The Association of Directors of Public Health
Resource for embedding health into the planning process

Introduction

The Healthy Places project, funded by The Health Foundation, was developed to enhance collaborative relationships between planning and public health professionals in local areas. While the original aim of the project focused on strengthening these relationships through Health Impact Assessments (HIAs), subsequent stakeholder meetings revealed that multiple methods should be considered for effectively integrating public health into the planning system, including, but not limited, to HIAs.

The purpose of this resource is to collate the various methods for embedding health into the planning process. These methods have been identified through consultations with stakeholders, project advisory group members, and ADPH Board and Council members.

Methods for embedding health into the planning process

Health Impact Assessments (HIAs)

HIAs are tools used to evaluate the wider determinants of health on a population in relation to the planning of a policy, programme or project. They provide decision-makers with valuable insights into the potential health consequences, aiming to maximise positive health effects, minimise negative health impacts, reduce health inequalities, and inform decision-making for alternative health-promoting methods. HIAs are instrumental in identifying the unintended consequences of planning projects and the subsequent impacts on population health.

Currently, in England, there is no national requirement for HIAs to be part of the local planning process, which can result in the marginalisation of health considerations in planning priorities. In contrast, the Welsh Government has implemented HIA regulations and legislation under the Public Health Wales Act (2017) as part of the wellbeing of future generations initiative. This legislation outlines specific circumstances where HIAs must be conducted, ensuring that every public sector entity demonstrates how it meets the goals of a healthier Wales, thereby integrating health into the planning process.[1]

West Sussex has also implemented HIAs into its public health and sustainability framework, for planning.[2]

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[1] Public Health Wales. Public Health Wales Act 2017. 2017. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].
[2] West Sussex County Council. Creating healthy and sustainable places: a public health and sustainability framework for West Sussex. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].

However, limitations to implementing HIAs in the planning process include the increased resources required during the planning stage and the significant demand placed on public health professionals to ensure all health requirements are met. Local authorities need adequate resources to effectively integrate HIAs into practice, which would improve health outcomes locally. Without the specialist capacity and workforce training, the use of HIAs has been limited.

Integrated impact assessments (IIAs)

IIAs are systematic processes that evaluate the potential economic, social, and environmental effects of planning initiatives. The goal of IIAs is to reduce and mitigate any negative impacts related to these factors. By involving multiple sectors, IIAs ensure a broad and comprehensive analysis of the local context, integrating different types of assessments into one cohesive process. This integration supports local development plans and aids in informed decision-making.

By incorporating multiple sectors and assessments into a single process, IIAs enable Directors of Public Health and other stakeholders to make more informed decisions about the direct and indirect impacts on sustainability, health and equalities, while also recognising areas for improvement.

The East Hampshire Local Plan Review includes an IIA that brings together several assessments, such as the Sustainability Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment, Equalities Impact Assessment , HIA and Habitats Regulation Assessment.[3] This comprehensive strategy assesses the proposed development plan's impact on the environment, economy, and social factors, helping to identify alternative sustainable planning strategies.[3] The implementation of IIAs in planning has led to predictions of significant positive effects on social and health objectives, including health and wellbeing, community accessibility, housing, economy and jobs. The IIA also identified negative effects related to biodiversity, carbon emissions, landscape, water resources and pollution. However, by identifying these negative impacts early, efforts can be made to reduce and mitigate them.[3]

The London Borough of Ealing, Newham and Harrow are other examples where IIAs have been successfully integrated into local development plans, promoting sustainable development, health and equality.[4] [5] [6]

Health in All Policies

Health and wellbeing are shaped by various factors, including social, economic, environmental, and commercial determinants of health, many of which lie outside the traditional health sector and health policies. To effectively address these factors, local governments must adopt a Health in All Policies (HiAP)

[3] East Hampshire District Council. Integrated Impact Assessment for East Hampshire Local Plan. 2024. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].
[4] Ealing Council. Ealing Local Plan Integrated Impact Assessment. 2022. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].
[5] Newham London. Newham Local Plan Review. 2024. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].
[6] London Borough of Harrow. Harrow's new local plan 2021-2041. 2024. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].

approach.[7]

Embracing a HiAP approach not only improves population health but also enhances health equity. The health and wellbeing challenges currently faced by the UK population are complex and require a cross-system strategy. This involves integrating health considerations into policies across various sectors, including education, housing, employment, transport and urban planning.[7]

HiAP systematically considers the health implications of planning decisions in public policies, aiming to improve population health and reduce the negative health impacts of these decisions.[7] It acknowledges that Governments must balance numerous priorities across diverse sectors and seeks to improve the accountability of policymakers for health outcomes at all levels and stages of the policy-making process. This ensures that health and health equity are integral to decision making.

However, successful implementation of HiAP requires effective coordination of priorities, which can be challenging to achieve. Additionally, individual sectors may not perceive immediate benefits toward their own goals by adopting a HiAP approach, and the process can be resource-intensive, requiring significant time to develop mutual understanding and strong relationships between sectors.[7]

Coventry City Council has implemented a HiAP approach by committing to become a Marmot City. In this capacity, relevant organisations involved in the planning process have committed to work together on innovative projects aimed at improving health and reducing inequalities. As a Marmot City, Coventry has successfully connected sectors across the council, public sector, and voluntary organisations, embedding health considerations across the system.[8]

Policy methods

Policy methods encompass the regulations, laws and policies implemented to achieve health goals and improve health and wellbeing within populations. Integrating these policies into the planning of the built environment can have significant effects on public health.

One example of such a policy is zoning regulations around schools to limit the number of new takeaway food outlets.[9] Evidence in the UK suggests that takeaway outlets are more likely to be located near schools compared to other types of establishments, such as churches or gyms etc.[10] By the end of 2017, 35 local authorities across the UK had adopted takeaway management zones around schools.

This policy has its advantages, such as reducing the availability of unhealthy food options, but it also has

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[7] Local Government Association. Health in All Policies: a manual for local government. 2016. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].
[8] Coventry City Council. Coventry: a Marmot City. 2024. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].
[9] John Rahilly et al. Changes in the number of new takeaway food outlets associated with adoption of management zones around schools: A natural experimental evaluation in England. SSM – Population Health. 2024. June; 26. doi: 10.1016/j.ssmph2024.101646. [Last accessed: May 2024].
[10] NHS London Healthy Urban Development Unit. Using the planning system to control hot food takeaways: A good practice guide. 2013. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].

potential drawbacks. For example, it could increase demand and prices at existing fast-food outlets. It may also lead to 'gaps' in streets, potentially affecting the economic productivity of an area. Wrexham County Borough Council is an example of a local authority that has implemented such zoning regulations, specifically enforcing a 400-metre ban on new takeaways around schools.[11]

Another example of this policy in action is Healthy Streets.[12] Greater London was the first region in the UK to adopt this strategy, followed by areas such as Hampshire, Norfolk, Hertfordshire, Suffolk, Liverpool, and Lancashire.[12] This approach aims to embed public health into the transport sector of cities, prioritising people and health in the design and use of public spaces. By creating healthier streets, this will help to encourage more active travel, reduce traffic and improve air quality.

Policy advocacy

Policy advocacy is the process of informing and influencing political decision-makers to support the adoption or implementation of evidence-based policies that improve health outcomes. Integrating these policies into the planning of the built environment can have direct and significant effects on public health.

Previous campaigns advocating for healthier environments include the Royal Society for Public Health's Health on the High Street, and Routing Out Childhood Obesity.[13] [14] Health on the High Street is a campaign and policy report exploring the impact of high street businesses on local public health. RSPH called for measures such as increasing the influencing of local authorities in the planning process, reducing the number of betting shops and fast-food outlets, and embedding public health considerations into the licensing of all businesses.[13]

Routing out Childhood Obesity focused on changing the street environment, particularly around schools, and providing children with access to healthier routes to and from school. The campaign identified four priority areas for change: banning of unhealthy fast food outlets near schools, stopping targeted junk food advertising to children, reducing junk food adverts in all council-owned advertising sites, and improving active travel routes.[14]

Policy advocacy and campaigning are effective ways to promote public health and communicate areas for change to national government. However, the future of the political landscape remains uncertain due to the recent General Election.

Cross sector collaboration and developing a shared language

One aim of the ADPH Healthy Places project is to improve cross sector collaboration and develop a shared

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[11] Wrexham County Borough Council. Local planning guidance note no.9: Hot food take-aways. 2011. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].
[12] Healthy Streets. London: Small changes delivered at scale through maintenance programmes. 2024. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].
[13] Royal Society for Public Health. Health on the High Street 2015. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].
[14] Royal Society for Public Health. Routing Out Childhood Obesity. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].

language between public health agencies, planning departments, transport, housing and other relevant sectors. Strengthening these partnerships is crucial for addressing the broader determinants of health and achieving more effective and sustainable outcomes.

Currently in England, each local area adopts varied approaches to planning, resulting in inconsistencies in language and practice. Fostering a collaborative environment across sectors will help to integrate health considerations into all policies. For example, the Shaping Places for Wellbeing Programme in Scotland, a partnership between the Improvement Service and Public Health Scotland, seeks to deliver local place and wellbeing ambitions through shared information, contributing to the creation of Healthy Places.[15]

In March 2024, ADPH held a workshop with Directors of Public Health from across the four nations and stakeholders from the planning sector. The discussions highlighted the importance of creating a shared understanding of each other's roles and building mutual knowledge. Key takeaways included:

- Providing planners with practical steps to encourage healthy choices and upstream prevention during the planning and design phases.
- Achieving increased financial returns by investing in a more integrated approach to public health and planning, leading to economic benefits for communities.
- Enhancing capacity through the efficient use of resources**.**

One effective strategy for developing understanding amongst Directors of Public Health and planning professionals is to develop a document that explains planning concepts to public health professionals and vice versa. This document should also build an evidence base highlighting the importance of public health policies in planning.

Investing time in building collaborative partnerships and developing a shared language across sectors is essential for success. There have been suggestions to establish a responsible authority for planning, as there is with licensing, to help collaboration. However, this would require additional capacity.

As part of the ADPH Healthy Places project we have set up a collaborative group for planning and public health professionals to come together and start to build a shared language and mutual understanding. To find out more about the collaborative group, please contact us.

Capacity building and workforce training

Capacity building is the development of knowledge, skills, structures, and systems necessary to facilitate effective health promotion and address local health issues. This includes action from practitioners, organisations and communities. When embedding health into the planning process, capacity building and workforce training aim to enhance mutual understanding between the public health workforce and planning stakeholders. Interventions for capacity building can take various forms, including technical

[15] Public Health Scotland. Shaping Places for Wellbeing Programme. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].

assistance, sector-led improvement, consultations, training courses and guidance materials.

A recent evaluation in East Sussex and Southampton assessed changes in capacity and ways of working that promote healthy environments. This evaluation linked improvements to investment and employment of specialist roles, such as Health Place Officers. In Southampton City Council and East Sussex County, these officers were employed to support and foster the development of healthy, sustainably developed places, with a focus on integrating the HiAP approach into the planning process. They have also played a key role in enhancing workforce skills and knowledge by preparing a guidance booklet for public health professionals working with planning teams on planning applications.[16]

The evaluation has shown that the introduction of Healthy Place Officers has successfully increased awareness of health and health inequalities, leading to their greater consideration in the planning process.

Some UK universities offer postgraduate courses with 'healthy city-type' modules, such as UCL, Birmingham and Sheffield. UWE Bristol offers a professional course titled Healthy Cities, designed to train individuals on bridging the gap between public health and urban planning to create healthier communities.

Additionally, there are various professional accredited qualifications available, including WELL, LEED, Fitwel and Active Score. These qualifications aim to train the workforce in sustainable planning and building, and in embedding health considerations into the planning system.

Despite these advancements, this area of work is still developing, with no established strategic approach. Ongoing evidence is being gathered through evaluations of capacity within local authorities to further inform and refine practices.

Conclusion

There are numerous examples across the UK of how different mechanisms and approaches for embedding health into the planning process are improving health outcomes and reducing inequalities. While these efforts can be resource-intensive and require significant time to build mutual understanding and strong cross-sector relationships, the benefits of incorporating health considerations into planning demonstrate a solid investment in public well-being. To ensure these tools and approaches are effective, they must be supported by capacity-building and collaboration across sectors, fostering shared understanding and training a workforce equipped to integrate health into the planning process.

[16] National Institute of Health Research. Building and facilitating system capability to create healthy environments in East Sussex and Southampton: a qualitative process evaluation. 2024. Available online [Last accessed: May 2024].