by Belfast Healthy Cities sets out a range of Local Development Plan policy recommendations of value to all areas in Northern Ireland.<sup>18</sup>

Two key issues for consideration at this scale are how children travel and the ease with which they can access necessary facilities, including schools, green spaces and play areas. A combined solution to these two issues is the implementation of a compact city model, more recently known as the 15 minute city. This is whereby new housing is built to a sustainable density, within walking distance of essential amenities and interconnected by segregated cycle lanes and public transport. Unlike edge of town housing estates and retail parks (still being built today), this form of mixed use development considerably opens up accessibility for young people and indeed all those who do not drive. Furthermore, such a model 'naturalises' the choice of active travel, leading to healthier lifestyles and environments.

## 6D. URBAN CENTRE AND NEIGHBOURHOOD MASTERPLANNING

The layouts of our city centres and residential neighbourhoods have a major bearing on the quality of life for those who frequent them, not least children and young people. While such places are required to balance a variety of sometimes competing needs, their layouts must orchestrate the relationship between buildings and spaces, between different uses and between the movement of people through various forms of travel.

These inter relationships often hold the key to creating successful and sustainable places. By mixing uses in a layout, urban places can become more resilient to socio economic changes over time, while being kept lively and therefore safer at different times of the day and week. By consciously designing the relationship between built form and open spaces, a more human scale can be created, while benefitting from the animation and overlooking provided by building frontages. An especially important type of space to early years and childhood is the street, providing a point of access to the public realm within sight of parents, while also creating opportunities for engaging with others.

Transport decision making at this scale also enables the creation of more child friendly spaces. Pedestrianised zones in city centres - implemented either on a full or part time basis - transform the experience for children and their families. In a more residential context, home zones and quiet streets where speeds are limited to 20 miles per hour create much safer environments for children. In areas where a throughput of vehicles is unavoidable, then the quality of the pedestrian and cycling experience must be given especially careful attention.

Providing for play is another vital aspect of establishing child friendly cities and towns. While play areas are mostly provided within walking distances of residential neighbourhoods, they must also become features of our town and city centres. Good play spaces, be they formal play areas, natural play areas or play streets, give children invaluable space for play, so making urban centres more liveable and attractive places in which families can shop and visit.

### TIRANA, ALBANIA

The capital city of Albania is recognised for its innovative and cost effective approach to child friendly planning and design. Measures include regular road closures, a city forest containing children's 'birthday trees' and a children's city council to assist in the decision making process.



Municipality of Tirana

### SUPER BLOCKS, BARCELONA

In a bold move to transform the quality of life for city residents including children, Barcelona has embarked upon a process to implement 'super blocks'. These are achieved by limiting vehicular traffic to designated streets, enabling streets within the blocks to be transformed as spaces for play and recreation.





## 6E. SITE SPECIFIC LAYOUTS

In designing a building, a public space or a piece of infrastructure, urban design professionals must consider how they best provide for children of different age groups, engaging with them whenever possible. This is of course a priority for child targeted developments such as schools or play areas, but it must also be given proper consideration for other everyday developments, including those that are residential, healthcare, commercial (retail), transport or public realm related. Providing better places for children also widens their functionality to families and carers, while through good design, making them better for all users. As set out in this document children have many environmental needs that shape how they go about their daily urban lives.

As children under the age of 17 are unable to drive, child friendly site design must be geared towards independent movement, active travel and public transport. This will include a range of features, such as direct and convenient pedestrian routes, safe road crossing facilities and good quality materials. Providing for cycling is another often overlooked aspect of site layouts, whereby segregated cycle lanes and cycle stands should be integrated as standard.

Creating sociable spaces is another essential aspect of child friendly design, promoting social interaction and in doing so, adding to levels of safety and security. In external areas this requires attention paid to the quality of landscape design, allocated gathering spaces that have suitable orientation, shelter and seating.

Integrating opportunities for play should always be another consideration during the site design process. If space permits, formal play areas – even as small as one or two pieces of equipment – should be explored. Age suitability, safety requirements of specific play pieces and seating for those accompanying children need to be factored into such a design process. Regardless of space, opportunities for informal play and learning should also be factored into the design of site layouts. This can simply involve adequate uncluttered areas suitable for running, but also features such as low walls and steps; planting and natural habitats; signage and artwork.

### AMIR AVENUE, HADERA, ISRAEL

Even streets can be designed to become Child Friendly. This project in Hadera, Israel saw the transformation of a wide road by creating a linear park and play area down its centre. Made safe with railings and carefully designed crossings, the park includes natural play and imaginatively designed seats suited to older children and teenagers.



BO Landscape Architecture

## 6F. DETAILED DESIGN

Better equipping towns and cities for children must take place at all stages of development, including the detailed design and specification of buildings and spaces. The outcomes of decisions made at this scale will greatly influence the experience of end users in functionality, aesthetics and interest. It is at this stage that the physical needs of children at different stages of growth come into play; thinking about the city from a height of 95cm as posed by the Van Leer Foundation, or for example, the needs of an expectant mother while pushing a buggy.

Physical accessibility is an essential component of designing spaces, indoor and out, accommodating the needs of those with limited mobility (including those learning to walk) and those using buggies, wheelchairs, or indeed scooters and skateboards. Good design skilfully integrates aspects of accessibility with the overall design, rather than treating it as a separate add-on to the place in question. All users of a place, including children, should be able to freely access its component parts and not be excluded due to their mobility.

The lower eye level of children and their natural curiosity with the world around them means that consideration must be given to how they experience a place and what they can see and engage with. This should inform design decisions regarding the heights of vertical features (such as walls, fences, seating and planting) as well as the provision of signage. The floor surface also presents an opportunity to provide for children, particularly those likely to be using their hands as much as their feet. Detailed design presents a creative opportunity to stimulate all of our senses. Therefore, in designing and specifying places, urban and landscape design professionals can engage with sight (through views and colour), with sounds (through water, leaves and music), with smells (through floral planting), with touch (through surfaces and natural textures) and in a controlled environment, through taste (through edible landscapes). Green spaces and softer surface materials such as grass, gravel and sand, should be included wherever possible with appropriate maintenance arrangements. These are especially important factors for children with sensory conditions.

Finally, detailed design can also help places to communicate messages with and from children and young people. Tactile sculpture and other artworks can be a highly effective means engaging young people about a place, telling its stories without the use of words.

### ALEC THE GOOSE, BELFAST

The Market community in Belfast City Centre wanted to celebrate their neighbourhood's long association with the ever popular St George's Market. After a consultation process involving local children, a sculpture depicting the story of 'Alec the Goose' was commissioned. It is now a popular highlight for young shoppers.



The Paul Hogarth Company

## 6G. URBAN STEWARDSHIP

Urban Stewardship is how the places and spaces around us are created and cared for. Management and maintenance decisions, while often taken separately to planning and design, will greatly influence a child's experience of a place. Therefore the needs of children, young people and their carers must be continuously factored into such processes.

While the cleanliness and safety of urban spaces affects us all, it arguably has a bigger impact on children, as they may not be given a choice of places to frequent or avoid. If allowed, they are more likely to explore all corners of a particular place, often on their hands and knees, picking up what they find and at a certain age, putting it in their mouths. Keeping places clean, free of litter and of course dog faeces, is therefore a critical requirement of child friendly spaces. While children may not have the choice of where to go, poorly maintained places will deter their parents and carers, so influencing levels of activity and footfall.

Giving children, young people and families the opportunity to be involved in the care of their environments can be a powerful means by which to further connect them with their places. Endless opportunities exist for the creative participation of children in urban stewardship. Communal litter picks, the sowing of seeds, the building of bird boxes and the co creation of artworks are just some of the ways in which children can be included in management and maintenance processes. Doing so can engender civic pride and in turn, help make places safer and less prone to issues such as vandalism.

Events are an effective means by which to bring life to urban places, positively contributing to their social and economic sustainability. Those aimed at children and their families therefore have a valuable role to play at a community and a commercial level. Community events can bring neighbourhoods together and forge greater relationships, while in city centres, family oriented events help to attract and sustain footfall.

### TIDY TOWNS, IRELAND

Tidy Towns is a national competition that has been running in Ireland since 1958, centred on empowering communities to make a difference in the area. All across Ireland whether through family, school or clubs, children and young people are given the opportunity to conduct litter picks, plant trees, engage in arts projects and establish wildlife habitats.



A proactive and creative attitude to urban stewardship can play a major role in improving places for children and their families. Temporary interventions and pop-up activities are increasingly recognised as an important tool that cities can use to bring about change. Sometimes called Tactical or Guerrilla Urbanism, they can serve to pilot ideas, such as pedestrianisation or a new play space, as a precursor to more permanent interventions. They also have an economic function, helping drive footfall on streets that can benefit local businesses.

Successful interventions are part of a wider sustained and resourced strategy, rather than sporadic happenings that come and go. Yet within this framework, energetic creativity is the secret ingredient, presenting a myriad of opportunities (some old and some new) that transform places, while exciting, entertaining and inspiring children and young people.

- **Busking competitions and Musical performances**
- **Coffee mornings and Tea parties**
- **Community Picnics and Barbeques**
- **Dances and Community Ceilidhs**
- **Duck Derbies**
- **Farmers Markets**
- **Flash mob music and dance routines**
- **Guerrilla Gardening**
- **Light shows and fireworks**
- **Markets and yard sales**
- **Outdoor art installations and exhibitions**
- **Play Streets**
- **Pop Up Cafes and 'Streeteries'**
- **Pop Up Petting Zoos**
- **Processions and Parades**
- **Street Olympics**
- **Street Theatre**
- **Temporary Street Closures and Living Streets**
- **Yarn Bombing**

### PLAYING OUT, BRISTOL

Playing Out was the brain child of two mothers in South Bristol frustrated at the lack of local play facilities. They successfully applied to have their street closed temporarily to allow for children's play. This has since grown into a national movement of Play Streets, where streets are regularly closed to traffic, transforming them as community play spaces of immense local value.





## CASE STUDIES

### CONNSWATER COMMUNITY GREENWAY AND CS LEWIS SQUARE, EAST BELFAST

**East Belfast is home to one of the most comprehensive and successful regeneration projects to have taken place in Northern Ireland over recent years and from the outset, children and young people have played a central role in the life of the Connswater Community Greenway.**

The Knock, Loop and Connswater rivers flow from the Castlereagh Hills to Belfast Lough through a number of neighbourhoods in the east of the city. For a long time the watercourses and adjacent spaces were viewed as problematic no-go areas, prone to flooding, dumping and antisocial behaviour. But thanks to a major grant from the National Lottery Living Landmarks fund, as well as funding from Belfast City Council and Northern Ireland Executive, an ambitious project was realised to transform the 9km natural feature into a linear park. A continuous foot and cycle path now weaves its way along the entire route, passing through enriched wildlife habitats, upgraded parks and new public spaces connecting people and places, with CS Lewis Square, a new civic space at the heart of the project.







A primary objective of the greenway was to forge new physical and social links between the neighbourhoods along its length, including 23 schools and colleges who were involved in the planning and design process. Consequently, a safe and enjoyable off-road route is now provided not only for leisure and recreation, but for walking and cycling to school and college. Information panels and artworks engage people along its length about the local history and natural heritage and several new play areas are to be enjoyed, serving local children and visitors alike.

Along the greenway, CS Lewis Square is an especially popular civic space for children, young people and their families, even though it does not contain a formal play area. A magical landscape that tells the story of Narnia has been created by a series of dramatic sculptures depicting characters from the famous CS Lewis story, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.



Two cafes spill out onto the square, encouraging people to stay a while, helping to keep it lively and safe. And a large expanse of granite paving surrounded by seating steps is always a buzz with children on two feet, hands and knees, two wheels or four. Therefore, instead of a designated multi use play space, CS Lewis is a playful child led space, both on a day-to-basis and during one of regular events that take place there.



Connswater Community Greenway demonstrates the regenerative impact that good quality green and blue infrastructure can have on a large urban area and on the quality of life of its children and local residents. It is a family friendly visitor attraction that welcomes people to the area acting as a catalyst for further investment and economic regeneration.

Yet arguably, what makes the Connswater Community Greenway even more special, is that well after its construction, it is a living, breathing piece of infrastructure that brings children, young people and the wider community together. A whole host of activities and initiatives take place each year along the greenway, organised and facilitated by a dedicated team of staff and volunteers. These include Forest School Fridays where children are encouraged to explore their greenway and to learn about its flora and fauna. It includes a Legacy Programme to build skills and capacity among teenagers and young adults through activities associated with the greenway. And during the Covid19 pandemic, when restrictions are placed upon physical gatherings, a range of digital, online activities encourage children and their families to further engage with one another and their locality.

The Connswater Community Greenway is a lasting legacy for many years to come.



Images: Connswater Community Greenway



## A PLAYFUL PARADIGM, CORK

**In Cork an initiative has gained momentum to put play at the centre of inclusive policy and placemaking. Initiated through participation in a European programme, the Cork Playful Paradigm has succeeded in bringing together a diverse range of local stakeholders who together, now strive to harness play as a powerful tool for positive change.**

Like most cities Cork has long had a traditional understanding of play and its role of the city, almost entirely based around the provision of play areas and equipment. However, by participating in the European programme URBACT and learning from other cities such as Udine in Italy, Cork has begun to truly challenge and change this narrow definition.



The first step for Cork was to bring stakeholders together around the question "If Cork was playful, what would it look like?" In finding answers to this Cork Healthy Cities and Cork City Council were joined by an array of organisations, including libraries, youth and lifelong learning groups and even the community boatyard, Meithal Mara. Drawing upon their diverse backgrounds but shared learning, they reached consensus that play is a universal language that can improve places and bring people together. Furthermore, this new local group called Let's Play Cork made a commitment to turn international ideas into local action.





Early initiatives of the group have included the securing of funding for a new Play Development Officer and integrating toy collections into the public library network, inspired by the Parisian experience. Yet a major focus for Let's Play Cork has been in the area of public realm and placemaking, recognising the intrinsic relationship between play, our urban environment and the wellbeing of all.

The core part of this process has been experimenting with the delivery of pop up play, including work to overcome practical barriers, such as the burden of insurance. A simple yet ingenious idea included the creation of Community Play Bags, containing everything a family or community group would need to get out and about to play. And on a grander scale all together, Let's Play Cork oversaw the experimental temporary closure of a 2.5km stretch of riverside road. Over the course of a weekend and working with local community groups, the 'Open for Play' project transformed 'the Marina' into one giant playground, enjoyed by hundreds of people and attracting widespread support. So successful was the project that it has since resulted in the permanent pedestrianisation of the route and paved the way for a €4m promenade scheme.

Despite the inevitable setback of the Covid19 pandemic, Let's Play Cork has managed to sustain its citywide momentum. This has included an influential submission to the new city Development Plan to further embed play into policy. The group has also administered a series of popular placemaking training programmes centring on the River Lee and most recently, moving online.



What can be learned from Cork is the ability to bring about positive change through collaboration and energetic enthusiasm. Play is now high on the city agenda and climbing further. In the words of Councillor Kieran McCarthy, "All who have encountered the Playful Paradigm have come away seeing the urban spaces of their city in a different light". All cities would be encouraged to keep an eye on Cork and to follow their fascinating journey of playful discovery.





## BELFAST CITY CENTRE

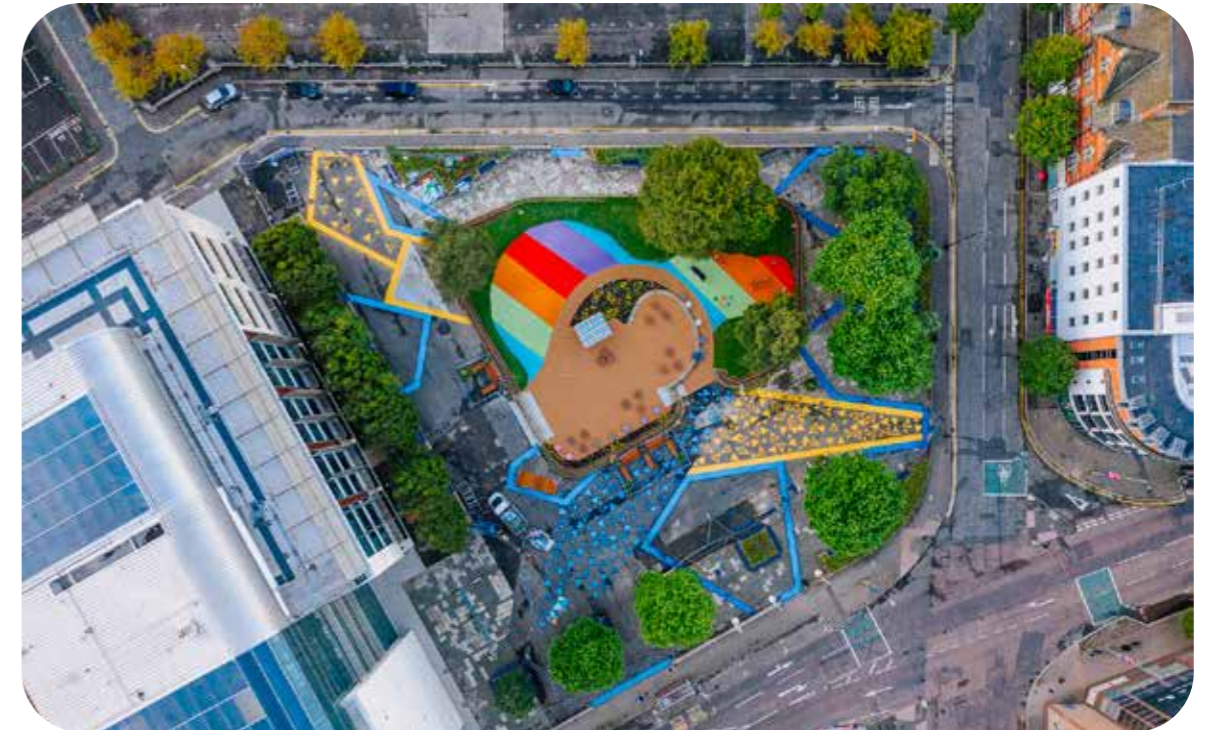
**On the morning of the 28th August 2018 a major fire took hold in the historic Bank Buildings in the very centre of Belfast. While thankfully all were safely accounted for, this dramatic incident proved to be a catalyst for change in the city centre, where the needs of children and young people were placed at the heart of its recovery.**

The damage caused by the fire was so extensive that a large security cordon had to be placed around the Primark department store, forcing the closure of other nearby businesses and indefinitely preventing vehicular and pedestrian access between the 4 principal shopping streets of Belfast City Centre. Understandably such measures were met with alarm by local traders and an urgent process was instigated by Belfast City Council and its partners to revive footfall and stem the economic damage caused by such unfortunate circumstances.



The result was to turn the closure of streets from a problem into an opportunity. In a matter of weeks, large expanses of city centre road space were transformed into a new leafy landscape for seating, performances and play. The needs of children were specifically met through the design of the pop-up park, including play surfacing, sculptures for climbing, undulating landforms and bespoke seating. Furthermore, a series of events were organised to take place on these streets, including a giant slide, musical acts and street theatre. To many the city centre was unrecognisable, whereby parked cars and through traffic was replaced by children and their families, spending time and to the benefit of local businesses, money as well. So successful were the experimental interventions that when it came to remove them, allowing through traffic to pass once more, a groundswell of public protest arose arguing for the permanent pedestrianisation of the city core.

Inspired by this reaction and informed by the priorities of the emerging City Resilience Strategy, Belfast City Council began to look at how the city centre and its public realm could more fully respond to the needs of children, young people and their families. Urban Childhoods Belfast set out a framework and a design strategy for making the city centre of Belfast child-friendly. The project supported Belfast's aspirations for attracting families, skilled and talented workforce, particularly those with children, back to the heart of Belfast. The awarding winning framework identifies a range of possible transformations, from reimagined streetscapes to sites suitable for a range of child friendly uses, including nurseries, innovation rooms and family housing.





The work of Belfast City Council did not stop there. A city centre location that could be suited to more permanent play was quickly found at Cathedral Gardens, also known locally as Buoys Park. This large civic space had for a long time been neglected and associated with antisocial behaviour. A design team was appointed and with the Council set to work engaging with local children, exploring how the space could be redeveloped a place for play. To test these ideas a new playful landscape was created, devoid of traditional play equipment, but full of imaginative interventions where children, young people and their families were welcomed to play and socialise. The success of Cathedral Gardens has since spurred a rethink for the permanent use of this space and others around the city and embedding play more widely in the city, including integrating it into new public realm.

These projects and the ongoing work in Belfast City Centre demonstrate how, over a relatively short period of time, urban places can be greatly improved for children and young people. Creativity, innovation and a willingness to experiment were brought to bear under difficult conditions. As town and city centres are now faced with their own extraordinary challenges, Belfast proves that change is possible and that by putting the needs of children first, wider social and economic recovery can follow.





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MINISTERIAL ADVISORY GROUP  
ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT  
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Belfast Healthy Cities  
Gordon House  
22/24 Lombard Street  
Belfast BT1 1RD

Telephone: +44 (0)28 9032 8811

[www.belfasthealthycities.com](http://www.belfasthealthycities.com)  
@belfasthealthy

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