

Housing

for a

A playbook for housing investors,
developers and operators

Good

Start

Developed by the Impact Investing
Institute and the Van Leer Foundation

Housing

for a

Good

Start



Authoring bodies



THE VAN LEER FOUNDATION

The Van Leer Foundation is an independent Dutch organisation working globally to foster inclusive societies where all children and communities can flourish. We bring together people with different perspectives and support them to achieve large-scale impact. Our support involves a unique combination of funding, networks, executive education, storytelling, technical assistance and knowledge.



THE IMPACT INVESTING INSTITUTE

The Impact Investing Institute is an independent non-profit organisation reshaping capital markets so that private finance reaches the challenges that matter most – the energy transition, regional economic growth, and the prospects of future generations. We work with investors, policymakers, businesses, and civil society to turn intent into practice, building the evidence, tools, and conditions for a fairer, greener, more resilient future in the UK and globally.

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Foreword

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If you are reading this Foreword,
you are already part of a pioneering group.

You may be an investor asking where capital can deliver deeper and more durable impact for communities you care about. You may be a developer looking to create places that are loved and lived in. You may be an operator working hard to ensure every resident feels that your building is home. Or you may be a policymaker, funder or partner looking for practical ways to make housing an integral part of how families thrive. This playbook *Housing for a Good Start* is written for you.

For more than two decades, housing has been a principal asset class for impact investing. Stable, affordable, quality housing is one of the most powerful determinants of life outcomes, directly shaping communities and underpinning the economic health and potential of towns, cities and nations. But one group has too often been overlooked in how housing is funded, designed, delivered and managed: babies, toddlers and the caregivers raising them.

A good home shapes the earliest experiences of a child's life: the room where they sleep, the floor where they learn to crawl, the route to childcare, the neighbour who says hello, the green square where a parent can catch their breath. Housing is not simply a backdrop to family life. It is a formative environment through which babies and toddlers experience safety, stress, play, connection and care.

Housing for a Good Start begins here. It asks what changes when the earliest years are not treated as an afterthought, but placed at the centre of how homes and neighbourhoods are planned, designed, delivered and managed.

This is not a new housing type or asset class. It is a shift in perspective and practice. It invites investors, developers and operators to look again at the everyday decisions that shape family life: affordability, layout, access, play, safety, green space, community, services and long-term stewardship.

It is also part of a powerful and fast-growing wider movement. Child-lens investing is asking how capital can improve outcomes for children. Place-based impact investing is showing how investment can be better connected to communities. The social value agenda is pushing real estate to account more clearly for the outcomes it creates. Housing for a Good Start brings these ideas into one of the most important settings of all: the places where young children begin their lives and where parents and caregivers take on new responsibilities that shape their futures.

The playbook offers a practical starting point. It sets out the first framework for Housing for a Good Start: the principles, action areas and measures that can help practitioners understand what good looks like, assess progress and keep improving over time.

It is not intended to be the final word. This is a growing and evolving field, and the next phase will be shaped by those willing to test, apply, adapt and learn from it. The examples profiled throughout this playbook show that early practice is already emerging. Now the opportunity is to build from that: with greater ambition, stronger evidence and a growing community committed to raising the standard.

The Impact Investing Institute and the Van Leer Foundation warmly thank everyone who has shared their insights and their own projects in this resource, so that others can learn from them.

If housing is one of the most powerful ways to shape life chances, then investing in homes and places that support the earliest years is one of the clearest opportunities we have to build stronger communities, more resilient places and better futures for generations to come.

We look forward to building what comes next together with you.

Executive summary

Housing for a Good Start applies an early-years and family lens to the planning, design and management of housing and the community spaces and amenities around it.

Extensive research – including Nobel laureate James Heckman’s landmark findings⁵³ that every USD1 invested in early childhood conditions generates USD6–17 in long-term social and economic returns – shows that the surroundings in which children grow, especially during their earliest years, are critical to their cognitive, physical and mental development, and ultimately to their future life outcomes.

Getting housing and placemaking right for families with young children supports parental wellbeing, thriving communities and ultimately the economic and social health of towns and cities, enabling families to stay in place rather than move out of the city as they grow. Helping cities retain families, support workforce participation and build more stable communities, also contributes to urban productivity and long-term city competitiveness. Crucially, the design and management choices that create better homes and neighbourhoods for babies, toddlers and their caregivers also improve the experience for all residents more

broadly. Making empathetically designed places that are safer, more connected, more stable and playful supports many different kinds of people, including those who are neurodivergent or have physical challenges and older residents.

These same qualities – safer, more connected, and more stable communities – translate directly into benefits for investors, developers and operators: more stable occupancy, fewer void/vacancy periods, less antisocial behaviour, and access to government-linked income streams with strong inflation and economic insulation.

Across high-income countries, policymakers are recognising the need to deliver high-quality, affordable homes to address the housing crisis that is hollowing out the social and economic fabric of so many major cities. Housing for a Good Start offers the opportunity for investors, developers and operators to respond with housing that is intentionally designed and managed with an early-years and family focus and delivers multiple benefits to residents, local communities and the wider economy.

Housing for a Good Start is not a new housing type or asset class. It is a shift in how practitioners work, inviting them to create places that give babies, toddlers, parents and caregivers the best chance to thrive, while also benefiting residents of all ages.

In this playbook we detail the emerging impact and business case that can be presented to investors, local authorities and policymakers to support Housing for a Good Start. We also introduce an inaugural practical framework – one that will evolve as real-world practice develops – setting out the principles and actions that underpin the ethos, design and management of Housing for a Good Start. Within this, we outline what characterises progression towards best practice – [see pages 15 and 16](#).

We aim to provide a practical and inspiring roadmap that shows how the theory behind housing that supports families with young children can translate into concrete actions, design approaches and service provision for residents.

Finally, recognising the potential of Housing for a Good Start as a compelling impact investment opportunity, the playbook includes a framework of indicators for evaluating both social impact and financial/operational performance.

Measuring outcomes is critical to understanding and improving what housing delivers for both residents and investors. Investors, developers and operators also need impact and performance data for their own decision-making – to refine their approach, demonstrate value to stakeholders and build the evidence base that supports continued investment.

As data accumulates across the field, it will also help attract policymakers and capital to the Housing for a Good Start agenda more broadly.

Housing for a Good Start is a growing concept that is not yet consistently embedded in housing investment, development and management practices. The principles, action areas and evaluation metrics introduced in this playbook are intended as a starting point and will continue to evolve as real-world practice expands and can better inform what ‘good’ looks like.

To that end, the Impact Investing Institute and the Van Leer Foundation have established a Housing for a Good Start Community of Practice that housing investors, developers and operators are warmly invited to join.

Contact place@impactinvest.org.uk for details.

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How to use this playbook

This playbook is a practical guide for investors, developers and operators seeking to apply an early-years and family lens to how housing is funded, delivered and managed – ensuring that the needs of babies, toddlers and their caregivers are actively considered alongside those of the wider community. It is also intended to inform policymakers as they shape housing strategy, policies and funding opportunities.



Earls Court Development Plan
Image: Earls Court Development Company, Van Leer Foundation

What?

What is Housing for a Good Start and why does it matter?

Learn the social, economic and policy reasons for focusing on housing provision designed intentionally to support babies, toddlers and their caregivers.

Why?

The growing business case

Explore why applying the principles of Housing for a Good Start is compelling in financial and economic terms for investors, developers and operators.

How?

What does Housing for a Good Start look like in practice?

Use the Housing for a Good Start framework to help shape developments and housing projects – or to appraise projects in which you are investing:

THE 8 PRINCIPLES

Eight principles that underpin best practice in the design and ongoing management and service provision of housing, that actively supports health, learning and opportunity in the early years.

THE 18 ACTION AREAS

Eighteen practical design features, development practices, and facilities and services that can be integrated to bring to life the principles of Housing for a Good Start. Appendix 2 provides a summary of useful resources to support implementation.

PROGRESSION STAGES

For each action area, there are four stages of progression – from ‘Baseline’ to ‘Excelling’ – allowing investors, developers and operators to assess where a project currently stands in relation to good practice, and track progress towards it. We detail the ‘Excelling’ stage for each action area in this playbook. All four progression stages are detailed in the accompanying [Housing for a Good Start toolkit](#).

Outcomes

Measuring social impact and financial performance

Explore Housing for a Good Start metrics to monitor and assess the impact of a project, with indicators to measure outcomes for babies, toddlers and their caregivers, and the impact on financial and operational performance of housing assets.

This playbook gives examples of measures to use – see the accompanying online [Housing for a Good Start toolkit](#) for the full set of social impact and financial performance measurement indicators.

Scope and terminology

Below we define the key terms used throughout the playbook.

Where terms are used in specific ways, we explain our usage here to avoid ambiguity.

AUDIENCES

We use three terms to describe the primary audiences for the Housing for a Good Start playbook:

Investors: All those contributing capital to a housing project, directly or indirectly, including pension funds, foundations, endowments and family offices (asset owners), as well as the asset managers who deploy capital on their behalf.

Developers: The entities responsible for delivering projects, from sourcing and acquisition through planning, financing and construction.

Operators: Those responsible for managing housing assets in operation, including maintenance, tenant relationships and lease negotiation.

MARKET FOCUS OF THIS PLAYBOOK

This playbook focuses on the UK, USA and Europe as the markets where the foundations for Housing for a Good Start are most advanced, where ideas detailed in this playbook are starting to become established in policy, and where examples of good practice can be seen and learned from. Despite their high-income status, these three countries/regions have areas of poor housing and family deprivation, underscoring the potential for Housing for a Good Start to deliver transformative benefits.

However, Housing for a Good Start is relevant to countries at every income level. We look forward to its principles being adopted in more regions around the world – and to profiling examples in other markets in the future.

SEE ALL KEY TERMS IN THE INDEX



The Housing for a Good Start framework →

Principles

1

Inclusive and physically accessible homes and neighbourhoods

2

Stable and financially affordable homes

3

Well-connected neighbourhoods

4

Supportive social networks

5

Everyday playful moments

6

Healthy and safe environments

7

Climate-resilient and sustainable design

8

Responsive and participatory engagement

Action areas

Please note that some action areas fit into more than one category, but for simplicity we have allocated each action area to one category.

Processes and governance

- 01** Early-years and family-informed design practice
- 02** Amenity gap analysis and action
- 03** Focused engagement across design and operations
- 04** On-site management that connects residents to services

Spaces and facilities

- 05** Family-responsive unit and home design
- 06** Play and green spaces that respond to community needs
- 07** Energy efficiency that reduces bills and stress
- 08** Accessible maternal and child healthcare services
- 09** Accessible childcare and early learning facilities
- 10** Public transport connections that enable everyday travel
- 11** Family-friendly walking and wheeling environment
- 12** Community spaces that support social interaction
- 13** Food outlets that enable affordable and healthy options
- 14** Family-friendly hygiene facilities
- 15** Sport facilities that encourage active lifestyles for caregivers

Services and initiatives

- 16** Play and early learning activities
- 17** Social programmes and community activities for caregivers and pregnant women
- 18** Family-centred information, wayfinding and signposting

Citywest Drive

Reducing housing stress for young families in Dublin

‘By listening to parents early, the project moved beyond housing delivery to creating real places for young families to belong.’

MARLEEN BEKKERS

FUND MANAGER, PATRIZIA SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Citywest Drive is a large-scale, affordable housing development in southwest Dublin, delivering 290 for-rent social homes across six residential blocks, alongside shared public and community infrastructure including a library and a childcare facility.

Drawing on extensive consultation with families using the [Family Voices Toolkit](#)¹ and other mechanisms, the project prioritises affordability and neighbourhood stability for lower-income households. A significant proportion of residents are expected to be families with young children at risk of housing stress in a city facing a severe social housing crisis and where rents have increased by 78% since 2015.²

PROJECT ECONOMICS AND FINANCING

- Private institutional capital deployed through an impact-focused real estate strategy
- Forward-funded delivery to a housing association ensuring long-term affordability
- Public bodies as purchasers/operators of social infrastructure (e.g. library and community centre)
- Non-profit organisation operating childcare centre

PARTNERS INVOLVED

- PATRIZIA Sustainable Communities Fund
- Ardstone
- Tuath Housing
- South Dublin County Council
- Van Leer Foundation
- ZCD Architects
- Neighborhood Lab
- YMCA



How it meets our principles

PRINCIPLE 2

Stable and financially affordable homes

Homes are delivered as social housing (35%) and low-cost rental (65%). The development has a partnership with an approved housing body (AHB), Tuath, to ensure long-term affordability and stable tenancies.

PRINCIPLE 3

Well-connected neighbourhoods

Family-oriented facilities such as a 1,400 m² library and childcare facilities are integrated into the development. Primary-care centres, GP surgeries, hospitals and schools in walkable distance or a short public transport trip away. A shopping centre with supermarkets and family-friendly stores is immediately adjacent, as are extensive public transport and pedestrian and cycling routes.

PRINCIPLE 4

Supportive social networks

Co-creation of shared spaces and amenities for children and families was achieved through extensive engagement with local families, especially those with young children. The development has partnered with YMCA to operate childcare with a focus on disadvantaged families.

PRINCIPLE 5

Everyday playful moments

Outdoor spaces include on-site landscaped courtyards and children's play areas informed by parent input on safe and playful environments.

PRINCIPLE 7

Climate-resilient and sustainable design

All 290 homes are 'A' energy-rated, cutting bills and protecting against fuel poverty – a key concern for households with young children, who spend more time at home and are more sensitive to cold and damp conditions.

PRINCIPLE 8

Responsive and participatory engagement

The Family Voices Toolkit centred families with young children in design decisions. A survey of c.400 residents, supported by Neighbourhood Lab, broadened insights, while parent workshops with on-site childcare also built community.

Learnings and legacy

- Demonstrated how early, intentional engagement can add social value at scale
- Strengthened reputation for socially responsive housing delivery
- Clear evidence base for replicating family-centred approaches across portfolios
- Opportunity for a new type of social housing model in public-private partnership



SEE
MORE
ONLINE

CASE STUDY

DUBLIN, IRELAND

Case study images:
Credit: PATRIZIA





What is Housing for a Good Start and why does it matter?

Key points

- **Housing for a Good Start is not a new housing type or asset class.** It is a shift in how investors, developers and operators plan, design and manage housing.
- With 90% of brain development happening before age 5 and babies and toddlers spending 80% of time in and around their home, **quality of housing and outdoor spaces is a primary determinant of childhood outcomes.**
- Safe, well-designed and affordable housing and neighbourhoods contribute to **children's cognitive development, physical health and life outcomes** – and to the wellbeing of the caregivers who raise them.
- The environment around the home matters as much as the home itself – **every additional year spent in a better neighbourhood has a measurable positive effect** on a child's long-term earnings and health outcomes.
- **Affordable, stable homes with easy access to amenities reduce parental stress**, freeing up time and attention for responsive caregiving; shared spaces that foster social connection benefit the whole family, particularly women, who carry the largest share of caregiving.
- **Families with young children are key to community and economic vitality** – their presence sustains local services, animates public spaces, supports intergenerational wellbeing, and contributes to neighbourhood safety; their absence signals deeper problems for all.

‘Housing for a Good Start is not a new housing type or asset class. It is a shift in how investors, developers and operators work, inviting them to create places that give babies, toddlers, parents and caregivers the best chance to thrive.’

A tale of two families

Imagine two scenarios for a young family raising a three-year-old and a nine-month-old.

Family one



In the first scenario, the family lives in a warm, well-maintained apartment where the toddlers play safely and toys have their place.

A caregiver can watch them while doing household chores. Childcare, groceries, green spaces and transit are close by, enabling families to live, work and play without impossible logistics. Neighbours greet each other by name and lend a hand.



In scenario two, the family shares one cramped, damp bedroom with toys and clothes spilling from limited storage.

Cooking, washing and supervising are constant juggling acts. There is no safe outdoor space for play or exercise. Childcare is far away, rent absorbs most of the household income, and neighbours live isolated lives.

Family two

In which scenario – all else being equal – are the children more likely to experience emotional stability and strong cognitive development? In which scenario are the adults likely to be dogged by mental stress, unable to give space and time to intentional caregiving?

If our earliest life experiences – and the wellbeing of those who care for us – are shaped by our homes, what does this mean for housing and its potential to impact health, happiness and productivity for the rest of our lives?

Housing for a Good Start exists to close this gap.

What is Housing for a Good Start?

Housing for a Good Start applies an early-years and family lens to the planning, design and management of housing and the community spaces and amenities around it.

It recognises that getting housing and placemaking right for families with young children is critical for early childhood development, parental wellbeing, and thriving communities.

Housing for a Good Start is not a new housing type or asset class. It is a shift in how investors, developers and operators work, inviting them to create places that give babies, toddlers, parents and caregivers the best chance to thrive, while also benefiting residents of all ages.

This playbook aims to show how to do that (and why).



Why the early years matter ...

The early years shape capacity for lifelong learning, emotional regulation and social interaction.³

-
- + 90% of brain development occurs before age 5 ...⁴

with over 1 million neural connections forming every second in a baby's first year.⁵ To support children's brain development effectively during this critical period, it is essential to recognise that supportive, stable and enriching contexts – along with strong support for caregivers – are key to healthy development.⁶

-
- + The major life changes experienced by new parents can affect their wellbeing and mental health.

When these are compromised, there is potential for a range of negative outcomes for children, including poorer health and development, lower-quality caregiving, and increased family stress.⁷ Additionally, positive support around new parents can help their own brains adapt in ways that lead to more responsive, flexible caregiving.⁸

-
- + Adverse home environments permanently reduce the skill base built in the first 5 years of life.

As Nobel laureate economist James Heckman's research shows, because 'skills beget skills', these early deficits compound over time, making the return on investment in a child's development highest before age 5.⁹ Lastly, babies, toddlers and their caregivers spend around 80% of their time in and around their homes, making housing quality a critical factor in this development window.¹⁰

Across high-income countries, many families with young children cannot access the housing they need.¹¹

- + In the UK, the number of children living in the private rented sector has almost tripled since 2000 ...

from 1.1 million to 3.2 million – with over a quarter of children under 1 year old now in private rented housing, often on short-term tenancies that undermine the stable routines young children need. Private renters also have less space per person overall than those living in other tenures and are more likely to live in damp and energy-inefficient homes.¹²

- + In the EU, 1 in 4 minors lives in overcrowded conditions ...

with families in lower-income households disproportionately affected.¹³

- + In the USA, nearly 1 in 6 children experiences unstable housing ...

living in households unable to pay rent or mortgage on time, moving frequently, or having experienced homelessness – with consequences for their development, health and life outcomes.¹⁴

Poor housing is shown to affect health and development.

Poor housing is not just about lack of comfort. It undermines child development,¹⁵ harms family wellbeing, and increases the risk of physical illnesses such as asthma.¹⁶ Researchers have identified several distinct mechanisms through which this happens.

+ Substandard physical conditions directly harm children's bodies.

Exposure to lead, mould, cold and pests causes respiratory illness and raises stress hormone levels; sustained early-life stress can permanently weaken children's immune and metabolic systems.¹⁷

+ Housing instability – not just the threat of losing a home – affects childhood development.

Every additional residential move in early childhood is independently linked to lower cognitive scores and more behavioural problems, with the largest effects appearing before age 5.¹⁸

-
- + Affordability stress is a separate pathway from instability.

When housing costs consume too much of a family's income, the resultant financial strain increases parenting stress and is linked to depression and behavioural problems in young children, even in families that remain in the same home.¹⁹

-
- + Overcrowding affects the quality of parent–child relationships.

It creates tension, including between adult members and children, and stress on household members' physical and mental health. Strong adverse effects on learning outcomes are also recorded.²⁰

-
- + The costs of poor housing extend well beyond individual families.

Inadequate housing costs the UK's National Health Service an estimated £1.4 billion annually across all residents.²¹ Housing instability among families with young children in the USA is estimated to generate USD111 billion in avoidable costs in healthcare and special education over 10 years.²² For governments facing acute pressure on public services, improving housing for families with young children is not a social aspiration – it is a fiscal imperative.

Growing families that have to move away from city centres to find more affordable places to live contribute to the hollowing out of urban communities.

If a working parent then must commute to and from the city, this can decrease their time with the family, increasing feelings of detachment and stress for all family members.

The environment around housing is crucial, too.

- + The environment around the home matters as much as the home itself.

Children who move to higher-income neighbourhoods before age 13 go on to have significantly higher adult earnings and better health outcomes.²³

- + Every extra year in a better neighbourhood helps – there's no single 'cut-off age'.

During childhood, every year spent in a higher-income neighbourhood increases a child's earnings in adulthood, so the gains from moving are greater the younger the child is at the time of the move.²⁴

- + Specific, identifiable neighbourhood features drive the effect – it isn't just 'richer area, better outcome'.

Countries that produce better outcomes for low-income children tend to share five characteristics: less residential segregation by income and race, less income inequality, better schools, lower rates of violent crime, and a larger proportion of two-parent households.²⁵

- + Where a family lives has a large, measurable financial effect over a child's lifetime.

Growing up in a high-opportunity neighbourhood from birth versus a low-opportunity one can change income in adulthood by around 30%.²⁶

What changes when housing is right for young families?

When we get housing (and the spaces and facilities around it) right for babies, toddlers and their caregivers, the benefits cascade across three levels:

CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

Safe, well-designed homes with nearby green spaces for play support children's physical, cognitive and emotional development.²⁷

The benefits range from healthy sleep routines to improved school readiness.^{28 29}

As experts at Harvard's Center on the Developing Child put it, 'What surrounds us shapes us.'³⁰ The difference between adequate and inadequate housing in the early years can shape a lifetime.³¹

FAMILY WELLBEING

Parents who have affordable, stable homes with easy access to amenities feel less stressed, with more time and mental space for responsive caregiving.³² When caregivers have access to shared spaces with opportunities for building strong, supportive social networks, the whole family benefits – especially women, who tend to carry the largest burden of caregiving.³³

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC VITALITY

Families with young children anchor essential services and create a stable tax base. Their presence animates public spaces and contributes to creating streets that feel active, looked-after and safe.³⁴ Physical features in shared and outdoor spaces that support families – step-free access, good lighting, nearby green space – also benefit older residents, people with disabilities, and the broader community. Families with children are a community vital sign – and their absence signals deeper problems for all.

From challenge to opportunity

Because cities are failing to deliver suitable housing, families with young children are declining sharply as a share of urban populations across major cities in the USA and other high-income economies – what’s being dubbed ‘the urban family exodus’.³⁵

Cities and communities today are challenged by exclusion, isolation, and threats to economic, environmental and demographic sustainability – both as populations age and families move away.³⁶ Cities that fail to retain families may face shrinking school systems, weaker tax bases, and increasing poverty concentration. By contrast, family retention can stabilise housing demand, sustain workforce pipelines, and strengthen local economies.³⁷

This playbook shows how creating homes and places that strengthen families can turn these challenges into an opportunity – to reduce caregiver stress, improve early childhood outcomes, reduce system costs and build more resilient communities and local economies that benefit all.

By combining measurable social and economic impact with the strong investment credentials we detail in Part 2, we anticipate Housing for a Good Start becoming a growing focus for institutional investors, a strategic planning priority for policymakers, and a sustained market opportunity for developers and operators who are committed to embedding the principles we detail in this playbook into their work.

‘...we anticipate Housing for a Good Start becoming a growing focus for institutional investors, a strategic planning priority for policymakers, and a sustained market opportunity for developers and operators who are committed to embedding the principles we detail in this playbook into their work.’

Agave at Twenty Two Toddler and Caregiver support for the ‘missing middle’

PARTNERS INVOLVED

- Bridge Investment Group
- Bridge Property Management
- Project Access
(Toddler and Caregiver programming)

‘We strive to incorporate the youngest members of our community and recognise their need to participate actively in community learning. Bridging the gap for early learners involves developing meaningful, trusting relationships, and offering age-appropriate material ... This not only creates quick connection and interaction today, but it also improves the confidence and social skills required to succeed in the classrooms they attend in the future.’

REGIONAL MANAGER, PROJECT ACCESS

Agave at Twenty Two in Tucson, Arizona, is an investment within a Bridge Investment Group-managed vehicle that is held within the Workforce and Affordable Housing (WFAH) strategy.

This focuses on preserving and operating affordable housing for the ‘missing middle’: renters who earn too much for government-subsidised housing but cannot afford market-rate housing. Agave at Twenty Two features a resident services programme delivered by Project Access, a nonprofit partner organisation, including a dedicated resource centre and resident services coordinator to support the wellbeing of residents. Project Access has established Toddler and Caregiver programming to respond to the needs of families with babies and toddlers.

PROJECT ECONOMICS AND FINANCING

Bridge Investment Group’s WFAH investments are typically structured using private capital to acquire the equity position, while property-level mortgage debt is provided by a government-sponsored enterprise.³⁸

The Project Access service, including the Toddler and Caregiver programming, is funded through a combination of property cash flows and Bridge’s community programming fund – which allocates a portion of fund management fees from the WFAH strategy to support on-site resident services and programming across WFAH communities.

How it meets our principles

PRINCIPLE 4

Supportive social networks:

The Toddler and Caregiver programme (delivered by Project Access) builds relationships with families through the on-site community resource centre and a dedicated resident services coordinator (RSC). Home visits establish trust with families who may not initiate contact. Engaging the child directly, not just the caregiver, is a powerful engagement strategy: children who feel seen become advocates of the resource centre and bring their parents back. Practical resources such as food, educational materials and baby supplies are delivered without bureaucratic barriers.

PRINCIPLE 5

Everyday playful moments:

The resource centre is designed and stocked to serve as an engaging, developmentally appropriate space for babies, toddlers, and their caregivers. It supports learning across the full 0–4 age spectrum with sensory, literacy, and physical experiences, and structured play programming for toddlers and their caregivers.

PRINCIPLE 8

Responsive and participatory engagement:

The RSC also welcomes families in the centre, ensuring that when a family visits, every member's needs are addressed. The RSC also visits families with young children directly, bringing donations, educational items, and small learning materials that prepare children for future learning. Consistent, positive relationships with the RSC make the community resource centre a place children want to return to, increasing parental engagement. Food distribution has been a consistent access point for connecting with families who might not otherwise seek out programming, allowing the RSC to build relationships in an accessible and low-barrier context of high trust.

Learnings and legacy

- Programming is poised to grow as new families with children move in, and the site has expectant mothers who will be joining the community.
- Children who feel connected to the resident services coordinator bring their parents – expanding community engagement organically.
- Recent academic research has demonstrated a positive correlation between higher participation in community programming and asset performance metrics, including rent collections and renewals.³⁹







3

The growing business case

Housing for a Good Start is still an emerging field with an evolving business case. But the proof points are steadily accruing and being constantly reinforced by case studies in different settings. Here we lay out five factors that are building a compelling case for investors, developers and operators.

Key points

Housing for a Good Start principles can be applied across all housing types – from social and affordable housing to purpose-built rental to market-rate development – and the business case for it is growing.

- **Investor momentum** – Affordable housing and other housing with strong social value is attracting strong capital flows from institutional investors, mission-led endowments and others across developed markets.
- **Strong performance with only incremental additional cost** – For investors, developers and operators, housing designed and managed to improve family wellbeing is likely to improve asset performance without a concomitant increase in delivery or operational costs.
- **Growing policy support** – Government policy across the UK, USA and Europe is supportive, recognising early childhood development as one of the highest-return public investments available.
- **Opportunities for market leadership** – Housing for a Good Start can help differentiate developers' propositions. First movers are already capturing reputational, relational and competitive advantages – the opportunity is open to all, but early engagement is likely to bring lasting benefits.

‘The business case for applying an early-years and family lens is not limited to specific types of housing or specific kinds of renters ... children, caregivers, and communities across build-to-rent, mixed-tenure and market-rate multifamily development all stand to benefit.’

ESTABLISHED

Social and affordable housing is already strongly supported as an investable asset class

Housing for a Good Start principles apply across all income strata, including market-rate residential development. However, the business case for applying an early-years and family lens is strongest for affordable and social housing, where the need is unsurprisingly the greatest, and where momentum is most evident – and for good reason.

The fact that affordable housing is an established, proven and growing asset class paves the way for other housing with social benefit to capture investor, developer and policymaker interest.

The growth in the affordable housing sector across high-income countries, strongly driven by governments seeking to address their respective housing crises, has been compelling – see ‘Capital flows into affordable housing’ on [page 42](#). The investment rationale is structural: chronic undersupply, government-linked income streams that are often inflation-proofed and largely insulated from the volatility affecting commercial and private residential property.

Capital flows into affordable housing

UNITED KINGDOM

In the UK, the social and affordable housing impact equity fund market has grown from virtually zero in the early 2010s to over £6 billion by the end of 2024, increasing by 15% from 2023 to 2024 alone.⁴⁰ Yet it is estimated that £10 billion of new equity is still needed annually to address the housing shortfall.⁴¹

Government is taking steps to address this. A 10-year £39 billion Social and Affordable Homes Programme (SAHP) has been launched to kickstart social and affordable housebuilding at scale across England.⁴² A 10-year rent settlement from April 2026 permitting CPI (Consumer price index) +1% annual increases⁴³ provides investors with long-term income visibility.

UNITED STATES

In the USA, federal rent support mechanisms, chronic undersupply, and a growing institutional investor base have attracted capital to affordable multifamily housing, supported by a growing ecosystem of institutional capital and dedicated impact standards.

The Multifamily Impact Framework™ has been designed to attract capital towards quality affordable rental housing at scale, establishing a common definition and minimum thresholds for impact. Those definitions and metrics are cross-referenced throughout this playbook.

EUROPE

The appointment of the EU's first-ever Commissioner for Housing in 2024, followed by the publication of the European Affordable Housing Plan in 2025, signals a structural reorientation of EU policy towards affordable housing delivery, backed by commitments from national and regional banks to invest €375 billion in housing by 2029.⁴⁴

With a shortfall in the EU of 650,000 homes per year above current delivery rates, and social housing representing only 6–7% of total housing stock,⁴⁵ the structural conditions represent a growing opportunity. In terms of the national response, Spain has established a new state-owned housing company offering long-term rental contracts of up to 75 years.⁴⁶ Ireland has committed more than €20 billion in capital funding to social and affordable housing over the next five years.⁴⁷

AFFORDABILITY AND HOUSING FOR A GOOD START

Raising children is increasingly expensive, and housing costs are a primary driver of financial pressure on families. When housing is genuinely affordable, parents can direct more of their income toward nutrition, education and the experiences that shape early development; they can also be more present with their children, without the constant pressure to earn more simply to cover rent or mortgage costs.

Children, caregivers and communities across build-to-rent, mixed-tenure and market-rate multifamily development all stand to benefit from the Housing for a Good Start framework – but the stakes are highest where affordability is most acute.

→
KEY FACTORS DRIVING INVESTOR INTEREST IN HOUSING WITH SOCIAL VALUE

£6 billion

UK S&A (Social and Affordable) housing equity fund market (2024)

BETTER SOCIETY CAPITAL, 2026

6.5 million

UK housing gap stands at 6.5 million homes

CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES, 2025

€375 billion

Committed by European national and regional promotional banks for housing investment by 2029

EUROPEAN COMMISSION / EIB GROUP, 2025

650,000

Annual shortfall in homes needed across the EU above current delivery rates

EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2025

over 95%

Typical occupancy in US affordable portfolios

AVANATH, 2017

239 basis pts

Outperformance of most affordable US housing vs market-rate, over 16 years

PREA, 2024

Growing institutional investor interest

The growth in affordable housing as an asset class is being driven by some of the largest institutional investors in high-income economies as they seek stable, long-duration cash flows to meet their liabilities and commitments.

These investors include Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) funds in the UK, Nuveen, CalPERS and NYCERS in the USA, and pension giants AP Pension, PKA and ABP in Europe. Increasingly, this momentum is being directed towards developments with an explicit family and community dimension.

As well as pension funds, mission-driven foundations, family offices and corporate-led investment platforms are increasingly deploying capital into housing designed for clear social benefit as a means of aligning their endowment investments with their philanthropic purpose.

See [Appendix 1](#) for details of recent projects.

OVERCOMING HESITANCY

Despite this momentum, discussions indicate that some investor hesitancy persists, particularly among asset owners considering social housing for the first time. The barriers are rarely financial – social housing has a strong track record of stable returns and strong community outcomes across high-income markets. The hesitancy is more often reputational and operational: the perceived risks of poor-quality or older housing stock; having to navigate difficult resident relations; unpredictable policy shifts or negative press coverage.⁴⁸ Quality property management is perceived as complex; demonstrating social outcomes is seen to be difficult to do credibly.

These are legitimate concerns and are precisely what the Housing for a Good Start framework can help to address. Designing assets and structuring services around the needs of families increases the likelihood of longer tenancies, higher retention rates, and lower void costs. In doing so, Housing for a Good Start enables asset owners to capture financial value while delivering social impact that might otherwise go unrealised.

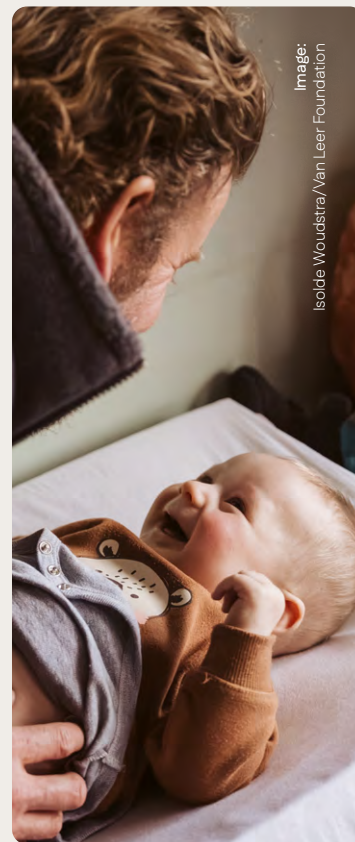


Image: Isolde Woudstra/Van Leer Foundation

Housing with clear social value delivers strong operational and financial performance

Operational risk in housing is, in large part, social risk. Developments that fail residents generate complaints, antisocial behaviour, high turnover, reputational damage and management burden. The financial consequences, through void/vacancy costs, enforcement, staff time and adverse coverage, compound over time in ways that are well understood by experienced investors.

The Multifamily Impact Council in the USA defines that a household is stable when it is not more than 30 days behind on rent or has not moved in the past 12 months for financial reasons.⁴⁹ In other words, financial precarity and residential instability are the same problem, expressed in ways that are simultaneously harmful to families and costly to operators and investors.

When housing compounds this pressure – through inadequate space, poor connectivity, absence of play provision, or insecure tenure – the consequences show up in tenancy data, maintenance records, and community relations. Conversely, housing that reduces family stress, supports stable routines and builds community cohesion creates the conditions for lower turnover, fewer incidents of antisocial behaviour, reduced wear on fabric and stronger long-term retention.

Asset performance underlines the opportunity that housing with social benefit presents. Operationally, analysis of the USA market shows that affordable housing funds consistently deliver 95%+ occupancy with resident turnover of 15–20%, compared to 50–70% in the private rented sector.⁵⁰ This differential has direct and material implications for void/vacancy costs, operational efficiency and income stability across the hold period. Housing for a Good Start has the potential to deepen and extend those advantages by focusing specifically on the conditions that drive stability for families in the most demanding phase of life.

As the growing interest among institutional investors indicates, the financial performance can also be compelling. Social, affordable and workplace housing has been shown to function as a stable, inflation-linked asset class, historically delivering 1.5–2% premia over government bonds.⁵¹ A 2024 study by the Pension and Real Estate Association found that over a 16-year period, the most affordable USA properties serving households at or below 80% area median income (AMI) outperformed those serving households above 120% AMI by 239 basis points, primarily driven by lower vacancy rates and limited tenant turnover.⁵²

The affordable housing sector already demonstrates the financial dividend of resident stability: 95%+ occupancy and 15–20% turnover versus 50–70% in the private rented sector.



The investment and operational case for Housing for a Good Start:



More stable occupancy
longer tenancies and lower turnover



Fewer void/vacancy periods
less time and cost between tenancies



Less antisocial behaviour



Less wear and tear



Government-linked income streams
with strong inflation and economic insulation

Stable families create stable tenancies.
Healthy homes reduce repair costs.
Community cohesion reduces antisocial behaviour.

These are not parallel benefits to financial performance – they are among the clearest routes to it.

Key business case factors for Housing for a Good Start

FOR INVESTORS AND FUND MANAGERS

- Strong government support for investor involvement in social and affordable housing to tackle housing gaps
- Availability of stable government-linked, often inflation-proofed income streams
- Potential to improve asset operational performance in terms of tenant stability, reduced void rates, tenant demand
- Strong ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) alignment and opportunities to demonstrate measurable social impact that supports the youngest and most vulnerable members of society

FOR DEVELOPERS AND OPERATORS

- Applicable to all housing types – and beneficial to many resident groups and income strata
- Availability of stable government-linked, often inflation-proofed income streams
- Potential to enhance asset operational performance in terms of tenant stability, reduced void rates, less wear and tear, and tenant demand
- Implementing many Housing for a Good Start action areas is cost-neutral or can be offset by improved operational/financial performance and other factors
- Opportunity to differentiate development/operational capabilities in a competitive market
- In some markets, aligns developers with government/policymaker priorities

POLICYMAKERS

- Evolves the response to the housing crisis to enable better family caregiving, not just ‘roofs over heads’
- Socioeconomic benefits of retaining young families in cities, including stronger communities, reduced crime and more resilient local economies
- Extensive opportunities for partnership with informed and motivated investors, developers and operators
- Evidenced benefits to future generations in terms of individual physical health, wellbeing, life outcomes and economic contribution – and resulting benefits for crime, welfare costs and economic growth

Family-friendly design demonstrates modest incremental costs

Early-years informed design training, focused family engagement, amenity gap analysis – these are shifts in how teams work, not primarily in what they spend.

A practical question for any investor or developer applying Housing for a Good Start to their projects is whether it carries significant additional cost – and emerging evidence is reassuring. Practitioner experience consistently indicates that the incremental investment required is modest relative both to total development cost and to the long-term asset value, operational benefits and reputational returns that result when Housing for a Good Start principles are successfully embedded.

This is partly because many of the most impactful changes are about process and professional priorities rather than capital expenditure. Early-years informed design training, focused family engagement and amenity gap analysis are primarily shifts in how teams work, not in what they spend. Also, the modest upfront investment required for Housing for a Good Start needs to be balanced against the long-term operational, reputational and social returns it can potentially generate – see table on [next page](#).

Some investors do cite uncertainty around measurement and attribution of social outcomes as a barrier. What the sector needs, and what this playbook seeks to support, is a more rigorous, shared evidence base on both the cost and the returns.

We address how that evidence base can be built in Part 5.

→

THE POTENTIAL COST IMPLICATIONS OF IMPLEMENTING HOUSING FOR A GOOD START IN A DEVELOPMENT

Cost implications table:
Multifamily Impact Council

ACTION AREA

POTENTIAL FINANCIAL IMPACT

INDICATIVE ONLY

PROCESSES AND GOVERNANCE

Early-years informed design	Cost neutral
Amenity gap analysis.....	Cost neutral
Focused engagement	Cost offset by higher tenant retention
On-site management	May be cost neutral, depending on the site

SPACES AND FACILITIES

Family-responsive design	Cost neutral
Play and green spaces	Slight expense
Energy efficiency	Cost offset by energy savings
Maternal and child healthcare	May be cost neutral, depending on partnership structure
Childcare and early learning	May be cost neutral, depending on partnership structure
Public transport connections	Cost neutral
Walking- and wheeling-friendly.....	Cost neutral
Community spaces.....	Cost offset by higher tenant retention
Affordable and healthy food outlets	May be cost neutral, depending on partnership structure
Family hygiene facilities	Slight expense
Sports facilities.....	Slight expense

SERVICES AND INITIATIVES

Play and early learning activities	May be cost neutral, depending on partnership structure
Social and community programmes ..	Cost offset by higher tenant retention
Family-centred information.....	Cost offset by higher tenant retention

EMERGING

Child-centred planning policy is providing a powerful tailwind

Housing for a Good Start sits at the intersection of two ongoing policy priorities: the chronic housing shortage and a growing political consensus (in the UK, Europe and the USA) that early childhood development is among the highest-return public investments available.

Nobel laureate James Heckman's research, demonstrating returns of USD6–17 for every USD1 invested in early childhood conditions,⁵³ has become a standard reference point in policy discussions across all three geographies. Professor Raj Chetty's work on social

mobility repeatedly illustrates the economic impact of environment on a child's outcomes in adult life, showing that every additional year of childhood spent in a better environment improves a child's long-term outcomes, from college attendance rates to earnings and even fertility and marriage patterns.⁵⁴

Several other policy priorities are supported by the principles embedded in Housing for a Good Start: the provision of green space and climate adaptation; tackling isolation and loneliness; and improving proximity to services and sustainable transport, for example. The framework also aligns with emerging policy agendas around healthy placemaking, social value and child-friendly cities. The examples from [page 53](#) and [54](#) represent the leading edge of a broader wave of policy that is embedding child-centred design into housing standards across major economies.

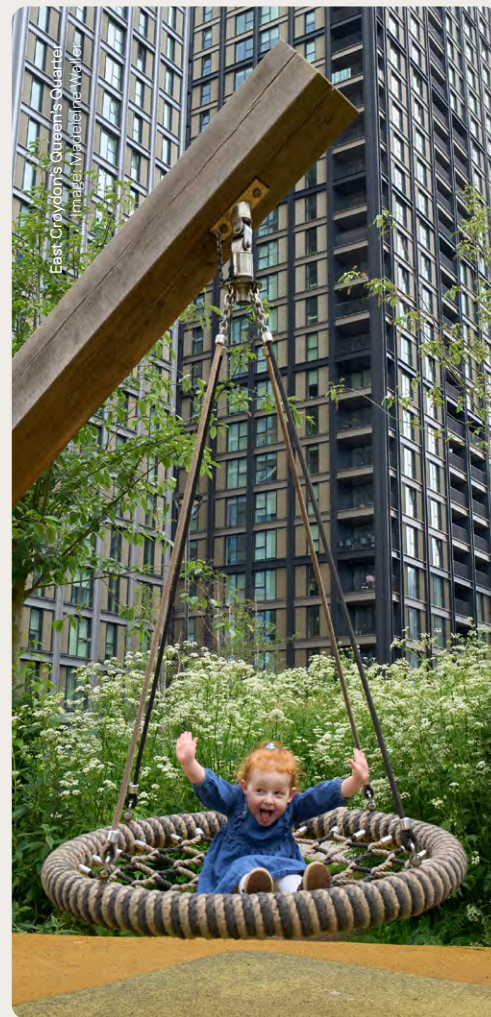
The direction of policy travel is clear. Specific mechanisms such as mandatory play provision in planning policy – as well as growing political concern about housing affordability – represent a shift that is moving across geographies at different speeds. Developers, operators and investors that align with these policy trends now may find themselves at an advantage as social value requirements in planning become more explicit.

Family-focused design is an economic imperative

There are also strong economic reasons why governments may want to prioritise family-centric housing design in cities. As the Urban Institute in the United States observes, urban growth has for many decades relied heavily on young, childless adults. As falling birthrates slow this pipeline, there is a growing need for cities to embrace a growth strategy focused on retaining families. The Institute identifies two core socioeconomic reasons to support this:

- **Failing to retain families now threatens cities' long-term economic and population growth prospects.** Cities where populations begin to shrink face a vicious cycle of school closures, economic contraction, fiscal imbalance, rising poverty concentration, and depressed housing markets, which are all harder to reverse than prevent.
- **Families play a critical role in long-term economic stability.** Parents spend more locally than adults without children. For example, in the USA, married parents with children spend USD25,000 more per year, on average, than childless married couples, and single parents spend USD4,000 more per year than single childless adults. Families also support school systems, pay property taxes, invest in local businesses, and anchor future labour supply. Nearly 60% of young adults live within 10 miles of where they grew up, suggesting today's children are tomorrow's local workforce.⁵⁵

This last point underlines why Housing for a Good Start is not just an imperative for lower-income groups. Prioritising family-focused housing provision at all income strata – and for both social housing and market-rate housing – is key to vitality across all neighbourhoods.



How policy is embedding early childhood outcomes in housing and planning

UNITED KINGDOM

Across the UK, children's play is becoming more firmly embedded in planning policy and statutory duties, although requirements vary between nations and cities. These provisions can materially influence scheme design, planning obligations and the determination of planning applications.

In England, proposed national policy reforms strengthen this direction. The draft National Planning Policy Framework explicitly calls for public spaces that facilitate social interaction, play and healthy lifestyles, and for connected, inclusive and accessible play opportunities. The draft Design and Placemaking Planning Practice Guidance also contains several references to children, play and independent mobility.

It adopts ZCD Architects' definition of doorstep space as space directly accessible from homes that supports social interaction, intergenerational use and independent children's play.⁵⁶

In Wales, the Play Sufficiency Duty⁵⁷ requires every local authority to assess and improve children's access to play every three years, making Wales the first country in the world to legislate specifically for children's play.⁵⁸

In Scotland, the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 requires Play Sufficiency Assessments to be carried out before each Local Development Plan is adopted.⁵⁹

London requires all residential developments to provide at least 10 m² per child of play space, with no segregation by tenure.⁶⁰



Image:
Isolde Woudstra/Van Leer Foundation

UNITED STATES

Several US states now prioritise Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC)⁶¹ applications that co-locate childcare, creating direct financial incentives for early-years integration at the development stage.

State-by-state requirements vary and no national standard exists, but the Multifamily Impact Council's Impact Framework explicitly includes childcare access and family programming as reportable impact metrics.^{62 63}

EUROPE

The European Child Guarantee, adopted by the EU Council in June 2021, calls on all Member States to guarantee children at risk of poverty or social exclusion effective access to early childhood education and care, healthcare and adequate housing.

National action plans are required from all Member States through to 2030, with biennial reporting. Although not yet hard planning law, this is shaping how Member States structure social spending and housing priorities and is backed by European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) funding.⁶⁴

EMERGING

Early movers are building competitive advantage – and the opportunity is open to all

‘Applying an early-years and family lens does not constrain returns. Applied well, it is the mechanism by which housing becomes more stable, more defensible, and more resilient in the long term – for residents and investors alike.’

FAMILY IS A DIFFERENTIATOR IN REAL ESTATE

As housing grows as an impact investment sector, differentiation within the space is increasingly important. A growing cohort of institutional investors across the UK, USA and Europe are building family-centred housing as a deliberate part of their portfolio strategy to achieve targeted impact. Additionally, within real estate development, there is a growing expectation of delivering social value. Housing for a Good Start can anchor that social value case and help developers to demonstrate true differentiation in a crowded market.



EARLY MOVERS ARE CAPTURING ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY

Jonathan Rose Companies, PATRIZIA, Ardstone, HUB, Peabody and Bridge Investment Group are just a few of the names implementing early childhood and family-centred programming across their housing portfolios. As they do, the benefits of delivering housing and places that correspond directly to the needs of young families will become more apparent and help to build market demand.

The opportunity is open to all – but those who move early will be better placed to shape emerging practice standards, build local authority relationships, and position themselves for the private market capital that increasingly comes with impact credentials. What's more, applying Housing for a Good Start principles does not constrain returns. Applied well, they are the mechanism by which housing becomes more stable, more defensible, and more resilient in the long term – for residents and investors alike.

The action and evaluation framework set out in the next sections of this playbook seeks to define what good looks like in practice – both to guide investment decisions, development briefs and management approaches, and to withstand scrutiny from residents, funders and regulators. The business case is building. The pioneers are already moving. The question is not whether Housing for a Good Start will become part of mainstream housing investment, but who will be central to its next stage of evolution.

Sendero Verde

Designing-in family health and wellbeing in East Harlem

‘By integrating early-years needs into design, affordable housing can serve as a foundation for healthy child development, supporting caregivers, reducing everyday stressors, and creating environments where young children can thrive from the start.’

DAWN MOTTRAM,
MANAGING DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS, ROSE COMPANIES

A transformative fully affordable newbuild development was completed in April 2024 in New York City’s East Harlem for 700+ families with incomes ranging from formerly homeless to 110% of the area median.

The rich mix of social, health and educational programmes is designed to increase its residents’ and neighbours’ health and wellbeing and provide over 85,000 square feet of community facility space. It is the world’s largest Passive House affordable residential building, substantially cutting energy use and improving indoor comfort.

PROJECT ECONOMICS AND FINANCING

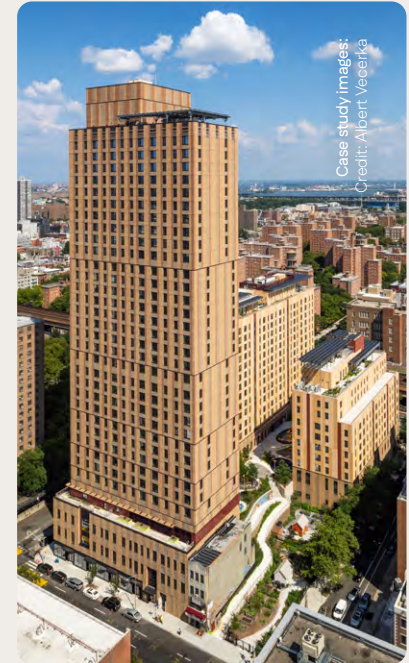
- Supported by loans from NYC Housing Development Corporation (HDC), NYC Department of Housing, Preservation and Development (HPD), Tax Credit equity from institutional investors, and soft funding from both local grants and State-funded green initiatives.
- An energy-efficient envelope reduces inflationary pressures on operational costs.

PARTNERS INVOLVED

- Rose Companies
- L&M Development Partners
- Acacia Network

Together with:

- Harlem Children’s Zone
- Civic Partners
- Union Settlement



Case study images:
Credit: Albert Veerika

How it meets our principles

PRINCIPLE 2

Stable and financially affordable homes

Seeks to provide safe, stable, green, affordable housing for more than 700 families on a range of incomes.

PRINCIPLE 3

Well-connected neighbourhoods

Has created a new public-facing streetscape with local retail and a school entry that opens onto Park Avenue. Embedded in a dense, family-supportive ecosystem that gives parents and caregivers immediate access to early learning, paediatric healthcare, nutritious food, safe play, and transit.

PRINCIPLE 4

Supportive social networks

Shared community gardens, event spaces, a fitness centre and communal lounges cultivate daily interaction. The Family Enrichment Center focuses on children and families, particularly aimed at preventing child abuse and protecting vulnerable families.

PRINCIPLE 5

Everyday playful moments

Four repurposed community gardens alongside a meandering central courtyard path mimic a historic Lenape trail, weaving educational, wellness, gardening, and play spaces across levels.

PRINCIPLE 6

Healthy and safe environments

Designed to Passive House standards, Sendero Verde provides a healthy and safe living environment with exceptional indoor air quality and non-toxic materials. The development integrates indoor and outdoor play areas, outdoor exercise equipment, indoor gyms, and multiple shared amenity spaces, supporting active, healthy living and safe environments for residents of all ages.

PRINCIPLE 7

Climate-resilient and sustainable design

The development embeds Passive House design to deliver lower energy use and improved air quality. Features include triple-glazed windows, an airtight building envelope, liquid-applied vapour barriers, variable refrigerant flow (VRF), photovoltaic solar panels, stormwater reuse in underground tanks, low-flow fixtures, and 'WaterSense' bathrooms.

PRINCIPLE 8

Responsive and participatory engagement

Extensive community consultation took place to build vital community consensus and foster local ownership. The Family Enrichment Center within the Union Settlement community facility proactively engages with families and is fully operated by local community members.

Learnings and legacy

Many of the learnings from Sendero Verde are being applied to future developments by the developer – for example, building to Passive House environmental standards to help create healthy living environments.



SEE
MORE
ONLINE

CASE STUDY

NEW YORK, UNITED STATES

Case study images:
Credit: Albert Vecerka





4

What does Housing for a Good Start look like in practice?

Key points

- Applying a Housing for a Good Start lens is a multifaceted endeavour, embracing housing and place design, support services, neighbourhood connectivity and participatory engagement.
- The eight Housing for a Good Start principles – plus supporting action areas and progression stages – capture the breadth of attributes that, collectively, can make housing an active driver of health, learning and opportunity in the early years of life.
- All eight principles matter but those new to this work can prioritise where to start – actions focused on training, consultation and governance offer a practical entry point.
- The Housing for a Good Start framework will continue to evolve as real-world application develops and new evidence emerges to inform best practice.



Image:
Peter de Ruiters
Van Leer Foundation

The Housing for a Good Start framework



Principles

- 1 Inclusive and physically accessible homes and neighbourhoods
- 2 Stable and financially affordable homes
- 3 Well-connected neighbourhoods
- 4 Supportive social networks
- 5 Everyday playful moments
- 6 Healthy and safe environments
- 7 Climate-resilient and sustainable design
- 8 Responsive and participatory engagement

Action areas

Please note that some action areas fit into more than one category, but for simplicity we have allocated each action area to one category.

Processes and governance

- 01 Early-years and family-informed design practice
- 02 Amenity gap analysis and action
- 03 Focused engagement across design and operations
- 04 On-site management that connects residents to services

Spaces and facilities

- 05 Family-responsive unit and home design
- 06 Play and green spaces that respond to community needs
- 07 Energy efficiency that reduces bills and stress
- 08 Accessible maternal and child healthcare services
- 09 Accessible childcare and early learning facilities
- 10 Public transport connections that enable everyday travel
- 11 Family-friendly walking and wheeling environment
- 12 Community spaces that support social interaction
- 13 Food outlets that enable affordable and healthy options
- 14 Family-friendly hygiene facilities
- 15 Sport facilities that encourage active lifestyles for caregivers

Services and initiatives

- 16 Play and early learning activities
- 17 Social programmes and community activities for caregivers and pregnant women
- 18 Family-centred information, wayfinding and signposting

Image:
Peter de Ruiter/
Van Leer Foundation



Housing for a Good Start Principles

“By spanning stability, quality, affordability, connectivity, social support, safety, play and climate resilience, the Housing for a Good Start principles shift housing from being a source of stress and risk to becoming an active driver of health, learning and opportunity in the early years.”

A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

This chapter sets out the full Housing for a Good Start framework in practical detail. The first half introduces the eight principles – the defining attributes of what good housing for families with young children looks like.

The second half goes deeper: 18 specific action areas, each with an indicative description of what ‘Excelling’ looks like in that area, give investors, developers and operators a practical tool to understand where they are today and what moving toward best practice looks like.

Applying a Housing for a Good Start lens means creating homes and environments that are healthy, safe, and nurturing for babies, toddlers and their caregivers. It requires thinking about not only housing design but the wider systems, services and relationships that help families to flourish and that strengthen the communities in which they live.

To capture this breadth and variety of need, we have worked with practitioners to identify eight ‘Housing for a Good Start’ principles which collectively offer a guide to what “good” looks like in practice – [see pages 67 and 68](#).

It is not expected that every Housing for a Good Start project will address all eight principles exhaustively, and different housing products may want to prioritise certain action areas and principles. However, it is increasingly recognised that when all eight principles are applied together, homes and neighbourhoods become secure, nurturing platforms that ease caregiver strain, support healthy early development, and lay a strong, enduring foundation for children’s lifelong wellbeing.

By prioritising stability, affordability, quality, connectivity, social support, safety, play and climate resilience, the Housing for a Good Start principles shift housing from being a source of stress and risk to becoming an active driver of health, learning and opportunity in the early years of life.

Our principles

1

Inclusive and physically accessible homes and neighbourhoods

Homes, spaces and services are designed and managed for diverse needs, abilities, cultures and incomes, ensuring every family can participate fully in community and neighbourhood life.

[SEE 1 IN PRACTICE](#)

2

Stable and financially affordable homes

Tenure security, fair and predictable rents, and transparent costs give caregivers the stability to plan ahead, reduce frequent moves in the early years, and maintain the consistent routines young children need to thrive.

3

Well-connected neighbourhoods

Homes within walking distance – or a short, safe, reliable public transport trip – of childcare, early learning, healthcare, nature, play spaces, shops and transport hubs help caregivers combine work, care and errands while giving children regular access to key services and experiences that support healthy development.

[SEE 3 IN PRACTICE](#)

4

Supportive social networks

Child- and family-friendly shared spaces, coupled with proactive management (for example, a community coordinator or housing manager), reduce isolation and encourage neighbours to meet, share childcare experiences and build trust, strengthening informal support networks.

[SEE 4 IN PRACTICE](#)

5

Everyday playful moments

Flexible homes with access to doorstep play spaces, inclusive and playable routes to nearby services and outdoor areas are designed to invite safe, developmentally rich play, movement and social interaction, weaving these experiences into families' everyday routines.

6

Healthy and safe environments

Quiet, clean, well-ventilated homes, and well-lit streets and open spaces with clearly legible signage and traffic calming, good sightlines and steps to improve air quality, protect young children from avoidable risks while supporting confident everyday movement and growing independence.

7

Climate-resilient and sustainable design

Energy efficient, well-insulated homes and climate-responsive public spaces, with trees, nature and shaded areas, keep environments comfortable and hazard-free, lower energy bills and strengthen the long-term health and wellbeing of young children and their families.

[SEE 7 IN PRACTICE](#)

8

Responsive and participatory engagement

Residents and the wider community – including caregivers, pregnant women and, where appropriate, children – are meaningfully involved in decisions about design, services and management across the property lifecycle so that homes and neighbourhoods adapt as families grow and remain relevant, equitable and supportive of early childhood.

[SEE 8 IN PRACTICE](#)

THE ACTION AREAS

Underpinning these eight principles are 18 ‘action areas’ (see page 79). Together, they provide a practical framework for continuous improvement rather than a compliance checklist. These are specific design features, development and operational practices, and facilities/services that embed the principles of Housing for a Good Start into projects, grouped into three categories: Processes and governance; Spaces and facilities; and Services and initiatives.

Individual action areas typically advance several Housing for a Good Start principles at once, creating an interconnected

system in which physical, programmatic and enabling interventions reinforce one another to shape outcomes for babies, toddlers and their caregivers.

The figure below sets out four progression stages – **Baseline → Establishing → Embedding → Excelling** – to help organisations understand where they are today and how to move towards Housing for a Good Start best practice. For investors appointing or evaluating delivery partners, these stages also function as a consistent due diligence tool and a roadmap for ongoing improvement.

PROGRESSION STAGES TO HOUSING FOR A GOOD START BEST PRACTICE



Baseline ↗

What is already in place – existing provision, industry norms and typical conditions – without a specific focus on the needs of babies, toddlers and caregivers.



Establishing ↗

Identifying what is missing and putting the fundamentals in place, so essential services and spaces are present, reachable, and accessible to families within appropriate proximity.



Embedding ↗

Shaping how spaces and services are experienced in practice, by integrating early-years needs into design, layout and operations, so they are comfortable, safe, inclusive, and easy to use.



Excelling ↗

Actively managing and coordinating spaces and services across systems and continuously improving them over time in response to families’ changing needs and feedback.

A FRAMEWORK FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The families who stand to gain most from Housing for a Good Start are often those most underserved by the current housing system. Financial instability, insecure tenure and the constant threat of displacement create a persistent backdrop of anxiety that can undermine even the best-designed physical environments and services.

By applying the principles and the action areas outlined here, it is possible to move from isolated improvements to systemic change – reducing avoidable stress, breaking cycles of disadvantage, and creating neighbourhoods that consistently enable young children and their caregivers to thrive.



Image:
Van Leer Foundation

Pines Way in Bath

Engagement-led family-friendly living

‘Bath needs more rentable family homes. I feel like [those behind this development] have genuinely listened.’

LOCAL RESIDENT,
DESIGN EVOLUTION EXHIBITION, PERCY COMMUNITY CENTRE

Regeneration of the former Homebase DIY store site at Pines Way, Bath, delivers a mixed-use scheme providing 275 build-to-rent homes and 179 shared/co-living homes, alongside generous shared amenities and landscaping.

The development considered family-friendly living and sustainability from the earliest stages, with extensive public consultation, including focused engagement with families, to inform the design of homes and the public realm.

PROJECT ECONOMICS AND FINANCING

£18.5 million acquisition – the development is financed through private investment.

PARTNERS INVOLVED

- Bridges Fund Management
- HUB Residential



Case study images:
Urban Symbolics, HUB and Bridges Fund Management

How it meets our principles

PRINCIPLE 1

Inclusive and physically accessible homes and neighbourhoods

A mix of housing types was developed in consultation with the local authority and the local community to ensure the scheme delivers housing that the city genuinely needs, including family-friendly living and extensive public realm and shared amenities.

PRINCIPLE 3

Well-connected neighbourhoods

The development is in a town-centre location near public transport links, dedicated pedestrian/cycle routes, and many services required by families with young children such as a creche, GP surgery, dentist, school and community centre.

PRINCIPLE 4

Supportive social networks

The development has communal lounges that can be used by families with young children, alongside extensive outdoor public space.

PRINCIPLE 5

Everyday playful moments

The site has been designed to foster play and social interaction, along with biodiversity enhancement measures, including more than 6,100 m² of publicly accessible space including around 450 m² of integrated play space.

PRINCIPLE 7

Climate-resilient and sustainable design

The development is targeting a reduction of over 60% in carbon dioxide emissions compared with a standard newbuild development, and high environmental standards including a BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) 'Excellent' rating for sustainability, and a Fitwel 3-Star rating for healthy buildings.

PRINCIPLE 8

Responsive and participatory engagement

Extensive community engagement helped to shape the development, with over 800 insights gathered through public events and focus groups over eight months. The Family Voices Toolkit guidelines were used to engage parents and carers of children under 5 years. Activities for children were designed to attract families and give parents and guardians time to engage with the exhibition and the team. Popcorn was given away to encourage participation.

Learnings and legacy

- A child-focused approach, meaningful engagement with families with young children, and collaborative consultation with the local authority enabled a more inclusive planning process and resulted in faster and better decision making for all parties.
- The development has demonstrated the importance of adopting the right approach from the outset and allowing sufficient time to accommodate unexpected events when engaging with families with young children.





Housing for a Good Start action framework

Below we present the action framework:

18 action areas that can help organisations deliver on the eight Housing for a Good Start principles. For each action area, we describe its purpose and what best practice (Excelling) looks like.

The full action framework – setting out four performance stages from Baseline to Excelling for all action areas – is available in the accompanying [toolkit](#).

Not all action areas are relevant in all contexts of a development. But we hope this framework can be a source of both aspiration and inspiration – and can continue to evolve as a community of Housing for a Good Start practitioners evolves.

Image:
Isolde Woudstra/
Van Leer Foundation



Five steps for using the framework

1

Prioritise

Identify which action areas are most relevant to your context, project type and resources.

For those new to this agenda, the journey can begin with small, deliberate steps: **Processes and governance** is the natural starting point, laying the foundations of knowledge, relationships and practice on which the other areas build.

2

Assess

Conduct a baseline assessment across your prioritised action areas to understand where your organisation or project currently sits – from **Baseline to Excelling** – using the downloadable [Housing for a Good Start toolkit](#).

3

Implement

Apply the relevant principles and action areas to your investment decisions, development briefs and management approaches.

4

Measure

Assess and monitor both social and financial outcomes across your portfolio, using the proposed Housing for a Good Start impact indicators as a starting point – detailed below and also in the downloadable [Housing for a Good Start toolkit](#).

5

Iterate

Refine your approach over time in response to resident feedback and emerging evidence as you progress from **Baseline to Excelling**.

Some further points to bear in mind when applying this framework

See Appendix 2 for Useful Resources to inform and guide implementation across these action areas.

THE FRAMEWORK IS NOT EXHAUSTIVE

Developers, operators and the communities they work with may identify further priorities in terms of action areas, best practice and impact measurement to incorporate as their understanding of Housing for a Good Start, and the needs of their own specific projects, deepens.

OUR DEFINED BASELINES VS STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

Some progression stages (especially those regarding housing design and building codes) may already be statutory planning requirements in some markets. Where statutory requirements are more stringent than what is presented here, we would encourage taking those as the baseline/starting point and exploring how to move further towards the Excelling stage.

AFFORDABILITY IN ALL ITS FORMS

Across all principles and action areas, affordability is taken as a foundational need for families, encompassing not just rent but bills, services and the cost of support such as childcare.

SCOPE OF PRACTITIONER INFLUENCE

Some action areas may address features that are not directly in a developer's sphere of influence – such as local healthcare facilities or public transport connectivity. We include these as examples of ambitious best practice that require all stakeholders – investors, developers and local planning authorities and campaigning groups – to work together to achieve.

AN INCLUSIVE FRAMEWORK THAT BENEFITS ALL

Although this framework is principally shaped to support babies, toddlers and their caregivers, it is not intended to exclude other tenants. All the principles – plus many of the action areas – benefit all residents and the wider community.

Action areas

Please note that some action areas fit into more than one category, but for simplicity we have allocated each action area to one category.

Processes and governance

- 01 Early-years and family-informed design practice
- 02 Amenity gap analysis and action
- 03 Focused engagement across design and operations
- 04 On-site management that connects residents to services

Spaces and facilities

- 05 Family-responsive unit and home design
- 06 Play and green spaces that respond to community needs
- 07 Energy efficiency that reduces bills and stress
- 08 Accessible maternal and child healthcare services
- 09 Accessible childcare and early learning facilities
- 10 Public transport connections that enable everyday travel
- 11 Family-friendly walking and wheeling environment
- 12 Community spaces that support social interaction
- 13 Food outlets that enable affordable and healthy options
- 14 Family-friendly hygiene facilities
- 15 Sport facilities that encourage active lifestyles for caregivers

Services and initiatives

- 16 Play and early learning activities
- 17 Social programmes and community activities for caregivers and pregnant women
- 18 Family-centred information, wayfinding and signposting



Processes and governance

The decision-making, planning and management processes that shape how developments are designed, delivered and managed over time to support Housing for a Good Start

1

Early-years and family-informed design practice

Delivering homes that genuinely meet the needs of babies, toddlers and their caregivers requires a shared understanding of early-years and family needs across all teams involved in the project life cycle – from strategy and design through procurement, construction and management.

What excelling looks like

Early-years and family-informed design is standard practice across the relevant housing portfolios. Requirements are consistently embedded in briefs and contracts, and proposals are stress-tested by early childhood or family-focused specialists. Property and asset management teams are trained to maintain and adapt these features over time – driving a consistent shift towards homes and neighbourhoods that support comfort, safety, play and caregiving at every stage of the project life cycle.

2 Amenity gap analysis and action

Housing for a Good Start depends not only on what happens inside the home, but also on the amenities, services and safe routes that surround it. The following sections of this framework cover the range of spaces, facilities, services and initiatives that this could cover.

3 Focused engagement across design and operations

Delivering homes that meet the needs of babies, toddlers and caregivers begins with listening to the families living in and around them and responding to their needs. The [Family Voices Toolkit](#) offers specific guidance on engagement formats designed for families with young children that can yield relevant insights for housing design, delivery and management.

What excelling looks like

A clear, ongoing and systematic process is in place to assess, plan, prioritise and deliver family-friendly improvements over time. Investments and actions are coordinated across projects and partners, so gaps are not only filled but anticipated, ensuring families have consistent, age-appropriate access to key amenities as the housing development and wider neighbourhood evolve.

What excelling looks like

Engagement is embedded in governance and decision-making and takes different family configurations fully into account. Caregivers are consistently involved from initial design through post-occupancy in shaping spaces, services and rules, with clear feedback loops showing how input informs actions, creating sustained trust, accountability and a shared sense of ownership over the housing environment.



Responsive and participatory engagement

Involving future residents both in the design of any development and in its ongoing governance increases the likelihood that it will genuinely meet their wants and needs. Repeatedly, the best-received developments designed with a child/family lens have made community engagement central to their process.

CITYWEST DRIVE IN DUBLIN [\(see page 17\)](#)

presented an opportunity to trial the [Family Voices Toolkit](#) designed by ZCD Architects to capture the perspectives of families, especially those with babies and toddlers who have less opportunity to participate in community consultation. Workshop sessions for young parents combined mapping exercises – of both the local neighbourhood and participants' homes – and a walking tour of green spaces in the area, and helped to surface priorities, especially for outdoor environments.

CALICO IN BRUSSELS [\(see page 115\)](#)

operates 34 households under the community land trust model, which guarantees permanent housing affordability and empowers vulnerable families to shape design and development of housing through a fully participatory governance model. Childcare is organised during General Assemblies so parents can participate, and the co-creation of a 'community care' model – which includes workshops for single parents, a birthing and end-of-life home, and a Kids Working Group – ensures a more inclusive living environment for families. The integration of co-housing principles in the building design of a community space provides informal shared spaces for families and children.

LIVE AND LEARN [\(see page 99\)](#)

which looks to integrate playful learning into affordable housing to support childhood development, is based on a foundation of community engagement and co-design, believing that communities have a wealth of knowledge and expertise that can enrich all design processes. Live and Learn, a project of Playful Learning Landscapes, employs a comprehensive community engagement and co-design model, soliciting feedback from children, caregivers and elders in the community. The goal of Playful Learning Landscapes is always to trace a through line from each of the community sessions to the final design.

4

On-site management that connects residents to services

On-site management helps families access and stay connected to local services, raise concerns, and build relationships with neighbours, making it easier to navigate daily life, get support when needed and feel part of a local community.

What excelling looks like

Support is consistent, proactive and well-coordinated over time. On-site management is visible, approachable and trusted, and has received training on family and early-years needs. Management helps families stay connected to services, resolve issues quickly and build strong local networks, and can point them to useful resources (both physical and online) to support children and caregivers. Communication is clear and two-way, and residents feel confident that their needs are heard and acted upon.





Supportive social networks

Digital tools that connect caregivers to evidence-based guidance and peer support extend the reach of a housing community beyond its physical boundaries – reducing isolation and strengthening the informal networks that families with young children rely on.

CHAT2LEARN APP

The Chat2Learn App is a free, evidence-based mobile application developed by the University of Chicago's Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab (BIP Lab). It is designed to help parents and caregivers of children aged three to six build their child's language skills, curiosity, and social-emotional development through guided, open-ended conversations.



Image:
Madeleine Waller

Spaces and facilities

The physical infrastructure within and around a development, including buildings, public spaces and shared spatial assets that support babies, toddlers and their caregivers

5

Family-responsive unit and home design

The design of the home itself shapes daily life for families with young children in ways that communal spaces cannot compensate for. Poor internal layouts, inadequate storage, thin walls and inflexible room configurations create friction, stress and noise that bear directly on caregiver wellbeing and child development. Homes designed with young families in mind reduce everyday burden and create conditions in which babies and toddlers can rest, play and grow safely.

What excelling looks like

Home design is developed with input from families and early-years practitioners and tested against lived experience. Design standards are refined over time in response to resident feedback, with lessons carried into future developments. The home is understood as the primary environment for early childhood and caregiver wellbeing and is designed and managed accordingly.



Inclusive and physically accessible homes and neighbourhoods

Housing for a Good Start encourages designing intentionally for all kinds of family units.

One example is a public housing project in **Carlsberg Byen**, Copenhagen that is exploring a new co-housing model tailored specifically to single parents and their children.

Units are flexible micro-homes (from 63 m²) that function when the children are at home or staying with the other parent, using alcoves and open plans rather than fixed rooms.

Common areas are sized and positioned so even small children can navigate them independently, and baby monitor range is factored into the layout. Community is nurtured through deliberate design: shared living rooms on each floor, accidental encounters on gallery walkways,

and shared roof facilities. Onboarding of residents is timed close to move-in to reflect the reality that family situations can change significantly over a three- to five-year development period. Research for the project included interviews with single parents and blended families, co-design with an expert group, and was grounded in two prior studies on housing needs among non-traditional families.

In the UK, **Sidney Close**, a development of 19 two-bedroom affordable homes for social rent in rural Buckinghamshire, is designed expressly to focus on the needs of very young children and babies and their caregivers who are spending a lot of time at home.

All 19 homes surround a central garden where children can play and neighbours socialise. Houses are built with an array of family-friendly features including a balance of private and public space; generously sized windows and views of the shared garden from every room; an open-plan ground floor with a kitchen and living room so children can still be watched while meals are being prepared.

The kitchen also connects to the private courtyard so children can play outside in sight of their parent or caregiver. The entrance has a WC and space for a pushchair and double-height space to hang washing.

The development is a good example of design features that go beyond standard UK housing and planning compliance, for example, the continuous perimeter layout of the homes to act as a shielding barrier, protecting the central garden and play space from the heavy traffic noise of the adjacent M40 motorway.

SEE
THE
DATA



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6 Play and green spaces that respond to community needs

Play and contact with nature are central to early development, yet in many housing developments they are confined to a single, underused and generically designed playground. Accessible, well-distributed play and green spaces, away from vehicular traffic, pollution and noise, enable everyday outdoor experiences, support nature contact, and provide opportunities for rest and social interaction for children and caregivers. Trees and other planting also help to filter out particulates from traffic and improve air quality.⁶⁵

7 Energy efficiency that reduces bills and stress

Energy performance shapes everyday comfort, costs and health. Well-performing homes reduce exposure to cold, heat and damp, lower energy bills, and create more stable and healthy conditions for babies, toddlers and their caregivers.

What excelling looks like

A true play-and-green ecosystem is delivered: a network of varied, nature-rich play opportunities woven through streets, courtyards and shared spaces, situated well away from (and properly shielded from) busy, polluted roads. Play and nature become part of daily life, communities feel more connected, and children access the rich sensory and social experiences that underpin healthy development. The ecosystem is actively managed, planting is carefully considered to improve biodiversity and air quality, and continuously improved over time in response to families' feedback and evolving community needs.

What excelling looks like

Homes are designed and operated to deliver very low or near-zero energy bills. High-performance building fabric, integrated renewable technologies and climate-responsive design create stable, comfortable environments year-round, and ventilation improves both air circulation and air quality. Families are protected from the financial burden of high energy costs so caregivers can focus on everyday life and caregiving.



Climate-resilient and sustainable design

Energy-efficient, well-insulated homes and climate-responsive public spaces lower energy bills and strengthen the long-term health and wellbeing of young children and their families.

The **L'Innesto project** transforms a former freight terminal site in Milan into Italy's first zero-carbon, affordable housing district. Its energy strategy is central to the design and works on three levels: reducing consumption through high-performance thermal insulation and a solar-assisted cooling system; optimising through a renewable-powered district heating network that serves the whole development collectively; and offsetting remaining emissions through urban tree planting and a city-wide decarbonisation fund. The result is that 100% of energy for heating and cooling comes from renewable sources, with 64% of total energy generated on site.

Residents can monitor their household energy consumption through a free neighbourhood app, giving families direct visibility over their bills and helping embed lower-consumption habits from the outset. A dedicated social manager supports tenants in navigating the development's shared spaces and sustainability features, helping residents get the most from what the neighbourhood has to offer and building the collaborative habits that keep it working well over time.



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8 Accessible maternal and child healthcare services

Access to trusted healthcare close to home makes it easier for families to get support during pregnancy and early childhood. Regular check-ups, advice and preventive care help babies and young children stay healthy, while reducing stress for caregivers.

9 Accessible childcare and early learning facilities

Access to childcare and early learning close to home supports families with young children in their daily lives. It gives babies and toddlers opportunities to play, learn and build relationships outside the home, while helping caregivers work and manage routines more easily, reducing stress.

What excelling looks like

Services feel safe, respectful and responsive, and span physical and mental health for children and caregivers alike, including post-partum. Quiet, private spaces support sensitive conversations, and staff communicate clearly and with empathy, helping families feel welcomed, understood and confident when using services. Telehealth options for both children and caregivers provide additional flexibility.

What excelling looks like

Childcare is well connected with health, education and community services, creating a joined-up offer for families, for example Sendero Verde in Harlem and Citywest Drive in Dublin. Over time, provision adapts to local demand and is improved based on feedback from caregivers, ensuring it remains responsive, inclusive and sustainable. Indoor and outdoor childcare spaces nurture child development and protect children and care workers from hazards including air pollution.

10

Public transport connections that enable everyday travel

Locating developments close to public transport helps families move easily between daily destinations. Frequent and accessible connections make it easier to reach childcare, healthcare, work and essential services, reducing travel time and making everyday routines more manageable with young children.

What excelling looks like

Public transport is well connected across modes and services, creating smooth, predictable journeys for families. Stops and stations and access routes from the property are well supervised, feel safe and are continuously improved over time based on how families use them and what they say they need.

11

Family-friendly walking and wheeling environment

Safe and comfortable walking and cycling/wheeling routes help families move easily between home and everyday destinations, making daily trips more manageable with young children while supporting health, independence and access to services.

What excelling looks like

Walking and wheeling are part of a coordinated, family-friendly mobility system. Routes from the property link seamlessly with public transport, feel safe and visible at all times of day, and are continuously improved over time in response to how families use them and the barriers they report.



Well-connected neighbourhoods

Connecting a development intentionally to its surrounding area is key to enabling children and their caregivers to feel socially integrated.

The **King's Crescent** project in London's Stoke Newington area emerged from the urgent need to regenerate an estate affected by partial demolitions and unsuccessful renewal attempts, which had left the neighbourhood fragmented and in poor physical condition.

The new proposal redefines the area as a mixed-tenure and community- and family-oriented neighbourhood. As well as reconnecting the estate with the adjacent Clissold Park, it integrates existing social housing structures with new residential buildings and open public spaces. At its heart is a pedestrianised play street that acts as the social and spatial spine of the development, linking the different phases of the project and extending connections towards the surrounding community.

Designed specifically with children and caregivers in mind, the street incorporates benches, traditional play elements, tables, logs and natural landscape features that encourage informal play, social interaction and everyday outdoor activity. In this way, play for toddlers and children is not hidden but sits in the middle of everyday movement, overlooked by homes and connected to the public realm.

Strandlodsvej in Copenhagen, Denmark, is a neighbourhood development seeking to integrate housing, mobility and community space. Located within 300–800 metres of two metro stations, the development benefits from strong public transport accessibility and incorporates new cycle paths to encourage active mobility and reduce car dependency. A diagonal pedestrian and cycling route acts not only as circulation infrastructure but also as an activated public realm, integrating wider pockets, garden-like spaces and play/stay areas designed specifically for children and caregivers.



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12 Community spaces that support social interaction

Indoor and outdoor community spaces give babies, toddlers and caregivers safe places to play, learn and spend time together, while creating opportunities to meet others, join activities and build local support networks.⁶⁶

What excelling looks like

Indoor and outdoor community spaces support a regular programme of activities and social interaction, helping to build strong local support networks. They are well maintained, actively managed and adapted over time in response to feedback from families and evolving community needs.

13 Food outlets that enable affordable and healthy options

Easy access to affordable, healthy food close to home helps families maintain a good diet during pregnancy and early childhood, while reducing stress and financial pressure on caregivers.

What excelling looks like

Food environments are safe, well-kept and responsive to what families need. A mix of shops and local markets offers culturally appropriate, healthy and affordable options, and the offer is adapted over time based on feedback from caregivers and patterns of local use.



Supportive social networks

Family-friendly shared spaces, coupled with proactive management, reduce isolation and strengthen informal support networks for children and their caregivers.

GADEHAVEGÅRD ([see online](#))

A large social and public housing urban regeneration project west of Copenhagen, Denmark, has an explicit focus on improving life outcomes for children, including by increasing contact among children from different backgrounds. A neighbourhood council oversees a year-round programme of events, shared meals, sports and cultural activities for residents, with a particular focus on families.

THE FAMILY IN DELFT ([see online](#))

A development of 94 affordable family apartments in the Netherlands seeks to keep families in the city by offering the space, security, and community infrastructure they need. Purpose-designed for families, shared amenities include a slide to a play deck, roof garden, communal living room, and bicycle shed – supporting everyday community life for residents across different family configurations.

THE CITY OF JOY ([see online](#))

In Rome, Italy, a former trade fair site is redeveloped with public spaces that cater to all age groups, incorporating play and learning as key components of the urban experience and enriching the neighbourhood with opportunities for sharing and connection.

THE BOTANICZNA ESTATE ([see online](#))

Poznań, Poland, has sought to provide a sanctuary for its residents in a busy urban environment. To do this it has created a car-free internal 'corridor' connecting two streets and a nearby lake, featuring playgrounds, street game markings, a running track, colourful social niches and pedestrian-oriented design – functioning as a shared social landscape that strengthens connectivity and informal gathering opportunities for residents of all ages.

14

Family-friendly hygiene facilities

Clean and safe public toilets close to home make it easier for families to spend time outside with babies and toddlers. Facilities for all levels of mobility, with baby-changing and child-friendly washing areas, support everyday trips and reduce stress for caregivers.

15

Sport facilities that encourage active lifestyles for caregivers

Places for sport and physical activity encourage caregivers to stay active and support their wellbeing. Flexible and informal opportunities, including spaces where parents and children can be active together, make it easier to fit physical activity into everyday life.

What excelling looks like

Facilities are consistently clean, safe and well maintained, with space and features to support all levels of mobility – including adult changing facilities and hoisting equipment for disabled users. Cleaning is regular and reliable, spaces are well lit and clearly signed, and families feel confident using them as part of their everyday routines.

What excelling looks like

Facilities are safe, welcoming and well looked after, with clear rules, good lighting and simple booking processes where needed. They support regular use and are adapted over time in response to how families use them and what they say they need.

[See Active Design guidance \(Sport England\).](#)



Image:
Catarina Heekkt

Services and initiatives

The programmatic and operational components delivered in and across spaces and facilities in developments designed to deliver a good start for babies, toddlers and their caregivers

16 Play and early learning activities

Regular activities such as story time, playgroups and parent–child sessions, delivered at a range of settings, bring early learning into everyday spaces. They support language, motor and social development, while helping caregivers build routines and connect with other families.

What excelling looks like

Programmes are well organised, safe and reliably delivered, with clear supervision and trained staff. Information is easy to find, access is well managed, and activities actively foster ongoing relationships and peer support between families, becoming a stable part of local routines.

17 Social programmes and community activities for caregivers and pregnant women

Social and support activities for parents, caregivers and pregnant women create opportunities to connect, share experiences and build supportive networks, helping to reduce isolation and make it easier to manage the demands of early parenting.

What excelling looks like 

Programmes are delivered by trained facilitators and support safe, welcoming participation. Over time, activities build strong local networks, with growing involvement from caregivers and pregnant women in shaping and leading initiatives.

18 Family-centred information, wayfinding and signposting

Clear and easy-to-use information helps families understand what is available and how to access it. Maps, signs and digital tools make it easier to find services and move around with babies and young children.

What excelling looks like 

Information is reliable, regularly updated and well maintained, with clear signage and visible information points or contacts for help. Families can quickly understand what is available, feel confident navigating the area, and experience fewer stressful journeys with babies and toddlers.

The full action framework – setting out four performance stages from Baseline to Excelling for all 18 action areas – is available online in the [Housing for a Good Start toolkit](#). See Appendix 2 for Useful Resources to inform and guide implementation of these action areas.

Live and Learn

Integrating playful learning into affordable housing

'I enjoyed the community activities the most. People like me don't usually have opportunities to get involved. No one ever asks me, "How do you feel? What do you want? What do you think?" It was an amazing experience to have a voice and feel a part of it.'

RESIDENT

Live and Learn seeks to incorporate playful learning into affordable housing development, starting with two pilot sites in Philadelphia.

Playful learning is a science-based approach that creates opportunities in public spaces for children and caregivers to interact in ways that spark curiosity and exploration, and support children's development. Playful Learning Landscapes specifically designs its learning goals for children from birth to age 8, with a focus on creating intergenerational spaces that engage whole communities.

PROJECT ECONOMICS AND FINANCING

The pilot project was primarily funded by a grant from a local foundation. Each developer also contributed matching funds.

PARTNERS INVOLVED

- Playful Learning Landscapes
 - Watchdog Project Management
- In partnership with
- Masters Group Design



How it meets our principles

PRINCIPLE 3

Well-connected neighbourhoods

Both Live and Learn pilot sites are in densely populated urban areas in Philadelphia. Accordingly, both sites are very walkable (with sidewalks), close to public transport, and close to many amenities like grocery stores, childcare centres and local businesses.

PRINCIPLE 4

Supportive social networks

Playful learning installations such as trails, interactive puzzles, murals and activity nooks are designed to provide intergenerational moments of connection and interaction. Most often, these moments are between children and caregivers, but such spaces also often create 'the new public square', a place where the community can gather and interact with one another. Sixty-seven per cent of adults said they felt 'very welcomed' in the space, showing that these environments elevate emotional wellbeing and inclusivity, and several respondents said that they feel more connected to the neighbourhood.

PRINCIPLE 5

Everyday playful moments

Live and Learn is the first project to integrate playful learning into affordable housing to inspire conversation, curiosity, play and learning for children and families. In the North Central Philadelphia retrofit, for example, an entry gate prompts incomers to step into their own story. A book nook is a welcoming place to sit and read. Yard benches with storytelling prompts encourage social interaction. In the Sharswood new development, painted animal prints invite children to step, hop or crawl like different creatures as they explore their neighbourhood, while a range of outdoor puzzles and games invite further exploration and learning about nature while practising communication skills using colour, shape, and pattern.

PRINCIPLE 8

Responsive and participatory engagement

Each Live and Learn site participated in a robust community engagement and co-design process. This included site walks with residents to identify locations for playful learning installations, community workshops and co-design sessions with the project team and architects, and community-led evaluation. All community residents, including children, were welcomed, valued, and compensated at all events.

Learnings and legacy

The project team are helping to explore ways to integrate playful learning into Philadelphia's RFP (Request for Proposals) process for affordable housing construction, including the possibility of offering incentives for developers who include playful learning, among other strategies.

KEY LEARNINGS

- Prioritise playful learning integration from the start of design to maintain construction budget and time frame.
- Practise a co-design process including housing developers, architects and community members (including children) from start to finish.
- Design with intentionality by incorporating the science of how and what children learn together with community voices.



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5

Measuring social impact and financial performance

Key points

- What gets measured gets managed – a consistent approach to measurement helps organisations understand what is working, identify what needs to improve, and demonstrate progress over time.
- Housing for a Good Start should demonstrate two complementary outcomes: social impact – how it improves the lives of babies, toddlers and their caregivers; and financial and operational performance – how it strengthens asset performance for investors, developers and operators.
- Social impact is evidenced through practical, comparable indicators applied to each of the 18 action areas, assessing what was put in place, what changed for residents, and whether the intervention contributed to those changes.
- Financial and operational performance metrics look to measure how applying a Housing for a Good Start lens influences asset performance, including resident experience, community stability and operational efficiency.
- Establishing a credible impact measurement process requires investment of time and resources, but the evidence it generates will be invaluable for accountability, investment decisions and shaping Housing for a Good Start best practice.

‘By structuring evidence in this way, organisations can: measure social impact in a consistent and comparable manner; strengthen accountability to residents, investors, funders and regulators; and show clear alignment with policy priorities and public value objectives.’

What gets measured gets managed

For Housing for a Good Start to deliver on its promise of improving outcomes for babies, toddlers and their caregivers while strengthening asset performance, practitioners need a clear and consistent way to understand what is working, what needs to improve, and how to demonstrate progress over time.

In this final section of the playbook, we set out how a credible impact measurement framework can be constructed to do that. The evidence generated can also help build the broader case for Housing for a Good Start, accelerating adoption and attracting the investment and policy support needed for this approach to scale.

Assessing two key outcomes

To scale as a credible area of impact investing, Housing for a Good Start needs to evidence two complementary outcomes:

Social impact

How early-years-focused design and management improves outcomes for babies, toddlers and their caregivers, enhancing everyday living conditions and reducing long-term social risk.

Financial and operational performance

How these same interventions strengthen asset performance – increasing economic value for developers, operators and investors while reducing long-term financial risk.

Meeting ESG reporting requirements

For investors, a structured Housing for a Good Start measurement framework also offers a significant reporting advantage. ESG and impact reporting expectations continue to grow driven by regulation (primarily in the EU), stakeholder (e.g. limited partner) demands and public scrutiny. The ability to evidence social value in a consistent, comparable and auditable way is therefore increasingly valuable.

The framework set out here is designed to meet those expectations, providing a clear and credible basis for impact reporting that goes beyond narrative claims to measurable, resident-level and community-level outcomes.

Evidencing social impact

Social impact is evidenced through practical, comparable indicators applied to each of the 18 action areas. Organisations can assess and strengthen each area's impact over time through three measures.

INPUT INDICATORS

Which action areas have been addressed and the standard of practice achieved, evaluated using the four-stage progression scale (**Baseline**, **Establishing**, **Embedding** and **Excelling**) detailed in the online [Housing for a Good Start toolkit](#).

OUTCOME INDICATORS

The changes experienced by residents, particularly babies, toddlers and their caregivers.

CONTRIBUTION INDICATORS

Evidence showing that the intervention is contributing to observed outcomes (for example, through resident feedback, before/after comparisons, or comparison sites).

By structuring evidence in this way, organisations can: measure social impact in a consistent and comparable manner; strengthen accountability to residents, investors, funders and regulators; and show clear alignment with policy priorities and public value objectives.

Measuring impact also supports a stronger investment case, helping to unlock incentives, attract blended finance (which blends private capital with public and/or philanthropic capital) and generally improve access to capital. Impact data can also inform better asset selection, development design and operational decision-making.

Where to start: a minimum viable measurement set

For organisations new to impact measurement, the full framework set out in the [Housing for a Good Start toolkit](#) need not be adopted in its entirety from the outset. A practical starting point is to identify the action areas being actively pursued and apply one indicator from each of the three measures – **Input**, **Outcome** and **Contribution** – for each of those areas.

This focused approach minimises the initial data collection burden, generates immediately useful evidence, and builds the measurement habits and processes that can then be extended as organisational capacity and confidence develop.

The example below illustrates how the framework applies in practice across one action area – ‘Early-years and family-informed design practice’. Taken together, these indicators provide a consistent and practical way for organisations at any stage of implementation to assess progress, benchmark performance and build a credible evidence base. Indicators for all 18 action areas are set out in the online [Housing for a Good Start toolkit](#) that accompanies this playbook.

Evaluation of action areas

Example 1: Processes and governance

Action area 1:

Early-years and family-informed design practice

Input indicator

Level of embedded practice across the Baseline to Excelling progression scale:



Baseline ↗

No structured training or shared design approach.



Establishing ↗

Foundational training delivered across teams (e.g. safety, sensory design, movement, play and caregiving needs).



Embedding ↗

Housing for a Good Start principles integrated into design briefs, procurement processes and project reviews.



Excelling ↗

Early-years and family-informed design is standard practice: requirements are embedded across all stages, proposals are quality-assured, and operational teams are trained to maintain outcomes over time.

Outcome indicator

Resident satisfaction with early-years relevant design features.

Contribution indicator

Evidence from design documents demonstrating application of training.



Evidencing financial and operational performance

This second area of evaluation assesses whether applying the principles of Housing for a Good Start translates into improved asset performance, looking at three areas:

- ① **Resident experience and demand**
- ② **Community stability and risk reduction**
- ③ **Operational and financial performance**

The three tables below detail several indicators that can be used to assess each of these evaluation areas. Meaningful measurement depends on comparison, so organisations should aim to track each metric against a prior period, portfolio average and sector benchmark wherever possible.

These metrics are specifically tailored to households with young children and are designed to complement – not replace – standard investment reporting. So alongside them, organisations should also track standard real estate investment performance metrics such as internal rate of return (IRR), total value to paid-in capital (TVPI), multiple on invested capital (MOIC) and distributed to paid-in capital (DPI). Income profile indicators such as net operating income (NOI) growth, cash yield and distribution yield, and cap rate at entry versus exit can also be included in reporting.

1

Resident experience and demand

Reflects perceived quality of living, shaping resident satisfaction and overall demand for the asset.

INDICATORS

Caregiver satisfaction with space and safety design (1–10 scale)

DESCRIPTION

Disaggregates satisfaction by the features most relevant to this group (storage, play space, sightlines, outdoor access) rather than a blended whole-building score that can mask specific experience

METRIC DEFINITION

Average score from caregivers of children under 5 on space/safety-specific survey items

Caregiver social isolation and peer-support access (%)

Assesses whether on-site design (shared courtyards, caregiver lounges, parent groups) is reducing a well-documented risk factor for new parents specifically, rather than measuring isolation generically across all residents

Percentage of caregivers of children under 5 reporting low access to peer support or high isolation, via survey

Rent/capital premium, family-designated homes (%)

Tests whether the market values these features enough to pay for them, rather than a blended average across all unit types

Percentage difference in rent/sale levels compared to similar properties without equivalent family-friendly features

Demand from households with children under 5 (%)

Measures whether uptake is concentrated in the intended group, not just families in general (e.g. a 12-year-old’s needs are very different)

Percentage of applicants/waitlist or move-ins who are households with at least one child under 5

2

Community stability and risk reduction

Assesses how interventions contribute to safer, more stable communities, reducing risks and management pressures over time.

INDICATORS

Incidents of antisocial behaviour
(#)

Neighbour disputes
(#)

Length of tenancy
(months or years)

Security and management costs
(£/\$/€ per home)

Property damage and vandalism costs
(£/\$/€ per home)

DESCRIPTION

Tracks reported incidents, indicating social cohesion and need for intervention

Measures the frequency of recorded conflicts between residents, reflecting social stability and the effectiveness of community management

Indicates how long residents stay, reflecting satisfaction, stability and reduced turnover risk

Captures operational costs related to maintaining safe and functional environments

Captures costs associated with damage to shared spaces and units, reflecting community cohesion and the effectiveness of design and management in reducing destructive behaviour

METRIC DEFINITION

Number of reported incidents per 100 residents over a given period

Number of recorded disputes or formal complaints per 100 residents over a given period

Average duration of tenancy across residents

Total annual cost of security, mediation and community management / number of homes

Total annual cost of property damage and vandalism repairs / number of homes

3 Operational and financial performance

Captures how interventions influence asset performance through occupancy levels, income stability and operational efficiency.

INDICATORS	DESCRIPTION	METRIC DEFINITION
Tenant turnover rate – households with children under 5 (%)	Measures the frequency of tenant changes, indicating stability and associated reletting costs (tailored to families with children under 5)	Number of move-outs by households with a child under 5 / total number of homes occupied by such households
Void/vacancy rates – family-designated homes (%)	Indicates whether family-friendly units lease at comparable or better speed than standard units, testing market demand for the intervention specifically	Number of vacant family-designated homes / total number of family-designated homes over a given period
Rent arrears, households with children under 5 (%)	Tracks income resilience for a group with documented higher exposure to income shocks (parental leave, reduced working hours, childcare costs)	Total value of overdue rent from households with a child under 5 / total rent due from such households
Household cost savings (£/\$/€ per unit)	Estimates reductions in daily living costs enabled by proximity and accessibility of services, and energy efficiency of the home	Estimated reduction in household expenditure compared to a baseline (e.g. transport, food, energy bills), using local benchmarks or resident surveys

Calico

Care and Living in Community

‘[One resident] has a lot of children that stay at home. So, from time to time, I and my other neighbour offer to take the children with us to the park. Through that little gesture we hope [our neighbour] knows that we are here and that she can count on us.’

CALICO RESIDENT,
2023 FOLLOW-UP REPORT

CALICO – Care and Living in Community – operates 34 households under the community land trust model, which guarantees permanent housing affordability and empowers vulnerable families to shape design and development of housing through a fully participatory governance model.

Childcare is organised during General Assemblies so parents can participate, and the co-creation of a “community care” model, which includes workshops for single parents, a birthing home and an end-of-life home, as well as a Kids Working Group, ensures a more inclusive living environment for families.

The integration of co-housing principles in the building design provides informal shared spaces for families and children, such as a community space with a shared kitchen.

PARTNERS INVOLVED

- Community Land Trust Brussels
Non-profit housing developer
- Bruxelles Logement
Local authority
- Angela.D
Feminist housing association
- Pass-ages
Birth and end-of-life housing association
- EVA bxl
Mutual care non-profit
- Vrije Universiteit Brussel
- perspective.brussels
Housing consultant and project evaluator

PROJECT ECONOMICS AND FINANCING

CALICO was a turnkey purchase by the project partners of a building developed by a private real estate developer. Half of the total budget derived from public funds granted to the Community Land Trust Brussels by a mix of regional and EU funding sources.

The remaining amount was raised by the participating project partners, as well as from the sale of housing units to residents and cooperatives. Unit prices are kept affordable – on average 30–50% below market price – as a result of the community land trust model: building and land ownership are legally separated, allowing residents or housing associations to purchase the apartments while keeping the land off-market.

How it meets our principles

PRINCIPLE 1

Inclusive and physically accessible homes and neighbourhoods

The development was designed to address specific intersectional needs complementary to the need for affordable housing. This includes a birthing home and end-of-life home available to anyone in the neighbourhood, as well as specific programming and housing allocation for single parents, especially single mothers. Apartment sizing was also considered, with three-bedroom units concentrated in an intergenerational cluster to accommodate families with children, alongside households including older people.

PRINCIPLE 2

Stable and financially affordable homes

The community land trust model was critical to enabling permanent provision of affordable housing for low-income and vulnerable families (for example, the vast majority (83%) of residents in CLTB homes have a migrant background). The resident selection criteria also intentionally include single-mother households (45% of residents), recognising their specific housing vulnerability.

PRINCIPLE 3

Well-connected neighbourhoods

Services within walking distance include daycare centres, primary schools, primary health centres and pharmacies. Public transport stops (bus and tramway) and a bike lane are next to the building. 91% of the residents declared they were quite or totally satisfied with the quality of the neighbourhood of the CALICO project.

PRINCIPLE 4

Supportive social networks

A 'community care' model reinforces the autonomy of those in need of care and support. The Angela.D partner association offers workshops where single mothers can share life experiences and build mutual support networks, alongside the provision of housing specifically for this target population. The design of the building also integrates co-housing principles with a community space located on the ground floor (including a shared kitchen) that is open to the public and acts as a vehicle for neighbourhood cohesion and inclusion.

PRINCIPLE 6

Healthy and safe environments

The three housing clusters and their facilities and support services, including a birthing and end-of-life home, and community spaces, support families through pregnancy, older age and overall mental and physical wellbeing. The building, which meets Passive House energy standards, also includes a small park and community space providing a safe and secure area for children. Throughout the development, the building has been adapted for accessibility for people with disabilities.

PRINCIPLE 8

Responsive and participatory engagement

From the outset, CALICO placed strong emphasis on involving residents in every stage of the project, from planning, to design, to governance. A General Assembly is the primary, formal decision-making body for all 34 households. Residents are also involved in housing allocation and selection. Training was organised to build residents' capacity to participate meaningfully.

Learnings and outcomes

Permanent housing affordability

30–50% below market price guaranteed in perpetuity

Improved financial security of households

Overcrowding household rate (EU-SILC) decreased from 28% to 13%

Improved health, well-being and quality of life

- 73% of residents consider that their quality of life has improved
- 100% of residents consider that the collective dimension (care, solidarity, meetings, etc.) will have a positive impact on their quality of life

Inclusiveness

- 45% are single-parent households
- 80% of adult residents are women
- 55% of households have migrant backgrounds
- 88% of residents felt that their views have been considered in the co-creation process
- 97% of residents considered that the project encourages them to develop support and/or mutual aid with the other residents
- **International recognition of CALICO** as a best practice development, contributing to the attribution of the World Habitat Gold Award in 2021 to CLTB⁸⁷ as well as the foundation of the European CLT Network and the launch of the Cities 4 Co-Housing Network by the Brussels authorities aimed at replicating the model in five European cities



SEE
MORE
ONLINE



Case study images:
Community Land Trust Brussels



6

Conclusion and next steps

Housing for a Good Start is an invitation to raise the standard of housing for babies, toddlers and the caregivers who look after them.

It asks investors, developers and operators to apply an early-years and family perspective to the decisions they already make: how homes are funded, designed, delivered, managed and measured. The opportunity is not only to build better homes, but to create places that support early development, caregiver wellbeing, stronger communities and long-term social and economic value.

A practical framework

The eight principles of Housing for a Good Start are by necessity multifaceted and wide-ranging and demand a real level of commitment by practitioners. But the individual actions to embed these principles into projects are concrete and achievable – even if the depth of implementation will vary by context and scale. The framework is intended to complement existing housing, ESG and social impact strategies rather than replace them.

As the case studies in this playbook illustrate, projects can prioritise which principles and action areas to address first – based on what is most relevant to their situation – and work towards the full framework over time. Also, this is not a discipline purely for newbuild development: practices such as the playful learning approach being piloted by Live and Learn in Philadelphia or the Toddler and Caregiving Programme at Agave at Twenty Two in Tucson demonstrate that Housing for a Good Start principles can be retrofitted into existing communities to yield meaningful operational benefits and social impact.



Image:
Isolde Woudstra/
Van Leer Foundation

Building a community of practice

The evidence underpinning the investment case for Housing for a Good Start is new but compelling. The priority now is to build this evidence base to reinforce the case for Housing for a Good Start and, in turn, help scale up capital flowing into it.

To help, the Impact Investing Institute and the Van Leer Foundation have established a Housing for a Good Start Community of Practice (CoP). This aims to generate more real-world evidence of what works, what needs refining and how the Housing for a Good Start framework translates across different contexts and geographies.

Those who join will help shape the next phase of this work: refining the framework, strengthening the investment case and demonstrating how an early-years lens can translate into better outcomes for residents, stronger places and more resilient assets.

Investors, developers and operators who can commit a small amount of time to test approaches, share learnings and explore challenges through a structured series of online and in-person sessions and events are warmly invited to join.

To find out more, or express your interest in joining the Housing for a Good Start Community of Practice, please contact place@impactinvest.org.uk

Good starts —→ and better futures

Housing is never only about putting roofs over heads. It shapes health, stability, relationships, opportunity and belonging. For babies and toddlers, it helps shape the foundations of life itself.

By working together, practitioners across the housing system can show that a more intentional, family-centred approach is not only possible, but transformative: for children, caregivers, communities, investors and the long-term wellbeing of society.



Image:
Isolde Woudstra/Van Leer Foundation

Key terms, index and appendices

Key terms

Affordable housing

Housing for rent or ownership that meets a suitable quality standard, is provided at below-market prices, and is aimed at supporting households unable to secure housing at market conditions.⁶⁸ Both the definitions used and what constitutes 'affordable' vary by geography and policy context: in the UK, regulated products include social rent, affordable rent and shared ownership; in the USA it typically refers to housing serving households earning below a defined percentage of area median income (AMI).

As used in this playbook, the definition also encompasses market-rate developments that prioritise financial accessibility for families who would otherwise be excluded from the private market.

There is contention that policy definitions of affordability (e.g. capping UK rent at 80% of market rent) still often fall short of what many people can practically afford. Wherever possible, it is important to determine in a development how 'affordability' is defined and whether it improves on government-set definitions.

Asset class

A category of investment with shared characteristics, risk profile and return expectations. Affordable and social housing has increasingly been recognised as a distinct institutional asset class, characterised by stable, inflation-linked income streams and chronic undersupply.

Community of Practice (CoP)

A structured peer learning group in which practitioners share experience, test approaches and build collective knowledge around a shared area of focus. The Housing for a Good Start Community of Practice, initiated by the Impact Investing Institute and the Van Leer Foundation, brings together senior investors, developers and operators to test and develop the framework set out in this playbook.

Early years/early childhood

In this playbook, the early years refer to the period from birth to age five, widely recognised as the most critical window for cognitive, emotional and physical development.

ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance)

A risk management framework used by investors to assess opportunities and risks associated with an investment. Housing for a Good Start can contribute meaningfully to the social pillar of an ESG strategy, as well as to environmental performance through climate-resilient design, etc.

Housing crisis

The acute and growing imbalance between the supply of affordable, good-quality housing and the demand for it in high-income countries. In the UK, USA and Europe, the housing crisis is characterised by chronic undersupply, rising rents, and the inability of a growing proportion of households – including families with young children – to access housing within their means, whether to rent or buy.

Housing for a Good Start

Residential development incorporating planning, design and management principles that support babies, toddlers and their caregivers. It is not an asset class in its own right but a shift in mindset and approach applicable across all housing sectors.

Impact investing

An investment approach that seeks to generate positive, measurable social or environmental impact alongside a financial return.⁶⁹ Housing for a Good Start sits within the impact investing landscape, offering investors a framework for delivering both strong housing fundamentals and meaningful early childhood outcomes.

Placemaking

The process of designing, managing and bringing to life the physical and social environment of a neighbourhood or development so that it supports the wellbeing, development, identity and sense of belonging of all residents.

Playbook

An evidence-based guide detailing a standardised framework of practical principles and actions to achieve a specific objective, or set of objectives.

Social infrastructure

The facilities and services that support community life, including schools, healthcare, childcare, libraries and community spaces.

Social value/impact

The positive impact an organisation or project has on society and/or the environment, beyond its financial returns – typically measured by the improvements made to people's wellbeing, the local economy, and the environment.

Tenure

The legal basis on which a person occupies their home. Tenure types vary by geography but include subsidised or social rent (below-market rent supported by government); affordable or workforce housing (moderately below market rate); shared ownership or equity models (part-buy, part-rent arrangements); purpose-built rental (known as build-to-rent in the UK and multifamily in the USA); and market sale or rent. Mixed-tenure developments – combining several of these types within a single scheme – are a key vehicle for delivering Housing for a Good Start at scale.

Index

CASE STUDY 1 - CITYWEST DRIVE, IRELAND

- ⁰¹ A structured engagement methodology developed by ZCD Architects and the Van Leer Foundation to capture the priorities of families with young children in housing design decisions
- ⁰² Cited in the Van Leer additional notes in the case study

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CASE STUDY 2 - AGAVE AT TWENTY TWO, UNITED STATES

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CHAPTER 4

- ⁶⁵ For more detailed technical guidance on this topic, please see All to Play For: How to design child-friendly housing by Dinah Bornat (2025).
- ⁶⁶ This action may be linked with Green Spaces where possible. However there are times when separate spaces may be needed to ensure both access to nature/exercise and building social and community networks (particularly for indoor spaces).

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APPENDIX 1

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- ⁷⁹ Area Median Income (AMI) is a US measure used to determine eligibility for affordable housing programmes, calculated by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for each metropolitan area. Many US affordable housing strategies, including those referenced in this playbook, target residents earning 60% AMI or below.

- ⁸⁰ Nuveen. (2023). Nuveen deepens its commitment to investing in affordable housing. Press release. <https://www.nuveen.com/global/insights/news/nuveen-deepens-its-commitment-to-investing-in-affordable-housing?type=uk-fp>
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Appendices

Examples of investment into affordable housing and/or housing with social impact

INSTITUTIONAL INVESTMENT

- In the UK, **Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) funds**, which collectively manage more than £400 billion and 6.9 million members,⁷⁰ have increasingly been allocated to affordable housing as a long-duration, inflation-linked asset.
- One LGPS pool, London CIV, has committed £470 million to UK affordable housing strategies,⁷¹ and Better Society Capital (BSC) has seen LGPS co-investments in its social and affordable housing portfolio grow to nearly £1.4 billion.⁷²
- **Legal & General's Affordable Housing Fund** has raised over £750 million since launching in July 2024, targeting over 5,000 homes by 2030;⁷³ CBRE Investment Management's UK Affordable Housing Fund has attracted 23 investors with total equity commitments exceeding £500 million.⁷⁴
- Together, institutionally funded registered providers (RPs)⁷⁵ contributed almost 20% of new affordable housing supply in England in 2024/25.⁷⁶

MISSION-LED INVESTMENT

- The **Esmée Fairbairn Foundation** is actively exploring social and affordable housing as a thematic impact investment area, with a formal research and due diligence process underway.⁷⁷
- **Grosvenor Hart Homes** – a social enterprise initiated by the Duke of Westminster – demonstrates what family-backed capital committed to children's outcomes can look like in practice, with plans to invest in more than 750 affordable homes alongside tailored support services for vulnerable children, young people and their families over the next 10 years.⁷⁸

Examples of investment into affordable housing and/or housing with social impact

INSTITUTIONAL INVESTMENT

- In 2023, Nuveen, the investment arm of Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America, expanded its affordable housing platform to \$6.4 billion in assets, serving residents earning 60% of Area Median Income (AMI)⁷⁹ or less,⁸⁰ with CalPERS expanding its commitment to the strategy to \$500 million.⁸¹
- In April 2026, NYCERS – the largest municipal public employee pension scheme in the USA – made a \$4 billion commitment to affordable housing production and preservation across New York City.⁸²
- On the asset manager side, The Vistria Group has built one of the largest dedicated affordable housing strategies in the USA, reaching \$3.4 billion in AUM (Assets Under Management) within just two years of launch, with over 7,000 units acquired – more than 80% of which are affordable.⁸³

Increasingly, investment is being directed towards developments with an explicit family and community dimension:

- Rose Companies closed its sixth preservation fund at \$660 million in 2025 – bringing total fundraising to over \$1.5 billion – pairing investment with on-site resident programming to support economic mobility and community resilience.⁸⁴
- Bridge Investment Group, now operating within Apollo's real estate platform, raised \$1.74 billion for its Workforce and Affordable Housing Fund II.⁸⁵ It has committed over \$40 million through its Community Enhancement Initiative to fund on-site programming, including preschool and afterschool programmes, adult education and health equity services,⁸⁶ including at the Agave at Twenty Two project ([see page 36](#)).

MISSION-LED INVESTMENT

- Baltimore-based \$3.4 billion Annie E. Casey Foundation has a core focus on impact investing that preserves and creates stable affordable housing for low-income families, using housing as a platform to deliver services that improve their lives.⁸⁷
- Corporate-led platform the Ballmer Group (co-founded by former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer) has committed \$150 million to workforce and low-income housing strategies that prioritise family and community stability.
- The Amazon Housing Equity Fund has committed more than \$3.6 billion to create and preserve over 35,000 affordable homes, with an emphasis on proximity to good schools and public transport.⁸⁸

Examples of investment into affordable housing and/or housing with social impact

INSTITUTIONAL INVESTMENT

- **PATRIZIA** closed its debut impact strategy in January 2024 with over €500 million of investment capacity for a pan-European social and affordable housing portfolio, backed by major **Danish pension funds AP Pension and PKA** alongside nine further institutional investors,⁸⁹ and explicitly embedding an early-years and community connectivity approach into the investment mandate.⁹⁰
- **CBRE Investment Management's** €640 million European Residential Impact Fund targets affordable middle-income housing across 15 European cities,⁹¹ while its €1 billion mandate with **Dutch pension fund ABP** is focused on delivering over 3,000 affordable and sustainable homes in the Netherlands.⁹²
- Public-private partnerships (PPP) are also attracting capital: Octopus Capital, which has raised close to £400 million for its affordable housing strategy in the UK,⁹³ views Plan VIVE in Madrid as a compelling opportunity to deliver quality homes at scale – alongside stable long-term returns.⁹⁴

MISSION-LED INVESTMENT

- **Realdania** – a Danish member-based philanthropic organisation managing a €3.4 billion portfolio – dedicates one of its nine focus areas explicitly to 'Spaces for Children and Young People', acknowledging that 'safe and healthy surroundings are crucial to a child's development and learning'.⁹⁵
- European family offices, among them **Anthos Fund & Asset Management**, the Amsterdam-based investment arm of the Brenninkmeijer family, are directing mission-driven capital towards affordable housing as an expression of their values-based investment approach.

Useful resources to support Housing for a Good Start implementation

INDICATORS

USEFUL IN SUPPORTING

SEE ONLINE

Urban95 resources

Practical design guidance, implementation tools, and case studies on creating healthy, safe and vibrant cities where babies, toddlers and their families thrive. Resources include:

- **Urban95 Starter Kit**

For city leaders and urban professionals on the value of investing in babies, toddlers and caregivers with design actions and planning guidance.

- **Urban95 Academy**

A course for mayors, municipal leaders, city planners and designers looking to improve the lives of children through neighbourhood design.

All action areas



Insights Brief

How good housing ensures a good start for children and parents

A briefing document setting out how housing can support a good start for children and parents. It makes the case for reframing housing as an investment in societal health and highlights why and how a range of stakeholders can embrace family-oriented approaches to housing policy, design and development.

All action areas



Useful resources to support Housing for a Good Start implementation

INDICATORS

USEFUL IN SUPPORTING

SEE ONLINE

Gehl Knowledge Hub

An urban strategy and design consultancy focused on creating inclusive neighbourhoods. Following collaboration with the Van Leer Foundation, its knowledge hub provides articles and case studies on public life, walkability, childhood-friendly environments, and inclusive urban design.

All action areas



The Multifamily Impact Framework™

A market-based, common framework of industry impact principles and reporting guidelines for multifamily properties, designed for practitioners in the USA, which strongly informs the Housing for a Good Start framework. Principles span areas such as affordability, resident engagement, housing stability, economic health and mobility, health and wellness, and good business. Impact guidance outlines how to use the Multifamily Impact Framework™ to outperform minimum impact thresholds. The framework is updated annually based on public feedback, ongoing research, and a comprehensive annual review process with Multifamily Impact Council Members.

All action areas



Useful resources to support Housing for a Good Start implementation

INDICATORS

All to Play For: How to design child-friendly housing – Dinah Bornat

Architect Dinah Bornat shows how we can shape communities for and with children and young people, as well as the benefits this can achieve. The book combines evidence, guidance and illustrated case studies to provide practical solutions for housing layouts through child-friendly design, and explores opportunities to realise social value, including through better engagement.

USEFUL IN SUPPORTING

Action area 1

Early-years and family-informed design practice

Action area 3

Focused engagement across design and operations

Action area 5

Family-responsive unit and home design

Action area 6

Play and green spaces that respond to community needs

Action area 16

Play and early learning activities

SEE ONLINE



Useful resources to support Housing for a Good Start implementation

INDICATORS

Early Child Care Resource Guide for Multifamily Operators

A practical guide for multifamily housing fund managers, owners, property managers, and service providers to add birth-to-5 years' service offerings to their asset, compiled by the Multifamily Impact Council. The guide offers five forms of intervention, organised by the level of physical modifications to the property required to put that intervention into place.

Designing Streets for Kids

Building on the success of the Global Street Design Guide, the guidance in Designing Streets for Kids captures international best practices, strategies, programmes and policies that cities around the world have used to design spaces that enable children of all ages and abilities to utilise cities' most abundant asset – streets. The guide includes design recommendations and case studies that highlight streets that are safe, enjoyable, and inspirational for children and caregivers.

USEFUL IN SUPPORTING

Action area 2

Amenity gap analysis and action

Action area 3

Focused engagement across design and operations

Action area 4

On-site management that connects residents to services

Action area 9

Accessible childcare and early learning facilities

Action area 6

Play and green spaces that respond to community needs

Action area 11

Family-friendly walking and wheeling environment

Action area 12

Community spaces that support social interaction

SEE ONLINE



Useful resources to support Housing for a Good Start implementation

INDICATORS

Proximity of Care Design Guide

A practical guide for urban planners, designers, developers, city leaders and early childhood practitioners to assess, design and deliver healthy, stimulating, safe and supportive spaces for young children, caregivers and pregnant women to thrive.

USEFUL IN SUPPORTING

Action area 2

Amenity gap analysis and action

SEE ONLINE



Family Voices Toolkit

A structured, practical tool for developers, asset managers and housing providers to meaningfully involve caregivers in housing design and management.

Action area 3

Focused engagement across design and operations



Playground Ideas for 0–3 Years

This toolkit shares practical ideas for designing playgrounds that work for children from birth to age 3 and their caregivers.

Action area 6

Play and green spaces that respond to community needs



Playful Cities Design Guide: Play for Anyone, Anywhere

A practical guide that helps urban practitioners and city authorities design and deliver small-scale play elements into streets, public spaces and everyday environments, enabling playful experiences for people of all ages and abilities across the city.



The Housing for a Good Start Playbook was developed jointly by the Impact Investing Institute and the Van Leer Foundation.

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Thank you

