



Lands Improvement

**Placemaking and the
active environment:
learning from Umeå, Sweden**

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Active environments and physical activity

Umeå, Sweden

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Placemaking and the active environment: learning from Umeå, Sweden

Our focus at Lands Improvement is on delivering 'Healthy, Happy Places'.

Last year we published our placemaking strategy, which sets out our four foundations and five pillars, explaining how we approach placemaking and how we will achieve our goal.

We worked with Create Streets to produce our Design Framework, the key principles that guide our teams and masterplanners as they embark on the journey of creating new, better communities.

Some of the steps forward we have recently taken:

- We have reviewed the first phase at our Linmere development, and asked ourselves how we can do better. We have engaged with the local authority highways team to challenge ourselves to deliver more walkable active neighbourhoods.

- We are putting placemaking first as we embark on masterplanning on new acquisitions.
- Undertaking research – part funding a PhD at the University of Bedfordshire to understand activity levels and barriers to entry for residents in and around Linmere.
- Working with leisure / health / planning departments to understand how we can deliver effective active environments that have something for everyone.
- Organising an 'activation and engagement' event at Linmere to showcase some of the activities and programmes that are possible on the site, and to connect with the new and existing local communities to seek their involvement in planning and delivery of these.
- Holding regular CPD sessions and visiting both urban sites and urban extension developments.

We have put the structure in place to create great communities, but this is just the start, now we want to learn and grow, forge partnerships and networks and be brave, taking the lead and driving conversations.



Ben is Placemaking Lead at Lands Improvement driving the strategy of creating Healthy, Happy Places. He leads the project team at Linmere, a 640-acre residential led, mixed use scheme to the north of Houghton Regis in Bedfordshire.

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We believe that active environments are at the heart of Healthy, Happy Places.

We learn as we interact with our environment, so our environment must invite active engagement. Our view is that we should build physical activity into the infrastructure of a place and not simply provide dedicated facilities for those few who choose to use them. We should give the entire community 'permission to play'. By creating active environments, we are providing a mix of opportunities for all members of the community to access and enjoy being active. Our paths, public spaces, formal and informal installations will be exciting and inviting for the full spectrum of residents and users, offering safe and engaging inter-generational spaces which can be used for a multitude of activities.

We have partnered with Trevor Smith of Sportsmith, and Andy Mytom from DMA architects to interrogate how we achieve our goals, and how we can connect with those who influence these outcomes. Together, we are asking - what is 'good play value'? Is 'play' just for children? How do we ensure that sport doesn't only take place within white lines and with whistles? What incentivises someone to take the active rather than sedentary option?

We want and need to learn from others, and when we heard of some exciting things happening in Umeå, Sweden, we decided to pay a visit.



'Change the Game' was set up by BalticGruppen, a developer based in Umeå. Over the last five years they have been the catalyst for creating a network within the local municipality to enable active lives across the city. In their words, they want to see a place where, *'everyone has a chance for an active healthy life and to reach their full potential'*.

They recognise that low physical activity levels have numerous knock-on consequences for health, opportunity, economic potential, and general wellbeing.

Like us, they realise that a large part of this is due to people not living in an environment that enables a healthy and active life - and this in a country where sports club membership and sports participation levels are high - this is therefore beyond sport.

Whilst it is about enabling physical activity, it's much more than this. Looking at activity through a lens that considers outcomes such as social, creative and psychological skills as well as physical skills and ability, will have a much larger societal impact.

This is not just about the places that are delivered, it's about the people and the programmes that facilitate its activation.

What we can learn and how our placemaking can benefit from approaches applied in Umeå

1. Coalitions and a shared vision

It's about networks, coalitions and partnerships. It's about building relationships and creating a shared vision. It's about plugging away and having patience. It's about perseverance and persuasion.

A new development in Umeå for 2,000 homes has movement and physical activity as one of its key pillars. But this didn't happen overnight. This was the culmination of a number of years hard work drawing together a network across Health, Housing, Economic Development, Education, Research institutes and more.

We all know it, but this example highlighted the importance of creating a shared vision prior to putting pen to paper and having a focus on outcomes rather than specific interventions. If the desired outcomes are overt and shared then ideas, design and delivery will follow.



2. Co-design and holding things back

The easy option for developers is to design, deliver, move on and forget about it. It's even easier when there's a set formula to apply. However, we don't know what people who will use the spaces want. Why not hold back, ask when the time is right, and deliver something that is not only more useful but will also have more ownership from its users?

The instalment to the right was designed having listened to young women talk about what it is like to live in Umeå. It provides a pressure free space with an invitation to sit and talk or just be. Crucially, the engagement was framed in such a way that the young women felt comfortable opening up. The focus was much more about finding out the issues rather than homing in on a design solution.



In a similar, but very different vein, we visited a village sports hall, the vision and design of which was led and driven by the community, as is operating it. As a result, they have a facility which meets the community's needs, and has the flexibility to be used for many different sports and activities.

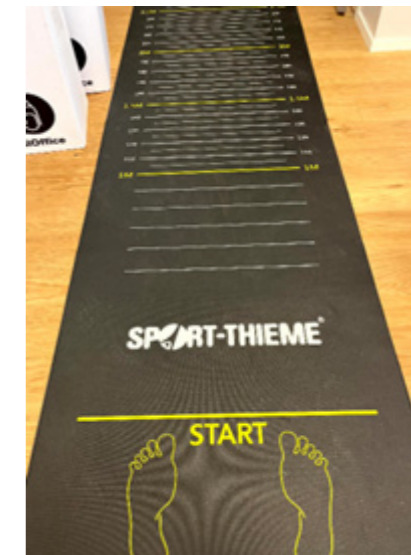


They recognised that activity is not all about formal sport – all around the building there are invitations to play, explore and be active:

What better way to get to the sports hall than down a slide



And to exit via a climbing wall (concept designed by the local school pupils)



3. Equality and inclusion

Sport and activity can have a high-cost barrier to entry. In Umeå, and now across a number of areas in Sweden, a 'Leisure Bank' has been created.

Unwanted or surplus sporting goods are donated to the Leisure Bank, where they are rented out for free to those that want them. These outlets are run and managed by those from disadvantaged backgrounds, further benefiting individuals in the community and society.

The Leisure Bank that we visited is hugely successful, well used and highly valued.

At the time we visited the bank contained predominantly ski and other winter equipment. In summer, there are bikes, bats, racquets, balls and all sorts of other equipment.



By the side of the (frozen at the time of visit) river they have Kayaks to hire in a self-service 'Kayakomat'. This isn't part of the Leisure Bank, but a separate initiative:



Why should the joys of relatively expensive sports be limited to those that can purchase and own the equipment?

4. It's not about fancy kit

Creating active environments which engender a confidence and desire to be active, doesn't need to be expensive, in fact shouldn't cost any more than how we deliver open spaces now – just doing it differently and getting much better outcomes for the same investment.

Small things can have a big impact. One simple example of some small spend in Umeå which has a big impact is this installation in a local school where the children play a game called Gagaball, amongst other things:



A few bits of wood and a ball, and hours of fun and physical activity.

The reality in the UK is that we have numerous identikit play areas, with debatable play value in many cases. We are focusing on the 'what' and not asking the 'why' or the 'how' or questioning the desired outcome.

We should also be allocating funds to activate and engage, not just into the installation of physical equipment and infrastructure.

As an example, Park Play is a new national initiative which aims to bring public spaces to life by delivering safe, enjoyable, informal activities for all ages once a week on a public park. Managed locally, with joint funding from Sport England and the National Lottery, Park Play is a growing phenomenon across the country.

5. Colocation

We learned that Swedish people are more likely to be members of their local 'sports club' rather than members of individual sports specific clubs as is more common in the UK. This creates a closer-knit community, better integration and better use of facilities.

The sports hall mentioned above is much more than just a sports hall. Having been designed and built by the community, it is able to meet all of the community's needs under one roof. It's the focal point for all the sports clubs, it's a community centre, it has shared workspaces, event space and a café. It has become the centre of the community. Even those that don't participate in sport benefit from the investment.

6. Working in practice

But where is the evidence? We visited a preschool where physical literacy has been adopted as a core component of their approach, to bring to the fore the importance of day-to-day movement in children's lives and to help give them the confidence and motivation to be active throughout their lives.

Whilst there were a number of physical changes that were made to the school, these were all minor. The major difference was the mindset of the teachers. Their approach is about encouraging movement in everything they do and letting go of some of the control that they traditionally had, giving more personal responsibility to pupils, factoring in their individual confidence and competence levels.

They have seen a marked change in pupil's wellbeing, and this is now being seen beyond the preschool and into primary schools.

Impacts and improvements noted with the pupils are:

- Enjoyment of movement
- Perseverance
- Developing own risk assessments
- Seeing full capability
- Trust in their own ability and others
- Self-awareness
- Body control
- Desire to participate
- No increase in injuries
- Inspiring each other
- Social interaction
- Resilience
- Raised self-esteem

Conclusion

Having an active environment and more importantly an activated environment, can have a significant impact on the health and indeed happiness of a community. Through collaboration, listening and a focus on outcomes, and through thoughtful and planned design and development we can and should change our approach to open space provision to create better environments to live in.

There are impressive examples of this taking place around the world with communities benefiting as a result, with Umeå as one. Lands Improvement will be doing its best to be another and to drive forward the thinking in the UK.

Watch this space for upcoming events exploring this very topic.





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