

Urban planning towards an activity-friendly neighborhood

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Aim of the abstract

The number of people who exercise in a non- or self-organised way, practised alone or in light communities (f/a with friends or family), is rapidly growing in The Netherlands (Borgers et al., 2013; Thiesen-Raaphorst, 2015). Especially sports activities from recreational-, fitness- and health-orientation fit within this 'sport light' concept, transforming public spaces into sports facilities. Promoting physical activity is a public health priority and a review of public health studies shows consistent associations between physical environment and physical activity behaviour (Humpel, Owen & Leslie, 2002). Therefore the demand for activity-friendly neighbourhoods has increased, both from a public health perspective as well as from the participants. Although some research on the motives of non- or self-organised sport participants (Borgers et al., 2013) and environmental factors (Humpel et al., 2002) is conducted, the municipality of Groningen is searching for specific insight into the motivation of their residents' use of the public space, aiming to apply the outcomes to their sports policy. This abstract describes a study in developing activity-friendly neighbourhoods in the municipality of Groningen and the possibilities for the local government for implementing the outcomes towards an innovative sports policy.

Practice description

The research was conducted from January 2015 till March 2016. During the course of the study an activity-friendly neighbourhood as a public space with mixed land use, a high density of people and accessible facilities like sports fields, schools and shops were identified. Residents tend to be more physically active when they live in neighbourhoods that have a higher density of people (Sallis et al., 2016). Furthermore, the mixed use of land promotes transportation between and to different daily activities. Improvements in physical health, mental health, social benefits, safety prevention, environmental sustainability and economics are known co-benefits of activity-friendly neighbourhoods (Sallis et al., 2016).

In the first phase of the study the activity- friendliness of the neighbourhood was scored. First a panel discussion with social urban planners, health professionals, a sport manager, sociologist and neighbourhood secretaries working for the local government was conducted. All 28 neighbourhoods in the municipality of Groningen were assigned a score using an 'activity-friendly environment scan' as guideline to obtain consensus (Duijvestijn, van Eck & Kuitert, 2010). For example: traffic measures were discussed to promote safety for cyclers, and the presence of informal sport- and play areas was mapped.

Secondly, a cross-sectional survey was conducted among residents of the municipality of Groningen (n=7337). Random citizens were asked, by internet and telephone, to rate the extent to which they perceived their neighbourhood as activity-friendly. Using the mixed method, the data made it possible to gain insight in the variety in activity-friendliness in the different neighbourhoods and the perceptions of the residents. The results show a small variety in the 28 neighbourhoods of the municipality.

Thirdly, a case study in a neighbourhood named 'de Hunze' was conducted. The chosen neighbourhood has an average activity-friendliness score, hence it is representative for neighbourhoods in the municipality of Groningen. The following groups were included

in the research: young people (those who attend neighbourhood schools), elderly (those who remember when the community was different), different types of families, and a range of experiences in the neighbourhood (those who live in apartments, house owners e.g.). Interactive feedback sessions with the residents of 'de Hunze' were organized in which people were asked what changes to the current state of the neighbourhood they felt needed to be made to increase activity-friendliness. In accordance to the wishes of the residents, plans were implemented to increase the activity-friendliness of the neighbourhood.

Context description and involved actors

The municipality of Groningen is the capital city of the eponymous province. The municipality counts over 200.000 residents, making it the largest city of the north of the Netherlands. The old hanseatic city is characterised by its two universities (University of Groningen and the Hanze University of Applied Sciences) with a population of over 50.000 students.

There is a need for a more integral policy approach; the current system does not leave enough room to implement a multidisciplinary cause of action.

Implications and learning

Theory has shown that accessibility of facilities, opportunities for activity and aesthetic attributes have significant associations with physical activities (Humpel et al., 2002). Attractive facilities, like parks and outdoor fitness facilities, on an accessible location are not sufficient. Individual or self-organised communities are more likely to become active at these facilities when they feel ownership and responsibility for the location.

The results show that developing an agenda requires involvement of the community as whole, not just of some of its members. This value was recognized as the need for joint ownership. While the local government is taking the lead in the process of attempting to improve activity-friendliness, it is pivotal to aim to involve all members of the community – including those that are not easily heard – to ensure success.

In light of the findings presented in this study, it is recommended to strive for involvement of residents, beginning in the early stages of the policy process. Early involvement is likely to increase the experience of joint ownership of the intended results in a community. This in effect increases the community's participation during the implementation process, and increases the probabilities of residents' perception of activity-friendliness.

The municipality of Groningen can perhaps try to concentrate the residents that are willing to achieve own initiatives. We are currently researching if the residents of 'de Hunze' are more physical active in their own neighbourhood.

References

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