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Child-Friendly Cities and Communities: opportunities and challenges

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ABSTRACT

With greater numbers of children living in urban areas, increasing attention is being paid to Child-Friendly Cities (CFCs) and their potential for transforming local government decision-making to be more inclusive of the needs and interests of children. This paper draws on interviews with CFC practitioners at both local and national levels in 9 cities across 7 countries, to explore the opportunities and challenges that arise in planning and actualising CFC programmes. The data show CFCs can reshape local government decision-making processes, allowing for greater opportunities for children's civic participation, through greater parity of children's interests and voices. However, CFC practitioners also encounter challenges related to uncertain conceptualisations of what makes a city 'child-friendly', complex governance structures, lack of political will from external partners and intergenerational tensions. In addition, age-based fragmentation has the potential to further marginalise the interests of children and young people in key policy areas.

1. Introduction

Since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989, there has been increasing interest in how children's rights can be achieved at local and national levels. While national governments are usually responsible for actualising children's rights, local governments also play an essential role in ensuring rights are realised in a way that makes meaningful changes to the daily lives of children and young people (Riggio 2002). With more people now residing in urban areas (expected to reach 60% of the population by 2030 (Brown et al. 2019; UNICEF 2018)), researchers and policymakers are paying greater attention to the experiences of children living in these areas, the specific challenges they face, and the opportunities these areas present for overcoming the civic deficits often associated with childhood, such as marginalisation and lack of opportunities to participate in civic life.

The growing interest in how municipal decision-makers and planners can better meet the needs and interests of children has led to increasing attention paid to the concept of the Child-Friendly City (CFC). Whilst not a new concept, however, understandings of what exactly a CFC is or should look like is 'still in its infancy' (Wilhelmsen et al. 2023, 274). Existing literature, however, emphasises the CFC as a city, community or town that embeds the civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights of the child, as defined in the CRC, into all decision-making processes and services that affect children (Riggio 2002; van der Graaf 2020). This recognition that CFCs should be guided

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by the principles of the CRC is reflected across the literature on CFCs, 'illustrating the prominent notion of a CFC as a place where children's rights are fully respected' (Cordero-Vinueza, Niekerk, and van Dijk 2023, 2).

Whilst the idea that CFCs actualise children's rights is shared across the literature, how rights should be actualised and which rights should be prioritised is less clear. Some frameworks and guidelines have been developed to offer guidance to CFC practitioners on how to go about actualising a CFC. Brown et al. suggest CFCs are achieved by 'providing space for play,' 'connection[s] to nature,' 'nurturing child-care-giver interactions', 'independent mobility' and opportunities to participate in 'processes of urban policy-making and design' (Brown et al. 2019, 4). Biggs and Carr emphasise 'features of the built and natural environment that can advance children's rights, including parks and play spaces and children's services' (2015, 101).

To address some of this uncertainty, UNICEF launched its Child-Friendly Cities and Communities initiative in 1996, which sets out frameworks and guidelines for cities and communities wanting to embark on the journey of becoming 'child-friendly'. Their framework is said to be implemented by 38 countries 'reach[ing] up to 30 million children' (UNICEF 2018, 8) making UNICEF a key entity promoting CFCs globally (Cordero-Vinueza, Niekerk, and van Dijk 2023, 2). UNICEF define CFCs as cities and communities that value and respect children and take their voices and needs into account when making decisions:

> 'A city, town, community or any system of local governance committed to fulfilling child rights as articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is a community where the voices, needs, priorities and rights of children are an integral part of public policies, programmes and decisions. Thus a Child-Friendly City is a city that is fit for all.' (UNICEF 2018, 8).

Their criteria outline 5 additional objectives which state CFCs should ensure children 'are valued, respected and treated fairly', have 'their voice, needs and priorities heard and taken into account' in decisions affecting them, have 'access to quality and essential services', 'live in a safe, secure and clean environment' and have 'opportunities to enjoy family life, play and leisure'. The framework is described as an 'evolving approach' (UNICEF 2018) where the objective is to 'demonstrate solid and progressive results' over many years (UNICEF 2018, 12).

The practical applications of CFCs will be explored in this paper through an analysis of the accounts of CFC practitioners, across different cities in Europe and the US, working to transform their cities into becoming child-friendly. This paper contributes to the existing literature on CFCs by exploring how practitioners interpret and understand what makes a city child-friendly and by exploring the opportunities and challenges practitioners encounter in adopting a child-friendly approach to municipal governance. Through an exploration of the strategic and practical elements of creating CFCs, this paper will reflect upon whether CFC programmes are capable of addressing the civic deficits currently experienced by children and young people growing up in urban areas. By analysing the accounts of practitioners and policymakers, this paper aims to provide insights into the practical applications of CFCs to guide policy development and to offer recommendations for future research.

This paper begins by exploring existing literature on the perceived civic deficits that children living in cities currently face, including deficits related to the urban environment (2.1) and deficits related to the extent to which children's views and interests are currently taken into consideration by local policymakers (2.2). Following this, Lockwood's (1996) theory of civic stratification will be introduced as a potential lens for understanding the extent to which CFC programmes can remedy these deficits and advance children's rights to and within the city (3). The research methodology (4) will be introduced; including an overview of the cities and countries interviewed as part of this research. The findings sections (5.1–5.4) will explore some of the key opportunities and challenges encountered by the practitioners when attempting to actualise CFCs in their unique contexts. These sections explore how practitioners conceptualise CFCs (5.1) and the limitations constraining their conceptualisations (5.2). Common to all conceptualisations of CFCs is that they necessitate a transformation of local government processes to better account for the needs and interests of children. Two additional findings

sections explore the challenges and opportunities of trying to enact this transformation by ensuring children's interests and needs are considered by adult partners in all decisions affecting them (5.3) and ensuring children have meaningful opportunities to input and participate in local government policy-making and planning (5.4). Having explored the experiences of practitioners attempting to actualise CFC programmes on the ground, and across different contexts, this paper concludes (6) with a discussion of the extent to which CFCs can remedy the civic deficits associated with childhood, outlined at the beginning of the paper. Drawing on the work of Lockwood (1996), I argue CFCs can reshape local government decision-making processes, allowing for greater opportunities for children's civic participation, through greater parity of children's interests and voices. However, CFC practitioners also encounter challenges related to uncertain conceptualisations of what makes a city 'child-friendly', complex governance structures, lack of political will from external partners and intergenerational tensions. In addition, age-based fragmentation has the potential to further marginalise the interests of children and young people in key policy areas.

2.1. Children and urban living

Urban living is becoming the most common living experience, with research showing that by 2030 around 60% of the world's population will be living in urban areas (Brown et al. 2019; UNICEF 2018). Whilst outcomes for people living in cities are generally better than in rural areas, the experiences of living in urban areas are highly unequal resulting in what UNICEF call the 'urban paradox' (UNICEF 2018). Children are particularly vulnerable to disadvantage within cities as cities are designed to support the 'production and consumption of goods' and those 'who cannot translate their needs into market demand and are largely left out' (Kingston et al. 2007, 97).

Increasing urbanisation has led to significant interest in city living from a range of academic disciplines including geography, politics and sociology. There is also research which focuses on children's experiences of growing up in cities (Churchman 2003) and particularly their experience of the built environments (Bourke 2014; Elsley 2004; Woolley 2006). This research mostly focuses on the deficits of city living for children addressing concerns such as poverty and economic inequalities (Malone 2015), health outcomes (Woolcock, Gleeson, and Randolph 2010) and lack of access to appropriate public spaces (Gill 2008). The heterogeneous nature of cities also means additional inequalities are faced according to race, age, gender and disability (Glaeser, Resseger, and Tobio 2009).

The literature on cities also argues for their potential to be reimagined in a way that improves outcomes for both children and adults alike. Kingston et al. (2007) for example, write 'they also provide opportunities for positive childhood experiences and can be made into 'nests' for healthy development' (2007, 97). David Harvey challenges us to rethink our current understanding of the city and recognise our abilities to recreate 'a new urban commons, a public sphere of democratic participation' (2003, 941). He writes the 'freedom to make and remake ourselves and our cities is one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights' (1–2).

2.2. Children and local government

Historically, children have been marginalised in political processes at both national and local levels, with children often being consigned to the 'private' sphere of the home (Cohen 2005). However, since the widespread ratification of the UNCRC, there has been a greater interest in ensuring the needs and interests of children are considered in decision-making and they have greater opportunities to participate in political processes (see Augsberger et al. 2018; Collins, Augsberger, and Gecker 2016; Nairn, Sligo, and Freeman 2006 for discussion on children's participation in local government). Riggio, writes 'local government is best positioned to translate national-level commitments into practise suitable to the local conditions' and without action from local government 'state-level commitments risk remaining mere declarations of intent' (Riggio 2002, 49). Consequently, there has been an increase in the number of youth parliaments and youth councils

(Matthews 2001) enabling children to input into matters of the community. Empirical research into the impact of such interventions, however, raises some important concerns around representation, accessibility, adultism and tokenism (Feringa and Tonkens 2017; Hill et al. 2004). Moreover, the picture of overall child participation is said to be bleak (see for example Phillips 2010) and the extent to which children's interests and voices are respected varies geographically. Children's participation in local government policy development is usually understood through a lens of education or their development as 'adults-in-formation' (Cohen 2005).

The right of children to participate in decision-making processes affecting them has received significant attention in the literature (Nairn, Sligo, and Freeman 2006), with a particular emphasis on child participation in the planning process (Freeman 2006) because of its perceived ability to rectify current power imbalances which currently disadvantage children. Recognising the complex and paradoxical nature of city living for children, central to all conceptualisations of CFCs in the literature (see introduction) is the consensus that children living in CFCs should have their interests and needs considered by adults in all decisions affecting them and they should have the opportunity to participate or provide input into these decisions.

3. Theoretical framework

To understand the extent to which CFCs are capable of rebalancing the civic deficits often associated with childhood, this paper examines CFCs through the lens of citizenship. David Lockwood's (1996) work on *civic stratification* examines rights-based divisions within society and why particular groups of people do not have the same rights as others but also how rights can be contested, expanded or even taken away. Civic Stratification, then can be a helpful framework for understanding the current partial citizenship status of children and the potential for CFCs to expand their citizenship through greater access to their rights. Lockwood understands civic stratification as a system of inequality between the state and individuals, whereby rights are restricted or enhanced in practice, which allows for inequalities related to age, gender, and ethnicity to be 'tolerated or rejected' (Lockwood 1996, 531). There are four types of *civic stratification*: civic exclusion, civic expansion, civic gain, and civic deficit. *Civic exclusion* refers to the denial of rights (e.g. children being excluded from the ability to vote), whilst *civic expansion* refers to the granting of rights (e.g. children gaining rights through the CRC). In this paper, however, I will focus on the more fluid concepts of *civic gain* and *civic deficit*. Whilst civic exclusion and expansion, then, refer to the formal granting and denial of rights for children, *civic gain* and *civic deficit* enable us to examine how children's rights, already granted, can be enhanced or restricted in practice. Lydia Morris, developed on the work of Lockwood to explore the citizenship of migrants, defines civic gain and civic deficit as a process 'whereby rights formally held can be enhanced or restricted in practice' (2003, 81). This, she argues is because 'rights are rarely self-evident or absolute' (Morris 2003, 96), they are nationally variable, subject to discretion and reinterpretation and 'are tied into often complex systems of differentiation that serve as both a statement of rights and as a basis for limiting the claims of some groups' (Morris 2003, 96).

Age categories can be difficult to define and understandings of who counts as a 'child' for the purposes of CFCs varies across the literature and, as will be shown, the understandings of the CFC practitioners. For this paper, I will be using the CRC's definition, to define a child as any person below the age of 18. However, it is important to note that for most of the CFC programmes, there were no clear boundaries for determining who should be considered a 'child' for the CFC but age boundaries were sometimes placed on specific actions related to CFC programmes (e.g. youth council members needed to be within a particular age range).

4. Methodology

The findings of this paper are drawn from semi-structured interviews with 20 people involved in the creation of CFCs at local, national and international levels. These interviews include practitioners

from 9 different cities, across 7 different countries: Finland, France, Germany, Switzerland, England, Wales and the US.

All of the participating cities, other than Leeds, were attempting to achieve their goal of becoming a CFC by applying the UNICEF framework. Whilst the details of the UNICEF programme differed across countries, UNICEF has made some attempts to standardise the initiative across contexts. The UNICEF framework requires local governments to undertake a Situational Analysis to assess the needs of children within the municipality and to establish a baseline against which progress can be monitored, develop a fully costed Action Plan which outlines actions and indicators of success, implement their programme of activities, and apply a monitoring and evaluation framework (see UNICEF 2018). Each cycle of the framework is expected to last 5 years and cities are expected to renew their programme after this time. UNICEF describe their framework as an 'evolving approach' (UNICEF 2018, 28) which is achieved over several cycles of the programme. Leeds has opted to develop their own framework, which involved an analysis of the views of thousands of children living in Leeds resulting in the development of '12 wishes' for the city (see. https://www.leeds.gov.uk/childfriendlyleeds/cfl-the-story/12-wishes)

Countries were selected based on their differing attitudes to children's rights and on their different relationships between the state and civil society (see Powell and Muddiman 2024 for further information). In all of these countries, except for England, one city was selected as a case study. These case studies were chosen based on the length of undertaking their CFC programmes to ensure a mix of cities at different stages of the programme, whether the city had developed a plan for their programme (the Action Plan for those part of the UNICEF initiative) and conversations with the UNICEF country-level team discussing contextual information, such as population size and approach to developing CFCs. This was important to ensure case study cities have already identified goals and objectives and have made some efforts towards becoming a CFC. The research includes interviews with three English cities and an additional interview with global UNICEF personnel. Table 1 provides a summary of case study cities and their CFC status at the time of the interview.

A purposive sampling framework was used to recruit the practitioners. CFC teams were either contacted directly or through UNICEF national offices. All of the interviews were in English, other

Table 1. Summary of participating cities and practitioners.

City	Population	CFC Status (At the time of Interview)	Participant Overview
Hämeenlinna, Finland.	68,000	Awarded UNICEF CFC status in 2013. Recently launched their fourth Action Plan.	One interview with Hämeenlinna. CFC coordinator.
Lyon, France.	495,000	Awarded UNICEF CFC Status in 2014. Implementing their second Action Plan.	Four interviews with; Two with UNICEF France, and two with Lyon CFC Coordinators.
Regensberg, Germany.	165,000	Awarded UNICEF CFC status following their 2014 Action Plan, their second Action Plan ran from 2019-2022.	Three interviews with; UNICEF Germany, the coordinators for CFC Germany, and the Regensberg CFC coordinator.
Bern, Switzerland.	130,000	Awarded UNICEF CFC status following their 2017–2020 Action Plan. Now delivering the second Action Plan for the years 2021-2024.	Four interviews with; UNICEF Switzerland CFC coordinator, Bern CFC coordinator, FAGER initiative coordinator, and Academic specialising in Children's Rights in Bern.
Cardiff, Wales (UK)	350,000	Applying for UNICEF CFC status at the time of interview. Implementing the first Action Plan.	Two interviews with Cardiff CFC coordinators.
Leeds, England (UK)	790,000	Part of the UNICEF Pilot but now acting independently of UNICEF.	One interview was carried out with the CFC coordinator.
Liverpool, England (UK)	480,000	Applying for UNICEF CFC status at the time of interview. Implementing the first Action Plan.	One interview with Liverpool CFC Coordinator.
Redbridge, England (UK)	300,000	Applying for UNICEF CFC status at the time of interview. Implementing the first Action Plan.	One interview with Redbridge CFC Coordinator
Houston, Texas (US)	2.3 million	Part of a one-year pilot scheme to launch the US CFC initiative.	Two interviews with; UNICEF US Coordinator and Houston CFC Coordinator.

than the French interviews, which were in French and translated. Data was analysed using a thematic analysis, whereby data was thematically coded and then these themes were used to identify similarities and differences across the different case study cities. Whilst it was necessary to retain the city information, as context is an essential part of understanding CFCs, practitioners have been anonymised and demographic information on the practitioners has not been included as in most cases the practitioners were not acting in an individual capacity but were instead speaking on behalf the CFC programmes within their city. Ethical approval for the research was provided by the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee on 19 May 2020.

A challenge of conducting this research was ensuring the variations across contexts were accounted for as different countries have different approaches to CFCs as well as differing governmental structures, resources and attitudes to children's rights. Cities also differed in terms of who the 'key players' were in implementing the programmes and a flexible approach needed to be adopted to the recruitment of participants. This means in some countries and cities, more participants were interviewed than in others. In all countries, however, we attempted to interview country-level UNICEF personnel to gain an understanding of the process and accreditation within that context and the practitioners responsible for overseeing the CFC programmes within their city or community. In some contexts, interviews were undertaken with people responsible for implementing particular aspects of the strategic plans. Additional data was also gathered through documents including UNICEF CFC guidelines (at global and national levels), city Action Plans, Situational Analysis and other relevant documentation provided by participants. This documentary data was used to provide further contextualisation to the interviews, often providing richer detail on the backgrounds and strategic plans of the different programmes. These documents needed to be translated for many of the countries where English was not an official language (France, Switzerland, Finland and Germany).

5.1. Conceptualising Child-Friendly Cities and Communities

The introduction of this paper explored how CFCs are conceptualised in the literature, this section draws on the collected data to understand how practitioners defined CFCs in their unique contexts.

Similarly to the literature, many of the practitioners demonstrated uncertainties with what a CFC should look like in practice. When asked 'what would make your city child-friendly?' the majority of practitioners demonstrated difficulties in summarising what it was they were trying to accomplish through the programme and most deferred to standardised criteria, such as the UNICEF framework. Many spoke of specific plans and actions they were undertaking through their CFC programmes, rather than the overall objectives of the programme. Interest was not in conceptualising a CFC in a definitive sense but in the identification of smaller, specific changes that when enacted cumulatively improve the everyday lives of children. In this sense, the CFC was not understood attainable state but instead as a continuous process of change and improvement.

There was a shared consensus across all of the practitioners that CFCs should be guided by a rights-based approach and efforts to become a CFC required local governments to transform their decision-making processes to be more inclusive of children and young people. These transformations were described by several practitioners as a 'cultural shift' or 'culture change' in how decisions are made. The city coordinator for Liverpool (England) summarised, 'I think a huge part of the child-friendly city, is a willingness and a commitment to change what you're doing, a culture change'.

Practitioners believed they would have accomplished this transformation when decision-makers at all levels of local government demonstrated they respected and valued the needs and interests of children in their decision-making process and children's participation was sought in any decisions

affecting them. This was summarised by the country-level coordinator for Germany, responding to a question on what a city child-friendly:

> First, a Child-Friendly City is a city that has representative participation structures for young people and has trained staff to accompany these structures. Second, the best interests of the child and children's rights are known not only in the youth department but also in other departments. Third, the administration has a data-base of knowledge about the different situations of children and young people in the municipality. (Country-level coordinator for CFC Germany)

There was also a sense that developing cities that meet the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, would also benefit people of all other ages and cities as a whole. This view was shared by the UNICEF team responsible for setting global criteria:

> To put children at the centre of the city's development, which I think is going to benefit everyone ultimately. For me, when the development of a city is looked at from a child's lens and when improvements are made to the quality of life in the city, on the basis that it's going to benefit the youngest residents. Then this benefits everyone. (Global UNICEF team)

This belief that actions which benefit children provide universal benefits was repeated in the majority of the interviews. Several of the practitioners talked about overlaps with other initiatives such as dementia-friendly cities, baby-friendly cities and women-friendly cities. There was a particular conflation between child-friendly cities and green cities, with many of the participants holding the belief that greener cities were also more child-friendly cities. In this sense, there was the potential for slippage between these different initiatives as they might overlap and interconnect.

Despite shared understandings of the need for a CFC to invoke a 'cultural shift', there was uncertainty about what actions needed to be undertaken to realise their goal. Differences were also observed in how the scheme was understood across the different national contexts. For example, the cities of Regensberg (Germany) and Bern (Switzerland) had a greater emphasis on the built environment and children's access to public space, whereas almost all of the other cities had a greater focus on addressing gaps in services e.g. goals related to improving mental and physical health (Hameenlinna, Lyon, Bern, Cardiff, Leeds, Liverpool, Redbridge, Houston), educational outcomes (Lyon, Bern, Cardiff, Leeds) and safety (Bern, Cardiff, Leeds, Liverpool, Redbridge, Houston). This can be explained by cities responding to the needs of their context, so despite using shared frameworks, the actions taken to realise these goals looked very different across the contexts depending on what was understood as being most important but also on what they chose not to address through the programmes.

5.2. The limitations of these conceptualisations

Practitioners' conceptualisations of what makes a city child-friendly were strongly influenced by the unique contexts in which they operate. These contexts meant different cities had different starting points when it came to understanding the child-friendly city and these different starting points influenced the priorities of the practitioners.

In particular, conceptualisations were felt to be determined by the wider economic-political contexts and some practitioners were implementing CFC programmes in cities that already had greater child-right supporting structures and laws in place at the national level than others. In Wales, for example, children's rights are already written into law (Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011), there is a children's commissioner, a future generations commissioner and a children's parliament. This pre-existing commitment to children's rights meant the child-friendly Cardiff team was well-funded and well-staffed, in comparison to many of the other cities, where there was often only one person responsible for overseeing the programme. Cities based in contexts with greater pre-existing support for children's rights were also more likely to have a greater number of resources to enable them to carry out a more ambitious programme of activities. Likewise, cities had different population sizes and different demographics in terms of age and wealth distribution.

The CFC programme for Houston (Texas, US) was operating within a fundamentally different context to the other case study cities. The US is the only nation-state (and the only country in our research) that has not ratified the UNCRC because children's rights are often positioned in debates as being at odds with the rights of parents (Bartholet 2010). This meant coordinators in Houston were starting from a very different starting point from other CFCs in this study:

> There was not an understanding of children's rights, and even the rights context can be very polarising. So many of the accountability mechanisms or positions at different levels of government in other countries don't exist here. (CFC Houston, Texas (US))

The CFC coordinator for Houston explained how they were using the programme as a framework to demonstrate to policymakers 'that the CRC and child rights approach is an effective, tested approach' and to make the case for why children should be included in day-to-day decision-making. So, whilst CRC ratification was 'ultimately something' that the team aspired to 'when the stars align', the UNICEF framework enabled them to put in place some essential foundational work towards the implementation of children's rights at the local level, despite this not being supported at the national level.

The support of the state in enabling CFCs was discussed in most of the interviews, with the majority of practitioners speaking on the challenges they had experienced in trying to affect change in areas in which they had no authority and how their actions were often limited by their competencies. This dilemma was described by the CFC coordinator for Redbridge (England):

> So, the question we had to develop to protect ourselves [when writing the action plan] was do we have permission to put the action in? […] and that was a big problem that we don't have the resources and we don't have the authority, to put in actions for other people. (City-Level coordinator for CFC Redbridge, England)

CFC coordinators for Regensberg (Germany) and Bern (Switzerland) both raised education as an example of an area where they were only able to make limited changes in specific areas. For example, they could change courtyards and school interiors but had no authority to change classroom-level activities such as how teachers provided feedback to children, which was an area of concern identified by children in Bern. They described it as challenging when asking children for their input, as the children would often identify concerns outside of the local government's political remit.

The limitations on the abilities of local governments to make particular changes can explain why cities more frequently focused on goals related to increasing respect and recognition of children's rights, as goals related to economic inequalities and the redistribution of wealth were often outside of their remit. For example, almost all the cities in the research discussed economic inequalities in their cities and how these inequalities produced uneven outcomes for children. However, none of the cities had included in their action plans any measures to address the structural conditions that led to the development of these issues. Instead, it was more common for them to include actions to treat the symptoms of inequality in children in specific contexts, for example improving health outcomes for children living in poverty, reducing inequalities in emergency preparedness (Houston) and improving the distribution of play spaces across cities (Bern, Regensberg).

The data show that whilst CFC programmes intend to ensure children's rights are implemented in the local contexts, the role of the state in creating environments that enable the rights of the child is still essential to the process. CFCs which had been established in countries less supportive of children's rights experienced a higher number of barriers and challenges than CFCs established in countries with greater state support for children's rights.

5.3. The challenges and opportunities of embedding children's rights in local government and beyond

Central to practitioners' conceptualisations of how cities can be transformed to better meet the needs of its youngest citizens was the belief that a child's rights approach was embedded within

all layers of the city so children's interests were being considered in all decisions affecting them. For the city of Regensberg (Germany), this involved requiring departments to complete a report for each decision detailing how children had been accounted for in the decisions. Other cities, however, took a less formalised approach and instead opted for partnerships across local government departments and other key organisations operating within the city e.g. nonprofit organisations, universities, private companies and residents. These partnerships were felt to be essential for ensuring actions across the city were undertaken cohesively and with a child's rights approach in mind.

For all of the CFC practitioners, it was agreed all departments of local government needed to make decisions in a way that actualised children's rights and not only the department in which the CFC team was based (often children's services or education). Departments that may not have previously had any obligations to children as a distinct age group needed to consider how the decisions they made would affect children. This often necessitated greater cross-departmental working described by the CFC country-level coordinator as 'getting all these different people around the table together' was a 'new way of working together'.

External partners frequently supported the development and implementation of action plans and contributed to strategic planning groups. In countries where there was a greater reliance by the state on third-sector organisations (e.g. Wales, England, UK, US) to provide services to support children and young people, nonprofit organisations such as charities working at local or national levels to advance children's rights, protect children's welfare and safety, and improve children's well-being were often important partners. In these countries, third-sector organisations supported CFC objectives (e.g. Mental Health America provided mental health training to young people in Texas as part of their CFC programme) and were also important partners for connecting CFC practitioners with children through their preexisting networks, particularly those from vulnerable or marginalised groups (e.g. Cardiff CFC team worked closely with nonprofit organisations supporting children from vulnerable and marginalised backgrounds to ensure their needs were fully recognised in the CFC programme). Universities often supported many of the CFC practitioners in undertaking monitoring and evaluation work of their city. Liverpool (England) was an example of a city that had sought to build strong 'informal' collaborations and partnerships with wider organisations as a 'goodwill arrangement' as 'it gives you the strength to be part of something bigger.' (CFC Liverpool, England).

For cities with fewer resources available to their CFC (e.g. US and UK), these partnerships were instrumental in delivering their CFC programmes. For example, the city of Houston relied on 'community organisations or non-profit' work to fill the gaps in their budgets and expertise because 'the departments in themselves are very nearly at capacity.' (CFC Houston Coordinator):

> There are so many layers to becoming a child-friendly city that we didn't realise we needed like graphic design or marketing, and we don't necessarily have a department that's available to do that in the city of Houston, so this is where the volunteers come in. (CFC Houston, Texas (US))

Despite the benefits of collaborative forms of working, almost all of the CFC practitioners, and country-level coordinators, spoke of the challenges they experienced in changing attitudes towards children's rights amongst adult decision-makers. Practitioners across a few cities experienced difficulties with cross-departmental working, with certain local government departments more willing to engage than others. Interestingly, the city of Redbridge found the departments that were not used to working with children were more responsive to the programme:

> It's creating really interesting collaborations and funnily enough, it's the places where you don't expect it, so children's services and education took us the longest time to win them over because to them it looked like more work. Whereas regen[eration], planning, housing, they have jumped on the idea, they can't get enough of it, they want to build it into everything so that's been interesting. (CFC Redbridge, England).

The CFC practitioner for the city of Houston explained during her interview she had been 'naïve' in 'assum[ing] that everyone is going to prioritise children's rights and children's issues':

> I think for us the biggest challenge has been mainly with city leaders answering the question [..] Some folks do care like I said, the mayor cares, one of our council members is a huge advocate. But they're faced with maybe folks that care about other things, so then it's like, how do we make sure that we don't rely on goodwill, but we also are thinking strategically on how to best make sure that the decision-makers prioritise this work? (CFC Houston, Texas, US).

Practitioners from cities and countries that had been developing their CFC programmes for a longer period (e.g. Switzerland, Germany and France) spoke about the added difficulties of maintaining enthusiasm for the programme over time. Challenges with maintaining this motivation were also furthered by municipal elections, where newly elected officials might have different priorities from previous members. This was particularly the case for cities in which children's rights were a more politicised topic e.g. US.

A few of the CFC practitioners spoke about how changing attitudes to children's rights needed to extend into the local community, as adults were often a significant barrier to the implementation of many of the CFC actions. As resources are finite, tensions emerged in how resources were distributed between people of different age groups. Local governments and community members often need to be convinced that resources should be appointed to children, rather than people of other age groups. The CFC practitioner for Hameenlinna (Finland) explained, 'Money is always an issue, there's always too little money, and there are debates about where we should put this money. Here, it's sometimes between the children and elderly people – whom should we invest in?' To improve intergenerational relationships and gain the support of 'the people in the quarters, the adults' the city of Bern made efforts to include them in their discussions:

> We don't plan children's playgrounds anymore with only children. We also invite adults, who live around the playgrounds, to hear about their needs, to include them and to create a goodwill atmosphere that they accept the new playground or the refurbished major playground, which might mean more noise. (CFC Bern, Switzerland)

The data show whilst collaborations afforded opportunities by prompting adults to consider the needs of children in their decision-making and pooling resources and expertise, making a meaningful change to the recognition of children's rights was challenging and tensions often emerged. Most notably, with local government departments lacking commitment to the programme, adults invoking the programmes for their gain and the rights of children coming in tension with those of other age groups.

5.4. The challenges and opportunities of ensuring children's participation in local government decision-making

The majority of interviewees, working at both local and national levels, shared concerns about the extent to which the needs, interests and voices of children were currently being taken into account by local governments. All of the interviewed practitioners conceptualised CFCs as providing children with opportunities to advocate for their interests and input into any decisions affecting them. This participation was seen as being essential to CFCs, even if this participation didn't always translate into actions:

> We can be proud of our national consultations with 6-18-year-olds because they made it possible for children to share new ideas. It gives them a voice and it allows adults to learn about the needs of young people in their communities that they may not have identified themselves. I think it's a source of pride. Even if the actions are not up to what we hope, it allows the opportunity to refocus the debate on what is the place of the child in the city. I think it also makes us realise that children are full citizens, and they are not always able to recognise their full rights. It allows us to have some ambition, even if it's not fully set up, to create a city that empowers children. (Country-level coordinator for UNICEF France)

Consultations with children, through surveys and focus groups, to explore experiences of growing up in the city were at the core of all of the CFC programmes. These consultations were used to identify key deficits and areas of interest and to source children's views on what improvements

needed to be made. In addition, some cities also developed more formal structures of participation, such as youth parliaments and councils (Bern, Lyon, Regensberg, Hameenlinna) which were used both as an opportunity to consult on CFC actions but also as an action in and of itself. Whilst this participation was believed to provide opportunities by recognising children as experts in their own lives, children's participation was often facilitated by adults and filtered through methods designed by adults, which limited the topics on which children's views were sought (e.g. In Bern youth parliament members would be asked by adult decision-makers to consult on particular topics). In this sense, children were only being recognised as experts in particular aspects of their lives. Issues which transcended age, such as concerns about housing, employment, healthcare, public services etc, were perceived as being the domain of adults and therefore children were not consulted.

The extent to which participation was adult or child-led varied across contexts, with most of the cities tending towards a more adult-led approach to participation. Finding the right balance between child and adult-led participation was found to be a challenge, especially as 'adults have a hard listening to children' (CFC Houston):

> That was one of the biggest challenges, the kids would say they wanted to talk but the adults just kept talking. And they were talking amongst themselves, and it's like; the kids are here too you know? (CFC Houston, Texas, US).

These difficulties experienced by CFC coordinators in supporting intergenerational decision-making were not unique to this programme and consistent with other research findings. Hickey and Pauli-Myler (2009) found 'the process of simply bringing together young people with decision-makers did not automatically alter the way that decisions came to be made' (2009, 373). This was also reflected in the account of the CFC coordinator for Bern, who explained the concerns of children growing up in Bern had been consistent for many years:

> The kids always say they want a greener city. They want other kids to be happy. They see other kids who are not as happy as them or as lucky as them, and they want them to have the same quality of life. [..] A big problem here in Bern is [theft], the [theft] of [phones] on the streets. And there are also concerns about spare time, usually the children from the better quarters are quite planned, so they don't have much spare time on their own during the week because their time is organised by their parents. (CFC Bern, Switzerland).

Despite children having the opportunity to input their concerns their participation still required adult support to be actualised. Only in one city did children have access to a budget to actualise their goals – in the city of Hameenlinna, Finland the youth parliament was provided with an annual budget which could be used to undertake specific projects within the city. The practitioner explained this budget has recently been used to build a changing space on one of the beaches.

Practitioners also experienced challenges in gaining and maintaining participation, with all practitioners raising either one or both of these as a challenge. The coordinator for the city of Hameenlinna (Finland) explained the children who participated 'have so many other hobbies, they just don't have the time to be involved in everything they want to be'. Children losing interest or ageing out of programmes meant the children who were participating were 'always evolving' (Liverpool, England). The city of Houston, however, tried to keep participants engaged by involving them in the implementation of their ideas as well as idea-sharing:

> The mental health committee are working on training with Mental Health America. The emergency planning committee are working on infographics and short videos for teenagers to learn about emergency preparation which will be shared by the city of Houston Emergency Management Department. And then the Youth Participation Committee are working on a children's rights podcast and Youth Advocacy Training. (CFC Houston, Texas, US).

When asked which children they believed were from their consultations, most of the cities mentioned particularly marginalised or disenfranchised groups of children. For example, almost all of the cities said they wanted to do more work with children from lower-income families, ethnic minorities, refugees, and children with disabilities who were often unrepresented in their

participation processes. Practitioners also experienced difficulties in gaining the participation of the youngest groups of children (under 5) and the oldest (over 15). This finding is consistent with other research on children's participation which shows particular groups of children are more likely to contribute to participatory opportunities which 'create[s] a misrepresentation of the voices of youth within a community' (Augsberger et al. 2018) by 'further obscure[ing] the voices of others, particularly those who were the hardest to reach' (Matthews 2001, 316).

A few of the cities used their links with nonprofit organisations to ensure children from marginalised backgrounds were provided with opportunities to participate. The city of Cardiff, for example, developed strong partnerships with organisations supporting children in care to ensure they were included in the plans. The city of Bern organised 'drop-in' sessions in the more economically disadvantaged areas of the city, which allowed children to participate when they were able, for as long as they were able, rather than making a longer-term commitment. The practitioner explained 'They come, they sit down, they work for a few minutes, concentrating, then other kids join and they run around, and then they say 'I have to go', and then they are away.' [CFC Bern, Switzerland].

6. Discussion and conclusions

This paper has drawn upon interviews with CFC practitioners, across different national contexts, to explore the potential for CFCs to remedy the civic deficits often experienced by children growing up in cities and other urban areas. This paper has highlighted some of the key opportunities and challenges experienced by CFC practitioners, including the challenges and opportunities of conceptualising and actualising CFCs, ensuring adult decision-makers make decisions that take the needs and interests of children into account, and ensuring all children have opportunities to input into decisions affecting them. This final section reintroduces Lockwood's theory of Civic Stratification (introduced in section 3), to reflect upon what the challenges and opportunities encountered by the CFC practitioners can reveal about CFC's potential for civic gain or civic deficit (how rights formally grated can be enhanced or restricted in practice).

The data suggests CFC programmes present several opportunities that could lead to civic gain for children, through a recognition of their rights in all layers of government. Committing to transforming cities into being 'child-friendly' created opportunities for the needs and interests of children to be considered in decisions where they were not previously considered (Phillips 2010). The commitment of local governments to children's rights is essential for ensuring they are realised, as Matthews comments 'Changing local decision-making structures without changing social and political values will achieve little' (2001, 31). All of the interviewed cities created new opportunities for children to input into local government decisions and to raise concerns or issues about matters affecting them. New opportunities were also created for various local government departments, academics, private companies and nonprofits to work together to develop cross-departmental solutions for improving some of the biggest challenges facing children growing up in cities. Cities working towards 'child-friendliness' for a longer period reported observed improvements in the extent to which children were considered by adult decision-makers.

At the same time, however, CFC practitioners encountered several significant challenges that limited the potential for CFCs to enhance children's access to their rights and in some restricted children's opportunities for civic participation. Limited conceptualisations about what makes a city 'child-friendly', and which aspects of CFCs should be prioritised, have the potential to create uneven outcomes across different contexts. Lack of resources, support and political remit to fully actualise these conceptualisations also led to practitioners only being able to make limited changes. Whilst the programme created opportunities for collaborative working, significant challenges remained in ensuring children's interests were being recognised and respected across all local government departments, with practitioners reporting inconsistent approaches. Inconsistency was also reported in opportunities for participation with children from marginalised backgrounds less likely

to have their voices and interests considered, as these children also experienced additional civic deficits as a result of other characteristics, such as race, citizenship status, economic situation, and disability. Age-based rights, whilst providing additional protections to children, can result in further marginalisation of children, perpetuating a system that perceives the rights of the child as distinct from those of adults. CFC programmes tended to focus on issues that were unique to children (e.g. education, parks, children's leisure activities) and policy areas which transcend age boundaries (e.g. employment, housing, healthcare, economy) were not considered the domains of children. In this sense, CFC programmes have the potential to reinforce the marginalisation of children by further entrenching the notion that children and adults have distinct needs from each other.

More research is needed to explore the practical applications of CFC programmes to support practitioners, policymakers and planners to embed children's rights within the local context. The countries included in this research were limited to European and US cities and more research is needed to examine the purpose, potential and impact of CFC programmes in other continents.

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