



How are local plans promoting healthy and safe communities?

The issue

Interest in the building blocks of health is increasingly focused on the role and contribution of spatial planning. The evidence is becoming clear about the effect of policy interventions in the built and natural environment on population health. Achieving healthy places requires planning processes and decision-makers to proactively consider health and [wellbeing](#).

Each planning authority in England is required to produce a local plan for its area to include policies for the future of towns, cities and countryside. The local plan is a critical part of the plan-led system and should support the delivery of local strategies to improve health, and well-being. It provides the scope and legal basis for the local planning authority to make urban development decisions.

The first step in delivering health through the planning system is documentation because being aware of the status quo allows improvements to be made. So by focusing on local plans we can establish a complete baseline of understanding of the state of current policy and practice by local authorities in spatial planning for health and wellbeing.

Our response

As part of a TRUUD researcher's PhD, a census of local plans in England determined the presence or absence of health considerations according to a [review framework](#). The census covers local planning authorities (excluding national park authorities and development corporations) and includes adopted or Regulation 19 stage local plans (as of June 2023) between 2012 and 2023.

The census applied a review framework with parameters to determine the extent to which local plan policies:

- link to public health needs in the statutory joint strategic needs assessment and priorities in the statutory joint health and wellbeing strategy,
- address the themes of housing, design, transport, natural and sustainable environment and food environment adopted from the Public Health England spatial planning and [health evidence resource](#),
- highlight implementation actions through health impact assessment and monitoring indicators, and
- contribute to wider public health and inequalities issues such as recognition of women and girls, mental health, crime prevention and safety, and suicide prevention needs.



Local authority partners



University consortium



Headline results from the census showed variability in the results and that **there is significant room for improvement**.

Of the eligible 344 local plans from 314 local planning authorities reviewed there is varied coverage across the thematic health parameters (see Figure 1) as well as geographical variations (see Annex 1).

- 36.6% (126) reference the joint strategic needs assessment,
- 29.4% (101) reference the joint health and wellbeing strategy,
- 37.5% (129) have a strategic health policy,
- 38.1% (131) have a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) policy requirement,
- 10.5% (36) have policies specific to women and girls,
- 90.7% (312) have policies specific to crime prevention and safety,
- 1.7% (6) have policies specific to suicide prevention.

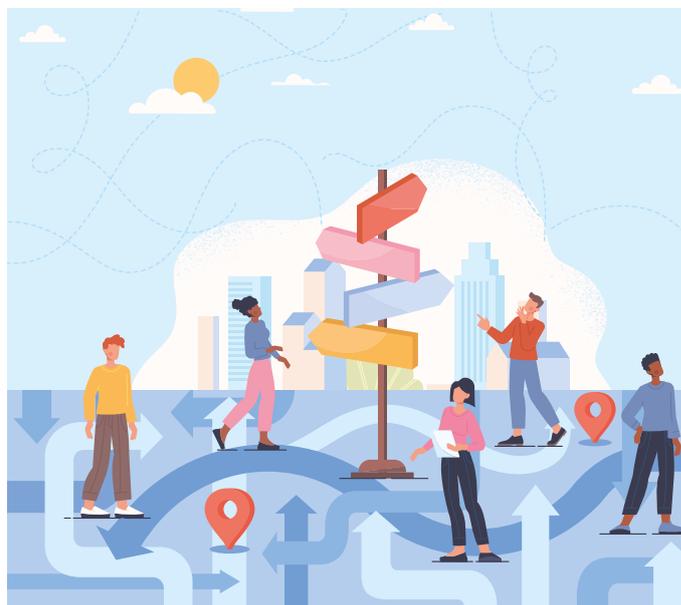
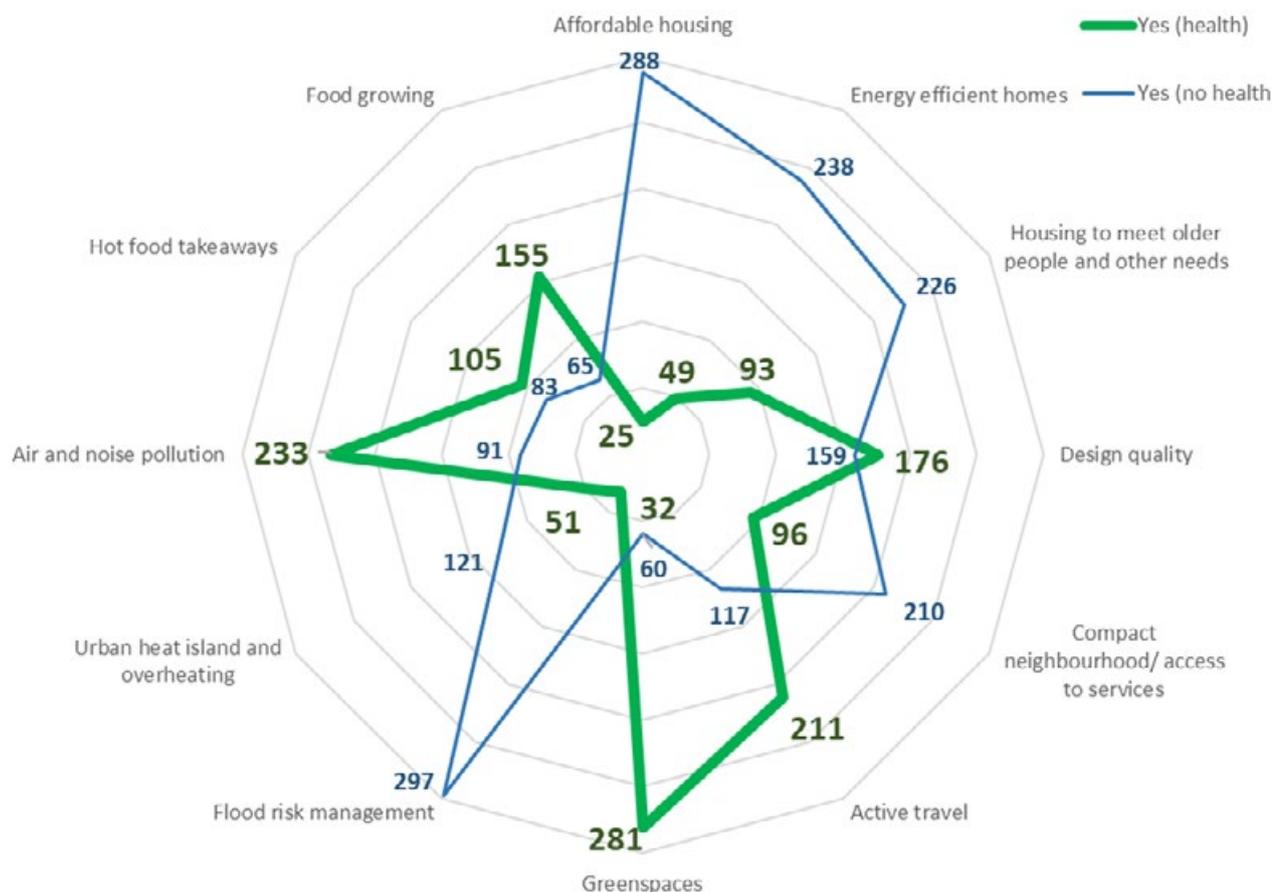


Figure 1: Summary of local plan coverage across the thematic health parameters





The policy problem

The local plan will continue to form the basis of the strengthened plan-led system. So having the means to secure meaningful public health involvement and tangible articulation of health and wellbeing considerations in local plans will become the litmus test for population health improvement.

The census provides a necessary starting point for ensuring health remains a tangible and central objective for the purpose of planning. This is particularly timely for national policy makers as the [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill](#) moves to receive Royal Assent, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities progresses with reforms to [simplify local plan-making](#), and ensure that new local plans maximise opportunities to protect human health, is recognised in the development of the Department of Health and Social Care's [major conditions strategy](#).

It is also timely for local policy makers and practitioners as they adopt a whole systems and place- based approach to improving population physical and mental health and wellbeing and reducing health disparities across our communities and areas.

Next steps

We want to understand and present the results through mapping, according to different perspectives such as geographical regions and rural-urban classification, and by overlaying contextual factors such as local plan adoption dates, deprivation, and housing growth.

Further analysis of selected local plans will provide a richer understanding of how health-informed policies are worded and identify connections across policies to begin to represent local plans as a complex and necessary web of decision-making on healthy places.

The review framework will be refined so that the census can be replicated to build a picture of the state of planning policy for health over time and developed into a Health-Improvement Policy Self-Assessment Tool for local authorities in reviewing and creating new local plans.

Acknowledgements

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About Truud

Tackling the Root causes Upstream of Unhealthy Urban Development' (TRUUD) is a 5-year, £6.7m research project that aims to design policy interventions to support the development of healthier urban environments. Our research seeks to promote a fundamental shift in thinking about how to prioritise healthy urban development. We are funded by the UK Prevention Research Partnership.

Contact the author

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Annex 1. Summary of local plan coverage across the thematic health parameters by English regions

