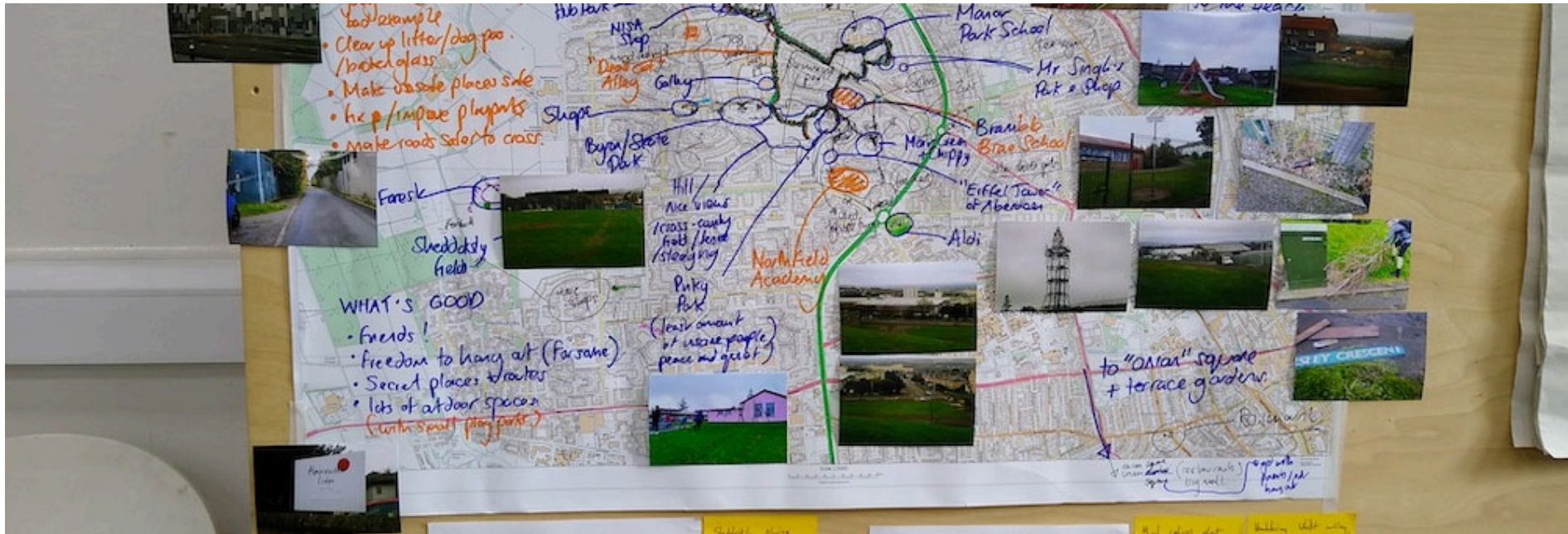


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Co-creating Local Neighbourhood Plans with Children and Young People: A 'How To' Guide

For this blog, we've invited Dr Jenny Wood and Anna Gaffney from A Place In Childhood to talk about some of the innovative co-creating work they've been doing with young people around place and neighbourhoods.



June 5, 2024

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Why Involve Children and Young People?

Decision-makers routinely miss out the specific needs and ideas of children and young people in public spaces, and their daily experiences of the neighbourhoods they grow up in. The tide is starting to turn with regards understanding that they have unique needs, and both an ability and right to voice them from a very young age. However, to do this we need methods and approaches that move beyond tokenism or very narrow and adult-controlled agendas.

At A Place in Childhood, we strongly believe that to exclude the voices, needs, and ideas of children and young people is to do deep harm to both them and us as a society. Not only are they the citizens who will feel the impact of decisions we make for the longest period, but they are also present citizens with specific insights, knowledge

experiences that support us to understand the world we live in and create better places for all.



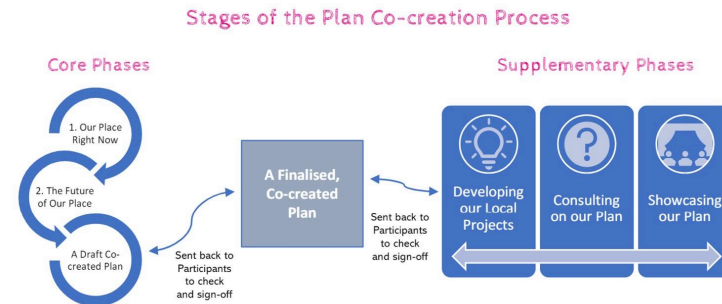
A photo of a child-led walk, taken by children living in Inverurie, Aberdeenshire

The How To Guide

Through our 5 years of practice at APiC, and the experiences of our Co-founders prior to this, we have now created a ['How To Guide' for cocreating local neighbourhood plans with children and teenagers](#). This combines the methods we routinely use to take a grounded approach to seeing the world through the eyes of young participants, and collectively building a picture of priorities for action together.

The guide offers step by step instructions for core parts of the method, and then also suggestions for other elements you can add to increase the robustness

determine next steps for the work. We include case studies for each step as well, which draw out learnings we've had along our journey. The diagram below shows the phases of the approach we use.



It's not always easy, but the process of working with groups in this way is highly rewarding. In remote rural settings, we've worked with entire schools from age 4-12 to cocreate plans to include everyone. Meanwhile, in others we've worked with specific classes or steering groups that represent a wide diversity of ages of children and young people and other characteristics.

In these situations, the plan created by the smaller group can be shared across a whole school setting for feedback and consensus-building. A great example of this is Inverurie Academy, whereby we initially worked with a steering group of 15 pupils aged 12 to 17. They then took the plan and consulted through the whole school, gaining 453 responses. They also conducted small group discussions and interviews with staff and pupils at the neighbouring St Andrews Special Educational Needs School. You can hear about their plan and process directly from them [in this video](#).

Inclusive Conversations

The core benefit of the first stages of the approach – the child and youth led tour – is that children and young people are put in control of where we go and what we see. As we then walk alongside each other, we can get to know the young people in a gentle and non-confronting way. Individual and small group side-by-side chats enable a relaxed way of sharing information about their lives, which can be difficult to achieve in face-to-face discussions in confined, indoor environments. The shared experience also supports reflection on what we're seeing and their own specific reactions to come through.



A photo of the process taken by teenagers living in Falkirk.

A key way this approach can be put to good use is to understand the diversity and variety of the child and young person experience, without putting anyone on the spot to disclose sensitive details about themselves in front of their peers. For example, we always facilitate sessions as a minimum of two people. This means that we have capacity to focus in on different needs and experiences amongst a group

One of us might concentrate on speaking to girls or non-binary young people on a walk, for example. Meanwhile, the other can get into deeper and fine-grained conversations with boys. This means that later we can sensitively, and without naming and making anyone feel uncomfortable, draw out different perceptions of the same places when we reflect on the tour with the full group. We have also found on some projects such as [Teenagers and Public Space](#), that conducting walks in gender-based subgroups can support project aims of diving deep on differing experiences.

This means we can bring in topics around safety or spaces not meeting all needs with everyone; validating the experiences of young people who may otherwise feel intimidated or unsure of how to express themselves. At the same time, we can still engage in group deliberations around these key issues, and sensitively raise the awareness of all to the differences in their lived experiences.

Understanding Uncomfortable Childhood Experiences

Speaking with children through this process sheds light on childhood experiences that we need to be aware of within local areas, while giving them time and space to explore what they think is happening where they live, how they feel about it, and how we could address it as a society. A couple of examples of how important this is are below:

- In one neighbourhood we worked with both primary and secondary age young people, taking walks through the woods and heard stories from girls as young as 9 about noticing they were being watched by adult men when playing. We also heard stories of children discovering a tent in the woods, whereby the person within it was unresponsive. While the children were not sure what was going on, from an adult perspective we can infer the severity of the situation for both the person they found, and the impact it will have had on their sense of safety.

- In another neighbourhood, we were struck by how paranoid and scared the girls of all ages were of being followed through the town centre or being accosted by strangers. The primary age children were very clear with us about the rules they follow around who they should and should not talk to, and where to go and what to do if someone makes you feel uncomfortable. The teenage girls told us of many and multiple places they avoid going due to fear of what could happen. While we did not know the details, we could infer that something had happened recently in the community that had left people feeling on edge.

Better Decisions with and for Children and Young People

The How to Guide is a resource that we hope will be helpful in your work to include the views and ideas of children and young people in a meaningful, and rights-respecting way. In the age of polycrisis and an ever-uncertain world, it is both effective and efficient to invest time and effort in understanding what childhood looks like today, and how we can support better decision-making and investments for the future.

We hope you find the guide helpful, and are very happy to discuss your thoughts, ideas, or if we might support you in your next project. You can get in touch by emailing Dr Jenny Wood at jenny.wood@aplaceinchildhood.org

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