



HEALTHY BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

Beyond the city

supporting health in regional localities

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Healthy planning is about supporting the wellbeing of all people, no matter where they live, their age, physical and mental abilities, and irrespective of their socio-economic status. In this 'urban' century, when more of us than ever live in cities, there is a danger that we will neglect those who reside and work in regional and rural Australia.

Health in rural and regional Australia

In shining the spotlight on healthy planning for rural and regional communities, it is important to dispel a few commonly held myths about the reality of the health and wellbeing challenges for those beyond the city. Geographical isolation, the tyranny of distance and car reliance make keeping healthy, physically and mentally, difficult for many. On the other hand, there can be a great sense of community in country towns, and the proximity of beautiful natural environments creates accessible opportunities for outdoor recreational pursuits in green, open spaces.

Data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reveal inequities between the health status of urban and rural populations.¹ There are higher rates of chronic disease outside of cities, with rural residents more likely to be overweight, exercise less and smoke daily when compared to urban dwellers. There are complex reasons for these differences associated with education, employment, income and access to medical services.² Opportunities to be active, to eat fruit and vegetables, and connect with community, are also foundational to support health and wellbeing. Providing these opportunities has its challenges in rural and remote localities, but there are successful initiatives.



Rural school kitchen gardens help children learn about healthy eating

Regional healthy planning case studies

While the NSW Premier's Council for Active Living (PCAL) no longer functions as an entity, its resource-rich website fortunately endures, hosting some excellent active living and healthy eating case studies.³ Several of these focus on regional localities. Extensive details are given about the projects, their locations, historical evolution, costs and funding sources, as well as a photographic gallery and evaluation of the initiatives. These case studies provide inspiration for how similar infrastructure could be implemented elsewhere. They also include ideas for adaptation and collaboration with local communities and businesses, as well as government and not-for-profit organisations from the health, planning and development sectors.

Junee Shire Council has implemented a shared walking and cycling path network linking destinations such as schools, residential areas, sporting facilities, shops and public transport stops/stations. This case study is evaluated against several of the design considerations contained in the 'Walking and cycling routes' section of PCAL's 'Designing Places for Active Living'. The project comes up well against key measures, especially in how it forges links between destinations used on a daily basis by Junee residents. It is also a good example of a safe, well designed and aesthetically pleasing shared pathway. There was some initial scepticism about the need for the project in this regional town, however over time it has become a valued community asset. Parents report increased comfort about their children cycling and walking to school, medical officers declare that the shared path encourages physical activity and prospective residents tell real estate agents that they are attracted to a town that offers opportunities to get around by bike and keep fit.

Being physically active and socially connected is also facilitated via great parks and open space areas. The Blayney Heritage Park offers children and adults alike a range of opportunities to cycle, walk and play in a well-designed and innovative setting. The



Green open space is an important recreational resource for regional communities

park's proximity to the town centre and local schools has created a well-used open space facility, importantly offering passive recreation in shaded areas. This initiative was funded by the Council, the NSW Department of Sport and Recreation (now the Office of Sport) and different donations from regional companies.

In addition to infrastructure projects, the PCAL case studies include plan making examples showing how healthy planning principles can be embedded in local policies and strategies. On the north coast of NSW, a collaboration between the local health service, the Bellingen Shire Council and the Heart Foundation, demonstrates the possibilities for doing this in a rural locality. This project resulted in broad support for healthy planning considerations in the local LEP, DCPs and strategies to levy different developer contributions in order to facilitate healthy built environments.

Supporting healthy eating is another illustration of healthy plan making in the PCAL case studies. Located on the South Coast of NSW, there is a notable example of regional cooperation across councils. Linked to the IP&R Framework,⁴ three councils have come together to produce the Illawarra Regional Food Strategy, which outlines the joint council policy position on food security and sustainability for the region.

Sport and recreational facilities

The importance of sport and recreation cannot be understated for those living in rural and regional Australia. A Victorian study⁵ found that rates of participation in sport were higher in regional localities compared to metropolitan Melbourne, suggesting that encouraging participation in organised sport is a useful way to

encourage more physical activity. In a major initiative, the NSW Office of Sport (OoS)⁶ is currently consulting regional partners and stakeholders to develop a new regional sport operating model. This will establish a placed-based approach to planning, investment and delivery of regional sport and active recreation for NSW. A key aim is to increase the percentage of people regularly participating in physical activity.

The NSW government approved boundaries in 2016 that divide the State into ten consistent regions. Sport and active recreation plans are now being prepared for each region. The plans will help to tailor service offerings to the unique needs and characteristics of each district, as well as optimising the allocation of resources to improve financial sustainability. This will also

assist in establishing regional infrastructure priorities, which can be complex.

Grant schemes issued by a range of state agencies are available to support regional infrastructure development and program delivery. New regional grants were announced in the recent State budget. The Stronger Country Communities Fund, for example, includes \$200 million over the next two years to support local infrastructure projects that involve:

- Building new community facilities (e.g. parks, playgrounds, walking and cycle paths)
- Refurbishing existing local facilities (e.g. community centres)
- Enhancing local parks and supporting amenities (e.g. kitchens and toilet blocks)

The Fund is available to all 92 NSW regional LGAs outside Sydney, Wollongong and Newcastle. Three application tranches are scheduled for 2017.⁷ The next stage of the OoS initiative is the preparation of draft Regional Sport and Active Recreation Plans. These will be presented in local forums and feedback sought later in the year.

Clearly, healthy built environments are achievable in rural and regional localities – so be inspired as there are lots of ideas and funding sources to help this happen! ■

Endnotes

- ¹ AIHW, 2017 'Rural Health', see: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/rural-health/>
- ² AIHW, 2017 'Access to Health Services', see: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/rural-health/access-to-health-services/>
- ³ PCAL, 2017 'Active Living Case Studies', see: http://www.pcal.nsw.gov.au/case_studies
- ⁴ PCAL, 2017 'IP&R Framework', see: <https://www.nswpcalipr.com.au/>
- ⁵ Victorian Participation in Organised Sport, 2015, see: <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/victorian-participation-in-organised-sport>
- ⁶ See: <https://sport.nsw.gov.au/>
- ⁷ See: <http://www.industry.nsw.gov.au/invest-in-nsw/regional-opportunities/stronger-country-communities-fund>



Sport infrastructure provides an integral component for increasing participation.