

CASE STUDY

Creating Active and Healthy Places

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Research has established that built and natural environments significantly determine health outcomes and influence health inequalities. How we plan and design places significantly influences whether individuals can live healthy and happy lives.

Many preventable health conditions are caused by a lack of physical activity, poor diet, and social isolation. These are all highly influenced by the environments in which people live, which in turn are influenced by planning. Planning is a significant part of the system as it also influences other factors, such as opportunities for employment, access to green spaces, housing, transport, and air quality, all of which influence people's health.

Clearly, the built and natural environment have a significant impact on physical activity. As part of our work investigating place-based whole systems approaches to tackling physical activity inequalities, YGT recognised the important role of planning and transport planning in supporting the socio-ecological model's outer policy and physical environment rings. These aspects are recognised as carrying a high weighting in this framework. They are difficult to influence, but the changes once achieved are highly impactful over the medium and long term.

We recognised that if we could influence and contribute to the work that goes into planning and policy decision-making, such as the preservation of green spaces and creation new active travel routes, this would significantly impact people's ability to be physically active.

Both local planning authorities within South Tees recommend that prospective developers complete a health impact assessment (HIA) as part of their proposal. These are to be created in consultation with Public Health, the Planning department, and other stakeholders; but none had been submitted.

Public Health South Tees (PHST) recognised that greatest impact would be achieved by embedding the HIA process within the Local Plan policy regarding health and wellbeing, rather than simply being a recommendation in the supporting text. This thinking resonated with YGT's ambition to influence the built environment to impact population-level change in physical activity. However, influencing Planning departments would require sustained, long-term engagement. PHST had previously

identified the departments' impact on wider health determinants but had achieved limited success in establishing collaborative relationships. Previous attempts to enhance collaboration across South Tees had faltered due to a lack of understanding of each other, time constraints, and heavy workloads.

Learning from our work with local communities, we decided to approach the work by first understanding what planners' lives looked like and what it is like to be that person through a physical activity lens. So, rather than approaching building the relationship with a shopping list of tasks, we initially spent a significant amount of time getting to know them and learning what it was really like to be a planner.

Through facilitated meetings, workshops and events, this aspect of the work gathered insight into understanding their workloads, challenges, and priorities, as well as what gets in the way of them doing what they want to do, making progress, trying new things, and taking new approaches.

Utilising YGT's "sludge, budge, and nudge" audit technique, participants from Planning, Transport Planning and Public Health delved deeper into the barriers hindering progress and explored potential solutions. This process revealed issues such as a limited understanding of each other's roles and decision-making processes, as well as a shared passion to creating healthier environments and a strong desire to collaborate.

The assessment revealed that while Planning departments recognised the value of physical activity within their remit, competing priorities, particularly housing demand, took precedence in practice. Over a year, three additional workshop sessions were convened to further explore these issues.

It was identified that YGT and PHST needed to work with Planning rather than at them. Together, everyone agreed that this required focused time and a dedicated resource that sat between Planning, YGT and PHST, and they decided to recruit for this through a new role.

The ability to explore and take a test-and-learn approach to deciding the outcome was significant, as it built trust and strong relationships between everyone involved. Additional expertise was also available through Sport England's planning team, which helped highlight the work's significance.

Sport England also funded the Town & Country Planning Association (TCPA) to support this agenda on a wider scale. They were interested in the collaborative approach and how they could bolster it. Therefore, South Tees also benefited from a new relationship and dedicated TCPA Project and Policy Officer who provided additional knowledge on the planning landscape. Alongside the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), they talked about and advocated for what healthy town planning means nationally and what it could look like locally.

Hence, for the first time in South Tees, the culmination of these efforts brought together senior planners, transport planners, and public health practitioners, supported by Sport England, TCPA, and the RTPI. Despite initial slow progress, participants valued the time for reflection and identified key issues like capacity and staff training.

There was an understanding that colleagues in planning and transport planning recognised the potential benefit of having additional capacity focused on health and physical activity at the intersection of their respective disciplines.

In spring 2023, the initiative sought to establish a planning position with emphasis on physical activity. The recruitment process revealed significant challenges in attracting qualified planners, both for this specialized role and existing vacancies. Recognising the need for a fresh approach, the team pivoted to explore alternative talent acquisition strategies.

The TCPA introduced Public Practice, a not-for-profit organisation that specialises in enhancing the capacity and capability of placemaking teams within the public sector. They draw from diverse built environment disciplines and backgrounds to align an organisation's goals and integrate various perspectives into the planning process. They had a history of recruiting someone into a similar role for Greater Manchester Moving, another Sport England Place Partnership.

Through this route, they successfully recruited for the 'Creating Active and Healthy Places Lead' role in public health spatial planning across the South Tees. The ideal candidate was identified when that person applied to the Public Practices Associate programme. Their unique background in architectural practice and research (their disciplinary background is in behavioural science), enabled them to consider how the built environment affects people's behaviour, how behaviour is influenced by the levels of social trust in a neighbourhood, and the extent to which you can change behaviour by raising people's levels of social trust and the impact it will have on health outcomes. The role presented an opportunity to work at a strategic level and develop policies with potential for significant and generational impact.

The role has been funded by YGT for two years, employed through Middlesbrough Council and line-managed through the PHST team, with direct communication back to YGT's Programme Director. The desire is that the role will be valued and funded beyond the duration of YGT.

The goal is to enhance collaboration between Public Health and Planning departments in both boroughs to encourage physical activity. This is being accomplished through the Local Plan policy framework, with the aim of creating a built environment that positively impacts health outcomes and supports people to flourish for many years to come.

PHST's vision is to see all local government policies through a health lens, and this role will provide planning colleagues with additional capacity and insight to ensure that all policies can implement this approach.

The role's purpose is to promote and deepen understanding of physical activity and Sport England's ways of working and how they can integrate into planning and policy decisions. The postholder is also encouraged to go where the energy is and explore other connections to physical activity that may emerge between Councils, PHST, YGT, and their wider network of Ambassadors.

Now in its second year, the role has become an integral link between PHST, YGT, and the respective Council's Planning teams. Significant progress has been achieved across various aspects of the work, resulting in the following key achievements:

- Co-designed and facilitated a Health in Spatial Planning Workshop, leveraging resources from the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities and the sector's best practices. The workshop was initially delivered to local planning colleagues within Middlesbrough Council, with plans to extend it to planning committee members and other stakeholders. Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council colleagues are working with us to implement a similar programme.
- Completed a Health in All Policies (HiAP) assessment of Middlesbrough Council's emerging Local Plan and conducted productive discussions with colleagues in Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council on this agenda, also. These discussions centred on the potential for a similar approach in the future review of their Local Plan with a particular emphasis on childhood obesity.
- In the emerging Local Plan for Middlesbrough Council, the postholder contributed to the Health and Wellbeing Policy and successfully secured an agreement to require Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) for all residential developments that exceed 100 dwellings, and devised an additional HIA screening process, based on health and open space deprivation on a ward-by-ward basis, to be conducted for all major development across the town.
- Facilitated the creation of Middlesbrough Council's first HIA planning toolkit, working with colleagues across Public Health and Spatial Planning, and other stakeholders. The toolkit used the well-respected HIA materials created by John Wilcox and colleagues at Wakefield City Council as its primary model.
- Contributed to PHST Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNA), ensuring integration into Middlesbrough Council's emerging Local Plan's Health and Wellbeing Policy. This work provides prospective developers with clear baseline information about the community and PHST's health and wellbeing goals.
- Collaborated with Natural England on the pilot Health, Wellbeing, Nature, and Sustainability (HWNS) dashboard, which aims to ground the public health equity agenda within a broader planetary health context.
- Contributed to the South Tees Active Hospital programme by examining how the physical environment promotes or inhibits physical activity and individual health across different spatial resolutions.

Looking forward, the focus remains on building existing work, further embedding health and wellbeing into planning policy, and sharing emerging practices with partners across the region and beyond through Sport England's expansion process.