

Local Government and Shires Association of NSW

Draft Submission to the NSW Parliamentary Committee on Children and Young People Inquiry into Children Young People and the Built Environment.

Introduction:

The Local Government Association and Shires Associations of NSW welcome the opportunity to offer comment to the NSW Parliamentary Committee on Children and Young People inquiry on trends and issues affecting children and young people in the planning and provision of the built environment.

The Associations represent general purpose councils, county councils and Regional Aboriginal Land Councils in NSW. The Associations represent Local Government, provide services to councils and facilitate the development of an efficient, effective, responsive, community-based system of Local Government in NSW.

The Associations understand that the terms of reference are that the Committee is to inquire into:

- trends changes and issues for children and young people in the development, implementation and coordination of policy, design and planning for the built environment;
- the mechanisms available for monitoring and reporting on planning processes and decisions concerning the built environment, as they relate to and impact upon children and young people;
- strategies to ensure that built environment issues affecting children and young people are readily identified and receive coordinated attention across portfolios and different levels of government;
- the role of the Commission for Children and Young People in giving input to the Government and non-Government sectors on inclusive and integrated planning and policy-making for children and young people in the built environment; and
- any other matter considered relevant to the inquiry by the Committee.

The Associations share the Committee's desire to ensure that the needs and wellbeing of NSW children and young people are factored into the planning and development of the built environment (including housing and residential areas, commercial zones, roads, street scapes and parks). Indeed the evidence of this shared concern lies with the fact that the Associations Rural Youth Affairs Project in 1997-98 laid some of the foundation for work on planning public space with young people in mind cited in the Committee's information papers. The Associations' policies on children and young people also display the concerns are shared (see Appendix 1).

Associations' relevant recent history

The Associations were funded to run the Rural Youth Affairs Project for 12 months from late 1997, by the State Government using funding from the Office of Children and Young People (Cabinet Office), the Department of Local Government, and the Crime Prevention Division (Attorney Generals Department). The project was to work with three councils to: i) involve young people in relevant Council decision making processes; ii) address issues of young people's use of public space and iii) support crime prevention. Councils were invited to participate and the then Hastings Council, Parkes Shire Council and Hay Shire Council participated. The Policy Officer, Adrian Pisarski worked intensively with these three councils. Whilst the superordinate goals were the same for all councils, the individual outcomes were different as a developmental approach was used to account for local institutional conditions and community needs. Three separate models or structures for engaging young people in Local Government were developed, one for each council. These were put in place for 1999. The issue of public space was addressed most significantly in Hastings, with an in depth Urban Design workshop approach developed by the Urban Design Advisory Service (DUAP) used.

Given the nature of this Inquiry the Associations will offer our understanding of the background and trends from a Local Government perspective.

Appreciating the background and concerns:

The Associations support many of the points made in the Committee's *Inquiry Issues Paper 1: Introduction and Overview*. The paper represents a fair overview of the situation as we understand it and the points made about the challenges resonate for the Associations and many councils.

Many influences on the built environment

We agree that the built environment is the product of the intersection of numerous disciplines, traditions, laws and regulations. We acknowledge that diverse government and nongovernment authorities have responsibility for different aspects of the built environment. Social and urban planners, architects, developers, engineers, builders and Local and State Government consent authorities contribute to the changes to the built environment. We agree that urbanisation, suburbanisation, increased vehicular traffic and environmental degradation influence the built environment. Critically, we note that balancing the often competing needs of groups with diverging interests is a challenge confronting developments in the built environment. Ensuring that the interests of children and young people are considered in these developments is increasingly acknowledged as critical for the long-term sustainability of cities and neighbourhoods.

Children and young people's views

Many elected representatives and professional staff know (but sometimes lose sight of the fact) that children view their surroundings differently from adults. Children view the environment as part of their total experience rather than seeing it in an episodic or compartmentalised fashion. Everything is connected: relationships with family, friends and animals; sights, sounds, learning and games; choices such as which way to go; and discoveries such as objects of interest. Unlike adults, for whom the built environment is frequently regarded in a functional way, children will often perceive their surroundings as locations for play, learning, interaction and stimulation.

However, all stakeholders need to remember that the constructs that people use change as they shift from childhood through to adolescence. Malone found that the media's creation of a 'virtual' urban environment which is drug-ridden and violent, influenced young people's relationships with their own neighbourhood as much if not more than their neighbourhood's physical and social aspects. Malone's project which was designed to involve young people in the planning and creation of their urban environment, also found that the media creation of young people as a problematic group contributed to the reluctance of planners to allow young people to participate authentically in the planning of relevant public and private spaces (see Karen Malone, *Growing Up In Cities as a model of participatory planning and 'place-making' with young people, Youth Studies Australia* vol. 18, n.2, June 1999 pp.17-23).

Environment effects development

Local Government recognises that children's local environments help shape their level of cognitive development, their social and motor skills and their personal identity". Local Government acknowledges access to good public space can help children to stay healthy and tackle problems of obesity by providing opportunities for exercise. To what was highlighted in Committee's *Inquiry Issues Paper 1* we suggest adding that all stakeholders must recognise that obesity is a modern epidemic, with significant increases in levels in young people over the last 10-20 years, with a range of serious long term impacts.

Specific built environment considerations

We acknowledge that important built environment considerations relating to children and young people include: playground equipment; availability of parks and recreational spaces; design of child care facilities; traffic flow through local areas; bus and rail interchanges; skateboard parks; youth centres; school and university designs; green spaces; including access to natural environments; and shopping centre designs and accessibility.

To this list, we strongly suggest adding two other important considerations: i) pedestrian networks through communities – in terms of self transport for older children and young people and ii) Public Libraries – a

critical space as well as service to particularly children and young people in school. As pointed out by Wyong Shire Council staff 'Libraries present a special challenge as they are a resource for all ages and therefore tend to be designed with a very neutral feel – this can present a very uncool image. Young people can feel unwelcome in libraries which are traditionally seen as quiet places and therefore incompatible with youthful exuberance. However, there is a trend towards creating special zones within libraries, for different user groups.'

In this context, the Associations support the design of walkable neighbourhoods and implementation of principles of active transport by those responsible for built environment and transport planning. Children need to have adequate access to recreational services, provided at a reasonable price, both passive & active open space, and quality, safe children's playgrounds. Active transport for children can be encouraged by providing a safe urban environment through which children can walk & cycle to school, without risk of injury by cars and other safety concerns (child abductions). Residential accommodation should be ideally situated within walking/ cycling distance to schools, and other facilities used by young people to encourage physical activity.

Further given Australia has highest rate of skin cancer in world, more thought needs to be given to this in the context of the built environment. Most skin cancer manifests later in life due to exposure as a child and young person. Councils and developers have a role in ensuring outdoor public spaces, particularly those frequented by young people, have adequate shade provision through shade structures and planting of shade trees- particularly playgrounds, swimming pools, outdoor courts & children's services.

Inclusive general planning

We strongly agree that hand-in-hand with these important built environment considerations there is the need for a more inclusive approach to general planning. A more inclusive approach involves looking beyond specific child and youth oriented places, facilities or project, to broader factors affecting children and young people such as housing developments, urban development, suburban sprawl, transport systems, public amenities and city-wide planning decisions.

We acknowledge the legitimacy of widespread criticisms of the built environment in meeting the needs of children and young people. These criticisms include:

- Diminishing accessibility, as the urban environment becomes increasingly inhospitable to children, with play and urban interaction in danger of disappearing
- Diminishing availability of public spaces to recreate and socialise
- Non-differentiation of the needs of children to adults
- Segregation of child and adult worlds through poor designs
- Little understanding by relevant professionals of the needs of children and young people
- Limited involvement of children and young people in urban planning decisions that affect their lives or in making general decisions associated with the built environment

Local Government acknowledges these criticisms represent challenges requiring further thought and further changes in practice, to work on improving the built environment for children and young people. One immediate challenge of this nature is dealt with in a later section.

Trends in Local Government

The Associations support many of the points made in the Committee's Inquiry *Issues Paper 3: Related Developments in New South Wales*. We believe there has been and continues to be some exciting work happening in relation to children, young people and the built environment throughout NSW Local Government.

Social planning

Councils play a vital role in supporting social justice through social planning. This social planning is an important plank in connecting children and young people to aspects of the built environment. A significant number of councils had been in the field of social planning for a decade or two before it became mandatory. Nonetheless, the Local Government (General) Regulation 1999 required all NSW councils to develop a social/community plan and report on identified access and equity activities in annual reports. The Department of Local Government *Social and Community Planning and Reporting Guidelines* (2002) and *Manual* (2002) provide assistance to councils on how to prepare, implement and report on the implementation of social/ community plans.

Each council must prepare and submit a social/community plan, at least once every five years, to meet the needs of residents in their area including those who may be disadvantaged in some way.

There are five essential components of a social/community plan: i) Demographic profile ii) Human needs assessment - examining the well-being of the people in the area and the unmet needs of the community across a range of priority issues relevant to that area; iii) Information about target groups - the mandatory target groups are: children; young people; women; older people; people with disabilities; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; iv) Assessment of the previous plan and v) Recommended actions.

Councils are strongly encouraged to actively engage with the target groups in developing the plans. Many councils have invested considerable effort in engaging young people in particular in the framing of the social plan.

This engaging of children and especially young people is critical, simply because it gives their needs and aspirations a better chance of inclusion in council Management Plans and budgets, and other plans. This is because a social plan delivers recommendations on activities that aim to promote social justice and enhance community well-being, such as:

- *council social/community welfare, cultural, health, and recreation facilities, services and activities*, such as - childcare, youth services, community care, disability services, neighbourhood centres, public libraries, galleries, museums, public libraries, community cultural development, medical services, health promotion programs, and sports and swimming facilities & programs.
- *social justice aspects of council activities* such as - providing infrastructure and services, planning and regulatory activities, providing information and levying rates and charges; and
- *activities of other spheres of Government*

Selected activities to address these needs are drawn out of the plan and included into an *Access and Equity Statement* for inclusion in the council's management plan.

Consultative mechanisms

The Committee's Inquiry *Issues Paper 3: Related Developments in New South Wales* notes "there has been growing interest in and use of youth councils across local government areas in New South Wales. Sagers, Palmer, Royce, Wilson and Charlton suggest that "virtually all councils have some formal youth governance structures such as youth advisory groups or councils" (2004: 2)." Whilst the data is becoming a little dated the Associations can confirm that approximately 40% of NSW councils had youth councils in 1999 (according to Baum et al *resourcing communities - the 1999 Community Planning and Services Audit* 2000). Councils are increasingly using these youth councils to seek input on a variety of local government matters (similar to the ideas covered in Committee's Inquiry *Issues Paper 3*) including urban planning matters.

The Associations note that Willoughby City Council staff have raised a number of issues with the Committee that bear repeating. They have stressed that consultation with young people plays a vital role in the provision of services. Willoughby has consulted young people on the major Civic Place redevelopment project as well as being proactive in consulting young people on a range of Council issues, many of which involve the built environment. Young people needed to be consulted in the planning of the built environment because strategically located youth services and facilities can dramatically impact upon their lives. They have also

stressed that strategically located youth services can impact dramatically on their effectiveness within the community. The days of situating a youth centre in an out-of-sight location must come to an end. These Centres spend most of their time trying to justify their existence, as it is very hard to attract young people to an awkward location. Willoughby Council has been ahead of its time in locating youth facilities in central areas within the Chatswood CBD. As a result, the facilities are utilised to their full potential including the Chatswood Youth Centre and Chatswood Skate Park. There was some concern when it was first decided that the skate park would be located close to residential and amenities; however there has not been a problem since the opening of the park. Willoughby is planning to draft a business plan to include a youth-friendly café in the major Civic Place redevelopment project.

Wyong Shire Council staff explained their views on the involvement of young people, stressing that too often the attention of decision-makers may be focused on negative perceptions of youth generated by news stories about the activities of just a very small number of young people. This may lead to youth facilities being planned in out-of-sight locations that are unattractive, inaccessible to transport and actually not very safe for young people – “We don’t want a youth centre / skate park in the town centre” might be a typical comment, with the unspoken assumption that it would “lower the tone”. In contrast they highlight that on the Central Coast, two examples of a more integrated and positive approach is:

- Gravity Youth Centre, Lake Haven (Wyong Shire Council) – located in a commercial/ recreational precinct between a shopping centre and library and a recreation centre, the youth centre includes accommodation for service providers, an art studio, skate park and community garden with amphitheatre.
- The Hive, Erina (Gosford City Council) – the most recent expansion of Erina Fair Shopping Centre included a community precinct – library, youth centre, community centre/ gallery, central plaza with public art that was used this year for the ArtStart youth festival. Design and finish throughout is of a very high standard.

Wyong Shire Council recognises the importance of involving children and young people in the planning and development of aspects of the built environment. Examples include:

- Graffiti Wall at Gravity Youth Centre
- Community Garden at Gravity Youth Centre
- Woongarah Public School – development of a children’s playground on a council reserve adjacent to the school. This has involved a workshop for teachers including presentations on Indigenous cultural heritage and the local environment. Students are to be directly involved in the design of the playground.

Another interesting initiative is the Hurstville City Council “Paved Paradise - Young People and Planning for Communities” project. Council now has a register of young people’s ideas and designs to bring to the attention of prospective developers. This includes copyright agreements with the kids giving council a 5 year first option to use their ideas/designs together with images and descriptions of their ideas. Consultants for the redevelopment of the Penshurst shopping centre (a small suburban village strip) are working now on integrating some components drawn from the work of Y10 girls (at Georges River College, Penshurst Girls High School Campus) who were involved with the Paved Paradise project.

Comment

But despite all the foregoing background knowledge, existing practice and emerging trends, we do not have at hand ready made data to allow us to reliably answer the question “how well is NSW ‘performing’ in comparison to national and international developments?” The Associations would suggest that the majority of councils have some appreciation of the need to improve the built environment for and with children and young people. Moreover, some are doing very well.

However, there are significant challenges in bringing the criticisms set out in the Committee’s Inquiry *Issues Paper 1* and on page 3 above, into mainstream thinking. Critical amongst these challenges are two major matters.

First is the need to find workable strategies to significantly improve the understanding of the needs of children and young people by relevant professionals, by planning and infrastructure divisions within councils and by State planning and infrastructure agencies.

Second is the need to find workable strategies to improve the limited involvement of children and young people in urban planning decisions that affect their lives or in making general decisions associated with the built environment.

One immediate challenge

The Associations question where legitimate concerns about including the perspectives of children and young people in decisions about the built environment fit within the present planning reforms. As the Committee is aware, the NSW Government is currently undertaking a major overhaul of the NSW planning system. These reforms include focus on strategic planning for growth areas; simplify planning controls; improve development assessment processes and allow flexibility in the use of developer levies for local facilities and services. The reduction in the number and standardization of local environmental plans (LEPs), regional environmental plans (REPs) and State environmental planning policies (SEPPs) aim to eliminate the current layers of red tape that slow down and complicate the approval process. The LEP will continue as the central planning document for mandatory development controls. It will contain links to most local planning rules that apply in the area – this means that one plan will tell the reader what local controls apply to a site. The format and some of the content of the LEPs are being standardised and modernized through the LEP template so that the community and developers more easily understand the planning system.

However, this standardization, simplification, and (alleged) modernization may exclude or trivialise the non-standard or complex processes needed to engage children or young people or take account of the needs of children or young people. The information on the draft LEP template doesn't attempt to deal the issues (or complexities) of accounting for different population groups or other communities of interest in the planning processes (with the arguable exception of the ageing population). For example, the draft LEP template does not deal with social impact assessment – which is one way the needs of children and young people could be taken into account in built environment planning decisions.

Other questions

The Associations appreciate the Committee has posed specific questions such as whether there are mechanisms available for monitoring and reporting on the impact upon children and young people of built environment planning or what further role the Commission for Children and Young People might take.

From a Local Government perspective, the Associations suggest it is premature to begin to specify or prescribe monitoring and reporting mechanisms. As we have acknowledged throughout all spheres of government and all infrastructure and facilities providers, need to understand the importance of the built environment to and for children and young people and work better at delivering what is needed. Many councils acknowledge the challenge. However, there needs to be considerably more debate and awareness-raising on the subject, and considerably more experimentation and action research before a State Government might put in place monitoring and reporting mechanisms.

In this context the Committee might consider commissioning the Commission for Children and Young People to work on a project of tailoring the clear message behind this Inquiry and particularly taking that message to all infrastructure planners and providers. By infrastructure planners and providers we mean the decision makers and their planners, architects and engineers dealing with the ongoing development of the built environment, whether they involved as developers or as consent authorities.

Conclusion:

The Associations hope to be able to elaborate on and explore with the Committee the basic points at a hearing, when councils have had more of an opportunity to give us feedback.

Appendix 1

Extract from Local Government Association of NSW and Shires Association of NSW Policy Statements

Children and families

Local Government in NSW endorses a vision for the future, which acknowledges that:

- children's best interests are the primary consideration in the provision of services.
- children have the right to care and education for individual development and participation in society.
- high quality children's services and education is an investment which develops and enhances the social, spiritual and economic well-being of the entire community.
- community participation in decisions about services for families and children is essential for the development of responsive services that meet local needs.
- there is persuasive empirical evidence that spending on early intervention, particularly in childhood, is as effective and much cheaper than law and order approaches to crime prevention (as outlined by the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Law and Justice in *Crime Prevention through Social Support Second Report*).

Local Government supports:

- children's services that provide for the unique needs and abilities of all individuals, enhancing, supporting and embracing the diversity of the community.
- accessible services to meet the diversity of needs throughout NSW.
- a co-ordinated and integrated approach to the needs of families and children; high quality children's and family services.
- leadership from Councils in identifying families' and children's needs and coordination of community and government responses to those needs.
- strong and effective linkages between the range of children's and family services and between all levels of government, the community and the private sector.
- a comprehensive range of centre-based and home-based services for children under school age and primary school children.
- professional development and support for children's and family services staff.
- responsive and inclusive services that address the needs of families with adults or children with a disability, families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, indigenous families and rural and remote families.
- community involvement in service planning and provision.

Local Government seeks:

State and Commonwealth Government enhanced funding for children's services such as mobile playgroups, family day care, long day care centres and preschools, especially in rural and remote areas recognising these services are an essential to child development and family support.

Young people

Local Government recognises that young people have needs for their own specific local facilities, services and programs that assist them in their own right and in their transition to adulthood.

Local Government recognises:

- Youth culture is an expression of young people's needs and beliefs.

- Young people's involvement in planning and delivery of services, community activities and social activities can enhance self respect, competence and connection to family and community and have significant benefits for the delivery of these resources.
- Councils need to devise and maintain strategies for involving young people in community planning and service development building of a sense of citizenship.
- Youth Advisory Councils are one effective means of inviting the active participation of young people and other youth service stakeholders in planning, services and programs.
- Young people need unique facilities and services, as well as access to universal facilities and services
- Young people have a right to access public space.
- Councils identify, provide or facilitate the provision of facilities, services and programs which meet the needs of young people, which maximise their quality of life and well being.
- Youth Week is an important vehicle for focusing on the strengths and needs of young people to promote a sensitive proactive approach to local youth development.
- Support services must be young people friendly, trusted and relevant to vulnerable young people to assist in their uptake, must use approaches that are supported by research and promote proven and innovative approaches and must create the least intrusion and disruption in their lives and encourage connection with services where young people have established long-term trusting relationships with service providers.
- Offering support and assistance to young people and their families early in the life of their problem can prevent escalation of risk behaviours and are more likely to succeed.

Local government seeks:

- comprehensive and enhanced Commonwealth and State funding programs for holistic youth work, that uses a mix of developmental, preventative and leisure based work with young people, to respond to issues such as leisure, health, violence, drug, legal, housing, transport and the like as they arise.
- improved Commonwealth and/or State capital facilities funding programs for new youth facilities, especially but not exclusively youth centres.
- Commonwealth and State Governments provide a general transport concession scheme for young people, similar to that available to aged pensioners.