

Healthy Built Environments

Healthy Built Environments: The Politics of Bringing Health into Planning



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Including health within planning requires political and key decision maker support at the highest levels. Building a legislative mandate for healthy planning is critical for long lasting political and professional commitment towards the creation of healthy built environments. This is also about developing policy from a research evidence base – and as readers of this column know, there is an extensive body of research and practice to support healthy built environments.

In our first column for 2015 we reflect on some of the strategies utilised to raise support for the inclusion of health as an objective of the state's proposed planning legislation (the *Planning Bill 2013*). The process included much of what often occurs in public health advocacy – a discipline with which planners partner to create healthy built environments. Planners and public health professionals were both centrally involved in garnering support for the inclusion of healthy built environment considerations. Here we offer our reflections to document what occurred and also as a potential way forward to advance other strategic initiatives in planning. Politics was a key part of the process, to help translate the healthy built environments research evidence base into legislative action.

So What Did We Do?

First, we offered leadership in advocating for healthy built environments. Both the NSW Premier's Council for Active Living and the Healthy Built Environments Program at UNSW had been working in the area for some time. Accordingly, when the review of the planning system was announced, we were in an excellent position to take up the opportunity to lobby for the inclusion of health in the new legislation. Our credibility had been established, as had our commitment to bringing health and planning in closer alignment, reflecting the strong evidence base for such action.

Second, we identified the key healthy built environment stakeholders in NSW with an interest in the new planning

legislation. Committed stakeholder engagement over the duration of the review was critical. Regular meetings were held at every stage of the legislative review. Stakeholders across government, non-government and peak industry groups were invited to participate. Each gathering took on a similar format with information dissemination by relevant experts and open discussion to determine appropriate responses. Recommendations were prepared following each meeting for consideration by stakeholders for inclusion within agency submissions. Of immense significance was the agreed prioritisation of recommendations by the stakeholders. This was continually refined and became a clear and straightforward aim – to have health incorporated as an objective of the new planning legislation.

Another important part of our stakeholder engagement was the legitimisation of the group. We named ourselves the 'Healthy Planning Expert Working Group' and volunteered our collective knowledge to NSW Planning. Terms of reference were prepared and the group provided a convenient conduit for communication between key healthy built environment stakeholders at each stage of the planning process. The group prioritised the strong research and practice evidence for healthy built environments. This was used in presentations to politicians and other key decision makers, as well as influential stakeholders across different sectors. These included development industry representatives who recognised the economic benefits of adopting a healthy

built environment approach in their commercial and residential developments.

Both formal and informal opportunities were used to disseminate the group's key message. Working group members attended public meetings across the state, as well as practitioner seminars convened by the Department of Planning as part of the consultation process. Members were present at gatherings sponsored by specialist industry and lobby groups, including lawyers and community advocates, to inform their constituents about the planning review. We articulated our key message at these forums – over and over again. We wrote about the importance of health in the new Planning Act in a variety of publications, including this column and a special issue of *New Planner* in mid-2012.

Finally, armed with the stakeholders' agreed 'key ask' we had a strong, focused and clear message, accompanied by the research evidence, to deliver to politicians. We participated in the political process as opportunities arose, including meetings with the co-chairs of the first stage of the Planning Review, presentations to key groups such as the Health Minister's Advisory Committee on Preventative Health, and representations to relevant Ministers.

We do not know which action, of those presented here, was the most important. We believe that it was a combination of all – and no doubt included the influence of specific individuals along the way. We are certain that being ready to deliver the key message about healthy planning in a strategic and coordinated manner was central to the inclusion of not one, but two, health objectives in the *Planning Bill 2013*.

We are delighted to be writing our healthy built environments column for the sixth year. 2015 will no doubt be another challenging, as well as interesting, time for us all. We are hopeful that the NSW State Government election will mean re-activating a reinvigorated planning system that has the promotion of healthy built environments embedded in legislation as a key objective ■