

Healthy living

New developments open the opportunity to create places where people can live happier, healthier and longer lives. **James Wood** reports



Above and right: Green space at Barking Riverside is seen as imperative to encouraging healthy living.

AS EFFORTS TO RESOLVE the housing crisis are increasingly focused on building the desired number of units, there is a danger of prioritising volume over creating desirable and healthy places to live.

The challenges facing the NHS are well documented. Services are stretched, GP waiting times are up and the number of people with conditions ranging from obesity to dementia continue to soar.

It is hard to change established habits in places where fast food outlets and restrictive town planning for pedestrians are commonplace, but as new developments spring up around the country, there is an opportunity to think about creating healthier communities for the future.

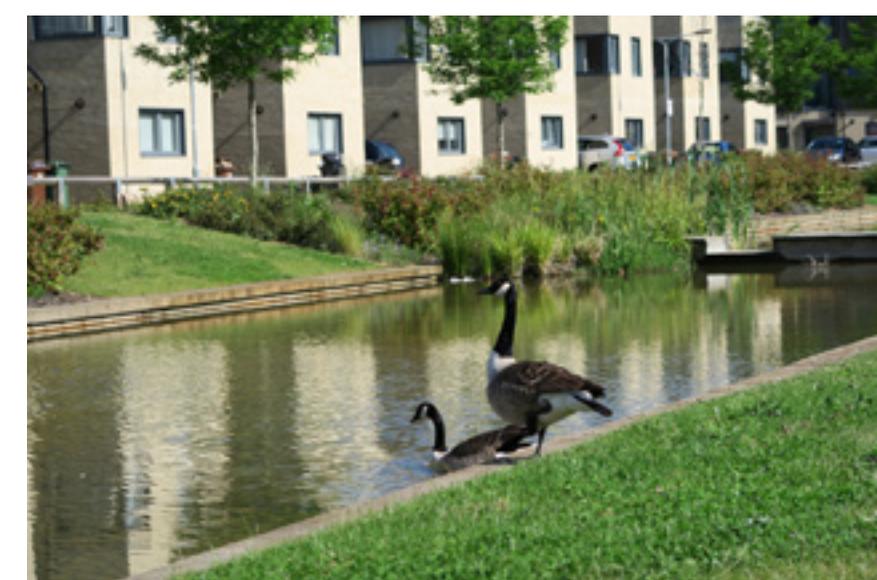
NHS England's Healthy New Town project aims to help achieve this. The initiative was launched in March 2016 and Barking Riverside was among

10 "demonstrator sites" chosen for the project.

New developments were selected to redesign how local health and care services will be provided, particularly in improving wellbeing and independence. It is thought that by doing this, there is potential to contribute to the long-term financial security of the NHS: it is estimated the healthy new towns project could help close the significant funding gap by 2-3% by 2020/21.

Barking and Dagenham Council and healthy ageing innovation centre, Care City, are co-leading the scheme, working closely with the Barking Riverside Limited joint venture partnership – made up of housing developer London and Quadrant (L&Q) and the Greater London Authority (GLA) – which will oversee the building of 10,800 homes at the site, scheduled for completion by 2031. It will become

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one of the largest housing projects in the country.

Care City, set up by Barking and Dagenham Council and the North East London Foundation Trust, is based in Barking, and focuses on health and social care across four boroughs in east London.

Working with researchers, education providers, technology experts, SMEs and social enterprises, its focus is on helping people to lead healthy lives, stay independent for longer, have better access to care and be given the chance to stay close to family.



Above: Striking architecture and flower beds at Barking Riverside.

These are the key aims for making Barking Riverside a healthy new town from the outset.

John Craig, chief executive of Care City, says: "A big focus at Barking Riverside will be on delivering good quality housing and the provision of technology that allows people to live healthy and independent lives in their homes into old age, creating a healthy environment and finding ways to provide more effective care services."

Careful infrastructure planning will be required, such as making fibre broadband and wifi available in public areas across the site, giving people access to 'real-time' transport information and designing public spaces to account for a range of needs and uses.

Dr Fiona Wright, consultant in public health at Barking and Dagenham Council, believes that creating a connected community and a sense of place is crucial to implementing the healthy new town.

She says: "Together, we want to make Barking Riverside a place which is healthy for all who live and work in and around the area.

"In the process, we want to ensure that no one is left behind, that all new residents benefit and that the process also works for existing and

neighbouring communities."

This will be achieved by making sure visitors to the area benefit, as well as local residents, irrespective of their economic and social circumstances

Adopting the healthy new town for the development has the potential to have an effect for the whole borough, by creating opportunities such as access to the riverside and more green space for all.

Making effective use of the natural environment is key. Waterside space will not only be available for runners and cyclists, but also for those who value having quiet areas to walk, talk and think.

But the scale of Barking Riverside creates a challenge. Wright says: "The rate of growth and the poor social and health outcomes for the residents of our borough provide us with an imperative to put in place strategies to maximise health and wellbeing benefits for all residents as the borough grows."

A shared commitment from the council, NHS and developers will ensure Barking Riverside is designed with an emphasis on ecological and sustainable practice.

One of the first pieces of work completed saw residents and advisers create 10 healthy new town principles,

which are now written into planning guidance for developers.

The ultimate aim is to improve the average life expectancy for people at Barking Riverside.

"There is a genuine chance to change lives," Wright explains.

Barking Riverside is managed by a

We want to make Barking Riverside a place which is healthy for all

Community Interest Company (CIC), which currently includes Barking Riverside Limited, L&Q as a housing association, the council, the George Carey Primary School, local residents and other observatory bodies.

As the development grows, the local population will be more involved with the project, enabling residents to determine priorities and decisions. Eventually, the idea is to let residents drive the initiative.

Matt Carpen, project director of Barking Riverside Limited, says: "There will be increased representation on the CIC from the local population, enabling priorities and decisions to be debated by residents themselves.

"There is a real opportunity at this stage in the project to think about future methods of both prevention and health care – from designing open spaces and promoting their use and wellbeing – to encouraging self-diagnosis and treatment."

So what's next for the project? Care City and Barking and Dagenham Council are working closely with NHS England and collaborating with those charged with implementing other

healthy new towns across the country to share good practice and ideas for each demonstrator site.

Craig says an early priority is to develop "detailed metrics" to allow work to be independently modified and verified.

The key to this, he says, is connecting a healthy place with how people really use the space.

"We will work closely with the CIC to ensure that work to help people become and remain healthy is genuinely led by them," he adds.

Wright stresses the importance of working with partners so that Barking Riverside is a healthy place to live and grow old.

"But we are equally determined that Barking Riverside and the health promoting environment will develop links strongly with our surrounding communities so all can benefit from this Healthy New Town," she adds.

"We will continue work and collaborate with other healthy new towns, our community and partners to embrace and embed our vision for Barking Riverside and take forward these innovative approaches to help other communities learn and develop their healthier environments."

Those heading up Barking Riverside's Healthy New Town initiative seem fairly robust in their ideas about how they intend to achieve their ambitions, but what is the guarantee that new residents at Barking Riverside will be willing and able to participate?

"Places 'lock in' certain kinds of behaviours," says Craig.

"Often, to help people live healthier lives, the challenge is just how much needs to change. To be encouraged to cycle more, people need somewhere to cycle to, pathways that get them there, and a place to store their bike when they get home.

"If any one piece of the puzzle is missing, behaviour change becomes dramatically harder. Healthy places are those that combine all of these elements – where the healthy option becomes the easy option for all."



Above: open spaces abound at the site to explore.