Health Inequalities - Early Years

Scottish Natural Heritage

Background on SNH
Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) is the public agency established under the Natural Heritage (Scotland) Act 1991 with responsibility for securing the conservation and enhancement; understanding and enjoyment; and sustainable use and management of the natural heritage; and as the Government’s statutory adviser on these matters. Our Corporate Strategy identifies four high-level outcomes:

- High-quality nature and landscapes which are resilient to change and deliver greater public value
- Nature and landscapes which make Scotland a better place in which to live and work, and to visit
- More people experiencing, enjoying and valuing our nature and landscapes
- Nature and landscapes as assets contributing more to the Scottish economy

Introduction
As well as conservation functions, SNH has statutory responsibilities for facilitating public enjoyment of the natural heritage and promoting awareness and understanding of the right of responsible access. A particular priority in this work is action to improve provision, promotion and use of paths and greenspace close to home. We are working closely with the health sector and other key stakeholders to further mainstream this activity in delivering health outcomes, and to ensure that we are helping to address disadvantage and reduce health inequalities.

Our response focuses on the following specific questions

- What are your views on current early years policy in Scotland in terms of addressing health inequalities?
- Are there any specific initiatives or research evidence from Scotland, UK or internationally that you would wish to highlight to the Health and Sport Committee?

The importance of physical activity and contact with nature

Green exercise describes physical activity in outdoor settings such as greenspace which have a strong natural environment component. It includes, walking and relaxation; outdoor learning and play; recreation and sport; and active travel. Being active in the outdoors and having contact with nature brings a wide range of health benefits – and improves quality of life. Regular use of green spaces can be therapeutic for children and can help them deal with mental health issues. It is also good for children’s physical activity levels and development of social and interpersonal skills such as listening, negotiation, problem solving and
self-esteem. The existence of local greenspace assets, and their accessibility for children and young families, is very important in helping to address health inequalities as they provide free-to-use opportunities for informal recreation – requiring no special clothing / equipment.

The Scottish Government’s strategy on Health and the Environment - Good Places, Better Health (GPBH) - recognises that the environment has a significant impact on the health of Scotland’s people and that action is required to create safe, health nurturing environments for everyone. The GPBH 2011 strategy which looked at some key health challenges facing children in Scotland, makes a series of evidence-based recommendations on this issue, stressing the importance of outdoor play and contact with nature for young children. The evidence indicates that children who play in natural and greenspaces develop a life long association with nature that continues into adulthood and creates a virtuous cycle. For 0-8 years, it is important that greenspaces are easily accessible on foot – within 5 minutes (a range of circa 300 metres) and that young children spend more time in them. This thinking will be part of the “Place Standard” tool that is currently being developed by SG Architecture and Built Environment Division and NHS Health Scotland

Evidence on greenspace provision close to home

The Early Years Framework puts much emphasis on the home environment and the school environment, but with little mention of the community environment, including local greenspace. Access to the outdoor environment via a garden or a school with good quality grounds is good, but many disadvantaged families do not have this. Evidence for this includes:

- The lack of opportunities for outdoor play for young families living in areas of poor greenspace provision, based on the Scottish Household Survey (SHS) 2012 -
  - access to greenspace varies by area deprivation levels: 61% of those living in the 20% most deprived areas live within a 6 minute walk of useable greenspace compared to 75% of those who live in the 60% least deprived areas.
  - there is an association between how far people have to walk to reach their local greenspace and how often they use it: adults who live within a 6 minute walk of useable greenspace are more likely to use it every day or several times a week (35%) than those who live within a 7-13 minute walk (14%) or further away (9%).
  - use of local greenspace also varies according to area deprivation level: around a fifth of those living in the 15% most deprived areas use their greenspace on a weekly basis compared to around 3 in 10 of those living in the 60% least deprived areas
  - similarly, people who use their local greenspace every day or several times a week are considerably more likely to report that their health is ‘very good’ or ‘good’ (80%) than those who never use their local greenspace (65%).
As use of local greenspace for the 0-8yr old group is dependent on parents/family, then their perceptions of these areas is important - SHS provides data on levels of satisfaction with local greenspace –

- almost three quarters of adults are satisfied with their local greenspace (73%). Satisfaction varies according to area deprivation level: 61% of those in the 20% most deprived areas express satisfaction with their local greenspace compared to 81% of those living in the 20% least deprived areas.
- access to children’s play areas also varies by area deprivation level: those living in the 15% most deprived areas, for instance, are less likely to have access to a play area in their neighbourhood; they are also considerably less likely to have access to a natural environment or wooded area for playing.

There are research findings available on the contraction in the spatial area that children play in around their homes, because of parents’ perceptions on safety, as well as the importance placed on other people’s views on their parenting skills. This was for older, more self-reliant children, but parents’ perceptions may also affect their use of greenspace with younger children. see – http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/Childhood%20and%20Nature%20Survey_tcm6-10515.pdf

Policy Connections

**Physical activity and health inequalities** is one of the key themes to be addressed in all local authorities’ Single Outcome Agreements. It would be useful to review how Community Planning Partnerships are using this mechanism to set in train measures not only to help achieve the UK Physical Activity Guidelines for children under 5, and over 5 years old – especially through encouraging active play - but to also implement green infrastructure and place making agendas in support of these objectives.

The recently refreshed [Scottish Government’s Biodiversity Strategy – 2020](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/Biodiversity%20Strategy%20-%20Scotland%20-%202020_tcm6-12485.pdf) Challenge for Scotland’s Biodiversity – recognises the wide range of social benefits from our biodiversity. It seeks improved health and quality of life for the people of Scotland through investment in the care of green space, nature and landscapes and the provision of opportunities to all to experience and enjoy nature regularly, with a particular focus on disadvantaged groups (see chapter 3). It also makes the link with the Curriculum for Excellence, which firmly establishes the role of outdoor learning for all age groups, and recommends increased access to nature within and close to schools to help deliver health and educational outcomes.

Local greenspace and nearby countryside is accessible to a wide range of ages, abilities and socio-economic groups and is facilitated by Scotland’s outdoor access legislation. Recent research (NHS Health Scotland) indicates that for 2010/11, physical inactivity cost the NHS in Scotland £94.1million, which equated to an average cost per Scottish resident of £18.30. Preventative spend on green exercise opportunities across all life stages is therefore likely to reduce health spend and also help to address health inequalities.
Scottish Natural Heritage, through our grant funding power, supports a range of projects which seek to help address disadvantage through outdoor learning and play, including:

- Grounds for Learning family project, working with vulnerable pre-schoolers and their families.
- Wild Things, offering primary school environmental education programmes around the Moray Firth for children including those with learning difficulties and behavioural problems.

While there are often individual links in place, there is scope for **better strategic join-up of these individual green exercise projects with NHS and local authority services tackling health inequalities in early years.**

Scottish Natural Heritage
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References -


**Natural Childhood** - Stephen Moss -The National Trust 2012. This report considers the phenomenon of ‘Nature Deficit Disorder’ and how best to enable children to reconnect with the natural world. http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/document-1355766991839/


