

# IDENTIFYING WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE FOR HEALTHIER URBAN DEVELOPMENT

## The issue

Unhealthy urban environments present significant public and planetary health risks around the world, and the causes lie upstream in complex areas of public sector policy-making, governance and private sector control.

By working with a wide range of academic disciplines as well as a large number of stakeholders, we sought to uncover where to intervene to make the most impact, basing the decision on as deep an understanding as possible of the fundamental problems.

This briefing note summarises our research approach, main findings and key recommendations.

## Our Response

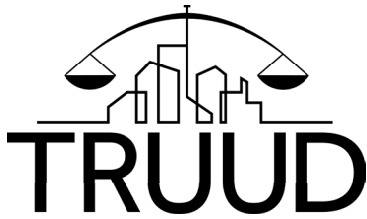
We used a systems-based and participatory approach to identify and prioritise the upstream issues, focusing on two key sectors: large-scale property development and city-region transport planning.

Our team included experts in urban planning and development, public health intervention design and evaluation, real estate investment, engineering and systems approaches, public involvement, public policy, management, moral philosophy and the law. In the main first phase of the programme, we:

- **Mapped** the systems using literature reviews, 132 in-depth interviews and four stakeholder workshops.
- **Identified** 50 potential intervention areas based on the evidence gathered, the team's shared understandings of the system, and stakeholder consultation on the evidence.
- **Prioritised and refined** areas for intervention that would demonstrate a clear path to improved health, albeit focusing on upstream impact on policy and practice.

See Appendix 1 for the 50 potential intervention areas, including the specific problems, those stakeholders who have agency over these problems, and the sectors in which they sit. In the second phase of the programme, we went on to develop seven of those interventions covering national, regional and local governments, the private sector (property and land use) and public engagement.





## The Evidence

Across the 50 intervention areas, we identified three themes:

- The need to address global and structural problems such as the commercial and political determinants of health, and the power of private sector federations and lobbying groups compared to, for example, underpowered local authorities.
- The prioritisation of health in agenda setting, particularly at the heart of government national level, and the lack of ambition and leadership to promote health in policymaking more generally.
- Opportunities to leverage health in mechanisms where it is currently insufficiently included, such as funding criteria, regulatory requirements, local authority legal expertise, and effective public engagement.

## Recommendations

When looking to intervene for healthier urban development, from the outset:

- Recognise the scale and complexity of the challenges ahead. We found issues such as short-term thinking, lack of health prioritisation and imbalance of power between local and national governments could be beyond the scope of one single research project.
- Look far upstream. We found that we had to look at wider structures and decision points than traditional public health intervention approaches.
- Taking a participatory approach, developing – iteratively - deeper shared contextual understandings.
- Employ sophisticated and progressive systems and transdisciplinary theories and tools, ensuring a pragmatic approach to working with inevitable uncertainty.
- Consider multiple systems and cumulative effects for high quality change.

- Target connected factors such as the prioritisation of planetary health, the integration of health evidence across urban development processes, and innovative methods for transforming mundane public involvement.

Future research should maintain the focus upstream on root cause problems, though perhaps on other areas of urban development (e.g. the political and economic pressures preventing reduction of car use, community ownership and infrastructure). It is highly recommended too that research teams prepare well for the challenge of engaging and involving comprehensively the very wide range of people that have a stake in these urban futures.

## 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 authors

This briefing is based on the article [Identifying intervention areas to shape healthier urban development in the United Kingdom](#) by Geoff Bates, Daniel Black, Sarah Ayres, Krista Bondy, Neil Carhart and Judi Kidger published in PLOS Sustainability and Transformation.

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# SYSTEMS ANALYSIS: ACHIEVING HEALTH IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Clusters of potential intervention areas, the 'problem holders' and sectors



**T**ransport  
Sector

## PROBLEM HOLDERS

