

Physical activity and the environment

This quick reference guide presents the recommendations on 'Promoting and creating built or natural environments that encourage and support physical activity'. It is for NHS and other professionals who have a direct or indirect role in – and responsibility for – the built or natural environment. This includes those working in local authorities and the education, community, voluntary and private sectors. It may also be of interest to members of the public.

The guidance offers the first national, evidence-based recommendations on how to improve the physical environment to encourage physical activity. It demonstrates the importance of such improvements and the need to evaluate how they impact on the public's health.

NICE public health guidance 8

This guidance was developed using the NICE public health programme process.

NICE public health guidance makes recommendations on the promotion of good health and the prevention of ill health. This guidance represents the views of the Institute and was arrived at after careful consideration of the evidence available.

Recommendations

The recommendations are aimed at many settings and sectors:

- Recommendations 1, 4, 5 (on land use planning) are relevant when developing regional spatial strategies, local development frameworks and local plans using, for example, 'Policy planning guidance 17' (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister undated).
- Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 are relevant when developing local transport plans and guidance using, for example, 'Policy planning guidance 13' (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2001).

All the recommendations are relevant when developing joint NHS and local authority strategies (for example, joint community strategies, access plans and local area agreements). They are also relevant when planning and managing the NHS (including its premises).

Strategies, policies and plans

Recommendation 1

Who should take action?

- Those responsible for all strategies, policies and plans involving changes to the physical environment. This includes the development, modification and maintenance of towns, urban extensions, major regeneration projects and the transport infrastructure. It also includes the siting or closure of local services in both urban and rural areas.

What action should they take?

- Involve all local communities and experts at all stages of the development to ensure the potential for physical activity is maximised.
- Ensure planning applications for new developments always prioritise the need for people (including those whose mobility is impaired) to be physically active as a routine part of their daily life. Ensure local facilities and services are easily accessible on foot, by bicycle and by other modes of transport involving physical activity. Ensure children can participate in physically active play.
- Assess in advance what impact (both intended and unintended) the proposals are likely to have on physical activity levels. (For example, will local services be accessible on foot, by bicycle or by people whose mobility is impaired?) Make the results publicly available and accessible. Existing impact assessment tools could be used.

Transport

Recommendation 2

Who should take action?

- Those responsible for all strategies, policies and plans involving changes to the physical environment, including local transport authorities, transport planners and local authorities.

What action should they take?

- Ensure pedestrians, cyclists and users of other modes of transport that involve physical activity are given the highest priority when developing or maintaining streets and roads. (This includes people whose mobility is impaired.) Use one or more of the following methods:
 - re-allocate road space to support physically active modes of transport (as an example, this could be achieved by widening pavements and introducing cycle lanes)
 - restrict motor vehicle access (for example, by closing or narrowing roads to reduce capacity)
 - introduce road-user charging schemes
 - introduce traffic-calming schemes to restrict vehicle speeds (using signage and changes to highway design)
 - create safe routes to schools (for example, by using traffic-calming measures near schools and by creating or improving walking and cycle routes to schools).

Recommendation 3

Who should take action?

- Planning and transport agencies, including regional and local authorities.

What action should they take?

- Plan and provide a comprehensive network of routes for walking, cycling and using other modes of transport involving physical activity. These routes should offer everyone (including people whose mobility is impaired) convenient, safe and attractive access to workplaces, homes, schools and other public facilities. (The latter includes shops, play and green areas and social destinations.) They should be built and maintained to a high standard.

Public open spaces

Recommendation 4

Who should take action?

- Designers and managers of public open spaces, paths and rights of way (including coastal, forest and riverside paths and canal towpaths).
- Planning and transport agencies including regional and local authorities.

What action should they take?

- Ensure public open spaces and public paths can be reached on foot, by bicycle and using other modes of transport involving physical activity. They should also be accessible by public transport.
- Ensure public open spaces and public paths are maintained to a high standard. They should be safe, attractive and welcoming to everyone.

Buildings

Recommendation 5

Who should take action?

- Architects, designers, developers, employers and planners.

What action should they take?

- Those involved with campus sites, including hospitals and universities, should ensure different parts of the site are linked by appropriate walking and cycling routes. (Campuses comprise two or more related buildings set together in the grounds of a defined site.)
- Ensure new workplaces are linked to walking and cycling networks. Where possible, these links should improve the existing walking and cycling infrastructure by creating new, through routes (and not just links to the new facility).

Recommendation 6

Who should take action?

- Architects, designers and facility managers who are responsible for public buildings (including workplaces and schools).

What action should they take?

- During building design or refurbishment, ensure staircases are designed and positioned to encourage people to use them.
- Ensure staircases are clearly signposted and are attractive to use. For example, they should be well-lit and well-decorated.

Schools

Recommendation 7

Who should take action?

- Children's services, School Sport Partnerships, school governing bodies and head teachers.

What action should they take?

- Ensure school playgrounds are designed to encourage varied, physically active play.
- Primary schools should create areas (for instance, by using different colours) to promote individual and group physical activities such as hopscotch and other games.

Glossary

Access/accessibility

'Access' is used to mean that a particular place or destination is accessible to local residents using a mode of transport that involves physical activity. Destinations may include work, healthcare and education facilities and shops.

Active play

The Children's Play Council defines play as:

'...freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child...' (National Playing Fields Association 2000). Active play involves physical activity (see below).

Physical activity

Physical activity is: 'Any force exerted by skeletal muscle that results in energy expenditure above resting level' (Caspersen et al. 1985). It includes the full range of human movement and can encompass everything from competitive sport and active hobbies to walking, cycling and the general activities involved in daily living (such as housework).

Traffic calming

Traffic calming is a means of restricting vehicle speeds, primarily using traffic engineering measures such as speed bumps.

Implementation tools

NICE has developed tools to help organisations implement this guidance. For details, see our website at www.nice.org.uk/PH008

Further information

You can download the following documents from www.nice.org.uk/PH008

- A quick reference guide (this document) for professionals and the public.
- The guidance, which includes all the recommendations, details of how they were developed and evidence statements.
- Supporting documents, including an evidence review and an economic analysis.

For printed copies of the quick reference guide, phone the NHS Response Line on 0870 1555 455 and quote N1444.

Related NICE guidance

Published

- Four commonly used methods to increase physical activity: brief interventions in primary care, exercise referral schemes, pedometers and community-based exercise programmes for walking and cycling. NICE public health intervention guidance 2 (2006). Available from: www.nice.org.uk/PHI002
- Obesity: the prevention, identification, assessment and management of overweight and obesity in adults and children. NICE clinical guideline 43 (2006). Available from: www.nice.org.uk/CG043

Under development

- Community engagement to improve health. NICE public health guidance (due February 2008).
- Workplace health promotion: how to encourage employees to be physically active. NICE public health guidance (due May 2008).
- Promoting physical activity, play and sport for pre-school and school-age children in family, pre-school, school and community settings. NICE public health guidance (due January 2009).

Updating the recommendations

NICE public health guidance is updated as needed so that recommendations take into account important new information. We check for new evidence 2 and 4 years after publication to decide whether all or part of the guidance should be updated. If important new evidence is published at other times, we may decide to update some recommendations at that time.

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