Child Friendly Neighbourhoods: An inclusive route to sustainable community wellbeing?

Shaping places: children and young people's perspectives

'Place is where people, location and resources combine to create a sense of identity and purpose …' (Scottish Government)

On 3 February 2022 Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland hosted an online event drawing together researchers, community activists and representatives from multiple agencies, including local and national government. The online event, attended by 60 people, came at a pivotal moment for considering the future of our communities as we move into a new, post-Covid normality.

This and a companion paper on **What we can learn from Covid** bring together key discussion points from three CNS presentations on current work and broad-ranging discussion and views offered from across the breakout rooms. All comments included in this paper came from the discussion groups are not attributed to any individual. It looks at what we can learn from our communities and what further questions we might ask in order to take this work forward, fundamental as it is to Scotland's future. For the purposes of this paper, the discussions are noted under five headings – **Place and Empowerment**, **Feeling Safe, Green Spaces & Nature, Intergenerational Spaces, Children as Activists**, with key points drawn together in a closing **Reflection**. Under each heading, our conversations are developed into questions to prompt further thought.

Place and Empowerment

We know the demographics – the statistics on poverty and the fact that poverty postcodes take as much as 14 years off life expectancy. But how does it really feel to live in our communities? To understand that, we need to listen to people, especially children and young people.

> #### We asked children and young people what matters to them in their communities?
>
> *Being able to learn*
>
> *Pets and nature… safe green spaces*
> *'I feel safe … with my cat and my hamsters'*
>
> *Relationships, having people to talk to*
>
> *Feeling safe … emotional safety … being safe online*
>
> *Having jobs   …   a home   …   food   …   clothes*

Children and young people know their neighbourhoods. They have ideas about them but don't know how to get their voices heard. If they are brought up in less advantaged areas, the stigma of poverty is a constant presence and can undermine willingness to act 'if we've been written off why should we do anything?' Many families tell us they never leave their own communities, not even for a short ride into the city – others talk about the transport

cost barrier for something as ordinary as 'a trip to the shops' – children in these families are trapped in an environment that never feels free of the postcode stigma.

> **Town v Country**
> *Often the focus of concern is on urban disadvantage but many of the problems and experiences described by urban children and young people are replicated in rural areas, sometimes with added layers of complication.*
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> *Rural young people describe the same feelings of insecurity – even in low crime areas children may be afraid of the outside world. Damaged environments – litter and broken glass, poor or absent street-lighting – are not unique to the city. Small towns and villages can be very limited in what they can offer their young people – and if the local park doesn't feel safe because of litter or bullying, there may not be much else to do. Rural youth can feel cut off from amenities that others take for granted – the cinema or MacDonalds. And they know about transport costs, that living in the country means paying more to have what others take for granted.*

It's easy to see what's wrong with some of our communities but often much harder to spot the strengths. Participants' experiences of these stigmatized areas are that they have a strong community spirit. They can be strong neighbourhoods – and so much more. 'Place and neighbourhood are so important as a focus for health and well-being.'

Q: What are the implications of poverty for children's and young people's engagement with their neighbourhoods, their sense of place? How can we help them overcome that?

Feeling Safe

Youth is a time for ever-broadening horizons, new ideas, diverse experiences. You value home – but as you grow up you want home to be the place you like best, not the only place you feel safe.

One of the most striking points to emerge from all sides was the issue of feeling safe. Children and young people said they only felt safe in their own homes: indoors is their safe space. They want to enjoy outdoor places but they are afraid

'We stay home on our PlayStations because it's not safe to go out – people pick fights with you'.

It will take time to change how people feel about their environment – how safe they think it is – but many problems could be remedied quickly. Many could be resolved by local people with minimal support from 'outside'. Safety can be a concern across all ages. Well-lit, well-connected spaces are fundamental and that's a planning issue. One proposal was that Glasgow's grid system of canals could be important in offering routes to and from the city, with access to wildlife and possibilities for walking, cycling etc. That would hit so many key priorities – health, cheap mobility and access, open air living, getting people out of their rooms.

Q: We can build strong communities but how will we make sure everyone can access them, even people trapped in their own homes?

Green Spaces & Nature

Twenty years ago schools were expected to take the role of community hubs, but that isn't a complete solution to the challenge of community-building. Participants knew that schools no longer have the spaces that can encourage intergenerational working – and for some, schools' inevitable focus on attainment can be off-putting.

During Covid, outdoor space – green space – acquired a special significance. For many it was the only space in which they could legally socialise. And green space is an obvious starting point because 'it's very tangible.' People can get their heads round green space. They can articulate the space they're in.

Green spaces:

- Can replace schools as communal spaces (engaging the school-averse)
- Are an accessible and 'tangible' subject (engaging children and young people)
- Offer opportunities for people of different ages to share ideas and problem-solve (breaking down age-based silos)
- Can empower people to tackle underlying inequalities such as health and life expectancy (shifting the focus away from the stigma of poverty and on to positive action)
- Can bring local and individual action (such as littering and recycling) into the arena of global environmental problems (helping people see that what they say and do counts).

'Once we've opened up that discussion, we could start to unpick some of the other, more challenging, issues. We could pick up on things like green space helping to improve physical and mental health and well-being 'doing it by stealth' … not having to ask to someone's face how it feels to be poor and experience food and fuel poverty.'

Q: 'It's the environment (what you go home to) that damages learning.' Can outdoor spaces step into the breach?

Intergenerational Spaces

Participants mentioned projects and initiatives that broaden the idea of green spaces to consideration of environmental problems – Green academies, Green flag status and Green space design were just a few. But how can children and young people make their voices heard in such fora? Within our communities we need intergenerational spaces where people of all ages can be citizens. 'There is lots of derelict land we could use but it's not made available.'

Intergenerational work and children's involvement in it have produced some great examples of community work evolving, almost spontaneously, from casual discussions – in Glasgow's West End a community space emerged from adults talking to young people in open air spaces about basic stuff such as littering. We need more informal spaces like that where different age groups can meet and hear each other's thoughts. And within our catch-all category of 'Children and Young People' we must be careful not to focus on what works for the under 10s – it's not just about formal playgrounds, bright colours etc. Where do teenagers go? What do they want? How do the aspirations of young people fit in with the needs of other parts of the community?

Intergenerational working can make Children's and Young People's sense of place stronger and participants emphasised how important that is. Although our participants' focus is on

young people, it's obvious how much could be gained from creating spaces for different generations to work together – identifying local problems and solving them in ways that work across the generations. 'A child-friendly neighbourhood has benefits for everyone.'

Q: How do we acquire and use outdoor spaces where the whole community can meet, talk and listen to each other?

Children as Activists

Listening to children reveals how acutely they are aware of their own poverty. But they know that's not just their problem. They know others in other places struggle too. They're interested in – ready to be inspired by – global problems – and quick to make links to their own communities, links between worldwide climate change and the loss of local green spaces, between food poverty in Valparaiso and food poverty in West Dunbartonshire. They tell us how much they want to enjoy their own neighbourhoods and also contribute to solving global problems.

Schools still have a pivotal role to play – participants spoke of school eco-committees and developing school sustainability policies – but schools need to do more with outreach so that they can hear from young people and also from the wider community. And this has to happen, not simply because Scottish Government makes repeated commitments to it but because the ambitions articulated by children and young people are aligned with key development questions that affect everyone's future.

The Language of Place
Participants identified two obstacles that need to be overcome:
- *Children and young people aren't used to being listened to (or asked)*
- *They may lack the vocabulary they need for these discussion.*

But, given the right tools … building relationships of trust (see the companion paper on Learning from Covid) can boost confidence – and there are other ways of expressing aspirations.

Primary children did a collaborative mapping exercise over several weeks to build a 'picture' of their neighbourhood. Rural children have a very strong understanding of their own area and its key points and landmarks. A mapping exercise has helped children develop a vocabulary to talk about places. They understand how they and other people might want to use spaces and have since worked with their local council to identify where facilities such as bins should be located.

Q: How do we make visible the impact of children's and young people's voices? What will they be able to point to, saying 'We did this'?

Deep mapping exercise with children

Reflection

'Climate change and other emerging issues have left our education system preparing children for a future that's no longer relevant. The culture of activism is visible in communities but it's not connected to policy-makers' thinking – that's a stumbling block for the political imagination.'

There are caveats. We want to help children and young people become active participants in their local and global communities but they mustn't be overwhelmed; they can't be made to feel responsible for all our problems. Nor should we take a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. We've created a category 'Children and Young People' that in fact is full of diversity – and not everyone wants to be a campaigner. We don't want to create another uncomfortable, unavoidable stereotype – the young activist. A person-centred approach means respecting children and young people as individuals.

'Places are shaped by the way resources, services and assets are directed and used by the people who live in and invest in them.' (Scottish Government)

BAS 28.2.22