

Physical Literacy and Active Environments

Background:

Physical Literacy is a concept which is most often applied to academia and physical education, but its application goes far beyond those realms, including as an influencer on the design and creation of the places where we live, work and play. By applying a physical literacy lens to the design of the built environment, we can create the conditions and settings in which every member of a community can acquire and develop the motivation, confidence, competence, knowledge and understanding to be active for life.



Lands Improvement Holdings (LIH), one of the UK's largest land developers has adopted the principles of physical literacy to guide its master-planning work on new housing developments to aid delivery of its stated ambition to build "healthy happy places for future generations".

Planning processes in the UK are often governed by standardised assumptions about the number and type of facilities that should be provided on new developments. These requirements (known as Section 106 Agreements) often rely on precedent-based formulae and fixed criteria for such things as play equipment, community facilities, formal sport pitches and courts, education establishments, etc. This often results in new housing developments seeming to be homogenous, rather than unique, where the look and feel of the landscape and environment is very much like any other – children's play areas which use the same equipment as everywhere else, open spaces dominated by formal pitches with painted white lines which show non-sporty people that the space is "not for them". In most cases the design, location and nature of these spaces is determined long before the first house is built and the first residents take up occupancy.

Project Description:

LIH is challenging much of this practice and is taking bold steps to adopt a more consultative, empathetic and sensitive approach to the design of the public realm – the spaces between the houses.



www.sportsmith.org.uk

David Morley Architects www.dmarch.co.uk

With its consultants – Trevor Smith (Sportsmith Ltd) and Andy Mytom (David Morley Architects), LIH has developed a systematic approach to identify the potential requirements of different community groups across a range of activities including "On Foot", "With Wheels", "In the Outdoors", Formal Sport and "Relaxation". This is compiled with key stakeholders – health authority, planning authority, leisure and lifestyles teams, early years and play specialists, family support teams, etc. and is later

revisited and re-populated once the development begins to be occupied, with residents being given the opportunity to add their own ideas and aspirations to the mix.

Children / Youth	On Foot ...	Emerging	Exploring	Performing	Notes
People <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents - Teachers - Activators - Community Clubs Programme <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School programmes - GP referrals - Community Campaigns - Local Authority Initiatives Places <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Paths and Trails 	Walking 	Close and safe open spaces. Paths that lead to key destinations e.g. Local Greens / Local shops etc... 	Attractive routes to key destinations e.g. small parks, school, shops, town centre etc... 	Marked routes for key campaigns, e.g. daily mile, parkrun, etc... 	
	Jogging 	Attractive routes to spark curiosity. Organised sessions. Circular routes (longer distances) Links to public spaces 	Distance markers on all routes (100m? 500m? 1km?). Circular routes (longer distances) linked to public spaces 	Organised events and competitions. Club sessions. 	
	Orienteering 	Easily identifiable markers to spark curiosity. Some located in obvious places. 	Short walking routes and organised sessions 		

Most developers will deliver their biggest Section 106 commitments at a later stage of development, once the community has become established, but at its Linnere development in Bedfordshire, LIH has turned this on its head and has provided the key community facility first. The Farmstead provides meeting halls, toilets, a café, a children's play area, a number of small retail spaces and office space for the site team. This team includes a community liaison/activation function which aims to bring residents together through events and activities and engage them in building and creating their own public realm.

Much of LIH's approach is based on the desire to build a community *with* the community, rather than provide what is recommended by disconnected agencies, sometimes via a software algorithm. LIH is challenging some of the formulaic approaches to facility specification by making the point that it is unfair to pre-determine what a resident community might need and where facilities should be located. LIH has created its own criteria to determine what represents "good value" from a play installation using the core principles of physical literacy. For example, it asks if traditional play areas really are effective in inspiring the social and emotional aspects of personal development in addition to the physical and cognitive elements that usually prevail. It asks if it is right to provide discrete age-specific play spaces across communities when most family units cover broader age ranges. It asks if those spaces could be better designed to stimulate intergenerational interest and create a landscape in which everybody has permission to be active in all places.



LIH asks if this type of installation supports good physical literacy development.

In a further unprecedented step, LIH has engaged with academia to support its approach, and has commissioned a PhD study with the University of Bedfordshire to create a mechanism by which local

populations can share their physical activity aspirations and contribute to the creation of their own active environment. This study is featured in another case study [here](#).

Impact:

LH's approach and philosophy leans heavily on the principles of physical literacy. It seeks to provide environments in which all residents are encouraged to choose an active option; to explore and create; to offer opportunity and variety for everybody; to develop their personal journey.

At Linmere, monthly engagements with residents are seeking to identify the physical activity motivations of the actual resident community and the developer is holding back on its provision of some of its required facilities until it has heard what the residents would like to see.

The outcome will be physical landscapes which provide the opportunity to "play on the way" and create motivation and confidence for residents to be more active and to adopt a physically active life, for life.