

21st Century Housing: Building Children's Futures

Report of a policy roundtable exploring the challenges facing children and young people with regard to housing and building child-friendly communities

19 January 2010

1. Background of the Speaking Out project

Speaking Out is a strategic partnership between Children England and the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS), which seeks to build a voice for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector across government.

The project aims to develop closer links between a range of government departments and the voluntary and community sector in delivering cross departmental policies in areas affecting children and young people such as health, education, employment and training, youth justice, community empowerment and housing and homelessness.

Speaking Out aims to support the children, young people and families voluntary and community sector to better understand the impact of a wider range of government policies and provide routes to influence them.

The project is funded by the Office of the Third Sector in the Cabinet Office.

2. Introduction

The 21st Century Housing roundtable brought together practitioners, policymakers and representatives from the children and young people's voluntary and community sector to discuss issues around housing provision in rural and urban settings and design of housing for children and young people. The event included presentations from four key speakers, including the Coalition for Rural Children and Young People, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and Planning Aid for London.

This report will set out the key recommendations from the roundtable, summarise the presentations and highlight key discussion points.

3. Key recommendations

Key recommendations that emerged from the roundtable are:

Recommendation 1: Young people would benefit greatly from receiving information on housing issues before they leave school. This information could be provided through peer-mentoring schemes, or through lessons such as PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education) in school, and through youth councils/young mayors.

Recommendation 2: Children's Trusts should be encouraged to take the lead in developing improved co-ordination across the different professions working with children and young people in housing need including housing associations and ALMOs; recognising the impact poor housing can have on their health, education and wellbeing.

Recommendation 3: Greater importance should be given by planners and developers not only to the physical and design aspects of house building in relation to children and young people, but also to the role of community development work within the area of housing need.

Recommendation 4: Children and young people, especially those living in crowded or unsuitable accommodation, need access to outside space which they can use, in both urban and rural communities. A wider alliance must be built to secure and create these spaces; including planners, developers, local decision makers and the wider community.

Recommendation 5: All those working with children and young people need to engage and encourage children and young people to think from an early age about design, planning and community-building, and seek routes to get the voices of children heard in decisions on these issues. The new emphasis on localism should be used to support this.

Recommendation 6: Initiatives such as 'MyPlace' which equip children and young people with the language and understanding they need to learn about and be involved in local design and planning decision-making needs to be expanded and developed, and lessons learnt more broadly.

4. Presentation by Jim Davis, Chair of the Coalition for Rural Children and Young People

The Coalition for Rural Children and Young People involves several national voluntary and community sector organisations and was set up to remind Government that children live in rural areas and need services and support.

The presentation looked at the issues for children and young people growing up in rural areas, including:

- Sparsity, isolation, limited facilities;
- Affluent and deprived individuals and families living side by side;
- 'Edge of village experience'. Social housing in rural areas is located literally on the edges of villages. This is replicated in residents' experiences in the

- community where they often feel separated from village life. Poverty is visible through the type of tenure they have. Increases their sense of scrutiny by others, yet their needs are often ignored as being marginal;
- Limited social housing, high housing costs, the impact of second home ownership;
 - Fundamental problems with transport which can further the sense of isolation and causes problems in accessing facilities;
 - The nature of living in a rural area is that people often know everything about you – this can be difficult and uncomfortable for young people; and
 - Rural child poverty as a significant, yet often overlooked problem with 500,000 children and young people experiencing this. This also adds to the sense of isolation and difference from their more affluent neighbours.

The presentation also looked at universal themes affecting both children and young people growing up in rural and urban areas:

- Ambivalent attitudes to children and young people – fear of young people and fear for children;
- Tolerance of children and young people tends to be lower in rural areas;
- Contested public space - adults claim space for themselves and seek to exclude children and young people from it. Especially problematic in rural areas as there are less spaces to use in the first place;
- Sense that children and young people should not be out on their own, and that groups of young people represent anti-social behaviour and pose potential risks to both adults and younger children;
- In a survey, 43% of adults said children should be 14 before going out alone. Of the same adults, 68% said they were under 14 when they went out alone; and
- Children and young people live in a green environment, yet rarely explore it. Few 'free roam' and explore and enjoy the countryside.

In looking at what we can do to ameliorate some of these problems Jim offered:

- We need to distinguish between rural living, deprivation and need. Being a rural young person does not mean you are deprived/disadvantaged. But personal circumstances that lead to disadvantage are amplified in a rural environment due to a lack of facilities, high cost of living, problems with transport, isolationism and the visible nature of poverty through the 'edge of village' experience;
- We need to work harder to make housing need more visible in debates on rural issues. Currently many are not convinced there is a problem.
- We need to work collaboratively to shift attitudes about children and young people, particularly that they are a threat to community life, pose risks and are responsible for criminal and anti-social behaviour. We need to resist stereotypes about rural children and young people and to make the case for increased visibility being a testament to the success of our communities rather than the opposite;
- We need to adopt a more European approach to children and young people, particularly around the length of time that we support young people, this needs to extend well beyond 18; and
- Finally we need to reduce the amount of second home ownership in rural areas as it is detrimental to communities and makes it harder for young people to remain living in rural areas as house prices are pushed up.

Key discussion points on rural children and young people and housing

- There is a need for young people to receive information on housing issues before they leave school. This could be done through peer-mentoring schemes, or through PSHE;
- A problem of the localism agenda is that by devolving planning decisions around new builds to a local level in rural areas, without centralised targets, local lobbies will be able to stop new builds. This can foster 'nimbyism';
- There is a need to shift the emphasis in house building away from an object-basis, towards making the case for need. Collectively we need to be better at communicating need;
- Supported housing provision needs to be expanded and adequately supported. Often supported housing is run by very small VCS organisations with little resources. In rural areas it is difficult to develop or expand supported housing as local lobbies stop developments through fear that the children and young people living there would be 'undesirable.' Yet more evidence of 'nimbyism';
- Housing associations often have great difficulty in acquiring housing in rural areas.

5. Presentation by Lynsey Hanley, author and journalist

Lynsey has written a book on her experiences of growing up on a large peripheral housing estate and the effects of geographical and social exclusion and growing up on the edge of a city. At 18 she moved to an inner city council estate in East London. She describes differences and similarities between both estates. The urban estate was meant to be less isolated in theory, but in practice she often found it was more isolating.

Lynsey spoke extensively about the 'wall in the head' (a fear of the unknown) that can be developed by children and young people growing up in large urban housing estates:

- It can foster a fear of the unknown through developing an 'us' (those living on estates) and 'them' (the outside world); those 'outside' can't be trusted;
- The sense that there are certain things that only those 'outside' can enjoy and those inside have no right to them;
- It fosters a belief that children and young people's own low economic and social status must somehow be their fault;
- It leads children and young people to think that there is life going on elsewhere which is not for them;
- Children and young people are discouraged by peers and family to engage with the outside world which limits their life experiences and opportunities. Due to fear of the outside. This leads to a sense of resignation and 'giving up' on a life outside the estate;
- Low confidence in themselves and each other leads to low trust generally;
- Parents living on estates are often depressed and suffer from poor health which directly affects the well-being and health of their children and leads them to believe they do not deserve a happy and healthy life;
- Estates can turn into a form of social isolation – less from a lack of facilities and more about a self-enforced social isolation through a sense that they are not entitled to access or use facilities. Also children and young people may be consumed by family problems and a constantly inward view which leads to social isolation;

- The impact of housing estates on education is particularly marked for those children and young people who are educated in schools within the estate. The entire place becomes self-contained so children and young people fail to see what lies beyond/other opportunities/different experiences which further builds up 'a wall in the head';
- The physical and spatial existence of estates are public badges of poverty and social inequality which undermine children and young people's self-confidence and belief. Made worse by the low expectations of those who have to live in these estates;
- Social inequality is key – inequality in terms of postcode, social perception, school attainment and economic status;
- Social isolation is not always about being bored and not having enough to do. It can be more about not feeling entitled to use the facilities on offer;
- Urban housing estates represent the concentration of poverty in one community, and their difference vis a vis wealthy areas nearby. It represents a very public social polarisation which is solidified through housing and geographical space; and
- 'Hidden injuries of class' directly linked to 'the wall in the head'.

Key discussion points on urban children and young people and housing

- Urban social housing prevents children and young people from seeing and accessing opportunities outside the estate which leads to intergenerational cycles of worklessness, teenage pregnancy and poor health. It is important to recognise that social issues can still be the same, even if housing is redeveloped;
- Importance should be given not only to the physical and design aspects of house building, but also to the role of community development work within these estates;
- There needs to be better communication between the range of professions working with children and young people growing up on housing estates. It is not enough to expect housing professionals or youth workers to support these children and young people in isolation. It requires a great cross-sector and professional effort to tackle some of these deep-rooted problems and structural barriers they experience; and
- Potential for housing to be linked into the new duty on local authorities to conduct child poverty audits and to draw up local strategies for tackling child poverty.

6. Presentation by Matt Bell, Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE)

CABE is an organisation that was established 10 years ago to champion high quality design.

Matt's presentation focused on the importance of design in housing:

- Good design is objective, not subjective. Good design is about asking:
 - Firmness – will it last?
 - Functionality – does it work?
 - Delight – does it look good?
- We need to engage children and young people on these 3 issues to get them thinking from an early age about design, planning and community-building;

- Design is an issue for everybody. To improve the lives of children and young people we need to improve housing and design across the piece;
- Britain can do good design, but this often only happens at the top end and when we choose to;
- Levels of aspiration can be raised by good design, not just good design in housing but in local facilities, e.g. a well-designed Children's Centre can raise the overall tone of an area and encourage more creative design in other buildings; and
- Design is about bricks and mortar, but also about communities and the ability to knit communities together. It's about space between houses as much as the houses itself, layout of play/green areas and the location of facilities and amenities.

Key facts on housing and design:

CABE "Space in new homes" report (2009)

- 40% said that there wasn't enough space for small children to play safely in the kitchen while meals are being prepared;
- 37% said they or their children do not have enough space to entertain guests privately; and
- 72% said they did not have enough space for the three small bins required to recycle properly.

Evans, Wells and Moch "Housing and Mental Health" report:

- Children living in more crowded or noisier homes suffer fewer ill effects if they have a room where they can spend time alone; and
- Parents with inadequate privacy may be less willing or able to socially engage their children. Both crowding and noise are negatively associated with parental responsiveness to young children.

Key issues for children and young people in relation to design:

- Space inside and space outside;
- Room to eat together, privacy, recycling;
- Identity, self-esteem, community and mutual support, safety and activity; and
- Children and young people need to be given the status of 'clients' with informed valued opinions about what works for them, and their aspirations for their communities.

What do we need to do?

- Consult more with children and young people on issues of design and planning, and on their terms and in their time frame;
- Collectively we need to demand good design and this can only be done through empowering communities and giving them the knowledge and lexicon to engage in planning decisions;
- We need to set minimum design standards for all housing. The HCA should be encouraged to set high standards, as in the London Plan, and not compromise on future priorities;
- Initiatives such as 'MyPlace' which equip children and young people with the language and understanding they need to learn about and be involved in local design and planning decision-making need to be expanded and developed; and
- We need to foster a 'design literate nation' and can do this through using architecture and building plans in everyday lessons, e.g. in maths projects.

7. Presentation by Nancy Astley, Planning Aid for London

Planning Aid for London is an independent planning charity that was established in 1973. The last 10 years of the organisation's work has been dedicated to outreach work across London. Nancy's presentation focused on engaging children and young people in building child-friendly communities.

Key issues to consider when thinking about communities:

- Communities are not necessarily geographically or spatially based e.g. a person could be part of a community at work, in a family, socially, politically etc;
- People are part of numerous communities simultaneously;
- Planning is about tying all of these communities together; and
- Children and young people are one of the largest communities we have therefore it is crucial we engage with them over planning issues.

Benefits for children and young people in participating in planning projects:

- Increased knowledge and skills;
- Builds team working and project-planning skills;
- Enables them to learn about decision-making processes;
- Fosters a sense of ownership which can only develop when children and young people are engaged over a long period of time; and
- Can strengthen engagement with wider communities and with other children and young people.

Benefits for communities of engaging children and young people in planning/design:

- Increases intergenerational trust;
- Breaks down barriers within, between and across communities;
- Can challenge negative perceptions of children and young people;
- Decreases exit from communities and builds a sense of heritage;
- Helps communities to understand the lifestyle children and young people have and how they use places and facilities; and
- Can cut the perception of crime and anti-social behaviour.

Benefits for policymakers in children and young people's participation:

- Better informed decision making;
- Saves time in collecting information about children and young people; and
- Good practice and PR.

Issues for further consideration:

- Work around children and young people engagement tends to be short term which can alienate children and young people and feel that their contributions are not valued. Also causes problems in terms of sustainability of good projects and programmes;
- To empower children and young people we need to think longer term and engage them in whole life-cycle planning;
- Children and young people need to be continuously involved in development and planning – not just in the development of new builds and projects; and
- We should promote planning as part of citizenship in schools to better enable children and young people to engage with their local communities and in planning/development decision-making.

How to empower children and young people?

- Think longer term;
- Provide an on-going opportunity for young people to access the decision making process and influence change; and
- Remember that communities continue to develop even when buildings have been built.

Key discussion points on design and planning:

- Generally staff at children's centres have minimal knowledge on housing issues for families. Are staff working in Children's Centres aware which families are living in temporary accommodation?
- A lot of children's centres are too busy and lack the necessary resources to be involved in the housing issues of their clients;
- We need to recognise that housing quality impacts massively on young people's life chances;
- More needs to be done to ensure that representatives from housing associations and directors of housing from local authorities are at the heart of discussions around children and young people and housing. They are often excluded from Children's Trusts and Local Strategic Partnerships;
- When it comes to housing and young people, there are many more issues for local authorities to address than just youth homelessness and housing for care leavers; and
- There are low levels of awareness in the wider policy-making sector about housing and its impact on the health and well-being of children. This is evidenced by no specific mention of housing in the Every Child Matters framework.

8. Next steps

The Speaking Out team will send this report to the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the London Mayor's Office and other key decision makers on housing and the environment. It will also be promoted through Children England's and NCVYS's networks.

Following consultation with Children England and NCVYS members, housing and homelessness has been identified as a priority policy area for the Speaking Out project 2009-10. In light of this, the Speaking Out team will continue to analyse housing and homelessness issues and facilitate discussion between the children and young people's voluntary and community sector, Government and other key stakeholders.

9. Appendix – list of delegates

| Name | Job Title | Organisation |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Francesca Albanese | Policy Officer | Shelter |
| Nancy Astley | Interim Director | Planning Aid |
| Matt Bell | Director of Campaigns and Education | The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) |
| Sandra Brown | Policy Directorate | Local Government Association |
| Sue Causton | Assistant Director of Support and Agency Services | Peabody Trust |
| Peta Cubberley | Regional Children's Co-ordinator | Shelter |
| Jim Davis | Chair of the Coalition, Coalition for Rural Children and Young People | The Children's Society |
| Marie Anne Diedhiou-Roy | Children and Young People's Organisational Support Officer | London Voluntary Service Council |
| Suncica Getter | Life Coach | Dad's House |
| Sophie Griffiths | Policy and Information Officer | Children England |
| Lynsey Hanley | Author and journalist | |
| Maggie Jones | Chief Executive | Children England |
| Rhiannon Jones | Information and Website Officer | NCVYS |
| Kathleen Kelly | Programme Manager, Policy & Research Department | Joseph Rowntree Foundation |
| Ian Martin | Director of Housing & Neighbourhood Services | Christian Action Housing |
| William McGranaghan | Chief Executive | Dad's House |
| Anne Reyersbach | Policy Manager | Children England |
| Laura Smith | Supported Youth Housing and Health Network | National Children's Bureau |
| Zoe Smith | Policy Officer | Royal Institute of British Architects |
| Dominic Weinberg | Policy Officer | NCVYS |
| Emilie Whitaker | Policy and Information Officer | Children England |
| Kerry Wilkins | | Planning Aid for London |