Active Design

Creating Active Environments through Planning and Design

Theme 3 – Creating and maintaining activity
It is essential that once delivered, spaces are utilised effectively and can be relied upon to be useful for years to come. To achieve this, how spaces will be used and maintained should be factored into the design process at the outset, and opportunities for activation of these spaces should be explored. Often, designing spaces to be flexible and able to accommodate multiple different uses can prevent a space becoming disused and allow it to respond to evolving and changing needs of a community, and changing activity trends.

The Principles

**Maintaining high-quality flexible spaces**

**Activating spaces**

*How does this increase activity?*

- People are more likely to use their environment for physical activity if places and facilities seem well maintained and safe.
- The monitoring and evaluation of physical activity interventions allows understanding to be developed of what is effective and what is less so. This allows changes to be made as required, to increase opportunities or the effectiveness of interventions.
- Encouraging people to be physically active through the activation of spaces and places is essential for communicating the benefits of physical activity and increasing participation, especially with people who traditionally feel excluded and or those who are less active, such as those with long term health conditions.
- Ensuring spaces and places are well maintained and managed enables them to provide value for money, to have a longer lifespan and remain a valued asset to communities for a longer period of time.
What other benefits are there?

Environment and climate change

- Well managed and maintained facilities are more effective, more resource efficient and used more, leading to less need for replacement. This in turn reduces the need for further carbon emissions in reconstruction in the future.

- Creating spaces which can be used flexibly for many different activities reduces the need to provide dedicated spaces for each anticipated (often time-limited) activity, and as such is more effective in creating compact places. In turn, this encourages the co-location of uses and facilities (See Principle 4).

Tackling inequalities

- Communicating and promoting physical activity opportunities in an effective and innovative way can open up opportunities to those who are less active, less confident to be active or simply unaware that opportunities exist. This can strengthen community bonds, increasing community cohesion and reducing loneliness.

Economic growth

- Activating spaces can have knock on benefits to the economy by increasing footfall in spaces and facilities, which can be vital for their long-term viability and as a tool to regenerate or reactivate places.

- Utilising spaces for multiple uses reduces the need to invest in multiple facilities and increases the opportunities for economies of scale within a particular facility or space.

- Investment in providing, activating and maintaining spaces and programmes for increased physical activity over time reduces other costs associated with managing poor health.
The aim
Spaces and facilities should be effectively maintained and managed to support physical activity. These places should be monitored to understand how they are used, and flexible so that they can be adapted as needed.

How to do it
The management, long-term maintenance and viability of facilities and spaces should be considered in their design. As these spaces operate, monitoring should be undertaken of their use and effectiveness. This enables evaluation, assessing the success of Active Design initiatives and understanding where changes can be made. Where spaces and facilities have been designed flexibly (see Principle 6), design responses can be undertaken to respond to this evaluation, or spaces could be activated differently (see Principle 10).

9.1 Manage and maintain spaces to enable effective and efficient use

- People are more likely to participate in sport and physical activity if places to be active are attractive and safe\textsuperscript{44}. Whilst spaces may be effective in encouraging physical activity through their design at the outset, this must be maintained to enable continued effective use over the lifetime of a place or facility, including both management and repair.

- As part of the management of space, it is important that a broad range of users are targeted, with a focus on those who are most in need, to reduce health disparities. This can be both through the management of facilities and through activation (see Principle 10).

- The broader use of school sports facilities (or other education establishments) by local communities outside of school hours offers significant opportunities for expanding access to sports and physical activity. Community Use Agreements can be an effective tool to achieve this access (see Houlton Case Study). Revenue from community use can fund ongoing maintenance. Funding may be available to support this\textsuperscript{45}.
9.2 Monitor the effectiveness of Active Design interventions and be prepared to make changes if circumstances have changed

- All Active Design interventions should be monitored to understand their effectiveness and efficiency, regardless of their typology or scale. Monitoring should be granular and consider different groups, split by age, gender and other appropriate measures. This monitoring will then indicate whether a space is operating as designed, alternative operation has been taking place (beyond the expected design or use) or that a space is ineffective and requires reconsideration.

- It is essential that spaces are monitored and evaluated so they can adjust to users’ needs and respond to unintended usage. For example, if spaces are dominated by a single group to the detriment of other groups, remedies could include physical design changes, splitting up spaces, ongoing management solutions or activation (see Principle 10).

- Spaces which have been flexibly designed (see Principle 6) can be adjusted to enable effective responses to these monitoring outputs, whether minor or major changes are required. This can include changes to further maximise the value and effectiveness of physical activity interventions or to adjust their effectiveness to encourage activity from particular groups or those in need.

- This monitoring and evaluation can also help to measure and understand long term health impacts, and the changing characteristics, health profile and demographic needs of a community. These outputs can be used to strengthen, and justify, cross discipline work between planning, health, leisure services and other operations.

Below: Temporary interventions can be monitored to assess their success (Stevenage Town Centre)
9.3 Consider management and monitoring, and how it will be funded, at an early stage

- Spaces should be designed to be able to respond to the changing needs of a community over time (see Principle 6), and as such, how spaces can respond to monitoring outcomes should be considered at the outset of the design process.

- How this management and maintenance will be secured and funded should be considered at an early stage. Monitoring and evaluating physical activity interventions can be embedded into monitoring activity required as part of planning permissions to measure the impacts of new developments at different scales, including buildings, spaces, streets or places.

- Major developments provide the opportunity to secure funding towards community development (e.g. staff and activation budgets) and the monitoring and evaluation of Active Design interventions should be considered as part of this, as well as the delivery of programmes to get the community active.

- Alternatives to local authority management of public realm, streets, spaces and formal open space may need to be considered, and the right organisation should be identified at an early stage.

- Alternative management groups might include sports clubs managing new playing fields, or developers taking responsibility for public open space and related facilities, either as part of their own management regime or with the support of other management entities.

- Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) may be appropriate stewards of the public realm in certain locations such as town centres.

- Consider how monitoring can ensure the design is continuing to meet the needs of the groups it was intended to target and support from earlier engagement.
Useful Resources

The Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) publish a practical guide on Long Term Stewardship in new developments.

Further information on sports facility management can be found in the Sport England Asset Transfer Guidance.

There is a free online resource from Sport England (Use Our School) that offers further guidance and information for local authorities and other education providers on how to make the best use of school facilities for the benefit of the local community. It is especially useful for those who have responsibility within a school for establishing, sustaining and growing community activity on school sites. ‘Use Our School’ can be accessed here; www.sportengland.org/useourschool
The aim
The provision of spaces and facilities which can help to improve physical activity should be supported by a commitment to activate them, encouraging people to be more physically active and increasing the awareness of activity opportunities within a community.

How to do it
Methods to promote sport and physical activity should be supported to communicate the benefits of such activity across all settings including neighbourhoods, workplaces and facilities. Effective investment should be employed to allow this promotion, with consideration given to how promotion could be more effective to target those in the most need. Volunteers and local champions within a community should be supported and encouraged where possible, as often local people can be the most effective in communicating within their communities the opportunities for sport and physical activity.
Managers and operators of our places and spaces should encourage their wide and varied use, establishing a broad programme of activities and events to engage the local community and visitors.

10.1 Provide investment into activity promotion, as well as provision itself

- Once a space or facility is provided, consider how it may function in the early days of its existence. Think about who it is designed for, and how the existence of the space or facility will be promoted in local communities effectively.
- Investment into programming will ensure that capital investment is used to its best effect, and can prevent a new space or facility from underperforming or being undervalued by the local community.
- Engage with local stakeholders, the Active Partnerships network and local councils to set up a programme of activities and events to activate the space, enabling the widest range of promotion within the community (See Principle 1).
- As part of wider stewardship programmes, major new residential developments provide the opportunity to secure investment (e.g. community activation funds) to support projects which can help new residents, which can help new residents to be active in their new surroundings, as soon as they move into the development. This can help to create and embed positive physical activity habits from the outset of a new development.

Below: Promotion can encourage use of spaces and facilities
10.2 Make spaces social to form connections around physical activity

- Sport and physical activity should be a fun experience and can have a positive impact on both people’s physical and mental health. Sharing these experiences with others can be a good way to make or maintain social connections, which can help reduce loneliness and create lasting friendships. It can also be a method to foster community cohesion.

- Spaces should be designed and activity promoted with this in mind, providing not just spaces for the physical activity itself, but space for people to gather, sit and chat before and after the activities.

Top: The Hub Café in Victoria Park, London, offers spaces to sit and rest, surrounded by parklands and playgrounds (Victoria Park, London)

10.3 Use digital technology to promote and activate, as well as more traditional methods

- Technology and social media can provide an easy, effective and highly accessible method to facilitate, communicate and encourage physical activity. Innovative and effective methods of utilising technology to promote physical activity in local spaces should be explored.

- The use of communication technologies and social media can be an excellent method of increasing awareness of physical activity opportunities in local places and spaces to those who are less active.

- The utilisation of fitness and health tracking applications is increasing year on year, and these can be an excellent method of encouraging more informal physical activity, either alone or in groups. Spaces should be designed to accommodate this activity, especially creating safe spaces for those exercising alone (see Principle 6).

- Those who cannot, or do not, have access to digital communications should also be considered in the promotion of activity at local spaces and places, with innovative methods explored on how to engage these groups (See Principle 1).

Above: Social media can communicate active opportunities to a wider audience
10.4 Encourage temporary uses and testing of ideas

- The temporary use of a space can provide opportunities to promote specific sports or activities and to demonstrate the wider possibilities for promoting physical activity. This can be through temporary events, or through trialing physical activity interventions in different contexts to see if they are successful in a local community, prior to investing in a facility or programme of activation.

- Temporary uses and testing of ideas through prototyping and piloting is a useful method to demonstrate the benefits of physical activity interventions without significant investment, allowing efficient use of resources.

*Above:* Temporary uses and pop-ups can explore the potential of spaces to encourage activity (Broad Street, Oxford)
Valence Park

Funded by the Greater London Authority (GLA) and the London Marathon Trust, Street Space (a social enterprise company) were commissioned to work closely with local residents to collaboratively design and deliver a programme of ‘activation’ events to increase the level of social and physical activity in Valence Park within the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. Over 300 local residents were engaged over a six month programme through taster activities including basketball, walking, learn to ride, treasure hunts and park photography.

Through listening and working closely with local people and existing park volunteers, Street Space developed a series of ‘micro experiments’ to attract and bring new audiences to Valence Park. ‘All Roads Lead to Valence Park’ identified and tested opportunities for new, playful wayfinding to draw people’s attention to the Park and encourage new visitors.

Alfresco Dining, Soho, London (Flexible Spaces)

To help in the safe economic recovery of the hospitality sector after the Covid-19 pandemic, and encourage more people back into cities, the UK government relaxed restrictions on pavement dining licences from summer 2020. In Soho, Westminster Council closed many streets to vehicle traffic to allow the allocation of space to safe street dining in the open air.

The scheme was a success in terms of helping the economic recovery of businesses in Soho, and encouraging many more people back into central London, and made walking in Soho considerably easier and more attractive. This flexible use of existing space, and prioritising people over vehicles in the public realm, has encouraged the government and many councils to continue the scheme, and transform many streets and public spaces into more active destinations. There were issues that occurred during the trial with footways becoming difficult or impossible to use for those with disabilities, and this has played a part in informing the post-Covid revised scheme’s more limited locations and suitable streets.

Useful Resources

Office for Health Improvement and Disparities provides guidance and information on the role and benefits of community champions in reducing health inequalities.

Sport England’s This Girl Can campaign provides a resource network and classes programme which seeks to get women and girls more involved in physical activity.

A network of 43 Active Partnerships cover the whole of England, bringing together people and organisations to increase physical activity levels. The Active Partnerships connect and support a vast array of organisations, using their position to influence systems, policies and strategies that can make it easier and more attractive for people to be active in their day to day lives.