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**Making space for children**  
— the big challenge for our public realm

By David Lammy MP



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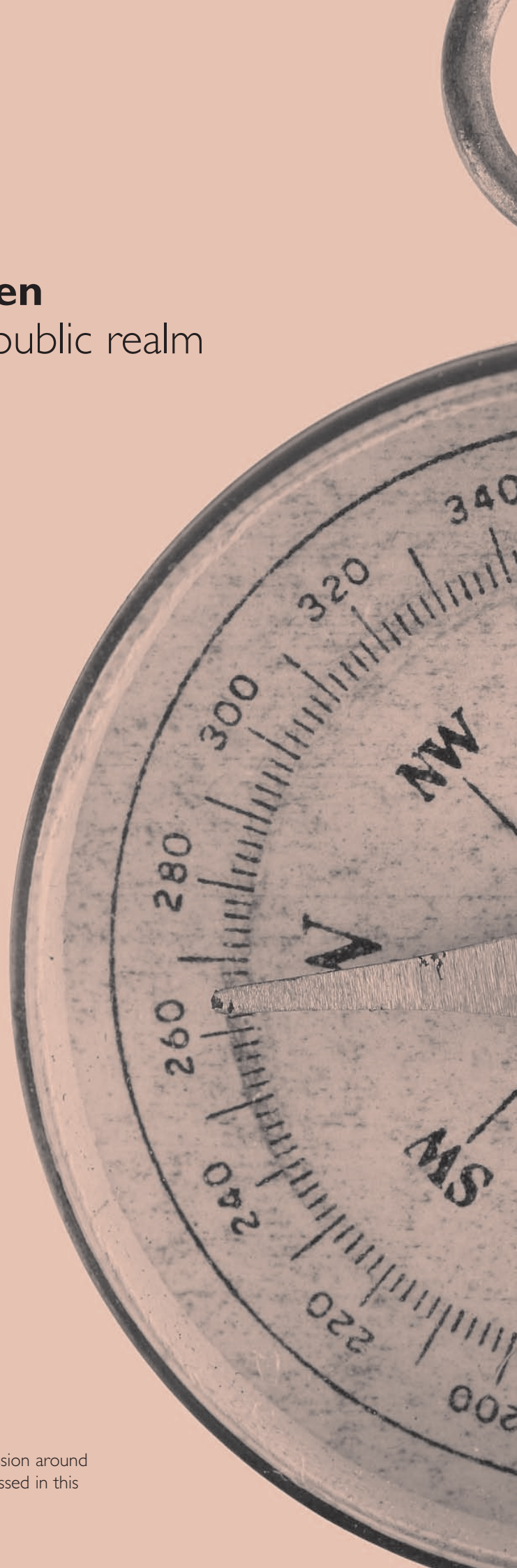
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## Making space for children

— the big challenge for our public realm

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Current debates about childhood and children's place in society generally lack a coherent political narrative. They tend to be framed either by anxious reactions to specific trends which tend to condemn the modern world as the enemy of real childhood or in notions of youth and childhood themselves being out-of-control, the enemy of civic and cultural life.

Neither response takes us much further in developing a vision that puts children at the heart of the public realm, rather than hiding them away from it. Seeking a less alarmist tone, the Children's Society last year launched its Good Childhood Inquiry. The question that it asks is welcome: what are the fundamental values underlying our efforts in policymaking for children? After a decade of investment in children's services and in the wider public sphere, I believe the challenge is to connect two of this Government's most successful policy agendas: children's services and local regeneration. We need to put children at the forefront of our efforts at urban renewal.

The Labour Party has always led movements to improve the lot of children in our society. In 1944, Butler's settlement raised the school-leaving age to 15, and introduced free secondary education. The 1948 Children Act transformed welfare and children's services, while successive Labour education reforms have advanced the principle that it is not just every child's entitlement to attend school, but to be given the very best chance to fulfil their potential.

Over the last ten years we have seen that tradition continued and extended. Child poverty has rightly been a priority. Educational standards have risen. Childcare has been expanded. And children have been given a voice in national debates through the creation of a Minister for Children, three Children's Commissioners across the UK and a Director of Children's Services in every area.

These reforms were dependent on political choices that could only have been made by a progressive, centre-left government. Our commitment to social and economic justice and our recognition of the limits of the market are nowhere more evident than in our policies for children and families. For all the talk of family values on the Right, only the Left is willing to recognise that markets, left to their own devices, don't create flexible working for parents; that they don't provide support for new families in those vital early years of a child's life; and that they don't protect children from becoming targets for advertising before they even reach primary school.

### Challenges ahead

Yet earlier this year we were reminded of the challenges that lie ahead by the widely reported comparative study by UNICEF on Children and Young People across the OECD. We should not be too defensive about the report's findings, because they point to something of significance. The report reveals a poverty that runs deeper than material issues. Holland, which sat at the top of the UNICEF table, is a similar economy, in many respects to, the UK and subject to the same pressures on modern childhood. But it has an entirely different approach to children and public space. The Dutch, for example, invented the Home Zone concept the woonerf where children are actively encouraged to play in streets that aren't so much pedestrianised as peopled.

Play spaces in Dutch towns and cities are rarely in sectioned off corners of the park but dotted throughout the public realm. We need to embed the concept of child friendly planning, now at the heart of housing policy, within our own policies for the built environment and open spaces. Children should be central to spatial planning principles and playable landscapes, not just the beneficiaries of the occasional playground, built as an afterthought to the main design.

Our public spaces are far more habitable than a decade ago. When I walk through my constituency in Tottenham, I see a marked difference from a decade ago there are signs of the better living standards, higher aspirations and revitalised local economy. But the common areas of the public realm still don't always reflect the vibrancy and community spirit of the area's resilient and resourceful people.



In particular, we need to ask ourselves how much our public spaces offer for children. The Children's Play Council has estimated that children today have, on average, just a ninth of the outdoor space in which to play compared to just a generation ago<sup>1</sup> and yet in every survey children tell us that they would much rather play outside than indoors. For every acre of land occupied by playgrounds in England, there are more than 80 acres for golf<sup>2</sup>.

Many town centres are cut off by ring roads, and on residential streets where children are being dwarfed by cars that get bigger and bigger. Not all new town squares created in the past decade seem open to them they invite people to 'live, work and play' in the city, but often this implies adults' play: the evening economy.

It is, of course, the poorest neighbourhoods that offer the worst, most crowded, most polluted and most dangerous public environments: where children are among the most badly affected. Research published in 2002<sup>3</sup>, for example, showed that children in the 10 per cent most deprived wards in England were more than three times as likely to be pedestrian casualties as those in the least deprived 10 percent.

There are counterpoints to this story that show what can be achieved, such as the wonderful, lottery-funded Sommerford Grove Adventure Playground in my constituency. It is an oasis of child-centred fun, imagination, care and creativity, where adults and children come together to create an environment and a community that reflects the best they each have to offer. We are slowly seeing more places like Sommerford Grove thanks to regeneration programmes and targeted lottery funding, often with a focus on inner city communities.

However, such examples are still limited in their reach. The scarcity of these places does not go unnoticed: children are feeling it. Survey evidence suggests that Fewer than one in five (17%) young people agreed with the statement, "my area cares about its young people." In the same survey, less than a third (32%) of young people agreed with the statement "There are places for young people to go in my area", whilst half (49%) disagreed.<sup>4</sup>

No adult would question that play was an important part of his or her youth but we risk, as a society, not allowing children the same outdoor opportunities that we took for granted. In 1977, the urbanist Colin Ward asked how the relationship between cities and their children can be made more fruitful and enjoyable for both.<sup>5</sup> This question should be central to our thinking as we look to build on efforts like the Young Advisors scheme and the Youth Opportunity Fund, both designed to help young people realise their own priorities in local areas.

## **The value of public space for children**

Why does all this matter so much? Because children, more than anyone else, depend on the public realm. They have little economic power, and fewer alternatives for their free-time activities than adults. We should not be surprised that they want to spend time outdoors. In a nationwide MORI survey, 86% of parents (with young children aged 11 and under) say that on a nice day their children would prefer to go to the park than watch TV.<sup>6</sup>

A more substantial and more enjoyable relationship between children and their environments would have four specific benefits. First, we are increasingly aware of the importance of children's everyday activities in the battle for their health. Department of Health data show that the number of 5-10 year olds who walk to school fell from 61% in 1992/93 to 52% in 2002/03. Among children aged 11-16, 40% walked to school in 2002/03, compared to 44% in 1992/93. The number of 5-10 year olds cycling to school is negligible.<sup>7</sup> With NICE estimating that by 2010 19% of boys and 22% of girls aged 2 to 15 will suffer from obesity, there should be little doubt that these phenomena are related.

We have a programme for safe routes to school, but children need safe routes to all parts of their local neighbourhood: more and better local play areas, child-friendly streets and accessible, child friendly green spaces. Indeed, a report carried by the British Medical Journal in 2001 warned that the main solution to the growing childhood obesity epidemic was to "turn off the TV and promote playing... Opportunities for spontaneous play may be the only requirement that young children need to increase their physical activity"<sup>8</sup> Children are naturally active. Often no interventions are needed: simply the right kind of space 'playable space' and their parents' confidence for them to use it.

Second, the public realm is where children's perceptions of, and response to society are formed. As well as the essential enjoyment of their childhood and the society of other children, the outdoor world is also where children learn most about the wider, adult community that they also inhabit and will one day form. The late American urbanist Jane Jacobs, wrote eloquently about the crucial role of public space in the formation of children: [They] need an unspecialised outdoor home base from which to play, to hang around in, and to help form their notions of the world. In real life, only from the ordinary adults of the city sidewalk do children learn - if they learn at all - the first fundamental of successful city life: people must take a modicum of public responsibility for each other even if they have no ties to each other.<sup>9</sup>

Ideally, public space provides the setting for positive encounters between strangers, where people from different backgrounds can touch and learn from each other's worlds. Repopulating public places with children should become a key part of creating an encounter culture, in which it becomes normal, comfortable and rewarding to meet people from other backgrounds and cultures. I am clear that this kind of everyday interaction through play is crucial not just to children's personal development but also in providing the foundations for citizenship and social cohesion in future generations.

Third, as the reality of climate change becomes more evident with each successive scientific assessment, research shows that children who have regular access to green space don't only thrive in their physical and social development but develop a natural affinity for nature.<sup>10</sup> We have an enormous responsibility, not just to take decisive action to curb the causes of global warming, but to ensure that new and future generations are brought up to respect and care for the natural world. This has to start with children's access to natural places to play.

The fourth and final reason to plan better for children's play is the simplest: because children enjoy it. Every parent and carer knows that a child who has had enough time out playing sleeps better; eats better; is more relaxed and at ease with the world. A growing number of teachers know that they also do better at school as a result.<sup>11</sup>

Children and young people need little encouragement to repopulate our urban (and suburban) public space. They are masters at creating their own environments from next to nothing. A wonderful example is what happened under the London South Bank centre, where skaters appropriated an underused space - nothing more than some concrete pillars demarking a dead zone underneath the grandeur of the Festival Hall and the Hayward gallery - and made it their own. From an initial standoff between skateboarders and centre managers, the activity is now a welcome feature of the cultural milieu of the place, and a tourist attraction to boot. For local residents it helped to break down the alienation between local young people and the highbrow arts conglomeration on their doorstep.

## The Playable city

My department's Time for Play policy document<sup>12</sup> makes it clear that we regard children's play and young people's recreation as equally important to their happiness, welfare and future life chances. But the importance of providing for children's enjoyment of play and recreation should affect our ambitions for public space as much as our policies for children's services.

The planning and building of towns and cities is a cultural act. Consecutive Mayors of Bogota, in Colombia, have taken this role seriously when they put children central to the urban policies that turned the city around from being one of the most dangerous and unequal in the world. With an eye for symbolism, they built playgrounds in parks in the most central and prominent parts of the city, along with general improvements in public transport, cycling facilities and open space.

In the UK, we need to embed the concept of child friendly planning within policymaking for the built environment and open spaces. Children should be central to spatial planning principles and playable landscapes, not just the occasional playground, a key element in any planning strategy. And this will not just benefit children. As the Mayor of Bogota argues: "Children are a kind of indicator species. If we can build a successful city for children, we will have a successful city for all people."<sup>13</sup>

The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre wrote about the 'Ludic City' an urban landscape that would offer more to citizens than just housing, work and shopping.<sup>14</sup> That is what we should strive for - playable towns and cities, where children and adults can enjoy places together as social space, still part of the consumer society - no vision for modern living worth having can ignore the vital role of commerce in regenerating our communities - but not consumed by it.



I saw the playable city at work last summer, when the Sultan's elephant, a giant mechanised model, rolled through London's streets. Here was an event that showed how public space could be about more than shopping and commuting. This was the city itself turned into a space for culture and art, not abstract and elitist, but for and with the people. It showed how the street could be turned into a giant festival where young and old meet, get inspired and participate in the experience. Afterwards, someone wrote in a blogpost: "thank you for reminding me how to be a child and for realising that cynicism is not a way of life!"<sup>15</sup>

Such events are important to challenge our imagination - but the improvement has to be permanent. Central to the creation of a child-friendly public realm is the belief that we can, indeed must, purposefully shape our built environment around people's needs and aspirations rather than the vagaries of the market.

This idea is of course already the natural basis of the planning system but it should be harnessed with more focus to improve outcomes for children in particular. The same is true for the place-making role for Local Authorities - the creative engagement of communities in the development of their own local environments - emphasised so strongly by the Lyons Review.

In those places where we are already doing this in the UK, the benefits are becoming clear. Projects examined by the Thames Valley Police showed significant reductions in vandalism and petty crime following the installation of play facilities and a youth shelter.<sup>16</sup> The studies show that these were places to learn social skills, self-esteem and empathetic abilities. Happier, more fulfilled and less frustrated children and teenagers improve our communities at large.

Similar examples abound, such as in York, Blackpool, Tower Hamlets, Liverpool and Lincolnshire where, for example, a Joseph Rowntree Foundation initiative brought communities together to think collaboratively about play facilities and the wider streetscape.<sup>17</sup> In this example, people from across the generations debated and designed together with professional designers. As a result, not only did physical spaces improve, but many residents also felt they learned new skills, increased confidence and have a better relationship with the local authority. To me, this is how the process should work: children and young people working together with the wider community: young citizens co-creating the world they will inherit.

We already have the Big Lottery Fund's initiative of £55 million to develop free, mainly outdoor play opportunities - more staffed adventure playgrounds, as well well-designed play areas - in the areas of greatest need. Play England is funded to provide support and development for local areas, helping authorities to plan strategically for play provision and promoting good practice. This year's Playday (on 1st August), coordinated nationally by Play England and its partners, will be on the theme of 'Our Streets Too!' with a host of play and recreational activities throughout the streets and lanes of the country.

For years, children were expected to be 'seen and not heard'. In urban planning we need them to be both; because for children to have the best chance to be happy, healthy and to prosper, they need to have a real stake in the common spaces of their neighbourhoods. Amongst the hustle and bustle of our modern towns and cities we need to engender local 'village' communities, where children are looked after in the widest sense. This must start with somewhere for our children - all our children - to play.

**David Lammy** is the Minister for Culture. His Ministerial brief includes responsibility for Children's Play.

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