

**Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology, Sydney**  
**Submission to the NSW Parliamentary Committee on Children and Young People**  
***Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment***

## **1. Introduction**

### ***1.1 About the Institute for Sustainable Futures***

The Institute for Sustainable Futures is an independent research, consulting and educational organisation at the University of Technology, Sydney. It brings together expertise from many disciplines to work with all levels of government, industry and the community. The Institute seeks to create change towards sustainable futures. In designing workable solutions to real world problems, we consider the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability.

The Institute is recognised for its inter-disciplinary expertise and innovative, solution-orientated approach. As an applied research organisation with many government, community and private sector clients, we are both conversant with new advances in sustainability, and able to apply that knowledge in a consistent and pragmatic manner.

### ***1.2 Our approach to social research and social sustainability***

It is our view that questions of sustainability are as much *social* questions as they are environmental or economic ones. People live in societies, and changes happen as a result of complex social relationships, processes and structures. This means for example, that technological solutions are insufficient on their own. Without a social analysis, attempts to achieve sustainability will ultimately fail. Yet 'the social' tends to be the neglected dimension in much sustainability thinking and practice. The Institute is working to change this.

We undertake research founded on the principles of social justice: equity, fairness and participation. Our approach is practically oriented and theoretically informed, aiming to generate knowledge and create positive social change. The Institute's social research contextualises and complements many of our other projects, while also addressing the social dimensions of a sustainable future.

The overall aims of the social sustainability research and project work undertaken at the Institute are to:

- Increase equity
- Reduce polarisation, disadvantage and disparities
- Improve quality of life
- Increase citizen participation in decision-making

The Institute is particularly interested in how social sustainability issues apply in an urban context, in debates about 'sustainable cities', and in practice in urban planning and development. The current neglect of the social dimension of sustainability in this and other contexts means there is great scope for innovative initiatives, such as some of those being practiced around the world under the 'child-friendly cities' banner.

## **2. Comments to the Inquiry**

The Institute commends the NSW Parliamentary Committee on Children and Young People for initiating this timely Inquiry, and supports the goal of developing a more integrated and inclusive approach to children and young people's interaction with the built environment. The evidence that poor quality built environments can have a negative effect on children and young people's development and their physical and mental health is growing, and the potential for well-designed built environment strategies to deliver positive outcomes for children and young people is significant.

The Institute makes the following brief comments to the Inquiry:

### **2.1 Merits of the UNICEF child-friendly cities initiative**

The Institute is pleased to see the focus in the Inquiry Issues Paper 2 on the UNICEF Child-Friendly Cities initiative. This is a rights-based approach, based on the United Nations framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CROC). The UNICEF describes a Child Friendly City as:

*a city, or any local system of governance, committed to fulfilling children's rights. It is a city where the voices, needs, priorities and rights of children are an integral part of public policies, programmes and decisions. It is, as a result, a city that is fit for all.*

It is our view that whilst the UNICEF initiative is a highly promising approach, it is not yet well known in Australia. There is a great opportunity for the NSW government and local governments to show policy leadership in this area by adopting the principles and strategies of the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative.

### **2.1 Compatibility of 'child friendly cities' and 'sustainable cities' approaches**

Sustainability is commonly defined as 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. Thus, one of the key principles of sustainability is *inter-generational equity*; a concern to balance the needs of current and future generations, or to avoid 'stealing from the future'. As a framework then, sustainability is highly compatible with a concern for children's rights, and a desire to design and build more 'child-friendly' environments, and involve children and young people in the development of the cities they live in now, and will inherit in the future.

For these reasons, the Institute is excited by the growing interest in 'child-friendly cities', and sees this framework as compatible with that of 'sustainable cities'. The child-friendly cities movement obviously shares many of the goals of social sustainability, including:

- equity and social justice
- participation
- reducing polarisation, poverty and disadvantage
- improving people's quality of life.

Furthermore, it has much in common with strategies for environmental sustainability. Some obvious examples of overlap are the focus on:

- reducing indoor and outdoor pollution
- reducing the dominance of the motor vehicle in favour of creating healthier, more 'pedestrian friendly' and 'cycle-friendly' environments
- protecting and ensuring access to the natural environment
- provision of high quality parks, open spaces and public spaces.

As an example, we draw the Committee's attention to initiatives in Italy. There the link to sustainability is made explicit in the title of that country's child-friendly cities initiative: *Città sostenibili delle bambine e dei bambini*, or 'Sustainable cities for girls and boys'.<sup>1</sup> This initiative is also linked to the country's commitments to Local Agenda 21 – a framework for implementing sustainability at the local level – and one that many Australian local governments are already familiar with. In Italy a national plan of action supported by the Ministry of the Environment encourages local authorities to develop policies and programmes for which prizes are awarded. The annual awards are for excellence in promoting 'sustainable spaces for children' and are based on parameters of measurable sustainability that refer directly to childhood. The objectives are to: rethink services for children, coordinate spaces dedicated to education, organize all areas of play, institute children's participation, rethink functional aspects of the city in order to meet the needs of children, assign financial resources to fund child friendly projects and renew squares, streets and public spaces to facilitate children's socialization.

### **2.3 Importance of local government**

There is clearly an important role for local government to play in creating more child-friendly built environments. Indeed, the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative is designed to support cities to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child *in a local governance setting*.

Typically, NSW Councils take the needs of children and young people into account only in relation to specific areas and types of activity – usually as part of their social plan, or in relation to their youth and children's services. While the Inquiry Issues Paper No 3 provides examples of the positive achievements of a number of local government Youth Councils, the breadth of the issues that such Councils are involved in tends to vary dramatically. Further, as the paper suggests, the various building and design guidelines that specifically address the needs of children and young people in the built environment, appear not to be widely used in practice.

A more integrated approach at the local government level would require councils to consider the needs of children and young people in relation to the broad range of council planning and service provision functions. Planning a city for children is not just about building more childcare centres or planning better youth services, and children and young people's needs should not be seen as relevant only to the 'community services' area of Councils and other organisations. There are many areas of local government activity in relation to the built environment that impact on children and young people. These include, for example, public domain and open space projects, town planning, cultural, recreational and events planning, and safety audits. One of the aims of an integrated approach to creating child-friendly environments would be to articulate ways for children and young people's issues to be understood and addressed in relation to issues such as these, as well as in relation to what are more obviously 'children's issues'.

An excellent example of this approach is the London strategy highlighted in the Issues Paper No 2, *Making London Better for all Children and Young People*. In developing this strategy, the Greater London Authority took an explicitly rights-based approach, drawing on the principles of the UN CROC and based on extensive research and consultation with children, adults and agencies. The strategy identifies priority areas for delivering improvements and includes an Action Plan with specific actions that the Mayor and Authority will undertake.

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<sup>1</sup> More information on this Italian initiative is available at: [http://www.childfriendlycities.org/cgi-bin/cfc/main.sql?file=search\\_simple\\_result.sql&lunga=Yes&ProductID=502](http://www.childfriendlycities.org/cgi-bin/cfc/main.sql?file=search_simple_result.sql&lunga=Yes&ProductID=502)

The Institute would like to see the larger NSW councils (especially the City of Sydney) and perhaps the Regional Organisations of Councils, adopt a similar approach. The Institute suggests that the NSW government encourage and support local councils in NSW to adopt the UNICEF approach. The Commission for Children and Young People is well-placed to play a central role in this respect. The Commission has the capacity to approach this work in a number of ways, for example, by conducting research, working in partnership with local government agencies to pilot a new approach, or producing resources to support the implementation of child-friendly cities strategies.

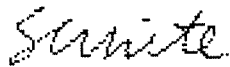
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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stuart White".

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