

# Built Environment Program Needs Assessment

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**To:** Chair and Members of the Board of Health

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## Recommendations

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It is recommended that the Board of Health receive this report for information.

## Key Points

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- The built environment refers to the physical environment where we live, work and play.
- The goal of WDG Public Health's Built Environment (BE) program is to support municipal and school board planners in designing healthy communities. WDG Public Health BE services include reviewing land use planning documents, sharing local data and evidence and engaging with partners through BE-related committees and working groups.
- From 2023 to 2024, staff conducted a needs assessment of its BE program to rebuild partnerships with planners, gain insight into planning priorities and explore potential opportunities for collaboration.
- Engaging with municipal and school planning departments through this needs assessment helped to strengthen relationships and clarified WDG Public Health's role in supporting these partners.
- The results of this needs assessment will be used to develop WDG Public Health's BE priority areas for the next five years (2024-2028).

## Background

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The built environment refers to the physical environment where individuals live, work and play. It encompasses the planning and design of buildings, roads, transportation networks, parks and various other types of infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> The way we design, plan and construct our communities has a significant impact on our health and can either promote or hinder healthy behaviours. For example, communities that provide convenient walking and cycling routes may encourage residents to be more physically active.<sup>2,3</sup>

Community design is led by municipalities and provinces using a process known as land use planning. This is the strategic management of land and resources to plan for future population growth and development while addressing social, economic and environmental concerns.<sup>4</sup> Good land use planning contributes to the design of complete communities where people of all ages and abilities can conveniently access most of their daily necessities and services both now and into the future.<sup>5</sup> This includes nearby access to shops, schools, services and greenspaces through the intentional organization of residential, commercial and industrial lands that are connected through efficient transportation networks. Designing complete communities supports healthier and more active living, fosters social connections, curbs urban sprawl, helps preserve natural environments and creates greater efficiencies in services and infrastructure.<sup>2,6</sup>

The Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS) mandates public health units to support municipalities in developing healthy communities. This is achieved through programs and services that reduce community exposure to health hazards, reduce the burden of chronic disease, and promote healthy built and natural environments.<sup>7</sup> Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) Public Health's Built Environment (BE) program supports our local communities in their efforts to design safe communities that encourage healthy behaviours and the prevention of injuries. This work is largely undertaken through policy development, where WDG Public Health promotes the design of healthy and complete communities by commenting on land use planning documents with a public health lens. This includes reviewing documents such as, municipal official plans, master plans, subdivision plans and design guidelines.

Between 2023 and 2024, WDG Public Health conducted a needs assessment of its BE program. Its purpose was to rebuild partnerships with municipal and school board planners following the COVID-19 pandemic, to understand local planning priorities and to identify future collaborative opportunities. This research consisted of interviewing planning departments across the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph region and conducting an environmental scan of other public health units' post-pandemic BE programming. This work builds upon an initial needs assessment conducted in 2014 and was instrumental in developing a comprehensive strategy for WDG Public Health's BE program over the next five years (2024-2028).

## Discussion

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### Needs Assessment

To understand the current landscape of land use planning within WDG from a public health perspective and to identify programming priorities, WDG Public Health conducted a needs assessment that consisted of two key components:

1. An environmental scan of current Public Health Unit (PHU) BE programs.
2. Interviews with WDG municipal and school board planning departments.

BE program staff also conducted an internal review and assessment of pre-pandemic BE initiatives, identifying current capacities and potential opportunities to update our program.

#### 1. Environmental scan of current PHU BE programs

In the spring of 2023, WDG Public Health surveyed members of the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) BE Working Group, a network of PHUs working in the built environment, to understand the current status of public health BE programming across Ontario post-pandemic.

A total of ten PHUs responded to the questionnaire, of whom the majority reported having resumed BE programming post-pandemic. Work included concentrating efforts on re-establishing partnerships with municipal planning departments and building staff capacity, with a key priority being to resume land use planning commenting.

#### 2. WDG Planning Department Interviews

In the fall of 2023, WDG Public Health began contacting local planning departments to participate in an interview. The purpose was to:

- Rebuild partnerships with WDG planners;
- Gain insight into how planners promote health through land use planning and identify challenges they encounter;
- Identify current planner priorities and opportunities for collaboration; and
- Inform the development of WDG Public Health's BE program.

WDG Public Health invited a representative from 17 planning departments across the WDG region to participate in an interview. All planning departments expressed an interest to participate and 15 had availability to complete an interview between the fall of 2023 and spring of 2024.

## Key Findings

Planner interviews provided a valuable opportunity to understand planning interests across WDG communities and to inform the redevelopment of WDG Public Health's BE program. Beyond strategy development, these meetings helped to increase public health staff knowledge and expertise related to land use planning, and to strengthen relationships between planners and WDG Public Health. Staff gained a deeper understanding of the unique and varying planning needs among WDG's communities and the staffing structures and capacities of each planning department. Planners shared current priorities and limitations in advancing healthy community design which helped to identify future collaborative opportunities.

A significant learning from planner interviews was understanding how WDG Public Health can best support planners in planning for future population growth and advancing healthy community design efforts. The most requested types of services include:

- Consultation and review on land use planning documents
- Sharing local data and research evidence
- Engaging with partners through BE-related committees and working groups

WDG Public Health was frequently cited by planners as a trusted and credible source of health research and data, and its involvement in the consultation and commenting on land use planning documents was noted to provide strong rationale and credibility for the inclusion of healthy community design elements.

"If me as a planner... puts a comment saying like 'connectivity is needed here'... or to consider active transportation... they will say 'oh, it's just their reasoning from their policy.' But when it comes from the health unit experts as a commenting agency, that will not just support but it will make your argument stronger." – Planner in Dufferin County

"I can see the data being very helpful in some of our early stages of review. Just to back us up and solidify our position on certain things. ...If we are struggling with a developer that doesn't want to provide sidewalks, for instance, we can say 'OK well here's evidence from the health unit that says this.' ... It just gives us more teeth to take before [developers and] Council." – Planner in Wellington County

Several smaller municipal departments also commented on their appreciation and reliance on public health to assess land use planning documents from a health lens due to a lack of capacity and expertise.

“I think [public health] has a role to play in the [design of] healthy communities. I mean you guys are the experts on this and because all of us are really small and we don’t have specific people [internally] to deal with that, we rely on agencies such as yourself. So I’m looking forward to [your commentary].” – Planner in Dufferin County

## Next Steps: Built Environment Program Priority Areas

This research was used to inform the development of the BE program’s priority areas over the next five years (2024-2028). The four priority areas are outlined below with a summary of work completed to date.

### Priority A: Revise WDG Public Health’s Land Use Planning commenting process

All interviewed planning departments identified land use planning commenting as a key role for WDG Public Health to support evidence-informed healthy community design. Local planners regard Public Health as a credible, evidence-based and influential commenting partner. This is also consistent with the direction of other PHUs who are in the process of re-establishing their commenting processes. Examples of the types of comments that public health has included in previous reviews include: encouraging active transportation infrastructure (e.g., sidewalks, cycling lanes, secure and easily accessible bicycle storage, street lighting), enhancing connectivity (e.g., providing travel connections to parks and other neighbourhoods, using a grid-based road design), improving accessibility (e.g., continuous sidewalks) and preserving and increasing access to greenspaces (e.g., including parks and trails for active and passive use).

As a result, WDG Public Health recently reviewed its internal land use planning process and commenting guidelines to reflect planner feedback and current BE best practices. WDG Public Health is reaching out to all planning departments to ensure our organization is added to land use planning review circulation lists. It is important to note that PHUs are not listed as an official commenting agency under Ontario’s Planning Act,<sup>8</sup> but despite this many of our partners still actively solicit our feedback. In 2024, BE program staff have submitted four land use planning commentaries (i.e., one block plan, two subdivision plans and one strategic plan), with several upcoming submissions anticipated later in 2024 and into 2025.

### Priority B: Develop healthy community design tools for planners

Many planning departments develop design guidelines that provide clear direction to public and private developers to ensure that new buildings and alterations to existing buildings align with current design best practices and municipal policies. In the next few years, several WDG planning departments will revise or develop new design guidelines. These planners, particularly from smaller municipalities, expressed an interest in WDG Public Health’s support to

incorporate health concepts into their building, street and community design standards. By providing developers with direction in the early stages of the design process, health-supportive design elements are more likely to be incorporated into land use planning applications. In the coming years, WDG Public Health will work with planning departments to support the development of their design guidelines and tools to include evidence-based health supporting design elements. Examples include street design that supports active travel for all ages and abilities and targets to increase the proximity of services to residents.

### **Priority C: Promote evidence-informed community design by measuring, monitoring and sharing data and best practices**

All planners expressed a need for research and data to inform the purposeful design of their communities both now and into the future. Types of research identified include evidence-based best practices and standards (e.g., strategies to increase active transportation, maximum housing block lengths), population health data and trends and data on local built form measures (e.g., dwelling density, sidewalk-to-road ratio). This information can be used to help planners and local decision-makers better understand the current health status and design form of their communities to inform future strategic planning. WDG Public Health will explore new and ongoing opportunities to collect, monitor and share data with partners through requests and partnerships.

### **Priority D: Partner with community collaboratives to support the design of healthy communities**

In addition to commenting on land use planning documents, healthy community design is planned and promoted through coordinated collaboratives and partner engagement. For example, many municipalities will form committees and working groups with partners to plan the use of large plots of land (e.g., the Clair-Maltby Secondary Plan) and will conduct consultations with partner agencies on key projects (e.g., Dufferin County Age Friendly Action Plan). Public Health was a partner on both initiatives and is currently a member of the newly-formed Technical Advisory Committee for the Center Wellington Active Transportation and Mobility Plan.

Planners expressed an interest for WDG Public Health to join working groups and consult on planning projects as opportunities arise. WDG Public Health is also involved in several community collaboratives whose work supports healthy community design. These include: WDG Active and Safe Routes to School Committee, City of Guelph Vision Zero Steering Committee, Safe Communities Wellington County and Dufferin Community Safety and Well-Being Plan Integration Table. Refer to the [April 2024 Board of Health Report, Injury Surveillance and Prevention Report](#), for more information.

To date, WDG Public Health has also consulted on four municipal and school board BE-related initiatives by providing data and research evidence. These include: the Guelph Outdoor Sports Facility Strategy, Wellington Catholic District School Board's Sustainability Plan, the City of Guelph Vision Zero Action Plan and the Guelph Wayfinding Strategy.

## Health Equity Implications

WDG Public Health applies an equity-based approach to its land use planning commenting process. While interviewing local planners, BE program staff learned about the diverse capacities and needs among WDG planning departments. Smaller municipal planning departments have fewer planning staff and capacity to assess land use planning documents from a health lens. Furthermore, several WDG municipalities have been identified as areas of significant population growth under the province of Ontario's Places to Grow Act and will experience substantial changes to their built environment.<sup>9</sup> As a result, WDG Public Health tailors its commenting to meet the different needs of WDG's planning departments and communities.

WDG Public Health also works with community partners to address inequities through various targeted initiatives. An example is WDG Public Health's involvement in two workshops in the Onward Willow neighbourhood in the City of Guelph that addressed local active transportation, road safety and community design challenges using an equity-lens. The first event, the *Walkshop*, was held in October 2023 and is described in the [April 2024 Board of Health Report, Injury Surveillance and Prevention Report](#). A second workshop, called the *ThinkShop*, occurred in June 2024. It helped mobilize over 80 local residents and organizations to identify challenges and brainstorm solutions to support equitable and safe active transportation within the community

## Conclusion

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The built environment and the way we design communities including buildings, roads, transportation networks and parks can greatly influence one's health. Ideal land use planning creates communities where services and daily necessities are accessible for all who live there and contributes to improved community and environmental health outcomes. WDG Public Health works toward helping our partners design complete communities that promote the health of residents across the WDG region. Between 2023 and 2024, the BE program undertook a needs assessment to rebuild partnerships with municipal and school board planners following the COVID-19 pandemic, and to better understand local planning priorities. Interviews conducted with planners were highly valuable and provided public health staff with insight into

the varying planner needs and priorities across the region. These interviews played an integral role in redeveloping the BE program and provided significant learnings for how to best support planners including: reviewing land use planning documents, sharing local data and evidence, and engaging with partners through BE-related committees and working groups. The findings from the needs assessment were used to develop the BE program's four priority areas which will guide WDG Public Health's efforts to promote healthier communities over the next five years.

## Ontario Public Health Standards

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### Foundational Standards

- ☐ Population Health Assessment
- ☐ Health Equity
- ☒ Effective Public Health Practice
- ☐ Emergency Management

### Program Standards

- ☒ Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being
- ☐ Food Safety
- ☒ Healthy Environments
- ☐ Healthy Growth and Development
- ☐ Immunization
- ☐ Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control
- ☐ Safe Water
- ☐ School Health
- ☐ Substance Use and Injury Prevention

## 2024-2028 WDGPH Strategic Goals

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More details about these strategic goals can be found in [WDGPH's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan](#).

- ☒ Improve health outcomes
- ☐ Focus on children's health
- ☒ Build strong partnerships
- ☐ Innovate our programs and services
- ☐ Lead the way toward a sustainable Public Health system



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