Question 70: How could national planning policy better support local authorities in (a) promoting healthy communities and (b) tackling childhood obesity?

National planning policy could better support local authorities tackle and prevent a range of health issues through targeting urban green and blue spaces (UGBS):

1. **Mandating Integration of Green and Blue Spaces**: Require local authorities to integrate green (parks, gardens, woodlands) and blue spaces (rivers, lakes, coastal areas) that are defined by their quality and community need, into urban planning. These natural environments promote physical activity, reduce stress, and improve mental well-being, which are critical for preventing and reducing inequalities in non-communicable diseases like obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. Beyond that, these urban green and blue spaces need to be available, accessible and encourage use, especially to those not accessing them. Currently, 6.1 million of the UK population do not have access to greenspace within a 10-minute walk of their homes, with those from a lower socioeconomic status, particularly deprived of local greenspace[1].

2. **Directing local policy to low and non-users**: Approximately 26% of people living in England visit green or blue spaces fewer than once a month[2]. The reasons for this underuse are varied, including structural, social and individual factors such as lack of nearby parks, safety concerns, cost, and poor health. Minimizing these barriers through planning and design that incorporates their needs can support equitable access to urban green and blue space and reduce inequalities in health.

3. **Guidelines for Active Travel Infrastructure**: Develop clear national guidelines that prioritize the creation and establish standard expectation for safe walking and cycling paths. These paths need to connect residential areas with schools, workplaces, and play and recreational spaces (such as green and blue spaces). Encouraging active travel can significantly contribute to reducing childhood obesity and promoting healthy lifestyles. Further, planning policy needs to provide clearer expectations on the use of planning gains/developer contributions to active travel to address this.

4. **Promotion of Community Engagement**: National policy should specify best practice for local authorities to engage communities in the planning process. This would ensure that local green and blue spaces meet the specific health needs of the population. It is also important to include children's voices in the planning process, who are often forgotten. Planning frameworks in Scotland are already successfully doing this and provide strong examples to follow[3-5].

5. **Encourage local authorities to integrate community asset transfer in the land use planning process:** Guidelines should encourage local authorities to identify, via the development plan process, green and blue spaces to support Community Asset Transfer and align more closely with the provisions of the Localism Act 2011. Community ownership of UGBS assets has strengthened health, social and economic outcomes and should be encouraged in local planning in a more integrated way.

6. **Health Impact Assessments (HIAs)**: <u>Require</u> Health Impact Assessments as part of the planning process for new developments. HIAs would ensure that the potential health impacts, particularly concerning non-communicable diseases and childhood obesity, are considered in all planning decisions and considerations.

Question 71: Do you have any other suggestions relating to the proposals in this chapter?

7. **Monitoring and Accountability**: Introduce a framework for monitoring and accountability, where local authorities are regularly assessed on how effectively they are incorporating health-promoting strategies into their planning decisions. This could include metrics on the availability and quality of green and blue spaces, levels of active travel, and the density of fast-food outlets.

8. **Funding and Resources**: Provide targeted funding and resources to local authorities to support the development and maintenance of the quality and usage of green and blue spaces. This financial support would be crucial in ensuring that all communities, especially those from a lower socioeconomic status, have access to green and blue spaces that promote health and well-being and that those spaces are actually used.

9. **Education and Training for Planners**: Offer training programs for urban planners on the importance of integrating health considerations into planning. This could include modules on the benefits of green and blue spaces, active travel infrastructure, and the impact of the built environment on public health. This also ties in with our suggestion for mandating health impact assessments.

10. **Cross-Sector Collaboration**: Detail the need and benefits of collaboration between planning authorities, public health officials, educators, and community organizations. One example we have seen of this working successfully is the inclusion of Healthy Planning Officers[6]. This multidisciplinary approach can ensure that health considerations are thoroughly integrated into all aspects of urban development, leading to more holistic and sustainable healthy communities.

Further support and best practice guidance is needed to promote such collaboration.

11. **Pilots and Research**: Support research that tests innovative approaches to improving health. These programs have the potential to reduce the burden in local authorities in the long term but require short term time and effort from planners and developers. A place for sharing and learning from issues across local authorities, that researchers could help with, could then more effectively inform national policy and local planning practices.

GroundsWell is an interdisciplinary consortium involving researchers, policy, implementers and communities. To find out more visit www.groundswelluk.org

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