

# a child's place: why environment matters to children

a Green Alliance / Demos report

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# A Child's Place: Why environment matters to children

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## Project partners:

Barnardo's, English Nature, Ikea, Royal Bank of Scotland

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Green Alliance is one of the UK's foremost environmental groups. An independent charity, its mission is to promote sustainable development by ensuring that the environment is at the heart of decision-making. It works with senior people in government, parliament, business and the environmental movement to encourage new ideas, dialogue and constructive solutions.

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## summary of recommendations

In February and March 2004, we undertook a series of interviews with children around the UK aged ten to eleven, to establish their attitudes towards their environment and how this affects them. The aim was to establish, via the children's perspective, what the lessons are for policy-makers.

We found that:

- There is a big gap in equality of access to high quality natural environments between children from rural backgrounds and children from urban backgrounds.
- Children have a strong sense of the environment as a social space and this influences the way they use public space for outdoor play and personal development.
- Assessing danger is children's top priority when thinking about different environments.
- Many children have a surprisingly good grasp of environmental issues but gain their most powerful understanding through exploration of their own natural environment. However, this need is being constrained by restrictions on access to the outdoor environment.

Children are losing their connection with the natural environment, and their well-being and environmental quality are inextricably linked. The worse a local environment looks, the less able children are to play freely, and develop the habits and commitments that will enable them to address environmental problems in the future.

Our recommendations are that:

1. New ways are found to facilitate environmental education through out-of-school learning and green school design
2. Better consideration is given to children's needs in decision-making on the design of public space
3. The link between children's well-being and the environment is embedded in national policy
4. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are given more opportunities to access quality public space
5. The environmental dimension of the public health agenda is given greater emphasis in public policy

The paradox is that we are fostering a generation that is likely to face the toughest environmental challenges yet, in terms of climate change and the ever-increasing pressure on natural resources. This generation, more than any other before, will need the environmental awareness and citizenship that is instilled through exploration in childhood.

## introduction

Watching children play outdoors is inspiring: climbing trees; discovering insects, animals and birds; running and shouting; playing games; letting their imaginations run wild; and story-telling. We can empathise with this as adults because we were all children once.

But children's ability to experience the natural environment is under threat. Fear and risk, lack of investment, overcrowding and poverty are all restricting their opportunities to spend time outside.

In this project, we asked children how they would improve their environments. They told us they want less traffic, better public transport, more green space, trees, dens, hiding places and less litter. Above all, they want adults and other children to help protect their local environments.

Children are a powerful symbol of the future. They provide us with a compelling reason to protect the environment. This symbolism has not been lost on policy-makers. The most widely accepted definition of sustainable development is the one used in the 1987 Brundtland report: "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy their own needs". Yet despite the frequency with which they feature in environmental discourse, children have played only a passive role in the development and implementation of environmental policy.

This report argues that children's well-being and environmental issues are inextricably linked. The worse a local environment looks, the less able children are to play freely, and to develop the habits and commitments that will enable them to address environmental problems in the future.

The environmental mantra 'think global, act local' is at its most pertinent when thinking about children's lives. Yet too often we prevent children from participating in local decisions. We fail to put in place strategies to ensure the long term preservation of children's play spaces. Moreover, the institutions that matter most to children - such as schools and play clubs - find it difficult to facilitate environmental learning through outside trips, holidays and outdoor lessons.

Children are resilient. They continue to derive enjoyment from even the smallest patches of garden, yard or school playground. Yet children's experience of the environment is in decline. We identified a significant divide between the attitudes of urban and rural children towards the environment. The majority of children no longer consider the street a suitable place to play. Beliefs about the inherent hostility and danger of public spaces are commonplace.

It is time to make space for children. A starting point is to combine some of the priorities of children's policy with the goals of the sustainable development community. This report aims to contribute to that task.

Under pressure: The state of children's environments

- The number of children walking to school or playing unsupervised is steadily falling. In 1989, 62 per cent of primary aged children walked to school, compared to 54 per cent ten years later in 1999 [Social Trends, 2004, No 34 p187]
- Play space is frequently restricted for school age children and too much variation exists between different areas. A 2002 review found that some local authorities were spending ten times as much per play area than others [Making the case for play: building policies and strategies for school aged children, Children's Play Council]
- Green space that is accessible to children continues to be sold off. New figures from the National Playing Fields Association show a steady rise in the number of applications to build on playing fields, from 625 in 1999-2000 to 1,325 in the year 2002-2003. [National Playing Fields Association press release, 23 June 2003]
- Pressures on the curriculum, school budgets and fears of litigation over accidents are squeezing out-of-classroom learning. The teaching union NASUWT has, for some time, urged its members to avoid school trips and school insurance premiums have increased by up to 20 per cent a year to indemnify against compensation claims [Teacher Support Network press release, June 2003]

## findings from the fieldwork

The starting assumption for this project was that environmental policy – and policy-makers – would benefit from listening more to children’s views about their local environments, and gaining their perspectives on global environmental challenges. Through a range of qualitative research methodologies, we talked to children about their perceptions of the environment and investigated whether a focus on children as active participants in environmental protection could change the way we think about environmental and children’s policy.

## methodology

Our programme of qualitative research focused on 10 and 11 year olds in four locations:

- Spring Grove School in Huddersfield has just over 200 pupils. A significant proportion has English as an additional language. The largest ethnic group is Pakistani.
- Goose Green School in south London is a large primary school with over 300 pupils. The school is a ‘fresh start’ school in that management of the previous failing school has largely been replaced. Many pupils have English as an additional language. A significant number of children do not stay at the school for very long. The largest ethnic group is black Caribbean/black African
- Wick Church of England Primary School is a small school in the rural village of Wick in South Gloucestershire. The school has pupils from Wick and also from the outlying village of Drayton. The majority of pupils are white.
- Foxpoint Play in Bath is a scheme run by the not-for-profit sustainability organisation Envolve. Play workers work with local children and young people to develop activities and events, especially those with an environmental focus. The scheme is centred on a disadvantaged area of Bath.

We employed a mixed methodological approach in the schools, which consisted of:

- 20 paired interviews with children;
- Three extended tours of children’s spaces with children (two playgrounds, one nature reserve);
- Informal talk and observation in the playground with Year Six pupils;
- A paper survey of parents in each school;
- Filmed interviews with headteachers in two locations.

At Foxpoint, we took a less structured approach, which included:

- One tour of an estate/park with children
- Two interviews with playworkers

The main findings from the research are structured into four themes.

### environment as a social space

*“This place called the green, where children play on the grass – it belongs to everyone.” (Boy, Wick)*

*“It’s clean on our side of the street but on the other side, no one really takes care of it. People do what they want and chuck whatever they want and they don’t take responsibility.” (Girl, Huddersfield)*

In describing their environments to us, children continually referred to the social codes and expectations that are features of different environments. Different areas were characterised by a whole range of social factors, including parental approval or disapproval, gender, bullying or danger.

Children segregate their environments according to need. Outdoor space is generally understood as a mosaic of interlocking units to be used according to a variety of subtle and evolving rules. This complexity is reflected in the modern design of school playgrounds, which typically zone areas to match different activities such as sports or quiet conversation. However, whilst children do not conceive of outdoor space as uniformly ‘public’, neither do they want it to become too extensively divided. They recognise that outdoor space often provides neutral ground for different groups to come together, and they frequently want to break down divisions that are imposed by adults.

Children are extremely vocal about the quality of their local environments. Other people’s poor treatment of public space is almost always the cause of their negative perceptions. This could result from litter, dog fouling, bullying, vandalism, crime, noise, neglect or lack of maintenance.

A focus on environmental ‘rules’ sometimes masks more fundamental problems. In south London, children explained to us at length the restrictions on their use of green space in the playground: they were not allowed to walk in it or sit on the wall. However, during a tour of the school, we discovered that the ‘green space’ was little more than a row of thorny bushes and the more fundamental problem was the lack of space overall. Many children, especially those with limited experiences of public space in areas of high deprivation, were unlikely to express environmental problems in terms of inadequate housing, lack of space or bad design, even where these were the root cause of poor environments.

Children are adamant that everyone should take responsibility for caring for the local environment. Where this breaks down, they are quick to blame teenagers for vandalism or anti-social behaviour. Very few children mentioned the government or local council as having a responsibility for the local environment. There was a vague sense that some official body must look after footpaths and parks but the children could not express who or what that might be.

## risk, danger and crime

“Environment – you’re talking about safety.” (Girl, Huddersfield)

“I feel most comfortable in the garden. Because I know that there’s no strangers there, and no-one can get me or anything” (Girl, Wick)

“If you kick into the street, it’s really dangerous to get the ball back.” (Boy, Huddersfield)

Danger is clearly an aspect of the social dimension of space. Assessing danger was the first priority for children when thinking about different environments and their preferences within them. It was often the first thing children mentioned when talking about being outside the home. Danger could come in a variety of forms, though a sense of danger was not always very specific.

In order of frequency and emphasis, children cited the following dangers:

### Traffic

Direct personal experience informed children’s fear of traffic, with many being able to give examples of accidents or near accidents. Many wanted greater provision for pedestrians and cyclists.

### Strangers/criminals

Children keenly felt the fear of strangers. The detail of the threat from strangers was not often articulated, though some children mentioned the risk of being kidnapped or killed and the implication of sexual predation was clear from others. The street was seen as the most dangerous place to be, with only a few children naming it as a place where they played. For a large number of children, the only outdoor space where they could be sure to be safe from strangers was the garden. In our survey of parental opinion, parents overwhelmingly expressed concern about allowing their children access to open space, even though they recognised its importance to their well-being.

### Being lost

Fear of becoming lost and therefore more vulnerable to strangers and criminals was clearly a significant deterrent to breaking parental restrictions on access to public space. However, our tours of play spaces with children elicited some evidence that children do not always tell their parents exactly where they had been. This suggests that children do roam more freely than their parents would wish but that this is generally a spontaneous rather than a premeditated decision.

### Bullying

Bullying was mentioned although few children gave details of personal experience. Interestingly, children included destructive behaviour towards physical spaces in their definition of bullying.



### Trains

Fear of trains was clearly influenced by the terrorist attack in Spain that occurred during the fieldwork. However, trains were also seen as being dangerous because of the potential for being in an accident, getting lost or becoming a victim of crime. Trains were generally believed to be more dangerous than cars.

### Terrorism

Terrorism featured as a significant fear in London. Existing fears of train accidents and crime were accentuated by the perceived threat of a terrorist attack. Children's concern over terrorism raises a question around their interpretation of media coverage. High-profile stories such as the Soham case, train crashes and terrorist attacks, featured heavily in children's explanations of why they were scared of particular spaces. There is a strong interaction here between media coverage, parental and children's concerns, with parents and children often consuming media together.

## inequality of space

*"We don't have a garden but my grandma has a garden and it's about this big [demonstrates]. When it snowed it was great." (Girl, London)*

*"Loads of time in the garden – I grow things, green beans and things. I've got a little greenhouse as well. I have things to play on in the garden. I have my own shed." (Boy, Wick)*

The most striking contrast in our sample was in attitudes towards urban and rural environments. Children were very loyal to their own patch. Children from urban areas of high deprivation would praise the merits of their environment in the same breath as citing examples of serious crime or vandalism. It was noticeable that children in rural areas were often negative about urban space and vice versa. This distrust of the unfamiliar seemed to be borne of a high degree of loyalty and ownership to their local area rather than direct personal experience of other environments.

Inequality of space expressed itself in rural-urban terms - many of the rural children came from more affluent families than the urban children - but it is clear that the underlying inequality is in overall levels of deprivation and its impact on children's access to quality space. This inequality was at its starkest when children talked of their opportunities for outdoor play. The children from more affluent backgrounds in rural areas generally had large gardens, lived on farms or had access to privately owned fields. They often mentioned different types of equipment in the garden such as trampolines, ponds or sheds. By contrast, children from disadvantaged backgrounds in urban areas lacked access to outdoor space at home and at school. Access to private gardens was rare and shared gardens were often beset with problems such as overgrown nettles or noisy neighbours. Children from such backgrounds generally had fewer opportunities – often saying that they had never done something, such as going to the beach.

## learning and well-being

“I’m interested in climate change. I like it because it’s technical and I want to know if something is going to happen to the area.” (Boy, Wick)

“When I go in my garden, sometimes I see a fox, and I think it is so secret because I saw a fox” (Girl, London)

“The countryside – I’ve been there maybe about once” (Boy, Huddersfield)

Many children had a surprisingly good grasp of environmental issues. During the interviews, we played a word game to understand which concepts were more familiar than others. Virtually all the children could give full descriptions of ‘recycle’, ‘natural’, ‘pollution’, and ‘rainforests’. Many children also described ‘health’ and ‘asthma’ and some spoke about a causal link with environmental issues such as pollution, natural foods and exercise. A smaller proportion could describe ‘organic’, ‘genetically modified’, ‘climate change’, and some recognised organisations such as Greenpeace and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). None of the children felt they could describe ‘conservation’, ‘biodiversity’ or ‘sustainability’, though some were familiar with the words.

Although children had learned about environment issues at school, it was clear that they gained richer learning from direct experience. Encouraging this virtuous circle could have a wider impact on environmental awareness and citizenship in the longer term. A number of children spontaneously said that playing outside and exploring new spaces contributed to their learning and overall well-being.

Examples of how access to the natural environment contributed to children’s well-being included:

- letting off steam, shouting and running;
- quiet reflection;
- confiding in others;
- being with family members and pets.

There were also clear learning outcomes from outdoor activities pursued by children:

- communicating and negotiating with others (especially in the playground);
- responsibility for others (e.g. younger siblings);
- curiosity in living things;
- story-telling, magic and myths (especially in relation to secret spaces).

The idea of secret or special places was particularly important to children. Secret spaces tended to be places that were perceived to be safe (and therefore not that far away from home) whilst also being flexible or ambiguous in their social role. Examples included the bottom of the garden and local disused parkland. The unofficial nature of these spaces enabled children to imbue them with their own distinct meaning. Voluntary organisations with junior arms, such as the RSPB and local wildlife clubs, seemed to provide a bridge between secret discoveries and more formal or official learning. A small proportion of our sample were enthusiastic members of these groups.

## conclusions

Our research shows that children are losing their connection with the natural environment. Children's well-being and environmental quality are inextricably linked. The worse a local environment looks, the less able children are to play freely, and develop the habits and commitments that will enable them to address environmental problems in the future.

The research also highlighted a disparity in children's access to high quality natural environments. All children benefit from the opportunities provided by access to outdoor space but these benefits are currently not equally distributed. Whilst children have universal rights and needs, poverty places severe limits upon the extent to which they can be recognised. Such spatial inequalities adversely affect children's health, well-being and personal development. Public policy must find ways to extend the benefits of access to the outdoor environment more equitably.

In this section, we explore what our findings tell us about policy on children's well-being and the environment. We set out our conclusions and recommendations against the following five areas:

- **Environmental education through exploration:** we need to provide for children's innate sense of exploration and self-discovery through out-of-school learning and greening school design.
- **Participation in decision-making:** children's voices should be heard early on in the design and maintenance of public space through regeneration strategies and land-use planning.
- **Protecting children's spaces:** the links between environmental policy and children's well-being must be embedded into national policy to ensure delivery at local level.
- **Spatial inequality:** public policy needs to address the problem that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have fewer opportunities to access safe, clean public space.
- **Health and well-being:** the links between children's health and environmental problems need to be recognized at the national policy level and, through strategic partnerships, at local level.

### environmental education through exploration

Research shows that a sense of care for the environment is conditioned in childhood through prolonged, repeated interaction with the natural world [*Environmental Education in the 21st Century: theory, practice, progress and promise*, J Palmer (1998), Routledge]. Encouraging deeper levels of commitment to the environment will become more important as we face increasing levels of environmental risk into the 21st century.

Our fieldwork shows that children learn about environmental challenges, such as climate change, and environmental solutions, such as recycling, with relative ease. However, the attachment to environmental issues, in the sense of noticing and caring about the way local environments look, is already well established by the time children are able to grasp properly the technical concepts of environmentalism. This means that a far stronger link between spontaneous discovery of nature and formal environmental education needs to be made.

Opportunities for out-of-school learning are decreasing. Curriculum pressures, tight budgets and health and safety concerns are also taking their toll. Under these circumstances children could become disconnected from the natural environment, especially urban children in low-income communities.

The environment is an underused resource for children. We suggest two areas of intervention that would redress this balance:

#### *Entitlement to out-of-classroom education*

Every child should be entitled to outdoor learning if we are to reconnect environmental education to children's innate delight of secret spaces and self-discovery. Entitlement in education is an established concept but rarely has it been extended outside the classroom walls. The Government should address the agenda set out by the consortium of organisations coalescing around the need to promote out-of-school learning, including the RSPB, the National Trust, Field Studies Council and Natural History Museum. Specific recommendations being advocated by this coalition are:

- Introduce monitoring of out-of-classroom experiences to formal school inspections;
- Increase the amount of pre- and in-service training for out-of-classroom teaching;
- Support and encourage voluntary sector providers of out-of-classroom learning;
- Ensure that the Teacher Training Agency is providing the necessary tools to give teachers the competence and confidence to deliver out-of-classroom teaching;
- Provide added value to school league tables by incorporating out-of-school activities.

Out-of-classroom learning should not just be about one-off excursions to established learning institutions such as museums or galleries, though these are clearly also of value. School safaris should occur on a weekly basis in all schools, and could involve children learning about trigonometry through the study of fun fair rides, or locating a geography lesson within an airport arrivals lounge. Helping children explore their environments should involve reappropriating spaces for children through regular and maybe unexpected use.

An ideal way to pioneer this approach would be through the extended schools concept being promoted by DfES. We recommend that this scheme should include a more overt spatial and sustainability element. The extended school model is currently based on the ability of a school to encourage multi-agency working and provide a universal point of entry to a number of different services, often out of school hours. This offers some clear benefits to pupils and the community. However, there is a risk that the focus on a single location further excludes children who are alienated from schools and fails to encourage transfer of learning between schools and other locations. A valuable evolution of the extended schools concepts would be to monitor and assess extended schools on the basis of diversity of learning locations and the number of school trips.

## Green school design

To date, the high awareness of the value of out-of-school learning in the non-governmental sector has largely failed to permeate government and hence schools policy. Although 63 per cent of the educational estate is outdoors, Learning through Landscapes has estimated that school grounds are only used to 30 per cent of their potential. However, DfES is slowly waking up to this agenda and, in September 2003, launched its Sustainable Development Action Plan for Education and Skills. The Action Plan brings together environmental management of schools and education for sustainable development for the first time. This acknowledges that sustainable development is best taught in conjunction with real environmental improvements, and is an important step forward in view of our findings that children respond more positively to learning about environmental issues through direct experience. We need to build on the positive foundations laid down by the Action Plan.

The Action Plan has a specific focus on the management of school buildings and grounds. However, there are opportunities for it to be more creative and extend its reach. Gaps that need addressing include the lack of commitment to eco-schools and any mention of biodiversity. The European wide eco-schools programme provides a broader framework for integrating environmental perspectives into school design, from environmental management and energy use considerations through to curriculum activities. It is managed in the UK by ENCAMS and funded by Defra. However, without leadership from DfES, or financial support for schools, the scheme has low take-up and huge drop-out rates. There is potential to make a renewed version of the eco-schools initiative the focus for a new partnership between DfES and Defra, perhaps by using the new focus on extended schools as a conduit. One way to make the scheme more attractive to schools would be to make the scheme a channel for a 'Sustainable school design and building fund' which would award money to schools for innovations such as embedded micro-generation of renewable power, energy efficient classrooms and waste management solutions.

Making such highly visible solutions a daily feature of school life would considerably advance children's environmental awareness. Environmental innovations in both retro-fit and new build could also be financed through the DfES Building Schools for the Future programme, which will see all secondary schools in England rebuilt or renovated over the next ten to fifteen years, representing an annual investment of £2 billion. Two thirds of this procurement will be through the Private Finance Initiative. Central government guidance and evaluation should do more to support local authority procurers who include highly visible educational features such as rainwater harvesting and solar PV in their specifications for contractors. The long-term nature of PFI contracts makes such features better value for money owing to paybacks from energy and water savings. The efficiencies this could confer would easily justify the inclusion of such environmental considerations under the Government's Value for Money guidelines for PFI projects.

Given children's enthusiasm for discovering nature and nurturing secret spaces, the DfES/Defra partnership should also coordinate a separate strand on the role of biodiversity in school environments and the synergies between children's play needs and achieving Biodiversity Action Plan targets. Another task for the partnership should be the commissioning of an independent report from the Playing Fields Monitoring Committee to review sales of playing fields and identify the implications of the current situation for children's health and well-being.

#### summary of recommendations:

- DfES should commit to an entitlement to out-of-classroom learning.
- DfES should monitor and assess extended schools on the basis of diversity of learning locations and the number of out-of-school trips.
- DfES and Defra should renew commitment to eco-schools in the UK as part of a new strategic partnership, incorporating a funding stream for innovative green design in schools.

#### participation in decision-making

Children clearly have an important role in helping to shape decisions about public space and our findings highlight the importance of this to their well-being and personal development. The Government has already undertaken extensive work to encourage children's participation in policy development. Furthermore, the new requirement within the Children's Bill for local authorities to 'recognise the contribution made by them to society' seems set to further increase the opportunities for children's involvement, particularly around regeneration issues.

Additionally, CABE Space, in partnership with the charity CABE Education, has recently published a good practice guide *Involving young people in the design and care of urban spaces*. CABE Space was set up in May 2003 as part of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and is funded by the ODPM and DCMS. It champions excellence in the design and management of parks, streets and squares in our towns and cities. Its new good practice guide highlights a number of existing initiatives from across the country and provides a practical and creative guide to getting young people aged 5-18 involved in improving their local spaces. The principles it outlines form a robust basis for establishing good forms of participation by children.

So plenty of progress is being made in this area. The challenge is to ensure that children's involvement in decision-making on their environments is meaningful and translates into transparent and consistent consideration of their needs. The DfES should build best practice into its guidance to local authorities on how to implement the requirements of the Children's Bill, including specific reference to the CABE Space recommendations on the design of urban space.

On the basis of our findings, we believe that environmental participation for children should be based on the following principles:

#### *Flexibility*

Many consultation exercises fail to match children's expectations for instant, or at least quickly visible, results. Participation in environmental issues can help overcome this problem, because it can break down the boundary between participating in making decisions and in actually carrying those decisions out. Of course, achieving environmental goals must be based on long-term and sustained decisions, but there is also a place for spontaneity and flexibility. Policy-makers could learn much from the approach of *Engage* at Foxpoint, one of our case studies in this project. Here, roving play workers asked children about the kinds of activities or improvements they would like to see in their local area. In many cases, children's ideas could be enacted on the same day that they expressed them, for example spontaneous bike rides were a regular event. Other ideas - such as creating a vegetable patch, building a den or having a street party - took a little more time, but were achievable in a time span that was motivating to children.

#### *Accessibility*

Our findings demonstrate that very few children are aware of local authority or other public agency responsibility for public space, and do not know how to complain or access information. This suggests that, in spite of the overall progress in this area, involving children in decision-making will continue to prove challenging. It is important that information and communication between children and decision-makers is both accessible and fun. This could include better use of information sources in children's areas such as playgrounds and parks and more use of maps to help children interpret the local environment. Such information needs to incorporate opportunities for feedback. An exemplar would be the Olympic consultation, where children were able to stick notes on large maps displayed in community centres to indicate areas of special interest or problems; these were translated into mapping software used as a communication tool between policy-makers and communities. Such data could be powerfully applied to shape decisions on transport infrastructure or regeneration initiatives for children.

#### *Funding*

When children's views are aired, it is usually through voluntary organisations or charities that do not have the financial impetus to sustain projects. This results in the emergence and submergence of children's projects. Equally, government is too reliant on voluntary sector providers for out-of-school learning and children's initiatives on the environment. The government should establish a framework for longer-term funding for projects on children's environments. The work of CABE Education is starting to address this need through its national network of educators interested in using architecture and public spaces in formal and informal education.

## Safety

Children will only participate in environmental decision-making if they feel that the spaces and the processes for their participation are safe. Our fieldwork showed that most children felt their school to be a safe or a comfortable place to be. Schools and other trusted institutions should aim to familiarise children with local environments, and the networks through which they can discover them, without over-controlling or sanitising them in a way that dampens children's enthusiasm for self-discovered or 'secret space'. We need mechanisms that link education and children's needs with local providers of green space. Extended schools could provide an ideal forum for this in some areas, though other bodies such as Local Strategic Partnerships and Children's Trusts could also play a role.

## Innovation

Technology presents new opportunities for participation. The dangers of the internet and mobile technology have been well publicised. However, new technologies also offer a plethora of opportunities for youth groups, play schemes and other fora to be able to contact children through innovative means and encourage them to meet in local parks and playgrounds. These kinds of activities could help protect children by providing exciting and spontaneous meeting opportunities, whilst also helping to distinguish between trusted and non-trusted sources.

Local and electronic media could play a particular role in signposting space available to children and encouraging greater public tolerance of children's use of spaces that fall between public and private definitions such as church yards and cemeteries, disused land, allotments and market squares.

### summary of recommendations:

- DfES should build best practice on involving children in the design of public space into its guidance to Local Authorities on the implementation of the Children's Bill – this should stress the need to ensure that children's participation is meaningful, transparent and sustained.
- DfES should establish a framework for long-term funding for voluntary sector projects championing children's environments, possibly delivered through CABE Education.
- Extended schools, Strategic Local Partnerships and Children's Trusts could all play a role in providing a bridge-head between children and the providers of green and public space.
- Green space providers should use new technologies to reach children more effectively.



## protecting children's spaces

Policy on children remains only loosely connected to policy on sustainable development. Defra focuses primarily on the needs of children in rural areas, particularly in socially excluded communities. The DfES Directorate of Children and Families focuses predominantly on improving education and health services for disadvantaged children. Whilst beneficial, an exclusive focus on the problems of disadvantaged children can overshadow the wider role that the environment plays in the well-being and personal development of all children. Overall, there is no organisation that champions children's perspectives on the environment on a sustained basis.

The gaps in the institutional framework mean that the overarching synergies between environmental policy and children's well-being are being overlooked by the UK Government. The DCMS 2004 document *Getting serious about play - A review of children's play* has signaled a revival of interest in play, yet we know of no instance where local authorities have considered sustainable development priorities, such as biodiversity or a reduction in carbon emissions, with reference to developing play opportunities for children. The drive to eliminate child poverty by 2010 is commendable, but has overlooked the related, but separate issue of spatial inequality. A recent publication by Shelter argued that more than a million children were suffering health and education problems because of an over-crowding crisis [*Toying with their Future*, Shelter, 2004,].

Our fieldwork highlights the importance of outside, non-regulated space to children's social development and sense of discovery. It is clear that children thrive on having access to their own outdoor secret places and that public space needs to facilitate such opportunities. However, children's spaces are currently low on the political agenda and the new focus on children's well-being does not extend to environmental considerations. The links between this agenda and environmental solutions need to be much more effectively integrated into the national policy framework.

### *Institutional framework*

There is no government institution currently charged with providing a long-term focus on protecting children's spaces. One way of addressing this would be through a specific agency. CABE Space and CABE Education could help raise the profile of young people's needs in relation to public space and champion this across government, particularly to ODPM and DCMS. The Government's Sustainable Communities Plan offers the opportunity to incorporate best practice into local consultation processes and design by addressing children's needs through the provision of green infrastructure.

Another way of ensuring children's views are incorporated into major decisions is by introducing child-proofing to new development and regeneration proposals. Taken too far, this approach can add unnecessary bureaucracy but, as Demos argued in 2002, 'child impact' statements on proposals such as road or airport expansion and housing development, could prove to be the missing link in understanding the real impacts of environmental change [*Other People's Children*, DEMOS, 2002].

## Sustaining green spaces

The review *Getting serious about play - A review of children's play* concludes that play provision, in terms of playgrounds, parks and other children's spaces, has been given low priority as local authorities have diverted money to statutory services. More recently, play has been undergoing something of a renaissance. SureStart and the Children's Fund both emphasise the importance of play. Parks and playgrounds stand to benefit greatly from the £200m of lottery cash from the New Opportunities Fund that will be dedicated to children's play. There are also a burgeoning number of funding sources that have become available to improve public green spaces, including the Heritage Lottery fund, the ODPM-led partnership Living Spaces and a multitude of other voluntary sector grants. However, there are still no real solutions for how high quality play spaces and parks can be made sustainable beyond these periodic injections of cash.

To date, the management of local play space has been the preserve of the local authority, but as the Children's Play Council's concludes, there is too much variation between local authorities and the lack of integration into other strategies compounds the risk of low long-term commitment [*Making the case for play: building policies and strategies for school aged children*, Children's Play Council, 2002]. The new Children's Trusts, which are currently taking on the commissioning of integrated education, social care and health services for children, should be given responsibility for children's play spaces, and this approach should be piloted in a number of areas. This radical approach to commissioning would be likely to encourage more partnerships between those seeking positive outcomes for children, and those seeking good quality public space, as well as being more in touch with children's views

### summary of recommendations:

- CABE Space and CABE Education should help to raise the profile of children's needs on public space and champion this across government, particularly to ODPM and DCMS.
- A requirement should be introduced for child impact statements on new development proposals.
- ODPM should pilot an initiative for the Children's Trusts to take responsibility from local authorities for children's play spaces, and roll this out nationally if the trial is successful.

### spatial equality

It is clear that some children, and especially urban children from low-income communities, are being deprived of the opportunity to enjoy and become aware of the natural environment. This is significant in view of the link between children's direct experience and environmental awareness in adulthood, and it is conceivable that it was reflected in the Office for National Statistics finding that people living in villages are more likely to take environmental action than urban-dwellers.

Financial inequalities accentuate these disparities. Poorer neighbourhoods in urban areas lack access to natural green space. Children from such backgrounds therefore have fewer opportunities to access safe, clean public space and are at more risk from environmental problems, such as cramped housing conditions, air pollution and traffic accidents. Natural play space is free but rural dwellings or houses close to attractive city parks tend to push up property prices. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, barely one in six of all rural settlements have a sustained level of social housing [Social housing in rural areas, report number 651, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2001]. These inequalities can be exacerbated by general fears from parents and children about risk and danger. Studies have shown that if the nearest green space is more than 280 metres from home, then parents feel it is not safe to allow their seven to eight year olds out on their own [Accessible Green Space in Towns and Cities, English Nature, 1995].

Children also need access to different kinds of environments. There is a wide constituency of support for improving children's access to nature and green space. The DCMS and the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) suggested in a joint 2001 paper *The historic environment: A force for our future* that free access for children to historical sites, such as ancient monuments or country homes, would help to encourage environmental learning. DfES and DCMS have recently pledged £7 million to help more children go on museum trips. These proposals are welcome but more needs to be done to promote sustained dialogue between children living in different areas. The twinning of rural schools with urban schools - city children spending a day at a country school and vice versa - could be more widespread and sustained beyond single visits, helping to break down the barriers that exist between children from rural and urban areas.

One example of how children's experience of different environments can be broadened is provided by one of our fieldwork locations. The headteacher at the school in Wick was keen to broaden children's experiences of different environments using technology. The school's project *Outside In* used a combination of data projection and webcams to project images of other environments; images used so far include the inside of a bird box, images of space, or links with partner schools in cities or other countries. The images are shown in the main thoroughfare in the school, and can be shown at any time of day. This helps children continue learning outside of the time they are in structured lessons.

#### summary of recommendations:

- Defra should pledge to provide access to green space for all children within 250 metres of their home by 2020.
- Local volunteering bureaus should run city garden share schemes for disadvantaged children.
- The DfES should extend rural-urban school twinning schemes.

## health and well-being

Children are particularly susceptible to many environmental problems, such as air pollution, chemicals, unhealthy housing, noise and road safety. Furthermore, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are often exposed to the highest levels of environmental risk. Children born in wealthy rural areas can expect to live almost ten years longer than children born in poorer urban areas. There is also evidence that children's natural desire to gain physical exercise is being curtailed through safety fears and other pressures. For example:

- A survey of 1,000 children in Leicester found that 94 per cent of children want to spend more time out of the house.
- A nationwide survey of nearly 50,000 school age children found that whilst 31 per cent would prefer to cycle to school, only 3 per cent were able to do so. [No Particular Place to Go? Children, Young People and Public Space, Worpole, K, Groundwork, 2003]

Despite this evidence, public policy has historically failed to make the link between environmental problems and children's health. However, this may be changing. The EU has published a thematic strategy on Environment and Health and the World Health Organisation is developing a Children's Health and Environment Action Plan for Europe. The Government's forthcoming Public Health White Paper could also build in an understanding of the link between environment and health, particularly in respect of children.

These developments notwithstanding, there are further opportunities to strengthen the links between public policy on health and the environment through:

- *A new national focus for health and the environment:* there is currently no clear locus for environmental and health issues at a national level. A new government taskforce should be charged with assessing the environmental reasons for ill-health and draw up a joint agenda for the DoH and the Defra, focusing on reducing health inequalities through better environmental protection. The particular issue of children's health should be urgently addressed, in view of the rising levels of child obesity. The Public Health White Paper consultation offers an opportunity to embed the links between public health and the environment at a strategic level.
- *Stronger delivery partnerships:* establishing effective local partnerships to tackle the broader causes of ill health is essential. The Environment Agency, which has a remit to improve well-being in England and Wales, could facilitate links between local stakeholders responsible for transport and planning and the Primary Care Trusts.
- *Evidence-based policies:* despite increased research in recent years, there is still little concrete evidence for environmental impacts on children's health. The EU Environment and Health Strategy calls for research and data-pooling across the EU: the DoH should earmark funding to build up a robust body of evidence to support better policy development.

#### summary of recommendations:

- The DoH should establish a new taskforce on public health and the environment, with a remit to draw up a joint agenda for the DoH and Defra and recommendations for embedding this into the policy framework; one strand of this should focus on children's health and environment.
- Stronger local partnerships should be developed to tackle the environmental causes of ill-health.
- The DoH should earmark funding to build up the evidence-base on the causal links between environment problems and children's health and share data with other EU Member States.

The benefits of such approaches are enormous. Tackling children's quality of life issues and environmental sustainability together can improve quality of life for everyone now, as well as in the future. The paradox is that we are fostering a generation that is likely to face the toughest environmental challenges yet, in terms of climate change and the ever-increasing pressure on natural resources. This generation, more than any other before, will need the environmental awareness and citizenship that is instilled through exploration of the natural environment in childhood.