

Built environment & physical activity

A position statement

Background

There is an urgent need to increase physical activity levels in the UK, with over two-thirds of adults and children undertaking less than minimum recommended levels of activity. The built environment includes land-use patterns, transport systems, urban design, green spaces and all buildings and spaces that are created by people, including schools, homes, workplaces and recreational areas. Most sustainable physical activity occurs during everyday activities within the built environment rather than for leisure. Hence the qualities of the built environment have a significant role in facilitating more active lifestyles by reducing barriers to, and creating opportunities for, physical activity. There is increasing evidence that adapting the built environment has the potential to encourage increased physical activity to levels that are beneficial to health.

Features of the built environment that have an impact on physical activity include:

- location, density and mix of land use
- street layout and connectivity
- physical access to public services, employment, local fresh food and other services
- safety and security
- open and green space
- affordable and energy efficient housing
- air quality and noise
- resilience to extreme weather events and climate change
- community interaction
- transport.

The built environment is closely related to health inequalities, with poorer people living in environments with worse air quality and least access to green space and experiencing higher rates of road traffic injuries as pedestrians. Making changes to the built environment can reduce health inequalities; for example, living close to areas of green space can improve health regardless of class.

Creating and maintaining the built environment to be conducive to physical activity has a number of societal, economic and environmental benefits including climate change adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity, reduced traffic congestion, revitalisation of local shops and services and increased community cohesion and social interaction.

What we think

The only way we will achieve the physical activity levels needed for health across the population is through making changes to the design, physical composition and use of our built environment. Building physical activity back into daily routines requires a range of activities which together make active travel, leisure and incidental activity in daily routines the easiest, cheapest and most appealing options for people. The public health community need to work with a wide range of stakeholders to advocate for this.

What you can do

- Build relationships with a wide range of stakeholders including councillors, planning, regeneration and transport teams in the local authority, local employers, CCGs
- Ensure public health is considered in local plans including the Local Development Framework, Supplementary Planning Guidance and Sustainable Communities Strategy
- Ensure that built environment and planning are considered in the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and Health and Wellbeing strategy.
- Make sure that there is public health input at the earliest stages of planning proposals and that the potential health impacts of proposals are assessed.
- Follow the recommendations in the Faculty of Public Health Position Statement on Transport to deliver measures that achieve a modal shift away from cars in favour of walking, cycling and public transport.



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RESOURCES

Shaping Neighbourhoods – for local health and global sustainability (Second edition)
Barton H, Grant M and Gause R
Routledge: London 2010

Manual For Streets
Department for Transport
Thomas Telford: London 2007
<http://assets.dft.gov.uk/publications/manual-for-streets/pdfmanualforstreets.pdf>

A healthy city is an active city: a physical activity planning guide Edwards P and Tsouros A
World Health Organization:
Copenhagen 2008
http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/99975/E91883.pdf

Cities for people Gehl, J. Island Press: Washington DC 2010

The Built Environment and Health Inequalities Marmot Review Task Group Task Group 4: Final Report 2009
<http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/built-environment-marmot-review-task-group-report>

Health and urban planning toolkit NHS London Healthy Urban Development Unit
<http://tinyurl.com/mrefhq>

Promoting and creating built or natural environments that encourage and support physical activity National Institute for Health and Care Excellence Public Health Guidance 8 2008

Steps to healthy planning: proposals for action Spatial planning & health group 2011
http://www.spahg.org.uk/?page_id=194

Spatial Planning for Health: A guide to embedding the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment in spatial planning Town & Country Planning Association 2012
http://www.tcpa.org.uk/data/files/spatial_planning_for_health.pdf