

Northern Sydney Child and Family Health Service recognises the importance of the built environment in supporting (or impeding) the healthy development of children. The Service, therefore, strongly supports the 'Inquiry into children, young people and the built environment' and provides the following comments in relation to the issues the Inquiry raises:

**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:**

The Northern Sydney Child and Family Health Service supports the following points made in the Inquiry Issues Paper:

- Diminishing availability of public spaces for children and young people to recreate and socialise.
- Non-differentiation of the needs of adults and children.
- Little understanding by professionals involved in creating the built environment of the needs of children and young people.
- Limited involvement of children and young people in making decisions associated with the built environment currently and the need to increase children and young people's involvement in built planning processes.
- The contributing role of the built environment in relation to increasing rates of childhood obesity. Of significance are the broad range of issues related to the built environment that can impact of children's physical activity (eg. traffic, recreation space, safe urban design, etc) and the need for urban planners to consider this issue in all urban planning decisions.
- Finally, the fact that there is a need to *specifically* consider the needs of children and young people in relation to the built environment and that a failure to consider their needs, *in particular*, is likely to render our built environment dangerous, inaccessible and unsatisfactory.

Not highlighted in the report but also important to note is the critical role of children's early development in lifelong social and health outcomes. Research indicating the importance of children's early physical, social and emotional development is now well established (Garbarino & Kostelny 1992, McCain & Mustard 1993, Shonkoff & Phillips 2001). This research highlights the importance of designing the built environment with children's healthy development in mind, as the consequences of this early development have implications both for the individual and the broader community throughout the lifespan.

The complexity of urban planning processes has progressively increased over the past 20 to 30 years, with the introduction of more detailed planning guidelines including processes to assess social and environmental impacts of developments. Therefore, calls for a consideration of the specific needs of children and young people might be seen as further increasing the complexity of the planning process and as a result, meet with some resistance. However, it is important that the Committee on Children and Young People give weight to the significant body of research demonstrating the critical importance of children's early development when considering its final recommendations and any impact they might have.

**2. The mechanisms available for monitoring and reporting on planning processes and decisions concerning the built environment, as they relate to an impact upon children and young people:**

- Local government is already required to produce a range of planning documents, which provide guidelines for development of the built environment. These include Development Control Plans (DCPs) and Local Environment Plans (LEPs). There may be some scope to include in these existing planning processes specific provisions relating to the consideration of the needs of children and young people. In addition, Local government is required to produce a 'Social Plan', in which there is a specific section relating to children and young people. It may be beneficial to require that consideration of the built environment be a key aspect in the development of the Social Plan.
- In addition, Northern Sydney Child and Family Health Service recommends that all major developments require the completion of a Children & Young People Impact Assessment, which would include consultation with children and young people. This could be included as part of a broader Social Impact Assessment, however it is important to establish specific guidelines for its completion. This requirement should also apply to all State government planning related to the built environment.

**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:**

- The NSW government already has in place the Families First strategy to examine issues affecting children at the local level and to develop multi-agency responses to those issues. The Committee may like to consider how the Families First planning framework could be expanded to include a stronger focus on issues relating to the built environment. Including supporting increased involvement by Local government and State planning agencies.

**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:**

[No comments]

**5. Any other matter considered relevant to inquiry by the Committee:**

The following are specific local examples from the Northern Sydney region that reinforce the need for a better approach to integrating the needs of children and young people in the built environment:

- High density housing in St Leonards, Chatswood and Hornsby with minimal parks / green space locally available.
- Lack of planning for adequate levels of child and family related services and facilities at development sites in Huntleys Point and Macquarie Park.
- Restriction of children and young people's recreation opportunities in West Ryde and Meadowbank due to high levels of traffic and location of major roads in relation to housing and children's facilities.
- Consultations in the Northern Beaches indicating that parents are concerned that decisions taken about the design and layout of public spaces do not always result in public utilities that are family friendly. In particular, the research recommended that:
  - Planning decisions that are likely to impact on the character of urban spaces need to consider the particular ways parents use public spaces, thereby, promoting an increasingly family friendly environment. Some of
  - Play environments be designed to support a range of family uses. In particular, consideration needs to be given to the role of playgrounds as a social focal point for mothers, pre-school children, children with disabilities and primary school aged children.
  - Planning take place giving due consideration to the importance of child safety, without it becoming the dominant consideration.
  - Public toilets be designed to meet the needs of a variety of family types including those with multiple births, children with disabilities, babies and toddlers. Consideration should also be given to the needs of disabled users including parents with a disability.
  - Future planning discussions that may impact on the availability of on street parking include consideration for the need for increased 'parent only' parking spaces.
  - Consideration be given to the impact of limited or inadequate footpaths and pavements on parents with young children, children with disabilities and parents with disabilities.

The following issues are also highlighted based on local experience:

- The need to plan for families with children in a similar way that State and Local government have planned for aged people. Mosman is an example of a suburb where the latter has been done very well but where minimal planning appears to have been done in relation to children while birth rates have been increasing.
- The need for an adequate level of maintenance and signposting to encourage ongoing use of local facilities (eg. parks, streetscape etc).

**REFERENCES:**

Garbarino, J. & Kostelny, K. 'Child Maltreatment as a Community Problem' in *Child Abuse and Neglect*, Vol.16, 1992.

McCain, M. & Mustard, F. *Early Years Study: Reversing the Real Brain Drain*, Government of Ontario, 1993.

*Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, J. Shonkoff & D. Phillips, eds., National Academy Press 2001.