



Northern Ireland
Assembly



QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST



The Open
University
Ireland



STRANMILLIS
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast



St Mary's
University College
A College of Queen's University Belfast

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

The Spatial Context of Anti-Social Behaviour in Housing: An Under-Examined Dimension of Policy Scrutiny

Dr David Coyles
Senior Lecturer in Architecture
Ulster University
d.coyles@ulster.ac.uk

17 June 2026

KESS Policy Briefing

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-informed policy and law-making within Northern Ireland

Key points:

- Anti-social behaviour is typically understood through social, behavioural and legal lenses. This briefing introduces the physical and spatial environment as an additional perspective through which anti-social behaviour can be understood.
- Many contemporary housing environments in Northern Ireland were shaped by large-scale redevelopment programmes undertaken during the 1970s and 1980s in response to severe housing need and urban decline.
- These redevelopment programmes drew upon influential international planning philosophies, including *Defensible Space*, the *Essex Design Guide* and the Dutch *woonerf* movement, which sought to create safer and more manageable residential environments.
- Four recurring spatial characteristics emerged from these approaches: reduced permeability, enclosed residential spaces, territorial definition and passive surveillance.
- These characteristics continue to shape many contemporary residential environments and may influence how anti-social behaviour is experienced, observed, interpreted, reported and evidenced.
- The physical layout of residential areas can affect visibility, patterns of movement and the availability of witnesses, potentially influencing the evidence available to support anti-social behaviour interventions.
- Design approaches intended to foster ownership and community identity may also create ambiguities regarding who is responsible for communal spaces and perceptions of who belongs within them.
- This briefing does not suggest that housing design causes anti-social behaviour. Rather, it argues that the spatial context within which behaviour occurs forms an important part of the wider governance environment.
- Legislators may therefore wish to consider the physical and spatial characteristics of residential environments alongside social, legal and behavioural factors when scrutinising anti-social behaviour policy and legislation.

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

Introduction

The Department for Communities is currently considering a series of legislative reforms intended to strengthen the powers available to social landlords in addressing anti-social behaviour. These proposals, developed following consultation with stakeholders and members of the public, include changes to injunctions, powers of arrest, powers of exclusion and possession proceedings. The recent Department for Communities consultation demonstrated broad overall support for the current legislative proposals, whilst also highlighting some concerns relating to the empirical evidence base justifying proposals, impact on vulnerable groups, under-reporting and the potential misidentification of behaviour. These issues tend to be viewed primarily as social and legal matters. As is the case elsewhere in the United Kingdom and Ireland, debates surrounding anti-social behaviour in Northern Ireland have tended to focus upon questions of enforcement, victim protection and statutory powers. There is no doubt that these are all fundamental core considerations. The purpose of this briefing is not to advocate for or against any specific legislative proposal. Neither does the briefing seek to diminish the significant impact that anti-social behaviour can have on victims and communities. Instead, the briefing seeks to introduce an additional perspective that has received relatively little attention within discussions surrounding anti-social behaviour in housing: *the physical and spatial environments within which such anti-social behaviour occurs*.

The organisation of buildings, streets, pedestrian routes and communal spaces forms an important - but often overlooked - aspect of the context within which anti-social behaviour takes place. This briefing therefore advances a modest central argument. It does not suggest that housing design causes anti-social behaviour and recognises that such a reductive claim overlooks the complex social, economic and personal circumstances that often underpin anti-social behaviour. It does, however, suggest that many contemporary housing environments, particularly in Belfast, were shaped by specific planning and architectural ideas whose influence remains evident and active within the present-day built environment. Understanding the specific history of these environments, and the ideas which shaped their formation, may therefore provide policymakers with a useful additional lens through which to consider the practical physical and spatial operations and implications of anti-social behaviour legislation.

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

The Origins of Contemporary Housing Environments

Many of the housing environments that feature in contemporary discussions of anti-social behaviour across the UK are products of a range of residential design ideas and policy initiatives that developed during the second half of the twentieth century. The post-war period marked a critical turning point where the management and regulation of private and public housing became a new domain of governmental interest and oversight. Within the UK context, Northern Ireland's position was unique. By the end of the Second World War, the region faced a substantial housing shortage, with the 1945 Housing Act (Northern Ireland) being introduced to help generate the 250,000 new homes thought to be needed to meet the shortfall. This legislation put in place two new mechanisms to boost large-scale housebuilding: establishing the Northern Ireland Housing Trust (NIHT) to acquire land and develop new housing schemes throughout the region; and empowering local authorities to initiate and undertake their own housing projects. Following the wider UK policy orthodoxy of the time, these processes were guided in Northern Ireland by the 1963 *Belfast Regional Survey and Plan* (often referred to as the Matthew Plan), which focused squarely on the expansion of suburban areas and medium-sized towns identified as key growth centres, and intentionally away from declining inner-urban areas. These new policy tools brought the construction of substantial new housing estates across the wider region. Developments such as Rathcoole, Rushpark, Mount Vernon, Lenadoon, Seymour Hill and Twinbrook on the suburban fringes of Belfast, reflected a broader shift towards planned residential communities situated beyond the traditional inner-city environment. In addition, the expansion of existing towns such as Newtownabbey, Antrim, Larne and Carrickfergus, and the creation of the new town of Craigavon, reflected a new decentralised strategy of dispersed housing growth.

Whilst these programmes addressed a pressing need for new housing, the continued lack of attention to inner-urban areas meant that the confluence of urban conflict and inner-city decline which emerged in the 1970s presented a considerable challenge to policymakers. In many cases, inner-urban areas were characterised by terraced row-housing constructed during the mid-to-late 19th and early 20th centuries. By the 1970s, much of this housing resided in a state of dilapidation and disrepair. A 1976 government report estimated that 40% of Northern Ireland's housing stock required positive intervention, with approximately 90,000 dwellings requiring replacement. Within Belfast itself, only 48% of houses were deemed to be fit for occupation. This gave rise to the launch in 1977 of a substantial programme of comprehensive urban regeneration across the region. The scale and scope of this initiative provided extensive opportunities for housing authorities to experiment with the new approaches to residential design that were emerging during this era. The traditional street patterns that typified many urban areas were now being criticised for encouraging through traffic, reducing privacy and offering residents little sense of

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2026

ownership over their immediate surroundings. A range of newly developing debates sought to respond by bringing a newly enlightened perspective to residential design. It was within this context that the seminal design philosophies of *Defensible Space*, the *Essex Design Guide* and the Dutch *woonerf* gained prominence and began to exert significant influence upon the design of housing environments throughout the UK and wider Western hemisphere.

Whilst founded in the United States, Oscar Newman's writings on *Defensible Space* (1972) posited a range of ways in which housing design could reduce crime in residential areas, prompting its frameworks to be widely adopted within municipal governments across the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. The publication of the *Essex Design Guide* (1973) by Essex County Council was similarly groundbreaking. The Guide introduced a comprehensive range of technical standards and 'best practice' guidelines for all aspects of residential design, giving considered attention to previously neglected areas such as amenity space and vehicular circulation, and endures as one of the most influential residential design frameworks in Britain. The Dutch *woonerf* movement (meaning 'living street') was likewise influential in how it introduced wholly new ideas about residential and mixed-use streets being shared between pedestrians and vehicles, informing later approaches to residential street design that extended across Europe and North America. Whilst all three philosophies were distinct, they shared a common goal in emphasising the creation of residential environments where privacy and safety were more easily managed through designs which encouraged a feeling of ownership by residents over communal space. The continuing relevance of these ideas is reflected in an extensive body of international research that continues to examine how the design of residential environments influences issues such as safety, territoriality, surveillance and social interaction. Northern Ireland therefore represents not an isolated case, but a distinctive local expression of wider international planning ideas.

Underpinning research

Research carried out by the Ulster University *Hidden Barriers* programme (2015-2025) revealed how these design ideas had particular relevance for the comprehensive urban redevelopment which progressed across Belfast and other urban areas in Northern Ireland during the 1970s and 1980s. This included extensive analysis of government archives alongside interviews undertaken with planners and architects involved in designing these redevelopment schemes. The findings provide valuable insight into how the application of these new design principles did so within a context where concerns for residential safety and security were significantly heightened by the backdrop of prolonged urban conflict. For example, in some instances, whole neighbourhoods were replaced with new housing layouts intentionally designed to be difficult to navigate, so that 'only residents ... would know the route' through the area. In other examples, the new designs sought to break residential areas into smaller clusters to create more manageable areas which would '[give]

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

local people control and [keep] those that aren't from the area out'. Also widely evident is a wider redevelopment strategy to significantly reduce, and at times completely eliminate, the through-flow of people and traffic from residential areas. In some cases, designers report doing this to prevent residential streets being used as a 'short cut for people to get from one road to the other in busy traffic times'. In others, the reduction in permeability is stated to be part of a wider strategy to reduce 'terrorist incidents'.

Common Spatial Characteristics of Housing Redevelopment

Whilst the motivations underpinning individual redevelopment schemes varied considerably, there are four recurring spatial characteristics which are particularly relevant to contemporary discussions surrounding anti-social behaviour: reduced permeability, enclosed residential space, territorial definition and passive surveillance.

Reduced Permeability is evident in contemporary residential neighbourhoods characterised by cul-de-sacs, dead-end streets and fragmented circulation systems which limit opportunities for through-flow and through-movement. These measures were intended to reduce traffic and improve environmental quality but also responded to wider concerns regarding safety and security. Irrespective of the underlying intent, the resulting environments provided fewer routes through neighbourhoods and reduced levels of movement by non-residents.

Enclosed Residential Spaces are another popular design response, where many redevelopment schemes incorporated residential courts, enclosed housing clusters and other semi-private communal spaces. These arrangements created new communal residential spaces that were purposefully insular by way of deliberate disconnection, both visually and spatially, from the surrounding networks of streets.

Territorial Definition can be understood as the implementation of new residential designs which placed a specific emphasis on more clearly defining semi-public space which was considered informally to be residential territory. Through the general arrangement of layouts, location of entry and exit points, orientation of the housing, and patterns of access, many new designs consciously sought to reinforce distinctions between spaces primarily associated with local residents and those used by the wider public.

Passive Surveillance can be understood as the casual observation of communal areas by the residents who live within that specific space and who share the communal areas. Across Northern Ireland, these ideas were widely adopted during the comprehensive redevelopment period. This can be seen in the ways that many housing layouts, courtyard arrangements and pedestrian routes were organised in ways that increased, facilitated and encouraged opportunities for informal observation of spaces by residents.

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

Suggested Areas for Policy Scrutiny

Taken together, these characteristics continue to shape many contemporary housing environments throughout the region. Their significance lies not simply in their historical origins but in their potential implications for the contemporary management of anti-social behaviour. Four issues are particularly relevant to current legislative discussions: *visibility*, *responsibility*, *territoriality*, and *evidence*.

Visibility is perhaps the most obvious consideration that relates to historic design factors. Different residential layouts create different opportunities for observation by residents with some spaces being highly observable and others having little-to-no direct observation. Behaviour occurring within an open and highly connected street may be witnessed by large numbers of residents and passers-by. Common forms of problematic behaviour may indeed be discouraged by this degree of visibility. Conversely, the same behaviour occurring within an enclosed courtyard, a dead-end street or an awkwardly fragmented pedestrian network, may be observed by very few individuals. In this sense, the physical and spatial layout of a residential area may influence not only whether behaviour is seen and who sees it, but also the types of behaviour that might occur as a consequence.

The idea of residents having some form of *responsibility* for a space, implied by the feelings of ownership imparted by the design of some residential areas, represents a second important consideration. It is widely understood that many common forms of anti-social behaviour frequently occur within spaces where this sense of ownership is ambiguous. These spaces might be thought of as those that appear to be neither wholly public nor wholly private. In this respect, the predominance of 'shared space' courtyards and partially enclosed communal spaces, often occupy this ambivalent status. This vagueness can create uncertainty regarding who is responsible for monitoring or reporting perceived problematic behaviour. Moreover, different residents may hold different assumptions regarding what these feelings of ownership imply, what the acceptable uses of these spaces are, who possesses authority to use them, and who possesses authority to manage them.

A third consideration concerns the informal notions of *territoriality* found in many residential areas. With many residential environments being consciously designed to encourage feelings of community identity and informal supervision, this can also foster mistrust and tension as these spaces still remain public spaces which remain open to all. Whilst these territorial distinctions are informal, they continue to play a crucial role in shaping how people understand who might belong in a certain residential area. An important potential consequence is therefore that these territorial understandings might also influence how behaviours are interpreted by local residents. This suggests that some disputes concerning anti-social behaviour may sometimes involve disagreements that extend beyond the

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.

behaviour itself to larger questions about social inclusion and social cohesion within public residential spaces.

A final consideration is *evidence*. The Department for Communities consultation highlighted concerns regarding under-reporting and the difficulty of obtaining clear evidence and the potential misidentification of behaviour. Whilst these issues are often discussed in legal or administrative terms, the physical characteristics of a residential environment may influence the availability of witnesses, the clarity of events, and the ease with which responsibility can be attributed to particular individuals. For example, behaviour occurring within highly visible environments may generate different forms of evidence than behaviour occurring within more enclosed spaces or where these spaces are ambiguous.

Conclusion

This briefing has sought to introduce a spatial perspective to contemporary discussions surrounding anti-social behaviour in housing. It has demonstrated how many of the residential environments within which anti-social behaviour occurs today are products of post-war housing policies and influential planning philosophies that shaped the redevelopment of towns and cities throughout Northern Ireland during the second half of the twentieth century. The ideas associated with *Defensible Space*, the inaugural *Essex Design Guide* and the Dutch *woonerf*, encouraged residential environments which are now noted for the ways in which they reduced vehicular and pedestrian permeability, enclosed formerly open-ended and interconnected communal spaces, and actively encouraged territorial definition and passive surveillance both between and within neighbourhoods. These characteristics endure across housing environments in Northern Ireland and continue to influence how residential space is experienced and understood.

The spatial characteristics highlighted throughout this briefing are not presented as causes of anti-social behaviour. Rather, they draw attention to the role of the physical environments within which behaviour occurs. In doing so, the briefing illustrates the ways in which these environments may influence how incidents are observed, interpreted, reported and evidenced. The questions which the briefing raises about themes such as visibility, ownership, territoriality and surveillance, are similarly not put forward as separate considerations to standard and accepted forms of anti-social behaviour governance. Instead, they are positioned as often overlooked and undervalued aspects of the wider context within which this governance takes place. There is a growing awareness that complex policy challenges are rarely explained through a single policy lens. As anti-social behaviour legislation continues to evolve, greater recognition of the physical and spatial environments within which anti-social behaviour occurs may contribute to a fuller and more nuanced understanding of how these powers are ultimately experienced by residents and communities across Northern Ireland.

KESS does not support or promote perspectives or messages stated in this Briefing.

The opportunity to apply to present at KESS is open to all academics in the five university partners; and is promoted through their internal communication channels and social media: contributions from all perspectives are encouraged, as they make for a richer annual KESS Programme.