Parliamentary Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment

Submission from the Commission for Children and Young People

"Bike tracks are great – if there were more, people would ride around rather than playing video games"

"It's good to have spaces where little kids have a place to play whilst adults interact; it builds relationships."

"I like big trees 'cos they help you breathe...it feels good to see trees".

"It's good to know people who build places ask children, like, they want to hear their say".

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1. THE COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

1.1   The NSW Commission for Children and Young People ('the Commission') promotes the safety, welfare and well-being of children and young people in NSW.

1.2   The Commission was established by the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998* (NSW) ('the Act'). Section 10 of the Commission's Act lays down three statutory principles which govern the work of the Commission:

a) the safety, welfare and well-being of children are the paramount considerations;
b) the views of children are to be given serious consideration and taken into account; and
c) a co-operative relationship between children and their families and community is important to the safety, welfare and well-being of children.

1.3   Section 12 of the Commission's Act requires the Commission to give priority to the interests and needs of vulnerable children. Children are defined in the Act as all people under the age of 18 years.

1.4   Section 11(d) of the Act provides that one of the principal functions of the Commission is to make recommendations to government and non-government agencies on legislation, policies, practices and services affecting children.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1   The Commission is pleased to make a submission to the Parliamentary Committee Inquiry into Children and Young People and the Built Environment.

2.2   There has been an increasing interest and recognition that children and young people, as members of our community, are legitimate 'users' of our built environment, with their own particular set of wants and needs. This submission forms part of a longer term project being undertaken by the Commission on children and young people and the built environment.

2.3   This submission is drawn from a range of work undertaken by the Commission over recent years. This includes the Commission's current research project on children's well-being, consultations for our response to the United Nations National Plan of Action, *A World Fit for Children*, our Inquiry into the Best Means of Assisting Children with No-one To Turn To, and the Health Futures consultations. It also draws on current Australian and international research and discussions with experts in the field.

2.4   The words of children and young people speak clearly of their experiences, perceptions, concerns and ideas about the built environment in New South Wales today. They have been enthusiastic in sharing what they like and don't

like about their built environment, how they would like to contribute to its design and development and what they would change if they could.

2.5   The first section of this submission provides a broad outline of the context of children and young people's lives. The following section details the main themes from what children and young people have told us and draws links with Australian and international literature and research. The final section concentrates on Three Action Areas relating to the key findings which suggest possible ways forward. This includes some recommendations for how the Commission plans to work with, and influence, key stakeholders in making NSW a more child friendly state.

3.   A SNAPSHOT: INDICATORS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES

3.1   In 2001, there were 1 578 238 children and young people under the age of 18 living in NSW. They make up 24.8 per cent of the NSW population.

3.2   Sixty nine per cent of these children and young people live in major cities and 31 per cent live in regional and remote areas. While the majority of our population is urban based, it is important to remember that the built environment is important to children and young people wherever they live.

3.3   According to the Child Health Survey conducted by NSW Health in 2001, the top three favourite activities of children aged 4 to 12 years were:

1.   playing – either at home, in the front or back yard or in the park;
2.   playing sport; and
3.   watching television, movies, videos or a computer.

3.4   This very simple statistic tells us something about how and where kids like to spend their time and the balance between physically active and passive recreation in their lives.

4.0   SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGES

4.1   Children and young people have been affected by some of the social and economic trends of the past 25 years.

4.2   *Smaller families*: Diminishing birth rates mean that for the foreseeable future, there will be fewer children and young people as a proportion of Australian society. There is a risk that children's interests will be marginalised compared with the needs of older generations.

4.2.1   Alternatively, children may be 'over-valued' and protected, as the number of one child families increases. Combined with the trend to 'over-occupy' and 'over-organise' children's lives, this contributes to a reduction in children and young people's freedom.

4.3   ***A substantial increase in two parent working families, single parent families and an increase in working hours***: As parental work hours have increased, greater numbers of children are spending more time in formal, supervised child care and Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) rather than spending unsupervised or unstructured time at home or near home. Fewer adults are at home to provide support for children playing in the local area.

4.3.1   Alternatively, children may be at home alone, but not allowed outside when their parents are still at work. When children are at home there is a greater use of within-home entertainment devices, including computer and video games, CD players and television. Data from the NSW Child Health Survey 2001 found 40% of children aged 5 – 12 years, reportedly watched two or more hours of television or videos a day on average and 15% are reported to play computer games for an hour or more a day on average[1].

4.4   ***Greater concerns about child protection***: An increased awareness and concern about child protection and 'stranger danger' has meant that parents are much less likely to let their children 'roam' their neighbourhoods or play in their streets unsupervised. Although the abduction of a child is a rare event, parental (and children's own) concerns about this appears to be limiting their use of their local neighbourhood.

4.4.1   This, combined with parental concern about traffic, limits children's capacity to explore their environment uninhibited by physical constraints.

4.5   ***Increasing car dependence:*** As a society we are increasingly dependent on cars. There is more traffic in urban and suburban locations and wider, busier roads to accommodate the traffic. This has led to a significant decline in roads being used as a place where children and young people play informally[2,3] either by themselves or with other children in the street.

4.5.1   The reasons for a stronger reliance on cars are numerous. People are generally 'time poor' and rushing to get to and from where they need to. Children may attend child care or school outside of their immediate area, or parents may have long distances to commute to work. A relatively new trend towards extensive extra curricular activities for children, and an increasing reluctance to let them travel independently, also contributes to parents' reliance on cars.

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[1]NSW Health website http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/obesity/adult/background/implications.html 14 December 2005
[2] Tranter, P. and Doyle J. (1996) "Reclaiming the residential street as play space", *International Play Journal*, Volume 4, (p81)
[3] Freeman, C. (2002) "Cities for Children? Children's Changing Access to the Built Environment", *Children and Young People's Environments*, edited by Gollop, M. and McCormack, J, Children's Issues Centre. (p21)

4.5.2 Parents' also feel increased social pressure to be 'good parents', for example, by driving their children to places rather than exposing them to 'dangers' as pedestrians from both traffic and from perceived 'stranger danger'[4].

4.5.3 Parents' concerns about the dangers are not entirely unjustified. Traffic fatalities are the leading cause of death in Australia for children over the age of one year[5]. The Child Death Review Team Annual Report 2004 found that the most common cause of external deaths was transport fatalities (44.9%).[6] However, trends in transport fatality rates have shown little change since 1996, fluctuating between 3.3 deaths per 100, 000 in 2004 and 4.9 deaths in 2000.

4.5.4 The negative impacts of the increased reliance on cars on children are numerous. They include a loss of a sense of place caused by reductions in children and young people's independent mobility, loss of contact with local children, loss of local play opportunities and a reduction of incidental exercise in getting to and from places. The implications of these impacts are discussed further in section 5.

4.6 *Greater urbanisation*: More people are living in cities, where there are competing trends towards urban consolidation and urban sprawl. In both instances, it is questionable whether children's interests are being well served.

4.6.1 In areas of higher density housing, children may be living in smaller dwellings with little or no private outdoor space. Some high rise buildings even ban children from playing in common areas with other children who are not residents of the building.

4.6.2 On the urban fringes, there is a trend towards larger dwellings built on smaller blocks. The very design of these homes channels kids towards indoor, physically passive activities. This can be compounded by the lack of public transport or services which can be absent from newly developed areas.

5.0 WHY WE SHOULD BE CONCERNED: THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

5.1 Some of the effects of these social, economic and environmental changes are already evident in poor health outcomes of our children.

5.2 Of greatest concern, the incidence of both obesity and diabetes has increased markedly over the last 20 years. In the ten year period from 1985

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[4] Valentine, G (1998). *Public Space and the Culture of Childhood*. Ashgate Publishing, England.
[5] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002
[6] NSW Child Death Review Team (2005), *Annual Report January – December 2004*, NSW Commission for Children and Young People, Sydney.

to 1995 the level of combined overweight/obesity in Australian children more than doubled, whilst the level of obesity tripled in all age groups and for both sexes[7].

5.3   Overweight and obesity is a serious chronic medical condition that is associated with a wide range of life threatening conditions, including respiratory problems and diabetes[8].

5.4   The most immediate consequence to overweight as perceived by children themselves is social discrimination. This is associated with poor self esteem and depression[9].

5.5   Lack of exercise is a well known risk factor for both obesity and diabetes.

5.6   The increased prevalence of these diseases is of concern not just for child health outcomes but also for the adult disease burden. As adults, they will face increased risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, kidney failure and stroke.

5.7   Alongside obesity and diabetes, the prevalence of asthma in children has also risen to almost 20 per cent of children. It is acknowledged that there are environmental triggers for asthma, including pollution.

5.8   The increase in cars affects air quality. Emissions produced by cars increased by 22.2% between 1990 and 2000[10]. In a recent conference paper, based on unpublished work by the Bureau of Transport and Regional Economics, Canberra, it was estimated that motor traffic pollution was responsible for about 1,200 deaths, 2,500 hospital admissions and 21,000 days of asthma each year in Australian capital cities, at a cost of $3.3 billion per year[11].

5.9   In addition to these physical health problems, around 14.3 percent of Australian children have mental health problems[12] . It is acknowledged that mental health issues may be strongly influenced by the designing, planning and building of communities. The most significant factors promoting mental health appear to be: adequate physical housing; supportive neighbourhoods; a safe environment; protection against toxicity; an environment conducive to human development and mental health[13].

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[7] NSW Health website http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/obesity/adult/background/background.html December 2005
[8] The University of Sydney NSW Centre for Overweight and Obesity website http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/obesity/adult/background/background.html December 2005
[9] NSW Health website http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/obesity/adult/background/background.html
[10] Travelsmart Australia 2003
[11] Jalaludin, B (2004) in 'Mental Health and the Built Environment'. In C. Johnson (ed.) *Healthy Environments: 11 essays*. Government Architect's Publications: Sydney.
[12] National survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing report, 1997, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
[13] Raphael, B. & S Wooding, S. (2004) in 'Mental Health and the Built Environment'. In C. Johnson (ed.) *Healthy Environments: 11 essays*. Government Architect's Publications: Sydney.

5.10   Responding to these public health problems requires concerted and coordinated action. Tackling the rise in these diseases will require us to think about the link between public health, the built environment and our notions of community life.

5.11   Simply telling children and young people to exercise more will not succeed if they live in environments which are not welcoming or safe to be in. For many children, the loss of the residential street as a play space has dramatically reduced their opportunity for creative, self-directed, spontaneous and interactive play. Children and young people tell us that quiet streets for play are really important to them.

5.12   Apart from the acknowledged health outcomes, the impact of the built environment on children's social, physical and cognitive development also needs to be considered. While we understand that children learn through play, we are not fully aware of the effect of restricting their opportunities to move around and 'play' in their environment. For example, at the physical level, children are less skilled at simple things like throwing and catching a ball or riding a bike.

5.13   Information from the Active Lifestyle Programs at Sydney Olympic Park[14] demonstrates that 60% of girls and 55% of boys in Year 10 were not able to meet the expected standard of basic physical skills like catching, climbing, skipping, tumbling and jumping. It also found that only about 15% of parents do any sort of physical activity with their children. 'Safe activities' limit children's scope for autonomy and exploration, for learning judgement, for developing their capacity and self confidence through taking 'safe risks'.

5.14   There is also a link between children's experiences of their environment and the attitudes they develop towards it. Children develop a strong sense of belonging in a neighbourhood they are able to engage with. Limiting children's access to their locality is also limiting their opportunity to 'connect' with their community and their understanding of their families' and friends' place within it.

5.15   As they get older, young people can experience significant difficulties negotiating access to public and private spaces. These restrictions (for example, in the form of 'banning' from shopping centres or the increased likelihood of contact with the Police when young people congregate on the streets) may result in young people being alienated from their communities. Young people from Indigenous Australian, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds or other disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have contact with the Police in such instances.

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[14] Presentation to the June 2005 Commission for Children and Young People's Young People's Reference Group.

5.16 In some instances, the impact of this alienation can be profound. Young people who could otherwise be engaged or involved within their communities, may end up in contact with the justice system.

6.0 WHY IMPROVING THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD BE A PRIORITY

6.1 Unhealthy kids grow up into unhealthy adults. The consequences of childhood obesity are widely documented in terms of both financial and health implications.

6.2 Our communities are becoming increasingly urbanised and more complex to negotiate. Children and young people are becoming more disconnected from their neighbourhoods and communities with possible implications for greater alienation and higher rates of crime.

6.3 Whilst it is apparent that the physical environment can influence the development of children and young people, there is no strong evidence of the long term effects of limited access to that environment may have. Will children and young people experience sufficient opportunities to develop social and emotional competence and resilience from their increasingly sheltered lives to operate as fully functioning adults? Whilst we are not cognisant of the long term effects of a reduced capacity to roam neighbourhoods unaccompanied, push boundaries, establish what is 'safe' and what isn't, develop and exercise judgement, we might have enough reasons to be concerned about it.

7.0 CONSULTATIONS WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

7.1 Perhaps the most significant and useful contribution the Commission can make to this Inquiry is to help Committee members hear the views and experiences of children and young people.

7.2 In preparing this submission, the Commission has consulted with approximately 125 children and young people aged 4 - 18 years, from August to December 2005. Previous information from consultations the Commission conducted were also taken into consideration.

7.3 These groups come from a diverse range of backgrounds, including children and young people with physical and intellectual disabilities.

7.4 The consultations took the form of small group sessions and a variety of age appropriate methods were used. These included using pictures of a range of environments to elicit responses about the environment, asking the children and young people to draw pictures and maps of their neighbourhood, including the areas that they liked and were able to go independently. One group of children were given disposable cameras and asked to take

photographs of a range of places, including those they liked to go and also where they did not like to go in their neighbourhood.

7.5   We consulted a number of times with the Commission's Young People's Reference Group and were able to build on discussions and themes with them.

7.6   We also conducted one group with parents of small children to find out what was important to children under five years, and the key factors in influencing their parents' decisions about where they spent time.

7.7   The built environment has also emerged as a key issue in several previous major projects and so the views expressed by children and young people in previous consultations have also shaped our views.

7.8   The next section of this submission describes the key themes that have emerged from our consultations. In essence, children and young people have identified a set of desirable attributes for their environments which are in many ways similar to what adults would also identify as desirable qualities for their built environment.

8.0   THEMES

8.1   *Community*

8.1.1   Children and young people tell us that people and the relationships between them are a crucial element in feeling part of a good community.

8.1.2   Being around friendly people, knowing your neighbours, having friends close by, and having a mixed, diverse community are all important to children and young people's sense of a good environment.

I love where I live. I'm good friends with everyone in the street, it's very quiet with a cul de sac. (boy, 17)

It's great having a very diverse mix of people and neighbours. (girl, 17)

Community promotes a sense of identity and safety and reduces fear and isolation. (girl 17)

8.1.3   The majority of young people provided with cameras photographed their neighbour's houses and their street and talked about how these two aspects of their environment affected their lives.

8.1.4   Children and young people also expressed a strong desire to have places to go in their community where they could meet up with other kids.

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8.1.5   In thinking about their surroundings, however, children and young people talk about the spaces and places which belong to the whole community rather than places specifically designed for their use.

8.1.6   Their preference is to be part of the community, rather than separated out into particular places.

8.1.7   This has implications for planning and design – that there is value in thinking creatively to provide flexible, multi-use places for use by all members of the community rather than segregating groups of the community from each other.

8.2   Facilities

8.2.1   Children and young people have told us that good communities also have good facilities.

I like going to playgrounds. That's where I meet up with my friends or make new friends (boy, Year 2)

8.2.2   Of most importance to them were parks, schools, shops, libraries and swimming pools – the places where they spend long periods of their day in compulsory activity like schooling or their recreation time.

I like where I live as there's lots to do - it's easy to get to parks, pools and shops. (boy, 16)

And when I go to my Nanna's there's a park nearby to play. If you don't have a back yard, you can't play. (boy, Year 2)

8.2.3   The need for indoor activities that were not too expensive was raised a number of times.

8.2.4   It was also important that these facilities were easily accessible and within walking or riding distance.

8.2.5   Parents of children under five years old repeatedly mentioned facilities as being important. The most important were parks with fenced areas, safe indoor and outdoor play areas, pram parking spots in shopping centres, lifts in railway stations, cafes near playgrounds, clean toilets in public parks, pathways and refuge islands on streets.

8.2.6   As streets have become less accessible to children and young people, it is important that playgrounds, parks, entertainment facilities, swimming pools and other recreational areas are designed and are able to be accessed so that children and young people get the maximum benefit from them.

8.2.7   Fear of litigation appears to have resulted in the removal of more adventurous play equipment and the restriction of designated play areas across NSW. The impact of this is that play areas are often uninteresting to

children. Changes to public liability legislation[15] over the last couple of years, aimed at reducing litigation, may mean that authorities such as councils and schools may be encouraged to develop more adventurous play areas for children.

8.2.8   Paradoxically, it is apparent from what children and young people have told us and from both Australian and international research, that it is just as important to have areas available that are not necessarily specifically designed and designated for children and young people. These 'separated' areas often fail to satisfy the complexity of children's developmental needs and also tend to separate children from the daily life of their communities.

8.2.9   Children develop a sense of themselves and a sense of their environment through exploration and interactive play. Some of the children and young people we talked with in the consultations created places to play around them. For example, many of the young people who took pictures of their neighbourhoods lived in proximity to an industrial area and photographed abandoned industrial sites that they had taken over as places to explore and play in. These children also had access to playgrounds but said that they got bored playing there.

8.2.10   Coffin and Williams found that the average length of stay at a typical fixed-equipment playground was only 21 minutes in London[16]. A Swedish study found that children in Sweden only played in the playground 10-20% of the time and that the other remaining 80-90% of the time, children play elsewhere.[17]

8.2.11   Children and young people enjoy playing on more challenging fixed equipment, as well as with (or in) non-fixed equipment such as branches, leaves, soil, sand, mud, stones, grass, trees and in rugged terrain and other natural places[18].

8.2.12   Like recreational playgrounds, many school playgrounds also provide little access to the kinds of things that children like to play with in their free time. Many schools have decreased the opportunity for children to engage in diverse and creative play.

8.2.13   Tranter and Malone[19] tracked the spatial movements of children in school grounds in Melbourne and Canberra during recess and lunch breaks. One school had an excellent environment for children's environmental learning but the area was out of bounds during these periods. The children's play was

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[15] *Civil Liability Act 2002* (NSW)
[16] Coffin, G. with Williams, M., *Children's outdoor play in the built environment,* London, National Children's Play and Recreation Unit, (1989).
[17] Noted on the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities website, *Child Friendly Cities in Sweden* (www.childfriendlycities.org/resources/examples/sweden.html)
[18] Freeman, C. (2002) op. cit. (p23)
[19] Tranter, P. and Malone, K. (2003) op. cit. (p11)

quite restricted and was mostly confined to concrete and cropped enclosed areas. The children's movements were quite small over these periods.

8.2.14   Another school allowed children and young people to explore large areas during this period. Given access to these areas, children and young people played in the educational garden (used for class activities), built cubby houses in the forest, dug up parts of the school ground and engaged in activities involving water, dirt and other material to creatively construct their own play equipment and environments[20].

8.2.15   Whist the need and desire for both 'children's spaces' such as playgrounds parks and pools appears to be in conflict with the need for areas for 'free' play such as the street, alley ways, natural or 'wild' environments, in fact the two go hand in hand. In order to be truly child friendly a neighbourhood, community and city all need to be accessible to children.

8.3   *Safety*

8.3.1   Children and young people regularly reported the need to feel safe in their environment.

8.3.3   They do not feel safe around people who behave 'strangely' or people using drugs and alcohol. They fear becoming a victim of theft and/or violence. Stranger danger was a commonly referred to concept in all age groups.

8.3.4   For example, we asked a group of Year 2 primary school students whether they enjoyed using public spaces that adults also used.

8.3.5   Many of them responded fearfully that:

They might kidnap you.
Other adults are scary.
They might offer you a lolly and maybe they put some drugs in it.

8.3.6   Other children and young people have described the way in which their opportunities for recreation and exploration are limited by external dangers:

I used to be allowed to ride by myself just around the block and everything with my friends when I was really little. Because my friends used to live next to me and we just rode around but now I can't because it's busy and, like, anything could happen. (girl, 10)

Like, you've got to go to tennis classes. You can't just hit a ball out on the street. You've got to go for tennis lessons one afternoon. (girl, 14)

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[20] Tranter, P. and Malone, K. (2003) op. cit. (p10)

Public spaces aren't safe around here. It's not safe on the streets if you're alone, you can't go to the public toilets, the train station's not safe. There are people using drugs. (boy, 12)

The thing that's scary about the park is you could probably be there alone and somebody might come and do things to you that you might not like...Or you could be wearing bare feet and step on syringes. (girl, 8)

8.3.8   Whilst the perception and almost overwhelming fear felt by the children and young people the Commission spoke with is high, the actual incidence of harm to children by strangers is, in fact, low.

8.3.9   The parents we spoke with also talked about a sense of fear. One mother said:

I grew up in the country and my brothers would ride 12 kilometres to their cricket game – my son is six and I wouldn't let him ride down the block on his own.

8.3.10   Their fear seemed to be based on both 'stranger danger':

It's all around you – whenever you open the paper or turn on the TV or the radio .. you hear about all these things that happen to small children.

and also a fear of busier roads and traffic

I can't imagine ever letting my kids ride their bikes, even on bike paths. The traffic is just too busy and aggressive.

8.3.11   This fear impacts on children and young people's capacity to explore their neighbourhoods uninhibited.

8.3.12   Hillman et al[21] conducted a study in the United Kingdom which involved measuring children's' freedom to visit places independently within their own neighbourhood.

8.3.13   Not surprisingly, they found that children had far less freedom to travel around their neighbourhoods in 1990 than they did in 1971. In 1971, 88% of nine year olds were allowed to travel to school unaccompanied but this had reduced to 27% in 1990.

8.3.14   Claire Freeman[22] in Leeds in 1994 showed significant decline in play ranges. Parents reported that when they were growing up they were allowed to play close to home from the age of five or six, and from the age of nine they were allowed to play, up to four or five miles away. However, only one parent in

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[21] Hillman, M., Adams, J. and Whitelegg, J (1990) *One False Move: A Study of Children's Independent Mobility*, London: Policy Studies Institute

[22] Freeman, C., cited in Gollop. M. and McCormack, J. (2002) op. cit. (p20)

the survey allowed their children to play wherever they wanted in the suburb, with five parents limiting their children's play to the front of their house or a neighbour's. One parent summed up what effect this must have on children and young people of today:

I think my children miss out on the sort of adventure play which was my particular favourite (fantasy adventure in old buildings, building fires and cooking outside), dens and staying out all day.[23]

8.3.15   A project undertaken by Cunningham et al in Lismore, found restrictions in free range play. In a survey of children aged between 10-12, 40% of boys and 75% of girls played only at home. These children were not able to engage in free range play[24].

8.3.16   In a recent study conducted by researchers at the Deakin University's Centre for Physical Activity and Nutrition Research, involving 1200 families from 19 state primary schools with children aged five, six, 10 and 12, it was found that walking to school was uncommon and that most children engaged in low levels of physical activity. Parents identified road safety and "stranger danger" as the main barriers to children playing unsupervised outside, with 50% of parents seeing the need to supervise the five and six year olds[25].

8.3.17   They are also aware of how planning and design impacts on their feeling of personal safety. For example, many children and young people told the Commission that they felt scared in dark, poorly lit places and did not want to go there. They also commented that they were frightened to use public toilets that were poorly maintained and in isolated locations.

8.3.18   Children and young people told us that they feel safer in places where there are lots of people and that are used a lot, provided those people are welcoming and not acting strangely.

8.3.19   The implications of this information again relates to designing places and spaces which have the capacity to meet the needs of more than one group of its citizens at a time. Children and young people enjoy places which are comfortable and interesting, where they feel welcome and kept safe by others using the space.

8.4   Being active

8.4.1   Being active in their environment is another theme about which children and young people held mixed views.

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[23] Freeman, C., cited in Gollop. M. and McCormack, J. (2002) op. cit. (p21)
[24] Cunningham, C., Jones, M. and Barlow, M, *Town planning and children: A case study of Lismore, New South Wales, Australia,* Department of Geography and Planning, University of New England (1996).
[25] Salmon, J., Telford, A. and Crawford, D. (2004) *The Children's Leisure Activities Study,* Centre for Physical Activity and Nutrition Research, Deakin University, Burwood.

8.4.2   While more children and young people talked about informal 'play' and recreation, they also raised their enjoyment of organised sport, its health and stress relief value, and the need for spaces which allow for sporting activities.

8.4.3   Many young people said that their participation in organised sport often ceased once they got to Year Eleven and the greater demands of study (and part-time work) began.

There is no time for exercise because of all the stress, yet you know that you really need to exercise to manage the stress. (boy, Year 11)

8.4.4   Not all the children and young people we talked with were interested in the outdoors and physical activity.

8.4.5   A group of Year 2 children nominated the following list as their favourite places to go:

Shopping, bowling, roller coasters, Questacon in Canberra, the movies, school, Disneyland and Time Zone.

8.4.6   None of them listed an outdoor or really physical activity.

8.4.7   Given the high number of overweight and obese children in Australia and the high link between weight and exercise, it is an important consideration that many children and young people are telling us that they know they do not get enough exercise and that they would prefer to do indoor physically passive activities than be outside playing.

8.4.8   The extent to which children and young people completely relied on their parents to move around their neighbourhoods was also notable.

I don't use public transport or walk – my parents drive me where I need to go. (girl, Year 7)

8.4.9   Regardless of the cause, reliance on parents and private transport has obvious health and environmental implications.

8.4.10 Being close to, or being able to travel easily to parts of their community is another common theme raised by children and young people.

8.4.11 Interestingly, parents also spoke about their need to keep fit and healthy, and model exercise and healthy habits such as walking to their little children, but mentioned some barriers to this.

We could do with more pathways – I would like to walk to the Shopping Centre, but the way it's built is as if only people with cars can go in them. I'd advocate pathways – particularly along routes to major shopping centres.

Little legs need refuge islands between crossings.

8.4.12 While not all children and young people seek outdoor activities, it is difficult to ascertain whether there is a cause and effect relationship. That is, are kids not interested in physical activity because their environment is not conducive to it, or do they just prefer indoor, physically passive activities?

8.4.13 We do know, however, that some physical activity is important for the growth and development of children and young people. Encouraging children to exercise is more likely to succeed if their environment is conducive to it.

8.5   Public transport

8.5.1 Lack of transport – private or public – limits children and young people's access to what their community has to offer.

8.5.2 Young people are major users of public transport and it is a key to their safety, welfare and wellbeing that that they have affordable, reliable transport. One young person told the Commission:

One thing I would try to change is the transport system. We can't get around without our parents driving us, and it's not always safe at night. (girl 16)

8.5.3 Young people have expressed concern about poor services for public transport and how it is often slow and late.

If the trains are late and I'm late to school the office ladies are like: Oh it's your fault ra ra ra. Why didn't you get up earlier? Like, it wasn't my fault, my train was late. And that's no excuse - detention, you know. It's not your fault. And that can sometimes be a bad start to the day. I mean you don't want to be at school.

8.5.4 In many parts of NSW there are major shortcomings in the public transport system. The shortcomings include limited route penetration in some areas, low frequencies, high cost, and inadequate physical design of infrastructure such as terminals, stations and bus stops.[26]

8.5.6 Many children and young people with disabilities and parents/carers with prams and strollers face barriers to access public transport.

8.5.7 Mothers of children under five years reported on their use of public transport:

Between (my stop) and the City, there's not one single train station that has a lift. I had to lug the stroller up flights of stairs when I was pregnant.

They don't appreciate mums with strollers struggling and slowing everyone down ... Once I was told that I shouldn't be travelling during the office peak as I was delaying everyone.

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[26] CCYP submission to the Ministerial Inquiry into Public Passenger Transport in NSW 2003

8.5.8   For young people with a disability, a number of railway stations do not have suitable access to enable them to access the trains such as lifts or ramps[27]. It can be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for these children and young people to access trains. Parents/carers transporting children around on trains, also face problems if stations have no ramps and lifts are not working.

8.5.9   Only some buses are accessible to those in wheelchairs and if timetables are unreliable, a young person in a wheelchair may have to wait for a very long and often unknown period of time for a bus that has wheelchair access.

8.5.10   In some cases bus stops and train stations are often located far from homes[28]. Young people and parents with children may have to walk a long way to access public transport, have to wait at isolated, unsheltered spots for public transport to arrive and cross busy roads to access public transport as a result of poor planning. This may result in children and young people not using public transport which in turn contributes to their social isolation.

8.5.11   The cost of public transport and the lack of availability concessions in some areas was problematic. Children and young people also told us they found the criteria for concessions to be inequitable.

8.5.12   Children and young people rely on public transport and for them the priorities are reliability, cost effectiveness and safety. Whilst the term 'child-friendly transport planning' is not an overly familiar concept in NSW, it is gaining currency overseas and is integral to a child-friendly city.

8.5.13   In planning child-friendly transport, the children and young people themselves who experience the problems are likely to be able to contribute to solutions and should be involved in the planning process.

8.6.   *Children and young people's participation in planning*

8.6.1   The children and young people the Commission spoke with were knowledgeable about the decision makers and stakeholders in planning and development processes. More significantly, they want to be consulted about planning and development decisions.

8.6.2   Few were able to give examples of being consulted about these processes, even those who are involved in local government decision making structures like Student Representative Councils and Youth Councils.

8.6.3   Asked to think about changes to their school, we asked one group of young people what they would like to have a say about. Their suggestions were:

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[27] Ford, V. and Gennery, J. (2003) *Barriers to Young People Accessing Public Transport in Western Sydney*, Ettinger House and Western Sydney Community Forum. (p18)
[28] ibid. (p18)

- the location of eating areas ('where all the kids hang out – that's an important place to us')
- where playgrounds should be located, and what surfaces should be used in play areas
- where, and the type of, trees that should be planted in the school area
- where stairs and walkways should be located to get the most use.

8.6.4   There were many examples of both good and bad practice.

8.6.5   One example of good practice was from a private school which regularly uses a template to assess the student impact of any proposed changes to the school. The school's SRC seeks the views of all students and then uses the template to provide feedback to the School Council. The SRC's report is taken seriously and is considered a fair process by the students.

8.6.6   On the other hand, another young person who is a member of a Youth Council in a rural area reported that the Youth Council had never been consulted about any planning or development decisions under consideration by the Council.

8.6.7   The Youth Council is asked to be involved in 'youth' specific issues like organising Youth Week. This appears to be a common experience.

8.6.8   It is worth noting that the Department of Local Government's own website includes a Youth Consultation Checklist which includes suggestions about what Youth Councils could be consulted about.

8.6.9   In addition to 'youth specific' issues, it suggests young people be consulted about:
- major developments (eg. shopping malls);
- community safety;
- provision of services and facilities for the community (eg. recreation facilities);
- the management of public land, and
- other Council planning processes.

8.6.10   Simply put, it would seem that decision makers are underestimating the interest and possibly the competence children and young people have in built environment decisions. Nor are they making the most of well-established mechanisms for children and young people's participation such as Youth Councils and Student Representative Councils.

9.   SOME WAYS FORWARD

9.1   What does this snapshot of views from children and young people and from Australian and overseas research tell us about children and young people and the built environment?

9.2   Most strikingly, there is a sense in which the set of circumstances the children and young people described are conspiring to keep children and young people out of their environment and community.

9.3   Whilst many children and young people are choosing to spend much more time indoors undertaking physically passive activities, it is not clear whether this is through choice or has developed over time through habit or lack of a viable alternative. It is also clear that lack of physical activity has negative long term health implications.

9.4   As a community, we need to think very seriously about how we can address this social and physical isolation. It is worth asking ourselves what do we want our communities to be like for children and young people?

9.5   The key themes raised by children and young people helps provide some sense of where the Commission might concentrate its efforts.

9.6   Children and young people consistently raise the importance of their neighbourhood, their local community and access to facilities. They want to be involved in planning their communities, and have a fresh perspective on the local environment as it relates to their needs. Children and young people also have lots of ideas and suggestions for how that might be done. The limits on their independent mobility and participation in their community, whether caused by concerns about traffic, stranger danger or lack of transport options, needs to be addressed.

9.7   There are a number of timely opportunities to capitalise on in NSW.

9.8   A Growth Centres Commission has been established to oversee the development of growth areas in North West and South West Sydney and there is scope to work with it on creating new, child-friendly urban environments.

9.9   The NSW Government is already monitoring health and environmental outcomes and looking at other issues that affect the built environment. Innovative resources, such as iPlan, that provide practical ideas and direction for consulting with children and young people are starting to influence planning practitioners.

9.10   Converging interests around physical activity, transport, obesity, air pollution, asthma, green house gas reduction, traffic congestion and road safety would all benefit from a coordinated effort to create more child friendly cities.

9.11   In addition, there is a growing awareness of the benefits of encouraging children and young people's participation in decisions that affect their lives and greater willingness to involve them.

9.12   With this in mind, the action areas outlined below refer to the importance of child-friendly values in achieving a child-friendly environment.

10.   ACTION AREA 1: An inclusive environment

10.1   A commitment to child friendly principles

10.1.1   As a first principle, the Commission supports the development of built environments that promotes inclusion, not isolation, of children and young people as a priority.

10.1.2   Inclusion implies an environment where all community members are welcome, where spaces lend themselves to a multiplicity of uses and allow members of the community to intermingle, and where issues of accessibility and physical safety have been attended to.

10.1.3   An inclusive environment is important for children, not only to provide space to play, but also to enhance their capacity to use their environment safely and imaginatively. It allows and promotes active civic engagement by young people. It provides spaces for adults to interact informally and build relationships with children and young people and encourages increased use of community facilities.

10.1.4   Principles for inclusive, child friendly environments are being adopted and put into practice in some other countries, usually at the municipal level, through the Child Friendly Cities movement. This movement, which has its own set of Principles and Building Blocks, provides one model for how communities can be more 'child friendly'.[29]

10.1.5   In essence, however, efforts to create child and young person friendly communities can be distilled down to a set of practices which put children and young people front and centre. The Commission believes these can be summarised as:

- promoting children and young people's participation in decision making that affects their lives;
- promoting awareness of children and young people's needs and interests to the community, and considering these during policy, budgetary and service delivery decisions;
- evaluating those decisions;
- making an adequate budgetary commitment to children and young people; and

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[29] For the Principles and Building Blocks of the Child Friendly Cities Movement, see UNICEF, http://www.childfriendlycities.org/about, viewed 20 December 2005.

- monitoring progress over time.

10.1.6 In Australia's federal system, the levers for creating child friendly communities are shared across all levels of government although the State and Local levels of government which, through their service delivery roles, have perhaps the most direct impact on children and young people.

10.1.7 The NSW Government is already some way down the track to creating child friendly environments. For example, over the past five years NSW has developed a culture of children and young people's participation in decision making which is in evidence across government agencies, councils, schools and non-government organisations. In addition, the existence of the Commission for Children and Young People supporting children and young people's needs in policy, service and budgetary processes as well as encouraging a community wide awareness children's interests.

10.1.8 Beyond State level decision making, local government is presented with many opportunities to influence the way in which children and young people live. With responsibilities covering local planning, building and development, and the provision of services and recreational opportunities for children and young people, local councils have a major role in shaping the built environment for children and young people.

10.1.9 The Commission is interested in exploring how the practices described above could be applied in the context of local government to enhance children and young people's built environment.

10.1.10 To this end, the Commission will explore the possibility of partnering with a Local Council to investigate how local government can harness its capacity to create more child friendly environments.

10.1.11 The Commission will also conduct a seminar, specifically targeted at the local government Councillors and officials.

10.1.12 Recommendations 1 and 2

1. The Commission will explore the possibility of partnering with a Local Council to investigate how local government can harness its capacity to create more child friendly environments.

2. The Commission will conduct a seminar on the built environment and creating child friendly communities, specifically targeted at local government Councillors and officials.

10.2 New areas of Sydney – an opportunity to trial change

10.2.1 One opportunity to influence the planning and development of new areas of Sydney is in the work of the Growth Centres Commission. The Growth Centres Commission has been established to oversee the development of

growth areas in the north west and south west of Sydney and to coordinate the delivery of housing and infrastructure in these areas. It is anticipated that 400 000 people will live in these areas of Sydney, including many families with children.

10.2.2   This presents a unique opportunity to influence the development of entirely new areas of Sydney to plan for and 'build in' the needs of children and young people.

10.2.3 Recommendation 3

The Commission will approach the Growth Centres Commission to explore the possibilities for taking the needs of children and young people into account in the development of Sydney's new growth areas.

10.3   Influencing new developments in existing areas - child friendly indicators

10.3.1   Another promising avenue to influence future development is to work with the Department of Planning about developing 'child friendly' indicators to incorporate into the development of an electronic assessment tool to prepare and assess the performance of land-use plans against key criteria including housing, employment, urban form, transport accessibility, open space and impacts on water and energy.

10.3.2   Possible indicators might include: number of green spaces; walking distance and routes to major facilities; transport routes and times; footpaths cycle paths; and illumination of walking routes and public spaces.

10.3.4 Recommendation 4

The Commission will explore, with the Department of Planning, opportunities to develop indicators of a 'child friendly' community which could be incorporated into its tools for assessing land use plans.

10.4   Inclusive planning, development and management practices

10.4.1   The movement towards creating multiple use public spaces is relatively new in Australia. We have tended towards a more segregated model. For example, youth centres that 'contain' young people and take them away from the rest of the community, or small parks with a minimal amount of play equipment for young children which are distant from other public amenities which children and their parents need to use.

10.4.2   The costs of this segregated model outweigh the benefits. Lack of contact between different groups of the community can generate lack of understanding, intolerance and sometimes even fear of each other.

10.4.3   Moreover, segregation creates a set of amenities which are not well used because they are designed to meet only one need. Physical distance from other amenities also contributes to lack of use.

10.4.4   A more creative approach to planning yields different results.

10.4.5   For example, public schools buildings in New South Wales are used for school activities during school hours. Despite the potential of schools to provide a physical hub for local community activities, school buildings are a significantly underused resource. With the exception of the provision of After School Hours Care, many school buildings are locked up and unused after school hours. Children and young people are even forbidden from using school grounds to play in outside of school hours.

10.4.6   A broader conceptualisation of the role of schools would enable schools to become a focal point for community activities (for all members of the community) and would assist the development of the community's social capital. This relates not just to the ways in which existing school buildings might be used, but also to planning the location of schools so that they are at the physical and social centre of a community, rather than physically and socially isolated.

10.4.7   As another example, a youth centre could be more beneficially located as part of a larger community centre, or in or near a shopping centre. This gives young people their own legitimate space, access to other attractions, contact with other people and public transport will not be a problem.

10.4.8   In NSW, the Department of Planning's *Urban Design Guidelines with Young People in Mind*[30], originally published in 1999, provide direction for people designing new projects or refurbishing existing centres and covers issues on designing for all members of the community, accessibility, making safer places and participative design processes. While it is not a new publication, it is an excellent resource to encourage inclusive planning and development which may benefit from being relaunched or further promoted to key audiences.

10.4.9   While inclusive design and development practices create a positive built environment for children and young people, it is desirable that they be coupled with management practices for both the public and private spaces where children and young people spend their time. It is the interplay between design and management which truly permits participatory environments. Where both elements are in play together, they can yield positive results and result in a more harmonious and safer community.

10.4.10 At the most fundamental level, inclusive management practices means not placing unfair restrictions children and young people's access to public or

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[30] Urban Design Guidelines with Young People in Mind, 1999, NSW Department of Urban Planning and Infrastructure and the Urban Design Advisory Service.

private places in their community, eg. 'banning' from shopping centres. At another level, there is room for more participatory models of management which bring children and young people into the decision making processes involved in managing some of the spaces which they use. The development of the NSW Youth Shopping Centre Protocol is one example of a participatory model of management. The Commission's guide for the involvement of young people on boards and committees, *Participation: All Aboard!*, provides practical ideas and tips for how children and young people can be involved in management structures.

10.4.11 Recommendations 5 and 6

That the Department of Planning promote the further uptake of its *Urban Design Guidelines with Young People in Mind*.

That the Committee support and promote:
- increased planning for, and availability of, multi-use spaces for children and young people within the broader built environment;
- the use, and planning, of public schools as a physical resource to the community which can be used (outside of school hours) for a wide range of community activities; and
- the uptake of inclusive management practices to encourage children and young people's access to, and participation in, their community.

11. ACTION AREA 2: Promoting children's citizenship and participation

11.1 Architects, planners, developers and local decision makers want to build places that communities will use. The Commission believes that these audiences would be receptive to the principle of finding out what people want in order to create successful, well used facilities.

11.2 However, there has been relatively little information available to assist members of these professions to gather the views of children and young people and incorporate their perspectives in creating child-friendly environments.

11.3 One valuable source of information is the iPlan website[31] which has been developed through a partnership of planning practitioners and advisers as a single, comprehensive, easy to read resource for practitioners in the NSW planning and development system. iPlan is a guide for community engagement in the NSW planning system that includes comprehensive references for consulting with and engaging children and young people.

11.4 With our responsibility to promote children and young people's participation and enhance citizenship, the Commission is uniquely positioned to work with built environment professionals and decision makers to involve children and young people in this area of policy.

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[31] Department of Planning, viewed December 2005, http://www.iPlan.nsw.gov.au

11.5 The Commission's *TAKING PARTicipation seriously* kit is designed to assist organisations to involve children and young people in decision making. It is full of practical examples, tips and activities which can be applied across different disciplines.

11.6 There may also be a need for resources which specifically deal with children and young people's participation in shaping the built environment in the Australian context. For example, the London based Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) has published three guidebooks which combine information about participation, technical matters, processes and case studies. Other similar publications which the Commission is aware of are 'A Child's Perspective of Planning' published by the Dutch Institute of Design and 'A Kid's Guide to Building Great Communities', published by the Canadian Institute of Planners.

11.7 In addition, it would be advantageous to provide future built environment professionals with information about how to involve children and young people in planning at the undergraduate level.

11.8 Recommendations 7, 8 and 9

The Commission will promote *TAKING PARTicipation Seriously* Kit to the built environment professions.

The Commission will approach the Royal Australian Institute of Architects and the Planning Institute of Australia to explore the need for a new publication to promote children and young people's participation in the development of their environments.

The Commission will investigate with universities that offer Architecture and Planning Degrees the inclusion of a curriculum component or module on how to involve children and young people in planning.

12 ACTION AREA 3: Monitoring the impact of the built environment on children and young people

12.1 It is of critical importance to monitor the impact of the built environment on children and young people in a more systematic way.

12.2 Given the multiplicity of factors contributing to the built environment, it would be challenging to develop indicators.

12.3 This would involve looking at the interplay between health outcomes like the prevalence of childhood obesity, diabetes, asthma, mental illness, and exercise levels with environmental factors such as air quality, traffic density, dwelling density, availability of 'green spaces' and developing appropriate indicators.

12.4   Some of this data is being collected in NSW now. For example, the Department of Environment and Conservation produces a *State of the Environment* Report. The NSW Government also has a 25 year air quality management plan, *Action for Air*. The plan takes a total air quality management approach in examining the role of urban planning and public transport, industry, freight transport and pollution sources within homes. *Roads Safety 2010*, the Roads and Traffic Authority's Framework comprehensively covers the issues of footpaths, road safety and public transport.

12.5   Other indicators which could be monitored include children's independent mobility, modes of travel to and from school, their use of public transport, resources spent in 'play' and 'provision for play', and accessibility to green spaces. These indicators are monitored in the United Kingdom[32]. The UK is also developing a national indicator for accessibility which measures the time taken to walk from home to a park or green space.

12.6   Compatible with our research and monitoring function, the Commission for Children and Young People may have a role to play in developing a set of built environment indicators. This would allow changes in the impact of the built environment on children and young people to be measured over time. looking at the gaps in current data collection and coordination of information collection.

12.7   Recommendation 10

The Commission will investigate the development of a set of indicators which demonstrate the impact of the built environment on children and young people in NSW over time.

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[32] UK Audit Commission, viewed December 2005, http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk

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