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contents

Town & Country Planning

May–June 2023 • Volume 92 • Number 3

regulars features

- 146 **On the Agenda**
Fiona Howie:
Improving outcomes for people and the environment

- 148 **Time & Tide**
Celia Davis and Hugh Ellis:
Notes from Fantasy Island

- 151 **Bird's Eye View**
Catriona Riddell: Where have all the strategic planners gone?

- 215 **Going Local**
David Boyle:
Co-operation, actually?

- 216 **Legal Eye**
Bob Pritchard:
The funding conundrum

Special Issue on 20-Minute Neighbourhoods, pages 166–214.
Cover illustration by Clifford Harper.
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Feature articles

- 155 **Levelling up in the UK**
Janice Morphet on Westminster's levelling-up ambitions and the Devolved Administrations
- 159 **England's proposed National Development Management Policies—potential lessons from Victoria**
Ben Clifford on lessons from Australia for the NDMP proposals

Special Issue: 20-Minute neighbourhoods

- 166 Guest Editor **Gemma Hyde: 20-minute neighbourhoods**
- 167 **The TCPA's 20-minute neighbourhood project**
- 169 **Chris Boardman: Incentives, instinct and intellect—aligning what we need to do with what we want do**
- 171 **Samanthi Themini-mulle and Siân Whyte: Stats or stories? Why both matter in 15-minute neighbourhoods**
- 175 **Rob Holt and Joseph Carr: Active Design—encouraging the creation of active environments**
- 179 **Rosalie Callway and Sally Roscoe: Putting health at the heart of our homes and neighbourhoods**
- 182 **Caglar Koksall, Florence Hewett and Graeme Sherriff: A 20-minute neighbourhood map of Manchester and Salford**
- 187 **Richard Dunning, Les Dolega and Andrea Nasuto: Who is ageing in what place? A classification of England**
- 191 **Elias Willberg, Christoph Fink and Tuuli Toivonen: Towards equitable 20-minute neighbourhoods**
- 195 **Gemma Hyde: Supporting health by taking a seat**
- 198 **Tim Evans: Whose place is it anyway?**
- 200 **Anna Barker, Helen Forman, Carl McClean, Susannah Walker and Sibylla Warrington Brown: Designing neighbourhood parks to foster women and girls' sense of safety**
- 205 **Robin Hewings: How 20-minute neighbourhoods can tackle loneliness—creating less lonely places**
- 208 **Sam Bodmer: School Superzones—their contribution to making healthy and safe neighbourhoods**
- 212 **Jemma Beedie: Living well locally—adapting the 20-minute neighbourhood in a rural context**

improving outcomes for people and the environment



In *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, Ebenezer Howard writes that the aim of acquiring land on which to build a Garden City may be 'stated in various ways', but it is, 'in short, to raise the standard of health and comfort' of all workers through creating a 'healthy, natural and economic combination of town and country life, and this is on land owned by the municipality'.¹ Helping people to live healthier lives was, therefore, very much part of Howard's original proposition and the 'experiments' of creating the two Garden Cities.

This relates to the Special Section in this issue of *Town & Country Planning*, but is also an important reminder of elements of the vision for Garden Cities. The TCPA is very conscious of the criticism of the concept, not least in the wake of the government's Garden Communities programme. We are pleased, therefore, to have published an updated *Garden City Myth-Buster* and accompanying animation.² While it might not convince all of the critics, it recognises the misuse of the term 'Garden City' and the confusion that has caused. But it also asserts that the idea is one of the strongest tools available to enable a healthy, affordable and zero-carbon future.

Sadly, the TCPA remains concerned that the government's planning reforms are a missed opportunity to help us achieve such a future. After 20 sittings, which started on 20 February 2023, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill has finally completed its Committee Stage in the House of Lords. While the government made amendments to the Bill, no clear concessions were secured. We await to see, therefore, what amendments might be secured at Report Stage, and the Association continues to work closely with Lord Crisp to try to secure improvements to the legislation in relation to the TCPA's Healthy Homes campaign.

Since the powerful debate in Committee about Lord Crisp's amendments and others relating to the role of planning in improving people's health and

wellbeing,³ discussions have been held with the government, but they continue to argue that all the TCPA's Healthy Homes Principles are being addressed through other legislation, regulation, and policy. Lord Crisp and the Association continue to be clear that that is not the case.

We are also currently worried that other elements of the government's reform package will potentially further undermine people's health and wellbeing. Currently, the only requirement to consider the effect that new plans and development proposals will have on population health is via Strategic Environmental Assessment and Environmental Impact Assessment. Once it becomes law, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill will scrap these processes and replace them with a single assessment called an Environmental Outcomes Report. As drafted, it will not require the impact of plans and development proposals on population health to be considered.

In practice, this will mean that local planning authorities will still be able to include a focus on population health in their plans and policies and will still be able to ask developers to consider health and wellbeing in their proposals—but, with no legal requirement to do this, councils' ability to insist on it will be significantly weakened.

The Association has raised these concerns with the relevant officials in response to a consultation on the new approach,⁴ and will continue to do so. While the opportunities to influence the Bill might be very limited now, implementing the new system of Environmental Outcomes Reports will still take some time. Secondary legislation will be needed, which will be brought forward after the Bill receives Royal Assent, and the consultation recognises that there will be a need for a transition period.

In parallel, the government is also consulting on the proposed Infrastructure Levy,⁵ which is similarly being created by the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill but will again require secondary legislation. While that would inevitably take time, the consultation proposes a 'phased 'test and learn' rollout' over an 'extended period'. This is in recognition of local authorities raising concerns about how the new levy will be administered and operated, especially in light of the lack of resources that local authorities currently have. While a 'test and learn' approach may be very sensible, it will mean that different approaches

will be in place across the country for potentially the next nine years! The prospective timeline suggests that, while there would be a gradual expansion of the test and learn approach to more authorities between 2027 and 2031, an expansion to a national roll-out might not be complete until 2032.

A general election is expected in 2024, which of course begs the question of whether we will ever see Environmental Outcome Reports, or the Infrastructure Levy, come into force.

As the long run-up to the election begins, we have also started hearing more about the Labour Party's priorities and possible policies that will be included in its manifesto. Much of the coverage has focused on Keir Starmer's comments about the Green Belt and his commitment to support the 'builders' rather than 'blockers', to enable more housebuilding by reforming the planning system.⁶

While the detail of that planning reform is unknown, it is disappointing to once again see the narrative that the planning system is a barrier to economic growth. As Catriona Riddell's article in this issue makes clear, we need to support the planning profession if we want the planning system to enable transformational change. If the system is under-resourced, ongoing reforms are unlikely to fix some of the fundamental problems that planners and planning and the nation face. On all this, the TCPA will continue to work across the political spectrum in the run-up to the next election.

● **Fiona Howie** is Chief Executive of the TCPA.

Notes

- 1 E Howard: *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. Swan Sonnenschein, 1898
- 2 *Garden City Myth Buster: A Short Guide to Myths and Truths about the Garden City Idea*. TCPA, Apr. 2023. www.tcpa.org.uk/resources/garden-city-myth-buster/
The animation is available at www.tcpa.org.uk/resources/myth-buster-animation/
- 3 See F Howie: 'Can we help make the Bill actually deliver levelling up?'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2023, Vol. 92, May-Jun., 74–75
- 4 *Environmental Outcomes Reports: A New Approach to Environmental Assessment*. Consultation. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Mar. 2023. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/environmental-outcomes-reports-a-new-approach-to-environmental-assessment
- 5 *Technical Consultation on the Infrastructure Levy*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Mar. 2023. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/technical-consultation-on-the-infrastructure-levy
- 6 See, for example, 'Starmer vows to wage war on property-owning 'blockers' preventing new development'. *Daily Telegraph*, 17 May 2023. www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2023/05/17/keir-starmer-vows-to-wage-war-on-property-owning-blockers/

The TCPA's **vision** is for homes, places and communities in which everyone can thrive. Its **mission** is to challenge, inspire and support people to create healthy, sustainable and resilient places that are fair for everyone.

Informed by the Garden City Principles, the TCPA's strategic priorities are to:



Work to secure a good home for everyone in inclusive, resilient and prosperous communities, which support people to live healthier lives.



Empower people to have real influence over decisions about their environments and to secure social justice within and between communities.



Support new and transform existing places to be adaptable to current and future challenges, including the climate crisis.

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- Community participation in planning
- Garden Cities and New Towns
- Healthy Homes Act campaign
- Healthy place-making
- New Communities Group
- Parks and green infrastructure
- Planning reform
- Planning for climate change

notes from fantasy island



The low-lying coastal regions of eastern England face the most dramatic and existential threats of climate change. Rapidly eroding coastlines, sea level rise and the increasing costs of maintaining sea defences mean that entire towns and villages will, very soon, need to face up to challenging decisions about their future. A year ago, the Environment Agency's Chief Executive gave a stark warning that relocation would be the only safe and viable option for some vulnerable coastal communities, and conversations about this need to start now.¹

One of these most vulnerable areas is the East Lindsey district in Lincolnshire, where nearly 40% of the authority area is at risk of coastal flooding.² Faced with this uneasy reality, East Lindsey District Council's 2018 Core Strategy adopted a 'zero population growth scenario'² for its coastal area, instead directing housing growth towards safer (and higher) ground inland.

One of the district's largest settlements is Skegness, a town that faces many of the challenges and contradictions of England's coastal resorts. Since the arrival of the railway in the 1870s, the town's character has reflected its status as one of the country's most popular tourist destinations, replete with pleasure gardens, pier, ballroom and elegant hotels by the early 20th century. But today, the town's continued reliance on tourism means low salaries and seasonal incomes, poor social mobility, and limited opportunities.

In *The Seaside*,³ a brilliant new book by journalist Madeleine Bunting, the author journeys around the coast to take stock of England's seaside resorts. In Skegness she finds a familiar dichotomy between the shiny amusement arcades, theme parks and their 'forced jollity' and their failure to disguise underlying dilapidation, underinvestment, and poverty. Around a third of residents have no qualifications, levels of economic activity are double the national figure (reflecting the size of the older population), and life

expectancy is up to 10 years lower than the national average.

All of this leaves East Lindsey Council with a clear dilemma: how to secure investment and raise aspiration when, in its own words, the 'settlements where the need for regeneration has been identified are also at the greatest risk of flooding'.²

One evidently all-too-tempting proposition is the 'Skegness Gateway', a large development being bought forward through a Local Development Order (LDO) by East Lindsey District Council and local landowners. The proposal is for a significant mixed-use extension to the west of Skegness, providing 1,000 new dwellings, employment land, a local centre with retail and hospitality units, a college and primary school, a crematorium, and tourism accommodation.⁴ The council published notification of the Skegness Gateway LDO for consultation late in 2022, and the proposal has garnered demonstrable political backing. Matt Warman, MP for Boston and Skegness, and East Lindsey's Cabinet members have featured in photoshoots and press statements, and the project has also been mentioned in the House of Commons.⁵

The council's narrative in support of the LDO is rooted in the town's wider need for investment and regeneration, pitching the Skegness Gateway as intertwined with the opportunity arising from £14 million Town Deal funding from central government. The LDO is seen as the 'bedrock' of the Towns Fund programme: 'the 'theory of change' that underpins the Skegness Town's Fund bid is that regeneration requires sustainable, high quality urban growth. The town must get bigger.'⁶ In particular, the provision of a further education campus within the LDO site is used as justification; seemingly the wider improvements to services and infrastructure for the town are viewed as contingent on the delivery of the LDO.

Despite this promise of investment, the Flood Risk Assessment for the LDO does not make comfortable reading. A series of unsettling maps display clearly, in deep hues of red and purple, the vulnerability of the whole town in the event of a breach of sea defences. Once climate change is allowed for, the flood risk modelling shows that parts of the LDO site could be subject to widespread flooding up to 2-3 metres deep.⁷ The subsequent



iStock/Duncan Cuthbertson

Skegness faces many of the challenges and contradictions of England's coastal resorts, including, in its low-lying east coast location, vulnerability to severe or even catastrophic flooding

list of flood risk mitigations reveals the lengths required to achieve safety in such a location.

Raised site levels, flood compensation areas, minimum heights for sleeping, 'sacrificial' ground floor uses, structural reinforcements, protected car parks (to capture 'floating' vehicles), and strong anchoring of caravans⁸ is a list that gives the sense of a bewildering rejection of the reality of the town's climate future. You cannot help but wonder what impact these sorts of measures might have on future residents—each raised platform and floor of a home that cannot be used for 'habitable accommodation' acting as a constant reminder of the existential threat beyond the sea defences.

But neither a Flood Risk Assessment concluding 'constant' and 'high' significance of risk,⁸ or concerns raised by the Environment Agency that the modelling demonstrates significant risk and that 'anyone caught in such a flood would face a very real danger to life',⁹ seem to be enough to deter East Lindsey District Council.

Even without the flood risk danger, the justification for the LDO seems weak. The council's decision to circumnavigate the Local Plan process means that there is limited evidence on which to base the need for 1,000 new homes at Skegness. The extant Local Plan identified an overall housing requirement of 7,819 homes up to 2031 for the district, with 1,257 of these made up from existing commitments in the coastal zone, and East Lindsey's Authority

Monitoring Report concludes that the Local Plan's coastal housing policy is performing effectively and the district is meeting the Housing Delivery Test.¹⁰

In comparison, the scale of the Skegness Gateway for a town with a population of 20,000 is significant. No up-to-date housing need assessment has been published to support the Local Plan review. The justification instead rests on vague assumptions that need will increase owing to the government's standard methodology (an argument surely weakened through recently proposed amendments to the National Planning Policy Framework).

The proposed LDO applies a sequential test to the town of Skegness to justify housing at the site.⁴ This further undermines East Lindsey's Local Plan, which applied the sequential test to the whole district, meaning that sites of lower flood risk (inland) were identified for housing, forming the basis of the housing strategy which has since been successfully implemented.

This strategy was based on 2017 flood risk evidence which projected sea level rise of up to 1.21 metres by 2115¹¹—enough for East Lindsey District Council to conclude that development on the coast was unsafe. Updated climate change projections account for 1.7 metres of sea level rise.¹¹ Yet the council has backpedalled into the awkward position of promoting development that will inevitably put future residents at significant risk and increase pressure on emergency services during flooding

events, which could lead to potentially catastrophic consequences. The council's compromising of its Local Plan has inevitably led to other developers doing the same, with a planning application coming forward for a further 500 homes in the town.¹²

But what can be learnt from all this? Is this a case of a rogue authority burying its head in the sand, or the unsurprising actions of local politicians desperate to secure investment in a struggling, isolated town? With limited support or mechanisms to navigate the stark realities of climate change, councils in vulnerable coastal areas are left with a dilemma. How do they secure a hopeful future when investment has been piecemeal and inadequate, and when the tantalising promise of new services and infrastructure is so often tied up with the delivery of new housing development?

It is clear that that the Skegness Gateway proposals would endanger the lives of people in Skegness. However, the fact that the council has taken this path illustrates a failure of central government to enable long-term strategic solutions to the existential threat to our coastal communities. Local authorities cannot be left to face the rapidly encroaching shoreline alone. Long-term responses to flood risk and coastal change must start now, and they must be co-ordinated at a strategic level required for climate adaptation, with the right powers and the right partners on board.

'Local authorities cannot be left to face the rapidly encroaching shoreline alone. Long-term responses to flood risk and coastal change must start now, and they must be co-ordinated at a strategic level required for climate adaptation, with the right powers and the right partners on board'

East Lindsey's climate change denial shows that this must also be on a statutory basis, to stop authorities opting out of their responsibilities to current and future generations. Ultimately, the answer to the crisis on our coastline lies in Resilience Development Corporations,¹³ an idea discussed in previous articles in this journal and whose translation to reality is now long overdue.

● **Celia Davis** is a Projects and Policy Manager and **Dr Hugh Ellis** is Policy Director at the TCPA. The views expressed are personal. This article is informed by case study research undertaken by the TCPA and the Centre for Sustainable Energy for the Climate Change Committee. The final research report, *Spatial Planning for Climate Resilience and Net Zero*, is due for publication in July.

Notes

- 1 S Russell: 'Rising sea levels could force towns to relocate, Environment Agency head warns'. *The Independent*, 7 Jun. 2022. www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/environment-agency-norfolk-hembsby-telford-b2095511.html
- 2 *East Lindsey Local Plan Core Strategy*. East Lindsey District Council, Jul. 2018. www.e-lindsey.gov.uk/article/8934/Adopted-Local-Plan-2018
- 3 M Bunting: *The Seaside: England's Love Affair*. Granta, 2023
- 4 *Skegness Gateway Local Development Order. Statement of Reasons in Support of Consultation Draft Skegness Gateway Development Order 2022*. East Lindsey District Council, Nov. 2022 (Documents referred to below relating to the LDO can be found at https://publicaccess.e-lindsey.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=EASTL_DCAPR_137285)
- 5 *Skegness Gateway Project: Sequential and Exception Test Report*. Robert Doughty Consultancy, Nov. 2022
- 6 *Skegness Gateway. Planning Policy Committee Report*. East Lindsey District Council, 17 Sept. 2020. <https://democracy.e-lindsey.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=172&Mid=6334>
- 7 *Skegness Gateway Flood Risk Assessment and Drainage Strategy*. Create Consulting Engineers, Oct. 2022
- 8 *Environmental Statement to Accompany a Local Development Order*. Robert Doughty Consultancy, Nov. 2022
- 9 Comments on Skegness Gateway by the Environment Agency, 6 Jan. 2023 (para. 123)
- 10 *Authority Monitoring Report 1st March 2020-28th February 2021*. East Lindsey District Council, 2021. www.e-lindsey.gov.uk/article/6165/Authority-Monitoring-Report
- 11 *East Lindsey Strategic Flood Risk Assessment*. East Lindsey District Council, Mar. 2017. www.e-lindsey.gov.uk/article/6200/Strategic-Flood-Risk-Assessment
- 12 C Redford: 'New plans for more than 500 homes in Skegness — and it's not the Gateway scheme'. *Lincolnshire World*, 14 Dec. 2022. www.lincolnshireworld.com/news/people/new-plans-for-more-than-500-homes-in-skegness-and-its-not-the-gateway-scheme-3953011
- 13 See, for example, H Ellis: 'Dowding and the forgotten art of national organisation'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2020, Vol. 89, Jan., 4–6; H Ellis: 'Dear Prime Minister, act now to save the Calder Valley'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2020, Vol. 89, Feb./Mar., 49–50; and, especially, *Building National Resilience to the Climate Crisis: The Case for Resilience Development Corporations in England*. TCPA, Feb. 2020. www.tcpa.org.uk/resources/resilience-development-corporations/

where have all the strategic planners gone?



I am often asked two related questions about strategic planning, the first being what makes a good strategic planner and the second where all the strategic planners have gone. My answer to the first is that, while a good understanding of the planning system and how it fits within other agendas—particularly around the economy, climate and the environment—is a prerequisite, other softer skills are also very important.

Much of the strategic planning role is not just about managing the competing demands of development on land, infrastructure and natural resources, but usually involves managing the different priorities of partners and other organisations. This ringmaster role requires good core skills in negotiation, collaboration and communication, ensuring that everyone understands what is needed and what their particular role in delivering the shared agenda is, whether they be in a local authority, a government department or delivery agency, or are working in the private or voluntary sectors. Partnerships need nurturing, and often this role falls to the strategic planners.

My answer to the second question is much more difficult. There is only a small group of experienced strategic planners still practising in England, and that pool is getting shallower by the day. Since the demise of Structure Plans in 2004, followed by the abolition of regional planning in 2010, this part of the profession has slowly withered. There are only a few hardy souls left now, mainly tucked away in county and unitary authorities. There has been some replenishing as a result of the few local authorities that are bravely trying to develop strategic plans and frameworks, especially within the city regions, but generally the picture is pretty bleak.

A new generation of strategic planners is desperately needed—and not just in case the government, any government, decides that strategic planning is actually a good thing and reinvents it. The need to think strategically and build strong

partnerships across local authority boundaries did not disappear with regional planning in 2010. In many ways, it is needed even more today than at any time before, given the increasing demands on land, the national priorities around building health, economic and climate resilience in which planning has a key role to play, and the many, many different partners involved in all of these areas. Whether it is addressing city-region-scale housing needs, levelling up socio-economic disparities or managing strategic infrastructure investment or the impact of nutrient neutrality, strategic planning is a necessary part of cross-border collaboration in most parts of England.

The current government does not show any serious intent to resurrect a more formal approach to strategic planning, other than some platitudes in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill on 'voluntary Spatial Development Strategies'.¹ But, just for a minute, think about what would happen if the next government does decide that the mistakes of 2010 need to be rectified and a new formal approach to strategic planning is introduced after the next general election. How will we deliver this if there is no-one to do it?

To answer this question, we need to look at what is happening more widely within the profession, particularly in local authority planning departments. It is no secret that morale generally across the profession within local authorities is pretty low as a result of a complex range of issues that have impacted over the last decade, starting with the 2010 coalition government's austerity measures, which are still hitting the public sector hard today. All the recent evidence points to the same range of issues that have had a significant impact on local authorities' ability to both attract and retain planners, as well as the many other specialists that contribute to place-making functions.

Resourcing is an ongoing challenge, with more and more being squeezed from diminishing budgets, and more and more heavy lifting being expected from the statutory planning system and therefore planning departments. New working practices, especially as a result of Covid, have resulted in a significant number of local authority planners working largely from home, with some home-working full time and not through choice, with less support and greater feelings of isolation, especially among

Table 1
Recruitment difficulties in local authorities—results from the Local Government Workforce Survey 2022

	Counties, %	Districts, %	Single tiers, %	All councils, %
Responses to: 'Please indicate for which of the following occupations, if any, your authority is experiencing recruitment difficulties – <i>counties, districts and single tier roles</i> '				
Planning officers	83	63	47	58
Legal professionals	67	50	53	53
ICT professionals	83	31	45	43
Chartered surveyors	50	35	40	39
Engineering professionals	58	6	42	27
HR and industrial relations officers	33	19	32	26
Finance officers (other than s151)	50	22	21	24
Heavy goods vehicle drivers	17	28	17	22
Administrative officers/assistants	67	4	17	16
ICT user support officers	25	19	11	16
Economic development officers	33	11	13	14
Civil enforcement officers	17	15	11	13
Cleaners, domestics	42	2	11	10
Call centre agents/operators	25	4	8	8
Personal assistants and other secretaries	25	4	4	6
Gardeners and grounds people	8	6	6	6
Community drivers	33	0	4	5
Other front line staff	8	4	2	3
Section 151 officer	0	2	4	3
Playworkers	0	0	0	0
Other (please specify below)	17	13	17	15

Base: All respondents 119 — counties (12), districts (54), single tier (53)
Source: Table 9 in *Local Government Workforce Survey 2022*⁵

younger and less experienced planners. There has been an increase in abuse of planners personally (especially online abuse) from all quarters, including internally from their own councillors. Planning as a function has seen significant devaluation, and there is now a general lack of trust in the planners that deliver on behalf of the public sector. These negative perceptions are largely a result of the focus that the current planning system places on housing numbers and regulation, as opposed to the positive place-shaping role that planning should play.

In 2018, the lack of trust in planning was an issue identified in the Raynsford Review of Planning in England, which recommended that planning should have a clear purpose ‘prioritising the safety and wellbeing of people, within a framework of long-term sustainable development, so as to create places of beauty, safety and resilience’.² This lack of trust was confirmed in 2019 Grosvenor research on public trust in planning for large-scale development, which found that only 7% of the public trust local

authorities to make decisions in the best interests of the area—and this position is unlikely to have changed since then.³

The Raynsford Review also identified how funding cuts and negative messages about planning have led to a demoralised planning service, citing the fact that planning departments had suffered the largest cuts in budgets in local authorities between 2010 and 2017, with a 53% reduction in spending during this short period.⁴ The 2022 Local Government Workforce Survey found that 58% of all councils were experiencing difficulties in recruiting planners, a higher level than that for any other occupations in local government (see Table 1, above).⁵

These sources all provided compelling evidence that the situation was bad, but it was really the fall-out of our Covid experience that confirmed that we had reached crisis point. In December 2021, Sam Stafford, author of the 50 Shades of Planning blog, put out a call for evidence from the front line to see how bad things really were.⁶ While there



Inner Circle Consulting

Attendees of a 'summit' held in April to look at the issues impacting on planning departments and explore what is needed to address them in a co-ordinated and comprehensive way

were some positive stories from local authority planners in the mix, generally the issues cited were of low morale, resourcing challenges, and the impact of new 'post-Covid' ways of working. A follow-up 'call for evidence' from Sam a year later indicated that things had not got any better, and in many ways had got progressively worse.⁷

This anecdotal evidence has been backed up by recent quantitative evidence. The RTPI's interim findings in its 2023 State of the Profession survey found that 82% of local authorities had difficulties recruiting planners in the last year and that a quarter of planners left the public sector between 2013 and 2020.⁸ Alongside this, a survey undertaken by the RTPI's magazine, *The Planner*, found that 87% of planners feel that social media is fuelling misinformation on local planning issues and that planners often find themselves the target of online trolls as a result.⁹ A survey carried out in 2022 by Public Practice found that the majority (63%) of those surveyed agreed that siloed working had a negative effect on their ability to work productively, and that difficulty in attracting qualified and skilled candidates was overwhelmingly the most common issue being faced.¹⁰

I could go on, but it is clear that we have reached crisis point in our planning departments, which is now universally acknowledged by all parts of the industry—including central government, which has established a working group to look at how to build capacity and capability in local government. Out of this, so far, we have had a consultation on increasing planning fees¹¹ and some verbal promises from the government's Planning Minister and Chief Planner that announcements about further resources are expected over the summer. The government has also introduced significant help for local authorities

on digitising as much as possible of the work that they do. The existing planning bursary programme managed through the RTPI has also been expanded to help more young people into the profession.¹²

But this is not enough, and we have already waited three years since the government first promised a comprehensive skills and resources strategy to support the planning sector as part of the now-forgotten Planning White Paper.¹³

Of course, solving the myriad of problems impacting on planning departments is not just a matter for the government, and it is not simply a case of increasing funding and digitising services, although both would help. There is a lot that local government itself can do. Strong leadership is critical, especially in relation to championing the positive value of planning and planners within local government, and that needs to start with a much better understanding from within, especially among councillors. There also has to be a recognition that we cannot simply morph into new ways of working without really understanding the impacts that they will have on people and then establishing the necessary support systems. What does a manager's 'open-door policy' look like, and how does a customer-focused service operate in an increasingly virtual world? How do we ensure that those new to the profession or more junior still get both personal and professional development support in order to progress?

We need a co-ordinated approach across all partners and sectors with a role to play and a coherent, deliverable and sustained action plan that targets all the issues impacting on planning services. This has to start with changing the narrative around the value of planning and the role that planners play in supporting sustainable growth, shifting it from the negative perceptions that we are often faced with today and the increasingly polarised debates that monopolise the narrative around housing numbers.

What we do not need is more beleaguered planning departments being targeted by the Secretary of State for not being able to deal with the number of planning applications that they receive within a set timescale. In April, Michael Gove wrote to 10 local planning authorities telling them that their 'very poor quality service to local residents' was 'not good enough' and that he was minded to designate them, taking their decision-making powers away.¹⁴ Clearly, poor service needs to be addressed, but there is very likely to be issues behind this, such as lack of resources, wider internal organisational changes, or simply an overwhelming number of applications to deal with. Support rather than attack from the government would be more welcome.

All this approach will do is encourage even more planners to walk away from local government—a 'lose-lose' situation in the end for all involved.

Thankfully, there is a chink of light beginning to shine on the crisis. Thanks to the initiative of the Planning Officers Society, the TCPA and the RTPI, a 'summit' was held in April to look at the issues impacting on planning departments and explore what is needed to address them in a co-ordinated and comprehensive way. All bodies representing the profession attended, alongside representatives from the private sector, higher education and wider stakeholders, including the Local Government Association. This initial stage was as much about sharing what everyone was already doing individually as it was about collaborative actions. It was a 'call to arms' and reflected the urgency of the crisis, but it is also just the start of the process.

I have been working as a planner for over 30 years and those like me who have been around a long time will have benefited from the golden era when planning was so much more than a numbers game and a regulatory function, and planning departments were well resourced with the right capacity and skills. We owe it to the later generations to find a way back to that.

I am under no illusions; I know the new 'normal' is very different from the old, with the impact of austerity measures over the last decade, changes as a result of our Covid experience and changing technology, especially in relation to social media, all impacting on working practices as well as the value placed on planning. Apart from anything else, the money we had then simply is no longer available, so sharing resources and skills across local authorities and more public-private partnerships will be essential going forward.

It is likely to take years to instigate real change and repair the reputational damage of planners, increasing the value of planning back to where it started many decades ago. But there will also be some early wins from this campaign, learning from those local authorities that, probably against the odds, are doing brilliantly and should be celebrated. Vitally, it is a start, and all involved are committed to making things better. And maybe somewhere in the mix someone is thinking about how we build a new generation of strategic planners so that we can hit the ground running should a new government decide that strategic planning is a critical part of the planning system to support long-term sustainable growth.

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Notes

- 1 Schedule 7 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill makes provision for two or more local planning authorities to prepare a Spatial Development Strategy on a voluntary basis
- 2 *Planning 2020 'One Year On'—21st Century Slums?* Raynsford Review of Planning in England: Updated Final Report. TCPA, Jan. 2020. www.tcpa.org.uk/resources/the-raynsford-review-of-planning/
- 3 *Building Trust*. Discussion Paper and Research Findings Summary. Grosvenor, Jul. 2019. www.grosvenor.com/property/property-uk/community-success/building-trust
- 4 See Fig. 10, 'Change in spending by sub-service by local authorities in England, 2010–11 to 2016–17' in *Financial Sustainability of Local Authorities 2018*. National Audit Office, Mar. 2018. www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Financial-sustainability-of-local-authorities-2018.pdf
- 5 See Table 9 in *Local Government Workforce Survey 2022*. Local Government Association, May 2022. www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/LG%20Workforce%20Survey%202022%20-%20Final%20for%20Publication%20-%20Tables%20Hard%20Coded.pdf
- 6 'Life on the front line'. Blog Entry. 50 Shades of Planning blog, 14 Dec. 2021. <https://samuelstafford.blogspot.com/2021/12/life-on-front-line.html>
- 7 'Life on the front line II'. Blog Entry. 50 Shades of Planning blog, 13 Dec. 2022. <https://samuelstafford.blogspot.com/2022/12/call-for-evidence-life-on-front-line-ii.html>
- 8 See 'Interim State of the Profession 2023'. Webpage. RTPI. www.rtpi.org.uk/policy-and-research/interim-state-of-the-profession-2023/
- 9 See '87% of planners say social media fuels misinformation'. News Story. RTPI, 21 Mar. 2023. www.rtpi.org.uk/news/2023/march/87-of-planners-say-social-media-fuels-misinformation-on-local-planning-issues/
- 10 See 'Authority resourcing & skills survey 2022'. Webpage. Public Practice. www.publicpractice.org.uk/survey-2022
- 11 *Increasing Planning Fees and Performance: Technical Consultation*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Feb. 2023. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/increasing-planning-fees-and-performance-technical-consultation
- 12 See 'RTPI bursaries increase to support more young people into planning careers'. News Story. RTPI, 12 May 2023. www.rtpi.org.uk/news/2023/may/rtpi-bursaries-increase-to-support-more-young-people-into-planning-careers/
- 13 See Proposal 23 on page 71 in *Planning for the Future*. Planning White Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future
- 14 See the letters from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities sent on 12 Apr. 2023 to local planning authorities at risk of designation, at www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-from-the-dluhc-secretary-of-state-to-local-planning-authorities-at-risk-of-designation

levelling up in the UK

With the prospect of increasing unification of UK policies, **Janice Morphet** considers the implications of the Levelling Up White Paper and the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill for the Devolved Administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the local authorities under them

Since the *Levelling Up in the UK* White Paper (LUWP) was published in 2022,¹ followed by the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill (LURB), much of the public discussion about its purposes and content has focused on the implications for planning and for England. However, closer consideration of the White Paper indicates that much of its content applies to the Devolved Administrations (DAs) of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the local authorities under them. This is reflected in the separate publication *Levelling Up: Delivering for All Parts of the UK*,² where information on the UK Government's expenditure in the DAs is interspersed with similar pages for the English regions which have no legal entity or powers.

What is also interesting is that many of the proposed actions in the LUWP that have some effect on the DAs concern matters that are already devolved and have not been subject to policy on delivery from Whitehall and Westminster since devolution was implemented in 1999. However, there has been an increase in the ways in which UK central government has been changing the powers of the DAs since 2014. This has occurred both through legislation and through direct funding relationships between local authorities under the DAs and the Treasury in London. This broader scope of the LUWP, which is continued into the LURB, is worth some consideration for its wider implications of reducing the powers of the DAs and the increased centralisation from London across the governance scales of the whole of the UK, including local authorities.

Before looking at the LUWP in detail for implications for the DAs, it is interesting to note the scale of change which is being brought into the role and exercise of their powers. It is possible to see this in two ways. The first is through legislative or *de jure* changes which have been in operation since Brexit.

Here we see the powers of the DA Parliaments in Scotland and Wales and the Assembly in Northern Ireland being reduced through a range of legislation, which includes:

- the European Communities (Withdrawal) Act 2018;
- the Internal Market Act 2020;
- the Subsidy Control Act 2022; and
- the use of Section 35 intervention powers of the Scotland Act 1998 in relation to the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill.

The effect of these legal changes is to override powers given to the DAs in 1999 and subsequently, by introducing powers for the same matters for the whole of the UK, such as those for the internal market. Furthermore, since 1999 the Sewel Convention³ meant that the Scottish and Welsh Governments could offer their views on legislation that would have implications for them. However, since Brexit the Convention has been largely ignored and shown to be powerless to uphold devolved decision-making through the Miller 1 case before the Supreme Court.

The second way in which Westminster has been reducing devolutionary powers is through changing the operation of DA powers by more *de facto* means. These include the introduction of deals between Whitehall and the local authorities under the DAs, starting with that for Glasgow City Region in 2014.⁴ Through these deals, like the deal frameworks in England, councils agree projects and additional funding which also require a commitment from the devolved governments. These deals last longer than those in England, which in general are for only five years. They also require the councils under the DAs to contribute their own funding as part of the deal. The deals are set within governance frameworks that



Both the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments have prepared Legislative Consent Memorandums contesting the UK Government's view that consultation or consideration through the legislative consent process is not required for the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill

are determined in London, and each project has to be approved through a board which includes more members from Whitehall than local members. These deals now cover the whole territory of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with the last deals being concluded shortly before the publication of the LUWP.

In 2019, one of the last acts of Theresa May as Prime Minister was to instigate the Dunlop Review of UK Government Union Capability, which reported later that year.⁵ As recommended by the Review a new mechanism for discussing policies within the UK was established and was broadly welcomed at the time as a sensible way forward for intergovernmental relations. Between the publication of the Dunlop Review report and the LUWP in 2022, the reduction in DA powers through Brexit legislation continued. However, the publication of the LUWP suggests a greater step towards unification of UK policies for local authorities in ways that have not been in place since before 1999 if not earlier, and these appear to be carried forward into the LURB.

What does the LUWP include that will have implications for the DAs? First, there is a commitment to streamline funding arrangements across the UK at this level (p.128), although it is not clear what this might mean. Since 1978, the Barnett formula has been used to allocate funds to the DAs in proportion to that provided in England.⁶ Since devolution, this funding has been spent under the devolved powers of the administrations. But the introduction of a streamlined system suggests a uniform approach to funding streams across the UK.

The LUWP argues that this more centralised approach is to benefit the citizens in the DAs so that they are able to benefit from the 'scale' of the UK (p.137), again without indicating what this benefit might be. On these more general new operating provisions, the LUWP states that Westminster will work to ensure that 'what works' is shared by the UK Government across the DAs (p.155), again without indicating what evaluative mechanisms will be used to examine effective policy-making.

Other proposals in the LUWP that relate to the DAs concern more specific national initiatives such as the introduction of Freeports, a UK-wide strategy for creative industries (p.167), sharing digital skills experience (p.185), and establishing pathfinders for skills (p.195). The 2023 Budget added to these

initiatives by including proposals for Investment Zones across the UK. The LUWP also brings together place-based policies, including a pan-UK approach to high streets (p.211). The LUWP proposes to use an intergovernmental review to support regeneration and places (p.211), which may include more generic policies for the whole of the UK. The existing deals for local authorities in the DAs will continue.

For longer-standing devolved services, the LUWP states (on p.xx) that:

'Devolution settlements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland recognise that devolved governments are best placed to deliver certain services, like health and education. But outcomes are a shared interest for the whole of the UK.'

Specific actions on these issues across the UK are proposed. In DA governance, the UK Government intends to create and insert a role for stakeholders which may dilute the democratic structures that were set up in 1999 and may be similar to those used more frequently in England. It also intends to introduce 'community covenants' (p.215). It is proposed by Westminster to introduce a joint delivery plan with the DAs, which could be similar in structure to those used for individual deals. There is also an intention to co-ordinate action on climate change across the UK.

At the local level, councils under the DAs will be expected to work within the 'missions' set out in the LUWP, although many of them are devolved. The 12 missions are also set within six 'capitals'. These are shown in Box 1. In England, there is to be a new Office for Local Government—Oflog—but at present it will not be extended across the UK. However, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) will be required to report on mission outcomes for each UK local authority. Every UK local authority will be required to demonstrate how it is performing against delivery of the 12 missions. The missions cover a range of issues that include wellbeing and 'pride in place', together with life expectancy, education, skills, and productivity. There is an objective that public transport access in England should reach the same levels of connectivity as that in London, and that broadband will roll out to 5G standard to most of the population across the UK.

There is technical guidance on the missions and the metrics to be used by the ONS.⁷ Reviewing this technical guidance in detail, it is clear that local

Box 1

Levelling Up White Paper missions

Living standards: To increase pay, employment and productivity in every part of the UK, with each containing 'a globally competitive city' and a smaller gap between top-performing and other areas.

Research and development: 'By 2030, domestic public investment in R&D outside the Greater South East will increase by at least 40%, and over the Spending Review period by at least one third. This additional government funding will seek to leverage at least twice as much private sector investment over the long term to stimulate innovation and productivity growth.'

Transport infrastructure: Local public transport connectivity across the UK to be 'significantly closer to the standards of London', including integrated ticketing and simpler fares.

Digital connectivity: 'By 2030, the UK will have nationwide gigabit-capable broadband and 4G coverage, with 5G coverage for the majority of the population.'

Education: A 'significant' increase in primary school children reaching expected standards in reading, writing and maths. For England (education policy is devolved) this will mean at least 90% meeting expected standards, with at least a one-third increase for this metric in the worst-performing areas.

Skills: A 'significant' rise in the numbers completing high-quality skills training across the UK. In England, the target is for 200,000 more doing so, including 80,000 in the lowest-skilled areas.

Health: A narrowing in healthy life expectancy between the UK areas where it is highest and lowest, with the overall average healthy life expectancy rising by five years by 2035.

Wellbeing: An improvement in perceived wellbeing in all parts of the UK, with a narrowed gap between areas with the highest and lowest levels.

Pride in place: A rise, across the whole UK, in 'pride in place', defined as 'people's satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community', with a narrowing of gaps between areas with the highest and lowest levels.

Housing: An increase in the number of first-time home buyers in all UK areas. The 'ambition' is for a 50% fall in the number of rented homes deemed non-decent, including the biggest improvements in worst-performing areas.

Crime: An overall fall in homicide, serious violence, and neighbourhood crime, focused on worst-affected areas.

Local leadership: A devolution deal for 'every part of England that wants one', with powers 'at or approaching the highest level of devolution and a simplified, long-term funding settlement'.

Source: Table 2.1, 'Levelling up missions', in *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*¹

authority delivery on the missions will be dependent on central government activity and funding. In the main, mission delivery cannot be wholly in the gift of any local authority in the UK—private-sector expenditure on research and development, for example. Indeed, much of the discussion on measurement within the missions appears to be making good shortfalls in regional data sets for the private sector.

On specific educational attainments local authorities might be considered to have greater influencer and control, but now that the majority of schools are managed by academies there is little opportunity for local authorities to directly influence their performance. Wellbeing and pride in place missions relate to community cohesion, safety, and other factors such as housing and cultural provision. The government has made significant funding available to local authorities in England through short-term support for Town Fund schemes and Shared Prosperity Funding. However, this has not made any significant shift in improving the provision of non-market housing in

the face of growing needs in a decreasing rental market, although the government's objective of creating more first-time homeowners is a mission. The last missions are concerned with community safety and the establishment of deals across the whole of the territory of England to match the current position in the rest of the UK.

While referring to the whole of the UK, many of the missions in the LUWP appear to be more focused on England. The application of the content of the LUWP within the DAs has not been subject to consultation with them or subject to the legislative consent process across the DAs through the application of the Sewel Convention as, in the UK Government's stated view, this is not required for the LURB as it is acting in whole country's interest. This is not the view of the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments. The Scottish Parliament set out its view in a Legislative Consent Memorandum on 27 July 2022, which stated:

'In substance these provisions will, and are intended to, provide a legislative framework to underpin a role for UK Ministers in devolved areas.'

*Statements on the levelling-up missions would include matters within the devolved competence of the Scottish Parliament. These provisions are made for the purposes of education, health, housing and justice which are within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament.*⁸

The Welsh Senedd also prepared a Legislative Consent Memorandum 28 September 2022, which stated:

*'It is the Welsh Government's view that the Senedd could pass equivalent provisions to those contained within Part 1 and place on Welsh Ministers identical obligations to set out how they propose to 'reduce geographical disparities' in economic, social or other opportunities across Wales; supported by identical reporting, scrutiny, review etc. obligations as set out in Part 1 of the Bill.'*⁹

At present, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill is passing through Parliament and issues involving the more centralised adoption of powers currently operated by the DAs remain. The UK Government is using some of the arguments of the UK having a 'post code lottery', which implies that citizens are losing out if different approaches are used in different locations and that they cannot benefit from wider experience to be provided by central government—although it is not clear how this wider success is to be derived or measured. The LUWP is using the language of soft power and its practices to change operational relationships between Whitehall and the DAs without changing the *de jure* powers.

It is also using the intergovernmental apparatus—which was welcomed following the Dunlop Review as a more equal way of working, post-Brexit—to implement change in a way that was not anticipated at the time.

In terms of the deals, they seem to fall within the cracks of accountability between the National Audit Office and the devolved audit administrations as their content is entirely in the control of Whitehall.

So, what does all this suggest is the state of relationships between UK central government and the DAs? What effects will there be on policies for places if these are to be unified? Are the DA governments weaker than they were a few months ago, and will their powers be further undermined once the LURB has been passed? The local authority deals have shown that the DAs cannot exercise much power where central funds are provided. Furthermore, there is some indication that local authorities under the DAs are being redirected to prioritise the projects in the deals above their own priorities and those of their own devolved governments.

Much of this policy on the new relationship between central government and the DAs was led by Sue Gray when she was Second Permanent Secretary at Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, with responsibility for these issues.

Now that she has resigned and may possibly joining the Labour Leader's team, will these re-centralising policies slow down or will they be transferred into Labour Party policy? In 1997, when New Labour was elected, it was assumed that competition for services would be abandoned or abolished by the incoming government, but a continuing competitive approach was introduced though Best Value. Would a change in government provide a similar, albeit softer approach, to reducing devolved powers?

Perhaps local authorities in the devolved administrations will ignore the levelling-up missions once they are enacted? However, if they are part of a national measurement reporting scheme through the Office for National Statistics and are possibly associated with deal funding or other centralised policy regimens, this may be difficult. The LUWP is creating a new relationship between the DAs and UK central government post-Brexit, undermining DA powers from below.

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Notes

- 1 *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*. Levelling Up White Paper. CP 604. HM Government, Feb. 2022. www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom
- 2 *Levelling Up: Delivering for All Parts of the UK*. HM Government, Feb. 2022. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052710/Delivering_for_all_parts_of_the_United_Kingdom_Hi-res.pdf
- 3 P Bowers: *The Sewel Convention*. Standard Note SN/PC/2084. House of Commons Library, Nov. 2005. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn02084/>
- 4 J Morphet: 'Deals and devolution: the role of local authority deals in undermining devolved decision making'. *Local Economy*, 2023 (forthcoming). First published online Apr. 2023. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/02690942231172170>
- 5 *Review of UK Government Union Capability*. Dunlop Review, Nov. 2019. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/972987/Lord_Dunlop_s_review_into_UK_Government_Union_Capability.pdf
- 6 M Keep: *The Barnett Formula and Fiscal Devolution*. Research Briefing. House of Commons Library, Jul. 2022. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7386/>
- 7 *Levelling Up the United Kingdom: Missions and Metrics. Technical Annex*. HM Government, Feb. 2022. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1054766/Technical_annex_-_missions_and_metrics.pdf
- 8 *Legislative Consent Memorandum: Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill*. LCM-S6-23. Scottish Parliament, Jul. 2022. www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/legislation/bills/lcms/levelling-up-and-regeneration-bill/splcms0623.pdf
- 9 *Legislative Consent Memorandum: Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill*. Welsh Parliament, Nov. 2022. <https://senedd.wales/media/5gdfx1u1/lcm-ld15356-e.pdf>

england's proposed national development management policies— potential lessons from victoria

Our understanding of the possible consequences of the significant reform to decades of planning practice represented by the introduction of NDMPs in England can be aided by consideration of the workings, successes and shortcomings of the Victoria Planning Provisions and their operation in the Australian State of Victoria, as **Ben Clifford** explains

The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill currently going through Parliament would radically change the planning system in England. One of the most significant measures in the Bill is the proposal to introduce 'National Development Management Policies' (NDMPs). Announcing the Bill, the government suggested that having policies on issues applying across the country would help to make Local Plans faster to produce (by saving planners from repeating nationally important policies in their own plans) and easier to navigate (by reducing their length).¹

A consultation paper from the government published in December 2022 suggests that the NDMPs would cover considerations such as heritage asset conservation, preventing inappropriate development in the Green Belt, or dealing with areas of high flood risk that apply regularly in decision-making across England, and would draw heavily on existing National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) considerations which are already 'material considerations' when assessing planning applications, but without statutory status. Existing policies aimed at decision-making in the current

NPPF (which itself would be reformatted to focus on plan-making) would form the core of the NDMPs, apparently supplemented by additions to reflect new national policies in relation to, for example, net zero, carbon reduction, allotments, and housing in town centres.²

The government consultation suggests that NDMPs could also provide more consistency for small- and medium-sized housebuilders by reducing the complexity that comes from having slightly different requirements across local authorities. There would still be scope for local authorities to have policies relating to particular local issues not covered by the NDMPs, which might include (where appropriate) issues around student housing or coastal management.

The legal process to introduce these new NDMPs would involve the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill (if it receives Royal Assent as an Act of Parliament) amending Section 38 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, so that, instead of making a determination on a planning application in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise, the local

planning authority would instead take regard of the development plan and any NDMPs unless material considerations *strongly* indicate otherwise; and if the development plan conflicts with an NDMP then the conflict must be resolved in favour of the NDMP. The Bill also defines the NDMPs as any policy relating to the development or use of land in England designated as such by the Secretary of State, and says that, in producing them, the Secretary of State would have to undertake such consultation as they think appropriate.

There are a number of potential concerns raised by these proposals, which at the time of writing the House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee is examining.

First, these proposals significantly alter the nature of a planning system in which the locally made development plan has primacy. Instead, national policy would have supremacy, and as such the NDMPs represent centralisation of planning decision-making.³ Secondly, there is the risk of an erosion of public participation, since there are specific processes around participation and rights in plan-making which would not apply here, with only a weak legal protection leaving it to the whim of the Secretary of State as to how much it is considered necessary to consult on any NDMP. Thirdly, there is also wide scope and discretion over what the Secretary of State can designate as an NDMP in the first place, which again could lead to concerns around centralisation and the scope for participation in the system.

Such concerns can be seen in commentary on the proposals. Highlighting that they break with the tradition of 70 years of law and practice, the RTPI has suggested that there should be a requirement for Parliament to debate and approve the policies, following public consultation.⁴ The Local Government Association has expressed concern that the NDMPs could leave councils unable to tailor policies to local circumstances.⁵

The Mayor of London believes that the NDMPs are oppositional to devolution and could stifle innovation on things such as net zero, fire safety, and housing delivery.⁶ The Mayor has argued that they should be subject to tests set out in legislation, including tests on their justification, purposes, and deliverability, and that they should be national minimum standards which can be exceeded locally where evidence in justification exists.⁷

The London Assembly has also expressed concern about the government's approach, with particular disquiet that Local Plans cannot contain policies on the same areas as the NDMPs if they are setting absolute standards rather than minimum standards which can be enhanced locally.⁸ And, arguing that proposals give secondary legal status for the Local Plan, the TCPA has highlighted the lack of meaningful safeguards in relation to public scrutiny of the NDMPs.⁹

Comparison with Australia: the Victoria Planning Provisions

It is clear that the NDMP proposals represent a significant change to the existing planning system in England. Our understanding of them can be assisted by consideration of international practice. Comparative approaches to studying planning have a long history and can help to illuminate the taken-for-granted—albeit any comparison must consider the political, legal, administrative, social and cultural context for planning.

In this respect, Australia and the UK might be noted as nations drawing legally on the tradition of common law, with British administrative traditions including an agency model of local government (where local authorities are seen as agents carrying out government policies and with a 'dual polity' where there is little movement of professionals between levels of government) and with dominant (neo)liberal social models and governance approaches. Both the UK and Australia also have planning systems that differ by nation (in the UK) or state (in Australia) but which generally involve some balance between centralised and localised policy-making and decision-making and of 'by-right' and discretionary decision-making.

The planning system in the State of Victoria offers an interesting comparator for the NDMPs proposal: the Victoria Planning Provisions (VPPs).¹⁰ Victoria has a planning system that mixes by-right planning (with zoning and particular types of development either expressly allowed or expressly prohibited) with a discretionary system (with planning permits required for a range of development neither expressly allowed nor prohibited). Each local planning authority produces a 'planning scheme' (which might be considered akin to a development plan) that allocates zones and 'overlays' along with other policies to regulate and guide decision-making about land use and development.

The VPPs are much wider than the NDMPs and can be considered a toolkit of parts, out of which a local authority must assemble their planning scheme. They include a state-wide planning policy framework (originally called the State Planning Policy Framework or SPPF, but now just the Planning Policy Framework or PPF, which contains guiding principles about the use and development of land with themes of settlement, environmental and landscape values, environmental risks, natural resource management, built environment and heritage, housing and economic development, transport, and infrastructure) and a set of zones and overlays which a local planning authority can use in making the planning scheme for their area (in 1996 there were 23 zones and 22 overlays).

There are also particular provisions, which are authored by officials at the state level and apply across the planning schemes of all of Victoria's 79 local authorities. The idea is that since the rules in



Melbourne, Victoria — the Victoria planning system mixes by-right planning with a discretionary system

zones and overlays apply to particular locations only (as allocated in each planning scheme), they allow for controls for certain issues and application types state-wide; the PPF is policy background to guide applications, whereas the particular provisions can trigger the need for planning permission in the first place and include binding restrictions applying to the determination of planning permits. They are outcome-focused and can have a powerful effect, and include provisions relating to advertising signs, car parking, uses with adverse amenity potential, home businesses, native vegetation, telecommunications facilities, licensed premises, and gaming.

There is a key group of clauses under the particular provisions governing residential development and assessment guidelines (now popularly referred to as the 'ResCode'), which work alongside residential zones, the neighbourhood character overlay and, separate to the planning system, building regulations (which provide universal minimum standards even where a planning permit is not required).¹¹

The general provisions provide guidance on how decisions should be made about permits and specify some things as essentially what would be understood in the UK as 'permitted development'. The incorporated documents include state-wide documents, but local authorities can also add to them in their particular planning scheme (in 1996 there were 29 documents specified by the state). They can include codes of practice and technical standards such those as relating to telecommunication facilities and car parking. All of these state and locally authored components are combined to form the 'planning scheme' for a particular local planning authority area.

The emergence of the Victoria Planning Provisions

Prior to the introduction of the VPPs, each local planning authority had considerable discretion over the content of their planning schemes (although there had been some consistency through widespread

acceptance of standard codes for issues such as overlooking and shadowing, and there were some state-wide controls where they were felt necessary, for example over native vegetation clearance). This even included discretion over what zones might be used in the first place and over the restrictions associated with them (although there was consistency across Melbourne's local authorities through the role of the now abolished Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works). Some planning authorities had also made slow progress in adopting a planning scheme at all.

In 1993, under right-wing Liberal Premier Jeff Kennett, the then Minister for Planning claimed that planning schemes were too large, too complex and had too much variation between them, which could increase costs, uncertainty and delay for developers. It was argued the planning system often gave too much weight to the views of existing residents at the cost of facilitating economic development.¹² A committee called the Perrott Committee was established to develop a more standardised planning system for the State of Victoria. There were no resident or community representatives on this group, which was seen by some as having been heavily influenced by developers and their consultants. There was little meaningful public engagement on the development of the measures that became the VPPs—which might be understood as something of a 'crash through' model of government.

In 1996, the proposed state-wide standardised planning provisions were introduced. There have been a number of additions and changes since—for example the number of zones available to use in planning schemes has increased from 23 to 30. The controls around residential development were replaced in 2001 following battles over medium-density housing and arguments in favour of greater emphasis on local context through ensuring that attention is paid to site analysis and appropriate design response. With increased references made to neighbourhood character and community

involvement, greater discretion was introduced around moderate infill developments.

Additions and changes to the VPPs over time have varied slightly according to the issues and the politics of the time, with wide differences around public engagement over the development of parts of the VPPs, from the tokenistic to the meaningful. There is a continual tension between the need for customisation and meeting particular needs for different localities within the state and the desire to avoid the VPPs themselves then becoming ever longer and more complex—a basic dilemma which recurs at various levels of their design and drafting.¹³ Interestingly, the Labor Party promised that, if elected in 1999, they would seek to increase local control over decision-making in planning again, but did not then follow through with this commitment once elected to state government, and the VPPs survived a change of administration.

The Victoria Planning Provisions in practice

The VPPs have been criticised by some as being based on a worldview that sees planning as essentially bureaucratic, and negative and even pointless, and so seeks to centralise in order to impose on local government standardised systems intended to facilitate development.¹⁴ But they are now taken for granted to the point that many practising planners cannot recall (or have never experienced) the system before they existed and are well used to working within the framework that they provide. There are some clear advantages to the VPPs. There were certainly some local planning authorities that did not have an up-to-date planning scheme, or had one that was not particularly sophisticated, and introducing the VPPs ensured a baseline of provisions that applied state-wide, which probably improved the decision-making framework in those local areas.

There are advantages to consistency. Centralisation means that well designed changes to VPP clauses can have beneficial effect rapidly, and amending their core controls can allow powerful changes to be introduced state-wide. This has included, for example, the response to wildfires in 2009, which resulted in a new Bushfire Management Overlay in 2011, the update to which was the subject of public engagement in 2022.¹⁵ As well as ease of change and impact, standardisation can act to raise professional standards, encouraging a structured and logical approach to decision-making consistently across different local authorities.¹³

The centralised VPPs also have not entirely extinguished the ability to respond to local circumstances, since within their defined parameters there can still be flexibility in each adopted planning scheme. This includes the ability to customise schedules accompanying residential zones in relation to building setback, height, site coverage, private open space, and so on. That said,

it is very difficult for local government to introduce mandatory controls through schedules or local policies with state government maintaining oversight over attempted variations.

The VPPs are not generally considered to have met the original 1990s objectives of reducing the size and complexity of planning schemes, nor of making the planning system more efficient and less costly to administer. The task of trying to account for differences across the state and in existing planning schemes meant that the VPPs quickly developed into a complex and layered mix of compulsory and optional features. This complexity has increased over time.

In some cases, VPPs seem to have actually increased the amount of developments needing approval via the discretionary permit route. Smaller, rural authorities are required to have the same set of state-wide policies as urban and high-growth areas, and the provisions include things developed for places where there are particular problems, which can then increase complexity elsewhere as they are applied universally. And everywhere, over time, the number of provisions has grown, so the streamlining aim is lost in the face of broad pressure for planning to resolve or regulate various issues (or try to).

To some extent the process of implementing the VPPs involved a loss of some local distinctiveness. While some authorities had outdated or even inadequate planning schemes, others had already developed effective schemes. For example, some heritage towns had nicely developed design guidance on matters such as roof pitches, while some green belt authorities had stricter policies over the sub-division of land—and in replacing local with state-wide policies, some nuanced and sophisticated local policies were lost when the VPPs were developed and implemented.

The weight given to the state-wide policies and provisions under the VPP approach makes it all the more problematic when there are issues missing or not appropriately covered by the VPPs. The ResCode has not applied to developments over four stories high, and a lack of effective control has been associated with the boom in high-rise development, particularly in central and inner suburban Melbourne.¹⁶ In the inner suburbs, historic 19th century shopping strips at a human scale are a loved and characteristic feature of Melbourne, but with local planning authorities having to 'pick from what's on the shelf' within the VPPs, sometimes the regulatory levers are less matched to local context and circumstance than might be ideal to protect them.

Furthermore, there have been concerns about the impacts of high-rise apartment buildings in the central business district, which has led to the VPPs being amended to include new design standards under the *Better Apartments* document which



'The introduction of the VPPs has not 'solved planning', and concerns around efficiency and effectiveness continue to drive calls for further reform'

initially, in 2017, focused on internal amenity issues but was then further amended in 2019 to consider access to outdoor space and some public realm issues.¹⁷ However, a rush of development occurred before these policies were updated, leaving a legacy of housing at extremely high density which has raised concern about matters such as access to daylight, internal space standards, overshadowing, and public realm and neighbourhood character issues which will now not be easily resolved and could not be adequately considered at the time of approval under the VPPs then in force.

The VPPs were introduced at a similar time to local government reorganisation in Victoria. Perhaps somewhat inevitably, given the VPPs and other reforms that have made planning more centralised and hierarchical, there is a feeling from some that local government is increasingly disenfranchised and seen as a less vital part of planning government; more of a de-democratised delivery agency. Addressing issues such as apartment design therefore requires action from the state government.

The combination of state-wide standardised controls and strong Ministerial powers means that in theory problematic VPP clauses might be amended or missing issues might be addressed through additional clauses with relative ease, but this requires the Minister 'both to accept the problem and assume responsibility for the solution'.¹³ There have been examples where Ministers have sought to avoid directly dealing with potentially problematic issues by delegating back to local councils, for example by having car parking standards set locally.

At the same time, amendments to the VPPs can themselves become political issues owing to their control by central government, and this can lead to some back-and-forth as Ministers and administrations change. Suburban height controls were introduced under a Liberal Minister in 2013, but then removed once the Labor government was elected in 2016.

A Labor Minister had increased controls over industrialised sheds in rural areas in 2006, but these controls were then scrapped by a Liberal Minister. There has been a tendency to fiddle with the VPPs as governments change.

The remove between making and amending the VPPs (state government) and decision-making on planning permits (primarily local government) can be problematic; there can be issues around the distance and disconnect between state and local governments. There is limited ability for local government planners to try to fix problems that they might encounter, while state government officials in the Ministry might see the system differently as they are removed from local government practice and the challenges and consequences of everyday decision-making. This has apparently not been helped by communication and co-operation inadequacies between the layers of government. In other words:

*'state government management of the system risks being at once too far above the system (in that it is separated from anecdotal experience of system issues) and not high level enough (if it is not adequately monitoring the state-wide outcomes). It is therefore important that the system include a strong performance monitoring framework to help ensure that problems with the system are effectively and promptly diagnosed.'*¹³

Unfortunately, this does not appear to have happened very effectively; the Victorian Auditor-General expressed concern in a 2008 review that there was no formal mechanism for the Ministry to systematically collect, analyse and monitor the views of stakeholders on an ongoing basis or to evaluate the impact of the implementation of planning policies and reforms.¹⁸ A follow-up review in 2017 noted that this issue of a lack of structured feedback mechanisms (from local decision-makers to central policy-writers) continued.¹⁹ Furthermore, there is no

formal use of planning appeals tribunal decisions to help identify potential improvements to the system's operation, even though there is clear scope for this as a feedback route to the Ministry.

A system whereby standard policies, authored by state government officials, apply across all local authorities means that there is a need for those drafting the policies to have a good understanding of the impacts of their wording and to be able to effectively write these policies. That does not always appear to have been the case to date; just as the state-wide continuity of the VPPs means that well designed changes to the clauses can have beneficial effect rapidly, so poorly worded clauses can have detrimental impact widely. Over time, amendments have often improved the wording of controls, but this has taken an iterative approach. An understanding of the relationship between the strategy and the controls and of the need for precise language which gives clear guidance to decision-makers in local government has sometimes been lacking.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that, even with strongly centralised planning policy making, decision-making on planning permits can still vary considerably between local authorities using the VPPs. This has been linked to resourcing, and resourcing issues remain key in the efficient operation of the planning system in Victoria.

'The potential for measures which spread harmful impacts across England through a few poorly worded clauses drafted in the Ministry is enormous, and careful thought needs to be given to how the NDMPs are working in practice'

Conclusions—thinking ahead to the National Development Management Policies

The Victoria Planning Provisions provide an example of centralisation of planning policy-making in a governance setting which is in many ways familiar to England. The VPPs were introduced in 1996 and are now well embedded in planning practice.

Views on their merits clearly diverge, but there do appear to have been some advantages in relation to some issues and in some places from ensuring that certain minimum standards are consistently applied state-wide, and from the ability to implement positive new measures with ease. However, there are also disadvantages related to a reduced ability to account for particular local contexts, a reduced role for local government, and a disconnect between planning policy-making and planning decision-making.

There has also been some variation in levels of public engagement around the development and revision of particular clauses in the VPPs. More broadly, planning reform has continued apace in Victoria, with a wave of other initiatives implemented and proposed. In other words, the introduction of the VPPs has not 'solved planning', and concerns around efficiency and effectiveness continue to drive calls for further reform.

If, as now seems likely, the NDMPs are introduced in England, they will represent a significant reform to decades of planning practice and remove the primacy of the locally made development plan in decision-making. There are important issues around what this means for local democracy and the ability to respond to local character and circumstances across a country with an arguably much wider range of development contexts than the State of Victoria. This might be potentially problematic if they offer only the weakest or lowest levels of regulation because of concerns about viability in some parts of England and authorities that wish to have stronger regulations on some issues are then prevented from doing so.

The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill also offers weak protection on community engagement and the widest possible scope of discretion for the Secretary of State in terms of what can become a NDMP and how the NDMPs are developed—something that experience of the VPPs suggests we should be concerned about.

The NDMPs could be positive for planning practice in increasing standards for *some* authorities with outdated or poorly developed Local Plan policies on *some* issues. They could become beneficial if, for example, they made the Nationally Described Space Standards mandatory across the whole country rather than having to be adopted into local planning policy via a convoluted route, or if they helped to embed something like the TCPA's Healthy Homes Principles.

But as experience from Victoria shows, there is reason to be concerned about channels of communication between layers of government and about understanding in central government of planning outcomes and decision-making in practice. If we look at the example of office-to-residential permitted development in England, issues with the wording and coverage of the regulations which became apparent fairly quickly after the approach was introduced in 2013 were not addressed until political pressure led to an independent review reporting in 2020.²⁰

The potential for measures which spread harmful impacts across England through a few poorly worded clauses drafted in the Ministry is enormous, and careful thought needs to be given to how the NDMPs are working in practice and what outcomes they are leading to on the ground, including clear opportunities for feedback from local planning authorities and

careful attention to Planning Inspectorate appeal decisions. Correcting errors must not take seven years.

It is also instructive that introduction of the centralised VPPs in Victoria does not appear to have made the planning system speedier or more efficient. Issues with plan-making by authorities in England are surely related to the decade of super-austerity imposed on local government, as well as political issues around housing targets and allocations. The NDMPs are unlikely to resolve these issues, nor the dilemmas of everyday practice in interpreting them in decision-making on planning applications.

It is somewhat disconcerting to see central government policy reduce the capacity of local planning authorities and then see central government claim that key areas of policy-making must be centralised because of a lack of capacity and progress locally. Systematic evaluation of the implications of central government policy-making remains important as the chaotic bandwagon of planning reform continues.

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20-minute neighbourhoods

Guest Editor **Gemma Hyde** introduces the Special Issue on 20-Minute Neighbourhoods

Three years ago, the way that most of us live changed. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, we suddenly found ourselves spending more time in our communities and neighbourhoods. Many of us no longer travelled as frequently, or as far for work, socialising, shopping or services, and we discovered, sometimes with joy and sometimes with disappointment, what our local environments could provide. Against this backdrop the TCPA, supported by Sport England, began a project to explore 20-minute neighbourhoods, a place-making framework to support living locally more of the time, translating evidence and practice from around the world into the English context.

The idea is simple: that people should be able to access key services and amenities close to home by travelling actively—walking, wheeling, and cycling. We call these places 20-minute neighbourhoods, or complete, compact and connected communities. There are many other names for the same ideas—including 15-minute cities, healthy living zones, and complete communities.

To most, 20-minute neighbourhoods sound instinctively appealing, but in recent months the concept has faced controversy, cast as an ‘international socialist conspiracy’ aiming to remove personal freedoms and keep people in ‘climate lockdowns’, and conflated with institutional trust issues around Covid vaccinations and the cashless society.

However, the TCPA believes that 20-minute neighbourhoods are about increasing freedom and choice; making active, connected lives the easiest, most logical enjoyable choice—which should all sound very familiar to anyone well versed in the Garden City model and Ebenezer Howard’s ideas on healthy, walkable neighbourhoods, where people have local opportunities and access to the ingredients for a ‘good life’. The 20-minute neighbourhood comes from the same well-spring of ideas.

All the available evidence suggests that the environments into which we are born and which we grow up in, play in, live in, work in, and age in shape our health, our behaviours, and our life-chances. We, in turn, have the power to shape our environments—and so the TCPA will continue to advocate for and support places implementing healthy place-making ideas and frameworks such as 20-minute neighbourhoods, so as to help shape better places for human and planetary thriving.

This edition of *Town & Country Planning*, focused on 20-minute neighbourhoods, brings together voices from across the built environment, research bodies and communities to show how far we have come, celebrate successes, acknowledge the ongoing challenges, and, it is hoped, inspire commitment to this work for the next three years and beyond.

● **Gemma Hyde** is Project and Policy Officer at the TCPA and leads the TCPA’s work on 20-minute neighbourhoods. The views expressed are personal.

20-minute neighbourhoods and the TCPA

Free 20-minute neighbourhood resources are available from the TCPA website — see www.tcpa.org.uk/collection/the-20-minute-neighbourhood/

The resources including recordings of the entire TCPA webinar series, at www.tcpa.org.uk/collection/20-minute-neighbourhood-webinars/

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the TCPA's 20-minute neighbourhood project

Societies around the world are facing urgent, complex and interconnected problems, many of which are driving high levels of deprivation, social inequalities and poor health outcomes across people's life courses. These inequalities in life experience can have deeply detrimental effects on individuals, families, communities, and society.

In the face of this challenge, disparate places are seeking to create places that better foster conditions for human and planetary thriving, and there is growing evidence that people are healthier when they can live in **complete, compact** and **connected** communities in which many of their needs are met locally—sometimes known as 15-minute cities or 20-minute neighbourhoods.

In 2020, supported by Sport England, the TCPA began a project focused on 20-minute neighbourhoods.

After researching and speaking to politicians, urban planners and local authorities across the world, the TCPA published *20-Minute Neighbourhoods—Creating Healthier, Active, Prosperous Communities*,* a guide to translating the 20-minute neighbourhood idea into the English planning context.

Since then, the TCPA has promoted the concept; continued to learn and share learning through a highly successful webinar series; tracked reference to the TCPA guide across national and local policy; supported places in implementing the concept; and continued to develop web-based resources to help communities create places in which everyone can thrive.

* Available at
www.tcpa.org.uk/resources/the-20-minute-neighbourhood/

The project in numbers

31,000+

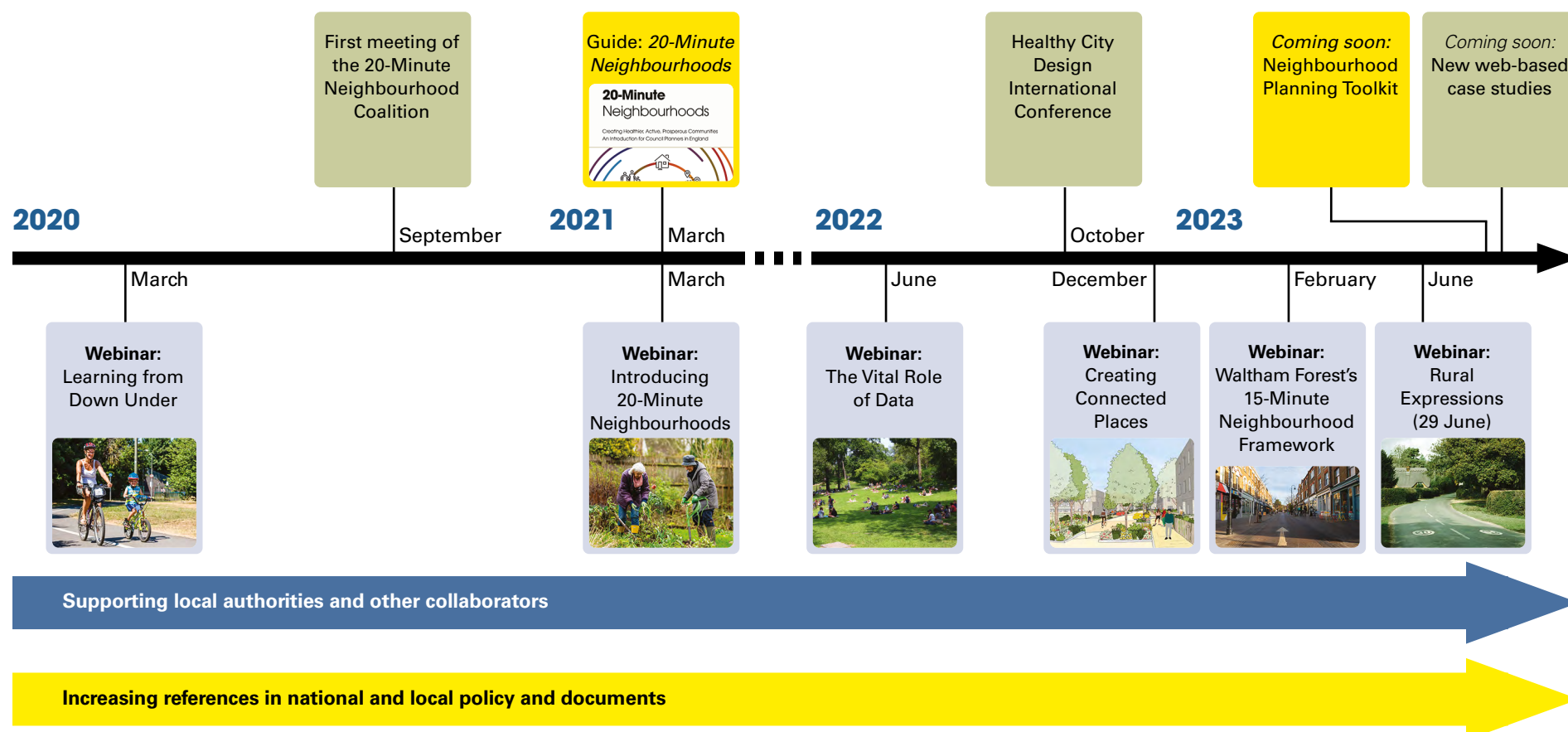
Webpage visits

12,000+

Guide downloads

4,000+

Webinar reach



incentives, instinct and intellect — aligning what we need to do with what we want to do

Chris Boardman, National Active Travel Commissioner for England and Chair of Sport England, argues that, contrary to popular belief, evidence is not the main driver of change, and considers what, if data isn't driving our decision-making, will make us to step into the unknown

More than a decade ago, my daughter, Agatha, asked me a question that changed the pattern of my working life. She asked me: 'Can we ride to the park?' In fact, it wasn't the question that changed everything; it was my answer, which was: 'No'.

We lived in a typical northern seaside town. The park in question was just 584 metres away from our home. It was a distance that takes a little less than three minutes to pedal and I, an ex-Olympic cyclist, didn't feel that I could keep my daughter safe on our local roads for a journey of less than three minutes. That felt wrong, it wasn't what I wanted for her and it wasn't what I wanted for me. So I decided to do something about it. More than a decade later, I'm still at it because if the last few years have convinced me of anything, it's that active travel has an enduring relevance. In fact there aren't many major problems we are facing today that can't be made better by more people walking, wheeling, and cycling.

The Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty, who sits on the Advisory Board for Active Travel England, has made clear that enabling people to move around under their own steam is probably the single biggest health intervention that government could make.

In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, there's no doubt that cheap local transport options would benefit millions (my bike maintenance—I don't own a car—costs me just £20 a year). And as a full third of the poorest quintile of households in the UK do not have access to a car,¹ making active travel easy would ensure transport equity for huge swathes of the population. The biggest challenge of all though is decarbonisation and adapting to climate change. Even here, active travel has you covered because the original and best zero-emissions engine... is you.

There is a veritable mountain of data which show that changing our streets and our neighbourhoods to enable more self-propelled journeys would benefit all of us in a myriad of different ways. So why then, are we still not doing it? It's clear that data and evidence on their own are not enough, so what are the fundamental drivers of behaviour that we often ignore? I think there are three:

- First, we fear change; this fear is deep seated and instinctive. While we might know that what we're doing now is far from optimal, change presents a potential threat.
- Secondly, we tend to do the easiest thing for us right now; that's how we're built and the evidence

of this is absolutely everywhere, from what we eat to the ways we travel. So if change is needed, it must be easy, otherwise we will probably stick with what we're doing now.

- Lastly, the most deep seated of our instincts is the drive to protect our kids. For increased happiness in life and in the lives of our children, we will tackle things that are a little bit scary and we'll inconvenience ourselves if need be, because we can see the pay-off in the lives of those we care about; it give us a sense of achievement, of rightness. Giving our children transport independence is something we can probably all align behind, something we will change our own habits for.

Why is all this important? Because creating healthier and sustainable environments requires us to change and, for active travel in particular, the reallocation of street space from one use to another can feel like it's being done to us. Regardless of being for the right reasons, it's hitting our instinctive panic buttons.

To enable people to try doing things differently, we need to speak to those three drivers because, contrary to popular belief, we are not always logical decision-makers; we're creatures of instinct influenced by facts and data, not the other way around. These traits are hardwired into us and if we wish to alter how we do things, we ignore them at our peril.

'The story that we tell and how we connect with people on an emotional level is critical to driving change, to start a movement for moving'

I first learned to help people get comfortable with change while working with the British Olympic Cycling Team, specifically using a wind tunnel to help athletes see the impact of different choices on their performance. Later, when I worked as Greater Manchester's Cycling and Walking Commissioner, I used the same technique (but this times with pens and maps!) to help local councillors safely explore what 'better' might look like for their communities. Putting the pen—metaphorically and literally—in the hands of the people who will have to live with the consequences and asking questions has proved effective, and it's a method I now use nationally in my role as National Active Travel Commissioner for England.

Be it a local councillor or an Olympic athlete, the fundamentals remain the same: we need to be able to manage our deep-seated drivers, to be able to align what we *need* to do with what we instinctively *want* to do.

Another key factor in dealing with our fear of the unknown is ensuring actions are a choice. That might sound like the easy way to do nothing, but it's important that the consequences of choosing the status quo are also visible. Do you like what you have now? Can you afford it? Is it what you want for your kids' futures? It's important when considering difficult options that the implications of not changing are also owned. Change made this way generates a collective sense of purpose, of ownership, and a feeling of pride, of leading the way.

Our role in this? As outlined, it's only fair that the people who will live with the consequences should own the answers, so our job is to find the best questions. A good place to start is at the other end, to create a collective goal. What outcome do you want? What is that made up of? How do we get each of those things? Which is most important? By working backwards, it is easier to stop being emotionally overwhelmed by today's problems.

What I hope this narrative has conveyed is our tendency is to lead with talk of evidence because we can measure it. While it should be the foundation of change, a solid base on which to build, no-one buys a new house because it's got great foundations. The things that get us to *actually* change, to do things differently, speak to our basic drivers.

Sport England has just launched its updated Active Design guidance.² While the guide is designed to help planners, engineers and architects build activity back into our lives, it's about much more than just getting people moving. It's a blueprint for future-proofing our neighbourhoods. It's a guide that shows how to give kids transport independence, enables families to save money, and shows a nation how to decarbonise. Changing how we use our streets is part of the solution to many of our biggest problems.

The story that we tell and how we connect with people on an emotional level is critical to driving change, to start a 'movement for moving'. It's not hyperbole to say that this work is about saving a planet—but that's not what I'm doing it for. I'm trying to build a future for Aggie. She turned 18 last month and I want to make sure that, when she has a family and her children ask her the question, she'll be able to say, 'Yes, we can ride to the park.'

● **Chris Boardman** is National Active Travel Commissioner for England and Chair of Sport England. The article draws on his keynote address to the TCPA's Spring Conference, held on 29 March 2023. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

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stats or stories?

why both matter in 15-minute neighbourhoods

Drawing on recent 15-minute neighbourhood work with Waltham Forest Council, **Samanthi Themiminulle** and **Siân Whyte** consider an approach to gathering evidence on meeting need that makes best use of both data and community insight—‘stats and stories’—and the difference that this approach can make

Considering what needs to go into a ‘15-minute (or 20-minute) neighbourhood’ could be deemed quite simple. Just take a map of a local area, draw a circle with a 15-minute average diameter, note what’s already in that location that helps people thrive—and consider what else they might need. But in taking that approach, what insight informs our understanding of ‘need’ in local neighbourhoods? What measures can tell us whether these needs are met? And how do we make this work not just for one neighbourhood, but across a varied geographical area, with the ability to prioritise and take decisions on what to do next?

At The Young Foundation, the question of what evidence we use to help answer these questions is crucial in getting the most from the 15-minute neighbourhood concept, as well as for other communities trying to create complete, compact and connected places. It is a question that has become even more crucial in recent months, as the 15-minute neighbourhoods approach has been muddled, misinterpreted, and misrepresented.¹ There is a need to work closely with communities throughout their development and take a people-centred approach.

In this article, we explore how to take an approach to evidence that makes best use of data and community insight (‘stats and stories’), and the difference this approach makes. We provide a case study example from our recent work with Waltham Forest Council, where we developed a data-rich and resident-led vision and framework² for the local area that has been embedded into its corporate policy and council-wide strategy.³

Based on The Young Foundation’s wider portfolio of community research and social innovation projects, we also provide perspectives on future opportunities to make the most of local data and community participation in place-making approaches.

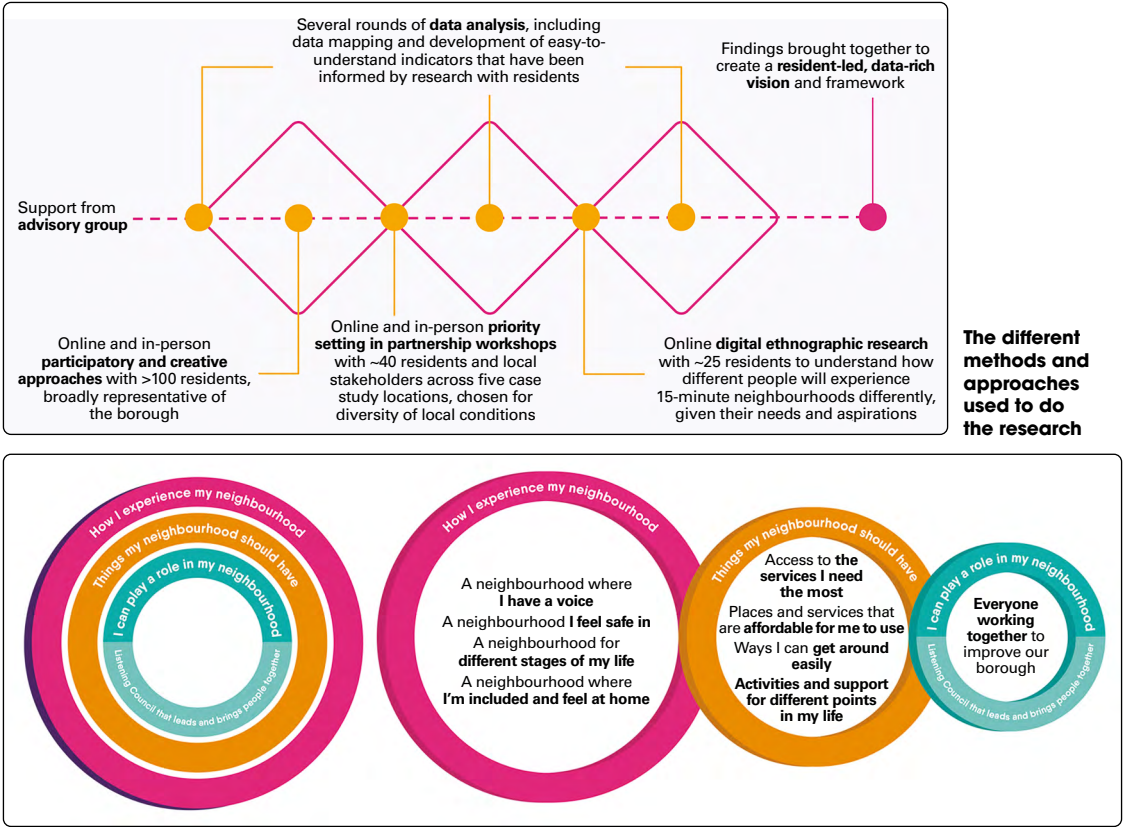
A data-rich and resident-led approach

What we did

To develop a data-rich and resident-led vision and framework, we worked with communities across the borough to understand their experiences, opinions and aspirations for the place where they live, over what is typically considered in the 15-minute neighbourhood approach.⁴ We worked iteratively, to create a two-way conversation between communities and the data we were working with to build out the framework. This built on our prior experience in developing the initial Civic Strength Index for London, working with communities and local organisations to develop a shared definition and a set of measurable factors that impact on civic strength.⁵

Drawing on the literature and evidence, we started by collating datasets that would enable us to map and understand the dynamics between communities and existing local features associated with 15-minute neighbourhoods. We made extensive use of publicly available datasets, such as Public Transport Accessibility Levels data,⁶ journey time to local services data,⁷ and the E-food Desert Index.⁸

This was an opportunity to assess the availability and quality of data. It also provided important contextual background to consider in subsequent



A vision for 15-minute neighbourhoods in Waltham Forest

engagement with more than 160 residents, community representatives, and local organisations, building on existing resident insight—including the council’s work engaging with more than 1,000 residents.

Using participatory, creative and ethnographic research methods, we then gathered rich and diverse insights about communities’ day-to-day experiences, aspirations, and ideas. For example, we used a digital platform to engage residents in arts-based research methods, to understand their relationship with their neighbourhood. We also created vignettes to build detailed accounts of how people with specific needs might experience 15-minute neighbourhoods.

What emerged from communities was an understanding of the assets, services and spaces that 15-minute neighbourhoods should include. But more importantly, engagement highlighted strong themes of inclusion, access, and social connection, and the understanding that a 15-minute neighbourhood should not and could not have everything. Findings from the participatory engagement directly informed the overall vision for 15-minute neighbourhoods, as well as what data was used and how data was framed and considered in the final framework. We revisited and built out the datasets originally collated, to better reflect what residents had identified as important. At this point, we worked closely with the council to

understand and make use of data that it was collecting, as well as noting where it could invest in additional datasets. For example, the council’s Resident Insight Survey data, collected via a representative sample of residents, filled important gaps about people’s experiences of where they live.

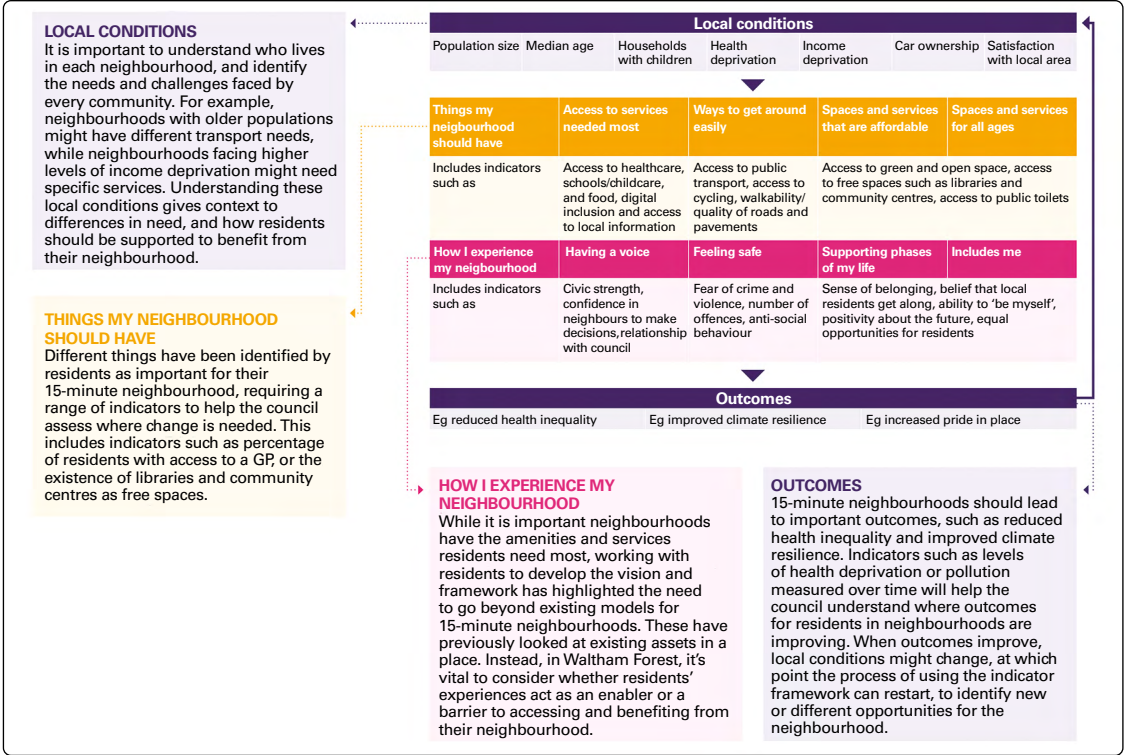
Ultimately, the indicator framework, developed using factor analysis, included data on the physical aspects of a neighbourhood, but also the subjective and lived experiences within a neighbourhood. It was structured to capture the tensions that can accompany place-making, as well as the need to work iteratively with communities to develop neighbourhoods that they want to see.

Further details of our methodology and approach are set out in our recent report² and shared in a recent TCPA webinar.⁹

What we learnt

Our recent report² details our full approach and recommendations, but some key takeaways include:

- **Centre a definition not on distance, but on individual experiences:** It is thanks to resident insights that we moved our thinking beyond just a consideration of a local area’s assets to also account for the experiences it should enable. To come back to where we started this article, it is not about drawing circles on a map. Instead, the



Indicator framework for 15-minute neighbourhoods in Waltham Forest

focus should be on seeking out the perspectives of a diverse range of residents who all have their own personal '15 minutes' and needs, which may look different from one another. This fluid and flexible application of the concept takes into the account a local area's surrounding context and does not unintentionally create boundaries by sticking rigidly to minutes travelled.

- **Build data and community participation capacity:** To maximise the value of this opportunity to extensively engage with communities, longevity, usability and flexibility had to be built into the framework. Findings from the research unearthed several recommendations to collect higher-quality data that is more reflective of people's experiences (for example, their perceptions of community safety as well as crime). The Young Foundation's project team worked closely with Waltham Forest Council to create a framework and database that spoke to their (strong) internal data capacity, including enabling them to expand on or replace data as better-quality data became available or as communities moved along the place-making journey. For example, this included recommendations of where crucial metrics could be built into existing Resident Insight Surveys. We also provided recommendations on how to keep the momentum of a participatory approach, by providing opportunities for residents to play a role in shaping their neighbourhoods in ways that work for them.

- **Take a phased approach that opens up a conversation:** In close collaboration with the council, we chose measures for the framework that were most meaningful, even where that meant certain areas would be 'red' (indicating something needed to be addressed locally) or where further work was needed to gather the right data at a granular neighbourhood level. This was part of recognising the need for a phased approach to 15-minute neighbourhoods, acknowledging that not everything can happen at once, but that data is a good starting point for a conversation on what is needed in different local areas (a different response might be needed in one neighbourhood compared with another, for example). It will also help in monitoring performance and progress. However, it needs to be combined with other forms of insight and critical thinking to be most effective.

Going a step further

The approach we took in Waltham Forest used data and community insight in conjunction, examining each in turn, and exploring how they might shape each other. However, we think that in future there are interesting opportunities for local areas to bring together greater community participation to build data capability, thinking of data as civic infrastructure. In neighbourhoods, people's tacit and lived knowledge and experience come alive—and data would only ever tell part of that story. Nonetheless,

it is often this part of the story that that communities often have limited access to and ownership over.

Particularly when compiling numerous datasets to speak to complex concepts and frameworks, accessing data becomes a resource-intensive task. It takes time, data literacy, and consideration of how to navigate poor-quality data. Within neighbourhoods, the challenge becomes greater, as the collection of, or public access to, data at an appropriate geographic scale becomes far more limited.

What if we could think of neighbourhood-level data as basic civic infrastructure that communities could be supported by? Could we enable better place-making if data was democratised in a way that meant communities could help make sense of it — so that it speaks to actual, lived experiences within the neighbourhood? How can we turn data into an asset *for* communities rather than *about* communities?

This might look like communities being trained and resourced in ‘citizen science’ methods¹⁰ to frame and carry out their own data collection. It might look like local social infrastructure, such as libraries, being equipped with online neighbourhood data banks. It might also look like others with capacity taking on the task of piecing together data, to make it more accessible to communities, such as the Greater London Authority’s Civic Strength Index⁵ and the Co-op’s Community Wellbeing Index¹¹ (both developed by The Young Foundation),⁵ or Centric Lab’s Right to Know¹² digital toolkit.

The Young Foundation is also working with communities to play a greater role in shaping *what* data we collect and value in the first place. We saw the value of this in Waltham Forest, where, through resident insight, our understanding of which measures are critical to understanding local experience shifted, as did our perception of what ‘good’ looks like.

We are currently piloting approaches to co-evaluation in Thamesmead with the Greater London Authority as part of CLEVER Cities, an EU project trialling working with local citizens to ‘co-design’ the regeneration of urban areas to make them greener and healthier.¹³ As part of this, we are working with the local Community Design Collective¹⁴ of residents to build in their perspectives on social impact measurement and determine what data we should collect to understand the impact of the project, with the aim of sharing what we have learnt later in the year.

Stats and stories

To close, we hope we have provided food for thought on the value of taking a broad approach to evidence when developing 15-minute neighbourhoods approaches, and on why we need to value both data and lived experiences. We do not think it is possible to separate stats from stories. Instead, we need to stretch beyond the question of whether we need quantitative *or* qualitative evidence, to instead

consider how we enable communities to have a greater role. It is this more human approach to evidence that will unlock the huge potential of 15-minute neighbourhoods.

● **Samanthi Themiminulle** is a Senior Researcher and **Siân Whyte** is Head of Strategic Design and Insight at The Young Foundation. The views expressed are personal. Contact Siân Whyte (sian.whyte@youngfoundation.org) for more information about how the 15-minute neighbourhood concept could work in your local area.

Notes

- 1 H Goulden: ‘With true collaboration, people can shape the places that they live’. Blog entry. The Young Foundation, 22 Mar. 2023. www.youngfoundation.org/with-true-collaboration-people-can-shape-the-places-they-live/
- 2 *Research and Engagement to Develop 15-Minute Neighbourhoods in Waltham Forest*. The Young Foundation, Mar. 2023. www.youngfoundation.org/our-work/publications/research-and-engagement-to-develop-15-minute-neighbourhoods-in-waltham-forest/
- 3 See ‘Our new neighbourhoods approach’. Webpage. Waltham Forest Council. www.walthamforest.gov.uk/neighbourhoods/our-new-neighbourhoods-approach#:~:text=We%20have%20launched%20our%20new,and%20accessible%20place%20for%20everyone
- 4 We took into consideration any literature and evidence-building on the concept, including that concerning ‘15-minute cities’, ‘20-minute cities’, ‘15-minute neighbourhoods’, and ‘20-minute neighbourhoods’
- 5 *A Civic Strength Index for London*. The Young Foundation, Oct. 2021. <https://youngfoundation.b-cdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Civic-Strength-Index-Final-Report-1.pdf?x22784>
- 6 See Transport for London’s Public Transport Accessibility Levels website, at <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/public-transport-accessibility-levels>
- 7 See the Department for Transport’s ‘Journey time statistics, England: 2019’ website, at www.gov.uk/government/statistics/journey-time-statistics-england-2019
- 8 See the Consumer Data Research Centre’s ‘E-food Desert Index’ website, at <https://data.cdrc.ac.uk/dataset/e-food-desert-index>
- 9 ‘Waltham Forest’s 15-minute Neighbourhood Framework’. Webinar, TCPA, with Waltham Forest and The Young Foundation, Feb. 2023. www.tcpa.org.uk/resources/waltham-forests-15-minute-neighbourhood-framework-webinar-recording/
- 10 See the Citizen Science hub on the Institute for Community Studies website (powered by The Young Foundation), at www.youngfoundation.org/institute-for-community-studies/our-work/citizen-science/
- 11 See the Co-operative Group’s Community Wellbeing Index website, at <https://communitywellbeing.coop.co.uk/>
- 12 See Centric Lab’s Right to Know project website, at <https://right-to-know.org/>
- 13 See the CLEVER Cities London website, at <https://clevercities.eu/london/>
- 14 *Making the Case for Co-production*. Future of London, Mar. 2023. www.futureoflondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2023/03/FoL_Making-the-case-for-co-production_digital.pdf — see the case study example, ‘Co-designing a greener South Thamesmead Garden Estate’

active design — encouraging the creation of active environments

Rob Holt and **Joseph Carr** look at the latest version of Sport England's Active Design guidance, and at why urban design and planning are so important to getting people active



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The pandemic highlighted the importance of local green spaces in helping people to be active

May saw Sport England release the third version of its Active Design guidance.¹ Active Design is a set of ten principles aimed at planners, designers and developers, and everyone involved in delivering and managing the built environment. Its aim is to help

create 'Active Environments'. This latest version has been produced for Sport England by David Lock Associates, in partnership with Active Travel England and the Office for Health Improvements and Disparities. We share the view that well

designed places and spaces can have a positive impact on people's physical activity levels and their overall health and wellbeing, both physical and mental. When the design is right, our environments can encourage us to be more physically active, leading to healthier lives.

This article looks at this latest version and at why Sport England, the government's sports development agency, still sees urban design and planning as important in getting people active, and how this is reflected in Active Design.

Why is urban design and planning still so important to Sport England?

While more than 60% of adults in England are active, one in four people (11.9million) undertake less than 30 minutes of activity per week.² Activity levels are now returning to pre-pandemic levels. However, while this overall number is positive, there are areas of concern.

Inactivity levels are still higher than before the pandemic, women's activity levels have recovered slower than men's, and the long-term decline in young people's participation in sport and physical activity continues, despite a recent recovery. We can also see the gap between activity levels in the most and least affluent continuing to grow, and significant inequalities between the physical activity levels of some minority ethnic groups have widened.

Regular physical activity is proven to help prevent and treat many noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), and the design of our neighbourhoods can influence physical activity levels. Addressing the TCPA's Annual Conference in November 2022, Professor Chris Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer, spoke about the importance of the built environment for health outcomes, noting that:

'If you look back over the last 150 years, more has been done for public health by proper planning than almost any other intervention except perhaps vaccination.'

Sport England's Active Lives survey data shows that walking, cycling and fitness exercises make up 75% of the nation's physical activity (in minutes per week), and this rises to 80% if running is included. These are activities that can be done in the places around where people live, such as in the street, in the park and within the local environment, meaning the journey to being active starts from the doorstep. Through the design and layout of new and existing communities and neighbourhoods, creating Active Environments can harness opportunities for people to be active within their local environments.

Reviewing this data, it is clear that the design of the places and spaces in which we live, work and play can have a significant role in shaping our daily activity opportunities and activity choices. The right conditions in our built environment can encourage

us to be more physically active and lead healthier lives. This belief is reflected in Sport England's 10-year strategy, *Uniting the Movement*, with Active Environments being one of the strategy's 'five big issues':

*'Active Environments: There's no such thing as a 'neutral space'. The places and spaces around us can have a positive or negative impact on whether, how, when, and where we move.'*³

Uniting the Movement sets out the ambition to make the choice to be active easier and more appealing for everyone through the design of our environment, whether that is through how we choose to move around our local neighbourhood or a dedicated facility for a sport or activity.

Creating Active Environments in which places and spaces are designed to encourage all physical activity will help to reduce the gap in opportunity for all people to be active, helping to tackle inequalities in health and physical activity. This includes active travel, children's play, outdoor leisure, and anything else that provides people with choices in how they get active. It is about making the active choice the easy choice for everyone. The creation of Active Environments has many synergies with the 20-minute neighbourhood concept, particularly co-location of facilities, creating walkable communities, and providing active travel connections.

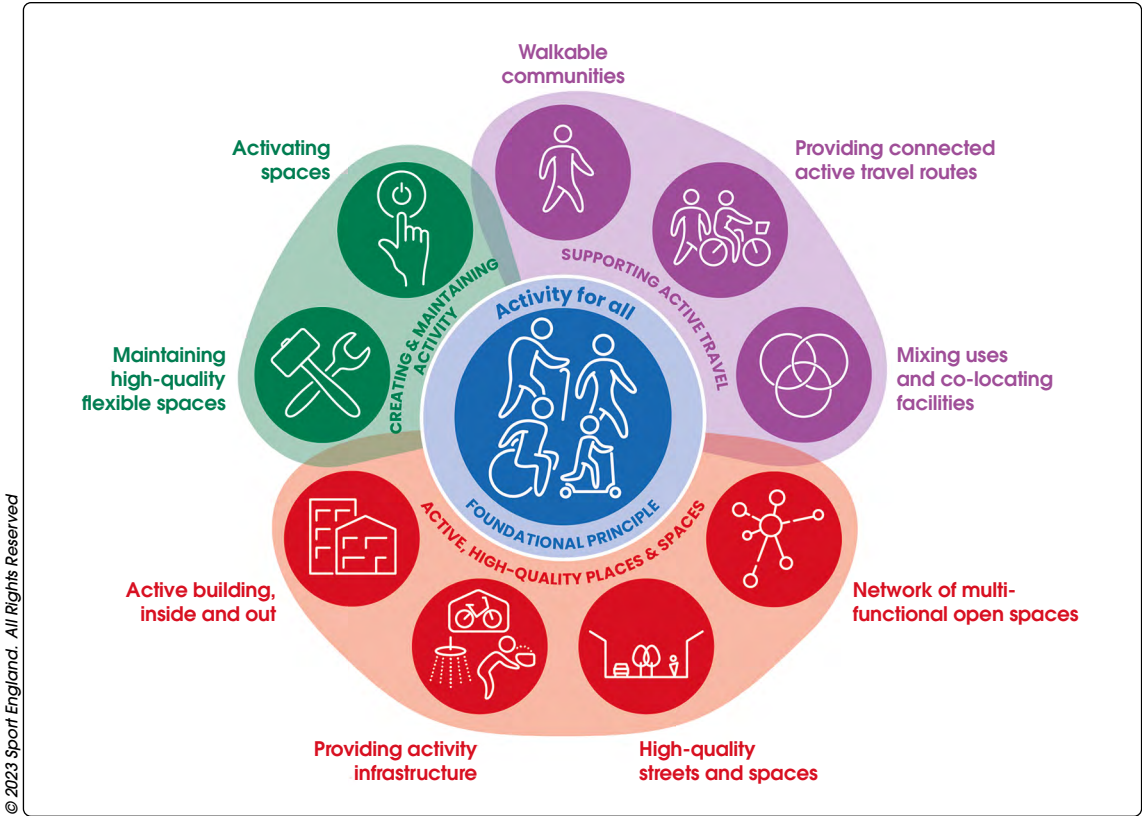
Updating Active Design

Active Design was originally published in 2007 and was one of the first guidance documents to consider the impact that the built environment has on physical activity levels. It was updated in 2015, reflecting the changing planning context, creating the 10 principles of Active Design and adding in useful tools such as in-depth case studies into activity interventions. In the above context, Sport England is clear that more work still needs to be done to embed these Active Design principles into our built environment.

Therefore, May saw Sport England release the third edition of Active Design, centred around enabling delivery of the UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines⁴ (at least 150 minutes of moderately intensive physical activity every week for adults) through the creation of Active Environments.

This update of Active Design has also led Sport England to collaborate with other government departments and stakeholders to secure real impact, with the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities and Active Travel England collaborating on the update, adding a focus on health outcomes and providing collaborative insight into the delivery of active travel opportunities within the guide.

The new edition reflects the latest research and practice in encouraging physical activity in the built



The 10 Active Design principles

and natural environment, with a literature review of recent publications and studies, policy and design guidance undertaken to identify gaps, new topic areas, and usability improvements. Following this, an extensive stakeholder engagement process has been undertaken both online and in-person, to understand how Active Design was being used, where it could be improved, and what good practice could be shared.

Key issues identified through the research and engagement process were:

- the importance of linking physical activity to other areas of policy priority, such as environmental sustainability and climate change, reducing inequalities, and economic growth;
- the need to minimise resource pressures, simplifying any principles to make them more 'actionable', and demonstrate their use through examples and case studies;
- new or emerging topics of relevance, such as new transport infrastructure, tackling inequalities in provision, digital solutions, and expanding the network of play opportunities; and
- post-Covid changes to lifestyles and needs from the built environment.

Seeking to tackle these issues has formed the centre of the update of Active Design. The ten

principles have been retained but have been adapted to reflect the changing context and improve usability. They have also been broken down into suggested actions that make them easier to apply in practice—which is intended to support design teams looking to implement Active Design and planning teams looking to assess proposals.

The foundational principle of the guidance is 'activity for all'. This is centred around a focus on early engagement, co-design and consultation with communities to ensure that needs are properly understood before designing to meet those needs. Where previously the principles were grouped into three categories (awareness, accessibility, and amenity), they are now grouped by three clear themes that underpin what makes an Active Environment, along with the foundational principle of activity for all. These themes are:

- **supporting active travel**, ensuring that active travel is the first choice for journeys;
- **active, high-quality places and spaces** which support physical activity; and
- **delivery and activation**, making sure places which are delivered are maintained and used effectively.

This will enable users to extract key elements of the guidance and utilise it more easily to meet their aims. Active Design also now makes it clear where

ILLUSTRATIVE PLACE 1
Existing Suburban Neighbourhood

Many of the existing suburban neighbourhoods in our towns and cities were built around the car and are not designed to support physically active behaviours. With simple interventions and the engaged support of communities, existing neighbourhoods can be adapted so that people can live physically active, healthier behaviours close to home.

Design Interventions

- A Pedestrian-priority street en route to school, with on-street play opportunities
- B Active travel and public transport only traffic allowed through local centre
- C Waymarking and cycle paths to connect local centre to existing primary school
- D Segregated cycling and walking space on major road with reduced vehicle space
- E Modal filters to restrict through traffic and improve walking and cycling environment
- F Publicly accessible nature reserve and habitat networks
- G Community garden and green links established on former in-block garage plots
- H Junction improvements to prioritise and segregate active travel at major intersections
- I Primary school with shared sports facilities for community use
- J Intensified local centre with residential, retail and community uses with flexible civic space
- K New community park with local leisure and sports facility
- L Active travel and public transport interchange (mobility hubs) at local centre
- M Regenerated local industrial estate providing mix of local employment and small retail or commercial spaces

ACTIVE DESIGN PRINCIPLES IN ACTION:



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Through a mix of in-depth case studies and illustrative places, the guide shows how the Active Design principles can be applied in a variety of places

design interventions that support physical activity can also support other key objectives such as environmental sustainability, reducing inequalities, and economic growth. This is to enable those implementing Active Design to easily understand synergies with other priorities, and not see them as competing with the principles of Active Design: *‘What we are learning from our engagement on the ground and the review of Active Design is that in order to drive change in this space we need to ‘piggyback’ off other agendas which are gathering momentum—the climate emergency and preventative health.’* Nick Evans, Head of Planning at Sport England

The update of Active Design seeks to set a framework for further, topic-specific or place-specific guidance to be prepared in the coming years, focusing on specific issues or contexts which influence Active Environments. A critical part of the guide looks at different development typologies, providing case studies and illustrative examples across these typologies and setting out how Active Design can be implemented in them. Overall, the latest edition of Active Design and future guidance based on its updated principles are intended to practically support the creation of places in which all groups can be more physically active, in turn creating Active Environments which

will improve the quality of life and work and tackle health inequalities.

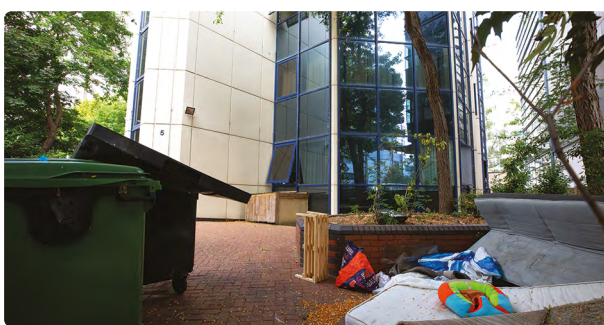
● **Rob Holt** is a Strategic Planner with Sport England, and **Joseph Carr** is an Associate Planner with David Lock Associates. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 See Sport England’s ‘Active Design’ webpages, at www.sportengland.org/guidance-and-support/facilities-and-planning/design-and-cost-guidance/active-design
- 2 *Active Lives Adult Survey November 2021–22 Report*. Sport England, Apr. 2023. <https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-04/Active%20Lives%20Adult%20Survey%20November%202021-22%20Report.pdf?VersionId=In4PN2X02DZ1LF18btgj5KFHx0Mio9o>
- 3 *Uniting the Movement: A 10-Year Vision to Transform Lives and Communities through Sport and Physical Activity*. Sport England, Jan. 2021. https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2021-02/Sport%20England%20-%20Uniting%20the%20Movement%27.pdf?VersionId=7JxbS7dw40CN0g21_dL4VM3F4P1YJ5RW
- 4 *UK Chief Medical Officers’ Physical Activity Guidelines 2019*. Department of Health and Social Care/Welsh Government/Department of Health (Northern Ireland)/Scottish Government, Sept. 2019. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/832868/uk-chief-medical-officers-physical-activity-guidelines.pdf

putting health at the heart of homes and neighbourhoods

Rosalie Callway and **Sally Roscoe** examine how the TCPA's Healthy Homes and 20-Minute Neighbourhoods campaigns set health promotion at the heart of planning for homes and neighbourhoods, with both seeking to give people better choices



Clockwise from left: Terminus House (Harlow), Newbury House (Ilford), and 5 Sydenham Road (Croydon)

Location, location, location... if only we had the choice. Instinctively, most of us know what an unhealthy place to live in looks and feels like. When people are searching for a home, to rent or buy, cost will always be central. But if we could afford to choose, it is certain that few of us would choose to live in an isolated industrial estate, far from the shops, schools or the GP, with no park within walking distance for our children to play in, and no bus stops or train stations nearby to get us to work.

We would not choose to live somewhere that was a fly-tipping nightmare, with piles of old mattresses and fridges dumped outside because there was inadequate storage and we couldn't afford a car to take them to the tip. We would not choose a home so overheated in the summer that it would be impossible to sleep at night, or so costly to keep warm in the winter that we would be forced live with the cold and damp. We would actively avoid being stuck somewhere that felt unsafe and noisy, where strangers could easily access the property,

and in a building that had not been properly checked for fire safety or flood risk.

If we could afford to choose, most of us would look for somewhere that is well maintained inside and out, that makes us feel secure, and that is connected to the local area and transport links. Yet in too many instances people do not have a choice. All too often, new homes are being located and built in ways that are damaging rather than promoting people's health.

Built environment quality and health

Our understanding of the dire impacts of poor housing and neighbourhoods on our mental and physical health has grown in recent years.^{1,2} But, despite this awareness, new developments that are failing people are still being produced.

A review of the impacts of permitted development rights (PDR) found many of the problems described above.³ Numerous dilapidated office blocks converted to flats have been located alongside busy major roads, despite clear evidence on the impact of particulates on our heart and lungs and on rates of dementia, and even resulting in increasing levels of osteoporosis in women,^{1,4} as well as evidence of both traffic noise and pollution's impact on hypertension and stress levels.⁵

The internal quality of dwellings for those living in PDR accommodation is also raising alarm bells over potential health risks, including concerns about mould, damp and fire risk. One resident of Terminus House, a PDR conversion in Harlow, described the flats as 'prisons without bars'. She expressed concern over the impact on her mental and physical health from living such a small flat, more akin to a hallway in a noisy building, where she did not feel safe.

Owing to weaker controls under PDR, local planning authorities also have less opportunity to extract developer contributions from PDR homes to invest in the additional local infrastructure and amenities necessary to support new residents (including schools and GP surgeries). The lack of additional funding places a further strain on local authorities and communities' ability to meet local needs.

But poor-quality homes and wider neighbourhoods are not just products of PDR housing. The latest BRE report on the quality of existing housing stock found that over one in 10 homes (2.6million) were considered poor quality and 'hazardous' to occupants, with health impacts arising from poor-quality housing costing the NHS around £1.4 billion annually.⁶ One in 10 people in the UK (over 6 million people) are living in poor-quality housing, and they are twice as likely to have poor general health than people who do not.⁷ We also know that homes and neighbourhoods that fail to address climate impacts and resilience leave residents vulnerable to a number of risks from extreme weather events such as flooding and overheating, as well as excess cold and/or high energy costs in the winter. A study of flooding and health in England found that people whose homes



Oakfield, Swindon—an inclusive, multi-generational and mutualised development by Nationwide Building Society, supported by Igloo Regeneration. It has recently been awarded a Building with Nature design award for embedding green infrastructure for wellbeing, wildlife and water benefits

had flooded were up to six times more likely to have probable PTSD, depression or anxiety than those unaffected.⁸

Dependence on minimum compliance with building regulations and voluntary planning requirements is not delivering in terms of health outcomes, especially for those living in the most deprived areas. A recent legal review of urban planning and development in England found that 'critical values of health and wellbeing, less still health inequalities, are not integrated into the legal requirements that [local planning authorities] rely on to base their decisions'.⁹ It identified 'weak and outdated' regulatory standards (with an industry described in the Grenfell Tower inquiry as having a 'culture of non-compliance'). The review recommended establishing in law the principles set out in the Healthy Homes Private Members' Bill (which draw on the TCPA's Healthy Homes Principles) and called for the better use of local health evidence bases to shape planning decisions.

The case for change could not be more apparent. Our homes, places and communities should enable everyone to thrive.

A tale of two TCPA campaigns—with health promotion at their heart

The TCPA's Healthy Homes and 20-Minute Neighbourhoods campaigns present two different mechanisms for change: the Healthy Homes campaign seeks legislative and policy change in housing quality, while the 20-Minute Neighbourhoods campaign offers a toolkit for creating healthy neighbourhoods.

However, both have the shared aim of proactively promoting health through creating built environments

and neighbourhoods that help people and communities to thrive. Both campaigns call for housing that is well connected to community amenities, including public transport, cycling routes and walkable streets, along with green and blue infrastructure, health care services, local shops, and schools. They call for a good mix of secure and well maintained homes, including the provision of genuinely affordable housing (i.e. affordability assessed on levels of income, not market prices).

The campaigns also highlight how health benefits can be achieved at various scales. For example, inclusive access to green and blue infrastructure can deliver health benefits in and around buildings as well as at neighbourhood scale. Living green walls and roofs have been shown to create better insulation in the winter and a cooling effect in the summer.¹⁰ Sustainable urban drainage systems (such as swales and rainwater gardens), street trees, hedgerows and parks enhance the public realm for cycling and walking, help to reduce rainwater run-off, and act as physical buffers to ameliorate some of the stresses associated with noisy and polluted roads.¹¹

Underpinning both campaigns are the Garden City Principles, which establish a transformative vision of how communities can be organised to create places where inclusive local democracy and lasting stewardship are embedded practices, with land values reinvested for the long-term public good. Whether we are working at the building, neighbourhood or town and city scale, we should see health promotion running throughout. This emphasises that how we plan, design, build, manage and maintain our communities should be founded on the aim of creating places that help people to thrive, in harmony with nature, both now and for the long term.

The debate on the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill in Parliament has focused on how the current system is failing to address health inequalities through our built environment.¹² Peers from across the political spectrum have highlighted the poor quality, layout and location of many new homes, particularly at the 'affordable' end of the scale. They recognised that current voluntary policy and guidance is insufficient, with homes being produced that need to be retrofitted almost as soon as they are finished. Peers endorsed establishing the Healthy Homes Principles as a statutory requirement for all new homes, as well as a clear policy promoting 20-minute neighbourhoods.

Change is never easy. Over the year ahead political parties will be increasingly focused on their manifestos, the next general election, and, if they win, their first 100 days in office. Politics will always be largely reactive, short term, and piecemeal. But in the rush to win votes, we must not lose sight of why planning for a better quality of place is so important—it is peoples' lives and the health of the planet that are at stake. It's time to put health back at the heart of our planning system.

● **Dr Rosalie Callway** is Projects and Policy Manager and **Sally Roscoe** is Projects Assistant at the TCPA. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

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a 20-minute neighbourhood map of manchester and salford

Caglar Koksai, Florence Hewett and Graeme Sherriff outline a new method for studying the adoptability of 20-minute neighbourhoods, developed in the context of Manchester and Salford

This article presents the operationalisation of the concept of 20-minute neighbourhoods (20MNs) in Manchester and Salford. In the previous issue of *Town & Country Planning*, we argued that, although the idea that people should access essential services and amenities within short walking or cycling distance is laudable, the 20MN concept contains many ambiguities.¹ These include which services and amenities are to be considered essential, the optimum distance to travel and access them, and how to incorporate quality and cost concerns into analysis.

In this article, we develop a novel method for studying the adoptability of 20MNs in the context of Manchester and Salford. We contend that the 20MN is an analytical tool best understood in relational terms, which can reveal inequality of service provision in cities when viewed holistically at the scale of local authority boundaries, and which underscores key urban planning issues when combined with other sets of data, such as car ownership and housing design.

Methodology

There are many ways to measure 20MNs, and we provided an overview of different measures and service points used in our earlier article.¹ We note that there is no set standard or methodology agreed upon by scientific consensus that suggests which services and amenities are essential and for whom,

nor for determining the ideal distance to services and amenities.

When undertaking the analysis, two main approaches exist. The first addresses where clusters of services and amenities are and looks at which households are within the catchment areas of these services at agreed distances (say, 800 metres, for example). The second is a more detailed approach that uses each household as a unit of analysis and measures their distances from each service and amenity individually and identifies clusters of households with varying levels of access. In this article, we adopt the second approach, to reach a more granular and contextualised understanding of 20MNs in Manchester and Salford, taking into account the topography of urban settlements and the characteristics of service provision unique to each area.

To understand which services and amenities were essential and what distance to use for our analysis, we first undertook an extensive review of the existing literature on 20MNs, which we reported in this journal previously.¹ The review highlighted that the choice of services, amenities and distances relied on a good understanding of the area of study, relevant planning issues, and dominant demographic characteristics, as well as some degree of professional judgement. Following the literature review and internal discussions within the research team, we identified and have listed in Table 1 the services and

Table 1
Services and amenities used in the study, and the coding system for each household's scores

Theme	Ordnance Survey Points of Interest classification	Coding If any essential class is missing, then the related 'theme' returns a score '0'; otherwise it scores '1'. The minimum score for each household is 0 and the maximum is 6
Health and wellbeing services	0364 Chemists and pharmacies 0369 Doctors surgeries	Both essential
Food services	0661 Bakeries	Minimum two are essential; if below, returns '0'
	0662 Butchers	
	0667 Frozen foods	
	0669 Grocers, farm shops and pick your own	Minimum one is essential
	0705 Markets	
	0672 Organic, health, gourmet and kosher foods	
Green space and recreational amenities	0819 Supermarket chains	Minimum one is essential
	0699 Convenience stores and independent supermarkets	
	0253 Country and national parks	Minimum one is essential
	0814 Municipal Parks and Gardens (and OS MasterMap Public Parks and Gardens dataset)	
	0453 Allotments	Minimum two are essential if the 'Country and national parks' and 'Municipal Parks and Gardens' class (above) returns '0'
	0252 Commons	
	0254 Picnic areas	
	0255 Playgrounds	
	0293 Gymnasiums, sports halls and leisure centres	
	0302 Sports grounds, stadia and pitches	
Community facilities	0314 Social clubs	Minimum one is essential
	0456 Halls and community centres	
	0458 Libraries	
	0447 Sports clubs and associations	
Public transport	0738 Railway stations, junctions and halts	Minimum one is essential
	0756 Tram, metro and light railway stations and stops	
	0732 Bus stops	
Retail and commercial services	0141 Cash machines	Minimum one is essential
	0138 Banks and building societies	
	0763 Post offices	
	0685 General household goods	Minimum one is essential
	0701 Discount stores	
	0708 Shopping centres and retail parks	
	0700 Department stores	

amenities relevant to the Manchester and Salford areas, categorised into six themes:

- health and wellbeing services;
- food services;
- green space and recreational amenities;
- community facilities;
- public transport; and
- retail and commercial services.

The themes were chosen based on broad clusters of services and amenities in the literature. We used

the Ordnance Survey (OS) Points of Interest dataset, as of September 2022, to identify the locations and types of services and amenities, as well as the OS MasterMap Public Parks and Gardens dataset in identifying green spaces (of 2 hectares or more). It is worth noting that this dataset is context dependent, is applicable mainly to England, and may vary in another country or even another city region within England. For instance, a similar study in Leeds would not include the '0756 Tram, metro and light railway

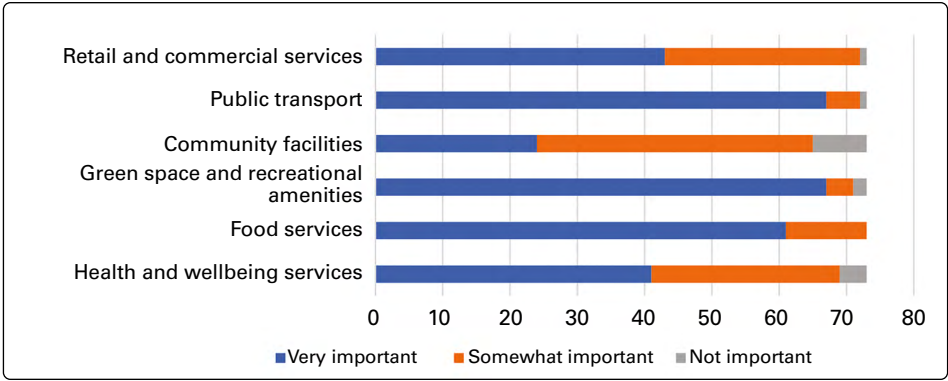


Fig. 1 What respondents want nearby

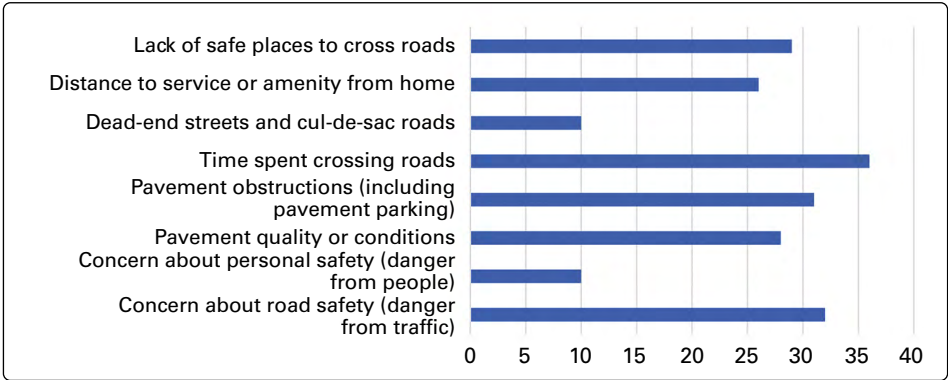


Fig. 2 Barriers to accessing local services

stations and stops’ classification, unlike Manchester and Salford, which are well served by the Metrolink tram system.

We then assigned scores to each service and amenity classification and theme, based on our literature review, and mapped the weighted score to determine how many of these services and amenities each household in Manchester and Salford can access by foot within 10 minutes (based on a walking speed of 5 kilometres per hour). For example, for a health and wellbeing theme to score 1, both GP surgeries and pharmacies need to be accessible. We used ESRI’s ArcGIS Service Area tool,² which takes into account road network and landscape barriers, to ensure a more accurate assessment of accessibility.

One of the primary criticisms raised against the 20MN concept is its narrow focus on distance as the key measure of accessibility. The quality of amenities, safety and conditions of routes and the cost/affordability of services are all equally important, if not more so. To address these shortcomings, we contextualised our spatial analysis by means of public engagement activities between November 2022 and February 2023, collecting feedback from members of the public via both in-person and online events. In total, we collected 78 valid responses to the online survey, and approximately 30 people attended in-person meetings across three engagement events.³

Results

The descriptive results of the study are presented in Figs 1 and 2. For our online survey, we asked the respondents to answer the following questions:

- Which services and amenities can you currently access within a 10-minute walk of your home?
- Which services and amenities are important for you to be able to access within walking distance of your home?
- Which issues and barriers limit how much you currently access local services?
- Do you have any comments on the idea of 20-minute neighbourhoods?

We also posed some questions about the online map itself and aggregated personal data—for example age.

While some of the questions allowed for free-text responses, others were multiple-choice options.

In brief, the respondents were fairly representative in terms of gender, with slightly more men than persons of other genders. The age distribution of the respondents followed a normal distribution similar to the adult age profile of Manchester and Salford, as recorded in the 2021 Census. The responses regarding desired services and amenities within walking or cycling distance of homes closely mirrored a recent YouGov poll,⁴ with some minor deviations in terms of access to health and wellbeing services, which ranked highly in the national poll.

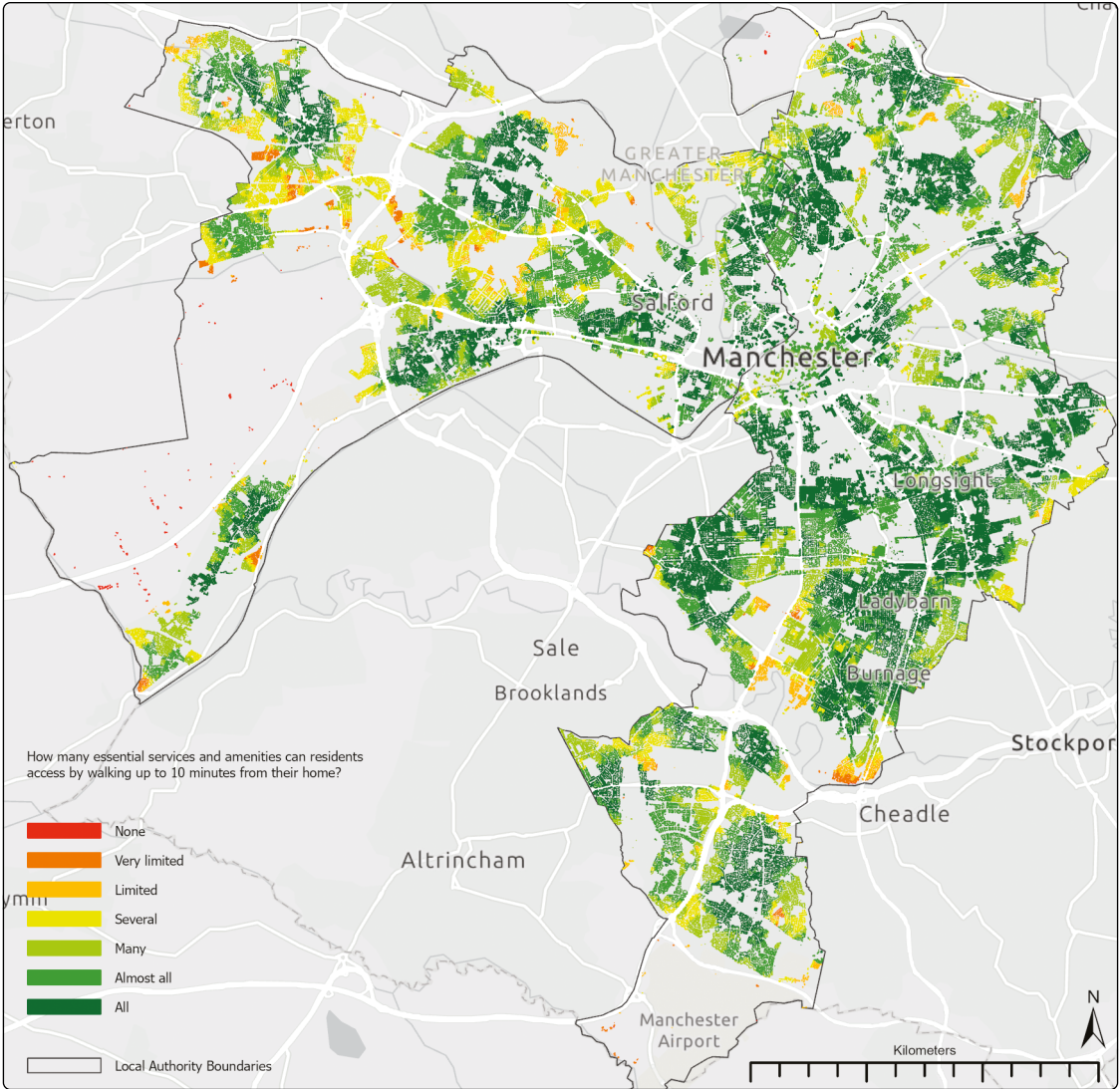


Fig. 3 20MN map of Manchester and Salford

Data sources: EDINA Digimap Ordnance Survey Service for UK Buildings, OS Points of Interest, OS GreenSpace Mastermap, as well as OS Basemap. *Analysis:* The authors

The responses to the question of what the respondents think of 20MNs were generally positive, with many expressing support for the concept and a desire to live in a neighbourhood where essential services and amenities are within close proximity. Some respondents highlighted the importance of access to green spaces and public areas, as well as ensuring that neighbourhoods are safe and suitable for all residents, including disabled people.

A few concerns were raised regarding the practicality of implementing the concept, as well as the need for better public transport options in areas with fewer services and amenities within walking distance. A few people expressed scepticism about the 20-minute metric, arguing that it fails to account for the quality and quantity of facilities, or the actual

travel times, which may be longer due to obstacles such as road crossings or obstructed pavements.

Overall, the 20MN concept was viewed positively by most respondents, with the caveat that it must be implemented thoughtfully and inclusively. While small variations in the most commonly desired services and amenities and the main barriers to access were observed across age and gender groups, it is difficult to speculate whether these differences are due to demographic characteristics or other factors, such as income or education, given the limited sample size and the absence of additional information.

Based on the above results, the literature review, and professional judgement, we mapped access to essential services and amenities in Manchester and Salford. The map shown in Fig. 3 illustrates the

number of these services and amenities that residents can access by walking up to 10 minutes from their homes. While red indicates a score of 0, green represents a score of 6, indicating that all six themes identified in Table 1 have been met.⁵

Discussion and recommendations

The full analytical potential of the 20-minute neighbourhood lens in creating liveable places lies in its ability to uncover spatial variations in service provision within a city and to reveal correlations between service provision and other urban development and socio-economic characteristics.

It is not surprising that residents in the majority of Manchester and inner areas of Salford have access to essential services and amenities within a 10-minute walking distance, given the high level of urbanisation and population density, as well as the Green Belt protections that ensure access to open spaces. Conversely, areas on the River Mersey south of Manchester, or ribbon development on the A580 in Salford, have access to a lower number of services and amenities, primarily retail and community services, as a result of car-dependent estate developments. Further west in Salford, rural areas have little or no services available within walking distance.

However, this masks the impact of unequal access to services and amenities and its wider impact on climate emergency, healthy places and social equity goals. For example, Manchester city centre, which has experienced rapid urban densification over the last two decades, does not conform to the 20MN characteristics, mainly due to the lack of accessible green space and health and wellbeing services.

Outside the city centre, the 20MN lens also highlights the impact of Radburn-inspired, inward-looking, cul-de-sac dominated neighbourhoods in which essential services and amenities are non-existent. A detailed look at these areas reveals that car or van ownership per household is much higher than in inner-city neighbourhoods, reflecting not only the lifestyle embodied in these areas, but also a level of forced car ownership as a result of inaccessibility issues.

Based on the above discussion, the following recommendations can be made.

Testing, testing, testing

Given the diverse methodological approaches to measuring 20MNs, and in the absence of clear evidence on which one is superior, localities should keep an open mind regarding the variety of approaches that can be taken. The inherently local and heterogeneous nature of neighbourhoods means that locally effective solutions may not meet the 20MN model; therefore, every locality should test their own vision of what a 20MN might look like, identifying services and amenities relevant to the particular demographic, taking into account

concerns about socio-economic inequalities and addressing accessibility barriers. Otherwise, the ambiguity around the 20MN and what it means can exacerbate existing inequalities.

Partnership approach

Delivering the 20MN concept on the ground will require working within multi-actor coalitions, formed around a strong vision, to achieve the spatial, economic, infrastructural and environmental interventions necessary to form truly accessible, walkable/cyclable neighbourhoods. Population health policies, the strategic priorities of local authorities, partnerships with business associations, and voluntary, community and social enterprises (VCSE) play a vital role in defining what a 20MN means in that locality and delivering that vision.

Places for living

We concluded our previous article in *Town & Country Planning* on the topic with the following paragraph, which is worth repeating here:

*'In taking the 20MN concept forward, the overall purpose and intention of the idea must not be lost: to create communities within which residents can lead high-quality daily lives. Too great a focus on which, how many, or what types of services and amenities can be accessed within a 20-minute radius may result in losing sight of the goal of building neighbourhoods where people live dignified lives.'*¹

In embedding 20MN principles into policy and guidance, a balance should be achieved between setting measurable walk-time or distance guides for key services and allowing for a holistic approach that accounts for local characteristics and sets resident wellbeing as the priority.

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Notes

- 1 F Hewett and C Koksall: '20 minutes to what?'. *Town & Country Planning*, Vol. 92, Mar.–Apr., 108–11
- 2 See ESRI's 'Create Drive-Time Areas' webpage, at <https://doc.arcgis.com/en/arcgis-online/analyze/create-drive-time-areas.htm>
- 3 One such event was the ESRC Festival of Social Science 2022, which provided some funding towards the data analysis part of this study
- 4 F Smith: 'Most Britons would like their area to become a '15-minute neighbourhood''. Web article. YouGov, Mar. 2023. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/articles-reports/2023/03/06/most-britons-would-their-area-become-15-minute-nei>
- 5 An online interactive version of this map is available at <https://arcg.is/01fLOf1>

who is ageing in what place?

a classification of england

Richard Dunning, Les Dolega and Andrea Nasuto discuss a new classification of the variety of places in which we are ageing — a tool that could help in coming to a better understanding of neighbourhood demographic characteristics and the likely needs of local populations

We're getting older. Statistics about the median age of national populations have less longevity than the people themselves. Local statistics present a starker picture: for example, the average age of people in rural villages and dispersed settlements in England is 46 and has been increasing at a significantly faster rate than the average age in urban areas for decades.¹ Place matters in describing the population's age.

The average age of our housing stock is getting older too. Half of the housing stock in England is over 50 years old, and 20% is over 100 years old. In Blackpool, 78% of the stock is over five decades old, while in Huntingdonshire 73% of the stock has not yet had its 50th birthday.² Place matters for understanding housing.

The structures of our built environment are ageing too. New Towns are not so new. Suburbia has seen generations come and go. Infrastructures age; some are updated, some are replaced, and yet others are left to dwindle and decay. Service types change, but not always at the same speed as needs, meaning that they can age faster than the populations they serve.

We argue that the ageing population, who are often viewed as a homogenic group, exhibit diverse socio-economic characteristics, health status, digital engagement, and mobility, which underpins unique needs and challenges. To better serve us, as we age, it is essential to understand these differences at a small geographic level. Town and country planning must surely be concerned with the coincidence of an ageing population and the ageing structures

which support those lives—particularly where people want to age in place.

That people want to choose where and how they age in place has been well researched.³ There is now a substantial and supportive case study literature on successful examples of ageing-in-place communities and on lessons to be explored in the design of homes, outdoor spaces, neighbourhood structures, service location and many other facets which influence the quality of life through the ageing-in-place process. However, there has been less research on the spatial distribution of the ageing population, particularly linked to the variation in environments they live in—effectively the types of ageing in place. Over the last couple of years, we have been working on a project for the Nuffield Foundation to construct a classification of older people in England which seeks to address this knowledge gap.⁴

The changing demographic character of the country represents a significant challenge for planning. Developing places that are suitable for residents to 'age in place' is key, but older people are not a homogenous group, nor are the places in which they live. To understand variations in the population of older citizens the research team developed the ageing-in-place classification (henceforth, AiPC), which allows for a more detailed understanding of the specific characteristics, needs, expectations and aspirations of different older people and the places in which they live. Using secondary data at fine spatial scales and geospatial algorithms, we

Table 1
AiPC hierarchy and cluster names

Supergroups	Groups
1 Struggling, more vulnerable urbanites	1.1 Disadvantaged single households
	1.2 Struggling white British
	1.3 Terraced mix, relative stability
2 Multicultural central urban living	2.1 Inner-city diverse living
	2.2 Peripheral constrained diverse living
3 Rurban comfortable ageing	3.1 Rural comfortable ageing
	3.2 Ageing in the affluent fringe
4 Retired fringe and residential stability	4.1 Retired country and coastal living
	4.2 Comfortable rural/suburban ageing workers and retirees
	4.3 Constrained semi-rural ageing and retirement
5 Cosmopolitan comfort ageing	5.1 Cosmopolitan family ageing
	5.2 Coastal later-aged retirees
	5.3 Cosmopolitan ageing

Source: The authors

classified England’s population of adults aged 50+ into five ‘supergroups’ and 13 subsidiary groups (see Table 1).

The AiPC helps to explore the geography and characteristics of the ageing population and the environments they live in, with clear spatial variation between the clusters.

In Supergroup 1, ‘Struggling, more vulnerable urbanites’, areas that are predominantly located in major urban centres of the Midlands and Northern England were identified. These areas tend to suffer from income deprivation, have low digital engagement, and have above-average likelihood of being in socially rented accommodation.

Supergroup 2, ‘Multicultural central urban living’, comprises mostly city-centre urban areas with people struggling with income levels and living in overcrowded conditions. This is also the youngest group and the most ethnically diverse, with good access to amenities and health services.

On the other hand, Supergroup 3, ‘Rurban comfortable ageing’, is the oldest group, living predominantly in rural or rural/urban fringe areas. This cluster is characterised by better health and the highest digital engagement, while their access to amenities is among the lowest.

Supergroup 4, ‘Retired fringe and residential stability’, occupies largely suburban areas, with the majority of the residents being retired white British. They tend to live in under-occupied houses, and this group is the most stable in terms of residential mobility.

Lastly, Supergroup 5, ‘Cosmopolitan comfort ageing’, is mostly spatially distributed within Greater London and the South East of England. This cluster groups areas that have higher-than-average house values and the highest proportion of working population.

Our research considered the utility of AiPC in relation to three thematic areas: housing, neighbourhoods, and society. These three research themes were used to evaluate spatial variation in service accessibility across the geo-demographic classification and the extent to which implementing our AiPC classification can enhance small-area estimation of loneliness and housing satisfaction for an ageing population. Here, we focus on the neighbourhood characteristics.⁵

Ageing in place is most likely to be successfully achieved in neighbourhoods where residents can meet the majority of their regular needs such as groceries, healthcare or leisure within a 20-minute return travel time of their residence. This concept has recently gained in importance and visibility—and it’s fair share of antagonism—across the western world under the 15-minute city or 20-minute neighbourhood concept. However, more limited mobility in older-age people, alongside rural areas being often a more preferable location choice for older people, may mean that the concept of the 20-minute neighbourhood is a smaller geographical area than has popularly been thought.⁶

We used the Liverpool City Region area as a case study to map services that correspond to the World Health Organization’s six determinants of active ageing (from 2007):

- economic determinants;
- health and social services;
- behavioural determinants;
- personal determinants;
- physical environment; and
- social determinants.

The time taken to walk to the nearest of each of these types of services was then mapped against the location of dwellings. This allowed us to see

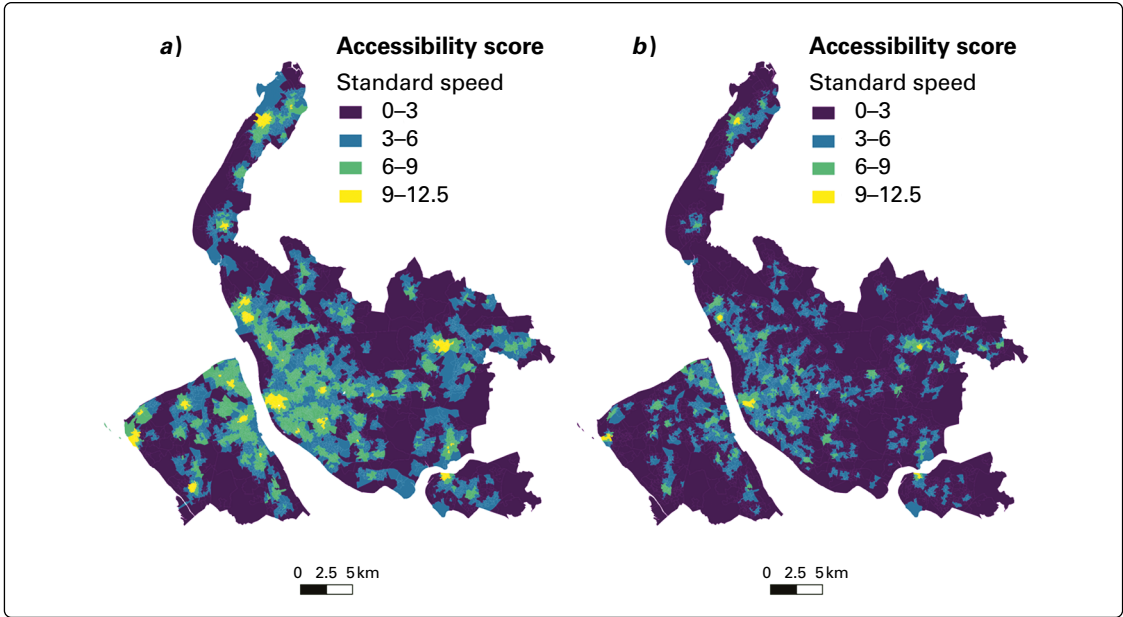


Fig. 1 Maps showing the accessibility score for 'Standard walking speed' and 'Reduced walking speed' groups of people aged 50 years and over in the Liverpool City Region
Source: The Authors

how many services could be reached within a 10-minute walk for each of the AiPC groups. We mapped this for a walking speed of 1.2 metres per second and a reduced walking speed of 0.9 metres per second to mimic the reduction in speed which corresponds to functional (not chronological!) ageing.

Fig. 1 shows how access to services by foot varies across the Liverpool City Region when we consider a slower walking pace common to older citizens. We note that the maximum score found in the study area is 12.5, a value well below the theoretical high point of 18, which could be reached when all service categories needed are accessible in a 10-minute walk. This means that in the Liverpool City Region the availability of basic services within a 10-minute walk ranged from approximately 69% to 0%.

For visualisation purposes, four classes can be distinguished in Fig. 1:

- 0-3, corresponding to areas with very low access;
- 3-6, corresponding to areas with low access;
- 6-9, corresponding to areas with high access; and
- 9-12.5, corresponding to areas with very high access.

Only a few very high-access areas, coloured in yellow, are visible in the left-hand panel of Fig. 1, accompanied by more extensive coverage of high-access areas shown in green, where people have at least half of the service categories accessible to them in a 10-minute walk. When the score is computed for people with reduced mobility (the right-hand panel of Fig. 1), a striking reduction in

yellow (very-high-access) and green (high-access) areas is noticeable.

We can visualise this reduction in relation to the AiPC supergroups to express the differential impact of a reduced walking speed. The two 'violin' plots in Fig. 2 on the next page shows the distribution of household accessibility within each group (the wider the plot, the more households). In Fig. 2a it is apparent that 'Multicultural central urban living' (Supergroup 2) older households are likely to have more services accessible to them than is the case for 'Rurban comfortable ageing' (Supergroup 3) households for an average walking speed (1.2 metres per second). For the same two groups, with a reduced walking speed, the average number of services they can access decreases—but not close to evenly: 'Multicultural central urban living' drops from 7 to 5.5; 'Rurban comfortable ageing' drops from 4 to 1.5. Place matters.

The conclusion is that while it is well documented that rural and urban fringe areas, often preferred by ageing communities, tend to have lower accessibility to essential services, it is actually reduced mobility that poses a significant challenge for this demographic in otherwise well served neighbourhoods. When an adjusted walking speed is used, to illustrate the difference between older residents with lower mobility, there is a major reduction in the number of services that the population can access, but the most significant reduction is not even between groups. This may have implications for decision-makers regarding the density and mixed-use character of developments and may encourage a

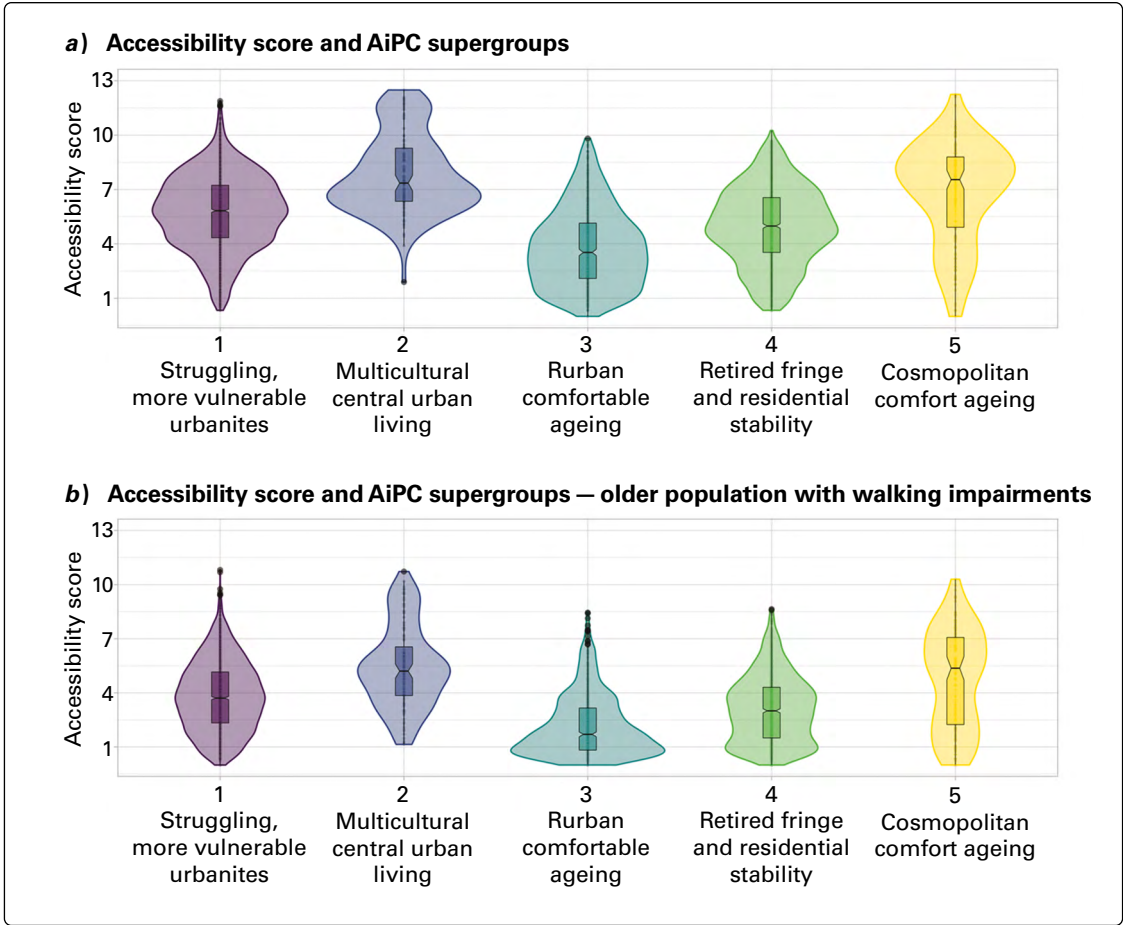


Fig. 2 The impact of reduced walking speeds on accessibility by AiPC supergroup

Source: The Authors

fuller understanding of what the 20-minute city means for an ageing population.

Ageing in place is going to increasingly matter as the population ages, however variegated. The AiPC tool is one option to help planners think about the neighbourhoods that they are responsible for and the demographic characteristics and likely needs of the populations that they serve. Diversity in ageing matters. Diversity in place matters. Equity in facilitating ageing in place matters—but it is an unequal challenge.

● **Dr Richard Dunning** is Professor of Land Economy and Housing, **Dr Les Dolega** is Senior Lecturer in Geographic Information Science, and **Andrea Nasuto** is a PhD candidate, all at the at the University of Liverpool. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

1 *Statistical Digest of Rural England. 1 — Population.* Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Mar. 2023. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1142169/1_-_Population.pdf

2 *Council Tax: Stock of Properties, 2021.* Valuation Office Agency, Sept. 2021. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/council-tax-stock-of-properties-2021

3 See, for example, J.L. Wiles, A. Leibing, N. Guberman, J. Reeve and R.E.S. Allen: 'The meaning of 'aging in place' to older people'. *The Gerontologist*, 2012, Vol. 52 (3), 357–66. <https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article/52/3/357/580905>

4 The research team changed through the project. It included Dr Fran Darlington-Pollock, Yuanxuan Yang, Professor Alex Lord, and the authors. More details of the project can be found on the Nuffield Foundation website, at www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/older-people-in-england-geography-of-challenges-and-opportunities

5 The full AiPC map can be found at <https://mapmaker.cdrc.ac.uk/#/ageing-in-place-classification>

6 See R. Dunning, A. Calafiore and A. Nurse: '20-minute neighbourhood or 15-minute city?'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2021, Vol. 90, May/June, 157–59 for a discussion of the 20-minute city concept

towards equitable 20-minute neighbourhoods

Elias Willberg, Christoph Fink and **Tuuli Toivonen** outline results from a recent study examining the effects that age, winter conditions and the service network have on accessibility for people walking to services in towns and cities



Elias Willberg, Christoph Fink and Tuuli Toivonen

We want our cities to be more walkable, but many challenges remain—including equity considerations linked to age

In the urban planning community, the ideas of 20-minute neighbourhoods and 15- or 30-minute cities are the talk of the town. These ideas are increasingly being translated into concrete plans and policies, as a growing number of cities and municipalities in Europe, and beyond, have adopted such goals in their city strategies. The 20-minute neighbourhood and related concepts are essentially a revitalisation of an old idea: to promote proximity to everyday destinations. Their focus is, above all, on accessibility, a concept that has fascinated

geographers and scholars of other disciplines for decades. The 20-minute neighbourhood concept captures the core concerns of accessibility: how easily people can reach everyday opportunities, such as services and other amenities, and how equally these opportunities are distributed over a city.

Despite this wide interest and current popularity, we seldom think too much about whose walking distance we mean, and at what time of the day or year. In consequence, this means that the 15-, 20- or 30-minute threshold usually represents an area

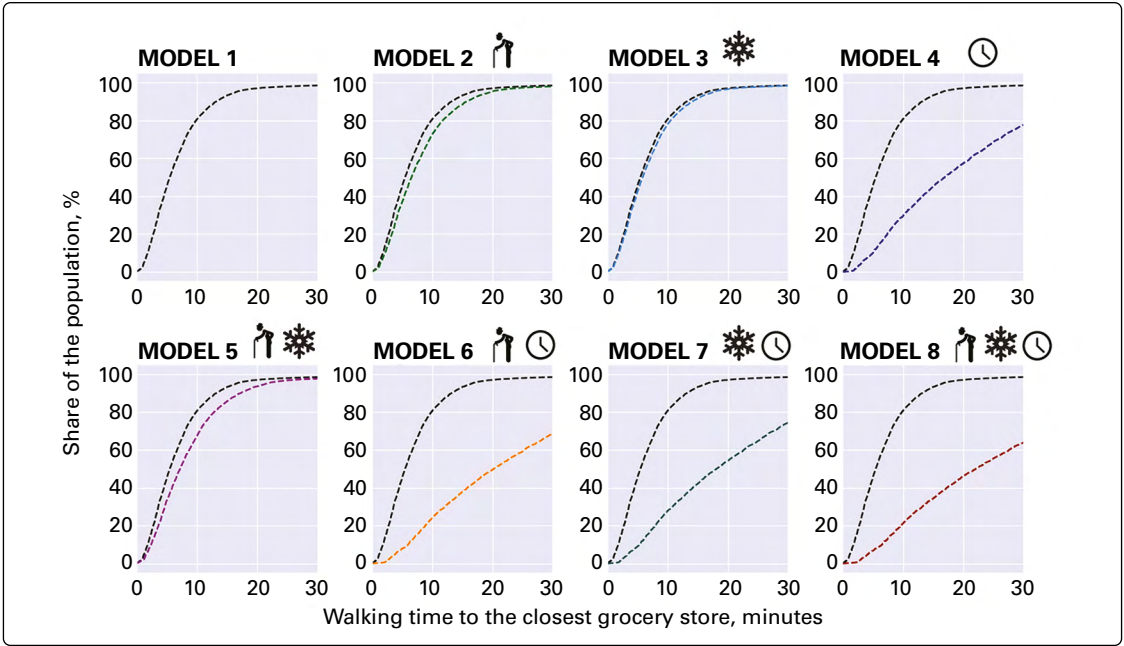


Fig. 1 Variation in walking accessibility to local grocery stores in the Helsinki metropolitan area, considering sensitivity to older age (model 2), winter conditions (model 3), unconventional opening hours (model 4), and combinations of these (models 5–8)

that an average adult can cover in favourable street conditions. However, as people have different walking abilities—for instance, due to age and other factors—variation in walking speeds can mean that a person with reduced mobility covers only a fraction of a healthy adult’s distance in that time.

In the same way, temporal variation matters for walking accessibility. In northern latitudes, temperatures around freezing point, snowfall and piling snow drifts make footpaths slippery and difficult to navigate for part of the year, while in more southern latitudes it can be the heat that demands people take a rest in the shade during a walk. Due to time constraints or, particularly in the wake of the Covid pandemic, a wish to avoid contact and infections, some people may also need to access essential services at unconventional hours, when most stores are closed and distances to the nearest shops that are open are longer.

All these types of factors have relevance for planning. If our aim is to create truly inclusive cities, we need to address the realities of vulnerable population groups in addition to the more capable residents when planning for walking access.

How does the physical urban environment impact walkability from older people’s perspective?

In particular, older people are affected by changes in walking accessibility. According to one estimation, a substantial proportion of older people are not active enough to stay healthy.¹ Many of them, especially

among those over 75 years of age, suffer from health issues which limit the range and frequency of daily walking activities or even exclude them from accessing opportunities. This population segment commonly reports unmet travel needs to out-of-home activities.² At the same time, the rapid ageing of many societies, including that in the UK, is increasing the importance of planning for older age groups, especially from the public health perspective. In many countries, society is actively looking for ways to maintain the health of their older members.

Walkability for older people is particularly limited by mobility restrictions and fear of injury or discomfort. Physical environment features that can contribute to such fear include a lack of sidewalks or their poor quality, icy or snow-filled streets, other road traffic, poor lighting, and the lack of shade or places to rest.^{3–5} Year-round maintenance of and improvements to sidewalks (as well as improvements in their connectivity) are important in improving walking opportunities. Similarly, traffic control and separation, adequate lighting, the existence of greenery and the number of benches, among other factors, have been shown to promote walking among older people.^{3,4}

However, when viewed at the scale of an entire urban area, physical proximity to activities remains one of the strongest determinants of walking, as identified by 20-minute neighbourhoods and related concepts in such a tangible manner. If the nearest service is too far away, most older people cannot get there on foot, no matter how good the walking environment along the route is.

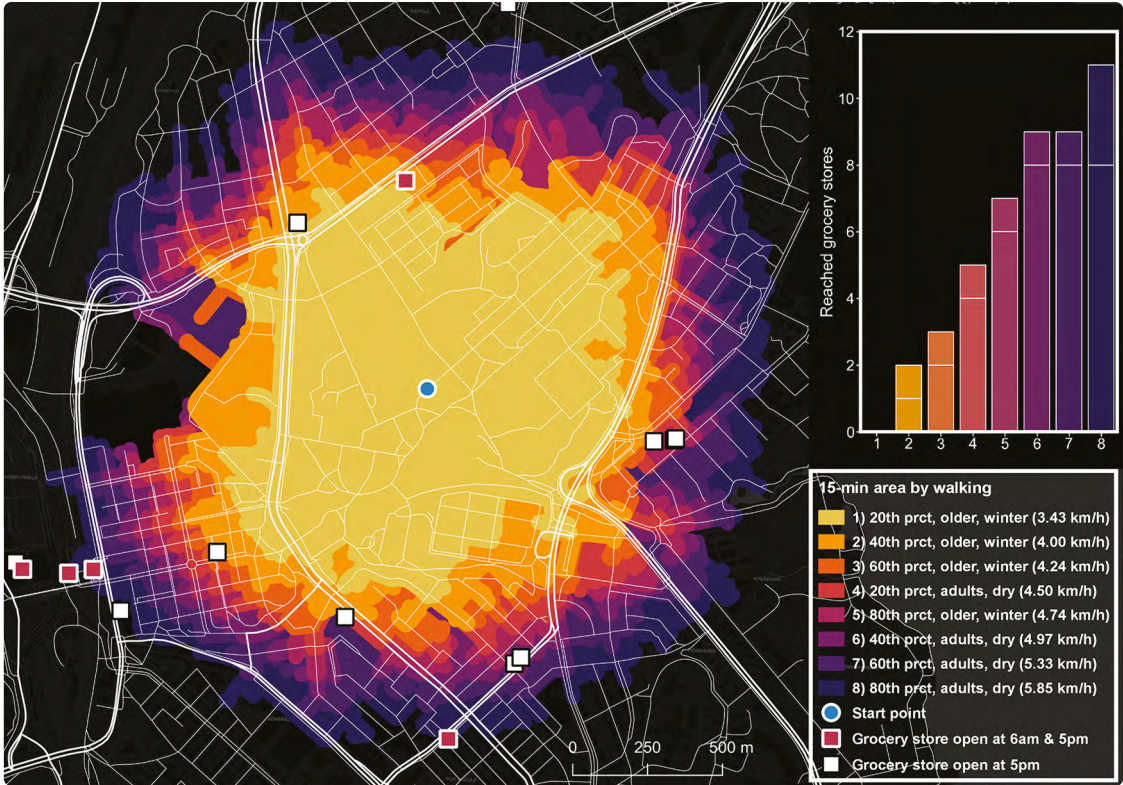


Fig. 2 Assumptions matter. How many grocery stores can be reached by a person at the 20th, 40th, 60th and 80th percentile under the assumptions of the basic model (adult population and dry street condition) and the most sensitive model (older population and winter street condition). The bars show the cumulative number of grocery shops reached in each of the eight scenarios at 5pm (the bar) and at 6am (the part of the bar above the white line)

Research into walking accessibility in Helsinki

Against this background, our new study⁶ set out to examine the effects of age, winter conditions and opening hours on the walking accessibility to grocery shops in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, Finland, which sees significant seasonal variation in walking conditions. We measured people’s walking speeds in varying summer and winter conditions and at various street sections. Using these measurements, we then modelled travel time, by walking, to the closest grocery store across the entire study region, at high spatial and temporal resolutions, and by applying different traveller and temporal assumptions.

Our baseline model assumed the walking characteristics of an average adult in dry street conditions, as well as the availability of all grocery stores. We then compared the baseline model to age- and time-sensitive models, which assumed either average walking characteristics of older people (over-65-year-olds), winter street conditions, only grocery stores that open in early mornings, or combinations of these factors. The study took advantage of rapidly developing computational tools targeted at mass calculations of accessibility (for example Pandana, r5py), as well as the availability of

open geographic data on services, the road network, and population distribution.

We found that the opening hours of shops—in other words, the density of the service network—clearly has the largest effect on walking accessibility in the Helsinki metropolitan area. However, the challenges brought by age and winter conditions also contribute to reductions in access to grocery stores. In the optimal scenario (model 1), in which accessibility is measured with typical assumptions represented by the baseline model, as many as 97% of residents could reach their nearest grocery store on foot within 20 minutes.

However, the situation changed if we looked at the worst-case scenario, which considers the travel time of older people, in typical winter conditions, in the early morning (model 8). In this case, only 46% of the population reaches their closest store as quickly (see Fig. 1). To complicate matters, the results also show that there is large variation between older people, in some cases even more than between them and other adults (see Fig. 2).

One of the main contributions of the study is that it shows how much assumptions matter in accessibility planning and research. The results are particularly relevant for ideas such as 20-minute

neighbourhoods, which seek to establish normative, prescriptive travel time thresholds to guide policy and planning. Our study shows that, often, it is possible to conclude that a neighbourhood has excellent service accessibility under one set of justifiable assumptions, but a different set of equally justifiable assumptions could lead to the conclusion that the same neighbourhood is under-served.

Actions for equitable 20-minute neighbourhoods

Enhancing people's ability to access destinations by walking is one of the cornerstones of creating more sustainable urban mobility systems. Being able to walk to daily destinations improves people's physical, mental and social capital. It also reduces the environmental impacts of mobility by encouraging people to take short journeys on foot rather than by driving. Concepts such as 20-minute neighbourhoods, which promote proximity of everyday services, strive to foster exactly these benefits of local living. In this respect, our findings further strengthen the notion of how important local services are for an inclusive and walkable city.

However, equity remains vital for the successful implementation of such concepts. While 20-minute neighbourhoods and similar ideas represent an opportunity to promote equity and sustainability, their benefits are by no means easy to realise. Recent studies from the UK and the US show how, in many urban regions, only a small proportion of people live in high-access areas which could be labelled as '20-minute neighbourhoods'.^{7,8} As our study shows, without careful judgement, there is a risk that 20-minute neighbourhoods will be designed, subconsciously or deliberately, with healthy and young adults in mind, overlooking the needs of vulnerable people and of those with restricted mobility. A recent study has shown how calculated travel time measures are likely to overestimate the accessibility of these groups, especially when it comes to walking and cycling.⁹

So, what could it mean, in practice, to pay more attention to older people's walkability? Depending on the region and the city size, different strategies might work best. However, the actions taken do not necessarily have to be costly or slow to implement. For example, in places where the pedestrian infrastructure is already well developed, measures could include prioritising pedestrians over other traffic at traffic lights, as well as a push for better pavement maintenance to improve older pedestrians' sense of safety and convenience. In other contexts, further development of safe walking infrastructure and the provision of amenities such as resting benches and shading trees can be the key to promoting walking.

However, the facilitation of such actions also calls for a perspective shift, so that the needs of the vulnerable and disadvantaged become the starting

point for planning. As we have long known, if we design our neighbourhoods for those with children, a wheelchair or a walking stick, we will have a better chance of supporting equitable walking opportunities for everybody.¹⁰

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supporting health by taking a seat

Gemma Hyde explains why the humble park bench is a vital element in the design of successful neighbourhoods that support health and wellbeing

It has become common to express the idea of place as something complex, formed of dynamic systems of built and natural features and replete with cultural and social elements, histories, and communities within communities. In response to framing places this way, simple health-promoting interventions can seem too good to be true, or improbable in their ability to impact—but the humble park bench may be an unexpected hero that people and places are looking for.

The public bench

The history of public benches can be traced back to ancient civilisations. The Greeks and Romans used stone seating in public spaces for public gatherings and cultural events and as places to rest during long journeys. During the Middle Ages, benches were used in churches and cathedrals as seating for worshippers. Typically made of wood and often carved with religious symbols, the benches could be moved into the town square for public meetings and trials.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, public benches became more widespread in parks and public gardens and along promenades. They were often made of cast iron or wood and were designed to be comfortable and durable as well as decorative. In 1833, the Select Committee on Public Walks was formed to promote the 'health and comfort of the inhabitants [of populous towns]'¹ by securing open spaces for walking, exercise, socialising, and entertainment. The committee worked to provide spaces to counter the urban ills of 'overcrowding, poverty, squalor, ill-health, lack of morals and morale'. All of which sound unnervingly familiar in 2023.

During the 20th century, public benches continued to be important features of urban design. In many cities, they were installed along streets, in squares, and at public transport stations. Today, public benches and places to sit are still found in a variety of settings,

from parks to high streets, to cemeteries. Some continue to look like benches have for decades, but others take advantage of the natural landscape, use or imitate rocks and boulders, or are features built directly into buildings and walls. In the 21st century benches can also be found that provide services such as mobile phone charging, live public transport timetables, and wi-fi access points.

However, the provision of public seating and benches has, over recent years, faced challenge and opposition, linked into people's perceptions and experiences of anti-social behaviour. A shift in some places to defensive or hostile architecture has seen the removal of seating and the introduction of seating designed to inhibit use and comfort. Elements such as rails, fins and arm rests are designed in to restrict behaviours seen as anti-social, such as littering, public sleeping, skateboarding, and even congregating if you are a young person.

During the Covid-19 lockdowns park benches were alternately viewed as vectors of infection and then as a public good. Some councils taped off seating in questionable attempts to stop people congregating, apparently with little regard for any unintended consequences. For some with reduced mobility, attempts to get outside and around during Covid restrictions were hindered by the lack of opportunities to rest. Conversely, as restrictions eased, benches and public seating became a new focus of social life and connection for people only allowed to meet friends and family outdoors.

Benches and mental health (or in the language of 1833 'lack of morale')

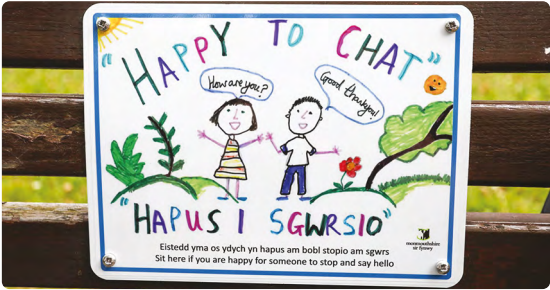
Benches play a role in society for people of all ages and all circumstances. Research by The Young Foundation has found that, even if only for a moment, use of bench-space allows people to loosely belong within the flow of the neighbourhood



Vlad Patana on Unsplash



Gemma Hyde



Monmouthshire County Council

'More attention should be given to the simple, yet impactful object that is the public bench'

around them, to see and be seen. The Young Foundation also found that benches enable people to spend longer outside and that they function as a social resource, giving people a sense of legitimacy in being in a space. In use, they increase the sense of a place being both within a community and safe.²

They can also be vehicles for self-care. A study of the users of urban benches in a central square in Woolwich, London found that, for some, the action of sitting and watching and the entwining of watching and thinking combined into a reported calmer way of being.³

This may all just sound 'rather lovely', but there is a rising tide of poor mental health in the UK, exacerbated by the pandemic and a lack of timely access to properly resourced mental health services:

- One in 16 children aged 10–15 are unhappy with their lives. One in eight are unhappy with school.⁴
- 49% of young people aged 11–25 report experiencing negative emotions which affect their everyday life.⁵
- 51% of young people spend most of their free time in their bedrooms, often alone.⁶
- One in four women experience mental health problems during pregnancy and during the first 24 months after giving birth.⁷
- Suicide is the largest cause of death for men under 50. Higher rates of suicide are also found in minority communities, including homosexual men, war veterans, men from BAME backgrounds, and those with low incomes.⁸
- One in four over-65s live with an issue with their mental health.⁹

Research is also increasingly establishing the link between loneliness and prolonged chronic stress and both the onset and the progression of physical illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, digestive issues, high blood pressure, and memory and concentration impairment.¹⁰

So, could more well placed public benches help? Yes, if they are part of a wider acknowledgement that place is an important determinant of physical and mental health and wellbeing. Place matters, and sitting outside in public spaces has positive outcomes for wellbeing and inclusion, and, as found by the Bench Project,¹¹ this is even more significant for people commonly marginalised by society.

Benches in the neighbourhood

Twenty-minute neighbourhoods, or complete, compact and connected communities, are places where people can meet more of their daily needs within a short walking or wheeling distance of their homes. The idea offers a spatial framework for thinking about the role of the built environment in creating and maintaining population health—where improvements in physical and mental health outcomes promote wellbeing and reduce health inequalities across an entire population.¹²

The TCPA's *20-Minute Neighbourhoods* guide¹³ outlines eight features that should be considered in redeveloping or creating neighbourhoods, and the provision of benches and public seating intersects with, and complements, the development many of them, supporting healthier, happier places for all.

Well designed and connected public spaces allow people to meet and spend time with one another on ostensibly neutral ground in planned and unplanned ways. They allow people to interact with others within the context of belonging to a whole community. Socially inclusive public spaces and good green spaces in the right places enable people of all ages to access essential services and facilities and access nature without physical barriers, safety concerns, or transport difficulties.

Places for all ages are places where people can choose to live their whole lives, because the needs of all age groups and life stages are accommodated. This means considering the needs of different age

groups to enable people to age well in place, which helps in creating strong communities in which people know their neighbours and feel supported and rooted—which itself supports health and wellbeing. Benches offer people, old and young, places to socialise, rest and enjoy watching, and being part of, the community. They encourage ‘loitering’ in the truest and most positive sense.

Across 20-minute neighbourhoods, public benches and a variety of public seating should be provided:

- in proximity to facilities, points of interest, and public spaces;
- to provide shelter and shade;
- to overlook formal and informal play space for children and teenagers;
- to accommodate the needs of those with differing mobility and desires for stopping in public space, including to eat or work;
- to allow incidental play opportunities;
- to provide a variety of seating layouts for individuals and groups, side by side and face to face; and
- to offer differing degrees of privacy, screening and observation.

Then, once in place, benches can be ‘activated’—linked to schemes that increase the likelihood of them being used to form connections, reduce loneliness, and support positive mental health. A number of projects with such aims have sprung up around the country in recent years, such as ‘Chatty Benches’ in Salford,¹⁴ ‘Talking Benches’ in Frome and Shepton Mallet,¹⁵ and the ‘Happy to Chat’ benches in Monmouthshire.¹⁶ All these schemes use signage on benches as a simple way of signalling to people that if you sit there you are happy to engage in conversation and share a moment with another person. Some even have a regular visit from a community worker or health connector who can listen and signpost people to other services as required.

Public seating should be seen as a social good and

‘The bench suggests the city is a place in which we can belong’

Edwin Heathcote: ‘Public benches: the seat of civilisation’. *Financial Times*, 19 Jun. 2015. www.ft.com/content/f38b96f2-1019-11e5-ad5a-00144feabdc0

a vital element in supporting mental health, as well as physical activity. Benches allow people the choice to stay longer in public spaces and feel welcome in doing so. In designing successful neighbourhoods that support the health and wellbeing of all ages, more attention should be given to the simple, yet impactful object that is the public bench.

● **Gemma Hyde** is Project and Policy Officer at the TCPA. The views expressed are personal.

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whose place is it anyway?

Tim Evans looks at how the 20-minute neighbourhood might provide a framework within which we can rethink our assumptions about what makes for a good life and so enable a more holistic and sustainable form of community regeneration

What do we think a good life looks like? If we were to take a moment and think about what brings us joy, purpose, and meaning, what would we come up with? This article explores what a good life looks like, what resources are needed to achieve it, and where we might locate them, in the context of community regeneration. I suggest that looking at community regeneration through the lens of asset-based community development (ABCD) ¹ enables us to see the following elements as important drivers of a more sustainable and holistic regeneration approach in which physical regeneration *supplements* rather than *supplants* the important work that only citizens and communities can do:

- the importance of connection;
- the discovery of local assets;
- the invitation to citizenship; and
- the neighbourhood as the primary agent of change.

We live in a world that so often tells us that a good life comes from the marketplace; from our consumption—yet we often hear stories of people who have great material wealth and discover that they experience poverty in many other ways. I remember, years ago, a friend who was a sociology lecturer addressing a class of students about poverty when he was interrupted by one of the students who came from a favela in Brazil. This student challenged the assumption being made about what was meant by poverty. Yes, you have greater material wealth and we experience material poverty, he said, but we are rich in ways you do not know: 'We have each other; we have community.'

We too often assume that, for a good life, people need well designed and well intentioned professional interventions and services. But what if we paid more attention to the environment; to the context in which people could flourish? In community

regeneration we are tempted to frame that in terms of having better physical resources—which of course are important to creating a more just environment for people to call home. But the student from the favela had identified something even more powerful—relationships and a sense of community and connection. What is needed in community regeneration to build that, and who should do that work?

When I was a young adult, one of my favourite radio and TV shows was *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* It brought comedians together to improvise based on characters or a plot line that they were given. Much of our view of a good life is based on the plotlines and characters we are given as normative. But what if we made some different assumptions here? Might the 20-minute neighbourhood might give us a framework within which these new assumptions can take root in our thinking and practice? Indeed, whose place is it anyway?

Recognising residents as citizens rather than consumers and re-centring neighbourhoods as the primary producers and contributors, by encouraging and precipitating democratic citizenship among individuals and community-building among neighbourhood associations (while not devaluing the professional skills and knowledge of regeneration professionals), will enable a more holistic and sustainable form of community regeneration.

When I ask people about what enables them to live a good life, close to the top of the list are the quality of their relationships, a sense of having purpose, and being able to make a contribution. So when we at Nurture Development² think about a regeneration programme in our work we ask ourselves: 'How can physical regeneration play a part in enabling this sense of a good life to emerge in a community that so often describes itself as being a 'forgotten place.' The power of the

neighbourhood as a primary agent of change is key to a regeneration programme:

- It is the place that people call home, care about and to want to see change for the better.
- It is large enough to make a contribution, yet small enough to be known, valued, and connected.
- It is where we can build social and economic capital through proximity to others.
- The shared resources of the neighbourhood are an antidote to the widespread individualised and consumerist assumptions about what makes for a good life

A key starting point is to relocate authority. The answer to the question of what makes for a good life does not lie with outside professionals but with residents themselves. It lies in what what is important to them and what they care enough about to stand up for; in their passions, gifts and skills, and the other resources of the neighbourhood; and in how they feel they could be part of building the kind of neighbourhood they want to live in, raise their children in, and grow old in. In seeing other regeneration programmes in operation I observed that:

- Decision-making power rested with those who would not be impacted by (or suffer from) the consequences.
- Those outside geographic communities assumed the authority to define community problems and determine solutions.
- Outputs and outcomes were set by regeneration professionals and policy-makers, rather than those impacted by their efforts, and tended to be transactional and programmatic in nature.
- Local community assets were not recognised and valued.
- Lots of money was spent and some good outcomes, such as better-quality housing, were delivered, but residents were often left wondering whether they were much better off and whether the money had been spent wisely.
- Longer-term challenges remained.

But communities should be looked at, not in terms of their problems, but in terms of what they would look like if we mapped a community according to its strengths rather than its needs.

In Nurture Development's work with residents to engage them in a regeneration programme we began to distinguish between three different approaches in which language had become interchangeable: community consultation; community engagement; and community development.

In our work engaging residents in the community regeneration process there was recognition that past efforts had fallen into the process of doing 'community engagement' that would lead to a set of designs and then into a community masterplan that would be 'consulted on'. In contrast to this

approach, a community development approach might be as follows:

- Openly and routinely review power relations between community members and outside actors to ensure that the community holds a primary position and that members are supported in their efforts to organise themselves in inclusive and consequential ways.
- Start where the community is, but do not stay there. Support and resource them in building power and power-sharing structures that include the gifts of all residents and their associations, while maintaining a critical appraisal of power differentials and robustly analysing social and economic inequity.
- Have the community impacted identify and articulate problems and possibilities in their own language and terms.
- Whenever possible, allow the community to agree on solutions and responses to community problems, after which supplementary supports from external actors may be leveraged.
- Let the community determine change-making and desired outcomes, which happen at the speed of trust, in ways that enhance equity, inclusion, and social justice.

We are in the process of learning how to apply these principles and are using a tool, the Helper's Crossroads,³ while working with a local community to engage them in a community regeneration programme. Moving the work of professional regeneration colleagues much more into the 'with and by residents' space has enabled community engagement to move into community development rather than community consultation.

An ABCD approach to community regeneration offers possibilities for a more resident-led, participative and sustainable form of community regeneration. Seeing that much of what we need for a good life—in all kinds of social, environmental and economic ways—is made available by living in a connected neighbourhood in which all that we need is no more than a 20-minute walk away provides an antidote to those individualised and market assumptions that shape so much of what we think a good life offers us. After all, a neighbourhood belongs to neighbours.

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Notes

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designing neighbourhood parks to foster women and girls' sense of safety

Drawing on research on women and girls' views on parks and safety, **Anna Barker, Helen Forman, Carl McClean, Susannah Walker and Sibylla Warrington Brown** look at the need for public space design and policy to fully consider green space—a vital element of any 20-minute neighbourhood—through the lens of gender and safety, and they outline some key guidance principles for parks professionals

Parks are an essential part of local neighbourhoods. As well as providing environmental benefits, a local park can help to create a sense of community and provides a space in which to be active, play and relax, which benefits mental as well as physical health. So it is no surprise that parks are recognised as a key part of a thriving 20-minute neighbourhood, and also one of the top five amenities that British people would like to have within a 15-minute walk of their home.¹

But simply providing a park is not enough; it has to be accessible and of good quality. Unequal provision of green space is now being recognised as an important issue.² Engagement with nature is often lower among groups who could benefit the most, including women.³ Deprived communities often have a lower quality and quantity of green space provision than more privileged areas, and the creation of 20-minute neighbourhoods recognises the importance of addressing these inequalities.⁴

So far, gender has been given less attention in policy and research,^{5,6} despite recognition that women may spend more time in their local area

as a result of gendered caring responsibilities and different commuting patterns.^{6,7} Neighbourhood parks may therefore be of particular importance for some women, and so inequalities in local park provision may be amplified for them.

These are not the only barriers that women and girls face in accessing good-quality local parks and their benefits. Our recent research demonstrates that safety is perhaps the single biggest issue for women and girls, significantly restricting their ability to access parks and other green space. The majority of women and girls we interviewed in West Yorkshire think that parks in their local area are very or fairly unsafe for women and girls (57% and 76%, respectively).⁸ Any public space design or policy that does not consider green space through the lens of gender and safety will fail to be fully inclusive. This, clearly, has to include the 20-minute neighbourhood.

Women have particular safety concerns which men do not share, notably a fear of rape, and the constant worry that sexual assault may form part of other crimes, such as robbery. Their feelings of

Umeå kommun



Årstadernas Park, in Umeå in northern Sweden

safety are also affected by other aspects of their identity such as race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and age.

Notably, parks are a particular source of fear. Women and girls feel less safe in parks than in other types of public spaces, such as residential streets and busy public spaces like high streets, and on public transport. Moreover, the gendered differences in feelings of safety are stark. In Britain, women are three times more likely than men to feel unsafe in parks during the daytime. And as many as four out of five women feel unsafe in parks after dark, compared with two out of five men.⁹ Nearly one in 10 young people aged 16-19 years who experienced rape (including attempts) since the age of 16 were victimised in a park or open space, according to the Crime Survey for England and Wales.¹⁰

Safety is a relative and multi-faceted concept, broader than crime. Some acts of sexual harassment which women regularly experience in public spaces are not categorised as crimes, but do impact on how safe they feel. Some 71% of women in the UK have been sexually harassed in public, and this figure is much higher (86%) among 18-24 year olds.¹¹

The implications of this for women's access to community parks and local neighbourhood mobility need to be addressed. 'Good green spaces in the right places' will only be accessible for women and girls if they feel safe there. This principle has to be at the centre of design and policy if we are to provide inclusive and vibrant local spaces for all.

In the rest of this article, we set out what women and girls told us about parks and safety, as well as giving an outline of the guidance for parks

professionals created as a next stage from our research.

Research findings

In 2022, we interviewed 117 women and girls aged 13-84 years across West Yorkshire to better understand what women and girls perceive to make parks feel safe and unsafe, and why.¹² Their views were varied, depending on identity, age, location, and park experiences, yet key areas of consensus also emerged. These are the issues that we focus on below, as issues that can be considered in planning new parks for compact neighbourhoods, as well as improving existing local spaces.

Women and girls told us that visibility is crucial for their sense of safety in parks, with darkness perceived as less safe than daytime, and open areas preferred to areas of thick vegetation and hidden or secluded spaces. As one participant explained:

'So parks with thick vegetation, hedges, trees; no I don't feel safer [...] they have thinned things quite a lot so there is more visibility and that feels really good.'

The creation of visibility and openness along main paths and in core areas of parks is vital. In this respect, the edges of parks also feel safer, particularly in the absence of fences or other barriers, as they are overlooked by passers-by on the street and facilitate easy escape.

For teenage girls a sense of openness is even more important. Fences and barriers—like those around multi-use games areas (MUGAs)—made girls feel trapped and unsafe. Girls were also concerned about play spaces being dominated by

boys, and the lack of facilities in parks which met their needs. The girls we spoke to prioritised active sociability—so things like age-appropriate swings and group seating can make them feel like parks are spaces for them.

Generally, women and girls do not feel safe in parks after dark, and largely avoid parks at these times. In a country where it can get dark as early as 3pm, that's a significant restriction. So lighting emerged as a key issue. For some women and girls, lighting on commonly used routes through parks would mean that they could confidently walk home on a winter's afternoon, walk their dog in the park in the early morning feeling safe, or access an exercise class or work opportunity in another part of the neighbourhood where the park acts as a significant cut-through route. Teenage girls also pointed out that some facilities in parks are lit, but not the paths to/from them.

However, this was not a unanimous opinion. Other women did not feel that lighting would be sufficient for them to use parks after dark, and prioritised societal change. As two participants put it:

'That's not going to stop men from hurting a woman just because there's more lighting in the park.'

'We are doing things around it which make us safer, but not dealing with the cause, which is males' behaviour [...] and until that is dealt with, women and girls will not be safe in those quiet spaces.'

Experiences of harassment pervaded women and girls' sense of unsafety in parks. Furthermore, participants often discussed avoiding parks where they had heard about incidents of male violence, such as rape. These findings are concerning for the gendered accessibility of all parks, yet have particular implications for women's local mobility, including use of active travel routes through parks:

'Last month a girl got raped in the park. [...] she was just taking her kids to school and it was 8 in the morning, so it wasn't even night [...] he's just grabbed her and raped her in the park [...] And the thing is, it's not the first time I've heard of it, so I kind of feel weird going there.'

Women and girls felt that men should take more responsibility for changing their behaviour in parks to make women and girls feel safer, such as not walking or jogging too close and standing up to harassment. In addition, there was agreement, from girls especially, that relevant authorities are not doing enough about harassment in parks:

'Parks are all the same as they used to be, and they've still had loads of reports about women being harassed.'

Another clear area of agreement was that well used parks felt safer. Women and girls said that

their sense of wellbeing and safety in parks was improved by the park being used and shared by other users that they perceived as legitimate. The presence of other women was seen as a sign of safety, and empowered other women and girls to use the park. Furthermore, parks that have a range of facilities and mixed uses, including amenities such as cafés, tend to be busier and so felt safer:

'Having other women and girls there, especially [...] on their own; it makes you feel a lot better.'

The presence of park staff, volunteers and other users helps women to feel that they are not alone or isolated, reduces prospects for violence, and gives a greater chance of bystander intervention in the case of trouble. Opportunities to seek help are also important, with women emphasising the importance of visible staffing and policing, and girls favouring the installation of help points. Organised activities were also seen to improve safety by bringing in more users who could intervene or provide support:

'I will walk the dog while parkrun's going on because [...] there's an organised thing going on, there's lots of volunteers around, there's lots of people I could ask for help if I needed.'

These events also extend women's use of parks by enabling them to engage in exercise, recreational and social activities that they would not do alone because of safety concerns.

While this may seem like a blueprint for parks in compact 20-minute neighbourhoods, there are other issues, in particular the uneven access to high-quality park space in deprived areas.⁴ As one girl explained, the lack of access to quality facilities in her local park, including a play space, meant that she had to travel to a park further away:

'There was a reason I wouldn't leave and go to the park. The state of it. You'd have a swing set without the swings. They would have been taken away having been vandalised. We'd spend most money on transport to get to another park that was better maintained.'

Given their greater facilities, staffing and resources, 'major' city parks may continue to feel safer for some women and girls:

'In the bigger parks [...] definitely you feel much more comfortable being around those facilities because there is people there and there is stuff going on and there is a sense of it being official [...] And it attracts people throughout the day.'

For 20-minute neighbourhoods to work in the long run, we will need to address this, by redressing the uneven distribution of high-quality facilities but most of all by ensuring that all parks of every size feel safe for women and girls.

Table 1
Principles for safer parks

	Principle	Description
Eyes on the park	Busyness and activation	The presence of other people makes parks feel safer. This can be fostered by targeted activation to bring more women and girls into the park, as well as activities that make parks busier.
	Staffing and authority figures	Parks staff and other official presences such as the police are important in creating a sense of safety.
Awareness	Visibility and openness	The ability to see around for a good distance and be seen by others — particularly along main paths and in core areas of the park — is important.
	Escape	Women and girls feel safer near the perimeters of parks and in unfenced spaces, because they can escape more easily from dangerous situations, and are more visible.
	Lighting	Good lighting along main paths in parks can improve some women’s access, but contrast, light colour and aspect need to be taken into account, as well as considerations around the effects on residents and wildlife.
	Wayfinding and layout	Facilities, paths and features need to be arranged to encourage use by women, to maximise visibility, and to be easy to navigate.
Inclusion	Belonging and familiarity	Familiarity makes parks feel safer, and can be fostered through both design and activation; and women from diverse groups need to feel that they belong.
	Image	The image and reputation of a park influences how safe it feels to potential users, and requires good maintenance, management, and communications.
	Access and location	A safe park on its own is not enough. For women and girls to use the park, they must also be able to access it safely, which means that the surrounding area and approach must all feel safe.
	Co-production and engagement	Involving women and girls in designing parks creates safer spaces, but it is essential to consider intersectionality and other needs.

To this end, West Yorkshire Combined Authority has worked with Keep Britain Tidy, who manage the Green Flag Award programme, Make Space for Girls and the University of Leeds to develop a set of design and management principles for both existing parks and new developments. The following section is a very brief outline of what this guidance contains.

New parks guidance

‘If more things make it safer for you to be in parks, obviously you’d want to be in parks more often, because it’s safer for you.’

The guidance—*Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls*¹³—covers 10 principles (see Table 1)

under three themes. ‘Eyes on the park’ reflects the fact that the presence of others makes women and girls feel safer. ‘Awareness’ addresses design issues that can help women and girls feel more secure. ‘Inclusion’ considers the importance of bringing a diverse cross-section of women and girls into our parks and designing spaces with their input.

Forming supplementary guidance to the Green Flag Award programme—the benchmark standard for management of parks and green spaces across the UK and beyond—the principles illustrate practices and projects that can be implemented at varying scales and budgets. In addition, 10 case studies from Britain and abroad are included to demonstrate how these principles can be applied. One of the case studies is of Umeå in northern

Sweden, which began focusing on gender equality in 1978. A group of teenage girls worked with landscape architects and an artist to create Frizon ('Freezone') in Årstadernas Park (see the picture on the second page of this article). Based on a roundabout, it has coloured roof lights and swinging seats, with backrests, ergonomically designed to suit teenage girls. It also hosts WiFi and speakers to play music; and it has excellent visibility and lighting, situated near well used paths.

Conclusion

Designing safer parks is important for everyone, but our research demonstrates that the perspectives and lived experiences of women and girls require specific consideration. If we can create vibrant, lively, sociable and active green spaces that are welcoming for women and girls, local parks could be cornerstones of gender-inclusive and accessible 20-minute neighbourhoods.

The guidance principles we have outlined show how we can make changes to park design and management to help women and girls feel safer and more welcome in these spaces, at all times of day and throughout the year. However, the women and girls we spoke to also highlighted broader social issues, such as misogyny, harassment, and violence against women and girls, requiring more fundamental change. Societal change is essential and necessary, but we can make a difference in the present by changing our parks. And that is what this research and the guidance addresses.

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how 20-minute neighbourhoods can tackle loneliness — creating less lonely places

Research shows that where we live makes a difference to our chances of being lonely — but there are ways to design new places and change existing places to encourage connection that fit very well with the 20-minute neighbourhood idea, says the Campaign to End Loneliness's **Robin Hewings**

Where we live makes a difference to our chances of being lonely. If we think about our local area, we can all think of places where we might bump into people and places where we might go to see friends. We can probably also think of places where we would rather not linger and features such as badly designed road crossings that stop us from wanting to go and visit other people or places.

Recent research backs up our common sense beliefs: some places are lonelier than others. That is true even when we take into account who lives there, and some of these differences can be attributed to the local built environment. Loneliness is a major social determinant of mental and physical health, as well as being deeply damaging in its own right.

There is no easy or simple way to tackle loneliness across society so we need to find every policy and service that can make a difference. That's why the Campaign to End Loneliness is a supporter of the 20-minute neighbourhood coalition. Making our environment better for social connection can prevent people becoming lonely in the first place, complementing the vitally important work of

services to help lonely people, such as social prescribing, befriending and voluntary groups.

Recent Campaign to End Loneliness work on the built environment

As a result of clear evidence that the built environment makes a difference to loneliness,^{1,2} the Campaign to End Loneliness wanted to understand what practical policies could improve the situation. This interest was also reflected by the group of UK parliamentarians³ who are interested in loneliness. We ran events with academics, architects, think-tanks and housing providers to generate insights and discussion. We also drew on the international academic literature on this topic, and found practical examples of projects that have made a difference to an area.

We found that evidence on loneliness and the built environment is growing rapidly, with exciting research being developed. While there is lots more to learn, there is a clear basis for action. Our report, *Tackling Loneliness through the Built Environment*,⁴ draws on examples of successful projects in the UK

which include both the development of new buildings and regeneration, housing, and the wider social infrastructure of shops and local facilities. These projects can have a real impact on people's lives, creating safe, enjoyable and friendly spaces for people to live in and meet others. Recommendations from the report are set out in Box 1, below.

What is needed

Our key finding was that what we need from our built environment is not one particular type of building or venue—it is about the overall pattern. We need walkable, safe, friendly neighbourhoods in which people can get around, and a community infrastructure with services from the public, private and voluntary sectors. With the right mix there are spaces for different kinds of interaction. That means we need 'bumping spaces'—places where you bump into people—like a post office queue or benches, where we might see neighbours or acquaintances. These support 'weak ties'. We also need places for the creation of 'strong ties', where we develop and maintain real friendships—for example at community groups and activities.

The right spaces also create the opportunity for more formal services to tackle loneliness—a lunch club needs a community hall, for example. As part

of the From Isolation to Inclusion project funded by the EU's Interreg North Sea Region, the Canal and River Trust in the UK is tackling loneliness through activities at its network of well planned, well maintained waterways and waterside spaces. These activities can be delivered only because of the existing infrastructure of attractive local spaces. Similarly, in the Belgian city of Aalst the municipality has been talking to residents about how to increase belonging in their local area. Another municipality that is part of the From Isolation to Inclusion project is Aarhus in Denmark, which has explicitly designed new housing in the city to encourage social connection among residents, with new flats that have indoor spaces for children to play in and a kindergarten, as well as specialist housing for older people.

In doing this work, we need to bear in mind that different people will experience the same place differently. A good place for a group of young people to gather near a shop might feel threatening to others. A cosy pub can be lovely for some, but not welcoming to everyone.

How to make it happen

What makes social connection develop well in a local area (or not) often lies in the details—the perfect spot for a bench that is nice for a chat; the

Box 1

Recommendations from *Tackling Loneliness through the Built Environment*

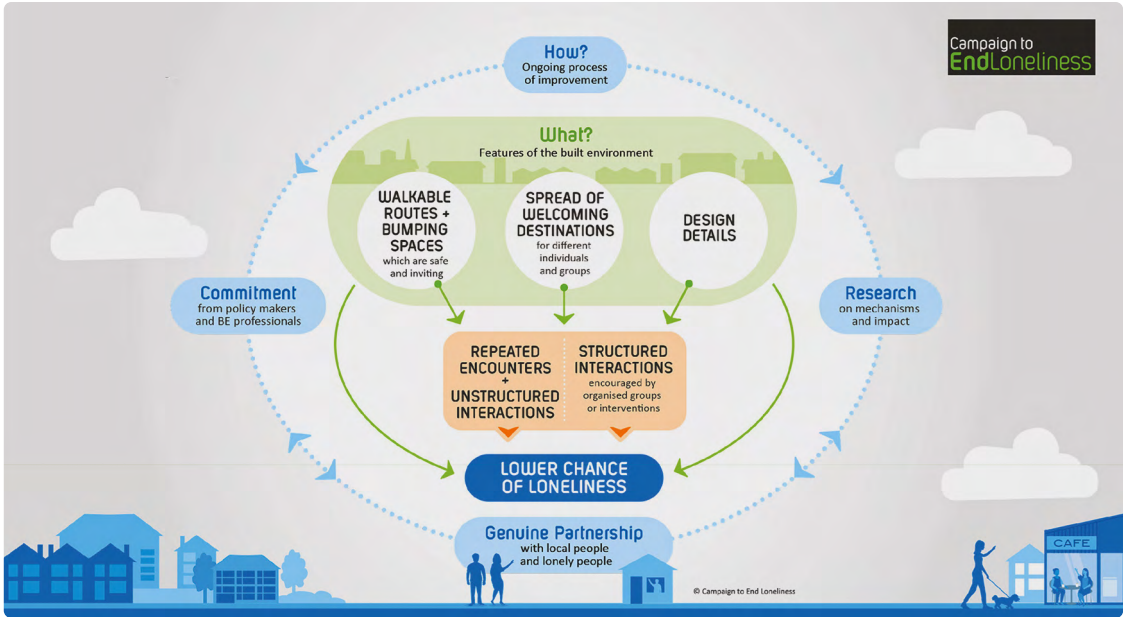
Protect and create less lonely places: Identify, protect and create attractive, friendly built environments, and green spaces with safe, navigable walking routes to enable access to them. These should be designed to support the development of both weak and strong ties for people of different genders and ages, with physical and mental health problems, who are members of ethnic and sexual minority groups, and of varying socio-economic status.

Involve local people and make this an expected part of built environment practice and policy-making: Facilitate local people, including lonely people and people at risk of loneliness, to inform and contribute to the process of change, and encourage an expectation that the protection and creation of less lonely built environments is prioritised among the public. And, via training, regulation and examples of good practice, ensure that the issue becomes a standard part of thinking and practice for powerful stakeholders: built environment policy-makers and professionals.

Connect this work to other local improvements that address loneliness: Connect work to create a less lonely built environment in an area to improvements in housing, transport, employment, education, health, culture and leisure which can also impact on loneliness.

Strengthen the evidence: Undertake new research, as recommended by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport Tackling Loneliness Evidence Review,^a to strengthen understanding of the extent and mechanisms of connection between specific types of place or aspects of place-based interventions and reductions in loneliness, so informing improved design of the built environment.

^a *Tackling Loneliness Evidence Review: Executive Summary*. Independent Report for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Jan. 2022 (updated Mar. 2023).
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Tackling loneliness through the built environment

shared space that is not used because it is dark and feels like it is in a wind tunnel. Understanding the use of places for social connection depends on tapping into deep local knowledge by really speaking to people, including those who may be vulnerable to loneliness. Listening to what they want and how they might use an area can make all the difference.

‘We need to encourage a public expectation that addressing loneliness will be prioritised as a matter of course when changes are made to the local built environment’

To do this, we need to encourage a public expectation that addressing loneliness will be prioritised as a matter of course when changes are made to the local built environment, and that the places that result should be within easy reach of people. This priority needs to be built into formal regulation through the National Planning Policy Framework and especially through strategic local development plans. Alongside this, training and support is needed for national and local decision-makers, as well as for planners, architects, housing associations and construction companies, to foster an understanding of the impact of loneliness and their power to bring about change. Built environment professionals who are already prioritising this aspect of their work can champion good practice on this issue.

Loneliness is not an island from other pressing social issues. This call to action dovetails into a number of other agendas. It shares much with creating age-friendly communities for young and old, creating successful local economies, and encouraging active travel. Indeed, in the same way that there has been a step-change in action to change neighbourhoods so that more people are physically active, we need to make sure that our built environment encourages friendship and connection rather than loneliness. There are many reasons to support 20-minute neighbourhoods—and tackling loneliness is one of them.

● **Robin Hewings** is Programme Director for the Campaign to End Loneliness. The views expressed are personal.

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school superzones — their contribution to making healthy and safe neighbourhoods

Sam Bodmer outlines the School Superzone concept, principles, process, actions, success factors and benefits, and presents case study examples of the idea put into practice in London

Growing up in a healthy and safe neighbourhood is a key part of giving children the best start in life; places where children can play safely, breathe clean air, be active, enjoy a healthy diet, and thrive. The Covid-19 pandemic has made their importance even clearer. Too many children's schools are in environments that are dominated by traffic, have unrestricted advertising of unhealthy products and too many unhealthy food outlets, and limited access to high-quality green space.

Environmental harms tend to cluster in areas of high deprivation, affecting the most vulnerable communities and widening health inequalities.¹ Unhealthy exposures in the early years, which affect physical, social and cognitive development, have lifelong effects on many aspects of health and wellbeing, including educational achievement and skills, employment prospects, obesity, heart disease, and mental health.²

Local authorities and their partners can take action to improve the health of future generations by addressing environmental harms and assets in the places and spaces where young people spend the most time outside of the home, such as the school and its immediate neighbourhood.³ The greatest benefits can be realised by focusing improvements in the most deprived areas.

In 2017, the Mayor and partners across the health system in London came together to take forward a

theme set out in the London Health and Social Care Devolution Memorandum of Understanding⁴—to improve urban environments and create healthier places in which children can live, learn, and play. London partners developed an innovative 'School Superzone' approach in order to create healthy zones around schools in deprived areas.⁵

From August 2018, 13 London boroughs participated in an 18-month pilot programme to explore, test and develop the School Superzone concept. Activities were co-ordinated with support from PHE (Public Health England) London, the Greater London Authority, the Association of Directors of Public Health, the Healthy London Partnership, London Councils, the TCPA, and the London Healthy Urban Development Unit.

The School Superzone concept, process, principles, actions, success factors and benefits described in this article are based on the learning gained from the boroughs testing this approach.

Concept

School Superzones aim to protect children's health and enable healthy behaviours, using local authorities' powers and place-shaping potential to implement environmentally based actions. They support meaningful partnership working with schools and communities, add value to the work of external and



School Superzones concept diagram

internal delivery partners and agencies (including those for transport, regeneration, and planning), and better meet the public health needs of the local community.

The local authority designates a boundary around an existing or new primary or secondary school as a Superzone. Its extent is usually around 400 metres or a five-minute walk, although a wider area may be chosen to fit local need. Superzones provide a lever to address health and environmental inequalities around schools in areas of deprivation, and therefore selection is prioritised in the 30% most-deprived areas or where communities have poorer health outcomes.

Local authorities work with the local community—including the school, pupils and parents, community groups, businesses, and local councillors—to understand local needs and assets. The partnership builds a clear picture of what actions are needed and how they can help to achieve local public health and wider council priorities. A wide range of actions can be considered in order to address the wider determinants of health in an interconnected way through a combination of encouragement, regulation, and co-implementation.

An open and accessible network of well designed and functional public spaces is at the core of a healthy, inclusive and prosperous city. School Superzones have the potential to play an important role in local place-making and in forming the identity and character of a neighbourhood. In the longer term, it is envisaged that the Superzones will support co-ordinated borough-led approaches to investment in the built environment around schools and the

adaptation of existing public space into more child-friendly environments.

Superzones—in practice

In 2021 the Mayor of London made a commitment in his manifesto to expand the School Superzones programme across the capital. City Hall has provided investment of £1.9million, comprising funding for up to 50 grants to local authorities, central co-ordination, grant management, and an evaluation.

There are currently over 50 School Superzones, with more coming on board soon.

There have been a number of ways that local authorities, schools and community partners have approached the Superzone concept. Some have used grant funding to change the physical environments around schools, while others have focused on how children and families use the environment.

Actions taken by local authorities and schools since the first round of funding in April 2022 include:

- implementing the Healthy Catering Commitment in the area around schools;
- improving open spaces and parks;
- providing ‘safe havens’ for young people after school;
- delivering cycle and scooter training to children and their parents;
- creating walking and air quality maps alongside students;
- implementing school streets;
- improving cycle routes; and
- developing outdoor gardens and food-growing opportunities.

An evaluation of the School Superzones programme started in spring 2023. This will look at the benefits of the work on each of the priority health determinants, including active travel, community safety, the food and drink environment, and air quality, and how these benefits have been realised. It will also look at other areas such as the added value of the partnership approach to delivering the Superzones programme and how local and pan-London learning opportunities have supported the effective implementation and delivery of the approach.

Case studies

Lambeth

Lambeth's School Superzone is in the Oval area, around a cluster of eight schools where there is a high footfall as well as high levels of need and deprivation. Lambeth has chosen four key health determinants to focus efforts on:

- improving access to healthy food and drink;
- reducing the impact of poor air quality;
- enabling active travel; and
- increasing community safety.

The location of the Superzone and the priority health determinants were selected based on local health data, geographical mapping, and consultation with the schools, council colleagues, and community

partners. Lambeth has taken a multi-faceted approach involving a broad range of ongoing initiatives incorporating the priority health determinants. For example, to improve the food and drink environment, a workshop with students has been held to foster a better understanding of the shopping habits of children in convenience stores. Insights from this workshop will direct work with local convenience stores in the Superzone area to increase the range and prominence of healthier options. To increase community safety, under-age test purchases have been carried out for age-restricted products such as knives, alcohol, tobacco, and vapes.

Green screens and air source heat pumps have been installed to reduce air pollution, while safe routes with better air quality have been mapped out for children to use in walking and cycling to school. As part of this, the council has worked with the Cross River Partnership to map out and create resources for schools, which involved identifying common routes that children or parents use to walk or cycle to school, identifying alternative routes with better air quality, and creating posters and leaflets showing routes with better air quality and information on the importance of air quality.

Posters and postcards for every Superzone school have been created, displaying clean air travel routes, such as that for Vauxhall Primary School, shown below.



Information poster on clean air walking routes, produced for Vauxhall Primary School under Lambeth's School Superzone scheme



Year 8 and sixth-form students at a secondary school in Walworth delivering their 'Dragon's Den' pitches on ideas to make the Superzone area around their school 'safer, healthier and happier'

Southwark

Southwark has been delivering two School Superzones since April 2022—one around two primary schools in Peckham, and one alongside a secondary school in Walworth. The focus for the secondary school Superzone is on community safety and the use of parks and open spaces.

To ensure that student voices were at the heart of any plans made, the school and local authority worked together on a series of workshops, which culminated in 'Dragon's Den' style pitches. The students presented ideas that they felt would make the area around their school 'safer, healthier and happier' to a panel of 'Dragons', including Southwark Council's Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing and the Director of Public Health. Their ideas included improved lighting and access to the park, a smoke-free zone around the school, traffic reduction measures, anti-social behaviour measures, and more.

As a result of this, the council is working with the school to develop and to implement specific changes. The students will be involved directly in this process, including supporting the council highways team in proposing traffic reduction measures in the road outside the school.

● **Sam Bodmer** is Public Health Policy Officer—Superzones (pan London), based at Southwark Council. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 *Fair Society, Healthy Lives*. Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England post-2010 (Marmot Review), Feb. 2010. www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review
- 2 *What Makes Us Healthy? An Introduction to the Social Determinants of Health*. Health Foundation, Mar. 2018. www.health.org.uk/publications/what-makes-us-healthy
- 3 *Spatial Planning for Health: An Evidence Resource for Planning and Designing Healthier Places*. Public Health England, Jun. 2017. www.gov.uk/government/publications/spatial-planning-for-health-evidence-review
- 4 *London Health and Social Care Devolution: Memorandum of Understanding*. Signed for London, central government, and national health and care partners. Nov. 2017 www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/nhs_hlp_memorandum_of_understanding_report_november_2017.pdf
- 5 Y Doyle: 'Creating healthier spaces for London's children to live, learn and play'. Blog entry. Public Health England, Mar. 2019. <https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2019/03/05/creating-healthier-spaces-for-londons-children-to-live-learn-and-play>

living well locally — adapting the 20-minute neighbourhood in a rural context

Jemma Beedie explains how consultation with the community led to a locally appropriate reinterpretation of the 20-minute neighbourhood idea for the village of Drymen in rural Scotland



Photos: Forth Environment Link

FEL staff held a series of events and conversations with local residents and groups in Drymen

Over the winter of 2021–22, Forth Environment Link (FEL) undertook a consultation in the village of Drymen, in rural central Scotland, looking at the feasibility of 20-minute neighbourhoods in a rural context. FEL is a Scottish environmental charity, based in the Forth Valley. We connect people and place on actions which make a positive response to

the climate emergency. The project was funded by Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park and supported by Drymen Community Development Trust and Drymen Community Council, with participation by people living in communities across the east of Loch Lomond. This geographic area included Drymen (which lies four miles from



Balmaha and the south-eastern shores of Loch Lomond), Milton of Buchanan, Buchanan Smithy, Buchanan Castle, and Croftamie, which marks the boundary of the National Park, located a mile and a half to the south.

Between October 2021 and March 2022, FEL staff held a series of events and conversations with local residents and groups. FEL looked at the way that the community accessed various amenities, such as health centres, educational institutions, green space and work, by distributing surveys and speaking to local residents. FEL partnered with A Place in Childhood to get the perspective of the village's primary school students; were helped by Trust in the Park in hearing from its health walk group; cooked pizza with the local youth group; and also organised led cycle rides—all in an effort to find out what was important to residents and what they felt would help them to better live well locally.

An assessment of the situation early on in the consultation found that a strict adherence to the '20-minute' part of the framework would not suit rural living. The 20-minute neighbourhood (and 15-minute cities) framework was developed with urban areas in mind, where it may be feasible to meet most, if not all, needs through either a short walk or cycle, or through access to reliable, regular public transport.

Drymen, which has a population of around 800, is only a 30-minute travel time from Scotland's largest city, and yet is mostly failed by the provision of public transport. It proved to be an exemplary choice as a rural setting for using the Place Standard—the tool we used to assess which needs in the 20-minute

framework were being met already and which areas needed concentrated effort to improve.

It was quickly discovered that the standard 20-minute framework was not flexible enough to be applied to a rural context. As the time limit of this framework was less important to the overall findings, the consultation instead focused on whether residents were 'living well locally'. This is the name we gave to this adaptation of the framework, which helps in understanding the unique differences between standard urban areas and Scotland's rural spaces.

Scottish Community Alliance explains 20-minute neighbourhoods as:

*'... one way to underpin strong and sustainable communities, where people enjoy good access to local jobs, services, amenities, social infrastructure, green space, diversity of housing, safe walking and cycling networks, good public transport and a rich social and cultural life.'*¹

We felt that reframing the 20-minute neighbourhood as 'living well locally' met this description.

By adapting to the challenges and realities of living in rural Scotland, FEL was able to keep a focus on the parts of the framework that mattered most. By implementing the Place Standard and associated survey, we looked at whether residents felt satisfied with their access to facilities and amenities, even if they were located outside of the 20-minute boundary. Asking people how they could 'live well locally' seemed to better fit the outcomes of the consultation and reflect the day-to-day realities of residing in this rural area.

After gathering initial data with the Place Standard tool, FEL undertook research in a number of ways—a survey, online and in person; informal conversations; and more structured activities and events themed to each of the categories. 120 people responded to the survey led by FEL, in addition to those who attended in-person events to discuss the highlighted issues in more detail. Further surveys and events were held by other providers to continue the work, with findings contributing significantly to Drymen's updated Place Plan.

FEL found that residents felt satisfied with their access to natural spaces, and also felt safe in their community. There was a strong feeling of identity and belonging, and the people of Drymen concluded that, while there was room for improvement, on the whole the streets and spaces were satisfactory.

Key findings included that walking short distances to meet the majority of daily needs is not a feasible aim in most of rural Scotland, but an effort should be made to reduce reliance on cars. Even in rural communities, many drivers were still keen to use alternative methods of transport, but felt that the current infrastructure did not make this a viable option. Good-quality pedestrian and cycle routes, safe from speeding cars, connecting all local villages, were in high

demand. Better and more dynamic public transport was also high on the wish list. For these requirements to be met, greater regional collaboration is required between places. Community leaders and planners should endeavour to incorporate this into more hyper-local Place Plans in the future.

An example of public transport modification that could be implemented quickly is an increase in the direct rural taxi (DRT) service—primarily to improve travel options for people without a car, including specifically the very young and the elderly. This is a realistic adjustment that could prove to be very beneficial to some of the more vulnerable members of the community, and would improve village life overall by removing some unnecessary barriers.

More specifically, the outcomes of this work were:

- an evidence base and research on which Drymen could base its next 10-year Place Plan;
- better communication and improved relations between community councils and the Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority for ongoing closer collaboration; and
- knowledge to contribute to the national conversation on how the concept and core beliefs of the 20-minute neighbourhood can be applied in a rural village setting.

Overall, findings supported the hypothesis that Drymen and the villages of east Loch Lomond offer a strong sense of place, are safe places in which to live, and are places where people feel a sense of identity and control over their surroundings.

The consultation found that the aim is for Drymen and surrounds to be safe, connected places, where excellent pedestrian, cycling and public transport facilities allow people to move with ease through and between communities. Residents hope to continue to feel a strong sense of identity, to preserve their high-quality natural and built spaces, and to see an improvement in village amenities. They also want their places to encourage and welcome visitors, offering good-quality off-site parking and electric-vehicle charging, public facilities, tourist information, excellent signage, and local heritage trails along with access to popular walking routes. Deciphering this requirement was vital for prioritising village improvements and funding applications.

There were some difficulties in undertaking this consultation work. The research was carried out over the second winter of the Covid pandemic. Regulations were in place that limited the number of people that FEL could engage, and where. We did manage to run one drop-in session indoors with safety measures in place. However, much of the work needed to be carried out outdoors. While it was a good opportunity to offer led walks and cycle rides, which are part of FEL's core activity offerings, the cold, wet weather did somewhat limit these. We would recommend offering events indoors if

possible, with outdoor activities confined to the warmer months, especially if there is an opportunity to hold them during lighter evenings.

FEL also had some pushback from the community around the Place Standard tool itself. Some of the residents thought that the tool should be adapted for greater suitability for rural settings. FEL had follow-up discussions with various parties, including those behind the tool's development. We have determined that there is a requirement for greater guidance on how to run consultations with the existing Place Standard tool in different settings—for instance, rural versus urban—to allow room for different priorities and views to be expressed.

Another benefit of the consultation was that capacity-building sessions, led by the environmental group Hub G63 on FEL's behalf, generated an uplift in knowledge among residents and businesses about both the climate emergency and 20-minute neighbourhoods as concepts. A result of this was a shift from 86% of participants knowing 'little' or 'nothing' about these matters to 85% knowing either 'a moderate amount', 'a lot', or what they quantified as 'a great deal'.

One aspect of our final reporting that worked very well was the illustration that we commissioned from an artist. This received good feedback as an innovative way of reflecting what the community had asked for, and as an *aide-mémoire* for the community to continue to keep the results in the forefront of planning and development activities.

The consultation suffered some challenges due to the complex nature of the Covid restrictions during the period in which it was carried out, and there were some adjustments required in applying the Place Standard and the 20-minute neighbourhood concept to Scotland's rural villages. These challenges did not prove to be insurmountable, and we found that the research carried out contributed to Drymen's extended new 10-year Place Plan in a way that focused the community on the most important issues.

Drymen's new mission statement is to 'Work together as a community to deliver our shared priorities'. While FEL found that the 20-minute neighbourhood model was better suited once adapted into 'living well locally', we found that the consultation work proved very useful in determining exactly what those shared priorities are, so that the people of Drymen and its surrounds can work coherently and co-operatively to build the community that they envision.

● **Jemma Beedie** is Project Officer with Forth Environment Link. The views expressed are personal.

Note

- 1 'Just 20 minutes'. Webpage. Scottish Community Alliance, Aug. 2020. <https://scottishcommunityalliance.org.uk/2020/08/11/just-20-minutes/>

co-operation, actually?



The UK electoral system has just produced the kind of revolution in local government that it tends to manage only every 20 years or so. In short, the Liberal Democrats are back as a major force in local government, and especially so in the south of the UK—a kind of Wessex plus western Mercia. This is important (and not just because I am a Lib Dem member myself!), but because of something a man from IDeA, the training outfit for local government, told me in 2003: that at the time the best and the worst administrations in the UK were both Lib Dem.

It is also important for the subjects covered by this column. Because the Labour and Conservative parties have, for very different reasons, presided over the past century or so of centralisation and giantism—so having 30 councils in the hands of convinced devolvers of power may be vital. At least if they act on that conviction—I know all too well the fatal tendency for Lib Dem councillors to believe that they are ‘pragmatic centrists’ rather than ‘localising radicals’, seeing their job as looking at local issues through an un-ideological lens.

I have been trying to remember when it was that the Lib Dem group at the Local Government Association asked me to write a booklet about the big ideas emerging from Lib Dems in power. Then I remembered that they had chosen to call it *Power, Actually*, which pinpoints the date to shortly after the release of the Richard Curtis film *Love, Actually*. So it must have been early in 2004.

I didn’t include Tower Hamlets because it was no longer run by Eric Flounders’ ‘Liberal Focus’ team, but I remember the drama when they took control in 1985 and sent out redundancy notices by courier (Liverpool-style) the night before the first council meeting when, against furious opposition, they divided the borough up into its pre-1965 boundaries. But that was all three decades ago now. *Power, Actually* marked the next wave of Lib Dems in local government, which, because Labour was in power in Westminster, included great northern cities such as Liverpool, Sheffield, and Newcastle upon Tyne. They then went the way of all electoral success.

Now, following the May local elections we have the latest wave. Luckily for the new generation, they have a potential spur to action: there are now almost 450 Green Party councillors waiting in the wings.

Back in 1989, I was involved in exploratory talks between the two parties about the possibility of merger. It was stymied by the unexpected massive success for the Greens in the Euro-elections that year, when they came second across a great swathe of the outer Home Counties—but not before some of the Greens involved decided that we could not merge, because the Lib Dems were prepared to prioritise what they wanted and they were not. Just wait until you control a council, I thought—well, now they do, having taken outright control of Mid Suffolk.

Elsewhere, will the two parties simply plot against each other in the tried-and-tested way that politicians tend to do? I’m not overly hopeful. In places like Wealden Council, where my sister works, the Lib Dems and Greens immediately hammered out an agreement between them to run the council for the next few years; but they had to do so because of the arithmetic. But in the place where I live, Horsham in West Sussex, where there are now 28 Lib Dems and eight Greens (plus 11 others, mainly Conservatives), I fear that my local Green councillor won’t get a look in.

And in places like Lewes, where the Greens are now the biggest party (17 councillors; Lib Dems 15 and Labour nine), the temptation will be for the others to try to work together to exclude them.

Lord Dahrendorf used to say that he was worried about the existence of a Green Party, simply because it risked encouraging the other political parties to ridicule or ignore their vital message. I hope he was wrong, but I fear he may have been right.

There is only one way to make political parties work more closely together, and that is to get them campaigning alongside each other locally for something they both believe is important. No amount of national negotiations will do anything to bring them together if they don’t have a relationship locally.

I believe that Lib Dems and Greens have a great deal in common. If I’m right about that then, I hope, they will find roles keeping each other on the straight and narrow. In as friendly a way as possible.

● **David Boyle** is the author of *Tickbox* (Little, Brown), *Oppenheimer* (Sharpe) and, with Lesley Yarranton, *Edge City UK* (the Real Press). The views expressed are personal.

the funding conundrum



Just how the development management and land acquisition processes can be harnessed to fund infrastructure continues to present challenges for both the courts and legislators.

In February 2023, the High Court ruled on the vexed question of the extent to which NHS services can be funded through the current developer contribution regime.¹ The case concerned a challenge by the local NHS Trust to Harborough District Council's decision to grant outline planning permission for an urban extension near to the M1 motorway at Lutterworth. University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust's position was that the operation of its block contracting arrangements with local NHS clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) meant that there would be a 'funding gap' associated with the provision of healthcare services to newcomers to the area for a year after they moved in. This was translated into a request from the Trust for phased contributions totalling £914,000, to fund additional staff, drugs, materials, and equipment.

However, the Trust failed to convince Harborough District Council that its request could be justified, and planning permission was granted in the absence of the contributions.

In dismissing the claim for judicial review, Holgate J agreed with the council that there had been insufficient information to support the alleged funding gap, which meant that the sums claimed were not necessary to make the development acceptable.

Addressing the wider issue of how new development could be required to contribute towards treatment within the NHS, Holgate J reiterated the fundamental point that planning legislation does not confer a general power to raise revenue for public purposes. In this case there was no suggestion that a new urban extension at Lutterworth would increase the burden on the NHS in England as a whole because, ordinarily, new arrivals would have

previously been the responsibility of other CCGs. Even if a 'funding gap' could have been demonstrated for new residents in a particular area, this could be seen as a systemic problem in the way that NHS funding is distributed.

Holgate J's observations do call into question whether there can be any circumstances where it is appropriate to require individual development sites to contribute to NHS services. Having said this, Harborough District Council's decision on Lutterworth was predicated on the Trust's failure to evidence a funding gap rather than on any systemic factors, so the outcome should not be interpreted as heralding an absolute prohibition on any future NHS contributions being levied via Section 106 agreements.

Infrastructure Levy

Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Secretary Michael Gove clearly had NHS funding in mind in March 2023 when he announced the launch of a technical consultation on the implementation of the Infrastructure Levy. He expressed confidence that the new levy will provide 'local leaders the tools to bring forward more affordable housing and the transport links, schools and GP surgeries their communities need'.²

While there is reference to the levy 'largely sweeping away the sometimes-protracted negotiation of Section 106 planning obligations',³ the consultation does envisage a continued role for negotiated planning obligations. This is to be welcomed as experience gained from the operation of the CIL regime makes it abundantly clear that it is simply unrealistic to look forward to a system that is exclusively reliant on the Infrastructure Levy to fund necessary infrastructure.

The consultation suggests that planning agreements could be employed on 'large' and 'complex' sites which have unique infrastructure requirements. One of the questions posed in the consultation is just what could constitute a 'large' or 'complex' site for the purposes of this carve-out from the levy. The government's preference is to set a very high threshold for what it characterises as the 'infrastructure in-kind' routeway. This could include new settlements of 10,000 homes and

above, or complex urban regeneration sites with large-scale redevelopment of existing buildings.

Compulsory purchase and hope value

Land value capture is also a topic that will inevitably feature in the Law Commission's review of compulsory purchase procedure and compensation, which was announced in February 2023.⁴ This coincides with the government tabling yet more amendments to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill aimed at addressing the thorny issue of 'hope value' — the element of market value in excess of the existing-use value reflecting the prospect of some more valuable future use.⁵

The June 2022 consultation document on proposed changes to the compulsory purchase system⁵ highlighted the risk of hope value artificially inflating compensation because of the need to make assumptions about the grant of planning permission even when the prospect is relatively low. Back in the summer of 2022 the government was floating the idea of allowing acquiring authorities to seek clearance from the Secretary of State to cap payments for specific schemes at or just above existing-use value 'where it can be shown that the public interest in doing so would be justified'.⁶

'Perhaps time and effort would be better spent in pausing the constant stream of planning reforms and addressing another 'systemic' problem by dedicating more resources to ensuring that the current Local Plan system functions effectively'

The latest amendments are indeed targeted at specific schemes, including those that are intended to deliver affordable housing, health or education facilities. The basic idea is that when promoting Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) for these proposals, the acquiring authority can ask the confirming Minister to direct that compensation should be assessed on the basis that no new planning permission would be granted for the land. This request would have to be supported by a 'statement of commitments' which would explain what will be done with the land should the acquisition proceed, in order to demonstrate that the direction is justified in the public interest.

Any direction could, however, be reversed if the land is not subsequently used as planned, if the statement of commitments has not been fulfilled, or if there is no longer any realistic prospect of the statement of commitments being fulfilled within 10 years of the date at which the CPO became operative.

Criticism has been levelled at this approach on the basis that it marks a departure from the long-standing principle that CPO compensation should be based on 'equivalence' and landowners should not be any worse off as a result of the acquisition. While this may be a potential shortcoming, of greater concern is whether such an elaborate mechanism will ever be used in practice.

Perhaps time and effort would be better spent in pausing the constant stream of planning reforms and addressing another 'systemic' problem by dedicating more resources to ensuring that the current Local Plan system functions effectively. This would help to optimise planning certainty and reduce the prospect of hope value being legitimately claimed as an element of market value.

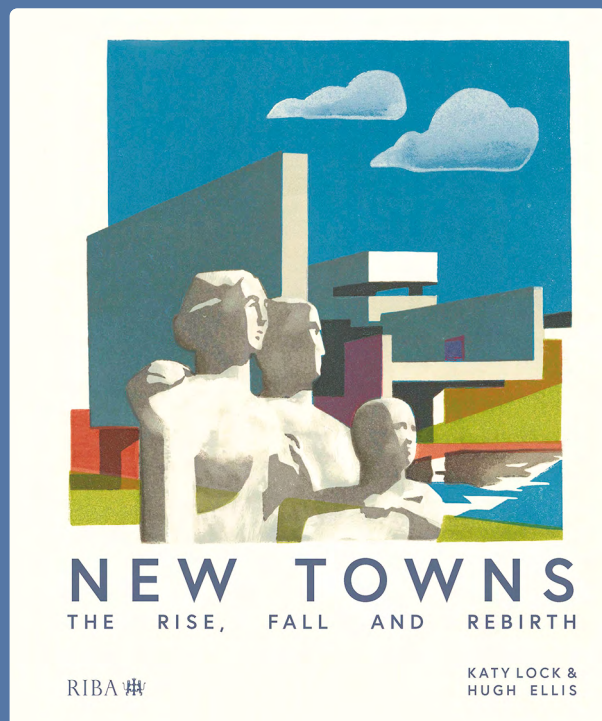
● **Bob Pritchard** is a Legal Director at Shoosmiths. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 *R (on the Application of the University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust) v Harborough District Council* [2023] EWHC 263 (Admin)
- 2 'New levy to make sure developers pay fair share for affordable housing and local infrastructure'. Press Release. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 17 Mar. 2023. www.gov.uk/government/news/new-levy-to-make-sure-developers-pay-fair-share-for-affordable-housing-and-local-infrastructure
- 3 *Technical Consultation on the Infrastructure Levy*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Mar. 2023. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/technical-consultation-on-the-infrastructure-levy/technical-consultation-on-the-infrastructure-levy
- 4 See 'Compulsory purchase review to ensure laws are fit for future development projects'. News Story. Law Commission, 6 Feb. 2023. www.lawcom.gov.uk/compulsory-purchase-review-to-ensure-laws-are-fit-for-future-development-projects/
- 5 Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. Fifth Marshallled List of Amendments to be Moved in Committee of the Whole House. House of Lords, Jan. 2023. <https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/50270/documents/3123>
- 6 *Compulsory Purchase — Compensation Reforms. Consultation*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Jun. 2022. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/compulsory-purchase-compensation-reforms-consultation/compulsory-purchase-compensation-reforms-consultation

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