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Healthy Urban Planning:
Recommendations from the NSW HIA
project

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Further Information

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Background

Rapid expansion in the population of urban NSW is creating challenges in planning for healthy and sustainable communities. This has been reinforced recently by the release of the NSW State Plan ¹. Under the theme of 'Environment for Living', the plan outlines a renewed commitment by the NSW Government to an improved urban environment. Healthy planning underpins this through the emphasis on the greater 'liveability' of and mobility within NSW's urban areas, and the creation of greater opportunities for recreation.

A number of activities have recently occurred in NSW as part of the NSW Health Impact Assessment Project at the Centre for Health Equity Training, Research and Evaluation (CHETRE), funded by NSW Health. This report details recommendations and action items based on the work of the NSW HIA project in order to make informed decisions about developing a healthy planning agenda in NSW. Sources for these recommendations are:

- The work of the NSW HIA project on urban planning. In operation since 2003, this project has helped a number of agencies and organisations develop the capacity to undertake Health Impact Assessments on policy, program and project proposals ². Six of these have been on Urban Planning proposals, ranging from major urban development initiatives including the Sydney Metropolitan Plan and Lower Hunter Regional Development strategy to more local proposals such as population plans and regeneration projects.
- A workshop was held in late 2005 by the Centre for Health Equity, Training, Research and Evaluation in partnership with NSW Health ³. The workshop was attended by 26 senior planning and health professionals from various levels of the health and planning sectors in NSW, including NSW Department of Health, NSW Department of Planning, Area Health Services, Local Government Agencies, and academia.
- The NSW HIA steering committee is the reference group for the NSW HIA project. The committee comprises key senior representatives from NSW Health and Area Health Services, and is chaired by the Deputy Director-General, Public Health and Chief Health Office.

Key Focus Area One:

The health and planning sectors work in collaboration to plan for healthy and sustainable communities in NSW.

Recommendation for Action:

NSW Health to organise a meeting between Directors-General of NSW Health and the NSW Department of Planning to discuss health and sustainability priorities and develop practical options for supportive engagement between the two Departments, to inform the release of the NSW State Plan and other NSW Government initiatives.

Rationale:

The work of the NSW HIA project has emphasised the strong links between health and planning, and the acceptance of professionals across both sectors to work in partnership on healthy planning. For this to become a reality, health should be recognised as a broad concept that includes the promotion and protection of ‘well-being’ and ‘living’, and not simply prevention of sickness and the provision of health services. In this way, health becomes an integral part of a broader sustainability agenda based on the creation of healthy and liveable environments that place people at their centre.

Current initiatives across the NSW State Government provide a platform for health and planning to work together. In addition to the NSW State Plan, examples of emerging opportunities are:

- the ‘Sydney Metropolitan Strategy’⁴ and recently established ‘Growth Centres Commission’⁵;
- ‘Futures Planning’⁶ by NSW Health, that aims to set directions for the NSW Health system for the next 20 years, including linking the Health System to the Urban Planning sector.

Key Focus Area Two:

NSW Health identifies opportunities to work with other stakeholders in the development of planning for healthy and sustainable communities, including but not limited to the NSW Department of Planning, NSW Department of Local Government, and the Premier’s Department.

Recommendation for Action:

NSW Health to take a leadership role in identifying and collaborating with cross-sectoral structures to develop practical options that will strengthen planning for healthy and sustainable communities.

Rationale

Working with and developing new and existing cross-sectoral mechanisms provides NSW Health with opportunities for considerations of health and wellbeing to be incorporated within a broader sustainability agenda. Some practical examples include:

- The Local Government Strategic Liaison Group aims to examine issues of mutual interest and promote collaboration and communication between the health and local government sectors. Over the next 12 months the group will examine issues related to urban planning within the local government setting.
- The Human Services Chief Executive Officers Group has implemented a number of innovative cross-sectoral (including the NGO sector) initiatives^{7,8}; that can contribute to models for healthy planning.
- The NSW Premier’s department’s ‘strategic projects division’ assists development of ‘state-wide capacity to manage complex projects and issues’⁹ through collaboration

and partnership with community groups, Government agencies and the business sector. Among a number of relevant projects, the division oversees the 'Regional Coordination Program', that supports Regional Coordination Management Groups consisting of regional managers of state government agencies, including Planning agencies, to 'prioritise and manage' issues impacting on communities.

- The Premier's Council for Active Living, as the primary inter-sectoral body for promoting physical activity in NSW¹⁰, aims to build and strengthen the physical and social environments in which communities engage in active living.

Key Focus Area Three:

Strengthen existing regulatory and accountability frameworks to incorporate health and wellbeing as core components of sustainable planning in NSW.

Recommendations for Action:

Strengthen existing frameworks in NSW to encourage planning for healthy and sustainable communities by:

- *as part of the review of the Public Health Act, including a clause providing the Chief Health Officer the power to inquire into the health impacts of major policy or projects as part of the review of the Public Health Act;*
- *NSW Health working with the planning sector to review existing guidance on Environmental Impact Assessment to more explicitly include consideration of health impacts;*
- *building health and well-being as a function within the Charter of Local Government and sustainable communities into the mission statement of NSW Health.*

Rationale:

Existing legislative structures and frameworks can provide mechanisms to encourage and give legitimacy to working towards healthy urban planning. Improved articulation of health and wellbeing considerations within the core business of other departments and agencies involved in planning will place health as a key sustainability issue.

Key focus area Four:

The creation of a coordinating healthy planning unit at the state level

Recommendation for Action:

Establish an 'Urban Planning' unit within that part of NSW Department of Health, funded by NSW Health with contributions from stakeholder agencies on a project basis. Core functions of the Unit would be:

- *coordinating broader healthy planning policies into action at the appropriate levels of health, planning and local government sectors;*
- *identifying opportunities for inter-sectoral work and the appropriate points within each sector to progress work on healthy urban planning;*
- *gather evidence on best practice across NSW, nationally and internationally;*
- *providing resources on the health impacts of planning- and local government-related activities;*
- *media liaison; and*
- *developing capacity to work on healthy urban planning within Area Health Services.*

Rationale:

For health and planning to engage and make well-informed contribution to healthy planning, organisational and workforce capacity needs to be built. This would include establishment of an 'Urban Planning' unit within that part of NSW Department of Health, funded by NSW Health and other stakeholder agencies on a project basis. This unit will be the central action

arm for higher level strategic committees and groups to feed into, dealing specifically with Healthy Public Policy, and developing identifiable capacity to work on healthy urban planning within Area Health Services.

A similar model has been implemented by the NHS in London ¹¹.

Key Focus Area Five:

The collection and use of evidence on healthy planning.

Recommendations for Action:

NSW Health to resource a clearinghouse of evidence on healthy urban planning

Rationale:

Good quality and accessible evidence was recognised as an important platform for effective action on healthy urban planning. There is a significant amount of evidence existing and emerging on the health impacts of urban planning in NSW and elsewhere. A sound program of evidence gathering and dissemination, supported by all key stakeholders, is required. As the evidence base increases it will be important to create a clearinghouse for this to become easily accessible for both health and planning professionals.

Examples of types of evidence include: Grey water, buffer zones, active living

Key Focus Area Six:

NSW Health and other stakeholder develop and use guidance and tools to encourage health and wellbeing considerations within sustainable planning in NSW.

Recommendations for Action:

- *NSW Health and key stakeholders develop guidance on healthy urban planning in NSW, including:*
 - *incorporating health and wellbeing into current strategic planning processes such as: Strategic Environmental Planning Policies, Regional Environmental Plans, and Local Environmental Plans;*
 - *a guide on considerations of health and wellbeing within local government social/community/public health plans.*

- *NSW Health actively promote the use of tools that encourage health to be considered within the planning cycle, such as Health Impact Assessment, Health Risk Assessment, checklists and best practice models.*

Rationale:

Guidance and tools encourage greater consideration of health and wellbeing within planning. Guidance is more likely to be used if jointly developed and owned by a range of key stakeholders, including the private sector and the community. For local level examples see local plans developed by Kiama ¹² and Auburn ¹³. Other States and Territories have developed guidance on healthy planning that could be developed for the NSW context, for example the Heart Foundation in Victoria ¹⁴.

As an example of tools within the planning cycle, Health Impact Assessment (HIA) has been shown to be a practical tool to encourage healthy urban planning in NSW and elsewhere ¹⁵.

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