



Children and Young People - Local Plan plug-in resources

Embedding the rights, needs and voices of
children and young people in Local Plans



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This resource is part of a set of practical ‘plug-in’ resources for Local Plan policy teams. It is designed to support local planning authorities (LPAs) in England to embed the rights, needs and voices of children and young people consistently and effectively in Local Plans. The common definition of a ‘plug-in’ is a *component that extends the functionality of an existing system without requiring the system to be re-built.*

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Background and purpose

Local Plan plug-ins

This practical resource is designed to support local planning authorities (LPAs) in England to embed the rights, needs and voices of children and young people consistently and effectively in Local Plans. The common definition of a 'plug-in' is *a component that extends the functionality of an existing system without requiring the system to be re-built*.

These resources have been developed in response to widespread recognition that the environments we are creating are not consistently working for children and young people. Places are too often shaped without adequate consideration of how children use the places and spaces where they live.

There are three plug-in resources and an Evidence and supporting resources list:



This background document



Self-assessment tools



Child-friendly planning principles and policy area suggestions



Evidence and supporting resources

Planning policy officers can draw on this support to engage with child-friendly planning clearly, efficiently and in a way that aligns with statutory responsibilities, including equalities duties and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The plug-ins have been developed to support Local Plan making and will be updated as planning reform continues in England, but the principles could be applied in other contexts such as Design Codes, Supplementary Plans and Developer Guidance.

Who are these resources for?

Primarily the plug-ins are for planning policy officers drafting Local Plans.

They also provide background evidence, justification and explanation for development management planners seeking to implement plan policies based on this approach. Local allies, including public health, children's teams, parks, leisure and recreation and transport teams may also find the resources of interest.

Developers, architects, designers and planning consultants may also find the principles useful in shaping proposals.

How do they help?

The plug-ins are not a prescriptive checklist. Instead, they act to support local planning authorities to take a consistent, confident and proportionate approach to making planning genuinely work for children and young people.

The plug-ins:

- offer evidence-informed principles and prompts that can be adapted to local context;
- connect child-friendly planning directly to wider Local Plan objectives and policy themes;
- support a tiered approach—from essential to leading practice—enabling progress across various authority types and contexts; and
- provide practical tools to support plan drafting, including policy wording examples, monitoring indicators and a self-assessment tool.



Notes

Language – what we mean by children and young people

In the resources the term ‘children and young people’ encompasses a broad and inclusive definition that spans all ages—from infants to teenagers as well as diverse identities, backgrounds and experiences. It is recognised that young people’s experiences of, and interactions with, the built environment are shaped by intersecting identities and circumstances, including gender, ethnicity, disability, language, geography and socioeconomic background. These factors influence how young people use, experience and are affected by the places around them.

Children and young people’s voices

There are two distinct but complementary dimensions to children and young people’s voices in the planning system: their involvement in the making of Local Plans and other policy and guidance; and their inclusion and ability to influence how individual development proposals are shaped.

These initial resources do not cover these aspects in detail. However, we recognise that meaningful participation is a core element of a child-friendly planning approach. We will continue to share examples, resources and guidance to support practice in this area through the accompanying evidence and resources list, as well as webinars and case studies available on our webpages.

Further work is planned to support local authorities in embedding age-inclusive engagement at both plan-making and development management stages.



Why planning for children and young people matters

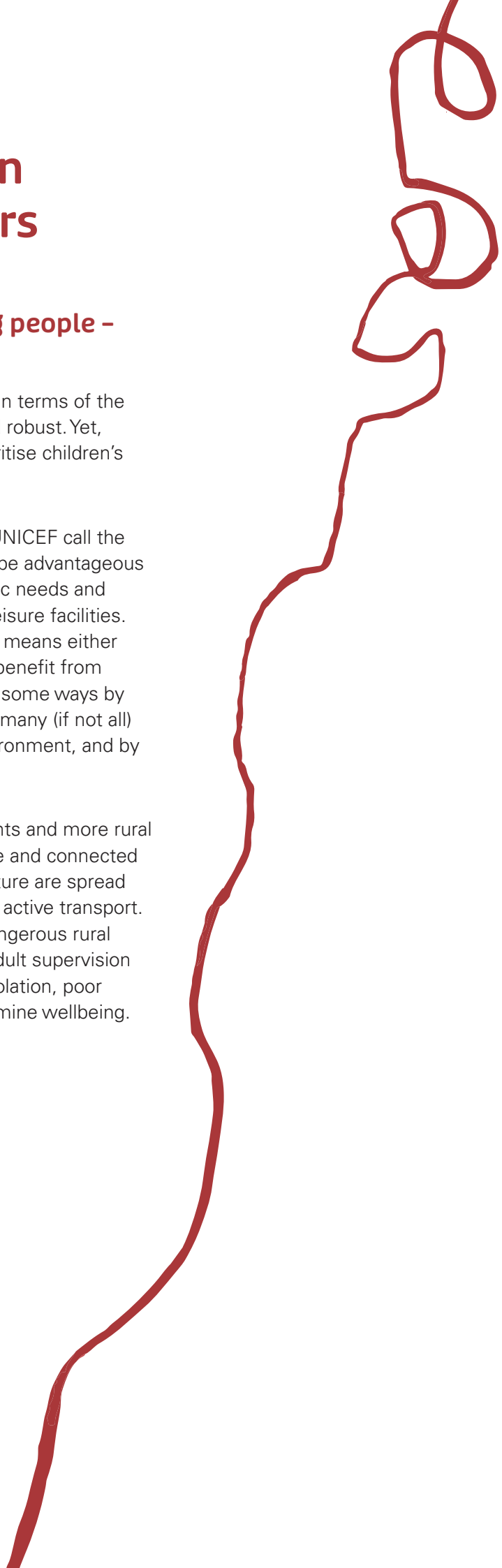
The built environment, children and young people – an overview of the evidence base

The evidence on what works for children and young people, in terms of the places and spaces they grow up in and use, is extensive and robust. Yet, the planning system in England has historically failed to prioritise children's needs, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

Children and young people living in urban places face what UNICEF call the 'Urban Paradox'⁴. By many measures, cities can and should be advantageous for children, with better outcomes in terms of access to basic needs and rights, better health and education, and access to play and leisure facilities. However, in many cities around the world, a range of factors means either that some children (especially in minoritised groups) do not benefit from the urban advantage and are in many ways disadvantaged in some ways by city life. Indeed, in many countries like the United Kingdom, many (if not all) children are disadvantaged in some ways by their urban environment, and by the decisions of adults about their environments.

Children and young people living in towns, smaller settlements and more rural areas also experience significant barriers to healthy, inclusive and connected lives. In many of these places, services and social infrastructure are spread across wide distances and are poorly connected by public or active transport. Children are equally restricted in their mobility—either by dangerous rural roads, the lack of footpaths and crossings, or the need for adult supervision to access school, play, or social spaces. Feelings of social isolation, poor public realm and reduced access to opportunities can undermine wellbeing.

⁴ <https://data.unicef.org/resources/urban-paradox-report/>



Although variable by place and social context, the challenges faced by children in England and more widely across the UK include the following.

- The increased dominance of the private car in many places, alongside planning decisions that do not prioritise active travel or other uses of the street (e.g. for play, rest, leisure, recreation). The latter include the creation and maintenance of spaces that – despite attempts to create shared surfaces or low-traffic neighbourhoods – make it difficult for children to move around, with attendant negative outcomes for their health⁵.
- The ongoing perception of adults that children and young people are ‘out of place’ in public spaces – either because they are ‘at risk’ away from the adult gaze, or ‘pose a risk’ – and a lack of focus on planning inclusive, intergenerational spaces⁶.
- The continued creation of generally poor, limited play and leisure facilities for children, which tend to emphasise fixed, generic designs for younger children without understanding the needs of diverse children of different ages and abilities⁷.
- Lack of access to, and the continued loss of, biodiversity and green spaces, exposure to harmful levels of air pollution, and a range of other environmental harms that curtail children’s right to a clean and safe environment (as noted below)⁸.
- Despite exceptions, the exclusion or marginalisation of children’s needs and children’s voices from planning and design processes, and an unwillingness to see children as members of the communities they live in, with their own rights and needs⁹.
- Increasing restrictions (compared with previous generations) from parents and other responsible adults that reduce children’s spatial range and/or independent mobilities.

In both urban and rural settings, planning decisions made without consideration of children’s rights, needs and voices limit their ability to thrive.

Research across multiple disciplines identifies key design and governance features that support child health, wellbeing and equity.

These will be explored individually in the *Thematic child-friendly principles* and include:



Play – inclusive, accessible and embedded

Autonomy and independent mobility

Travel and wayfinding

Nature, green and blue spaces

Care, education and youth facilities

Social infrastructure and intergenerational spaces

⁵ <https://jech.bmj.com/content/78/1/66.abstract>

⁶ <https://www.planning4cyp.com/>

⁷ <https://playingout.net/why/>

⁸ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/08/1140122>

⁹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14649365.2019.1645198>

A child rights-based approach explained

These resources adopt the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as a foundational reference point for action. In doing so, they align with the UK's obligations under international law and provide local planning authorities with a robust and practical basis for action.

The position differs across the UK nations: Scotland has incorporated the UNCRC into Scots law, Wales has legislated to require due regard to children's rights in ministerial decision-making, and in England and Northern Ireland the Convention remains a key policy and practice framework rather than being directly incorporated in the same way.

A child rights-based approach ensures that planning decisions and policy development systematically consider the rights, needs and perspectives of children and young people. The UNCRC positions children and young people as rights-holders entitled to environments that enable their health, safety, wellbeing and participation.

The UNCRC, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989 and ratified by the UK in 1991, is the most widely endorsed international human rights treaty. It sets out civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for all individuals under the age of 18. The Convention obliges governments, including national and local authorities, to take all appropriate measures to implement children's rights in law, policy and practice.

The UNCRC is made up of 54 articles, but five are particularly relevant to spatial planning:

- **Article 3:** The best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning them. Where and how they live concerns them.
- **Article 12:** Children have the right to express their views in matters affecting them, and to have those views given due weight.
- **Article 2:** Children must not be discriminated against—planning should respond to diverse needs, including those of disabled children, care-experienced young people, and others facing structural disadvantage.
- **Article 6:** Children have the right to life, survival and development—including through access to safe, healthy and stimulating environments.
- **Article 31:** Children have the right to play and recreational activities, including cultural and artistic experiences and opportunities.

England has not fully incorporated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into domestic law. As a result, children's rights are often overlooked in spatial and policy decisions but applying a child rights lens to Local Plans would provide a coherent framework to shape better policy—supporting wider goals around health, sustainability, inclusion and resilience. It helps ensure that children's lives are not shaped solely by adult priorities and supports a proactive, inclusive planning culture, embedding children and young people's needs and perspectives in plan-making and ensuring development considers their need from and experiences of place.

Also of note, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, in General Comment No. 26 (2023), affirms that children have the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment—recognising that environmental degradation and climate change threaten the full enjoyment of children's rights to life, health and development.

This builds on the UNCRC rights and emphasises that planning and design should respond to children's environmental, as well as social and spatial, needs.



Context for policy-making

Broad local authority context

Local Plans do not operate in isolation. They are part of a wider local authority policy and priority landscape, and a measure of their effectiveness should depend on how well they align with and respond to broader local priorities. For planning policy officers, understanding this wider context offers a challenge, but also a powerful opportunity to justify the inclusion of children and young people's rights, needs and voices in the Local Plan.

Most local authorities already have high level ambitions and commitments to improving outcomes for children and young people for example through:

- Corporate Plans
- Children and Young People's Strategies – including Child Poverty Strategies
- Health and Wellbeing Strategies
- Equalities and Inclusion Frameworks
- Open space and play strategies
- Climate mitigation and adaptation strategies

These strategies often set out aspirations related to early years, education, mental health, active lifestyles or youth engagement. While not statutory in planning terms, they form a key part of the evidence base and narrative that can underpin Local Plan policies. Planning officers can use these wider duties and strategic objectives and commitments as a rationale for Local Plan policies that promote child-friendly environments.

Similarly, local authorities have statutory duties under national legislation, including the:

- Children Act 1989 and 2004
- Childcare Act 2006
- Equality Act 2010
- Public Sector Equality Duty

These place clear responsibilities on councils to promote the wellbeing, safety, inclusion and participation of children and young people, particularly those experiencing disadvantage or discrimination.

Referencing these strategies also helps ensure the Local Plan reflects and contributes to the council's whole-systems approach, strengthening the case for cross-departmental working and increasing the likelihood of delivery, funding and partnership support during implementation.

Planning policy context

The planning system is currently being reformed and in a period of transition. However, planning policy provides a strong foundation for embedding the rights, needs and voices of children and young people in the design of the built environment.

The current National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, Dec 2024) emphasises that planning policies and decisions should promote healthy, inclusive and safe communities. It highlights the role of planning in supporting healthy lives, addressing identified local health and wellbeing priorities and reducing health inequalities. There is clear scope to interpret these expectations through a child friendly lens and to reflect them in Local Plan policies, site allocations and design approaches.

A revised draft of the NPPF is currently out for consultation. While the final form of national policy may change as reforms are implemented, the continued focus on plan led development, healthy communities and high quality design indicates that opportunities to embed child friendly planning principles will remain. These resources are therefore intended to be adaptable and capable of aligning with both the current framework and any future updates once adopted.

Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) reinforces the purpose in the NPPF, encouraging plans to be informed by a robust evidence base and responsive to community needs. It makes clear that planning should support social objectives, reduce health inequalities and enhance quality of life across age groups. Children and young people's needs can and should be considered as part of this broader ambition.

Local authorities can also explicitly scope children and young people into their Local Plan assessments including- Sustainability Appraisal (SA), Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) and Health Impact Assessment (HIA). In some places, all or some of these are wrapped up in an Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA).

There is also an option to opt for a Child Impact Assessment if deemed feasible and desirable. Including children and young people in these appraisals and assessments helps identify whether plan policies will positively or negatively affect children and young people's outcomes and provides a structured way to address risks or missed opportunities. Where relevant, the SA can draw on baseline data, often held by or accessible to the local authority, about child health and wellbeing, access to services or environmental exposures (e.g. air pollution near schools).

Local authorities can strengthen their approach by formally committing to the inclusion of children and young people in planning engagement processes. Where Statements of Community Involvement (SCIs) remain part of the statutory framework, they provide a clear route for setting out how and when different age groups will be involved. However, even if the SCI requirement is removed under future reforms, councils should continue to define and publish their approach to age-inclusive participation, whether within a Local Plan engagement strategy or another suitable mechanism. Referencing children and young people in such documents and embedding them in processes reinforces their role as stakeholders, promotes the use of age-appropriate methods and aligns with the legal and policy principles supporting inclusive and representative plan-making.

Adopting consideration of children and young people in Local Plan policy is often in strategic alignment with and supportive of other plan objectives, such as promoting walkable neighbourhoods, delivering active travel infrastructure, improving access to green space, reducing carbon emissions and enhancing design quality. Planning for children typically leads to better places for everyone. Rather than adding a new layer of complexity, this approach makes visible what is often overlooked. It helps Local Plans better reflect the full range of people who grow, live, play, learn and work in places, including those whose voices have historically been excluded.

How to use the resources



Where are you starting from? Baseline and self-assessment tools

Before drafting new policies or revising existing ones, it is advisable to take stock of the current Local Plan and assess how well it serves children and young people. This first step ensures that any new policy work builds on existing commitments, identifies gaps and avoids duplication. It also helps develop internal discussion and consensus for a new or strengthened approach to child-friendly place-making and highlights alignment with existing strategic objectives and local priorities.

In most Local Plans, references to children and young people—if they appear at all—are scattered across policy areas. They may be implicit rather than explicit. Understanding the current baseline is key to setting priorities for improvement.

To support this initial review, the resources include *Baseline and self-assessment tools*. These tools are designed to quickly review how well existing policy and related practices embed the rights, needs and voices of children and young people through key audit questions across themes and then provide a self-assessed score for each theme, helping identify gaps and strengths.

The policy audit and self-assessment tools are intended as devices for internal learning, collaboration and prioritisation. Used early, they can help to build a shared understanding of why planning for children matters, what the local priorities and opportunities are and how to do it well. The review exercise could also be repeated as the plan emerges and detailed policy is drafted.



Child-friendly planning principles and policy area prompts

This section is designed to support policy officers in integrating children and young people's rights, needs and voices into Local Plan policies. It sets out both a strategic objective and then the thematic principles aligned with common policy areas. For each principle, there is a short rationale followed by points to consider across common Local Plan policy areas. These prompts are not prescriptive but can be adapted to suit local priorities, language and policy style. Officers can use the information to identify opportunities for integration during policy drafting, to review existing policy text or inform discussions with stakeholders.



Evidence and supporting resources list

Highlights key national and local evidence sources on child health and wellbeing and sources of information and inspiration in support of the child-friendly planning themes, as well as suggested delivery and data allies from within local government.

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