

# Healthy Spaces: Health and Wellbeing

...which encourage us to get active



# 6 Healthy Spaces: Health and Wellbeing

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*There is evidence that green space in an urban environment can improve life expectancy and decrease health complaints.*

*Local access to safe natural green space can help individuals sustain levels of physical activity. The motivation to continue physical activity schemes is more likely to be sustained through the natural environment.*

Dr William Bird, Natural Fit (2004)

## 6.1 What are Healthy Spaces?

Healthy spaces are countryside sites and rights of way which can be used to generate benefits to health. The councils' network of greenspace, Public Rights of Way and countryside sites is ideal for low-cost exercise and physical activity, including walking, cycling, riding, organised sports, play and active recreation. The OAIP seeks to encourage the increased use of greenspaces to improve health and well-being in Central Bedfordshire in line with the councils' Physical Activity Strategy (Chapter 4 of the Leisure Strategy).

## CASE STUDY – ACTIVITIES AT DUNSTABLE DOWNS



Dunstable Downs is a council owned site, managed by the National Trust under a lease and management agreement.

It has long been a popular destination for walking and soaking up the magnificent views, but over the last few

years, a programme of activities have raised the profile of exercise and physical activity on the site. In addition to a new popular new Health Walk, which meets at the Chilterns Gateway Visitors Centre, the National Trust hosts a weekly Military fitness group and large scale events like the Kite Festival which promotes outdoor activity.

### 6.1.1 Walking, Cycling and Riding Routes

The geographic diversity of Central Bedfordshire is ideal to meet the needs of the walking and cycling community and is accessible via 1335 kilometres of Public Rights of Way, promoted walks and horse and cycle routes. These are detailed in Section 5 – ‘Local Spaces’. Cycle ownership in Central Bedfordshire is relatively high with some 60% of residents having access to a bike and there is an increasing interest in joining running and triathlon clubs. The council will be seeking to increasingly promote the area as a cycling, running and walking destination for both local people and tourists.

Following the recent award of £4.9 million from the Sustainable Transport Fund, Central Bedfordshire Council is focused on creating a comprehensive network of pedestrian and cycling routes to cater for commuters and enable access to services. Part of this funding has provided a Travel Hub in Dunstable to give advice and support around sustainable transport in the local area. Sustrans, who man the centre, are able to offer cycling and local travel initiatives to members of the public as well as

schools in the local area. There is also provision for Health Checks that are available every Friday through NHS Bedfordshire.

In line with this aspiration to increase walking and cycling, the council is seeking to develop the Rights of Way network to allow multi use; opening up new routes providing greater connectivity and improving access to green spaces and other leisure destinations.

### **6.1.2 Health Walks**

The Walking for Health programme,<sup>44</sup> managed by the Ramblers Association, encourages more people to become physically active in their local communities through participation in local guided health walks. The council supports the programme locally by commissioning the Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity (BRCC) to run the 'Simply Walking' scheme on its behalf. This volunteer delivered scheme includes thirteen separate health walk routes, encourages people to 'simply walk your way to health' and primarily targets the over 60's and those at risk of obesity and diabetes. In 2011, 343 walks were held with an average of 20.5 people attending each walk, with 7016 people benefitting over the course of the year.

The council also supports the Department of Health Walk4Life campaign which aims to help people to get active and fit. The council has eighteen registered Walk4Life routes on the website;<sup>45</sup> equating to 10% of the total registered Walk4Life walks across Central Bedfordshire and totalling 34 miles (54.7km). The council is also developing a series of Walk4Life Mile routes; which are mile long, waymarked, routes using rights of way.

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<sup>44</sup> <http://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/>

<sup>45</sup> [www.walk4life.info](http://www.walk4life.info)

### **6.1.3 Green Exercise**

The concept of the Green Gym was created by TCV (The Conservation Volunteers) as one of their flagship volunteering programmes; using conservation and volunteering as a form of exercise. The Authority has an active volunteer network and offer a similar green exercise opportunity across the rights of way and countryside sites of Central Bedfordshire. P3 and Friends groups provide wide-ranging opportunities to promote practical volunteering within local communities as a mechanism of keeping fit, reducing obesity and putting something back into the community.

The council is also looking to develop exercise and fitness initiatives such as the installation of outdoor exercise equipment, trim trails, orienteering courses and the use of sites by exercise classes such as 'military fitness' inspired boot camps. A recent research study<sup>46</sup> found that compared with exercising indoors, exercising in an outdoor natural environment was associated with greater feelings of revitalisation and wellbeing, decreased tension, confusion, anger and depression and an increased likelihood of repeating the activity on a regular basis.

### **6.1.4 Children's Play**

Natural or nature play is part of the available range of play space provided by Central Bedfordshire, 'encouraging children to climb, jump, touch and explore the natural environment through play'. The council manages 58 countryside sites which offer opportunities for physical activity and play in the widest sense. However eleven sites have been additionally equipped with 'designed' natural play and one has a 'trim / activity trail' for under 6 year olds.

In recent years a number of 'natural play' events have been run on the council's sites; including the BIG Lottery funded 'Run Wild' events at Baulk Wood run in partnership with the Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity. These events, and others involving the Greensand Trust, have aimed to re-engage families with the countryside through a range of 'natural play' activities including den building.

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<sup>46</sup> J. Thompson Coon, K. Boddy, K. Stein, R. Whear, J. Barton, M. H. Depledge. Does Participating in Physical Activity in Outdoor Natural Environments Have a Greater Effect on Physical and Mental Wellbeing than Physical Activity Indoors? A Systematic Review. *Environmental Science & Technology*, 2011

Site	Type of 'Play'
Rushmere Country Park	Natural Sculpture Trail
Dunstable Downs	Formal Outdoor Fitness equipment
Blue Waters and Plaiters Way	Natural
Tiddenfoot	Natural Trim/ Activity Trail
Baulk Wood	Natural
Campton Wood	Natural Sculpture Trail
Saxon Gate Pocket Park	Natural
Biggleswade Linear Wood	Natural
Clipstone Brook	Formal Play Area
Apennine Way	Formal Play Area
Steppingstone Place	Sports facility

### 6.1.5 Well Maintained Sites and Rights of Way

A Natural England study published in 2011<sup>47</sup> suggested that better provision of green space may encourage greater levels of green space use, which could lead to greater participation in physical activity and help reduce levels of obesity. The study found particularly strong associations between green space use and site maintenance; with use being influenced by the quality of the path network, standard of site maintenance and lighting.

The chapters on 'Breathing Spaces' and 'Connecting Spaces' provide detail about the current standards of Rights of Way and Countryside Sites and highlight issues and opportunities which can contribute to increased use and associated health benefits.

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<sup>47</sup> Natural England Green space access, green space use, physical activity and overweight, April 2011

### 6.1.6 Leisure Strategy Physical Activity Strategy

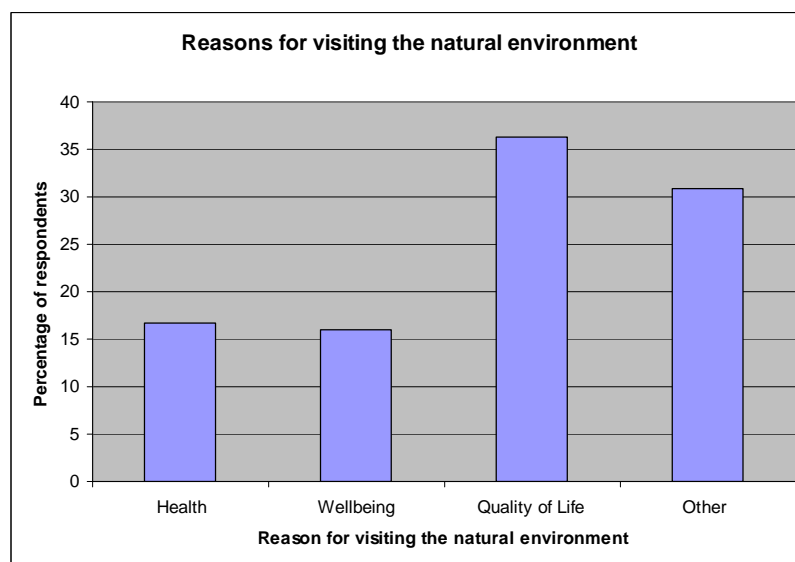
The council is producing a Physical Activity Strategy as part of the Leisure Strategy. The underlying principles of the Physical Activity Strategy are to inform choice and promote physical activity, creating positive links across services, and reduce the cost to Public Health due to inactivity by providing formal pathways for people who need or want to be healthy and active.

Physical activity is the 4<sup>th</sup> leading risk factor for mortality. Levels of inactivity are rising for many countries with major implications for the prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCD) and general health of the population. It has been shown that participation in regular physical activity reduces the risk of: Coronary Heart Disease, Stroke, Diabetes, Cancer, Hypertension and Depression.<sup>48</sup>

The Physical Activity Strategy is currently auditing available activity. This audit will establish demographic information on users and provide information about the demand for additional activities.

## 6.2 How are Healthy Spaces Used?

In Bedfordshire, health and wellbeing, and improving the wider quality of life are the main reasons for people to visit the natural environment.

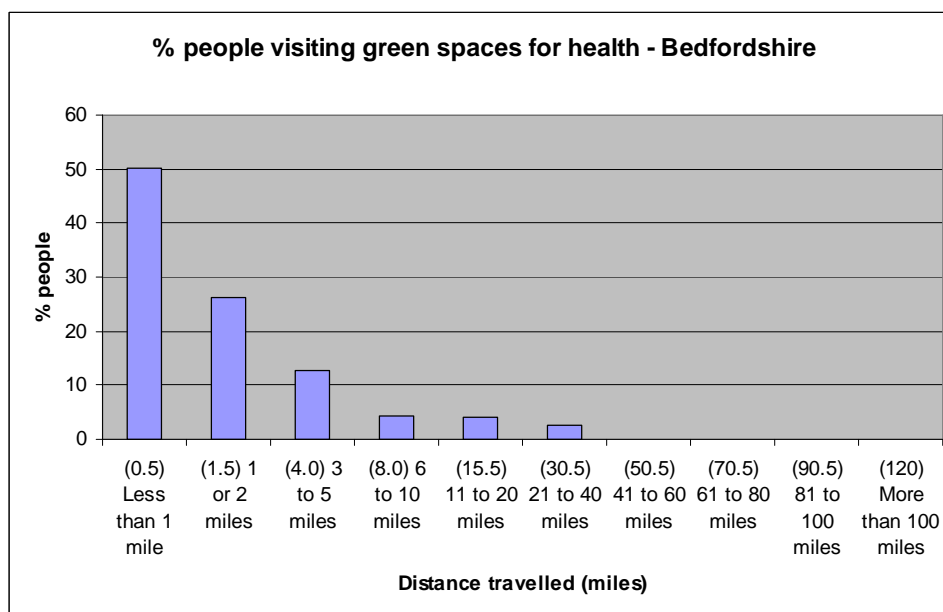


**Reasons for visiting the natural environment in Bedfordshire**<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> World Health Organisation, Global Recommendations on Physical Activity for Health.

<sup>49</sup> Data from Natural England survey - Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment, March 09 - Feb2011, published online at [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk)

Accessible green space, close to residential areas generates increased levels of physical activity across all age groups<sup>50</sup>, and is therefore an important, but often overlooked, factor in improving health. Over 50% of Bedfordshire visitors to the countryside, whose primary reason for visiting was for health benefits travelled less than 1 mile and over 75% travelled less than 2 miles (3.2km). This highlights the need to ensuring appropriate access to local greenspace in order to promote health equality.



### The importance of local green spaces for health<sup>51</sup>

The Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) is the national survey on people and the natural environment used as a measure for the Public Health Outcomes Framework 1.16 'utilisation of greenspace'. Survey results from March 2010 to February 2011 showed a direct association between the frequency of visits to the outdoors and levels of physical exercise. 49% of those who visited the natural environment frequently took part in at least 30 minutes of physical activity at least three times a week, compared to just 22% of those who never visited the natural environment.

Although planning policies now often stipulate that green spaces should be incorporated into urban planning, there are no minimum national requirements or

<sup>50</sup> The Great Outdoors: How our Natural Health Service uses greenspace to improve wellbeing, Faculty of Public Health, 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Data from Natural England survey - Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment, March 09 - Feb2011, published online at [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk)



guidelines to support this. The ANGST standards provide a means to do this; identifying that people in urban areas should be able to access a green space of at least 2 hectares (4.9 acres) in size within 300m or a 5 minute walk of their home.<sup>52</sup> The Central Bedfordshire Council Leisure Strategy will also help to set standards for leisure provision and identify priorities for new and improved facilities.

As shown in 3.2 walking the dog is one of the main purposes of using the rights of way network, this is also reflected in our countryside sites user surveys. A study produced in 2010<sup>53</sup> found regular dog walkers had a lower body mass index (BMI), as well as fewer chronic conditions and depression-like symptoms than those who didn't walk dogs. And that walking a dog also enables a scheduled activity that is more fun and rewarding than having to drive to the gym to work out for most people.

### 6.3 The Importance of Healthy Spaces

Inactivity is described by the Department of Health as a 'silent killer'. Evidence is emerging that sedentary behaviour can increase a person's risk of many chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke and diabetes as well as weight gain and obesity, all of which are costly to the Health Service. Regular exercise can lower the risk of heart disease and stroke by up to 35% and diabetes by up to 50%, boost self esteem and mood as well as reducing your risk of stress, depression, dementia and Alzheimer's disease by up to 30%.<sup>54</sup>

While the overall health of people in Central Bedfordshire is good it is estimated that 29.1% of adults in Central Bedfordshire are obese; this is higher than the East of England average of 28.3%. Mental health is also a concern; the number of people with a mental health condition is predicted to rise and it is estimated that 33,500 people in Central Bedfordshire will suffer from anxiety and depression by 2016.<sup>55</sup>

A 2009 report showed that the quality of the environment has a direct influence on the level of physical activity. It also demonstrated that exercising in a natural environment was shown to reduce chronic stress, enhance the sense of well-being and have a restorative effect on adults suffering from depression and anxiety. Given

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<sup>52</sup> Natural England Green space access, green space use, physical activity and overweight, April 2011

<sup>53</sup> Cindy Lentino, an exercise scientist at the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services in Washington, D.C 2010

<sup>54</sup> [www.nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness/Pages/whybeactive.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness/Pages/whybeactive.aspx)

<sup>55</sup> Adult and Older People JSNA v3, Central Bedfordshire Together 2010

that the annual national spend on parks is just £600m, a tiny budget compared to the £74.9 billion spent on health during 2003-2004, investment in more high quality, accessible and safe green space could result in a cost effective approach to addressing wellbeing issues.<sup>56</sup>

### **6.3.1 Healthy Spaces... as Green Spaces**

The Natural Environment White Paper<sup>57</sup> showed that while many people enjoy pleasant green spaces near where they live, this is not the case for everyone. People in deprived areas are nearly six times less likely than those in affluent ones to describe their area as 'green'. Those in deprived areas, minority ethnic communities, elderly people and those with disabilities have less access to greenspace or tend to use them less. A UK study has found that income-related inequality in health is affected by exposure to green space<sup>58</sup>. It demonstrated that:

- Those with close access to green space lived longer than those with no green space
- The survival of older people increases where there is more space for walking near their home
- Children's physical activity levels increase in areas with good access to green space

This demonstrates the importance of the ANGST standards in guaranteeing local access to green spaces and highlights the need for programmes to get people into the countryside, particularly in areas of deprivation.

Natural green space also mitigate against negative impacts of climate change; improving air and noise pollution; cutting particulate pollution; lowering risk of flooding and creating a localised cooling effect. This has a beneficial impact on health; reducing incidences of pulmonary diseases, mental health disorders and heat exhaustion.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> A walk in the park Becky Volker, Feb 2005, Spaces & Places

<sup>57</sup> [www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/](http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/)

<sup>58</sup> Mitchell R, Popham F, (2008). Effect of exposure to natural environment on health inequalities: an observational population study. *The Lancet* 372 (9650)

<sup>59</sup> Health and Natural Environments- An Evidence Based Information Pack, Natural England March 2012

### **6.3.2 Healthy Spaces... as Local Spaces**

The Public Health Strategy 'Healthy Lives, Healthy People'<sup>60</sup> explicitly recognises the environment (natural and built) as a determinant of health; stating that local communities must be empowered to protect green spaces and volunteer led walk programmes and promote community ownership of green spaces and improved access to land.

This empowerment of local communities is supported by the councils' continued management and development of volunteering opportunities such as the 'friends of parks' and P3. Many of our access and conservation volunteers are retired and older people. In addition our 'access for all' initiative develops paths for the less mobile providing wheelchair access to facilities which in the past have been inaccessible.

### **6.3.3 Healthy Spaces... as Economic Spaces**

Greenspace plays an important role in delivering cost effective support for health and there is a need to increasingly consider the economic benefits of the countryside as part of preventative healthcare, to mitigate against the cost of reactive service provision.

It is estimated by 2050 that 60% of adult men, 50% of adult women and 25% of children under 16 could be obese and this would cost the NHS £10 billion a year and wider society £49.9 billion a year.<sup>61</sup> The Natural Environment White Paper<sup>62</sup> published in June 2011 highlighted that access to nearby attractive public green space and footpaths is likely to increase levels of walking and highlights that good access to greenspace (perceived or actual) makes people 24% more likely to be physically active; helping to tackle obesity. The UK National Ecosystem Assessment<sup>63</sup> identified that if every household in England was provided with good access to quality greenspace it could save an estimated £2.1billion in health care costs.

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<sup>60</sup> Healthy Lives, Healthy People: Our strategy for public health in England, builds on Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS.

<sup>61</sup> Government Department for Science, Tackling Obesities: Future Choices – Modelling Future Trends in Obesity and their Impact on Health, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition

<sup>62</sup> [www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/](http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/natural/whitepaper/)

<sup>63</sup> UK National Ecosystem Assessment: Technical Report. UNEP-WCMC Cambridge 2011.

The value of walking to reduce the economic impact of obesity and ill health can also be demonstrated through the cost benefit analysis of the 'Walking for Health Scheme which found that it could save the NHS £81 million nationally and yielded a cost benefit ratio of 1:7.<sup>64</sup> Highlighting the impact that each Park and area of green space could have on health and the economy, William Bird<sup>65</sup> estimated that an urban park in Portsmouth providing the venue for 20% of total local physical activity could annually save the economy £4.4 million, including £910,000 to the NHS.

#### **6.3.4 Healthy Spaces... as Play Spaces**

The Central Bedfordshire Children and Young People's Plan recognises that "contact with nature, access to the countryside and outdoor activities, play, sport and leisure all have significant and beneficial impacts on families, children and young people." Several of the 18 identified Priorities, and associated Strategic Actions, have an existing or potential relationship with Countryside Access including priority 4 - supporting children and young people to lead healthy lifestyles including increasing physical activity (ECM outcome 1 – Be Healthy).

A key priority of the Healthier Communities strategy is 'ensuring a healthy start to life' which aims to reduce childhood obesity through an increase in levels of active play. Increasing access to the natural environment can play a vital role in efforts to increase activity and reduce obesity. Being outdoors is the most powerful correlate of physical activity, particularly in pre-school children<sup>32</sup> and improving levels of accessible urban green spaces is associated with increased amounts of play for local children.

#### **6.3.5 Healthy Spaces... as Partnership Spaces**

From April 2013, Directors of Public Health will be employed by local authorities and will be ideally placed to influence local services. There are clear opportunities for joining up activity relating to both health and countryside access to connect people with nature for the benefit of public health.

DEFRA are also urging Local Nature Partnerships<sup>66</sup> and Health and Wellbeing Boards to actively seek to engage each other in their work. Forthcoming guidance will make clear that the wider determinants of health, including the natural

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<sup>64</sup> Health and Natural Environments- An Evidence Based Information Pack, Natural England March 2012

<sup>65</sup> Natural Fit, Dr William Bird, 2004,

<sup>66</sup> These partnerships work at a strategic scale to improve the range of benefits and services we get from a healthy natural environment and from good management of the land

environment, will be a crucial consideration in developing joint strategic needs assessments and joint health and wellbeing strategies.

## **6.4 Healthy Spaces: The Next 10 Years**

### **Partnerships**

The council will develop strong partnerships with public health teams and local GP practitioners to investigate how more people can realise the benefits that exercise in the countryside can offer to their overall health and well-being.

The council will seek to ensure that the Health and Wellbeing Strategy and other key documents will reflect the importance of the countryside to public health and addressing health inequalities.

### **Physical Activity**

The council will continue to promote the health benefits of volunteering through the P3 scheme and work to increase the number of volunteers working within Central Bedfordshire.

The development of a 'Simply Cycle' programme (a sister scheme to Simply Walking) will promote cycling as a sustainable, healthy and new way of exploring the countryside of Central Bedfordshire. The council will continue to support and seek opportunities to develop the Simply Walking and Simply Cycle schemes.

The council will seek to develop partnerships with running clubs to promote the use of Rights of Way and sites for recreational running.

The Authority will seek to extend Central Bedfordshire Health Walks programme and develop a network of 1 mile exercise walks as part of walk 4 life NHS programme, seeking to ensure that every community has a route

The council will seek to develop and promote a range of adult fitness initiatives on our countryside sites including orienteering Courses and exercise programmes and events e.g. military fitness and single track trail run. Furthermore we will support a pilot by the National Trust to install outdoor gym equipment on sites and look to extend this if positively evaluated.

The council will increase opportunities for natural play through events and facilities at countryside sites.

## 6.5 Action Plan Summary for Healthy Spaces

The main Aims and Outcomes of the Action Plan for Healthy Spaces are detailed below. The specific projects relating to these aims are laid out in detail in the Action Plan which will be reviewed and updated every 5 years.

### **Aim 12 – Countryside Spaces and Rights of Way will facilitate play, health, well being and physical activities**

Outcome – Strategies and new delivery partners will recognise the positive and cost effective role that that countryside access plays in the health and wellbeing of the population

Outcome – Countryside Access will be a place to play and enjoy, with children and young people, rediscovering and appreciating the natural environment

Outcome – Activities and events that promote Health and Physical Activity on countryside sites will promote the use of the wider landscape

## 6.6 Policies for Healthy Spaces

The policies for Healthy Spaces will support the delivery plan but also ensure that the council, its partners and the wider community deliver outdoor and countryside access in line with agreed principles.

### **OAIP - Policy Statement 13 – Provision of Local Greenspace**

The council will seek opportunities to increase provision of local greenspaces (at the 2Ha / 300m level of Accessible Natural Greenspace Targets) in areas with identified public health issues that could be improved through better access to greenspaces and in line with priorities set out in the Leisure Strategy.

### **OAIP - Policy Statement 14 – Promotion of Health Benefits**

The council will promote the associated health benefits related to public use of Rights of Way and greenspaces and will seek to develop programs of activity (e.g. Health Walks, Nordic Walking and practical volunteering) to encourage greater public use of these facilities, particularly in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.

### **OAIP - Policy Statement 15 – Leaflets**

The council will ensure that all countryside, greenspace and rights of way leaflets and interpretation will carry health information, linked to the benefits of exercise in the natural environment

### **OAIP - Policy Statement 16 – Public Health**

The council will work to ensure that opportunities to integrate countryside access with public health are taken, seeking to influence the public H

health agenda and gain recognition of the impact of countryside access on reducing obesity, increasing exercise and preserving health.

### **OAIP - Policy Statement 17 – Play**

The council will continue to develop and promote the use of formal and natural play facilities on countryside sites.