

Building healthy places

Design principles to help create
healthy communities

Introduction

Housing associations have a unique opportunity to shape the health and wellbeing of their communities.

It's our role to create homes and neighbourhoods that support healthier, happier lives. If we do this, housing is easier to manage and more sustainable in the long term.

To do this, you need to embed our healthy design principles into your developments.

By adapting principles found in British Medical Journal, McKinnon et al, 2020, we've created a guide to help you create places where residents thrive.

This guide helps you to:

- Review your current and upcoming developments against these principles.
- Collaborate with local public health teams and planners to align your projects with local health priorities.

Key principles - at a glance



Connected neighbourhoods

- Design developments that connect with surrounding communities.
- Link homes to nearby streets, services and green spaces to avoid isolation.



Homes and places for everyone

- Offer a mix of housing types and tenures.
- Design for adaptability so residents can stay as their needs change.



Natural spaces

- Include open spaces, greenery, places to play and meet.
- Outdoor drying areas, gardens and food growing spaces promote health and social interaction.

Key principles - at a glance



Being active

- Prioritise walking, wheeling and public transport.
- Use well-lit, overlooked paths and avoid blank walls.
- Build places to play and meet.
- Design for safety and accessibility to encourage physical activity.



Access to services

- Ensure residents can easily reach schools, shops, healthcare and transport.
- Think beyond the red line - plan for the whole site.



Belonging and local character

- Reflect local identity in design.
- Where context is poor, look wider for inspiration to create places people are proud to call home.

Making it happen

Over the coming pages, we've gone into more detail on what you can do during the design and planning stages, and the impact these decisions can make on both residents and your organisations.

Connected neighbourhoods

Design and planning principles

- Enhanced neighbourhood walkability
- Build complete and compact neighbourhoods
- Provide active travel infrastructure including links to public transport.

Impact on health and wellbeing

- Social engagement and cohesion
- physical activity opportunities for all mobility.

Health and wellbeing outcomes

- Improved mental health and wellbeing
- Reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes
- Reduction in obesity
- Keep musculoskeletal system healthy.



Resident benefits

- Safer communities
 - Stronger social connections and reduced isolation
 - Easier access to employment, education and local opportunities
 - Increased independence for children, older people and those without access to a car.
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Landlord benefits

- Stronger community pride
- Neighbourhood management and reduced anti-social behaviour
- Improved resident satisfaction and tenancy sustainment
- Better engagement with residents and communities.

Homes and places for everyone

Design and planning principles

- Increase provision of affordable and diverse housing for all including those with specific needs (older people, people with disabilities)
- Improved indoor air quality, light exposure and ventilation.

Impact on health and wellbeing

- Warmth and energy efficient
- Improved engagement with healthcare services; improved mental wellbeing.

Health and wellbeing outcomes

- General health improvements
- Asthma outcomes improved
- Reduction in excess winter and excess summer deaths
- Reduction in cases of damp and mould.



Resident benefits

- Healthier indoor environments, less damp/mould
 - Lower energy bills, reduced fuel poverty
 - Homes that can adapt to changing needs over time
 - Improved comfort, wellbeing and quality of life
 - Reduced risk of health conditions linked to poor housing.
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Landlord benefits

- Fewer complaints
- Lower maintenance and responsive repair costs
- Reduced voids through more adaptable homes
- Greater tenancy stability and longer-term residents
- Improved compliance with housing quality and accessibility standards.

Natural spaces

Design and planning principles

- Reduce exposure to environmental hazards
- Enable access to and engagement with the natural environment
- Climate change adaptations.

Impact on health and wellbeing

- Increased physical activity opportunities outdoors
- Changed attitudes towards healthier eating and food growing opportunities.

Health and wellbeing outcomes

- Reduced risk of disease, strokes, COPD, type 2 diabetes and cancer
- Healthier eating
- Keep musculoskeletal system healthy.



Resident benefits

- Opportunities for healthy recreation and physical activity
 - Improved mental wellbeing and stress reduction
 - Fresh food growing opportunities
 - Increased social interaction and community connections
 - Access to attractive spaces for children and families
 - Greater resilience during extreme weather events.
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Landlord benefits

- Residents use and take pride in shared spaces
- Improved desirability of developments
- Increased resident satisfaction and wellbeing
- Reduced incidents of vandalism and neglect
- Enhanced environmental sustainability credentials
- Stronger community stewardship of communal areas.

Being active

Design and planning principles

- Prioritise active travel and road safety
- Enable mobility for all ages and activities.

Impact on health and wellbeing

- Physical activity opportunities for all
- Mobility
- Reduced exposure to particulate matter and excessive noise.

Health and wellbeing outcomes

- Improved mental health and wellbeing
- Reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes
- Reduction in obesity
- Keep musculoskeletal system healthy.



Resident benefits

- Improved physical and mental health
 - More opportunities for walking, wheeling and cycling
 - Increased independence and mobility for all ages
 - Reduced transport costs for households
 - Safer and more accessible routes through neighbourhoods
 - Better social interaction and connection within communities.
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Landlord benefits

- More financially resilient residents, supporting rent payment
- Reduced rent arrears and tenancy risk
- Increased resident satisfaction with neighbourhood design
- More attractive, sustainable developments
- Positive contribution to ESG and social value outcomes.

Access to everyday services

Design and planning principles

- Encourage access to everyday services
- Provide healthier affordable food for all.

Impact on health and wellbeing

- Enhance access to health services, schools, shops and transport
- Healthier eating and changes in dietary behaviours.

Health and wellbeing outcomes

- Improved mental health and wellbeing
- Reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke, cancers and musculoskeletal conditions.



Resident benefits

- Better access to jobs, schools and essential services
- Improved access to healthcare and preventative support
- Reduced travel time and transport costs
- Greater opportunities for education, training and employment
- Increased independence for older people and vulnerable residents
- Healthier lifestyles through access to affordable food and community facilities.

Landlord benefits

- More stable and sustainable tenancies
- Reduced car dependency and parking pressures
- Improved resident wellbeing and satisfaction
- Stronger local communities and neighbourhood resilience
- Greater long-term demand for homes in well-connected locations
- Reduced pressure on tenancy support services.

Belonging and Local Character

Design and planning principles

- Embed local materials, culture, and landscape cues into design to strengthen identity and pride
- Respond sensitively to existing context, or draw from wider regional character where local quality is limited
- Co-design with communities to ensure developments reflect lived experience and local narratives.

Impact on health and wellbeing

- Strengthens sense of belonging and social connectedness, reducing isolation
- Enhances emotional wellbeing through familiarity, pride, and cultural recognition
- Encourages community cohesion and stewardship of place.

Health and wellbeing outcomes

- Increased resident satisfaction and long-term attachment to place
- Improved mental wellbeing and community resilience
- Stronger, more inclusive and supportive neighbourhoods.

Resident benefits

- Stronger sense of belonging and connection to the local area
- Greater pride in home and neighbourhood
- Increased opportunities to shape and influence local places
- Better social connections and reduced loneliness
- Improved wellbeing through living in places that reflect local identity and culture
- Stronger community networks and support systems.

Landlord benefits

- Higher resident satisfaction and stronger community engagement
- Greater stewardship of homes and shared spaces
- Improved tenancy sustainment and reduced turnover
- Stronger community resilience and capacity to support local initiatives
- Reduced anti-social behaviour through increased pride and ownership.

What next?

Housing associations can lead the way in creating vibrant, healthy communities.

- Review your developments against these principles
- Use national and local guidance to shape your design briefs
- Collaborate with planners and public health teams.

Share this document with your design teams, architects, and development partners to embed health into design considerations from the outset.

Let's create homes and neighbourhoods where people thrive – and where housing is easier to manage.

For support, or to share your success stories, get in touch with your local public health team.

Links and resources



[Active Design | Sport England](#)



[Healthy Place-making | Town & Country Planning Association](#)



[Design codes for health and wellbeing | QOLF](#)



[Building for a Healthy Life | Homes England](#)



[Streets for a Healthy Life | GOV.UK](#)



[Chartered Institute of Housing \(CIH\)](#)



[Natural surveillance | Active Travel England](#)



Healthy Places and Communities

