

Equity in the 20-Minute Neighbourhood: Residents' Perception in Wester Hailes, Edinburgh

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1 ABSTRACT

Urban inequity continues to intensify globally, despite proximity-based planning models such as the 20-minute neighbourhood being promoted as pathways towards more equitable and inclusive urban environments. However, limited attention has been paid to how justice and equity are defined and experienced by residents, particularly in disadvantaged areas where these policies are implemented. Addressing this gap, this study examines how residents in Wester Hailes, Edinburgh – an underserved neighbourhood and a designated 20-minute neighbourhood site – define a just neighbourhood, their experiences of injustice, and their priorities for advancing equity, and explores how these lived realities challenge the model's equity ambitions.

Using a qualitative case study design, focus group discussions with residents (n = 12) were analysed thematically using NVivo software. Residents defined justice not simply as proximity to services, but in relation to affordable housing, equitable access to quality services and employment, recognition of diverse needs, safe social environments, and meaningful participation in planning. The findings highlight a critical limitation of proximity-based planning: proximity alone cannot deliver justice without addressing broader structural inequalities and ensuring recognitional and procedural justice. By foregrounding residents' perspectives, this study provides important insights for policymakers seeking to implement proximity-based neighbourhood strategies in more just and inclusive ways.

Keywords: Equity, 20-Minute Neighbourhood, Residents' Perception, Wester Hailes, Edinburgh

2 INTRODUCTION

Urban inequality continues to intensify across cities worldwide, driven by rapid urbanisation, climate pressures, and widening socio-economic disparities (UN-Habitat, 2022; Allam et al., 2022). In response, proximity-based planning models such as the X-minute neighbourhood have emerged and been widely promoted as pathways towards more sustainable, liveable, and inclusive urban environments (Büttner et al., 2022). By emphasising local living and ensuring access to essential services within short walking or cycling distances, these models promise to improve accessibility, enhance quality of life, and support more equitable distribution of urban opportunities (Moreno et al., 2021).

Despite these aspirations, proximity-based planning carries profound implications for social justice. Planning decisions regarding the location of services, the allocation of investments, whose needs are recognised, and how planning processes engage local communities actively shape patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Fainstein, 2010).

Existing debates have raised concerns that proximity-based planning may contribute to unintended consequences, including gentrification, displacement, and the reproduction of socio-spatial inequalities, particularly when implemented within market-driven urban contexts (Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki, 2021; Calafiore et al., 2022). These risks are especially pronounced in historically underserved neighbourhoods, where new investments may increase land values and attract higher-income residents without adequately addressing existing residents' needs or ensuring their meaningful participation in planning processes.

Despite growing academic and policy interest, the justice implications of proximity-based planning remain insufficiently explored (Mahmoudpour and Shirazi, 2025), particularly from the perspective of residents living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Much of the existing literature has focused on spatial accessibility and environmental sustainability, with less attention paid to how justice and equity are affected in X-minute neighbourhoods and experienced, perceived, and defined by residents.

Addressing this gap, this study examines how residents in Wester Hailes, Edinburgh – a socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhood and a designated site for the implementation of the 20-minute neighbourhood

policy – define and conceptualise a just neighbourhood. It further explores the key drivers of injustice and identifies the changes residents believe are necessary to improve equity and inclusivity. By foregrounding residents' perspectives, this research provides empirical insight into how justice is understood and experienced within the context of proximity-based planning and highlights key considerations for ensuring that proximity-based neighbourhood strategies move beyond spatial proximity to support more just and equitable urban outcomes.

3 METHODOLOGIES

3.1 Wester Hailes as a case study

Wester Hailes is a post-war housing estate developed in the late 1960s in southwest Edinburgh, comprising seven interconnected communities with a population of 11,121 residents. The area experiences some of the highest levels of socio-economic disadvantage in the city. It was selected as a case study because it is one of 19 priority areas for implementing the 20-minute neighbourhood strategy, due to its low deprivation scores and alignment with ongoing regeneration efforts. Despite this policy focus, residents continue to face significant accessibility challenges, including long travel times to essential services such as GP practices and affordable supermarkets. These conditions make Wester Hailes a critical context for examining how proximity-based planning interacts with social justice outcomes.

3.2 Research Design and Participant Recruitment

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach, employing focus group discussions with residents (n = 12) to gain in-depth insights into their perceptions of a just and inclusive neighbourhood, as well as the perceived (in)justice outcomes and implications of 20-minute neighbourhood initiatives in Wester Hailes. Purposive sampling was used to recruit a diverse group of residents. The final sample comprised 12 participants (5 men and 7 women) with varied characteristics in terms of age, ethnicity, ability, and employment status. The data were analysed using thematic content analysis, supported by NVivo 15 software.

4 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we explore residents' perspectives on social justice and the just neighbourhood to develop a context-specific conceptualisation of a just neighbourhood in Wester Hailes and consider what these insights reveal about the potential and limitations of the 20-minute neighbourhood approach in delivering just and inclusive outcomes. This includes examining how residents define and understand a just neighbourhood, their experiences and perceptions of injustice, and their priorities for advancing a more just and inclusive Wester Hailes.

4.1 Residents' Definitions of a Just Neighbourhood

This section seeks to identify the key characteristics that emerged as central to residents' understandings of a just neighbourhood. These include access to local services beyond mere proximity, recognition of social diversity and differing needs, and the presence of safe, supportive, and socially cohesive environments. These findings highlight that residents' understandings of justice extend beyond physical proximity to services, encompassing issues of affordability, recognition, safety, and social inclusion.

Access to services, opportunities, and housing: Residents consistently defined a just neighbourhood as one that ensures equitable access to essential services, employment, education, and housing. Accessibility was understood not simply as physical proximity, but as the availability of affordable, high-quality, and inclusive services that respond to diverse needs. Participants emphasised that neighbourhood justice includes access to opportunities and a clean environment, rather than only basic local services. Within this framework, affordable and decent housing was identified as a foundational condition, without which justice cannot be achieved. **Recognition of Social Diversity and Distinct Needs:** Residents identified the recognition of social diversity as a defining feature of a just neighbourhood. Justice was conceptualised as an environment in which people from different cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and demographic backgrounds are respected, valued, and able to live without discrimination or undue privilege. Importantly, justice was not equated with uniform treatment, but with acknowledging and responding to distinct needs and circumstances. Participants emphasised the importance of accommodating the specific needs of older people, disabled residents, and

minority communities. Consequently, Justice was associated with the capacity of services and the neighbourhood to adapt to varying requirements, prioritising need-responsive provision, rather than reliance on rigid or standardised delivery models.

Safe and cohesive social environments: A third defining characteristic of a just neighbourhood encompasses safety, social cohesion, and a sense of belonging. Residents emphasised that justice is constituted by a friendly atmosphere and the freedom from crime, creating an environment of peaceful coexistence. These factors were viewed as foundational: without them, the effective accessibility of services in the neighbourhood are diminished. Such relational conditions serve as enablers, allowing residents to confidently use public spaces and engage in community life. Consequently, residents articulated a view of justice that is lived through daily interactions, affirming that a just neighbourhood is defined as much by social relations as it is by service provision. Ultimately, a just neighbourhood, was envisioned as one in which people feel safe, connected to others, and genuinely part of the community.

4.2 Residents' Perceived Concerns and Their Justice Implications

This section examines the justice implications embedded in residents' everyday experiences, revealing how place-based challenges are closely connected to wider structural and institutional inequalities. The analysis identifies the following key issues:

Unaffordable Housing: Unaffordable Housing, driven by housing shortage, rising private rents and the deteriorating quality of the housing stock – characterized by outdated facilities and prohibitive maintenance costs – emerged as one of the most frequently and intensely articulated concerns. These pressures were often compounded by high energy costs and the broader cost-of-living crisis, disproportionately affecting low-income households. From residents' perspective, the absence of secure, affordable, and good-quality housing functions as a structural driver of injustice.

Inadequacy of Services and Social Spaces: A second major concern involves the inadequacy of local services (limited availability, low quality, and insufficient capacity) and the scarcity of social infrastructure. Residents pointed to the low quality (particularly in comparison to other neighbourhoods within the city) and limited capacity of existing essential services, such as healthcare and libraries. Beyond functional limitations, these services were criticized for failing to recognize the specific requirements of diverse groups, including non-English speakers, older residents, and families with children. These issues were seen as a significant barrier to meaningful access. Concerns extended to the public space, specifically the lack of quality recreational spaces, such as children's play areas and adequately equipped gathering spots (communal spaces). This deficit restricts opportunities for social interaction, rest, and leisure. Furthermore, access was described as uneven, with essential services physically distant for some parts of the neighbourhood (unevenly distributed across the neighbourhood). This spatial disparity suggests that proximity – a key metric of the x-minute neighbourhood – is a privilege rather than a standard, undermining the foundational principle of equitable access and reinforcing a landscape of unequal opportunity. This confirms that accessibility is compromised by both a lack of culturally responsive provision and uneven physical distribution.

Stigma, Misrecognition, and Social Exclusion: A profound concern raised by residents involves the enduring negative reputation of Wester Hailes, characterized by historical stigma, stereotyping, and underlying racial tensions. Participants described how external perceptions of the area as “deprived” or “problematic” translate into diminished community pride and a reduced sense of belonging among local people. Such perceptions were further reinforced by tangible safety concerns, including antisocial behaviour, crime and youth drug use, causing fear of walking alone in the neighbourhood especially at night. These conditions create a cycle of stigma and create misrecognition and social marginalisation and deepen social and spatial exclusion.

Institutional Neglect and spatial discrimination: A final, overarching concern centres on the perception of Wester Hailes as a disconnected and peripheral geography, disadvantaged relative to the rest of Edinburgh. Residents characterised the area as both physically and socially peripheral, describing a sharp inequality in service provision and environmental maintenance. They noted that their neighbourhood receives significantly less investment, attention, and respect than more affluent areas, intensifying feelings of neglect and marginalisation. This sense of marginalisation is visibly reinforced by the state of the local environment. Participants pointed to persistent issues of inadequate cleanliness, including accumulated litter, dumped waste, and a lack of recycling infrastructure. Furthermore, the presence of vacant and inaccessible buildings created “undefined spaces” that contribute to a feeling of decay. These physical symptoms of neglect can be

interpreted as evidence of spatial discrimination, institutional neglect, and a lack of accountability, which operate as structural drivers of injustice, shaping residents' everyday experiences of inequality and disregard.

4.3 Residents' Priorities towards a Just and Inclusive Wester Hailes

This section explores residents' priorities for advancing a more just and inclusive Wester Hailes. The analysis identified three interrelated categories: equitable and inclusive access to services, social and cultural inclusion, and equitable planning and service provision. These priorities provide important insight into how proximity-based neighbourhood strategies, such as the 20-minute neighbourhood, can better respond to residents' justice needs and aspirations.

Equitable Accessibility: The strongest and most frequently expressed demands fell under equitable accessibility. Residents repeatedly highlighted the need for more, closer, and higher-quality services, especially in health, housing, and transport. This included calls to improve local health services and facilities, increase services supporting daily needs, improve public transport, provide more affordable and quality housing, and ensure walkable access to essential services.

These responses reveal that residents experience injustice primarily as material disadvantage: Wester Hailes is perceived as receiving fewer, poorer, and more distant services than other parts of Edinburgh. The prominence of these codes indicates that a just neighbourhood, for residents, is first and foremost one in which basic urban resources are equitably distributed across space and population groups. This places distributional equity at the centre of residents' understanding of justice.

Furthermore, residents also emphasised inclusive services, particularly the recognition of age-based needs. Requests for greater inclusion of older adults and young people, as well as for more green and recreational spaces for children, show that residents do not simply want more services, but services that are designed for the people who live there. This highlights an important recognitional dimension of social justice. Justice was not defined as identical provision for all, but as provision that reflects different life stages, vulnerabilities, and culture. In the context of a 20-minute neighbourhood, this suggests that proximity alone is insufficient: services must also be socially meaningful and appropriate to those who rely on them.

Social and cultural inclusion: Beyond service provision, residents also strongly articulated justice in relation to the social and cultural environment of Wester Hailes. Calls for safer streets, improved security, reduced discrimination, and stronger community pride and belonging demonstrate that justice is also about the right to feel safe, respected, and valued in one's neighbourhood. Similarly, demands for community and cultural activities, festivals, and stronger social integration show that residents want Wester Hailes to be not only functional, but socially and culturally recognised. These themes align closely with recognitional justice, where justice depends on whether people and places are acknowledged as legitimate, worthy, and visible within the wider city.

Equitable planning and service provision management: While less frequently mentioned than service-related improvements, a distinct set of responses addressed planning and procedural justice. These were expressed through three types of desired change: enhanced community engagement and participation, improved waste management and environmental maintenance, and equal service quality in comparison to other neighbourhoods. Together, these codes point to residents' concern with how Wester Hailes is governed, maintained, and treated within the wider urban system, rather than only with the availability of individual services.

Requests for better waste management and environmental cleanliness reflect residents' expectations that their neighbourhood should receive the same standard of care and maintenance as elsewhere in the city, particularly given their perception that lower council tax contributions are used to justify lower levels of service provision.

Similarly, calls for equal service quality indicate a demand for non-discriminatory planning and delivery, where Wester Hailes is not systematically treated as a lower-priority area. This framing reveals that residents interpret environmental neglect not simply as a technical failure, but as a form of institutionalised spatial inequality in how local government allocates attention and resources. The inclusion of enhanced community engagement and participation further shows that residents associate fairness with having a voice in shaping local decisions and improvements, not only with the outcomes themselves.

Together, these codes frame justice in terms of equitable planning and institutional responsiveness: a just neighbourhood is one where services are not only provided, but where the area is properly maintained, fairly treated, and meaningfully involved in decision-making processes.

5 CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how residents in Wester Hailes define and experience a just neighbourhood, and what their perspectives reveal about the justice implications of proximity-based planning. The findings show that residents' understandings of justice extend far beyond the spatial logic of proximity that underpins the 20-minute neighbourhood model. While access to local services was recognised as important, justice was fundamentally associated with broader structural and relational conditions, including access to affordable and secure housing, equitable and inclusive service provision, recognition of diverse social needs, safe and cohesive environments, and meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

At the same time, residents' everyday experiences revealed persistent and interconnected forms of injustice. Unaffordable and poor-quality housing, inadequate and unevenly distributed services, stigma and social marginalisation, and perceived institutional neglect were identified as central drivers of inequality. These findings highlight that injustice in Wester Hailes is not simply a matter of physical distance to services, but is rooted in structural inequalities, uneven investment, and unequal recognition within the wider urban system.

Residents' priorities for change further reinforce this conclusion. Their calls for improved housing, better and more inclusive services, enhanced safety and social inclusion, and more equitable planning and maintenance demonstrate that achieving justice requires not only improving accessibility, but also ensuring fairness in how neighbourhoods are governed, resourced, and valued. These priorities point to the importance of distributive, recognitional, and procedural dimensions of justice, rather than focusing solely on spatial proximity.

Taken together, these findings highlight important limitations of proximity-based planning when implemented without addressing underlying structural and institutional inequalities. While the 20-minute neighbourhood offers a valuable framework for improving local accessibility, proximity alone cannot guarantee just outcomes. Without affordable housing, equitable investment, socially inclusive services, and meaningful community participation, proximity risks reproducing rather than reducing existing inequalities.

This study contributes to ongoing debates on proximity-based planning by demonstrating the importance of grounding policy implementation in residents' lived experiences. It shows that achieving just neighbourhoods requires moving beyond a narrow focus on spatial accessibility towards a more comprehensive justice-oriented approach that addresses structural disadvantage, recognises diverse needs, and ensures equitable and inclusive planning processes. These insights are particularly relevant for policymakers and planners seeking to implement 20-minute neighbourhood strategies in disadvantaged areas. Embedding justice at the centre of proximity-based planning is essential if such models are to deliver genuinely equitable and inclusive urban outcomes.

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