



BHF National Centre
physical activity+health

Building health: Creating and enhancing places for healthy, active lives.

BHFNC key document summary

The report 'Building health: Creating and enhancing places for healthy, active lives', was produced by the National Heart Forum, Living Streets and CABI and was published in July 2007. This report aims to investigate some of the key issues concerning the relationship between physical activity and the environment and presents a series of 'real world' recommendations. These recommendations seek to provide an environment in which physical activity is made more accessible and a more attractive option among residents of the UK.

Each chapter of the report addresses a) the problem b) why this happens c) what can be done d) what has been done (including case studies) and e) recommendations for action. The report is split into 7 chapters which are:

1. Strategic planning
2. Urban planning
3. Streets and the public realm
4. Walking and cycling
5. Urban green space
6. Outdoor playing space
7. Building design

Chapter 1:

Strategic planning is defined as 'including city, county and regional planning policy, embracing the dimensions of transport, housing, employment, services and environmental protection'. Strategic planning can influence people's physical activity levels through influencing opportunities for 'active travel.' The report concludes that the main impediments to strategic planning for promoting healthy physical activity are: lack of awareness on the part of the decision-makers, lack of knowledge, institutional inertia, perceived competing political priorities, and weakness in converting rhetoric into practice.

The report makes a series of recommendations about strategic planning for Government, professional and academic organisations:

- All Government departments should be required to apply a 'health check' to every investment programme they initiate, focusing on the impact that the programme may have on levels of physical activity.

- The Government should strengthen the guidelines for Community Strategies, Local Transport Plans, Regional Spatial Strategies, Local Development Frameworks, and Sustainability Appraisal to make health and physical activity, along with sustainability, a key goal.
- The Government, professional organisations and universities should promote the integration of health-promoting principles in education and training for professionals such as transport engineers.

Chapter 2

Urban planning is the discipline of distributing urban or suburban functions spatially, in terms of activity patterns of people in the physical setting. The authors detail the convincing evidence that good accessibility to jobs and facilities is associated with more active travel - there are clear benefits from having residential, retail and office buildings in the same location. The report identifies single-use development^{*}, low densities[†] and poor walking and cycling routes as the three main problems facing urban planning. It is suggested that the popularity of single-use developments stems from developers perceiving them as easier and more profitable to build. Similar reasons are given for low-density development whereas poor provision of walking and cycling routes is put down to developers and planning authorities tending to accord movement on foot and bike too low a priority in a society where 'the car is king.' To overcome these problems, recommendations include:

- The Department of Transport (DfT) should require local authorities not only to adopt the policy of prioritising pedestrians and cyclists in their transport policy statements, but also to produce an assessment of whether they have delivered that aspect of the policy as part of their annual plan.
- The Government should sponsor the development of a robust and meaningful methodology for assessing the public transport accessibility of any given location. The Government should then require local planning authorities to define their areas in terms of public transport accessibility and to adopt minimum requirements for development types and densities for each accessibility level.
- Local authority planning departments should require promoters of residential developments above a certain threshold size to prepare a statement explaining how residents would be able to walk, within a specified time, to a range of local services and facilities. In the future, this would hopefully result in it no longer being possible to build new homes on the edge of urban areas where the car is the only attractive option for accessing the facilities of the town.

^{*} Places where no more than 1 land use can be found in the same location. For example, residential areas or retail plazas.

[†] Density concerns the general principle that the more development there is per unit area, the greater demand there will be for services and facilities in the vicinity.

Chapter 3

In this chapter it is argued that the quality of our streets and public spaces continues to decline and that as a consequence, walking and cycling have become less attractive, public perceptions of safety have declined and activities such as play have transferred from the public realm to private space. The report proposes that a reduction in the speed of traffic is the most important measure to encourage use of the streets and public spaces by pedestrians, along with a fresh understanding of the importance of accepting risk as an essential component of activity and interaction. An example of this concept is presented from London. The pedestrian safety barriers in Kensington High Street were removed and this has significantly reduced the accident figures for pedestrians, due to increasing the apparent risk and therefore engaging both drivers and pedestrians more with their surroundings. Some of the recommendations for action include:

- The Department for Transport and Department for Communities and Local Government should carry out a review of their guidelines for the design of streets, public spaces and rural lanes. This should emphasise the principles of shared space, and the creation of a public realm free of barriers for simple day-to-day movement.
- The Government should give local authorities discretion to design streets appropriate to local circumstances and contexts
- Professional bodies and organisations representing the design professions need to adapt to respond to a policy based on integration of traffic movement and social exchange and interaction rather than segregation. This should be based on the concept of a 20mph speed limit in built-up areas.

Chapter 4

This chapter focuses on the sustained decline in walking and cycling for transport in the UK, which is identified as a consequence of policy-makers and planners in transport, land use and development control tending to create transport systems which favour the car. The report presents examples of what has been done to combat this, such as the National Cycle Network and The London Congestion Charge Scheme. Recommendations for action include:

- Government departments should establish strategic plans on the promotion of walking and cycling, commit significant resources to these and research and monitor the outcomes.
- Each Government department should identify within its sector all subsidies to private motor traffic and either ensure the removal of these subsidies or offer equivalent of higher value inducements to users of public transport and those who walk or cycle to work.
- The Treasury should raise fuel taxes; reinstate the fuel price escalator; remove VAT on bikes and cycling equipment; and reduce the amount of tax payable on cycling allowances.

Chapter 5

Urban green space[‡] is the next focal point of the report, specifically the steep decline in the quality of public parks during the last 25 years and the strong link between green spaces and good health. The report suggests that this decline may be due to a lack of information about the public's use of parks. For example, counting the number of people using green spaces is difficult, so any decline goes unquantified, making cuts in expenditure easy to justify, but difficult to reinstate. The following priorities for action are made in order to increase public use of green spaces:

- The Department of Health should revise its spending priorities to provide significant funding for the better management and maintenance of urban green infrastructure, as a direct investment in public health.
- Local authorities should re-structure their departments to bring together into one unit all those responsible for the planning, design, maintenance and management of urban green spaces.
- Local authorities should develop partnerships with local, regional and national organisations to enable joint funding and ownership of programmes to improve parks and green spaces and to maximise their health benefits.

Chapter 6

This chapter focuses on several problems including the continuing loss of outdoor recreational facilities, along with play facilities being under lock and key as opposed to open-access. This raises concerns as evidence has shown that outdoor play and adventure can increase levels of physical activity and fitness, activate higher cognitive processes and healthy brain development. The report identifies the barriers preventing open space and recreational facilities from fulfilling their vital role. These include an excessive concern about health and safety, lack of available technical support for voluntary projects, inconsistent interpretation of technical standards relating to provision of equipment and surfacing and increased insurance charges together with a greater tendency of the public towards litigation. The following is a sample of the recommendations made to the Government:

- The Government should review its planning policy on open space, sport and recreation, with a greater emphasis on public health. Indoor facilities should not be regarded as an adequate substitute for outdoor facilities.
- Local authorities should link policy on open space to transport policy. Open space should be accessible for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport and have adequate cycle parking and promote active travel.
- The Government, through DCMS should establish a national strategy for play in England – based on the needs of children to develop through play and recreation in non-educational settings – leading to relevant policies and funding streams.

[‡] Good quality, well-maintained parks recreation grounds and other green spaces within urban areas.

Chapter 7

The final chapter looks at building design and how it can affect physical activity levels. One of the examples used in the report highlights that lifts are prominently placed in entrance areas, with decoration and lighting that make the stairs appear as more 'escape routes' and not an attractive or alternative option. A possible explanation for this is given as the revision of Part M of the Building Regulations in line with the Disability Discrimination Act legislation, leading to a focus of attention and design budgets onto access and lifts. This is often detrimental to the stairwell, which receives rudimentary specification. The following recommendations are made to professional organisations:

- Architects should re-consider the place of stairs within buildings and investigate innovative approaches such as creating attractive central stairs alongside the traditional lift and fire escape.
- The British Institute of Facilities Management should develop guidance on maximising human movement and interaction within buildings.
- Professional bodies responsible for architectural education should make further change of emphasis in architectural education (and continued professional development) towards:
 - Architectural literacy
 - Contextualisation
 - Building residential density
 - Building for flexibility
 - A loose-fit, long-life approach to energy efficiency, moving away from forms driven by current technologies
 - Design codes for urban places
 - Holistic planning and community stakeholder participation.

To download the full report, visit:

http://www.heartforum.org.uk/downloads/BuildingHealth_Main.pdf