



membership resources

Briefing 08/57

December 2008

# Health impact assessment of greenspace

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and Email Contacts (Scotland)

CC: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts (England, Northern Ireland and Wales)

**A joint report by Health Scotland, Greenspace Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and Institute of Occupational Medicine**

## **Key issues**

Contains a review of international research evidence on greenspace and health

Outlines how to use the information to do a Health Impact Assessment (HIA)

Highlights sources of data and provides case studies

## 1. Introduction

The guide has been written to help people conduct a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) of greenspace. These are policies, strategies, plans, frameworks, projects or programmes it:

- Provides background information on greenspace
- Reviews of international research evidence on greenspace and health
- Outlines how to use the evidence to do a HIA
- Provides case studies of some completed greenspace

The project came about because both greenspace and health professionals felt that the guidance on the health equity impacts of greenspace would contribute to greater recognition of the role of greenspace in improving health and a greater emphasis on healthy greenspace in proposals. The guide offers a view of the best available international scientific evidence on the impacts of health, both positive and negative.

Greenspace means any vegetated land or water within or adjoining an urban area and includes:

- Natural greenspace including natural and semi-natural habitats
- Green corridors paths, disused railway lines, rivers and canals
- Amenity grassland, parks and gardens
- Outdoor sports facilities, cemeteries and allotments
- Derelict, vacant and contaminated land

A survey by greenspace Scotland in 2007 found that 58% of people use greenspace at least once per week and over 75% visit greenspace about once per month. It further found that the use of greenspace had increased by over 8% since 2004. Recent research on environmental justice in Scotland has shown the complex relationship between greenspace and deprivation. Findings include:

- Both the least and most deprived areas in Scotland have high percentages of people living near to a local designated wildlife site
- High levels of industrial pollution, derelict land and poor river water quality are strongly associated with deprivation
- People living in deprived areas are also less likely to live near to areas of woodland
- People living in the most deprived areas are more likely to experience poorer air quality than those living in less deprived areas

## 2. Greenspace policies in Scotland

The guide offers an overview of the best available international scientific evidence on the health impacts (both positive and negative) of greenspace. The focus of the review was to identify and explore the links between greenspace and physical, mental and social health and wellbeing. Key findings include:

- The evidence demonstrates a clear positive relationship between greenspaces and health, although the mechanisms which generate these positive effects are not always clear
- For physical exercise, the value of greenspaces as places to exercise is unquestionable. However, although people who use parks regularly appear to take more exercise, access to greenspace does not appear to be the key variable for explaining levels of physical exercise
- On mental health, there is compelling evidence for the restorative effects of greenspaces. But the evidence base is insufficient to answer more detailed questions about different spaces and populations
- In terms of social health, the review shows that greenspaces are one of the few remaining spaces that are available to all. Surveys show that greenspaces are important as places of memory, and are closely associated with neighbourhood identity

The Scottish climate which can be cooler, windier and wetter than other parts of the UK is also a factor in reducing outdoor activity and the use of greenspace. Factors have been exacerbated by poorly designed greenspace that is uninviting and uninteresting to those who wish to use it. Also there is a lack of investment in greenspace and a spiral of decline which is often associated with an increase in crime and anti social behaviour. Limited community involvement in the development of greenspace can also lead to a mismatch with local needs.

A number of issues are influencing the development of greenspace policy which include:

- Supporting sustainable development and mitigating climate change
- Protecting and enhancing urban and rural biodiversity
- Creating more cohesive and inclusive communities
- Improving quality of life through improving the quality and accessibility of greenspace
- Reducing social, environmental health inequalities and tackling obesity

### **3. What is Health Impact Assessment?**

Policy decisions in a variety of areas such as education, employment, transport, greenspace, housing, finance and welfare impact on health. Health Impact Assessment (HIA) uses a range of methods and approaches to help identify potential or actual health impacts of policies and uses this information to minimise any negative and maximise positive impacts. HIA is a fairly new concept and debates are ongoing about various aspects of its application and appropriate methodologies. There is growing national and international support for incorporating HIA into policy-making processes and there have been strong endorsements by the UK government.

HIA can range from a rapid appraisal to an in-depth piece of research, should ideally be prospective but may be retrospective, and may employ both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection. The adoption of HIA by decision-makers, and steps to incorporate it into relevant policy development processes, is important if we are to begin to positively affect the broad social determinants of health and impact in a more dramatic and holistic way on the upstream influences on health. Health impact assessment guides have also been developed for housing and transport.

Planning Advice Note 65 (PAN65) gives advice on the role of the planning system in protecting and enhancing existing open spaces and providing high quality new spaces. It sets out how local authorities can prepare open space strategies and gives examples of good practice in providing, managing and maintaining open spaces. A key aim of PAN65 is to raise the profile of open space as a planning issue and to highlight the importance of involving all sections of a community in the planning and development of open spaces. The document can be viewed in full at:

<http://www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/upload/File/Greenspace%20HIA.pdf>

The guide offers an overview of the best available international scientific evidence on the health impacts (both positive and negative) of greenspace. The focus of the review was to identify and explore the links between greenspace and physical, mental and social health and wellbeing.

The evidence demonstrates a clear positive relationship between greenspaces and health, although the mechanisms which generate these positive effects are not always clear. For physical exercise, the value of greenspaces as places to exercise is unquestionable. However, although people who use parks regularly appear to take more exercise, access to greenspace does not appear to be the key variable for explaining levels of physical exercise.

On mental health, there is compelling evidence for the restorative effects of greenspaces. But the evidence base is insufficient to answer more detailed questions about different spaces and populations. In terms of social health, the review shows that greenspaces are one of the few remaining spaces that are available to all. Surveys show that greenspaces are important as places of memory, and are closely associated with neighbourhood identity.

Scottish Planning Policy 21 (SPP21) also sets out the objectives of green belt policy and the way in which it should be used and enforced. A green belt is an area of land designated for the purposes of managing the growth of a town or city in the long term. It should be used to direct development to suitable locations, not to prevent development from happening in general.

#### **4. Summary and APSE comment**

APSE believes that with regard to physical health and mental wellbeing, evidence demonstrates a positive relationship between greenspace and health. However the mechanisms which generate these positive effects are not entirely clear. The value of greenspaces as places to exercise is unquestionable. Access to greenspace does not however appear to be the key variable for explaining levels of physical activity, although people who use parks regularly appear to take more exercise.

Exercise is not, however, the primary motivation for the majority of park users, and many greenspace activities are sedentary or involve gentle exercise. Evidence from a number of studies indicates that greenspaces are most valued as an escape from the stress, dirt, and noise of urban environments. Experiencing greenspace has a positive effect on levels of stress but the evidence base is as yet insufficient to address more detailed questions on exactly how greenspace impacts on stress, and whether different types of greenspace have different effects.

APSE would welcome any comments on this, which should be sent to [ptaggart@apse.org.uk](mailto:ptaggart@apse.org.uk)

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