

Quality of Life Foundation

Literature Review

Publica



In October 2019 the Quality of Life Foundation commissioned Publica to produce a literature review of past and current studies, reports and policies addressing the link between quality of life and the built environment. The aim of the review is to identify key themes and pathways through which the buildings, communities and neighbourhoods where people live and work might better support quality of life. By reviewing existing evidence, identifying gaps in the literature and assessing current practice it also sought to reveal unexplored avenues for the foundation to influence decision-makers.

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December 2019

Executive Summary

We face a housing crisis in the UK, with multiple challenges that include affordability, provision and the quality of the end product. At the same time, a new approach to prosperity has emerged, one that goes beyond economics to take a more long term view of what we might value, central to which is quality of life. But while it is generally accepted that the homes, communities and landscapes we are building have a profound effect on our quality of life, there remains little consensus about how these insights might be included in the development process to improve quality of life outcomes.

This review has examined numerous studies conducted by a variety of actors addressing how to improve quality of life and wellbeing through the places in which people live. It identifies six themes from the material reviewed that describe what people need from their homes and communities to support quality of life:

- **A sense of control** reveals that, regardless of tenure, some sense of agency among residents over their environment is essential and valuable.
- **Movement** addresses the different ways people get about as well as changing priorities and opportunities for design and evaluation.
- **Belonging and togetherness** examines the effects of change and other issues impacting peoples' ability to feel 'at home' and the social life of communities.
- **Feeling cared for** looks at how the places people live can support their different needs.
- **Nature** describes the appreciable but hard-to-measure contribution of the natural environment.
- **Enjoyment** is about the possibilities for fun and wonder which should be both supported and encouraged.

Of these themes, control emerges as a key aspect of quality of life. It was also found to arise in relation to each of the other five themes possibly because it describes the level of involvement and influence people have within their homes and communities. This sense of control over one's environment, both day-to-day and as it changes, has the potential to improve both the processes and outcomes of urban development.

Also apparent is widespread recognition of the need for structural change in both the public and private sectors. After two decades of little improvement this seems essential to ensure planning, construction and management of new neighbourhoods and communities fully aligns with supporting quality of life. This report identifies what such a shift might entail, and the potential benefits of transforming these processes.

Finally, what was not mentioned was also significant: affordability, security and management. These are known to be central concerns among residents assessing their own quality of life. Across the policies, strategies and other intelligence, the knowledge of those most effected is seldom sought or incorporated. If we want radical and transformative change in the way homes are delivered across the country this untapped knowledge base represents a vital opportunity.

What is quality of life?

Quality of life describes ease, comfort, independence and enjoyment. It draws attention to the accumulated impact of the day-to-day, which is the level to which individuals may feel their lives to be happy, active, sociable, interesting and meaningful. It encompasses a multiplicity of desirable conditions which are overlapping and have different scales.

Fulfilment of quality of life has often been understood hierarchically, in terms of need (from basic, physiological needs such as shelter, food and safety up to belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation).¹ This underlines the most basic requirement: that of meeting people's need for shelter. This is by no means a given; an estimated 320,000 people across the United Kingdom are homeless.² Adequate and affordable shelter is the baseline for experiencing any sort of quality of life and in the context of addressing the housing crisis, this reality should not be lost on all those involved.

While seeing quality of life in terms of its hierarchy remains a valid approach, it may also be usefully understood as a condition with levels, stages, and thresholds — a variable rather than a fixed state or a quality of life process. What is common among its conditions is that they may all be thought of as quite basic aspects of humanity and are shared across different backgrounds. The term often sits alongside 'wellbeing' or 'how we are doing' as individuals, as communities and as a nation, and how sustainable this is for the future.³ It might be thought of as health as defined by the World Health Organisation: not merely the absence of ill-health but, 'a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing.'⁴ Understanding health this way, as physical, social and psychological, opens up a large field of interrelated concerns which are interwoven with aspects of quality of life.

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1 Maslow, A Theory of Human Motivation, 1943. Referred to in Mohit, Quality of Life in Natural and Built Environments, 2013, p.36.

2 Shelter, Homelessness in Britain – the numbers behind the story, 2018

3 Office for National Statistics, Personal and Economic Wellbeing in the UK, 2019, p.2.

4 UK Green Building Council, Health and Wellbeing in Homes, 2016, p.4.

Scope

This review aimed to examine studies addressing how to improve quality of life and wellbeing through the places in which people live, conducted by: government bodies (the Cabinet Office, the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government and its former iteration as the Department for Communities and Local Government); the Office for National Statistics; executive non-departmental public bodies; the National Health Service; third sector organisations (charitable foundations, institutes, non-profit organisations and trusts); experts (professional bodies, specialists, membership bodies); academics at a number of institutions, and developers. Of the material reviewed some is quite large in scope or remit while some is extremely specific. Studies of some international organisations were included to complement work which specifically addresses the UK context. A full list of the material studied may be found in the bibliography.

Despite the range and breadth of material covered, the review is by no means exhaustive. The field is vast and research by various actors, across different sectors, operating at a range of scales continues to address the complex links between the qualities of places and lives they support. In addition, it is worth stating that the process of reviewing was carried out with the knowledge that a separate workstream would involve primary research, asking residents themselves about the relationship between their quality of life and the place in which they live.

The effect of the built environment

Across all the material studied in this review it is understood, to a degree, that quality of life and wellbeing can be supported, or infringed upon, by the places in which people's lives play out. This was clearly stated in *World Class Places: The Government's Strategy for Improving Quality of Place*: 'Quality of place can be understood as that subset of factors that affect people's quality of life and life chances through the way the environment is planned, designed, developed and maintained.'⁵ It was also seen as a vital component to achieve greater equity in society: 'Our vision is simple but ambitious: we want to ensure that all places are planned, designed and developed to provide everyone, including future generations, with a decent quality of life and fair chances.'⁶ Recent government strategy states more directly that the purpose is 'to help to grow a sense of community and place, not undermine it.'⁷ Regardless of how it is framed: 'Place quality... is a basic necessity of urban life with profound and far-reaching impacts on the lives of citizens today and tomorrow. It is so important to our basic wellbeing that it should be the expectation of all.'⁸

How to affect change

It has been the intention from the inception of the Quality of Life Foundation to address the entire place-shaping process, in how it might improve quality of life and wellbeing.

5 Department for Communities and Local Government and Media and Sport Department for Culture, *World Class Places: The Government's Strategy for Improving Quality of Place*. (London: Communities and Local Government, 2009), p.11.

6 *Ibid*, p.8.

7 *Creating Space for Beauty*, Interim Report of the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission, p.4.

8 Matthew Carmona, 'Place Value: Place Quality and Its Impact on Health, Social, Economic and Environmental Outcomes', *Journal of Urban Design*, 24.1 (2019), 1–48 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2018.1472523>>.

Understood in stages, this involves: land acquisition (arrangements by which the places people live are brought to be and financed); planning (how the places people live are arranged in specific locations according to spatial and social structures and statutory requirements); construction (processes by which the places people live are built); management (day-to-day care of the places people live) and; evaluation (processes of assessing quality, who measures, and whether there is a requirement to do so). The question this study addresses is how the processes of land acquisition, planning, construction and management of the places where people live can be better directed towards improving quality of life and wellbeing, and specifically addresses how to create stronger ‘feedback loops.’

The Happy Cities Agenda points to the significant shift required for quality of life to adopt a central position in making the places in which people live. Examining the processes by which places are made, it separates the activity into two categories. The first, the design category, leads to more short/medium term returns, that are quickly visible, and allows earlier benefits towards people’s wellbeing.⁹ The second, the enabling category, are those that concern more profound changes in the city, modifying the cultural fabric of society and recognising that ‘happiness is a choice, and people must engage to get the benefits.’¹⁰

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The need for new thinking

A large number of approaches have been developed that are intended to ensure the places people live meet certain standards, accompanied by numerous checklists to determine the planning of places to live. The various studies share evidence, knowledge and best practice with an educational approach, seeking to guide and inform those who make places for

people to live. What is notable and alarming given their proliferation, however, is the overall lack of change in the homes being built. The Quality of Life Foundation is coming into existence at a time when ‘people expect the next 12 months to be worse.’¹¹ Although troubling, this must be seen as an opportunity because attending to people’s quality of life in the place in which they live or work has been well proven to offset other negative conditions.

There are challenges. The ideas and goals that inform this review have now been debated extensively, and in some cases adopted as policy, for a number of decades. CABE, which formed in 1999 addressed quality of life directly, surveying residents on their feelings about what was impactful and matching their

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9 Global Happiness Policy Council, Happy Cities Agenda, p.134.

10 Ibid, p.134.

11 Office for National Statistics, Personal and Economic Wellbeing in the UK, 2019, p.24.

responses with scientific evidence¹². Numerous related studies have followed providing policy, checklists, toolkits and other ways to assess, recognise and promote design quality and it is the extent of work undertaken which makes the lack of change particularly disappointing.

Now, two decades after the formation of CABE and a decade following the financial crisis, *Creating Space for Beauty*, the interim report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, arrives with a practical purpose: 'to tackle the challenge of poor-quality design and build of homes and places, across the country and help ensure as we build for the future, we do so with popular consent.'¹³ The importance of its role is irrefutable – given the lack of movement. Its aims are also well-intentioned, calling for further evidence gathering and, the development of workable ideas across planning, land acquisition, infrastructure and renewal. The problem, in light of the findings of this review, is that *Creating Space for Beauty* maintains the same top-down approach which has proven ineffective, calling for the involvement of everyone but those most closely involved: residents.

The need for new thinking is evident. Lead actors in the development sector have recognised the value of a quality of life perspective. They are looking for opportunities to embed quality of life into strategic visions, design principles and management policies for new housing and mixed-use developments.

Although indicators, measures and indices exist for assessing and comparing quality of life in various homes and communities, for developers the question is: how to make these considerations part of investment, design and planning decisions?

New opportunities in data capture

Although indicators, measures and indices exist for assessing and comparing the quality of life that emerges from living, visiting and working in varied places, for developers the question is: how to make these considerations part of investment, design and planning decisions? The financial argument for quality of life is present in most of the studies reviewed, perhaps because most new housing, including social housing, is provided by developers. Quality of life becomes an alternative measurement of value with the understanding that it will also help secure better long-term returns.

'A socially smart city is one where a feedback loop operates to optimise social benefits, while minimising resource use; measuring, analysing, processing, and adjusting, as appropriate.'¹⁴ In this light, vast improvements over the last decade in our ability to collect data are exciting. In relation to quality of life, for the first time, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has combined data on personal and economic wellbeing in the UK. With this much more comprehensive picture, evaluation has become a far more sophisticated prospect.¹⁵

12 Centre for Architecture and the Built Environment, *The Value of Good Design - How Buildings and Spaces Create Economic and Social Value*, p. 3.

13 *Creating Space for Beauty*, Interim Report of the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission, p.4.

14 Global Happiness Policy Council, *Happy Cities Agenda*, p.119.

15 Office for National Statistics, *Personal and Economic Wellbeing in the UK*, 2019, p.2.

The key themes

The thematic headings used in the following pages address the entire place-shaping process. The themes presented offer a broad understanding of the relationship between quality of life and place, but new evidence, guidance and research is constantly emerging. They encapsulate ideas described in different ways and to a varying degree in all of the materials reviewed. The *Happy Cities Agenda*, for example, lists nature, mobility, sustainability & partnership, culture, and quality of service¹⁶. *Designing for Social Sustainability, A Framework for Creating Thriving New Communities*, on the other hand, identifies four elements as essential to building new communities that will be successful and sustainable in the long term: amenities and social infrastructure; social and cultural life; voice and influence; space to grow (alongside good housing, high quality public buildings and spaces, local economic opportunities and design that supports pro-environmental behaviour)¹⁷. *Wellbeing Principles for British Land* provides seven themes: healthy places, sociable places, places of delight, places that matter, places of ease, resilient places, inclusive places¹⁸. The list could be continued. The idea in this review is to assess what has been addressed within succinct and accessible categories to move forward with establishing the foundation's own objectives.

16 Ibid, p.116.

17 Safron Woodcraft and others, *Design for Social Sustainability- A Framework for Creating Thriving New Communities* (The Young Foundation, 2012), p. 23.

18 *Happy City, Wellbeing Principles for British Land* (British Land, 2015), p.8.

A sense of control

A fundamental prerequisite to an individual or community feeling as though they benefit from a high quality of life is feeling some degree of control and ownership over the place in which they live. What does it mean to feel ownership over the place where you live? A useful philosophical concept is ‘mastery.’ In relation to how we live, a feeling of control allows mastery over one’s conditions, while also empowering and giving a sense of purpose.

Long term stewardship

The concept of ownership is now understood in policy, in relation to design and ongoing management: ‘Well-designed places, buildings and spaces are robust, easy to use and look after, and enable their users to establish a sense of ownership and belonging, ensuring places and buildings age gracefully¹⁹ and, ‘Well-designed places clearly define the boundaries for private, shared and public spaces, making it more likely that occupants will use, value and take ownership of them.’²⁰ Perhaps more holistically, *Health and Wellbeing in Homes* introduces the concept of mastery as a desirable psychological state and the ways in which exposure to adverse environmental features can induce a state of helplessness. The report identifies residential design as linked to a holistic understanding of resilience.²¹

In these ways, ownership is far from a ‘nice-to-have’ because capacity to improve the conditions of the places people live offers benefits that extend beyond the individual. A sense of ownership can form the basis of the local management and long-term stewardship of places.²² *New London Villages, Creating Community* alludes to ownership terming it ‘a sense of attachment.’²³ Incremental benefits also result from the responsiveness of local authorities and relevant stakeholders to real-time complaints such as road repairs or noise complaints. Small but direct interactions are essential to give people a sense of power and control, and therefore a willingness to act over, their immediate environment.

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The trust deficit

There has come about the development of a number of innovative approaches to engaging citizens in the placemaking process, including public ‘charrettes’, ‘planning for real’ and collaborative design workshops. Advances in digital technology are also opening up opportunities for further engagement. Consultation and engagement can lead to public

19 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, National Design Guide - Planning Practice for Beautiful, Enduring and Successful Places, 2019, p.46.

20 Ibid, p.158.

21 UK Green Building Council, Health and Wellbeing in Homes, 2016, p.33.

22 NHS, Putting Health into Place: Executive Summary, p. 29.

23 Kath Scanlon and others, New London Villages - Creating Communities (Berkeley Group, 2016), p.6.

cynicism if not well run, or viewed by the public as tokenistic²⁴. It was also already known that, ‘the quality of public engagement is often poor and does not inform place shaping effectively.’²⁵

In describing the importance of ownership, the *Happy Cities Agenda* identifies trust as a critical aspect of wellbeing, which may be gained by engagement & transparency.²⁶ A study by Grosvenor highlights the severity of the current situation. The largest-ever canvassing of the public’s view on trust, placemaking and developers: *Rebuilding Trust, Discussion Paper and Summary of Findings* highlights strong levels of distrust and apathy towards developers and local authorities. It identifies that scepticism is directed particularly in regards to these parties acting honestly or with the best intentions of local communities in mind. It includes a particularly worrying reflection on the value of participation and engagement as it is currently practised: respondents who had attended or engaged in these events in the past year were more likely to distrust developers and to claim that development had reduced their quality of life or harmed their local areas. It locates distrust as not only based on the profit motive of development but also unaccountability, poor communication, a lack of care towards local needs and understanding on the part of developers. In these senses, it highlights a crucial link to democracy because control of development and planning is one of the most immediate expressions of democratic accountability. The report’s suggestions include profits caps, releasing cost-benefit analyses for all developments, offering more transparency and information and better communicating the benefits of development.²⁷

Giving constructive power to residents

A sense of control is intimately linked to the constructive power of residents. Several examples in recent years point to the importance of existing communities ‘taking ownership’ in advance of any specific construction project. To some extent, Neighbourhood Planning is intended to introduce a greater sense of ownership among residents. A recent project that is being delivered by Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service offers a further example: Village Design Statements allow a community to articulate what is important to them about the character of their village. The project points to the role of expertise with architects acting as skilled facilitators to produce statements that are concise and forward-thinking. These will eventually be adopted as Supplementary Planning Documents giving them a significant weight in the development consent process.

The importance of empowering residents is underscored by the findings of the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, an action-focused initiative aiming to improve the evidence-base on the relationship between community wellbeing and place and the impacts of interventions. Their evidence underpins the importance for community members to have an opportunity ‘to be involved in the organisation and planning of changes to places and spaces.’²⁸ They also recognised that this is not straightforward and requires skilled facilitators to ensure balanced representation and the possibility of agreement.²⁹

24 Cabinet Office, *Quality of Place - Improving the Planning and Design of the Built Environment: An Analysis of Issues and Opportunities* (Strategy Unit, 2009), p.46.

25 *Ibid*, p.102.

26 Global Happiness Policy Council, *Happy Cities Agenda*, p.116.

27 Grosvenor, *Rebuilding Trust - Research Findings and Summary*, 2019, p.17.

28 What Works, *Places, Spaces, People and Wellbeing: Full Review*, March 2018, p.7.

29 *Ibid*, p.8.

The value of local knowledge

Another factor in allowing people to feel a sense of control is the accessibility of planning processes. At present, local knowledge and intelligence that could inform specific urban planning and design is rarely sought or is confined to controlled means of engagement. There do exist, however, great opportunities for participation that could benefit all in the creation of new homes and places. The compilation of local heritage lists suggest themselves as participatory projects. Suggestions for spending Community Infrastructure Levies (contributions made when developers build a new scheme) are rarely sought from the local community, but are a key feature of neighbourhood planning. Community benefits such as these remain little known planning terms or if known, perceived as arduous bureaucratic processes.

The National Design Guide suggests that people in local communities are among its audience. It also suggests techniques through which local communities might become more involved and ‘play a vital role in achieving well-designed places and buildings’: through ‘co-design, design workshops and other engagement techniques so that places and buildings reflect local community preferences, improve their quality of life and fit well into their surroundings.’³⁰ Assessing what is ‘good’ is mostly not addressed by residents. Various review and certification services exist, but these do not often directly involve the community. While there is, of course, a significant role for expertise there must also, on account of the deep and intrinsic knowledge people have about the place where they live, be a role for them too. As communities need accessible information to engage, so too do developers. Mechanisms are required for accessing local knowledge to ensure developers’ actions reflect and deliver on local priorities.

30 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *National Design Guide - Planning Practice for Beautiful, Enduring and Successful Places*, 2019, p.5.

Movement

Our ability to ‘get about’ is deeply affected by the place where we live. At a basic level we may wish for seamlessness and comfort, but everyday journeys can also bring enjoyment. Additionally, the benefits of ‘active travel’ can keep us healthy (and mobile). At all scales, design and planning impacts peoples’ opportunity to access resources and services (community, recreational, retail and workplaces).

Movement is heavily impacted by the scale and density of the places people live. It is uneven in its impact according to different individuals’ characteristics such as age or socio-economic status. Accessibility, or how easy it is to move around, is vital. Wayfinding and information, determining how easy places are to navigate or how to plan movement, are crucial to improving accessibility. The 8 to 80 cities movement addresses the requirements mobility by advocating for cities to be designed to meet the mobility needs of an eight-year-old and an 80-year-old as this will provide a better, healthier, safer and more enjoyable public realm for everyone.

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From roads to streets

Ideas about movement have undergone radical change, reversing a long period in which vehicle movement was a primary motivation in planning. In the Manual for Streets the government set out a key objective for streets to ‘make a positive contribution to quality of life.’³¹ Streets are again seen to play an essential civic function: ‘as vital components of residential areas and greatly affect the overall quality of life for local people.’³² Changes in the approach to street design recommended were ‘prioritising pedestrians; recognising the importance of the community function of streets as spaces for social interaction and promoting inclusivity by recognising the needs of people of all ages and abilities.’³³ Progressive urban transport strategies prioritise pedestrian movement.

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31 Department for Communities and Local Government and Department for Transport, Manual for Streets (London: Telford, 2007), p.7.

32 Ibid, p.6.

33 Ibid, p.13.

Testing and adapting to change

The way we move changes constantly and, in fact, movement may be the most changeable condition impacting quality of life. During the years between the first and last of the studies reviewed, there have been dramatic changes in peoples' mobility; note, for example, toddlers riding scooters to pre-school, electric bikes, uber, car-pooling. New communication technologies have made working from home more viable, reducing the need for regular commuting hours. Across many of the studies reviewed, there is also a growing understanding of connections between movement, or physical activity, and health. A large amount of data is being collected around these themes, but this was seldom referenced in reports by developers.

Surprisingly, monitoring how movement changes is not completely embedded in the processes which make places. In the *Manual for Streets* it is stated that for new developments and changes to existing streets, 'monitoring, for reasons other than for local planning authorities to report on progress towards the achievement of design standards, has seldom been undertaken to date but can be highly desirable. Monitoring can be used to see how completed schemes or existing street environments function in practice so that changes can be made to new designs, particularly innovative ones, at an early stage.'³⁴ Although the manual is now over a decade old, it is unclear in the material reviewed that requirements have changed. The expectation is that Geographical Information Systems will make monitoring and testing a more viable and fine-grained element in the process of making places for people which improve their quality of life by providing for easy and enjoyable movement for all.

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34 Ibid, p.25.

Belonging and togetherness

One of the desirable conditions of any place in which people live must be that they feel ‘at home’ in it. More than simply belonging, ‘social life’ also contributes significantly to quality of life and should be supported by design features and the broader environment in which one lives and works. In terms of belonging and togetherness, everyday ‘micro-interactions’ can be very powerful over the long-term. The ability to map a life course, education or career path is part of people’s ability to put down roots. Designing lifelong neighbourhoods and being part of a community able to express and perform traditions allows people to feel they have a claim to a space.

Displacement

Change and displacement are prominent issues during the current wave of housebuilding. Sense of belonging is fragile and a sense of displacement, which can be felt as families, communities and individuals are uprooted, profound. Retrofitting existing neighbourhoods or meeting the under-provision of key services, facilities or amenities is one process, but wholesale regeneration of an estate or whole area is the predominant mode of development. The Institute for Global Prosperity addresses the disruption and displacement that regeneration can cause. It identifies the importance of a prosperity narrative and the idea that how people perceive, describe and understand their condition and changes to it over time is crucial for understanding wellbeing, distinguishing between the foundations of happiness (security and affordability) and the outcomes of this (satisfaction, sense of worthwhileness and meaning in one’s life).³⁵

Resistance to change

A related condition occurs when new communities are located where there is one already in existence. The RIBA endorsement of *The Independent Review of Build Out Rates* states that the delivery of new housing could be accelerated if developers ‘were to offer much more housing of varying types, designs and tenures on the large sites that matched appropriately the desires of communities.’³⁶ The RIBA report *10 Characteristics of Places Where People Want to Live* cites lack of coordination with existing communities leading to delay in development because it ‘increases public concern about the impact of new homes on existing residents. If local people are to buy into our collective ambition to deliver successful places, they need to be secure in the knowledge that it won’t have an adverse impact on their quality of life.’³⁷

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35 Institute for Global Prosperity, *Rethinking Prosperity for London: When Citizens Lead Transformation*, May 2019, p. 17.

36 *The Independent Review of Build Out Rates* in, Royal Institute of British Architects, *10 Characteristics of Places Where People Want to Live*, 2018, p.4.

37 Royal Institute of British Architects, *10 Characteristics of Places Where People Want to Live*, 2018, p.6.

A similar approach informed the *National Design Guide*. The term quality of life is not directly referenced in the guide, but wellbeing is referenced concerning the importance of designing with a strong understanding of context. If new developments are ‘well-grounded in their locality’, they are ‘more likely to be acceptable to existing communities. Creating a positive sense of place helps to foster a sense of belonging and contributes to wellbeing, inclusion and community cohesion.’³⁸

Diversity and social inclusion

The contribution of feelings of belonging and togetherness includes issues of diversity and social inclusion. At government level, *The Casey Review* reported that ‘despite the benefits of social interactions between people from different backgrounds, many groups in society remain relatively segregated.’³⁹ It identified mixing as effective to reduce prejudice and increase trust and understanding between groups leading to a greater sense of togetherness and common ground. Lack of mixing, it identified, can increase community tensions and risk of conflict.⁴⁰ It concluded with the following recommendation: ‘Where we live can be both a cause and effect of isolation and segregation. The Government should work with local government to understand how housing and regeneration policies could improve or inhibit integration locally and promote best practice approaches.’⁴¹

Mixing is good to reduce prejudice and increase trust and understanding between groups leading to a greater sense of togetherness and common ground. Lack of mixing can increase community tensions and risk of conflict.

38 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *National Design Guide - Planning Practice for Beautiful, Enduring and Successful Places*, 2019, p.10.

39 Dame Louise Casey, *The Casey Review - A Review into Opportunity and Integration* (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2016) p.53.

40 Casey, *The Casey Review*, 2016 p.54.

41 Casey, *The Casey Review*, p.169.

Feeling cared for

As a process with different stages, our quality of life may have better or worse times. Feeling cared for in the places people live extends to all

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aspects of wellbeing directly addressing the aspect in which people are ‘supported’ by the place they live. In *World Class Places: The Government’s Strategy for Improving Quality of Place*, the government explicitly recognised the poverty reduction potential of investing in the quality of places.⁴² It acknowledged this was the case across a spectrum of interventions ranging from improving cleaning and maintenance of the public realm to

more ambitious projects to add green spaces and community facilities. At present, the precariousness of peoples’ economic lives is exacerbated by private rented housing and the ‘gig economy.’ In the long term, protection from natural disasters and the stability of resources might also become more critical. The right to remain in a place long-term and to maintain family and social networks offers protection and gives greater resilience in the face of misfortune. A level of security is vital to quality of life.

Levels of governance

Among the issues raised by the need to feel cared for is the relationship between central government and local concerns; ‘central government only has limited powers and capacity to influence quality of place, which is largely shaped at the local level.’⁴³ While current

Uncertainty about the quality of housing has given rise to many ‘quality assurance’ models of accreditation.

government design guidance recognises that, ‘good design promotes quality of life for the occupants and users of buildings’⁴⁴ its design guidance remains ‘top-level’: ‘Specific, detailed and measurable criteria for good design are most appropriately set out at the local level. They may take the form of local authority design guides or design codes to accompany planning applications.’⁴⁵ It is recognised at government level, however, that strategic planning, that is designating areas for regeneration,

42 Department for Communities and Local Government, and Media and Sport Department for Culture, *World Class Places: The Government’s Strategy for Improving Quality of Place*. (London: Communities and Local Government, 2009), p.6.

43 Cabinet Office, *Quality of Place - Improving the Planning and Design of the Built Environment: An Analysis of Issues and Opportunities* (Strategy Unit, 2009), p.105.

44 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *National Design Guide - Planning Practice for Beautiful, Enduring and Successful Places*, 2019, p.39.

45 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, *National Design Guide - Planning Practice for Beautiful, Enduring and Successful Places*, 2019, p.3.

intensification, industrial use or transport infrastructure, needs to become more responsive to conditions on the ground.⁴⁶

The RIBA has addressed the structure of UK government in relation to the places people live by suggesting ‘new devolution deals until there is a solution in place for every area of the country, and creating a pathway to deepening devolution deals to ensure powers can be as extensive as those held by the Greater London Authority.’ It also recommends, ‘creating an overarching National Spatial Strategy which includes consideration of how infrastructure and economic development can align with housing growth and the development of Garden Cities.’⁴⁷

Taking responsibility for quality

It may be that feeling cared for will result from new approaches by developers. *Wellbeing Principles for British Land* provides an initiative to integrate wellbeing across British Land’s placemaking practices, drawing insights from public health, neuroscience, behavioural economics and environmental psychology.⁴⁸ *New London Villages, Creating Community* by Berkeley offers a vision of private developers ‘becoming the catalysts for community creation and taking the lead, as opposed to any legislative or regulatory changes.’⁴⁹ *Designing for Social Sustainability, A Framework for Creating Thriving New Communities* describes the potential of community outreach workers as a tool for developers to create opportunities for people to meet and engage with residents and help to support strong social networks.⁵⁰

Upstream – Moving Planetary Health Upstream in Urban Development Decision Making demonstrates the value of economic valuation of social and health issues to relate and direct efforts and funding to areas with the potential for the largest impact. It proposes broadening the concept of risk in real estate development to include the potential for ill health and the economic consequences as being shouldered by developers, identifying that wellbeing policy overemphasises and places too much responsibility on individuals rather than the social, institutional or political contexts in which people live.⁵¹

The current house-building effort - both renewal and densification - aims to address a crisis in the provision of places to live. However, the catastrophic impact of the Grenfell Tower fire and questions about its construction, has created widespread uncertainty about the quality of housing. This lack of confidence has given rise to many ‘quality assurance’ models of accreditation. Some studies which lean towards a consumer choice perspective have no mention of quality of life or wellbeing.⁵² The more technical, Building Research Establishment (BRE) has introduced a national Home Quality Mark (HQM) for new housing, which seeks to ensure quality is not compromised but as with many such interventions, compliance is voluntary.

46 Department for Communities and Local Government and Media and Sport Department for Culture, *World Class Places: The Government’s Strategy for Improving Quality of Place*, p.37.

47 Royal Institute of British Architects, *10 Characteristics of Places Where People Want to Live*, 2018, p.10.

48 *Happy City, Wellbeing Principles for British Land* (British Land, 2015), p.2.

49 Kath Scanlon and others, *New London Villages - Creating Communities* (Berkeley Group, 2016), p. 38.

50 Saffron Woodcraft and others, *Design for Social Sustainability- A Framework for Creating Thriving New Communities* (The Young Foundation, 2012), p. 11.

51 UPSTREAM, *Moving Planetary Health Upstream in Urban Development Decision-Making – a Three-Year Pilot Research Project* (Wellcome Trust, 2018), p.9.

52 David Birkbeck and Stefan Kruczkowski, *Building for Life 12* (Building for Life Partnership), p.43.

Many developers have introduced measurements to address the quality of delivered schemes. *Creating Strong Communities, How to Measure the Social Sustainability of New Housing Developments* provides a tool to identify places most in need of investment to strengthen their social sustainability. It is also intended for use to quantify changes in social sustainability to demonstrate the impacts that developments have on the indicators. Its purpose is to shift the focus of housing developers away from the point of sale towards the future health and wellbeing of tenants.⁵³ It defines social sustainability as the extent to which a neighbourhood, in its physical design and the everyday uses of space, supports individual and collective wellbeing. It proposes that this is about the creation of strong communities and quality of life now and in the future.⁵⁴

A new role for the NHS

Perhaps one of the most encouraging developments over the past decade has been the involvement of the NHS (in partnership with government and third sector organisations) in contributing to the places people live in terms of quality of life. *Putting Health into Place* describes an NHS supported quality standard for healthy neighbourhoods, developed with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and Homes England. It seeks 'to further incentivise building health and wellbeing into developments.' Another NHS programme (in partnership with Public Health England, the Town and Country Planning Association, The King's Fund, PA Consulting and The Young Foundation) for *Healthy New Towns* indicates that the involvement of the health service has great potential. This identified ten demonstrator sites, creating a network among housing developers committed to prioritising health and wellbeing in their development sites.⁵⁵ Projects in these sites explored the 'how-to' of healthy place-making. A steering group was drawn from the health sector, local authorities, government, planning, development and academia contributed expertise. Although its potential is yet to be fully realised this new direction forms part of the NHS Long Term Plan and as such represents a significant opportunity.

53 Social Life, *Creating Strong Communities - How to Measure the Social Sustainability of New Housing Developments* (Berkeley Group, 2013), p.69.

54 *Ibid*, p.3.

55 NHS, *Putting Health into Place: Executive Summary*, p. 29.

Nature

The natural environment has always occupied an important space in villages, towns and cities as the green, park, garden square or heath providing enjoyment, restoration and offering therapeutic qualities. Access to nature, in various forms and intensity, plays a vital and well-acknowledged role in the relationship between quality of life and place. The extent to which nature is a feature of a place in which people live is, however, very dependent on the scale of settlement. Individually the aspiration for a house with a garden is a milestone and lies at the heart of the shape of the places people live in. The term ‘concrete jungle’ played on the absence of green space in post-war housing estates, as well as (perhaps not unrelated) social conditions.

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Widespread appreciation for the value of greenery

Recognition of the profound impacts on mental and physical health and wellbeing means the importance of natural spaces is central to government policy: ‘Nature contributes to the quality of a place, and to people’s quality of life, and it is a critical component of well-designed places.’⁵⁶ This is often termed green infrastructure, defined as, ‘a network of multifunctional green space, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits for local communities.’⁵⁷ Nature features highly in *Place Value: Place Quality and its Impact on Health, Social, Economic and Environmental Outcomes*, an extensive review of academic and other literature which reveals collective findings on health, economic, social and environmental benefits linked to the design, quality and hence value of place. The report aims to create findings useful to those considering the case for investing in place quality and lists ‘greenness in the built environment’ among its required elements.⁵⁸

Measuring the effect of nature?

The measurement of nature poses an interesting challenge, and this is evident in a report by the Canal and River Trust seeking to assess and quantify in monetary terms the value and benefits of visiting riversides, canals and waterways. It offers the following as forms of measurement: evaluative accounts – cognitive judgements how people feel about their lives, hedonic accounts – linked to experiences in the moment and eudemonic (conductive

56 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, National Design Guide - Planning Practice for Beautiful, Enduring and Successful Places, 2019, p.26.

57 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, National Design Guide - Planning Practice for Beautiful, Enduring and Successful Places, 2019, p.28.

58 Matthew Carmona, ‘Place Value: Place Quality and Its Impact on Health, Social, Economic and Environmental Outcomes’, *Journal of Urban Design*, 24.1 (2019), 1–48 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2018.1472523>>.

'Greener, more environmentally sustainable cities, towns and neighbourhoods will also be more attractive, enjoyable and healthier ones.' In this respect, climate change represents not just a threat but an opportunity – addressing it will help improve quality of life.

to happiness) accounts – a broader perception of purpose or meaning in one's life.⁵⁹ It also echoes the approach of the Quality of Life Foundation in conducting a complementary study to this review which allows people 'to assess their own wellbeing, thus avoiding paternalistic or top-down assumptions.'

Notable in the material reviewed is that very specific recommendations with relation to other natural conditions are limited. The UK Green Building Council report provides one rare example, *Health and Wellbeing in Homes*. An example is its examination into the design of windows: 'Light: Recommendations on the design of windows. Why is it important? Good quality and well-designed lighting contributes to the appearance and identity of a home, as well as, of course, to the wellbeing of its occupants.'⁶⁰

Sustainability, resilience and variety

An important development for nature and its impact on quality of life is its symbiosis with the ever-increasing drive towards greater sustainability. This was recognised when the government strategy *World Class Places* stated, 'of course, greener, more environmentally sustainable cities, towns and neighbourhoods will also be more attractive, enjoyable and healthier ones.'⁶¹ In this respect, climate change represents not just a threat but an opportunity – addressing it will help improve quality of life.⁶² Climate change mitigation will become more necessary to ensure quality of life. Water attenuation, cooling, shading, the need to increase biodiversity all have roles to play. It is worth understanding that recent studies highlight worrying inequities in the likely impact of climate events in the places people live.

Engaging with nature

Crucial to the significant wellbeing implications and benefits of the natural environment is the possibility for interaction rather than the provision of an overly designed space that encourages a 'look but don't touch' approach. Spaces that can be flexible and support a range of activities, foster a sense of ownership and offer scope for local management, imaginative play, gardening and community events were shown to be the most beneficial for the widest range of residents.⁶³ These findings reflect recent shifts in approaches to landscaping providing designs with wilder, more ecologically-supportive and biodiverse planting becoming increasingly popular with low maintenance species prioritised.

59 Canal and River Trust, *Assessing the Wellbeing Impacts of Waterways Usage in England and Wales*, 2018, p.2.

60 UK Green Building Council, *Health and Wellbeing in Homes*, 2016, p.19.

61 Department for Communities and Local Government, and Media and Sport Department for Culture, *World Class Places: The Government's Strategy for Improving Quality of Place*. (London: Communities and Local Government, 2009), p.6.

62 Department for Communities and Local Government and Media and Sport Department for Culture, *World Class Places: The Government's Strategy for Improving Quality of Place*. (London: Communities and Local Government, 2009), p.25.

63 Social Life, *L&Q Shared Outdoor Spaces, What Works?*, 2015, p. 4.

Wild meadows and the conversion of post-industrial spaces, either intentionally or through neglect, into green spaces, as with the seminal example of the High Line in New York, reflects this new design ethos. The wellbeing implications of informal natural spaces include their potential to be more accessible, diffuse and interactive, and offer opportunities for formal and informal learning.

Enjoyment

The enjoyment people feel in moments of expression and creativity are vital to their quality of life. Self-expression but also, importantly, communal-expression are both fundamental parts of identity formation which can connect people. Traditional and familiar settings, from playgrounds and bandstands to concert halls and galleries are essential elements of the places in which people live. Fairs and festivals mark events and strengthen a sense of togetherness. Self-improvement can also be found in educational or creative activities. The availability of leisure is a strong indicator of economic inequality and this can be mitigated by the places in which people live.⁶⁴

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Shared spaces

Spaces for expression need not be separate elements within the places people live but integral parts of it. Cultural activity and its capacity to engender civic pride is suggested in current policy. The environment in which people live needs to support places for such expression. These might include both community rooms and outdoor spaces. A number of studies recognised that, ‘community management and maintenance of shared amenities – such as halls and gardens – is more likely to be a success when the future community is involved in the design process from the start.’⁶⁵

A study by Social Life for the developer L&Q called *Shared Outdoor Spaces, What Works?* examined issues and opportunities for the outdoor shared spaces at four new developments in London and found overall satisfaction high, but that spaces were not well used with a high number of residents, predominantly social tenants, unaware of their access to these spaces. The study found a need for more flexible, adaptable and inclusive spaces for everyone to enjoy, in particular, children.⁶⁶

Feeling pride in any creation is enjoyable, and it may also be easier to achieve if people have more hand in the production of the places they live; consultation and engagement, on the other hand, imply a more passive form of participation.

64 Office for National Statistics, Personal and Economic Wellbeing in the UK, 2019, p.16.

65 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, National Design Guide - Planning Practice for Beautiful, Enduring and Successful Places, 2019, p.160.

66 L&Q Social Life, L&Q Shared Outdoor Spaces: What Works?, 2015.

Making engaging and involving places

By way of contrast, *The Value of Good Design* records that in a European survey of people's attitude towards town centres it was found that by far the highest incidence of disliking town centres was recorded in surveys of British towns.⁶⁷ Feeling pride in any creation is enjoyable, and it may also be easier to achieve if people have more hand in the production of the places they live; consultation and engagement, on the other hand, imply a more passive form of participation.

The RIBA report, *10 Characteristics of Places Where People Want to Live*, draws attention to open-source architecture and other movements that empower communities to take a leading role in the delivery of the homes they want and need. The aim is to increase access and affordability to well-designed places. Capturing the public imagination also requires a greater effort to engage the wider community. This must be done in a way that allows people to genuinely contribute to shaping the homes in which they will eventually live.⁶⁸

Traditional buildings are also identified as having something to offer in relation to people's capacity to creatively engage with them: 'despite their relatively low-tech construction and materials, older buildings have often proved exceptionally adaptable to changing technologies and demands. Edwardian terraces have been adapted into flats and sculleries converted into family kitchens. Warehouses have been converted into offices and flats. It is important that new developments display the same adaptability.'⁶⁹ The adaptability, or customisation, of buildings and places might also offer clues to engagement: 'Built heritage is everywhere / People value it /... and are actively engaged with it.'⁷⁰

The enabling role of authorities

Several studies identified that authorities have a role in encouraging events in the places people live. The *Happy Cities Agenda* by the Global Happiness Policy Council references the 'enabling' capacity of councils 'by providing for example safety and organising events it opens up the opportunity for people to appropriate the space and make it their own, leading to spill-over benefits like richer culture and economic growth.'⁷¹ It recommends, 'city managers should focus on getting people together, and catalysing their interaction [...] using data and innovative methods to attend to the social needs of the city, and ultimately people's happiness.'⁷²

67 Centre for Architecture and the Built Environment, *The Value of Good Design - How Buildings and Spaces Create Economic and Social Value*, p.9.

68 Royal Institute of British Architects, *10 Characteristics of Places Where People Want to Live*, 2018, p.12.

69 Cabinet Office, *Quality of Place - Improving the Planning and Design of the Built Environment: An Analysis of Issues and Opportunities* (Strategy Unit, 2009), p.28.

70 Cabinet Office, *Quality of Place - Improving the Planning and Design of the Built Environment: An Analysis of Issues and Opportunities* (Strategy Unit, 2009), p.32.

71 Global Happiness Policy Council, *Happy Cities Agenda*, p.134.

72 *Ibid*, p.135.

Conclusion

This report reveals that design alone will not be enough. This is because quality of life is variable and the processes by which places come to be and develop over time are complex. New actors, different governance structures, innovative financing techniques, new forms of ownership and management all have a part to play in addressing the underprovision of housing and embedding quality of life considerations into the planning and construction of new housing and neighbourhoods

The overarching goal of this review has been to understand how the people who build the places we live might incorporate quality of life perspectives into their diverse business and operational models. A key insight, across the material reviewed, is that quality of life was mentioned far more in the preface and foreword of reports than in passages concerning specific recommendations and desirable outcomes. In other words, while connections between place and quality of life are understood, intervening in places on the basis of quality of life is far from straightforward. The practice of measuring how well different interventions perform in relation to quality of life is a first step because despite the growing interest in the topic the range of indices or measures that are used to quantify quality of life are inadequate. This is often because data at the required scale is gathered from wider

While connections between place and quality of life are understood, intervening in places on the basis of quality of life is far from straightforward.

surveys. A further challenge is the lack of long-term studies and this undermines the ability to establish causation between the design of the built environment and quality of life.

More study is required into the specific mechanics of establishing a new community, for example, into trust of neighbours, daily conversations and the sharing and mutually

beneficial relationships that can emerge and how they are fostered, maintained and encouraged. What seems to be missing is a clear and precise definition of what works, how social networks can be fostered and encouraged by the places people live and, in the case of entirely new neighbourhoods, how communities form? Although studies pointed to the importance for mental wellbeing, and effectively life expectancy and active ageing, of strong social ties and networks, they did not reveal the efficacy of specific interventions.

In this light, the suggestion made that ‘when a new community infrastructure intervention for boosting social relations is commissioned or introduced, it should be rigorously evaluated using robust methodology’ offers an important direction for future work. Quantitative evaluations ideally should use repeated measures and a comparator group, and use validated tools to measure outcomes. Particular fields lacking are ‘events; place-making; alternative use of space; urban regeneration and community development.’⁷³ In the studies reviewed, lack of long-term evidence was commonly cited.⁷⁴

What seems to be missing is a clear and precise definition of what works, how social networks can be fostered and encouraged by the places people live and in the case of entirely new neighbourhoods, how communities form?

73 What Works Centre for Wellbeing, Places, Spaces, People and Wellbeing: Full Review, March 2018, p.8.

74 Ibid, p.5.

It is essential to find new ways to evaluate in order for the process to improve. As was indicated across the material reviewed the stakes are uniquely high in the case of the places people live. Given opportunities in data collection, however, it is now possible to consider who does, or should, conduct evaluation. *Rethinking Prosperity for London, When Citizens Lead Transformation* by the Institute for Global Prosperity, advocates for a new direction. It offers the first citizen-led 'prosperity index'; a local, place-based and community approach to measurement to reveal a more nuanced perspective, demonstrating how a broader idea of evaluation might give further definition and clarity to the term 'quality of life'. It suggests that evaluation, including the entire place in which people conduct their lives, through time, could establish a process in which individuals can participate in qualifying, and hence improving, their lives supported by the places in which they live.

While measuring quality of life to this extent would represent a significant undertaking, the benefit is that understanding, monitoring and reacting to quality of life differences, deficiencies or inequities across communities might begin to unpick what particular people value and how to meet these desires in a more efficient way. In this way what seems to be missing – a direct line of communication with residents – might provide the possibility to secure health-supporting, valuable and resilient communities now and for the future.

Evaluation, including the entire place in which people conduct their lives, through time, could establish a process in which individuals can participate in qualifying, and hence improving, their lives supported by the places in which they live.

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