



A as in Active: Incorporating Active Living Principles within Planning.

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There is a rapidly growing body of evidence which demonstrates that being active in everyday life not only has substantial positive impacts on people's health, but it also brings significant environmental, social and economic benefits to all areas. Engaging in regular physical activity reduces the risk of obesity and serious illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes, and colon and breast cancers. Physical activity also helps alleviate depression and when people are out and about in public spaces they interact with each other thereby building the foundations for community connection and a sense of belonging.

Despite the now well-known benefits of physical activity, only half the NSW population does the recommended thirty minutes of physical activity on most days required for health benefits.¹ Physical inactivity contributes to the deaths of about 8000 people a year in Australia² and while direct comparisons can be misleading, it is interesting to note that deaths from other conditions are significantly lower – for example, breast cancer kills about 2500 people a year, heroin up to 500 and drink-driving more than 300. After smoking, physical inactivity is the second most significant preventable cause of illness and premature death for Australians³. The direct and indirect health costs of this are enormous, as are the environmental costs of car dependency, a major contributing factor to physical inactivity.

Active Living and the Built Environment

The built environment is one of a range of important variables which influences people's physical activity levels. While research to date has not shown any causal relationship between physical environment characteristics and participation in physical activity, good associations have been demonstrated.⁴ At the macro level factors such as medium to high residential densities, connectivity between home,

¹ *Report on Adult Health from the 2004 New South Wales Population Health Survey*. NSW Department of Health, Sydney, August 2005.

² Stephenson J, Bauman A, Armstrong T, Smith B, Bellew B. *The Costs of Illness Attributable to Physical Inactivity in Australia*. Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See for example, Gebel, K, King, L, Bauman, A, Vita, P, Gill, T, Rigby, A & Capon, A, 2005, *Creating Healthy Environments: A review of links between the physical environment, physical activity and obesity*, Sydney, NSW Health Department and NSW Centre for Overweight and Obesity. http://www.coo.health.usyd.edu.au/pdf/2005_creating_healthy_environments.pdf

work, shopping, recreation and public transport, and land use mix are supportive of physical activity. At the micro level the presence of pedestrian and bicycling facilities, pleasant street conditions, and perceptions around the neighbourhood being a safe and enjoyable place in which to be are important.

Some of the changes required to create supportive environments that make it easier for people to incorporate physical activity into the routines of daily life are relatively simple. Indeed many can be implemented in the short term across a range of environments and settings. To encourage walking we need to ensure that streets have footpaths and that they are in good repair. We also have to ask: Are there pedestrian facilities so that people can safely cross the road? Are seats provided along walking routes so that those using the paths can rest if they need to? Is there enough lighting in public places and do the lights work? Are there secure bicycle storage facilities at public transport points and workplaces? Do workplaces provide shower and change room facilities for staff? Do workplaces promote staff participation in physical activities such as walking groups and lunch time recreational games? Do beaches, accessible coastlines, parks and bushland areas have trails to promote walking and cycling?

Other changes are more complex and require longer term planning, coordination and an ongoing sustained commitment from all stakeholders. In considering some of the issues here, all levels of planning policy (state, regional and local) must be addressed. Do policies encourage walking, cycling and access to parks and open space for sport and recreation? Are suburbs designed to encourage active living – with safe and aesthetically pleasing streets and locally accessible facilities? Will there be adequate public transport options to help prevent reliance on the private motor car? Across the full spectrum, plans, policies and actions need to work together in creating a culture that encourages active choices because they are readily available and convenient.

So how can planners be encouraged to ‘Design Places for Active Living’?

In response to the increasing evidence linking urban planning to low levels of community participation in physical activity, the New South Wales Premier’s Council for Active Living (PCAL) has developed a web-based resource ‘Designing Places for Active Living’. Specific considerations to help create environments for active living are listed under six key issues:

- Cities, towns and neighbourhoods
- Walking and cycling routes
- Public transport
- Streets
- Open Space
- Retail areas

For each issue, there is an objective, a concise overview of important design considerations, together with links to key references and additional resources for detailed design guidelines.

The resource has been developed with the current NSW planning context in mind and is applicable to urban places in metropolitan, regional and rural areas. It aims to link into the policies and processes associated with the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy and the Subregional Strategies, while also being relevant for other parts of NSW. In particular, it addresses priorities associated with encouraging liveable communities and the use of sustainable forms of transport. Importantly, it does not necessarily require additional resources for implementation, rather incorporation of the key

design considerations at the planning, design and development stages of minor and major brownfield and greenfield projects.

A wide range of practitioners in local and state government, private consultancy, the development industry and other design and health professionals will find the resource useful. Town planners, traffic and civil engineers, road and community safety officers, architects and urban designers, developers, local government councillors, health and community workers are typical users. Interested communities will also find the resource of value in improving conditions in their local area.

Will the public support change?

Opinion polls and recent government community consultations have shown consistently that people place great importance on maintaining good health, being independent and happy. People desire a sense of community and social connectedness. They also want and need public places that they enjoy and in which they can participate in different activities with their families, friends and neighbours. They want cleaner air, greener streets and a greater sense of well-being.

The challenge is for governments to be proactive, supported and assisted by their private sector and community partners, to develop the legislation, the policies and the strategies that will create environments that encourage and support a more active lifestyle for all members of the community.

The resource is freely available on the PCAL website www.pcal.nsw.gov.au .