**Call for Evidence: Children, Young People and the Built Environment**

**Submission: Investing in Public Space and Social Infrastructure for Children and Young People**

Authors: Prof. Sarah Marie Hall, Dr Alison Briggs, Dr Liz Ackerley, Dr Laura Fenton and Dr Santiago Leyva del Rio (University of Manchester)

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1. The following evidence builds on research undertaken as part of the Austerity and Altered Life-Courses research project, funded by the UKRI (2021-2025) and a CAPE Collaboration Fund project (2022-2023). This includes empirical research and data collection in Greater Manchester, Sardinia and Barcelona. Our evidence is informed by our 2023 co-authored report ‘International Innovations in Childcare – What can Manchester Share and Learn’. Further information on these projects, including a copy of the [report](https://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=68653), can be found on our [website](https://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/morgan-centre/research/austerityalters/sharing-our-findings/).
2. One of the ways in which **children and young people experience outdoor spaces in towns and cities** is through childcare, when they are in the presence of a person or persons responsible for their care and wellbeing. Childcare is traditionally understood as a domestic activity, however in urban spaces such as towns and cities, the built environment is a vital space for the socialisation of children and young people. It is where they may travel, eat, play or sit, and as such we consider public space to be essential – it is a form of social infrastructure. Over the last ten years, such social infrastructures of public spaces, encompassing local transport, parks, town centres, streets, leisure centres, playgrounds, and youth clubs have been detrimentally affected by austerity cuts. Whether deteriorating, closing, or closed, sold off as asset or demolished, social infrastructures for children and young people, including for their care, have been decimated.
3. Simultaneously, the childcare sector has been dramatically impacted by austerity. As we state in our report (p.4): “Childcare is a vital component of a modern state and a city’s infrastructure. However, in the UK the childcare sector is chronically underfunded and is failing to meet the needs of parents, children and the economy. According to analysis from the Women’s Budget Group, an estimated 1.7 million women are prevented from taking on further hours of paid work due to childcare issues, resulting in up to £28.2 billion in economic output being lost every year. A professional, high-quality childcare system is therefore an essential part of a caring economy and enables parents to remain in paid work, undertake training, or to engage in other activities such as volunteering or caring for other relatives. Access to affordable, high-quality childcare also has the capacity to improve educational outcomes for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and to provide social networks and support for parents, thereby narrowing social inequalities.” We include in ‘high quality childcare’ access to safe, good quality and well-funded public spaces and social infrastructures.
4. There is geographical unevenness across and within urban and rural areas in the UK in relation to costs as well as the sufficiency and quality of childcare provision. Children and young people (and their families) living in urban areas are at risk of being doubly impacted by the retrenchment of public spending to maintain public social infrastructures: firstly, via increasing costs and decreasing access to good childcare, and secondly because of the lack of safe public spaces in which they can be cared for.
5. We have identified with our research **examples of policy and good practice that are improving children and young people’s experiences in the built environment in the UK and internationally.** For example,since 2015, Barcelona City Council has developed an innovative childhood strategy that aims to reduce the caring burden on families by reconceptualising childcare provision. Innovative strategies for childcare include the notion of a playable city, encompassing the implementation of policies that have begun to have a positive impact for all children and their families (see below). These types of urban innovations enabling children’s play, as well as facilitating interactions between families/carers are conducive to the provision of childcare by communities beyond the biological/legal family.
6. As we explain in our 2023 report (p.14-15): “Although Barcelona has over 900 children’s play areas, the Plan for Play in Barcelona’s Public Spaces (2019) sought to transform Barcelona from a city with play areas, to a playable city by 2030. Actions to improve and diversify existing recreational infrastructures included the closing of several of the city’s streets to traffic over weekends for the prioritisation of play; ensuring 60% of public schools have suitable playgrounds with community uses, and increasing and improving opportunities for play for children with SEND. There are approximately 246,453 children and teenagers (up to 17 years) living in Barcelona, 34.4% of whom are at risk of poverty and social exclusion.In 2021, a Plan for Childhood 2021-2030 was introduced to improve the lives of all children and teenagers in Barcelona. This plan focuses attention on the lives of children who are particularly affected by where they live and their family’s circumstances, and is based around seven childhood rights, outlining twenty-three challenges, and seventy actions. Additionally, any new urban developments must take the well-being of children into account. For instance, government-funded ‘Superblocks’ or ‘Superilles’ in Catalan, form a unique part of the urban landscape in Barcelona. These 400 x 400 m ‘block’ units encompassing open space in the centre, have been designed with the aim of recovering space for communities through limiting traffic; encouraging recreation and social cohesion/collaboration, alongside improving biodiversity. The first ‘Superblocks’ were introduced in 1993 and 2005, and following pilot projects in 2014, more have followed and are being planned as a result of the increases in journeys being made on foot or by bike. The initiative aligns with the city’s 2024 Urban Mobility Plan which aims to reclaim the city from cars by reducing private vehicle journeys from 26% to 18.5% and to have 81.5% of all journeys on foot, public transport and bicycle by 2024.”
7. Towns and cities in England can learn from the innovations in Barcelona. This international example demonstrates the importance, value and impact of investing in public social spaces and infrastructures designed with children in mind, so that they can be used as intergenerational spaces of care. This would facilitate interactions among parents/carers that are conducive to the creation of self-managed childcare systems beyond the home, as well as strengthening social bonds within local communities. This policy agenda has great potential to overlap with, support and galvanise policy commitments concerning public health and air pollution, net zero and carbon reduction, local transport and low-traffic neighbourhoods.
8. Our research suggests that **cross-government working is vital to address children and young people’s needs for access to social infrastructures in the built environment**. At a minimum, this includes the DLUHC, DWP and Treasury, and a cross-government policy agenda to invest in social spaces designed with children in mind so that they can be used as intergenerational spaces of care. Childcare is multifaceted and can be provided in many ways – including those beyond domestic or formalised spaces, to include the use of vital public social infrastructures. By recognising and incorporating these versatile approaches, we can create a more inclusive and accessible framework for childcare, centring the wellbeing of children and adults with childcare responsibilities.