Active Design: Creating Environments for Health & Wellbeing

A Guide to the 10 Principles of Planning and Design

Office for Health Improvement & Disparities | Active Travel England

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Our environments shape our health

Crisis

1 in 4 adults do less than 30 mins of activity a week.

20% decline in activity levels since the 1960s.

Inequality Gap

Inactivity disproportionately affects women, ethnically diverse communities, disabled people, and those in deprived areas.

Opportunity

The Solution: Active Environments

Active Design isn't just about gyms; it is about creating spaces that encourage movement in daily life.

Health

Reduced risk of chronic conditions and improved mental wellbeing.

Environment

Decarbonization through reduced car journeys.

Economy

£2.1bn could be saved in health costs annually if everyone had good access to greenspace.
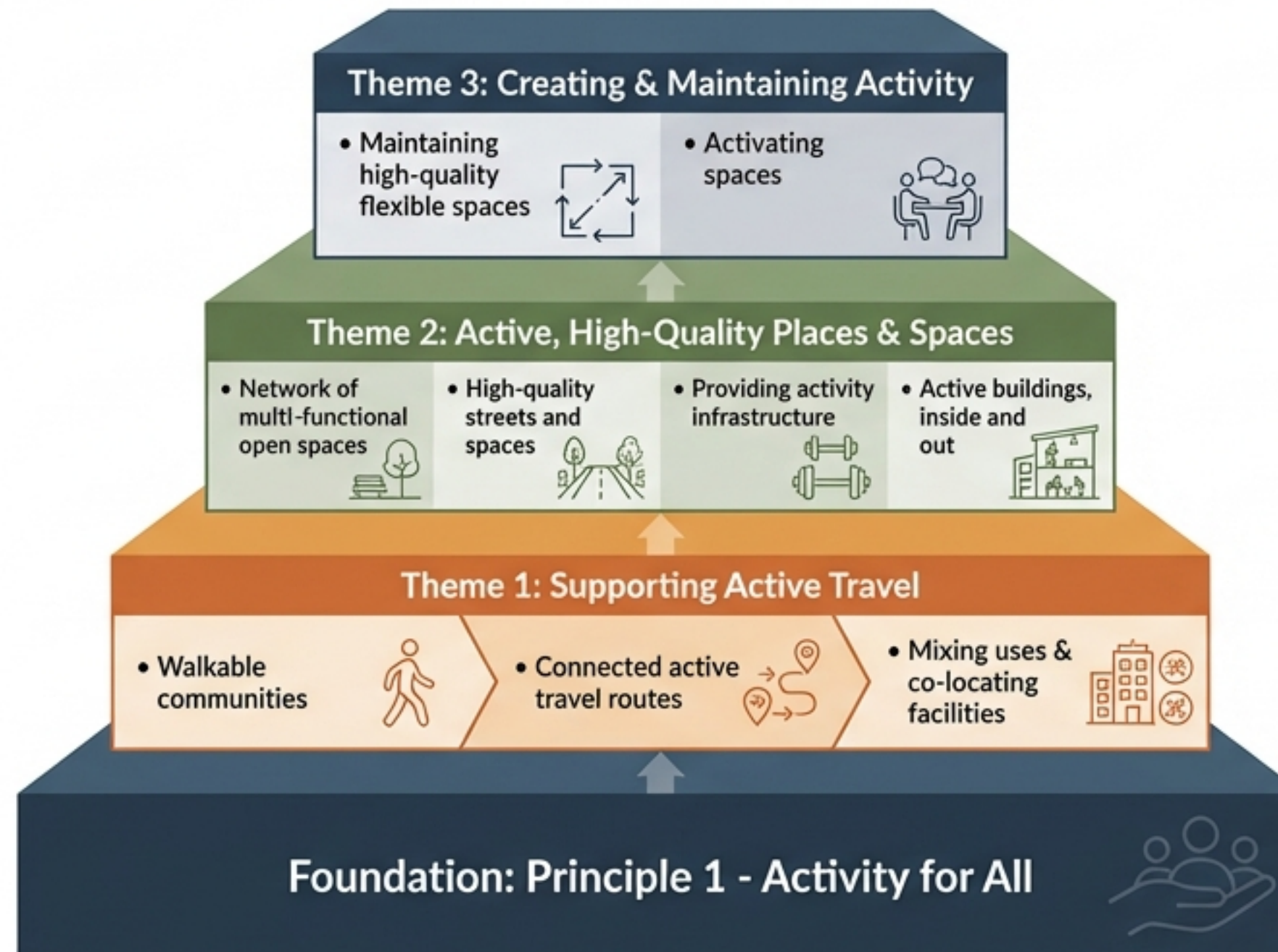
Community

Reduced loneliness through social interaction.

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The Active Design Framework

We move from a foundational commitment to equity, through to the physical layout of our towns, the specific design of our spaces, and finally, how we sustain them.

Theme 3: Creating & Maintaining Activity
- Maintaining high-quality flexible spaces
- Activating spaces

Theme 2: Active, High-Quality Places & Spaces
- Network of multi-functional open spaces
- High-quality streets and spaces
- Providing activity infrastructure
- Active buildings, inside and out

Theme 1: Supporting Active Travel
- Walkable communities
- Connected active travel routes
- Mixing uses & co-locating facilities

Foundation: Principle 1 - Activity for All

Equity is the starting point

Foundational Principle 1 – Activity for All

Environments must support activity equitably across all ages, ethnicities, genders, and abilities. We must identify and design for "blind spots".

- **Women & Girls:** 51% of residents in Barking did not feel safe after dark. Interventions like better lighting and "eyes on the street" are critical.

- **Neurodiversity:** Sensory experiences (noise, clutter) can be barriers. Spaces need clear navigation and areas of calm.

- **Affordability:** Prioritize free-to-use spaces (parks, walking loops) over paid facilities.
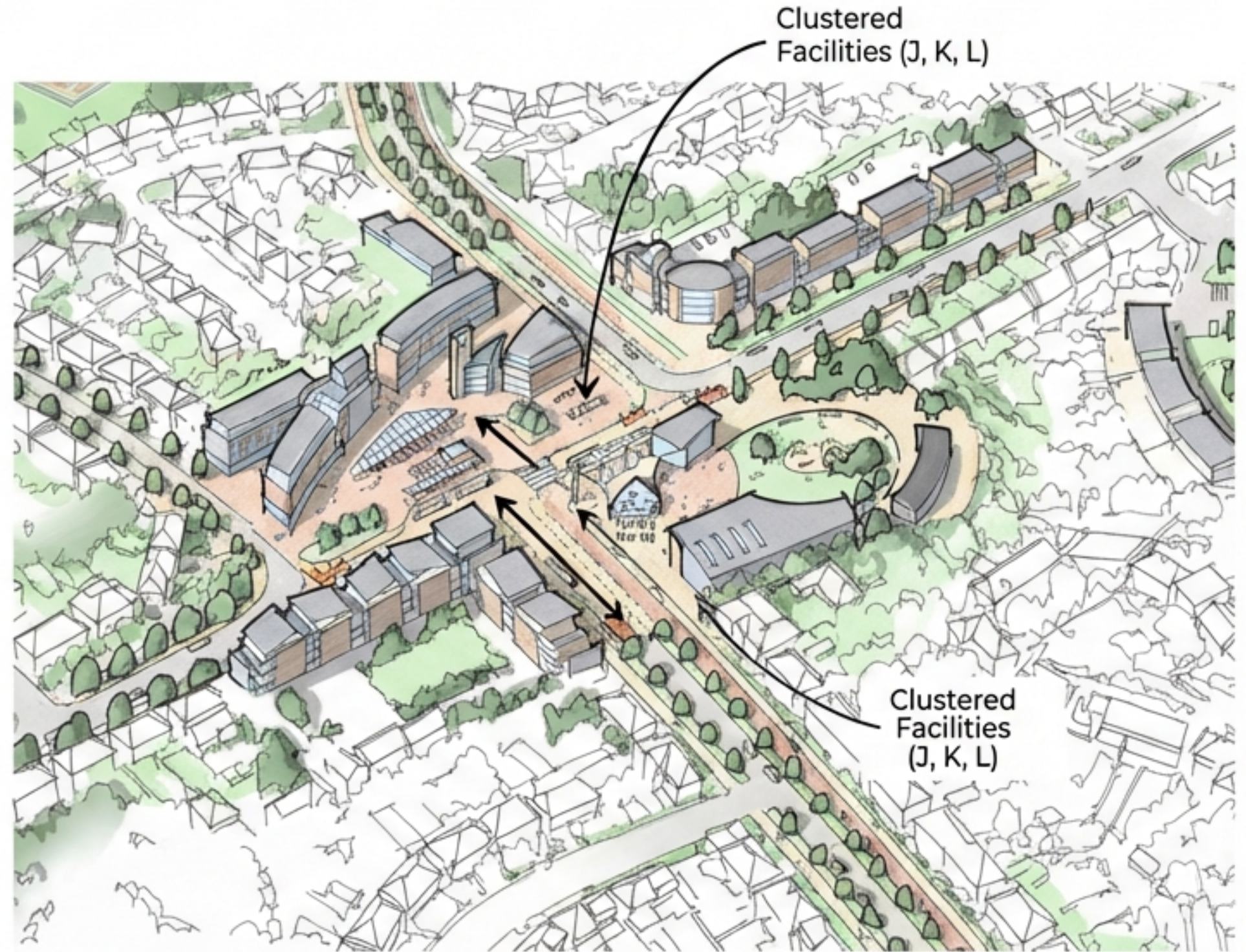
> **Undertake a 'learning and listening' exercise early in the design process to identify barriers facing under-represented groups.**

Making the active choice the easy choice
Theme 1 – Walkable Communities & Mixing Uses

- **The 800m Rule:** Essential facilities (schools, shops, health, open space) should be within 800m active travel distance of homes.

- **Trip Chaining:** Co-locating facilities (e.g., placing a library next to a leisure centre) allows people to complete multiple errands in one journey.

- **Impact:** Compact, mixed-use communities generate the 'critical mass' needed to support viable public transport and local businesses.

Clustered Facilities (J, K, L)

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Connecting people to places

Theme 1 – Connected Active Travel Routes

- **The Hierarchy:** Design should prioritize pedestrians and cyclists over vehicles.

- **Key Intervention:** Filtered Permeability. A network that is continuous for walkers/cyclists but disconnected for cars to prevent 'rat-running'.

- **Route Types:** Design for both direct 'Utility Routes' (commuting) and scenic 'Leisure Routes' (health).

A network of multi-functional spaces

Theme 2 – Multi-functional Open Spaces

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- **Beyond Grass:** Open space includes civic squares, allotments, play areas, and nature trails.

- **Green & Blue Infrastructure:** Incorporating water (SuDS, canals) and biodiversity improves mental health.

- **Connectivity:** Spaces should not be isolated islands; they must connect to form wildlife corridors and walking loops.

- **Value:** Access to nature reduces cortisol levels and improves mood.

Streets are places, not just movement corridors

Theme 2 – High-Quality Streets & Infrastructure

- **Placemaking:** Streets should use durable materials and include seating, shade, and shelter to encourage lingering.

- **The 'Hardware' of Activity:** Public toilets, water fountains, and secure cycle parking are essential.

- **Playful Streets:** Integrate informal play on the way to school (e.g., balancing logs).

- **Digital:** Use apps/QR codes for gamification and wayfinding.

Designing buildings that move us

Theme 2 – Active Buildings

- **The Arrival:** Cycle storage must be closer to the entrance than car parking. Entrances should be prominent and face the street.

- **Internal Design:** Stairs should be more visible and attractive than lifts. Showers and lockers are required to support active commuters.

Case Example: Aspire@ThePark

A leisure centre built inside a park with a glazed frontage that provides natural surveillance. Includes public café and toilets for all park users.

Sustaining the habit

Theme 3 – Creating & Maintaining Activity

Principle 9: Maintenance

- **"Broken Window Theory":** If a place looks unsafe or neglected, people won't use it.

- **Flexibility:** Spaces must adapt. A tennis court might become a cycle training ground.

Principle 10: Activation

- **Social Connection:** Design spaces for interaction (cafés, benches) to combat loneliness.

- **Activation:** Physical space needs 'software'—events, classes, and community champions.

- **Temporary Uses:** Use pop-ups to test ideas before building permanent infrastructure.

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Active Design at Scale: Houlton

Case Study: 6,200 Homes in Rugby

Key Success Factors

- **Early Delivery:** Schools and community hubs built *first* to establish active habits immediately.

- **The Network:** A dedicated 'Green Link' network separate from roads.

- **Repurposing Heritage:** Historic Radio Station converted into a secondary school.

- **Results:** High participation in community activities and higher home sales values than the surrounding area.

Applying the principles in every context

From suburban retrofit to town centre regeneration

Suburban Retrofit

Modal filters to stop rat-running, green links on garage plots, waymarking paths to schools.

Town Centre

Repurposing vacant stores for community use, parklets on high streets, consolidated cycle hubs.

Whether it's a new build or a retrofit, the principles remain the same: prioritize people over cars.

Roles & Responsibilities

Planners & Policy Makers

- Use Active Design to shape Local Plans and Design Codes.
- Refuse development that is not well-designed (NPPF alignment).

Designers & Developers

- Embed physical activity from the start (not as an afterthought).
- Use the 10 Principles as a checklist for site layouts.
- Engage with the community early.

Health Professionals

- Use the guide for Health Impact Assessments (HIAs).
- Link social prescribing strategies to physical infrastructure.

Is your development Active Design ready?

☑ **Equity:** Have we identified and removed barriers for the most vulnerable users?

☑ **Proximity:** Are daily essentials (school, shop, park) within 800m?

☑ **Priority:** Does the layout prioritize walking and cycling over the private car?

☑ **Quality:** Are the spaces durable, attractive, and multi-functional?

☑ **Longevity:** Is there a funded plan for long-term maintenance and activation?

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Building a Healthier Future

Designing for activity is designing for climate resilience, economic growth, and social connection. It is a rigorous, evidence-based approach to better placemaking.