

# Putting Children and Young People at the Heart of Planning

Children and young people are often overlooked in planning decisions, despite being among the most affected by the environments created around them says Jenny Wood

In the UK, childhood has become increasingly restricted—children today move around their neighbourhoods far less freely than previous generations, with traffic-dominated streets, safety concerns, and exclusionary regulations limiting their independence and play.

While policymakers focus on education, health, and social issues, the role of urban planning in children's wellbeing is frequently neglected. Yet the built environment profoundly impacts their physical health, mental wellbeing, and social development. Planning decisions determine whether children can safely walk or cycle, access public spaces, or gather with their peers without fear of hostility. The result? An urban landscape that prioritises adults' needs while diminishing children's opportunities to explore, play, and form connections with their local area.

## Why Children and Young People Matter in Planning

The UK's commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) highlights the fundamental rights of children to participate in decisions that affect them (Article 12), to access and use public spaces freely (Article 15), and to play and enjoy recreation (Article 31). However, planning policy in the UK continues to prioritise economic and infrastructure concerns over social and developmental needs. The dominant approach to 'child-friendly' planning—creating playgrounds and skateparks—often fails to meet children's and teenagers' broader aspirations for their built environment.

Children and young people value spaces that offer autonomy, adventure, and social opportunities. Research consistently shows that playgrounds are often not children's favourite places to play. They prefer parks, woodlands, and informal spaces where they can make their own choices. For teenagers, the situation is even starker: they are frequently treated with suspicion in public spaces and lack places where they can gather without being seen as a nuisance.

Developers, policymakers, and local authorities are increasingly recognising the importance of social value in planning and development. Creating environments that work for all ages fosters stronger, more resilient communities. Places designed with children in mind encourage active travel, reduce car dependency, improve public health, and contribute to safer, more inclusive urban spaces.



Dr Jenny Wood, is Co-founder and Co-director, A Place in Childhood



In short, children and young people have insights and knowledge that adults don't have; if we don't plan with them then we're missing a core part of the picture!

## The Role of A Place in Childhood (APiC)

At A Place in Childhood (APiC), we specialise in supporting child-friendly planning and design. We work with partners and communities to ensure children and young people have a meaningful say in shaping their environments. Our work spans RIBA Stages 0-3, offering on-the-ground facilitation, training, coaching, and practical guidance on embedding child-led approaches in planning. At the same time, we link with local and national curricular goals, and 'connect the dots' between planning and other services that influence and support children's environments.

Despite progress in Scotland and Wales, our research with ZCD Architects and RTPI on child-friendly planning policy across the UK reveals that children remain largely invisible in planning policy. They are most notable through their absence.

One area gaining momentum is the inclusion of children and young people in active travel decisions. They are natural experts in their own mobility and consistently prioritise safe, connected, and enjoyable routes. As policymakers place greater



emphasis on local living, the contribution of children and young people is becoming increasingly valued.

However, there remains a significant gap in provision for all ages, but especially teenagers. One of the most common concerns raised in our work is the lack of safe, welcoming spaces where young people can socialise independently. Policymakers and communities often fear that spaces made with young people in mind will increase (rather than lessen) anti-social behaviour. Yet, providing these spaces is fundamental to ensuring young people feel seen, valued, and connected to their local community.

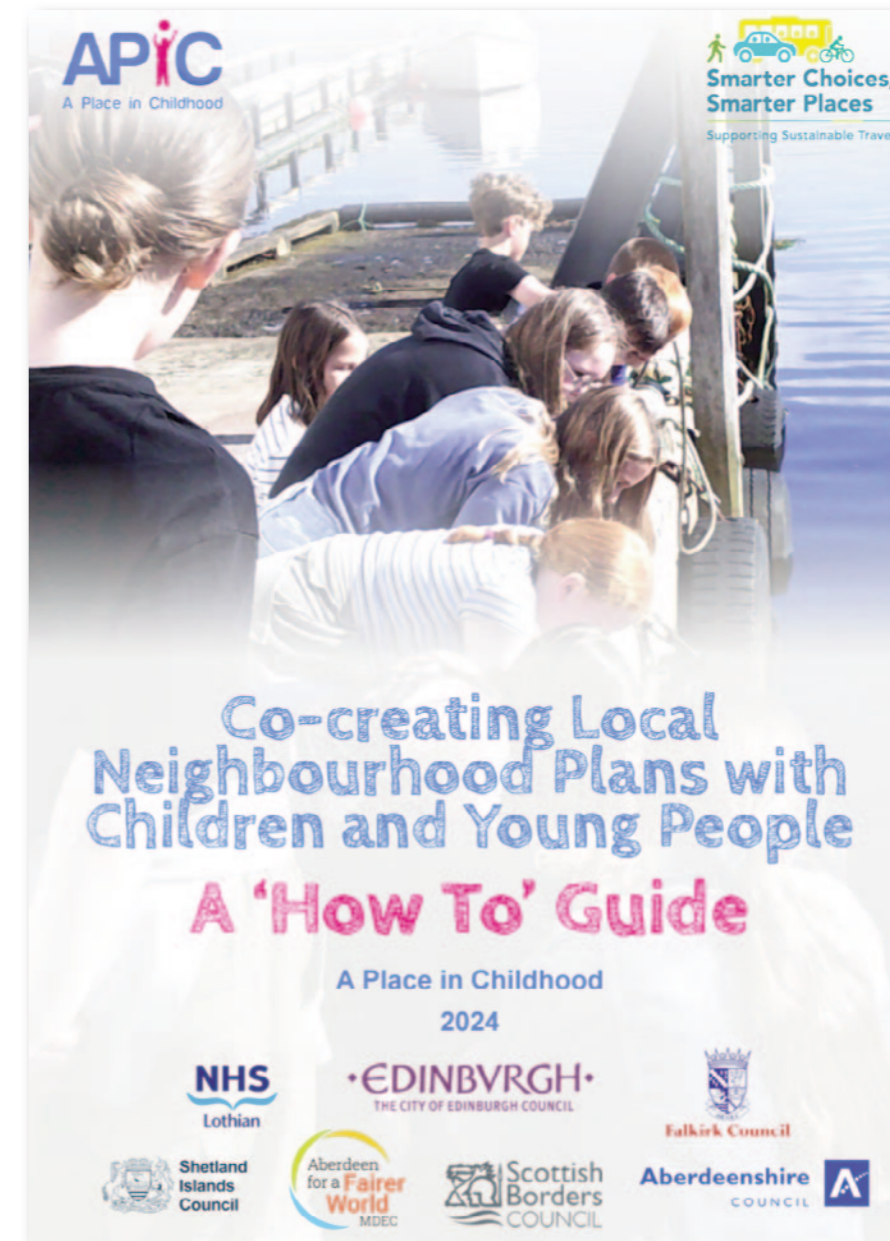
## Case Studies: Child-Friendly Planning in Action Neighbourhood Co-Design in Edinburgh and Glasgow

APiC has led impactful neighbourhood co-design projects in Edinburgh and Glasgow, focusing on place-based solutions within RIBA Stages 0-3. These projects show that children and young people have valuable insights and ideas to share, and can play an integral role in shaping their communities.

Key projects include:

- Edinburgh: Co-design initiatives at Leith Links and Pennywell Road, where young people contributed to the development of design principles and prototypes aimed at enhancing public space.
- Glasgow: Six Glasgow Liveable Neighbourhoods projects, each engaging children and young people in reimagining their local environments with a particular focus on creating safer and more inclusive spaces for girls and young women.

Additionally, APiC collaborated with Glasgow City Council, St Paul's Youth Forum, St Philomena's Primary School, and Sustrans Scotland on a pioneering Minecraft-based public space



co-design project. This project provided young people with a digital platform to develop design solutions that were then translated into real-world planning considerations.

The success of this project was widely recognised as it came Highly Commended in The Learning for Sustainability Awards, and won the Scottish Transport Award for Most Innovative Transport Project of the Year.

LEFT:

A site in Edinburgh that young people have chosen to reactivate for community benefit. Photo Credit: the pupils of

## Co-Creating Neighbourhood Plans

APiC has played a leading role in supporting communities to develop neighbourhood plans that embed children's perspectives. We have been honing our methods since our inception, but last year got the opportunity to work through an intensive project with seven local partners across Scotland. Through this, we facilitated the co-creation of seven plans, including three focused on a just transition. These plans span a diverse range of locations, including large cities, small to medium sized towns, and remote rural contexts.

Each plan contains an Experiential Map, that shows the participant's views, ideas and experiences of their local area, along-



RIGHT:  
A primary school child  
designing an 'Art Park'  
using Minecraft

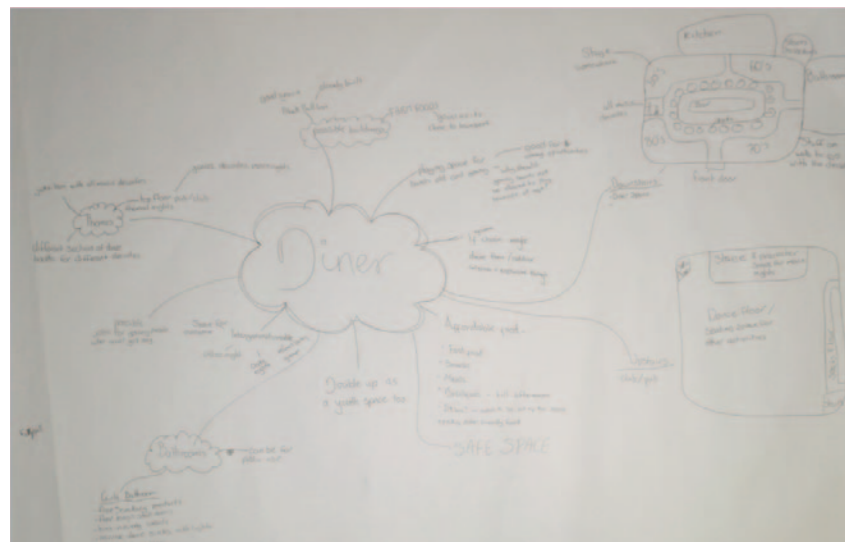
side a set of Priorities for Action (which are sometimes developed further into Projects). Example priorities from these plans that can be taken forward include:

- The building of new pathways and commissioning of new community bus routes on Shetland's Mainland.
- A proposed new use for a vacant building in Inverurie as an 'Intergenerational Cafe', to support social mixing, address loneliness, and provide affordable food.
- >>> • The regeneration of the harbour in Macduff to be safer and more enjoyable for young people to spend time at.
- Installation of more public art in Craigmillar, Edinburgh, to make the area feel more welcoming and exciting for everyone. Young people chose a particular site next to their school's astro which is particularly neglected. We are now working with children and teenagers and other stakeholders in the area to create a community park.

The impact of our approach has also been recognised by the Thornton Education Trust Inspire Future Generations Awards where we recently won best research project, and not-for-profit of the year.

One of the standout examples is Inverurie Academy, where pupils conducted extensive engagement, including working with

BELOW:  
Inverurie Academy's Plan for  
an Intergenerational Diner



St Andrews SEN school and consulting with over 40% of their wider pupil body. Their work was captured in a compelling video they created themselves.

Beyond the planning process itself, our approach has led to tangible community outcomes. For instance, in Falkirk, young people co-created a community festival that was attended by over 600 residents. This was an action they identified in their plan's priorities, because they felt the community doesn't get to come together enough, and they would like to further conversations about the needs of young people themselves.

The impact of these plans extends beyond immediate project timelines, influencing long-term local decision-making and demonstrating the value of child-led placemaking. For example, the plans are being embedded into Play Sufficiency Assessments, Local Place Plans, Children's Services Plans, and Local Development Plans.

To support wider adoption of these methods, we have developed a How-To Guide for Co-Creating Neighbourhood Plans with Children and Teenagers. This document outlines our framework and methodologies, providing a practical resource for planners and practitioners to try the approach. You can access it here. As well as direct delivery, we also offer training and coaching on the methods.

**A Sustainable Future**  
Planning decisions shape the lives of children and young people in profound ways, yet their needs remain undervalued in mainstream policy and practice. A more inclusive approach—one that genuinely integrates children's perspectives—will lead to better, healthier, and more resilient places for all.

As the focus on social value continues to grow, now is the time for planners, developers, and policymakers to champion child-friendly approaches. By embedding children's participation into planning and design, we can ensure that the built environment not only serves the needs of today's communities but also nurtures the next generation of engaged, independent, and empowered citizens. ■

*If you are interested in learning more about how to embed child-friendly planning into your projects, APiC offers training, guidance, and direct delivery/facilitation. You can contact Dr Jenny Wood at [jenny.wood@aplaceinchildhood.org](mailto:jenny.wood@aplaceinchildhood.org).*