

Gateshead Council, North East England Nature Partnership, and TCPA Workshop

Naturally Healthy by Design – How Green Infrastructure can tackle obesity across the life course and how planning can help influence this.

On the 25th September 2018 at the Centre for Life in the North East colleagues from the public, private, academic and voluntary sectors, specialising in health, planning, and the natural environment came together to share knowledge and experience around a common aim, to improve the health of the region using the natural environment.

Long has it been the case that all these professions and sectors are in consensus that improving and increasing green infrastructure is going to have a positive impact on health, and obesity across the life course. The workshop was held to try and tease out why the right changes are not being made and why the right outcomes were not being seen.

Gateshead has high levels of poor health, and obesity levels above the national average, however there is an abundance of green infrastructure in Gateshead. What is going wrong? What are the barriers to people using the resource? What could we do better? What could we do differently? As part of the Gateshead Thrive agenda, we need to support the transformation work in Gateshead, which means working differently to meet the needs of Gateshead residents.

Discussion ensued during the workshop about the potential limitations of the planning system in tackling obesity, what could planning really do to improve the health of Gateshead residents? It has been acknowledged that contributions made through the planning system towards the wider obesity targets may be considered small, an example of this is Gateshead's Hot Food Takeaway SPD (2015), which contributes towards the Council target of 10% obesity as one, of many, initiatives that the Council and other sectors have put on place to improve Gateshead's health. The impact of this one planning element may be limited in isolation, but when looking at a whole systems approach, results can be achieved. It is better to do something, rather than nothing.

From the variety of presentation's listened to, to the discussions in the workshops and through networking, this theme of common goals and aspirations for our region repeated. We needed more green infrastructure, in the right locations to improve the health of our residents. In addition to the need for more, there was a need for better green infrastructure that needs to be accessible and attractive to people across the life course. Young people may require more structure in their spaces, such as play areas; working age people may need safe green routes for a walking or cycling commute; older people may need places where they can take regular sitting breaks, the needs of all need to be met, in the right places. Inclusivity needs to be at the heart of what we deliver.

One of the ideas that came out of the workshop was to map Gateshead's green infrastructure layered upon Gateshead's obesity levels by location and establish 'hot spots' where more immediate action could be taken in a specified location. This would take a holistic approach, across the specialisms and sectors to ensure real change happens on the ground. Through discussion at the workshop it was established that the Council is often not the right organisation to take a lead, and addressing obesity through a community-led, place based, collaborative approach can be more effective. Attempts to improve population health and wellbeing, and obesity and co-producing solutions in partnership with local communities, especially in areas with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage is an approach Gateshead seeks to harness. The contribution that planning will make in these wider initiatives may seem small, but they will feed in to a wider goal. Once locations for action have been identified, a locally specific action plan will be put in place to ensure deliverable interventions are actioned.

The challenges that we face are not dissimilar to the challenges that face the public sector nation wide, including the lack of resources. A specific challenge for Gateshead is the level of poor health, and inequality is at such a level that intervention might seem to be an uphill struggle. The opportunities that are available are plentiful however, we have an amazing resource of green infrastructure and a vibrant community that are passionate about where they live, so we are confident we can start to make real change for the people of Gateshead.