

Embedding healthier decision-making in the urban development actor network

The issue

Senior real estate industry professionals make clear the complex web of decision-makers involved in creating and recreating cityscapes both in the UK and worldwide. The specific objectives of a diverse range of domestic and international UK investor, shareholder, land and property owner, landlord, tenant, and public authority clients they advise and support, are vitally shaped by financial drivers and constraints that are reflected in the built form, environment, and healthiness of urban places. Vested private and public sector interests in the value of urban land and property make real estate finance and investment a significant determinant of urban population health and health equity.

Expert real estate practitioners recognise healthier, sustainable urban development and wellbeing as key priorities for clients. Their decisions and advice have the potential to be a major force for improved decision-making health outcomes, but two barriers are identified: First, a deficit of input data on what makes urban places healthy for incorporation in financial modelling, risk forecasting and appraisal; and second, a need for health to take centre stage in public sector local plans and development negotiations against the UK backdrop of public sector financial restraint, economic and productivity priorities and short political timescales.

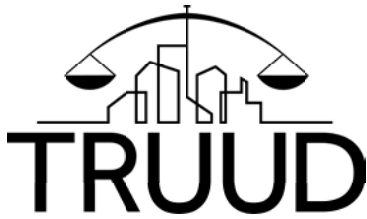


Local authority partners



University consortium





Our response

Responding to these issues, we are drawing on the insights of influential actors in the urban decision-making system to inform the question how better health impacts might be integrated, through two parallel strands of work. The first strand is exploring with actors with high-level experience of real estate finance and investment practice, how to resolve the identified challenge of a paucity of health and wellness data for incorporation as an element of the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) performance of urban property assets to inform industry advice and decision-making. Working with the Department of Health and Social Care Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID), the second strand is addressing the public sector knowledge gap on how health and wellness should inform local planning decisions and development negotiations. Together, the two strands address the need for common public-private actor objectives aligned with resilient healthy place outcomes to be jointly recognised and prioritised. By identifying and addressing the barriers to private and public pro-health urban decision-making the work is building a bridge to support better outcomes.

The two strands of work highlight that:

There is a **strong appetite for data-driven real estate** investment to be a force for good in delivering healthy urban development.

There is a **dearth of population health spatial characteristics** information to inform local authority development plans and development negotiations.

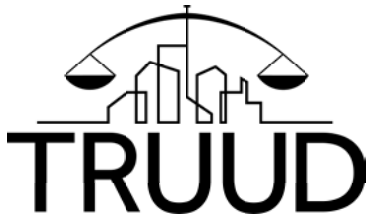
Changing the commercial and public sector drivers for healthier urban development requires **cross-sector collaborative consultations** to identify shared motivators and secure positive urban outcomes.

Building on underpinning research by real estate development and planning researchers Kathy Pain and Heeseo Rain Kwon, the work is being supported by experts in real estate social network analysis, valuations and appraisal, complex systems analysis, economics, planning and health, Nalumino Akakandelwa, Neil Carhart, Michael Chang, Eleanor Eaton, Alistair Hunt and Pablo Newberry. In linked work funded by the [UKPRP Population Health Agent-based Simulation Network](#) (PHASE) a tool for modal shift forecasting is being developed to inform [Greater Manchester Streets for All](#) healthy places delivery in collaboration with experts in urban transport planning and health, Cecilia Wong, Sian Peake-Jones, Arpana Verma and Tracey Farragher.

The evidence

Interviews conducted with 21 highly experienced real estate industry professionals with senior roles in top ranking agencies, investment banks, trusts and property companies, and subsequent discussions with leading experts in the field, have found that real estate finance and investment advisors and decision-makers are increasingly seeking robust evidence for evaluating the social wellbeing benefits of urban development projects. Property investors and shareholders are demanding evidence that their investments are in projects that create environmentally and societally healthy places. Contradicting a common perception of the real estate industry as solely focused on profit maximisation, it is responding to growing shareholder society pressure to demonstrate that investment is promoting both sustainable urban development and returns on investment.

Meanwhile, along with pension funds and an array of institutional investors, public authorities have an interest in the commercial health of urban property markets. Local authority planners are tasked with juggling priorities for human and environmental health with politically fluid economic objectives in a vertically and horizontally siloed institutional structure. Our findings highlight that power and influence to embed healthy vs unhealthy place outcomes in urban development is mobile in the public-private actor decision-making network. Four evidence-based journal outputs informing the Intervention were published by University of Reading authors in a co-edited special issue of *Built Environment* in June 2023 (*insert links to the free downloadable OA files below*).



We conclude that there is an urgent need for cross-sector collaboration to combat unhealthy air, green, blue and built spaces associated with respiratory and mental illness, obesity and diabetes, for example, which underpin wellbeing spatial and social inequalities.

[Burnett, A. and Pain, K. \(2023\) *Linking environmental and human health in English urban development decision-making: the human health literacy of environmental policy.*](#)

Built Environment, 49 (2). pp. 187-206. ISSN 0263-7960

[Emeghe, I. J. and Pain, K. \(2023\) *Mental wellbeing, housing provision and social valuation in a United Kingdom context: a planning issue?*](#) Built Environment: Urban Planning and Public Health Special Issue., 49 (2). pp. 286-303. ISSN 0263-7960

[Kwon, H. R. and Pain, K. \(2023\) *Searching for health and wellbeing: commercial real estate actor encounters with planning in the urban decision-making 'Black box'.*](#) Built Environment, 49 (2). pp. 229-247. ISSN 0263-7960

[Wong, C., Pain, K., Kwon, H. R. and Koksai, C. \(2023\) *Urban planning and public health.*](#) Built Environment, 49 (2). pp. 157-165. ISSN 0263-7960

[Koksai, C and Wong, C \(June 2023\) *Urban Planning and Public Health Beyond Public Health, Beyond Spatial Planning. Boundary-Spanning Policy Regime of Urban Health in England.*](#) Built Environment, pp. 166-186(21). ISSN 0263-7960

[Peake Jones, S and Le Gouais, A \(2023\) *Meaningful Engagement an Approach to Healthier Urban Development and Planning.*](#) Built Environment, pp. 304-321(18). ISSN 0263-7960

Next steps

Going forward, in the next steps we will:

- coproduce with industry experts a model with the capability to incorporate health risks, costs, and linked social value in property investment appraisal and decision-making.
- develop advice notes for local authority planners, developers, and funders on the determinants of healthy places to accompany work by OHID we have been consulted on.
- prepare a roadmap for public-private sector actor network shared healthy places objectives to assist their operationalisation.
- refine complex decision system mapping reflect emergent additional insights from the work into operational barriers to the embedding of pro-health practices in practice and allow impact evaluation.

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 author

Professor Kathy Pain
k.pain@reading.ac.uk