COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment

ISSUES PAPER 1: Introduction and Overview

The Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment has the potential to explore numerous issues. The built environment is the product of the intersection of numerous disciplines, traditions and regulations. Diverse government (and non-government) authorities assume responsibility for aspects of the built environment. Given the potential to pursue numerous divergent lines of inquiry, a small number of briefing papers have been developed to assist in providing some background to issues relevant to the Committee and its responsibility of overseeing the work of the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People.

This first briefing paper provides an introduction to some key concepts associated with the inquiry. Subsequent briefing papers will sketch the evolution of the 'child-friendly cities movement', review international good practice, consider relevant developments in New South Wales and identify the role of the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People to further advancing the ways to incorporate the interests of children and young people in the built environment across the State.

Executive Summary

Definitions of children and young people are central to this inquiry. Different definitions operate across existing New South Wales (NSW) policy and law, children generally encompasses all persons aged below 18 years, while young people frequently denotes those persons aged between 12 and 24 (or 25) years. However as the Commission for Children and Young People's jurisdiction includes 18 year olds, this inquiry will consider the impact of the built environment on those persons aged between 0 and 18 years NSW.

According to the most recent census data, there are 2,227,500 children and young people in NSW. This represents approximately 34 per cent of the total population of the State. Consequently, the needs of children and young people in relation to the built environment are considerable and must be given due attention in planning, developing and building activities.

The built environment is taken to mean all that is constructed in our neighbourhoods, cities and State. Discussions of the built environment are complicated by the diversity of disciplines, traditions, regulations and practices that have contributed to its evolution and contemporary influences. Social, urban and town planners, architects, developers, engineers, builders and consent authorities (local and State) contribute to the often incremental changes to the built environment.

Without considerable foresight and planning, the built environment can have devastating consequences. Isolated decisions can render areas dangerous or promote unintended negative consequences. Take for example, the famed Radburn housing design from the early 1900s. This public housing design was adopted in numerous industrialised countries and was exalted for its open spaces and innovative designs. Decades after being introduced, many public housing estates adopting these design principles were razed due to high crime levels, directly attributable to manner in which these areas were developed. Furthermore, research points to increased levels of aggression in poorly designed child care facilities, improved learning through effective school design and increased physical activity through urban planning. The legacies (positive or negative) of approaches to the built environment can be considerable.

Getting the built environment 'right' is a task of great complexity. Urbanisation, surburbanisation, increased vehicular traffic, diminishing natural environments and environmental degradation are just some of the changes influencing our built environment. Balancing the (often competing) needs of diverse groups with diverse interests is a challenge confronting developments in the built environment. Ensuring that the interests of children and young people are considered in these developments is increasingly acknowledged as critical for long-term sustainability of cities and neighbourhoods.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child highlights the need to involve children and young people in key decisions affecting their lives, including decisions about the built environment. The Convention and growing attention in the involvement of children and young people combined in the development of the 'Child-Friendly Cities' movement. This movement has now spawned numerous international examples of good practice, in which the needs of children and young people are considered central to any developments of the built environment. Failure to consider the needs of children and young people will render our built environment dangerous, inaccessible and unsatisfactory.

Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment

The Committee on Children and Young People was formed in August 2000. Its primary responsibility is to monitor and review the work of the Commission for Children and Young and report its findings and recommendations to Parliament. In accordance with section 28.1 of the *Commission for Children and Young People Act (1998)*, the Committee specifically has the following functions:

> (b) report to both Houses of Parliament, with such comments as it thinks fit, on any matter appertaining to the Commission or connected with the exercise of its functions to which, in the opinion of the Joint Committee, the attention of Parliament should be directed; and
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> (d) to examine trends and changes in services and issues affecting children, and report to both Houses of Parliament any chances that the Joint Committee thinks desirable to the functions and procedures of the Commission.

Consistent with these functions, it has been resolved that the Committee will conduct an Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment. The following terms of reference have been established for this Inquiry:

1. trends, changes and issues for children and young people in the development, implementation and coordination of policy, design and planning for the built environment;
2. the mechanisms available for monitoring and reporting on planing processes and decisions concerning the built environment, as they relate to and impact upon children and young people;
3. strategies to ensure that built environment issues affecting children and young people are readily identified and receive coordinated attention across portfolios and different levels of government;
4. the role of the Commission for Children and Young People in giving input to the Government and non-Government sectors on inclusive and integrated planning and policy-making for children and young people in the built environment;
5. any other matter considered relevant to the inquiry by the Committee.

This inquiry will involve a call for public submissions and evidence from witnesses. The Commission for Children and Young People will be central to all aspects of the inquiry. The Commission will be expected to provide a submission and give evidence to the Committee. Recommendations from the inquiry will need to reflect the focus of the Committee – namely, the oversight of the Commission.

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People was established in 1999. The Commission's main functions (as outlined in section 11 of *NSW Commission of Children and Young People Act 1998*) include:

- Promoting the participation of children and young people in the making of decisions that affect their lives;

- Promoting and monitoring their safety, welfare and well-being;
- Making recommendations on legislation, policies and services affecting them;
- Promoting awareness and understanding of issues affecting them; and
- Conducting special inquiries, at the Minister's direction, into issues affecting them.

A key element of the inquiry will be to examine the contribution and role of the Commission in working towards better outcomes for children and young people in relation to the built environment.

Children and Young People – Definitions

There is some conjecture as to the exact definition of a child and a young person. The *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 (NSW)* defines a child as being between 0-16 years of age and a young person as being between 16 and 18 years of age. The minimum age of criminal responsibility in New South Wales (NSW) begins at 10 years and the maximum age of criminal responsibility for a child is 18 years of age.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC) defines a child as being from 0 to 18 years. This definition is consistent with the age at which parental responsibility legally ceases in NSW.[1]

Furthermore, the NSW Youth Policy 'Working Together, Working for Young People 2002-2006' states that "young people are usually defined as people aged between 12 and 24 years". [2]

Consequently, reference to children and young people will be taken to cover those persons aged from birth to 18 years of age.

Size of the Population and Significant Relevant Trends

The 2004 New South Wales Year Book states that there are 2,227,500 people in NSW aged between 0 and 25, which is 33.6 per cent of the population. While NSW continues to have positive population change, it is well known that the overall population is ageing. In the last two decades, the median age in Australia has increased by 5.9 years, increasing from 30.5 years in 1984 to 36.4 years in 2004.[3] Projections suggest that this will rise further and could be as high as 46.2 years by

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[1] Roth, L. (2005) **Children's Rights in NSW**, Background Paper No. 2/05, NSW Parliamentary Library Research Service, Sydney.
[2] NSW Government (2002) **NSW Youth Policy： Working Together – Working for Young People 2002-2006**, Office of Children and Young People, Cabinet Office, Sydney.
[3] 3210.0 **Population by Age and Sex, Australian States and Territories,** Australian Bureau of Statistics,
http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/B52C3903D894336DCA2568A9001393C1
accessed 2/9/05

2051.[4] Reduced infant mortality, falling fertility rates and increasing life expectancy are two of the key factors driving the ageing population trends.

Further to these changes, there have been other considerable social and demographic developments in NSW in recent decades. Broadly, some key trends associated with children and young people include:

- Increasing dependence on families, with more young people residing with their parents for longer periods
- Increasing school retention rates and tertiary participation
- High rates of unemployment and casualisation of employment for young people
- Increased dual income families, with greater participation of females in the labour market
- Increased urbanization accompanied by growth in medium and high density housing
- Increased car ownership and vehicular traffic in many urban locations

These trends have significantly impacted on families, communities and directly on children and young people. These trends provide an important backdrop to discussions of the built environment.

The Built Environment
The built environment is somewhat difficult to define succinctly. It is perhaps easier to consider its meaning through consideration of what it entails. The built environment covers a broad array of structures, developments and spaces, which have significant consequences for the quality of life, civic relationships, play, exploration and safety and security. The built environment can serve to exclude and exacerbate inequalities. The built environment can enliven, stimulate and create new possibilities for socialising and interaction.

Numerous trends have influenced the built environment in recent times. The social changes identified above have significantly influenced the built environment. Population growth, improved transport, the advent of the motor vehicle, flight to the suburbs, telecommunication and technological advances, privatisation, globalisation and migration patterns are further factors influencing the built environment.

The build environment will be shaped by minor decisions at the micro level to master plans at the macro level. Barnett (cited in Carmona, Heath, Oc and Tiesdell) contends that "Today's city is not an accident. Its form is the product of decisions made for single, separate purposes, whose interrelationships and side effects have not been fully considered".[5] Coordination of these decisions and managing competing interests is a considerable challenge to achieving an integrated approach to the built environment. A decision to develop a green field site will have significant long-term

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[4] http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/ADF9B2B905D43653CA256FCE001101B5?Open accessed 2/9/05
[5] Carmona, M; Heath, T.; Oc, T. and Tiesdell, S. (2003) **Public Places, Urban Spaces**, Architectural Press, Amsterdam.

consequences, as reversal of the outcomes of such a decision will be difficult. Returning an area to its former natural environment will take many years.

Cities and neighbourhoods are the result of numerous planning decisions. Once popular designs might become outdated quickly, resulting in incremental developments to the built environment. Competing perspectives of different consent authorities might result in conflicting developments. Budgetary constraints, time pressures and local factors might influence critical development decisions.

A further contribution to the complexity of the built environment is the sheer number of disciplines, authorities and individuals that contribute to planning, developing and shaping our built environments. Numerous disciplines and professions are responsible for aspects of the built environment. Town, urban and social planning are prominent, as are architects, landscape architects, developers, investors, environmental health professionals, builders, engineers, local and state consent authorities. The intersection of these disciplines, each with specific traditions, influences the way our towns, cities, infrastructure and environments evolve.

Children, Young People and the Built Environment
Children view their surroundings differently from adults. Animals, textures, natural objects, scents, shapes and colours assume greater importance to children. The smallest of items can assume the greatest significance. A discarded soft drink can become a source of great interest. A fence railing or electricity box, are potential play structures to children.

"Children view the environment as part of their total experience rather than seeing it in an episodic or compartmentalised fashion. Everything is connected: relationships with family, friends and animals; sights, sounds, learning and games; choices such as which way to go; and discoveries such as objects of interest".[6] Unlike adults, for whom the built environment is frequently regarded in a functional way, children will often perceive their surroundings as locations for play, learning, interaction and stimulation. Development will be harnessed and stimulated through interaction with the built (and natural) environment.

Our surroundings have a dramatic impact on our development, quality of life and experience of the world. The built environment plays a critical role in shaping our lived experience. "Children's local environments help shape their level of cognitive development, their social and motor skills and their personal identity".[7] Furthermore, "access to good public space can help children to stay healthy and tackle problems of obesity by providing opportunities for exercise and getting fresh air".[8]

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[6] NSW Department of Urban, Affairs and Planning (1999) **Child-friendly Environments**, DUAP, Sydney.
[7] Tranter, P. and Pawson, E. (2001) 'Children's Access to Local Environments: a case-study of Christchurch, New Zealand, <u>Local Environment</u>, Vol. 6, No. 1.
[8] CABE Space, **Involving Young People in the Design and Care of Urban Spaces**, London.

The built environment will assume different importance as children grow and mature. For young people, peers begin to compete with parents for greatest influence. With increasing independence comes greater exploration of the built environment, often further away from home and parental supervision. Restricted access to licensed premises and reliance on public transport ensures that for many young people, 'hanging out' with friends becomes an important social function. Shopping centres, amusement arcades, cinema complexes, transport inter-changes, parks, beaches and other gathering spots are sites where the adolescent development milestones of developing mature relations with the opposite sex, developing an ethical code for behaviour and gaining independence from parents are achieved. These spaces (public and private) become central, for many, to the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Built environment considerations in relation to children and young people can include but is not limited to:

- Playground equipment
- The availability of parks and recreational spaces
- The design of child care facilities
- Traffic flow through local communities
- Bus and rail interchanges
- Skateboard parks
- Youth centres
- School and university designs
- Green spaces, including access to natural environments
- Shopping centre designs and accessibility

A more inclusive approach involves looking beyond these more specific child and youth oriented locations, to broader factors affecting children and young people for example housing developments (public and private), urban development, suburban sprawl, transport systems, public amenities and city-wide planning decisions.

Numerous commentators have criticised the effectiveness of the built environment to meet the needs of children and young people. Some of these criticisms include:

- Diminishing accessibility for children and young people – "the urban environment is becoming increasingly inhospitable to children … with play and urban interaction all but disappear[ing]"[9]
- Diminishing availability of public spaces to recreate and socialise
- Non-differentiation of the needs of children to adults (children seen as 'mini adults', rather than with separate needs)
- Segregation of child and adult worlds through poor designs
- Little understanding by professionals involved in creating the built environment of the needs of children and young people

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[9] Haider, J. (2003) 'Interplay between Design and Research: Interactive Play and Learning Environments for Children"

- Limited involvement of children and young people in making decisions associated with the built environment - "young people are rarely invited to participate in the urban planning decisions that affect their lives".[10]

To this end, it is critical that the built environment reflect the needs of children and young people. Given that children and young people constitute greater than 30% of the NSW population, it is essential that the views, needs and interests of children and young people are catered for in the way that homes, neighbourhoods, parks, schools, transport and shopping centres (to name a few) are designed and managed.

Impact of Poor Built Environments on Children and Young People
There is evidence across a broad range of built environments that poor planning, design and building can have negative consequences for (amongst others) children and young people. Well planned projects also may have unintended outcomes detrimental to children and young people. The legacy of this can be felt for many generations.

Research cited in the *Child–friendly Environments* publication, developed by the then NSW Department of Urban Affairs and Planning (now the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources) suggests that "when play space in a childcare centre was halved, children's play became more aggressive and less cooperative. The children were more irritable and teachers more controlling".[11] In this context, the built environment directly affects behaviour and has repercussions for learning.

In the 1920s, the Radburn public housing design was first utilised. This design attempted to segregate vehicles and pedestrians, often through a maze of laneways and culs-de-sacs. Houses were reversed from traditional suburban street design, meaning that they did not face each other across the road. Communal gardens and green spaces were dispersed through the network of streets, in an attempt to promote communal meeting points. This approach was embraced in England, the United States and Australia, with many substantial public housing developments reflecting these design principles.

In more recent times, significant problems have been associated with this approach, including crime and anti-social behaviour. In areas like Macquarie Fields in the south-west of Sydney, considerable work has been undertaken to rectify some of these problems, including demolishing some of the town houses to improve vehicle access, removing laneways, reversing houses and establishing clear territorial ownership over green spaces. In this context, the housing design principles employed in these public housing estates contributed to anti-social behaviour and crime, disproportionately affecting young people who are consistently shown to be the greatest victims of crime.

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[10] 'Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth', Presented by Growing Up in Cities, an action research project.

[11] NSW Department of Urban, Affairs and Planning (1999) **Child-friendly Environments**, DUAP, Sydney.

More recently, there has been growing concern about childhood obesity. Some estimates suggest that the number of obese and overweight children in Australia could be as high as 30 per cent. Numerous factors have been linked to this emerging public health problem, including urban designs that inhibit physical activity. Parental fear of local traffic and of threats posed to children by 'predators' have been blamed for restricting the activities of children and young people. Less freedom is afforded to children and young people to explore their local neighbourhoods. In a recent Sun-Herald article on childhood obesity, Dr Timperio (author of a study linking parental concern about road safety with obesity), suggests that "There are lessons for urban design in residential areas – it could be traffic routing, reducing traffic speed or more roundabouts, and the building of more public open spaces".[12] Failure to attend to understand the negative consequences on children and young people of poor urban design will continue to affect the health of children and young people.

Clearly, unless specific attention is given to the needs of children and young people in key designs associated with the built environment, then there will be many long-lasting negative outcomes. Aggression, poor socialisation, limited opportunities for cognitive development, obesity, crime and anti-social behaviour are just some of the social and health consequences of poorly designed environments.

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[12] Wilmouth, P. (2005) 'Generation XXL', **Sun-Herald**, August 21, 2005