

Housing and urban experiences of visually impaired children

There has been a wealth of social research on the housing experiences of physically impaired adults, which has influenced the development of housing and social policies. In order to find out if visually impaired children identified issues that have not yet been acknowledged, a research project by Chris Allen, Joanne Milner and Dawn Price asked 44 children about their experiences of their housing and urban environments. The main findings were that:

- f** Visually impaired children were active within, rather than victims of, the built environment of their home and neighbourhood. They developed their capacity to use the built environment by creating 'memory maps' of the layout of their homes and neighbourhoods, through listening to sounds, counting steps and so on. As a result, they regarded the physical design of these places as largely unproblematic.
- f** Although the children did not perceive the fixed design of the built environment as causing difficulties, they regarded moving objects as problematic. Visually impaired children's confidence at home and in the neighbourhood relied on their ability to predict the layout of the built environment. Their confidence was undermined by encounters with moving objects, notably cars. Parents reluctantly placed restrictions on their children's movements at busy times such as rush hours, for example by not allowing them to play in the street.
- f** Visually impaired children living in disadvantaged areas were less able to develop effective strategies to manage their neighbourhood environment. The confidence of these children was undermined by their poor living environment (including antisocial behaviour and bullying, and drugs needles in public areas). These environmental problems seemed to be more important than any issues relating to poor urban design.
- f** Many families wanted to move to a 'better' area so that their visually impaired children could play outside. However, social landlords' allocations policies prioritised the housing needs of adults over children, and were dominated by consideration of medical needs. The social needs of visually impaired children were not taken into account.

Introduction

The legislative definition of disability in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 is "those people with a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities".

This definition reflects a general tendency to think about people with disabilities in terms of physical impairment. It has resulted in housing and urban policies that concentrate on removing the physical barriers restricting wheelchair users. In consequence, housing initiatives such as barrier-free design principles and the maintenance of lists of adapted properties focus on the needs of people with physical impairments.

This research project was conceived in response to a concern that the housing and urban experiences of visually impaired children should be examined, in order to establish how policy could reflect their needs. The report examines the nature of these children's experiences and makes recommendations for housing and urban policy and practice.

Fixed environments

The research's main interest was in visually impaired children's experiences of their home and neighbourhood environment. However, the children and parents spent most of the interviews talking about their school life. Their main concern was that teachers in mainstream schools could only see the children's disability. The children and parents resisted the idea that visual impairment implied dysfunction, abnormality or 'having problems'.

"They were sort of seeing Justin's disabilities more, they were. They weren't seeing him as a normal little boy, they were sort of seeing his problems first, it was things like, special needs, are you with me?"
(Justin's mother)

Indeed, one of the main themes to emerge from the research was the notion that visually impaired children were active within, rather than victims of, the built environment of their home and neighbourhood. They developed their capacity to use the built environment of their home and neighbourhood by creating 'memory maps' of fixed points (for example, by noting sounds such as creaking doors).

In developing these memory maps, the children oriented themselves to the fixed points in their home and neighbourhood environment in a number of ways. They used their cognition (counting steps, for example) and senses (listening for sounds, for instance), and established routines (such as habitual

ways of walking particular routes). As a further strategy, they were then able to transpose these types of orientations to unfamiliar environments. For example, they would use the memory map of the built environment of their home to make sense of a friend's house.

INT: Yeah, how do you find it when you say go across a road to a friend's house or something?

Martin: Well it's just like, oh the opposite, opposite way round Twisted That's what I call it anyway. It is twisted because everything's the other way round, 'cos erm, our house right, the both of the houses on either side, are like erm, the opposite way round to ours. So like the house on the corner is like ours, and then the next one's the opposite way round, and this one's ours, you know, and then the next one's the opposite way round, do you get what I mean? It goes round in a pattern.

The visually impaired children did not generally consider the built environment of their home and neighbourhood to be problematic. Some parents described how their visually impaired children had had fewer accidents than their sighted siblings. Most parents had not made any adjustments to their property to take account of their children's visual impairment. They thought that housing adjustments were only necessary for children who were wheelchair users.

Mobile environments

Memory maps provided the visually impaired children with 'predictive confidence' – that is, a secure sense that they knew the built environment of their home and neighbourhood and could use it safely. However, the fixed points of the built environment constituted only one aspect of the children's homes and neighbourhoods.

The parents and visually impaired children also characterised their home and neighbourhood environments as being 'littered' with mobile objects, unpredictable movement and varying intensity of movement. The visually impaired children considered the level and intensity of movement in the urban environment to be their main problem.

Two types of movement were identified. Firstly, the children and parents talked about the problems of 'constant movement'. This referred to movement occurring 'there and then' as people went about their everyday business – examples included cars, people and shopping trolleys. Secondly, they talked about problems caused by 'intermittent movement'. This related to 'now and then' movements that led to

unpredictable changes to the home and neighbourhood environment as objects were moved around so that they were 'there today, gone tomorrow', and vice versa. Intermittent movements occurred as a result of everyday human activity, such as cars being parked when adults returned home from work. They also happened as a consequence of changes in the 'natural' environment (such as overgrown hedges and dog excrement), where appropriate levels of human control had not been applied.

Parents talked at length about intermittent movement within the home, and how they were able to limit it by reducing changes in the layout of furniture. Some also talked about how they had developed a 'clearing up mentality' so that nothing was left lying on the floor within the home.

In contrast, parents tended to talk about the problem of constant movement in the context of the neighbourhood, where the level and intensity of movement (for example, by people and cars) created dangers for their children. Since parents were less able to control movement within the neighbourhood, they placed restrictions on their children so that they could only go out under supervision, at certain quieter times of the day, and on certain days when movement was minimal. As a consequence, much of the children's time was spent indoors or at organised activities (such as scouts or guides) that took place in supervised environments.

The children found the speed and intensity of movement intimidating, but did not regard it as an insurmountable problem. They described the urban environment as 'messy' because of its high and intense levels of constant movement. But rather than withdraw from the dangers of the urban environment, they used strategies such as taking time to cross roads, and instruments such as their white canes to re-establish their sense of predictive confidence.

The older children often described how they were expanding their horizons into unknown urban territory, rather than how they were withdrawing from it. This interest in exploration was often driven by the children's frustration at the parental restrictions placed on them when they were younger. It also reflected the resourceful and strategic way in which teenage children were beginning to think about how to enrich their everyday lives independently from adult supervision.

"In the summer holidays I've really had enough, because having to get my mum and dad to take me places and I've done mobility lessons from lots of different places but never had the confidence to go

on my own. And I haven't done them in ages so I think I went out for a walk one day and I was just looking at the bus stops and everything. Oh I know I was, I'd pushed, cos I got a girlfriend, I was getting sick of getting dropped off all the time by my mum and dad and sometimes I couldn't go cos they couldn't take me. So I'd been pushed and looking at bus routes sort of how can I get there. So for a start I wanted to go to Huyton village one day, came home after this walk and went to me dad, and says "I don't care. If I get lost I've got my mobile phone, you can come and pick us up". If I don't do it now, I'm never going to do it. I just said I've had enough, so I went in the house, got my coat on, got my trainers on, got my bus pass and everything, my mobile phone and all that and I went to Huyton. I didn't even know, I didn't even know how to get back."

Barrymore

Changing the home and neighbourhood environment

While many of the visually impaired children developed strategies to overcome dangers in their homes and neighbourhoods, not all of them were able to exercise the same level of control. This was because some children lived in much poorer physical and urban environments than others. Examples of problems included antisocial behaviour and bullying, and the use and disposal of drugs equipment in public areas, such as on housing estates. Such problems created a barrier to these children's capacity to branch out.

Sharon's Mum: She used to get called blind, deaf, she used to get her glasses took off her, where we lived before, they were absolutely horrible, they'd pinch her roller blades off her, you know they really did, they were nasty people. It was, that's why I moved out. Because of five years of deterioration, I just didn't want the children, there was drugs there which there's drugs everywhere, there was car theft, there was children smoking the drugs and they were dealing it outside your door, there were house robberies, it just wasn't an environment to bring them up in.

INT: Right, was there anywhere for Sharon to play?

Mum: Just outside the front door.

INT: Did she play a lot?

Mum: No.

INT: Why not?

Mum: Because they were horrible to her, they made her feel different.

Many of this minority of children and parents lived in social rented housing, and regarded their home and neighbourhood environment as a problem. They did not develop strategies to manoeuvre themselves within their environment (in order to use it), but against it (in order to change it). This required them to work through public bodies such as social landlords.

However, several social housing tenants described how they felt that social landlords had stereotyped their housing needs. Landlords were seen to have stereotyped them as requiring 'disabled housing' when they were only asking for a better quality of environment for their children, so that they could play outside. In addition, social landlords tended to think of disabled people in terms of single person or adult-only households. This latter form of stereotyping had significant implications when it was followed through in housing allocations and in housing design and development practices.

Housing allocations tended to prioritise the housing needs of adults over children, which in extreme cases resulted in children living in dangerous housing situations. The design and development of 'barrier-free' housing had led to dwellings that had been built according to certain specifications, such as door widths enabling a wheelchair to pass through. However, the barrier-free homes that the research team visited were also designed to poor space standards (for example, they had small living rooms and kitchens). This failed to take account of the housing needs of families with visually impaired children.

Conclusion

The 1989 Children Act is often seen as the only legislation relevant to children's rights. However, housing policies can take better account of children's needs. For example, this report recommends:

- broadening the scope of barrier-free design so that it is not entirely based on the needs of single person or adult-only households;
- taking account of social as well as medical needs in rehousing decisions affecting children with visual impairments.

The report also has planning recommendations relating to initiatives such as 'Home Zones', which

reduce the speed and intensity of movement within urban environments where visually impaired children want to play.

About the project

Forty-four visually impaired boys and girls between the ages of five and 16 were interviewed at least twice. They also kept a diary for a week. These children were from a wide variety of different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, and were living in a variety of housing and neighbourhood circumstances across the UK.

How to get further information

The full report, **Home is where the start is: The housing and urban experiences of visually impaired children** by Chris Allen, Joanne Milner and Dawn Price, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 456 2, price £11.95).

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- **Improving housing services for disabled children and their families**, Jun 00 (Ref: 670)
- **Information for families with disabled children**, Nov 00 (Ref: N30)
- **Good practice in housing disabled children and their families**, Nov 02 (Ref: N62)
- **The housing needs of disabled children: the national evidence**, Nov 02 (Ref: N82)