Why do we need healthy and active spaces?

As we grow older, we can only remain healthy, independent, and autonomous as long as the services, structures and spaces around us are adapted to be inclusive for varying needs and capacities. At the same time, physical environments can impact on our health, for example through exposure to pollution or access to active transport options.

This is a space with multiple market failures, and where innovation must be stimulated in pursuit of longer, healthier lives (1). It covers many different aspects including landscape design, environmental pollution, pavement and road condition, city planning, green spaces and transport provision, to name but a few (2). It has also been shown that interventions in the built environment have a higher potential to influence people's behaviour across the socioeconomic spectrum than interventions aimed at individuals (3), thus strengthening the importance of this area.

About this briefing

An expert community from Government and its agencies, the health and social care sectors, charities and academia were invited to come together for a co-development workshop to identify research questions of interest to both the policy and the research communities. Participants identified three big challenges in this space, and three research questions that could help to bring the reality of healthy and active places a step closer.

Challenge 1: How might we rebuild community services that have been lost during the pandemic?

One of the three key challenges identified during the workshop was the aspiration to take a systems approach, rather than continuing to address needs in silos. This includes joining up different services that might be accessed by the same individuals as well as incorporating preventative measures (rather than just treating problems once they have arisen). It also means not just thinking about individuals, but also the social structures around them (for example, considering the needs of carers as well as patients).

The potential benefits are clear: more effective and efficient use of public funds and a better experience for service users. However, these arguments are well-known. The challenge is how to identify and overcome the barriers that are preventing a more holistic approach. Research that examines the barriers to joined-up interventions could help to unlock investment in prevention and early intervention (areas that are currently often underfunded) and to create more efficient and effective health programmes.

At the same time, there is a need to identify gaps in

not always easy to do this in practice. It is important to understand the barriers to involvement.

In addition, improving understanding of what prevents researchers from building in co-creation to their work could help to make this more routine in the future. For example, what additional support is needed for engineers who wish to involve users effectively in product design? Should we work to produce 'off the shelf' co-creation methodologies?

Challenge 3: How can physical infrastructure encourage physical and mental wellbeing and bring people together?

It is widely recognised that physical infrastructure, such as public and open spaces, is linked to older people's physical and mental health through its impact on people's ability to get out an about and interact with others (7-9).

Interventions such as improved walking spaces, wider access to green and all-weather spaces, appropriate seating, and accessible public toilets, have all featured regularly in the discourse (10, 11). However, there is still the need to map how effective and impactful these interventions are in improving physical and mental health across different age groups. There is also a need to understand how desirable they are for this sector of the population.

The rapid increase in digital communication technologies brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has focused attention on how online platforms might be used to reduce social isolation and to link communities together. The fast speed and low latency provided by 5G has the potential to facilitate the use of new applications, such as live medication reminders or fall detection that could allow healthcare providers to monitor and care for older people proactively 2King s4ed n6opletheWohtfoltfor(ecoge f(get 0.5 (incexa92 (, thefur all-8 (e is)TJC20 1 Tf0 -1.5