

Physical activity and the built environment

October 2006

Health and built environment professionals urgently need to come together to meet the challenges of increasing levels of obesity and the cost of treating related chronic diseases. We are seeing unprecedented levels of investment in our built environment, but greater cross-departmental working by national government, along with better co-ordination between primary care trusts and local authorities, will be essential if we are to make the most of the unique opportunity this presents.

Introduction

Our health is determined by a wide range of social, environmental and economic factors. Across the country it is the most disadvantaged communities that suffer from both the worst health problems and the lowest quality environments. Chronic disease accounts for 60 per cent of deaths nationwide and, while the factors driving this crisis are varied, it is estimated that environmental and lifestyle factors have the greatest impact.¹

CABE believes that the design and management of the built environment plays a pivotal role in promoting and sustaining health, and in particular in tackling rising levels of inactivity.



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Unprecedented public and private investment in the built environment presents a unique opportunity to create an environment in which 'healthy choices are easy choices'.²

The links between physical activity and the built environment

Streets and neighbourhoods

Most sustained exercise is taken during the course of everyday activities, such as travelling to work or going to the shops, rather than specifically for health purposes. It makes sense, therefore, that our built environment should provide a network of routes and destinations

that maximise the potential for activity on foot or by bicycle, rather than by motorised transport. If we want to encourage people to walk and cycle around their neighbourhoods, rather than use their cars, we must plan, design and manage a network of streets and connecting spaces accordingly. We have to create places that are attractive and responsive to the needs of cyclists and pedestrians first – and drivers second.

Active streets

The introduction of a traffic-free cycle and walking path alongside the A259 between Seaford and Newhaven in East Sussex has seen an increase in usage from 17,000 trips in 2004 to 63,000 in 2005; 59 per cent of users believe that the new route has helped them increase their levels of physical activity.³

In Copenhagen, Denmark, measures introduced over the last 30 years to reduce traffic and improve the quality of public spaces in the city centre has encouraged a 65 per cent rise in bicycle use since 1970.⁴

Parks

We need better parks and pathways to encourage people to take exercise, both informally and as part of organised sporting activities. Parks and green space are an effective way to encourage healthy lifestyles. They provide open space where people can be active, from walking the dog to throwing a frisbee, from flying a kite to playing football. They are also crucial in making our neighbourhoods more walkable. In encouraging these activities, the importance of good design and maintenance is critical. A park can quickly become a no-go zone if neglected. But a well-designed park establishes a virtuous cycle: when more people are attracted to a space it becomes more interesting, which in turn

attracts more people, who stay longer and undertake more activity.

Active parks

Recent research conducted for CABE Space found that residents of Norwich who live near a park are four times more likely to walk or cycle to work.⁵

It has been estimated that 7 per cent of urban park users in England go there for sporting activities, representing about 7.5 million visitors a year.⁶

Workplaces

Office environments also have their part to play. Building design and management can modify and shape our behaviour through, for example,



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the location and signposting of stairs. At the most basic level, the provision of showers and other facilities in offices can also encourage people to cycle to work, or to take exercise before or during the working day.

Active workplaces

When GlaxoSmithKline moved into its worldwide corporate headquarters at Brentford, West London, in 2001, it implemented a cycling strategy which guaranteed employees a parking space only if they arrived at work by bike. Secure parking facilities for 300 cyclists, combined with showers and lockers, saw the number of registered cyclists soar from 50 to 400, representing about 13% of the staff on site. Their average daily journey is 14 miles.⁷

A unique opportunity to encourage physical activity

The last decade has seen the emergence of a new public health agenda that represents a significant shift in focus from treating sickness to promoting health. Traditionally, public health was concerned with exposure to environmental factors, such as air and water pollution.

These measures have been largely successful and, over the past two generations, the attention of public health professionals has shifted to behavioural and lifestyle issues. Smoking has been the primary focus of this approach, but increasingly obesity and related chronic diseases are the principle targets for changing public behaviours.

The Wanless report⁸ warned that the huge sums invested in NHS modernisation will be wasted if high levels of preventable illness continue over the next 20 years. To date, the public health agenda has focused primarily on changing lifestyles and behaviour through taxes, subsidies, service provision, regulation and information.

Shaping and using the built environment for the promotion of health is a powerful tool that must be included in this list. But it is either barely mentioned, or viewed too narrowly, as merely a question of where to locate health facilities, rather than looking at how to use the built environment as a tool for reducing demand on those facilities.

The built environment is undergoing a once in a generation transformation:

- Many of our towns and cities are enjoying an unprecedented renaissance, with populations growing for the first time in decades.
- The government forecasts that by 2016 up to 4 million new homes will be needed in the UK. The sustainable communities plan aims to tackle low demand, which affects 850,000 homes in the North and Midlands and housing shortages in the wider





South East through the creation of well-designed, sustainable communities – not just the building of more houses.

- Government, together with the Big Lottery and Heritage Lottery Fund, are funding significant improvements to our parks. Also, the government's policy emphasis on, and investment in, the Cleaner Safer Greener and the Safer Stronger Communities initiative is highlighting how improvements to public space are vital to delivering socio-economic goals.
- We are in the middle of the largest public sector construction programme for a generation, which is particularly benefiting the education and health sectors.

In this unique context, it is imperative that an understanding of the direct relationship between physical activity and the built environment is embedded in the work both of the public health sector and the built environment professions. This includes not only those procuring, designing and

delivering healthcare buildings but also those doing the same in related sectors, including housing, public space and transport.

As the Wanless report⁹ noted, people need to be given the opportunities to take responsibility for their own well-being. We must ensure the design of our buildings, places and spaces provides that opportunity.

Seizing the opportunity

As the development of new programme guidance on physical activity and the environment by the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) demonstrates, there is increasing recognition of how the design and maintenance of the built environment impacts on activity levels. There is, however, currently little incentive to make the connection meaningful.

This undermines not only the success of public health programmes but also the success of initiatives such as the Sustainable Communities Plan which aims to

create places that 'contribute to a high quality of life' but has no explicit public health dimension. Healthy environments are essential for a sustainable healthy community, and, while the link between public health and the built environment may be recognised, it is still regarded by many as tangential, or the responsibility of the other side to deal with.

With up to two-thirds of men and three-quarters of women not taking enough exercise and a quarter of adults already obese¹⁰ we urgently need to address these issues. Nationally there needs to be greater cross-departmental working, while locally there must be better co-ordination between primary care trusts and local authorities. Additional research will also be needed to develop an evidence base to promote the most effective interventions.

Cross-government working

While minister for public health Caroline Flint's new co-ordinating role on physical activity is welcomed, there is a need for

working across government to be formalised and incentivised through shared targets and funding. Departments such as the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Department for Education and Skills (DfES), Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), Department for Transport (DfT) and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) need to recognise that they are already spending money on public health and should work together and with the Department of Health (DoH) to make better use of existing resources.

As part of the 2007 comprehensive spending review DCLG should be given shared responsibility for delivering a public service agreement on public health with the DoH. This will mobilise the Sustainable Communities and Cleaner Safer Greener initiatives as tools for delivering health outcomes.

Local co-ordination

At a local level, health facilities must be integrated into the planning of new developments and regional and local planning policy documents must aim to enhance healthier development and to promote more sustainable communities. Planners and designers should engage with strategic health authorities and primary care trusts to encourage them to see the built environment as a means of meeting their targets on physical activity and obesity.

In new developments, spatial planning should be more responsive to planning networks of well connected, well-designed public space and streets which present greater opportunities for walking and cycling to become the norm for local journeys. In existing areas, improved maintenance and management should similarly maximise opportunities for walking and cycling.

Measures need to be taken to improve co-ordination between public health and built environment professionals through the incorporation of formal links between local planning authorities and relevant health bodies. Specific DCLG/DoH guidance to planners and primary care trusts is needed.

Research

There are significant challenges in providing the type of hard evidence that is able to compete against the empirical clinical data used to measure the direct impact of medication. Proving the effect of built environment interventions is much more difficult but the impact of the results can be far-reaching. There is a growing need for evidence to show how spending upfront on the built environment and public health can save public money in the long run, and to identify the link between short-term actions and long-term outcomes.



Filling this knowledge gap will require funders of research in the health and built environment sectors to bring together existing funding sources. The Economic and Social Research Council, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council and the Medical Research Council should fund a joint programme for evaluating the impact of the overall design of neighbourhoods on physical activity

Conclusion

The estimated cost of physical inactivity in England is £8.2 billion annually, and this doesn't include the £2.5 billion cost of obesity resulting from inactivity.¹¹ It is imperative therefore that we seize the unique opportunity presented by the current investment in our built environment to create healthy environments that will last long into the future.

The government hopes to transform the population into a fitter and more active nation in the run-up to the 2012 Olympics. If the benefits of an active lifestyle are to be sustained beyond 2012 it is essential that we provide a built environment that offers opportunities for everyday activity.

1 Christine Hancock, *Expert paper to the prime minister*, July 2006

2 *ibid.*

3 Sustrans, *National cycle network usage report 2005, 2006*

4 Gehl, J. and Gemzøe, L. *Public spaces, public life*, 1998

5 Foster, C., Hilsdon, M., Jones A. and Panter, J., *Assessing the relationship between the quality of urban green space and physical activity*, unpublished

6 Dunnett, N., Swanwick, C. and Woolley, H. *Improving urban parks, play areas and green spaces*, 2002

Woolley, H. *Urban open spaces*, 2003

7 Kahn, S *Cycling to work: the GlaxoSmithKline experience*, 2006

8 Wanless, D *Securing good health for the whole population*, 2004

9 *ibid.*

10 Department of Health, *At least five a week*, 2004

11 *ibid.*

The annual cost of inactivity and obesity in England is over £10 billion. This CABA briefing highlights opportunities for using the built environment – our streets and neighbourhoods, our parks and our workplaces – to reduce this burden on our health service. If the government's hope of transforming the population into a fitter and more active nation are to be sustained beyond the 2012 Olympics it is essential that we offer more opportunities for activity in our everyday life.

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As a public body, CABA encourages policy-makers to create places that work for people. We help local planners apply national design policy and offer expert advice to developers and architects. We show public sector clients how to commission buildings that meet the needs of their users. And we seek to inspire the public to demand more from their buildings and spaces. Advising, influencing and inspiring, we work to create well-designed, welcoming places.

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