

Healthy Built Environments

The Built Environment and Getting People Active:

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The built environment has an important role to play in supporting human health and well-being as part of everyday living. In this column, we focus on how the built environment can support physical activity.

Lack of physical activity is one of the major risk factors for many chronic diseases (i.e. diabetes, heart disease, cancers, depression). In NSW, barely 50% of the adult population get sufficient levels of health enhancing physical activity. By planning, designing and building environments that make it easy to be active – as well as fun and inclusive for everyone in the community – we can improve population physical activity levels. In turn this will reduce the health burden from these chronic diseases.

Planners need an authoritative evidence base to argue for the development, prioritisation and implementation of policies and practices to support physical activity. Provisions have to be embedded in a wide range of long term strategic plans underpinning conditions for development which can be upheld if tested at appeal.

The Healthy Built Environments Program has recently undertaken a comprehensive and systematic literature review that will assist planners in this endeavour. Here we summarise the key findings of the review in relation to the 'Built Environment and Getting People Active'. The full document is on our web site. You can see exactly how the study was undertaken and download references (<http://www.fbe.unsw.edu.au/cf/HBEP/research>). The review includes an annotated bibliography of 70 studies with policy implications interpolated from the findings. A glossary of commonly used terms is also provided.

The literature review shows that while higher density areas are generally supportive of physical activity, increasing



Development that incorporates higher density residential development and mixed uses, together with good design that enhances liveability, is most likely to positively influence levels of physical activity.

the residential density of the built environment alone will not necessarily encourage increased physical activity. Density, mixed use and micro-design elements in some combination are most likely to positively influence levels of physical activity.

Keeping trip distances short through mixed use and compact development will make active transport a more economically viable option. Destinations give people places to walk to. Replacing uniform urban form with a variety of uses can lead to shorter distances between origins and destinations, which in turn will encourage more active forms of transport. Grid street patterns decrease distances between origins and destinations. Decreased distance between commonly accessed places encourages utilitarian physical activity.

Well maintained footpaths and bike paths encourage walking and cycling for transport, as does the provision of bike parking and other end of trip facilities. Perceptions that cycling is unsafe because of traffic, and that walking is unsafe because of exposure to crime, are important deterrents to walking and cycling for transport and recreation. Research indicates that people with

access to good quality and safe open space are more likely to be physically active for recreation.

So how can planning policies modify the built environment to encourage health improvement? First, strategic and statutory provisions need to be integrated with other interventions. These include promoting the use of walking and cycling infrastructure, together with public health campaigns. It would be rare for a built environment modification on its own to result in immediate behavioural change. Second, policies to increase land use densities need to bring uses, and not just people, closer together. Research indicates that higher densities should be pursued in the context of both the existing macro (regional) urban framework of services and infrastructure, together with the micro urban fabric of design features that make higher densities liveable.

Finally, there is consistent research evidence to show that facilities, such as well maintained and connected footpaths, bike paths and green open spaces, encourage physical activity. There are other benefits from social interaction and community connection. Policies to make environments safe –

What's the Evidence?



and to be perceived as safe – from crime and traffic also encourage physical activity.

Research evidence is mounting for built environment interventions that support health enhancing rates of physical activity. Good planning is about embracing this evidence to deliver environments that promote human health.

Associate Professor Susan Thompson and Professor Anthony Capon direct the Healthy Built Environments Program in the City Futures Research Centre at the University of New South Wales (<http://www.fbe.unsw.edu.au/cf/HBEP/>). The Program receives funding from the NSW Department of Health ■



Shopping areas that need to have trafficable access can also support safe pedestrian usage.



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