

The link between cognitive health and neighbourhood: perceptions of the public, and of policy-makers, about problems and solutions

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Background

Growing evidence indicates associations between neighbourhood-related factors such as pollution, social isolation and physical inactivity, and cognition, that is, our ability to think clearly, learn and remember. The evidence raises the possibility of neighbourhood intervention playing a role in protecting population cognitive health. However, there is little understanding of these associations among the public and policy-makers, what they mean and how they might be acted on. In this study we explored perceptions of the public and policy-makers about influences of neighbourhood factors on brain functioning, and how they should inform policy.



Methods

Qualitative methods were used in three phases; the study ran in parallel with a quantitative study looking at neighbourhood influences on cognition. In phase one, focus groups were conducted with middle-aged (40-69) members of the public to inform statistical modelling. In phase two, similar focus groups were held in four case study areas chosen based on the modelling results. In phase three, interviews with people in public health and policy roles were conducted, including people in the case study sites.

“Certainly the pollution level, as during Covid it was low, it just made you actually think better, think clearly, reassess life, all those things, just had a clearer sense of vision” (resident)

Results

Participants described effects on their cognition from community, culture and social interactions, access to green spaces and nature, upkeep and safety of the area, and pollution, traffic and noise. Solutions included better local consultation and involvement in policy and planning, support for community interactions and active and public transport, and education on cognition. There was little awareness, but much interest, from local policy-makers and implementers, about links between cognition and place. Barriers to implementation included lack of effective engagement with local communities, local funding and joined-up health and neighbourhood policy.

“There’s a general need, especially in public health, to move away from clinical and into kind of more holistic thinking and to integrate between different departments or different types of policies, like housing, education, green space, built environment. Whatever words are powerful enough to do that are useful, so if cognitive health is a term and an idea that people can rally behind then it’s useful” (policymaker)

Conclusions

People can perceive impacts of neighbourhoods on brain functioning and suggest ways local areas can be improved to support cognitive health. There is support for the idea of population-level interventions to support cognitive health.

Table 1. Key themes from 8 focus groups with the public (n=48) in 4 case study sites

Public perceptions of factors affecting cognition	Community, culture and social interactions
	Access to green spaces and nature
	Upkeep and safety of local area
	Pollution, traffic and noise
Public suggested solutions and perceived barriers	Better consultation with, and participation of, local populations in policy and planning
	Support for community activities and interactions
	Environment-friendly towns
	Active and public transport
	Education on cognition

Table 2. Key themes from 17 interviews with people working in local policy and public health

Policymakers’ awareness of cognition in current and future public health and neighbourhood policy	Little mention of cognition in public health and neighbourhood policy
	Barrier: definition and understanding of cognition
	Belief that there is a place for cognition as an aim of public health and neighbourhood policy
Policymakers suggested policy responses to links between neighbourhood factors and cognition	Improving public spaces, and infrastructure to encourage active transport
	Community and social interaction
	Access to green spaces and nature
Policymakers: Barriers and facilitators to implementing neighbourhood approaches that support cognitive health	Engagement with communities
	Joined up health and neighbourhood policy
	More local funding
	Research Evidence