



HEALTHY BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

## Vote YES for health!

Susan Thompson FPIA, Professor in Planning and Associate Director (City Wellbeing), City Futures Research Centre, UNSW Sydney. 2015 Sidney Luker Medallist  
Peter McCue, Director Sport Development, NSW Office of Sport

When will the sands stop shifting for embedding health supportive policy in planning? Legislative reform is painfully slow and there are signs that progress is faltering. Meanwhile, the health time bombs continue to tick as chronic disease rates grow and the public purse struggles to keep up.

**W**e know there is a lot we can do to prevent chronic conditions and that the environments where we live, travel and work are critical determinants. Some countries have championed healthy planning and the results are reflected in a range of policies and useful tools, while here in NSW the jury is still deliberating.

### International progress

The World Health Organization (WHO) maintains that global communities need to urgently bring health to the centre of urban planning. 'Health as the Pulse of the New Agenda' reiterates the compelling evidence linking equity, health and sustainability to create the best urban environments. The report declares that cities which prioritise population health 'attract more investment and businesses, create more jobs, and offer more opportunity to people from all walks of life'.<sup>1</sup> Further evidence is presented in the WHO's 'Global Report on Urban Health' which affirms the message that 'cities can be designed and managed in ways that enable healthier behaviour and achieve better health outcomes.'<sup>2</sup>

Across the globe there are many examples of governments acting to bring health and planning together. In the UK, the nation's Planning Practice Guidance leaves no doubt that 'the link between planning and health has been long established.'<sup>3</sup> This is further reinforced in the UK's National Planning Policy Framework which defines sustainable development across the economic, social and environmental roles that planning plays, including 'creating a high quality built environment... [supportive of community] health, social and cultural well-being.'<sup>4</sup>

Specific provisions that embed health into planning policy can be found in the Strategic Plan for the City of London 2015-2019 and the Metro Vancouver 2040: Shaping our

Future. Both recognise the links between neighbourhood vibrancy, safety, accessibility, environmental sustainability and community health across the life course.

### Tools to help

As well as the overwhelming body of research evidence and policy/practice initiatives, there are tools for both practitioners and communities. Most recently the Scottish Government released 'Place Standard.'<sup>5</sup> This refreshingly straightforward guide can be used for newly planned and established places, in both rural and urban localities, to assess performance across physical and social elements. There are 14 categories to rank, many of which focus on health supportive behaviours (such as walking and cycling for transport and recreation), to community cohesion, local economic opportunities and levels of safety. Closer to home, the City Wellbeing Program at UNSW has a freely accessible set of healthy built environment indicators, particularly targeting councils keen to measure the health supportive nature of their local environments.<sup>6</sup>

### State initiatives

This year has seen the release of the Greater Sydney Commission's 'Directions for a Greater Sydney 2017-2056.'<sup>7</sup> Disappointingly the ten Guiding Principles do not include any explicit reference to healthy built environments. While there is brief mention of walkability and healthy lifestyles, the document's focus on health is about hospital and medical infrastructure.

On the other hand, the NSW Government Architect's 'Better Placed' design policy for the State has taken heed of the overwhelming evidence about health and planning.<sup>8</sup> The policy acknowledges that the built environment significantly impacts on health and in turn, is strongly related to escalating rates of chronic disease. Health



Tools to embed health in planning

is woven throughout, with a 'well-designed built environment' defined as one that is healthy for everyone, 'promoting physical activity and walkable environments, social cohesion, and community safety and security to support people's well-being'.

### Conclusion

While Tasmania has long since incorporated health within its state planning legislative provisions, here in NSW we have not included a health object in the most recent revisions to the EPA Act.<sup>9,10</sup> The evidence is in-the shape, form and condition of the built environment are all key determinants of human health—and an easy way for people to keep well at every stage of the life course as part of daily living. Why is this message so hard for our decision makers to hear and heed? When will we say an unqualified YES! to embedding health in planning? ■

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See [www.who.int/phe/publications/urban-health/en/](http://www.who.int/phe/publications/urban-health/en/)
- <sup>2</sup> See [www.who.int/kobe\\_centre/measuring/urban-global-report/en/](http://www.who.int/kobe_centre/measuring/urban-global-report/en/)
- <sup>3</sup> See [www.gov.uk/guidance/health-and-wellbeing](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/health-and-wellbeing)
- <sup>4</sup> See [www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/achieving-sustainable-development](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/achieving-sustainable-development)
- <sup>5</sup> See [www.placestandard.scot/](http://www.placestandard.scot/)
- <sup>6</sup> See [cityfutures.be.unsw.edu.au/research/city-wellbeing/city-wellbeing-resources/healthy-built-environment-indicators/](http://cityfutures.be.unsw.edu.au/research/city-wellbeing/city-wellbeing-resources/healthy-built-environment-indicators/)
- <sup>7</sup> See [www.greater.sydney/directions-greater-sydney](http://www.greater.sydney/directions-greater-sydney)
- <sup>8</sup> See [www.governmentarchitect.nsw.gov.au/thinking/integrated-design-policy](http://www.governmentarchitect.nsw.gov.au/thinking/integrated-design-policy)
- <sup>9</sup> See [theconversation.com/the-mysterious-disappearance-of-health-from-new-south-wales-planning-laws-72098](http://theconversation.com/the-mysterious-disappearance-of-health-from-new-south-wales-planning-laws-72098)
- <sup>10</sup> See [www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/bills/DBAssets/bills/BillText/3456/b2016-063-d20\\_House.pdf](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/bills/DBAssets/bills/BillText/3456/b2016-063-d20_House.pdf)