

ESSENCE

One page overview of each 'condition' for addressing inequalities in physical activity

SEPTEMBER 2026



Built and natural environments that enable physical activity



Local natural and built environments are attractive, accessible, and safe, encouraging movement and physical activity.

What does this mean and why is it important?

Perceptions and experiences of local environments can affect people's willingness to engage with their surroundings and reflect broader inequalities. Improving the design and management of built and natural environments can make them safe and valuable for everyone. The built environment refers to human-made surroundings including homes, schools, workplaces, parks, transport, and public spaces. A place-based approach recognises that enabling physical activity requires sustained changes to the systems, environments and inequalities that shape everyday life.

Sector integration of physical activity: Understanding how the built environment affects physical activity can inform work across sectors, helping to address inequalities. Sustainably designed and managed local infrastructure, including housing, workplaces, amenities and travel, can encourage physical activity. Collaborative planning can help achieve shared objectives and promote accessibility. As maturity develops, physical activity, movement and accessibility increasingly influence routine planning, design, investment, management and renewal. Working with local organisations and community insights helps address barriers faced by disadvantaged groups.

Access to natural environments and public open spaces for all: Access includes whether communities can reach, enter, use and feel welcome. Designing spaces to meet cultural and practical needs helps ensure they are valued and widely used. This requires attention to barriers such as safety, maintenance, accessibility, confidence and belonging. Involving community voices, especially disadvantaged groups, helps shape how spaces are designed, managed, and cared for over time.

Tackling structural inequalities: Structural disadvantage can be seen in neglected environments, such as abandoned land and derelict buildings, which make places feel unsafe. Poor-quality housing, local amenities, public realm, infrastructure and travel options can also undermine community activity, safety and local pride. Regulatory processes, strategic planning and investment can address these issues, with policymakers accountable for considering the public health implications of any changes.

How can we identify the barriers and enablers of physical activity in the local context?

Experiences from Place Partnerships reveal four factors for creating built and natural environments that enable wellbeing and physical activity:

1. **Build pride, ownership and physical environments that reflect community knowledge.** Engage local communities in shaping their environments by involving them in decision-making, including how local spaces are designed, used and cared for.
2. **Appreciation for the specific local context.** Tailor strategies to the unique geography and characteristics of each place, including evidence about who uses local environments, who does not and the barriers shaping different experiences.
3. **Involve a range of stakeholders and multi-disciplinary teams in strategic planning for infrastructure and transport.** Involve a range of stakeholders and multidisciplinary teams in policy development, such as Local Plans, so that physical activity, movement and accessibility increasingly influence policy, resource allocation and development plans for local spaces.
4. **Establish regulatory processes or policy.** Implement policies that recognise built and natural environments as key health determinants and assess new developments for their impact on physical activity. Collaboration between organisations can embed physical activity within routine decisions and support long-term environmental improvements.

Reflection questions

- To what extent do planning, housing and transport policy, investment and routine decision-making lead to physical environments that increase physical activity?
- What local assets support physical activity; who is able to use and feel welcome in them; and how can we address barriers and optimise these existing environments?
- How can we elevate local voices and involve disadvantaged groups in decisions about the built environment and regeneration of their living environments?