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Submission to the Parliament of NSW Committee on Children and Young People Inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment

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## Scope of the submission

This submission concentrates on built environment issues affecting children, primarily those under the age of 12 and particularly children aged 0 to 5 years. The Benevolent Society's services for children and families are primarily targeted at families with children in these age groups. Issues specifically relating to young people aged 12 to 18 are not covered in detail. This submission draws on some existing research but more extensively on our experiences of working with families, children and communities. As such, much of the evidence presented is anecdotal.

The ways in which the physical design of spaces where The Benevolent Society and partner organisations provide services affects the type, quality and effectiveness of these services to children is discussed.

Issues facing the areas in which we work with children and families are covered, especially disadvantaged communities in inner and eastern Sydney, south west Sydney and on the Central Coast of NSW.

The submission also looks at possible ways in which the issues raised can be addressed at different levels of policy, planning and implementation of changes to the built environment.

The submission also considers state level issues of policy, planning and implementation of changes to the built environment, including ways to facilitate the participation of children and young people in planning decisions. The NSW Commission for Children and Young People is crucial to facilitating participation and a child centred approach to planning. The importance of undertaking additional research on these issues and improved processes for knowledge sharing between different disciplines is also discussed.

Ultimately, the success of the way the environments of our urban areas are developed and altered rests upon community participation from all age groups and social sectors and a willingness on the part of policy makers and planners to both listen to the voices of people living in these areas and to invest time and money into local level solutions driven from the ground up.

# 1. Background to The Benevolent Society

The Benevolent Society is Australia's oldest non profit organisation. Since 1813 we have identified and worked to meet key social challenges head-on. Our strength lies in being a 'whole of life' charity which promotes integration of knowledge - with key program areas of children and families, women's health, ageing, and social leadership. We aim to tackle social inequality by building caring and inclusive communities. We do this by delivering leading edge programs and services, by finding innovative solutions to complex social challenges and by calling for a more just society.

Our objective is for everyone to have the opportunity to live in communities that are safe, healthy and full of opportunities – communities that care for and include everyone.

## a. Approach to working with children, families and communities

The Benevolent Society has been providing services to children and families for nearly 200 years. The Society currently operates child and family services throughout greater Sydney and on the NSW Central Coast. The focus of all our services is on working with communities to build resilience and address disadvantage.

The approach and design of our child and family services is strongly shaped by both current research and thinking in this area and our own experience initiating and implementing integrated child, family and community initiatives in high need communities.

Our work with children, families and communities is underpinned by a philosophical approach that:
- Has a strengths or assets approach to individuals, families and communities
- Strengthens relationships between individuals, families and communities
- Has a focus on the systemic issues, as well as the interpersonal ones
- Is holistic, comprehensive and long-term
- Supports long-term intervention to prevent abuse and neglect of children
- Is committed to nurturing children and families.  (Centre for Children)

### b. Outline of services to children and families

The Benevolent Society's services to children cover a range of service types, including:

- Child protection services (Scarba)
- Ante natal groups
- Supported playgroups
- Volunteer home visiting
- Professional home visiting
- Partnerships in Early Childhood (PIEC)
- Communities for Children – Facilitating partner in Campbelltown (Ambarvale and Rosemeadow) and Southern Lakes (Central Coast)
- Early intervention programs and consultancy
- Parenting information (PlayPower)
- Child care centres.

## 2. Issues affecting service provision to children

The provision of services no matter who they are for is dependant on the built environment, at least to the extent that services need a physical space from which to operate. Services provided directly to children have different space requirements from those provided to adults.

### a. Child Care Centres and PIEC

The Benevolent Society operates two Child Care Centres and works in partnership with a number of other Child Care Centres in the Partnerships in Early Childhood (PIEC) programs. PIEC supports around 1000 families accessing child care in central, south east and south west Sydney on the NSW Central Coast. It aims to promote strong, healthy relationships between children, childcare staff, families and communities; nurture children's healthy development and connect families to social and emotional support networks in the community. A family worker or psychologist works in each centre with children, families and staff to provide support and training.

One of the PIEC workers' roles is to observe children's interactions with their parents, staff and peers, in order to identify those who are at risk of attachment disorder – difficulties bonding with caregivers. Each worker attends a number of different child care centres and thus has the opportunity to notice the effects of different spaces on

children and staff, as well as their own ability to observe children's interactions. A number of issues about design of centres have been raised by these workers' perspectives:

- Clear sight lines and smooth flow of movement from the entrance of the centre to the main area allows children to settle more easily at the beginning of the day. If the separation from the parent involves moving through different spaces it can create anxiety which in turn impedes learning.

- Centres with only large play areas can also create anxiety in children as they can feel overwhelmed. A sense of security and emotional regulation can be enhanced by having some smaller, more controlled environments in centres, along with some larger spaces. This then promotes children's ability to learn.

- Children's confidence and physical development is enhanced by being able to play outside for extended periods of time (Hart). As children of vastly different ages cannot safely play together, centres that have separate outside play areas for various age groups are more beneficial for children than those with one large area.

- The placement of staff within the space is also important. In centres where PIEC operates, staff are encouraged to sit on the floor and stay in one place for the first hour of the day. This gives staff a different perspective on the children as they are looking at the space from a child's height. It also means that the children have a secure base in the worker from which they can explore.

- PIEC works from a premise that child care centres are important community spaces and services are best provided from spaces that are already used by the community and which are non-threatening. The effectiveness of providing services to parents and the development of social connections within the community is affected by the spaces parents can occupy in the centres. Few centres have rooms where parents can congregate and interact with each other or with workers in an informal way.

Funding for child care centres must have more provision for changes to physical space. Additionally, planning processes for converting existing spaces or building new centres must be approached from a child development perspective.

The NSW *Children's Services Regulation 2004* requires that there be 3.25 square metres of indoor play space and 7 square metres of outdoor space provided per child in child care centres, but does not stipulate how this space is to be organised. This is

an issue that needs to be addressed by the Department of Community Services and funding made available for alterations to centre layouts to provide better play spaces in order to enhance children's learning and development.

### b. Child protection services

The two primary environmental issues that affect the provision of child protection services are the environment in which the children live, which is examined in the next section, and the layout of the spaces where the services are provided.

Play therapy is an important part of child protection work with young children in our Scarba services. The space in which this occurs influences the effectiveness of the therapy. Children who have experienced trauma need space to be able to express themselves physically – for example to move away from a worker when a discussion becomes too intense or distressing for them. Physical space allows children a sense of control and makes therapy and the issues they are dealing with less overwhelming. With more space for physical expression, children are able to deal with harder issues. A space with a lot of light is also helpful to the process, as children find it more inviting. Children using our services have themselves articulated their preference for light, open, welcoming spaces, and conversely have been reluctant to be in dark and cramped spaces.

A key problem is that funding agreements for such services don't provide for changes/ upgrades to the space and this is an issue that needs addressing in order to ensure effective services. Government and non-Government funding at all levels needs to provide a separate stream of money for creating welcoming spaces for children and separate age appropriate play areas, as well as spaces for work with parents. This is essential and needs to be reflected in funding provisions, rather than being seen as an 'added extra'.

## 3. Issues affecting disadvantaged communities

Disadvantaged communities bear the brunt of the consequences of poorly built environments. Poverty, lack of mobility especially a lack of affordable, accessible and frequent public transport, unsafe or non-existent areas for play and community gatherings and poor quality housing are all factors that disproportionately affect these

communities. When coupled with a lack of social cohesion the consequences can be devastating – such as the outbreak of riots in Redfern and Macquarie Fields in recent years.

In our experience, community building and changes to the built environment cannot be separated. For changes to spaces to have lasting positive effects the whole of the community must be involved in the planning process and it must be reflective of their needs and wishes. Such inclusive processes mean that communities have a sense of ownership over their space, and the process and outcomes are important ways of building social capital and creating social cohesion.

### a. Housing and neighbourhoods

Inadequate housing is a major concern in disadvantaged communities and is often identified by workers as a major factor in relation to child protection. The majority of families who are referred to our child protection services come from public housing areas.

Staff have identified the following issues in relation to Department of Housing accommodation and child protection concerns:

- Multi level, adjoined housing is inappropriate for families with small children. Supervision of children is made more difficult in multi level housing, thus impacting on the safety of children and the stress levels of parents. High rise flats, mostly in inner Sydney, are particularly unsuitable for children.
- Lack of choice in type and place of housing is of concern for families. Single level housing close to amenities, including effective transport mechanisms or family supports, is essential for the wellbeing of the children in vulnerable families.
- A large proportion of families housed in community housing are single parent families. This in itself places greater stressors on the children and resident parent/s. Some are under threat of eviction.
- Areas with a high concentration of public housing, especially exclusively Department of Housing estates, locate large numbers of disadvantaged families together. Socially mixed housing, where public and private housing is mixed in together, can work to alleviate the compounding of disadvantage and reduce the social stigma often felt by families living in large estates.

- Department of Housing estates in south west Sydney are often isolated and poorly serviced, with access to services made more difficult due to inadequate public transport.
- Social isolation, which is a major risk factor in child protection, is not alleviated by being housed in Department of Housing estates. Additionally, some of the neighbourhoods lack social cohesion.
- Department of Housing estates have high rates of crime and violence thus increasing the risk of harm to children in these areas. For children, these estates are often where all of their time is spent – they become their entire world. Living in environment where drug use, crime and harassment are common place desensitises children, as these experiences are normalised. This is also common for adults who often also spent the vast majority of time in the neighbourhood because of a lack of affordable and accessible transport options.

Families with low incomes in the private rental market are also affected by housing concerns. A lack of affordability in private rental and a shortfall in public housing places is a major concern in Sydney and increases low income and single parent families' vulnerability. For example, families are often living in cramped conditions and/or poorly maintained housing. A lack of space for families with children has been observed to increase stress on parents, compounding other problems they may be facing, for example making it more difficult to break cycles of violence and drug abuse.

## b. Play spaces

"Play is fundamental to all domains of childhood and adolescent development – physical, intellectual, social and emotional." (Hart)

A lack of appropriate areas for children to play is consistently brought up as a major issue by our staff, by parents in disadvantaged communities and by children themselves. In these communities existing playgrounds are often deemed unsafe, are inadequate, unwelcoming and often inappropriately developed without consultation with the community. In all communities where we work, the following issues about playground safety have been raised:
- Drug use and dealing in playgrounds and syringes on the ground
- Groups of people viewed as threatening congregating in parks and playgrounds as well as harassment of children and parents

- Broken/ vandalised play equipment
- Equipment removed and not replaced
- Lack of playground visibility making them unlikely to be used by children either accompanied or alone
- Play areas located in places difficult to access – not within walking distance of people's houses and/or terrain not able to be traversed with prams
- Lack of fences, shaded areas and appropriate equipment for different age groups
- Locations near busy roads or requiring crossing busy roads to access
- Locations away from where people spend their time – requiring separate trips to access.

The importance of play spaces is being increasingly recognised in planning in other parts of the world. For example, the City of London has developed a play strategy that has at its centre a recognition that every child should have a place to play within walking distance of their home. It also explicitly acknowledges the importance of play to vulnerable children:

"There is also evidence that access to open spaces, and to free play and leisure opportunities, is a significant compensatory factor in alleviating the effect of disadvantage on young people's well-being. Play provision should be universal and its planning should recognise that play deprivation is in itself a serious disadvantage for young people. Nevertheless, fully-inclusive and accessible provision, developed with a strategic view to local economic and social conditions, can have an important role in enhancing the lives of vulnerable children and those living with discrimination, disability or the risk of social exclusion." (London Play Strategy)

It is also important to consider the types of play spaces that are valued by children separately to those valued by adults. Children consistently show a preference for informal spaces for play and exploration, along with more formal spaces with interesting and varied equipment. Informal play spaces include local streets and open spaces or wilderness areas such as bushland. Research has also shown that children prefer to play in spaces that are close to family and within the neighbourhood, rather than being separated into playgrounds away from where community life occurs. (Hart)

Consultation with children aged 5 to 12 conducted in several suburbs in Campbelltown LGA in 2005 illustrates children's desire to utilise informal spaces as much as formal

spaces. When asked what they liked about their neighbourhoods, children frequently mentioned activities like:

- "playing hockey on the road"
- "going bushwalking behind [my] house"
- "lots of space to ride bike on road"
- "the water tank and sitting on top of it with friends"
- "bushland where children build cubby houses." (Campbelltown Communities for Children)

These types of activities were mentioned equally with enjoyment of more formal spaces like playgrounds and sporting facilities.

Additionally:

"Young children benefit from the attention of caring adults who can maintain continuity of care over time. Their care givers want to know that they are close by. As children grow older, their range increases, but they still need a safe environment that they can explore from a secure social base. Children also need the freedom to find peers and to play spontaneously at all times of day. Relying on public playgrounds too far from family, friends and neighbours becomes a planned affair that does not fit well with this concept of play."

Tranter and Malone argue similarly that:

"Adults have a poor understanding of the needs of children to interact with their environment - particularly to manipulate their environment. Adults are more concerned with an aesthetically appealing environment than they are with allowing children to create their own play environments." Public liability concerns also restrict children's opportunities for free play, and concerns with the safety of play spaces and equipment needs to be balanced with children's need to experience controlled risks and physical challenges. (Hart)

Related to these issues are increased restrictions on children's independent movements over the past couple of decades, often due to parental concerns about safety. Perceived safety concerns tend to fall into two major categories – concerns about traffic and concerns about dangers posed by other people. (Tranter and Malone) Children are aware of these issues and often concerned by them. During the previously mentioned consultation with children, when asked about what they didn't like about their neighbourhoods, their comments included:

- "being scared of being kidnapped"

- "walking home from the park alone"
- "having to ride bikes on edge of roadway"
- "going outside when it's not busy (someone might take you)"
- "getting chased home from the bush/ park by teenagers". (Campbelltown Communities for Children)

Concerns for children's safety need to be balanced with their need to explore and play independently. One way to do this is to recognise the links between traffic, alternative transport options and 'stranger danger': "if traffic levels are low enough to allow streets to be used for walking, cycling, social interaction and playing (all of which are important activities for children) it can be argued that potentially at least, streets become reinvigorated with supportive community life." (Tranter and Malone) Building cohesive communities is also vital to redeveloping a sense of safety for children to play independently – where parents know their neighbours and there is a sense of trust, they are more likely to allow children to play and travel locally without supervision and children are less likely to feel anxious about these activities. The necessity of working with whole communities to build social capital in order to improve children's experiences of their environments is discussed further below.

## 4. Policy, planning and participation at a State level

"Ideally towns and cities should be the place where children can socialise, observe and learn about how society functions and contribute to the cultural fabric of a community. They should also be sites where children find refuge, discover nature and find tolerant and caring adults who support them. If, having rich environmental experiences, feeling safe and secure, connected and valued, are universal indicators of quality of life, then what better place to start than to evaluate cities through the eyes of its children?" (Tranter and Malone)

### a. Children's participation

The participation of children, along with all members of the community, is crucial to successful planning for the built environment. Children often have different needs and priorities from other members of the community, for example the location and types of spaces for play. Thus they should be able to influence planning decisions that affect their lives.

Louise Chawler suggests three primary reasons for the importance of involving children in development processes:

- "children will learn formal skills of democratic citizenship in this way;
- they are the best experts on local environmental conditions related to their own needs; and
- they acquire a foundation for lifelong habits of environmental interest, concern and care."

She goes on to outline a set of principles for creating ways for children to participate:

- Invest in people who can facilitate participation
- Train people who work with children
- Institutionalize children's participation
- Use qualitative as well as quantitative standards and indicators
- Recognise participatory research as a significant contribution to agency planning and academic prestige
- Invest in communities
- Strengthen municipal authority and budgets
- Create community-based curricula.

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People is the most appropriate agency to advise on effective ways to enhance meaningful participation by children in planning decisions and to facilitate this participation. The Commission's expertise in this area should be acknowledged and built upon, giving it a more formal role in ensuring children's views and needs are prioritised in panning and policy decision on the built environment.

## b. Social capital and community development

The role of small scale, local community development initiatives that are inclusive of all disenfranchised groups cannot be separated from children's participation issues. Too often planning looks at large geographic areas, building large structures for people. We suggest instead that it is more appropriate to work with communities to build small scale, local structures and places that reflect the needs and wants of local communities. Such a shift is necessary because our experience has shown that large centrally planned structures designed to service large areas are not utilised, especially by those who are isolated or marginalised. A larger number of smaller scale initiatives work to enhance communities' sense of ownership, makes access easier and results in

spaces that are heavily used and highly valued. This requires a substantial shift in policy and planning at all levels of government. Resources need to be directed towards consultation and local level research as much as, if not more than, towards design and building by professionals.

Additionally, further research into inclusive community development strategies needs to be undertaken and mechanisms for knowledge sharing across different sectors and levels of government need to be developed. We suggest the formation of a separate agency whose role would include building on existing research on inclusive and effective planning and sustainable development, undertaking further research on these issues, and advising on policy formation and coordination to include this knowledge into all development initiatives.

### c. Transport

The availability of affordable, accessible, reliable and frequent public transport is essential for children's wellbeing. A lack of transport options disproportionately affects children in vulnerable communities and restricts their ability to access services and facilities. Many families in vulnerable communities do not have their own car; public transport is often vastly inadequate and unaffordable for families in these areas, particularly in outer suburban and regional areas. When combined with a lack of local infrastructure, families in these areas can easily become socially isolated and excluded from the broader life of the community.

Reliance on private car use also contributes to a lack of safety for children in their neighbourhoods and restricts their independent movement opportunities. It also has consequences for children's health and well-being by restricting opportunities for play and exploration as well as necessary physical activity. Tranter and Malone make the point explicit: "the need of children for safe and free movement around their neighbourhoods and cities requires many of the features of a sustainable transport system. The needs of children are also implicit in the concept of sustainable transport, especially in regard to the importance of equity."

Transport issues must be addressed at a state level and integrated policy formation with an emphasis on sustainability and equity in transport is an issue in urgent need of attention.

## 5. Conclusion

The needs of children in relation to their environments cannot be separated from the needs of families and communities. If we are to address the deficiencies in our built environments we must listen to everyone in communities, including children and other marginalised groups, and plan from the ground up. Development of policies that formalise the use of local community development approaches with the aim of building social cohesion are essential for creating sustainable environments that nurture children's development rather than hinder it.

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