



IN GOOD HEALTH

Ebbsfleet Garden City has been awarded “healthy new town” status by NHS England, with measures to be introduced to reduce obesity, help people who have dementia and encourage healthier choices across the population

BY JAMES WOOD



The healthy new towns scheme aims to offer support to people who have dementia, as well as encouraging community cohesion

Freewheelin’ – part of NHS England’s healthy new towns initiative includes plans to improve cycling provision.

The challenge to build enough homes to meet growing demand is one of the biggest facing the UK. Creating communities in which people live happily and healthily can be secondary to this, as the government faces pressure to deal with demand across the market in all tenures. It is difficult to change established habits when the burger bar and sweetshop are next to the school entrance – but the creation of new places opens opportunities to tackle health issues alongside housing.

In February 2016, it was announced that Ebbsfleet Garden City, where 15,000 homes are planned, is to become one of 10 participants nationally in the healthy new towns project.

Public body NHS England received an unprecedented 114 expressions of interests for its initiative in September 2015 – according to a spokesperson, around 30 were expected. The scheme will focus on areas of the country where a substantial number of homes are being built, introducing a range of measures to help people live healthier lives.

So what steps will be taken to encourage healthier living and how will they be implemented? Generally, the scheme promises to tackle conditions where the NHS is facing significant challenges; obesity and dementia are crucial examples.

According to government statistics, one in

The challenge is that we need a lot more staff to deal with large levels of demand. That's about how we stop people [healthcare professionals] going to London for work

SU XAVIER, PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISER

10 five-year-olds were classed as overweight between 2014 and 2015; the ratio rises to one in five for children aged 11 during the same time period.

A critical design question when establishing the scheme explains how creating adventure areas encourages kids to walk and play – it asks why children are happy to walk all day around a theme park but often get bored on the everyday journeys.

NHS England acknowledges the scale of the challenge. According to Design Council figures, 21% of children play outdoors today compared with 71% of their parents when they were young. In the age of smart phones and the internet, the task to encourage people to adopt healthier lifestyles is difficult, but one that NHS England says it is prioritising. When naming the 10 chosen healthy towns in a speech to the King's Fund in March, its chief executive, Simon Stevens, said: "We want children to have places where they want to play with friends and can safely walk or cycle to school – rather than just exercising their fingers on video games."

According to planning blueprints for Ebbsfleet Garden City, each section of the development will have its own primary school in a central location, within walking distance of all housing; three primary schools are planned for the Eastern Quarry. One preventative measure to tackle rising levels of obesity in children is a ban on fast-food outlets near schools throughout the area, achievable in the new developments of the garden city but not in established towns and cities.

The healthy new towns scheme also aims to offer support to people who have dementia, as well as encouraging community cohesion by designing "safe and appealing" green spaces and introducing cycle paths.

Such a complex illness makes daily tasks extremely difficult to negotiate, but the initiative aims to make it easier for people with dementia through a range of methods.

Innovative use of signage is proposed.



According to NHS England, the traditional approach has been to make signs larger, but new thinking suggests that those with the condition may respond better to movement – scrolling digital signs may be implemented as a result.

Other suggested measures include making streets wider, keeping trip hazards to a minimum, installing effective lighting and keeping people away from busy traffic areas and thoroughfares. Research concludes that these are things which can help, as well as making the most of technology and phone apps to ensure people can be treated in their

own home as much as possible, in familiar surroundings, rather than having to go into residential care.

Ebbsfleet has the most homes proposed of any of the successful bids. This poses challenges on the already stretched health service, as more people means greater demand. Integrating social, physical and mental healthcare is part of the plan to provide health services at the site.

Su Xavier, public health adviser for NHS Dartford, Gravesham and Swanley Clinical Commissioning Group – a joint partner on the project – believes an integrated hub should be created. "This would mean you can do things under one roof," she says. "When people say healthcare, they think hospitals – but the majority of services are provided through GPs.

"The challenge is that we need a lot more staff to deal with large levels of demand. That's about how we stop people [healthcare professionals] going to London for work and we do this by creating an accessible and integrated healthcare system here."

As pressure mounts to resolve the housing crisis, the task of building the required number of units may dominate the public conversation, but as homes are created in new towns, there is also a significant opportunity to create communities where people feel content to live.

By targeting some of the biggest health challenges facing the NHS from the outset in Ebbsfleet, status as a healthy new town, for the first garden city in over 100 years, will surely attract new residents, who can be confident of moving to a place where the wellbeing of people is seen as a top priority. ●

