

Building healthy environments – the role of specialist 'Health Places' posts



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Background

- New Healthy Places Officer roles were introduced at East Sussex County Council and Southampton City Council in 2022.
- The two councils wanted to explore the effectiveness of having such roles in creating healthy environments.
- So, the councils made a joint application to NIHR PHIRST scheme to undertake an independent evaluation.

Healthy Places Officer roles

- Settings: a city council (unitary authority) and a two-tier authority comprising the county council (so multiple local planning authorities).
- Dedicated capacity to drive work on healthy environments, but in turn, build and facilitate capabilities for healthy environments across local systems.
- Postholders had planning experience (by professional background) combined with interest and experience in public health.

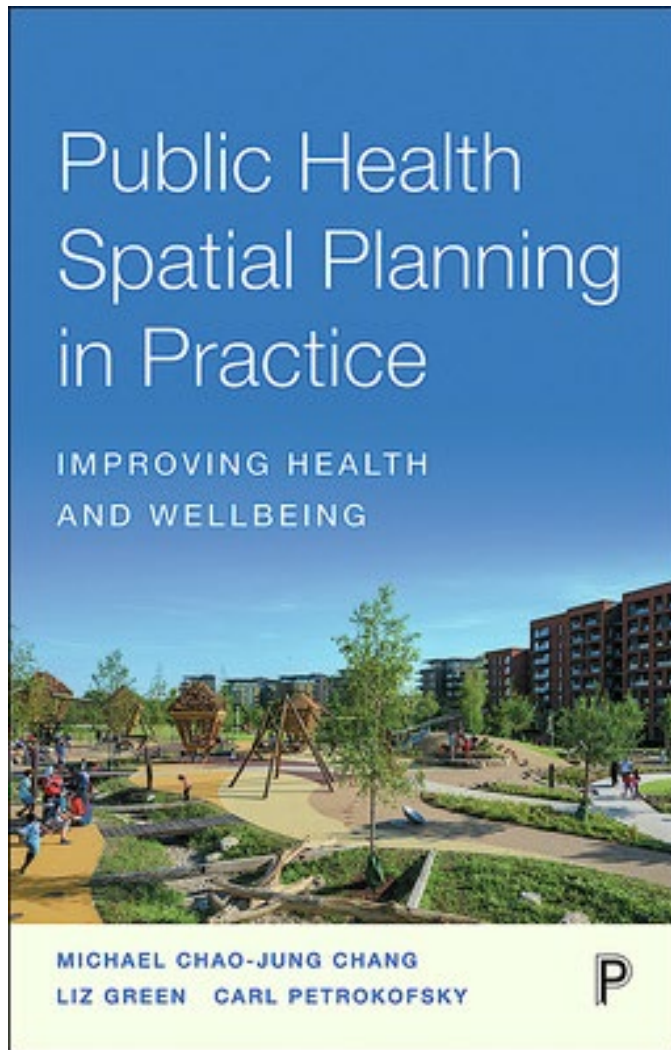
“I think it became clear to me ... as time went on that you do need somebody who is familiar with the language, familiar with the policies and the procedures and the parameters that have to be met for developing planning policy, and who can I suppose advocate a little bit more for public health”



Outcome 1 – Collaboration and Partnership

Across Southampton (unitary) and ESCC (two-tier) as well as with PHIRST LiLaC.

- To collaborate (including across geographic boundaries (people and places) and ways of working/processes etc.
- Across officers, networks and geographies – ‘Healthy Places’ / ‘Planning for Health’ / ‘Healthy Environments’.
- Strengthened cross departmental working – facilitated wider systems working through the undertaking.
- ‘In it together’ – intersectoral working and relationships.
- More relevant policies and plans with health in mind.



Outcome 2 – Raising the Profile

- Healthy Places are central to population health management.
- Wider determinants – addressing ‘environmental determinants’.
- Amplification on ‘healthy environments’.
- Presence and development of ‘Healthy Policies’, ‘Health in All Policies’, ‘Climate and Health in All Policies’ within Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans.
- Use of Health Impact Assessments (HIA)
- Hot Food Take Away – ‘Planning for Health’.

Outcome 3 – Wider Workforce Competencies and Development

- ‘Trail blazing’ (a new breed and generation of public health professionals).
- Investment (helping to make the business case for others).
- Local inform national best practice and capability.
- To acquire new skills and ways to engage.
- Developing a new workforce and work programmes



Evaluation outputs

- Briefing, with case studies
- Slide deck, infographic
- Video presentation
- Journal paper in Cities and Health + City Know-how

<https://phirst.nihr.ac.uk/evaluations/building-healthy-environments/>

Research Briefing - January 2024

Building and facilitating system capability to create healthy environments

A qualitative process evaluation

Local government can play a key role in developing built and natural environments that promote health through its statutory responsibilities for planning and other relevant functions. This briefing reports on an evaluation of Southampton and East Sussex councils' work to address healthy environments through the employment of specialist Healthy Places Officers.



KEY POINTS:

- Prior to the posts' introduction, intersectoral activity to build healthy environments was ad-hoc or reliant on individuals in both local authorities.
- The evaluation mapped a diverse range of policy areas including housing, transport and natural environments, with which the postholders are engaging. This has led to developments in intersectoral working, increased workforce capacity and emerging examples of more health relevant policies and plans in both authorities.
- It is unlikely that the scale of activities would have been achieved without the presence of these roles.
- Factors influencing change include resources and time, particularly for planning teams as well as wider political, economic and geographical drivers.

Background. The places where we live, work and play can support or hinder our physical and mental well-being (PHE, 2017). In East Sussex County Council (ESCC) and Southampton City Council (SCC), specialist posts have been funded to strengthen the public health and planning relationship, build capacity for planning for health within the local authorities as well as support local authorities to deliver health and wellbeing outcomes more widely, delivering on a Health in All Policies (HiAP) agenda.

The study. The evaluation aims were to identify early changes in capacity and ways of working that support efforts to promote healthy environments in local authority settings that can be linked in whole or in part to the investment in specialist dedicated posts. It also aimed to understand the ways in which these changes have come about and to assess any early impact these changes have on policy and practice. Data collection involved interviews with key stakeholders across a range of sectors and organisations, observations of events and meetings, workshops, and diaries completed by the Healthy Places Officers (HPOs). Case studies of local actions to facilitate and build healthy environments were also gathered.

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