Centre for Science and Policy
Policy Workshop

Delivering a child-friendly Cambridge

**Summary report of the discussion held on 4 February 2025
Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge**

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Introduction

The Policy Workshop on **'A Child-friendly Cambridge'** was organised by the Centre for Science and Policy (CSaP), University of Cambridge, in partnership with Professor Flora Samuel, Head of the Department of Architecture at the University of Cambridge, and Cambridge City Council Greater Cambridge Shared Planning. The Policy Workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule.

Background and purpose of the workshop

Local authorities across the Greater Cambridge area are developing a joint local plan that will determine spatial planning for Cambridge City and South Cambs into the future. Cambridge has an aspiration to include children and young people in the making of its plans but there is no real mechanism to do so at present. Engaging children and young people in the design of places would help make Cambridge a more sustainable and healthier place to live in, delivering equal opportunities and giving the younger generations the best start in life.

This workshop drew on multidisciplinary expertise to discuss how spatial planning in Cambridge could be made more child-friendly in the long term. The workshop took a holistic approach, seeking to bring together different aspects from health to education to arts and beyond.

The workshop addressed the following questions:

- What could a set of principles look like to formulate a child-friendly spatial strategy for Cambridge involving children and young people?
- Based on recent/ongoing projects, what are the key elements of a toolkit to help planners assess planning applications with a view to promoting a child-friendly space?
- How do we make sure that we are giving children and young people a real opportunity to input into the process of spatial planning? Are there practical steps for this? How to overcome barriers and communicate the benefits?

Setting the scene

Academic perspective

Young people across the UK are facing a number of challenges. The problems affecting children in Anglesey, North Wales are the same ones affecting children in Cambridge. For instance, lack of reliable public transport service effects children's and young people's ability to get to places, to socialise, to get jobs or internships and impacts their overall mental health.

While the Cambridge Room project created many more opportunities for conversations with community groups, local authorities and others, there is a need to bring the different stakeholders and initiatives together to add more value and create meaningful change.

There are several problems to tackle to be able to deliver a child-friendly city. Some of these include:

- Lack of indicators to suggest child friendliness have been achieved,
- Lack of definitions of play,
- Lack of standards on space for children.

The overarching objective of the workshop is to gain more clarity on what a child-friendly Cambridge would look like. This in turn would help bring more clarity into the planning system.

Policy perspective

Even though it is widely accepted that engaging children and young people in the place-making process can help create sustainable and healthy communities, many developers view youth engagement as a time-consuming exercise and fail to recognise its value. They are often unwilling to invest the necessary resources and time or seek relevant expertise for support.

The Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Authority (GCSP) is one of the first local planning authorities in the UK to commit resources to establish a planning officer-led youth engagement

network. Their award-winning Youth Engagement Team, established in 2017, involves a team of planners and urban designers with expertise in running user engagement. In the context of the national government's aspiration for 1.5 million homes in England in the next five years and the growing Life Sciences industry in Cambridge, there is a rising demand to build more homes. Children and young people will be highly impacted by these new developments. There is a growing need to develop policies that will support the GCSP's aspirations for a child-friendly Cambridge.

The following questions were raised:

- How can we help the process of bringing together people/organisations to build a Child-friendly Cambridge?
- What would a child-friendly Cambridge actually look like?
- What would a vision-map for child-friendly Cambridge look like?
- How do we build consensus in developing child-friendly planning policies?
- What incentives can the GCSP provide to create child-friendly places?

Principles

Participants explored existing principles used in planning frameworks by the local authorities in Cambridge and across the UK. Principles directly pertaining to engaging children and principles for spatial engagement were both discussed in this context. Engaging children can help establish a wider set of principles that can be used by developers and other stakeholders looking to create child-friendly spaces.

Existing principles

In March 2024, the Local Planning Authorities, Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council adopted a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) that sets out how local, and regional authorities will involve communities on a wide range of planning matters throughout the planning process. The key principles and aims of SCI are:

- **Efficiency:** To ensure that engagement is managed efficiently by consulting at the earliest possible stages of the planning process, by conducting early engagement with Councillors, stakeholders, community groups, applicants and individuals in a meaningful way,

- **Transparency:** To set clear and concise objectives of consultations by keeping people informed, publishing outcomes, and setting realistic timelines for consultations and being open and clear about decision making processes,

- **Cost-effectiveness:** To be proportionate and cost effective with resources and promote best practice by exploring new and evolving methods of consultation and communications including digital to engage more easily with local communities,

- **Inclusivity:** To ensure consultations supports the local communities in feeling heard by making consultation methods consistent to all, including those people without access or those who find it difficult to use digital communication,

- **Accountability:** To be accountable in the decision-making process, by explaining how the responses to consultations will be considered, how people will be informed of outcomes or decisions, and ensure that the planning stages are robust, justified and consistent.

It was noted that it would be important to bring together the principles of SCI, along with the five principles of the National Design Code which are as follows:

- Making space for nature,
- Prioritising walking and cycling,
- Safe, social and inclusive spaces,
- Enhancing character,
- Increasing sustainability.

Child rights-based approach

Participants explored the child-rights based approach as a starting point to understand the key principles that can inform the development of child-friendly planning processes. The UK

Committee for UNICEF's (UNICEF UK) Child Friendly Cities and Communities programme uses a child rights-based approach (CRBA), which is made up of seven principles:

- Four general principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (best interests; life, survival and development; non-discrimination; and participation),
- Three general human rights principles (dignity; interdependence and indivisibility; and transparency and accountability).

These principles could be the cornerstone of the vision for a Child Friendly Cambridge, as they:

- Emphasise the importance of including children's voices in planning processes, to make sure they not only survive in these spaces but thrive,
- Ensure transparency, inclusivity and engagement with children as equal partners (e.g. ensure participation of the most marginalised groups of the society),
- Stress the importance of making sure that young people understand the policies designed for them and know who to speak to if they have questions and reflections.

Principles to envision for a future child-friendly Cambridge

New principles should allow for more holistic approaches when working with children and young people, moving away from the silos in which existing services are set up. The following could be among the key principles for a future child-friendly Cambridge:

- Focusing on creating policies that include children and young people in local planning processes and that incentivise developers to include them in planning processes,
- Addressing existing social and health inequalities that inhibit a healthy environment for children given that health is a key determinant of adulthood,
- Harnessing the benefits of child-friendly planning,

- Ensuring that green spaces and other public areas are welcoming and accessible to all children, including those from marginalised communities. This includes taking active measures to make nature-rich spaces around Cambridge more open and welcoming.

Tensions

Building a child-friendly Cambridge involves navigating several tensions between competing priorities, groups of stakeholders and perspectives. Participants highlighted that often conflicting interests emerge between local authorities, businesses, local residents (including children themselves), and it is important to acknowledge and mitigate these tensions early on.

Bottom-up vs. top-down approaches

Participants discussed the importance of achieving the balance between bottom-up and top-down approaches when planning for a child-friendly Cambridge. While bottom-up approaches emphasise community engagement and the direct involvement of children and local residents in the planning process, the top-down approach focuses on the strategic planning and policy development led by local authorities and developers.

- Participants highlighted the importance of strengthening the participation of children and young people in the planning process to understand their needs and preferences. By invoking the concepts of citizenship and power, opportunities could be created for young people to enter discussions with local authorities and developers directly, which can help boost engagement.
- Urban spatial planning theories are most often set in stone, and there is a need to understand what children want versus what planners want to do. Hence, there is always tension in using a bottom-up approach when dealing with high-end developers.
- One participant noted that developers require specific instructions and tools to engage with young people, and they might be reluctant to engage if the approach used is bottom-up only. It would be important to balance community-driven initiatives and the interests

of high-end developers. Additionally, providing training and appropriate toolkits to developers can help implement a very effective top-down approach.

Short-term vs. long-term goals

The discussion shed light on the need to address the tension between immediate needs and long-term planning for sustainable change. The former tends to take precedence over the latter.

- Practical considerations of safety and accessibility of infrastructure need to be addressed promptly to create safe and functional spaces for children. While short-term goals, such as installing more play areas and organising child-friendly events, can deliver quick wins and demonstrate progress, it would be important to address the deeper systemic issues, such as the divide between the 'town and gown', which makes Cambridge less accessible to children in the first place.
- Long-term goals, such as embedding child-friendly principles into urban planning policies, redesigning infrastructure, and fostering a cultural shift toward prioritising children's needs, require sustained commitment, cross-sector collaboration, and investment.
- Participants also noted the importance of having a city-wide strategy that would involve all key stakeholders, including the Cambridge University Colleges and the central university team.

Spatial vs. social strategies

Participants explored the need to integrate different approaches when planning for physical spaces and addressing social dynamics to create a child-friendly Cambridge.

- Spatial strategies include redesigning streets to make them more pedestrian and cyclist friendly, improving public transport accessibility, and improving the accessibility of infrastructure in existing green spaces (e.g. by providing more bike racks, toilets).

- In addition to spatial infrastructure, appropriate 'social infrastructure' should be developed to ensure spaces are inclusive. One participant noted that adults and children from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds may feel unwelcome in nature reserves, as they may feel they need to have special clothing and equipment.

- Cambridge University Colleges and students alter the physical and social dynamics of the city in a number of ways, often not realising the impact they are having on the city and local children and young people.

Challenges

Participants identified several challenges that need to be addressed to help make child-friendly Cambridge a reality.

Lack of shared definition and standards

- Lack of shared and clear definitions of play and standards for child-friendly places can hinder co-ordination in multi-stakeholder engagements.

- Lack of clarity on what constitutes 'play', which is important to ensure spaces accommodate diverse needs.

- Lack of consensus on what constitutes a 'good' place to socialise. Young people's definition may not match that of local authorities or adults. This can lead to young people choosing "unpredictable third spaces" for socialising (e.g. shopping malls, ice-cream parlours and chicken shops). Some of these 'third spaces' can be used as hubs for organised crime, which raises safety concerns.

Access and safety

- While every space designed for children is different, cost, safety and access are key practical considerations that are constant for different types of spaces.

- Lack of adequate public transport, particularly during the weekends, was highlighted as an issue. Underdeveloped and infrequent bus services affect young people's ability to move

around and get to places to socialise. While guided busways constitute a part of the infrastructure enabling mobility, there are known safety concerns associated with them.

- Access to public spaces and safety within those spaces are closely connected. Lack of adequate surveillance and safety measures may discourage young people and children from engaging with existing spaces.

Research and evidence

There is very little evidence on how different groups of the population (e.g. children, young adults, carers, disabled people and others) use space differently and how planning process can adequately address these differences in the most practical way possible.

Bias and attitudinal elements

- There is a need to overcome biases in planning decisions to ensure young people's needs are accurately represented. Decision making frameworks need to be examined to determine if decisions made prioritise the needs of the designers, citizens or children.
- Two particular challenges mentioned in this regard were the 'adultification' of young people and the need to examine the attitudinal elements affecting the way young people are perceived by authorities. For instance, examples were cited of how groups of adolescents were sometimes not welcome near certain shops because they were perceived as a 'threat'.

Opportunities

Throughout the workshop, participants explored various opportunities and potential solutions to mitigate the tensions and address the challenges that were identified during the discussion. These opportunities focus on enhancing community engagement, leveraging existing resources, and fostering collaboration among various stakeholders.

Youth engagement and community ownership

- The Greater Cambridge Youth Engagement Framework, developed by the Council's Youth Engagement Service, considers four areas: 1) impact on the plan and decision-making process; 2) process; 3) children and young people's development and 4) practical factors. This framework aims to ensure that all youth engagement activities are designed to be effective and would benefit all participants.

- This Youth Engagement Framework is regularly updated and is used to run workshops that bring together developers, planning authorities, young people and other relevant stakeholders and to share best practices. Utilising these frameworks can provide a structured approach to design and run activities to involve children in placemaking and policy development.

- Adolescents are heavily influenced by their peers. Initiatives such as youth ambassadors programme, youth assemblies, design competitions can help bridge gaps between young people and authorities and encourage youth participation.

- Community ownership of some local spaces and nature-rich spaces was discussed at length as an opportunity to make them more child-friendly. Encouraging community groups and local charities to be charge of local spaces can help foster a sense of ownership and empowerment.

Leveraging Cambridge assets

- Cambridge's cultural institutions, such as museums and University Colleges, can play a significant role in fostering community engagement and providing educational opportunities for children. Collaborations with these institutions can enhance the reach and impact of child-friendly initiatives.

- Participants also highlighted the importance of identifying and repurposing underutilised spaces, such as vacant shops or old buildings, to create new opportunities for community activities and safe social spaces for children and adolescents.

- Large parks and green spaces in Cambridge are its assets. Improving toilet provisions, bike parking spaces, surveillance, and safety measures could make these spaces more child-friendly and help local communities make better use of them.
- The University and its Colleges are large landowners across Cambridge. Hence, it would be important to bring central University teams and Colleges on board to help deliver change and create a unified strategy for child-friendly planning, facilitating closer collaboration with local authorities and other key stakeholders. Community engagement programmes that the University and some of the Colleges have could be used as a mechanism.

Recommendations

Several key recommendations have been formulated during the discussion to help guide the development of a vision for a child-friendly Cambridge.

Developing better child-centric policies

- Timely and adequate training for local decision-makers can equip them with toolkits to create policies that prioritise children's needs and voices. Under the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities and Communities programme in Cardiff, comprehensive training, including UNICEF UK's 'Children's Rights in Practice', was given to Children's Services managers and council workforce to enhance the awareness and implementation of children's rights across Cardiff.
- Creating incentives for local authorities, developers and other key stakeholders to include children's voices in the planning process. A good example of this is the Play Sufficiency Assessment in Wales, whereby local authorities are required to assess whether their local area offers children enough opportunities to play. Sharing such best practices and pooling capabilities across local authorities, developers and other stakeholders can offer greater opportunities for better policy development.

- Efficient communication channels between various local stakeholders need to be established to ensure different perspectives are taken into account when planning for child-friendly spaces.

Enhancing youth engagement

- Establishing local and regional level mechanisms enabling regular consultations with children and young people and their involvement in decision-making processes. This could be achieved through youth councils, such as the Cardiff Youth Council, a representative council for 11–25-year-olds, that offers young people avenues to participate in the planning process.
- It is imperative that information about children's rights is shared with children, young people and adults in different ways and these groups are aware when important decisions affecting children, young people and families are being made. Providing awareness raising sessions and training programmes in schools (such as iSay Ambassadors programme by the Cardiff Youth Council) can improve children's knowledge of their own rights and boost youth engagement.

Improving infrastructure

- Addressing infrastructure gaps related to existing spaces to ensure safe and accessible play spaces for children,
- Using 'secure by design' principle to create new spaces that are safe for children to play and where parents feel confident about their children's safety,
- Using health impact assessments as a tool to understand the development of children and the cumulative effects of infrastructure on health and planning.

Promoting inclusivity

- Planning for children should consider social justice issues and power dynamics within the city. In Cambridge, this would include addressing the gap between Cambridge University

students and other young people in the city, by working together with University Colleges.

- Public spaces should be inclusive and welcoming to all children, regardless of their socio-economic background.
- Affordable social spaces (e.g., bubble tea shops, community hubs) should be protected to ensure young people from marginalised groups are not excluded. Local authorities should help local communities make these social spaces safer, especially for adolescents.