



CHILD FRIENDLY CITIES & COMMUNITIES

unicef UNITED KINGDOM

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# CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN THE NEW NORMAL

## 8. PLAY & THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

### THE CHANGE

Covid-19 threw into sharp relief the importance of the built environment surrounding our homes. Children, unable to go to school or at times even playgrounds, were largely confined to the few streets around them.

For some, gardens offered an outdoor space to play; allowing those children to continue developing their physical skills, creativity and imagination. But for those without, and especially those living in overcrowded, damp and cold homes, the pandemic added renewed urgency to the need for more public green spaces, within walking distance from home, and protected from cars and toxic air.

This call did not go entirely unheeded. Welcome urban innovations sprung up throughout the pandemic, with streets given over to pedestrians and the rapid rollout of miles of cycle lanes. And local recovery plans talked enthusiastically of building back better, with inclusion, sustainability and accessibility at their heart.

**NEW NORMAL**

A UK COMMITTEE FOR UNICEF (UNICEF UK) SERIES FOR COUNCILS AND THEIR PARTNERS

### THE CHALLENGE

As we move into the 'new normal' there is a real risk that the momentum prompted by the pandemic to rethink and reshape our local areas is lost. The challenge facing local authorities and their partners is how to harness the opportunity presented by the pandemic to reimagine cities and communities from children's perspective.

This 'reimagining' should go beyond simply planning for more play and move towards an understanding of the entirety of the world around the child, including how they move around their local area and whether they can do so independently and safely; whether they have access to public spaces where they can spend time and feel comfortable; and the sustainability of the local areas they live in and will inherit.

Using children's rights, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, can be one of the most powerful tools to do so. A child rights-based approach not only pulls out the clear links between the availability, quality and safety of public spaces and children's right to health, development, or leisure time, for example, but offers practical tools for bringing children to the centre of the planning and design process.

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## THE STARTING POINT: CHILDREN'S RIGHTS



All children under 18 should enjoy all their rights as set out in the UNCRC in all situations and **without discrimination**.



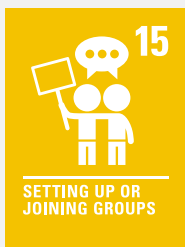
The **best interests of the child** should be the top priority in all decisions and actions that affect children.



Every child has **the right to be heard and for their views to be taken seriously**, including in discussions around local planning.



Every child should have the **same opportunities to develop to their full potential**.



Every child has **the right to associate freely with friends and others in public spaces**.



Every child has **the right to the best possible health**, including a clean environment.



Every child has **the right to a standard of living that supports their needs and development**, including housing.



Every child has **the right to rest and play**.

### THE UNCRC

The full list of children's rights as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) can be found [here](#).



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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** Engage with children to build a strong understanding of their experience of the built environment. Ensure that opportunities to participate in planning and design processes are promoted in an accessible and child-friendly way, proactively include young people who may face barriers to participating and that any decisions are communicated back.
- 2** Undertake a [child rights impact assessment](#) of existing and new planning processes, and ensure local planning teams have the training and support they need to use a [child rights-based approach](#) in their work.
- 3** Work with partners across the community to expand their understanding of “child-friendly placemaking” – going beyond playgrounds and parks to include any urban development, housing, transport etc. All these areas impact on children’s lives and should therefore consider their unique needs.
- 4** Ensure any development takes local children into consideration, particularly those living in poverty and other marginalised groups, and that action is taken to mitigate the impact of increased noise, nocturnal light pollution and air pollution.
- 5** Continue to shift communities towards more sustainable forms of transport. Not only are cars a major threat to children’s lives and health, car parking also competes with pavements, parks and playgrounds for space (and often wins).
- 6** Recognise the critical role of play in children’s physical and mental wellbeing and prioritise their right to play and spend time in the public realm. Consider how new developments may impact on children’s right to play, or discriminate against certain groups, and use a [child rights impact assessment](#) to put mitigations in place.
- 7** Reflect carefully on what play means to different groups of children. Older children, who are often explicitly designed out of public spaces, should have access to spaces where they can gather independently and safely with friends, for example. At the same time, the proliferation of playgrounds and skateparks may reflect assumptions about what children want, as opposed to meaningful engagement. Be creative and open to new ideas, weaving opportunities for informal play across the built and natural environment.



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## CASE STUDY

### REDBRIDGE: CHILD-FRIENDLY PLACEMAKING



Following tailored child rights training from UNICEF UK, [Redbridge Council's](#) Planning and Regeneration teams integrated child friendly design principles based on the UNCRC into their planning application processes for major developers and retailers.

The teams are paying particular attention to designing spaces *between* buildings that work for children and young people; moving away from standard landscaped areas towards something green, interactive, private, safe and co-designed.

A review of the 20-year local plan is also taking place in 2022, providing an

opportunity for the team to embed a [child rights-based approach](#) into future planning policies; a process that was featured as a best practice case study by the [Royal Town Planning Institute](#).

**Redbridge Council is one of nine cities and communities across the UK taking part in the UNICEF UK Child Friendly Cities & Communities programme.**

Read more about how cities and communities on the programme are reimagining **play in urban settings** [here](#).

Read how [Aberdeen City Council](#) is **involving children in the design of its city centre** [here](#).

## FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

- [UNICEF Innocenti's Report Card 17: Places and spaces: Environments and children's well-being \(2022\)](#): See in particular the section on 'neighbourhood' from page 37
- [UNICEF discussion paper: The necessity of urban green spaces for children's optimal development \(2021\)](#)
- [It's time for councils to get serious about play \(2021\)](#): Child Friendly Cities & Communities article in LocalGov
- [Child rights impact assessment](#): Child Friendly Cities & Communities template and guidance for local authorities

### CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN THE NEW NORMAL

This document is one in a series of recommendations for councils and their partners published monthly by the [UNICEF UK Child Friendly Cities & Communities](#) team.

Continue the series: [unicef.org.uk/child-friendly-cities/new-normal](https://unicef.org.uk/child-friendly-cities/new-normal)

