



BACKGROUND PAPER 6: Health and wellbeing

What was said during Time to Talk Canberra 2030

Health and wellbeing themes featured throughout the Time to Talk conversation. For example, when describing what the city means to them, workshop participants used words such as friendly, family, community, liveable, relaxed, safe, easy, comfortable and opportunity, which suggest a place that provides for the wellbeing of its citizens.

The key message of sustainable transport and need for alternatives to car travel suggest a desire for a healthy city, both in terms of a healthier population (walking, cycling and using public transport) and a healthier environment (reduced carbon emissions). The value that Canberrans put on the city's clean air, water and accessible green spaces also reflects a strong desire for 'health' in the fullest sense.

Definition of issue

Good health relies on a combination of physical, social and environmental factors. The World Health Organisation noted in 2010 that:

'Good health enhances quality of life, improves workforce productivity, increases the capacity for learning, strengthens families and communities, supports sustainable habitats and environments, and contributes to security, poverty reduction and social inclusion.'¹

Poor health is costly, both for the individual and for the broader community. Research by Access Economics found that doubling the rate of physical activity in the Canberra population could:

- generate \$46.7 million due to increased productivity from improved health, greater workforce participation, decreased absenteeism and reduced premature mortality
- save \$17.9 million on reduced care services
- save \$19.9 million in reduced government spending on health care, welfare payments and other health related costs.²

Role of strategic land use planning

Current research shows strong links between regular physical activity and people's mental and physical health and wellbeing. An active lifestyle can reduce the risk of some preventable diseases, including coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, obesity and some cancers; and may also lower blood pressure and prevent falls in the elderly. It also helps in managing some mental health issues.³

Planning and designing built environments which provide opportunities for people to choose more active, healthy lifestyles can have a direct impact on reducing the incidence of preventable diseases. The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) position statement 'Planning for Healthy Communities' says that:

'Planners can contribute to improving community health and wellbeing by encouraging built and natural environments that promote physical activity, spiritual, social and mental wellbeing and community safety.'⁴

To meet the Canberra 2030 objectives, strategic and statutory planning needs to:

- provide age-friendly and child-friendly facilities, infrastructure and urban design
- acknowledge the link between ecological and population health, and respond to climate hazards
- contribute to housing diversity close to facilities and services
- provide local destinations to safely walk or cycle to, like local parks or shops
- design linkages between destinations to be attractive and safe
- help reduce long term health expenditure by promoting physical activity.





What issues does the ACT Planning Strategy need to consider?

One of the goals of the Canberra Social Plan 2011 is 'good health for all' – healthy individuals participating in a healthy community. This means striving to ensure all community members are able to make healthy lifestyle choices, achieve equitable health outcomes and act as partners with their health care professionals in their own health care.⁵ As outlined in the Canberra Social Plan, the ACT Government will support health and wellbeing ('good health for all') through:

- concerted action on health promotion, early intervention, disease prevention and better integration of care in community settings
- the Capital Asset Development Plan as the ACT Government's health infrastructure program to respond to growing service demand
- promoting mental health and wellbeing in the community while funding the right mix of services
- ongoing work to attract, train and retain health care professionals
- assuring the financial future of the health care system by participating in the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission.

Active living and the built environment

Active living can be defined as a way of life that integrates physical activity into daily routines.⁶

Built environments can contribute to health and wellbeing by providing adequate areas for physical activity to help combat sedentary lifestyles and obesity. The National Preventative Health Task Force report 'Australia: the healthiest country by 2020 – National Preventative Health Strategy' supports changes to the built environment to improve the health of Australians. This echoes World Health Organisation estimates that 80% of premature heart disease, stroke and diabetes can be prevented.⁷

In the ACT in 2009, 64.9% of men and 50% of women were considered overweight or obese while 42.1% of people over 18 were classified overweight and 25.6% were classified obese. More worrying, young people and children were also showing signs of increased weight. In 2004, 16.7% of kindergarten children were overweight or obese. In 2006, a survey of Year 6 students found one on four were overweight or obese and in 2008, 19.5% of secondary students were overweight or obese.⁸ These statistics suggest that population health cannot be ignored in an integrated planning strategy.

Car dependency

Car dependency is a likely travel choice in low density urban environments, such as parts of suburban Canberra, so residents can achieve efficient travel times. In Australia, around 10% of all car trips are less than one kilometre, the equivalent of a ten minute walk, and 30% are less than three kilometres.⁹ Car dependency can also create conditions that lead people to become excessively overweight or obese.¹⁰

Canberra's current urban form and structure, with considerable distances between residential, employment and education locations, encourages travel by car rather than other, more active modes of transport such as cycling, walking or public transport. The 2006 ABS Population and Housing Survey, Journey to Work, confirms the dominance of the car driver/car passenger mode of transport to work in the ACT compared to the rest of Australia. It also indicates the lower car use by residents living in areas of high employment – North Canberra, Kingston, Barton, Belconnen and Woden town centres and their adjacent suburbs.

An active travel system

Active travel (such as walking and cycling) is increasingly recognised as a key feature of liveable cities. The incidental exercise from a walk to shops, the social benefits from meeting people on the streets and the economic benefits from slower travel, for example, minimising the costs associated with vehicle crashes, have been demonstrated in other Australian cities.

Walkability of an area is increased when there are clearly defined connections and easily understandable streets and pathway networks. Furthermore, people are more likely to walk or cycle to local centres and facilities, particularly within 400 metres, or a short five minute walk. Multiple local destinations of living or working places are an important motivator for regular walking or cycling behaviour.¹¹

An integrated approach to transport and land use planning can develop a more connected and permeable urban environment with more choices for active transport. Continuing to expand the on and off road cycle and pedestrian networks and improving infrastructure like lighting and signage will support active transport.

Where residential intensification takes place along major transport corridors and adjacent major employment nodes, residents are likely to have shorter trips, a higher proportion of which would be non-car. (For further discussion see the employment background paper).

Active ageing

A significant generational shift is occurring – the ACT has one of the fastest growing populations of people aged 65 years and over in Australia. It is expected this population group will grow from 15.8% in 2010 to 19.6% by 2020, and 22% by 2030.

The increased trend in people reaching older age and the longer life expectancy of the population have emphasised the need for the ACT to develop a strategic plan to address the future needs of our ageing population.

The 'ACT Strategic Plan for Positive Ageing 2010-2014: Towards an Age-Friendly City' states ACT residents maintain their health and wellbeing across their lifespan to allow them to age positively and to actively participate in their community as they get older.



Children and young people

The ACT Government is committed to the principles of a child friendly city, as promoted by UNICEF. Child friendly cities have a number of aspects. From a planning perspective, the more children can freely and safely move around a city, the healthier and more sustainable that city is. A high degree of independence in children is assumed to mean a safe community, because parents are happy for their children to be unsupervised in public space.

In light of concerns about increasing childhood obesity, there has been considerable research on walking to school. A comparative study of three different subdivision designs in the US found the New Urbanist inspired subdivision design was both perceived to be – and actually was in practice – more walkable than the more common subdivision which funnelled traffic from cul de sacs up to arterial roads, as is the case in Canberra.¹² ACT Health is currently conducting research of walkability focussed on the Kambah super school.

The ACT Government also has a policy focussing on children and young people, which includes a commitment to involving children and young people in decision making where appropriate.¹³

The Sustainable future program conducted a schools competition for ideas on what young people wanted for the future city of Canberra. It showed that young people were most interested in the following issues:

- balancing an increasing population with the limited space we have
- providing more energy efficient transport options
- reducing our use of water and production of waste
- increasing our use of renewable energy sources
- making our buildings more sustainable
- ensuring there are still many green spaces in Canberra.

It is clear that young people seek a vibrant, walkable and sustainable city.

Perceptions of safety

A sign of a vibrant and liveable city is how safe people feel. When women, children and the elderly feel safe in public areas, it suggests a community with low crime levels. Encouraging people to get into the city's public spaces and exercise is partly dependent on these spaces being safe. When people perceive an area or pathway is unsafe, they may avoid it and similar areas. The lack of people may then result in these areas or activities becoming even more unsafe.

One of the most effective methods of ensuring spaces are safe is to design them properly in the first place. Across the world there is increased recognition of the role good urban design plays in

reducing personal and property crime in urban areas, as well as the fear of crime. 'Crime Prevention Through Urban Environmental Design' (CPTED) is a set of planning principles that is increasingly being adopted to deter crime and improve the perception of safety. Four key CPTED principles aim to passively deter crime:

- 'natural surveillance' – designing spaces to increase activity, clear and direct pedestrian paths, streets that allow traffic to observe spaces, windows that face onto paths, streets and parks, and effective lighting
- 'natural access' – discouraging the use of unsafe areas by barriers or a change in lighting
- 'territorial reinforcement' – promoting the ownership of a space by the community and ensuring places are maintained; this also includes the clear delineation of public and private spaces
- 'target hardening' – strengthening the physical security of a site.

In 2000 the ACT Government published the 'ACT Crime Prevention and Urban Design Resource Manual' as a guide to architects, planners and developers on how to design spaces and buildings to minimise the possibility of crime. This is incorporated as a general code in the Territory Plan.¹⁴

Barriers to exercise

The major reason people give for not exercising is lack of time. This links to the issue of urban design and the promotion of mixed uses; locating commonly used local services near homes reduces the time needed in a car and promotes walking or cycling. The PIA's award winning guide, 'Healthy Spaces and Places: A national guide to designing places for healthy living' details the following:

- design principles that are the foundation stones of healthier, more active communities
- different development types where these principles can be applied
- information about how to make planning for healthier communities happen
- Australian case studies that show what is achievable and which have potentially wider application and
- links to the health and planning research and resources that support planning for active living.¹⁵

Mental health

While daily exercise is important, it is not the only contributor to health and wellbeing. People are social creatures, and regular social interaction is essential in a healthy and balanced life; communities need to be designed to promote social interaction.



Social isolation affects physical health. A recent analysis of 148 studies on social isolation and mortality statistics showed ‘a 50% increased likelihood of survival for participants with stronger social relationships.’ This study concluded the importance of social connections was equivalent to other well known health risks such as smoking.¹⁶ While the stereotypical image is of the widow or widower dying soon after their spouse, social isolation is not age dependant. A lack of social support for young people has been found to increase their risk for suicide.¹⁷

The link between mental health and the role of nature is now well understood. For example, people with access to a garden or views of nature while recuperating in hospital have quicker recoveries and need less medication.¹⁸ This work has been extended to consider how views or experiences of nature help with learning or other psychological issues. The notion is now being extended into the design of public space more generally.¹⁹ The Therapeutic Landscapes Network offers an extensive list of research citations on the role of nature in promoting good physical and mental health for all demographic groups.²⁰ Planning is not a panacea for such distressing and complex problems in health and wellbeing. However, planning’s role in promoting physical and mental health is important and can be addressed at many levels.

At the neighbourhood and street scale, where it is most relevant to liveability and wellbeing, we need to create greater diversity and choice in our living environments and public spaces. Suitable and well located residential accommodation, choices in recreation and equitable distribution of services are essential foundations to create a socially supportive and cohesive city. Respecting the rights of the individual, developing a variety of employment opportunities, creating avenues and places for social and cultural expression are less tangible but, nevertheless, still critical attributes for health and wellbeing.

Risk from natural hazards

A new concern in planning is the impact on the health of citizens of natural hazards and extreme events, which are likely to be more frequent under climate change. Hotter, drier conditions will translate into more frequent and intense heatwaves, while bushfire frequency is also predicted to rise. Research for Melbourne has shown that night-time temperatures are likely to be consistently elevated.²¹ The role of urban form in reducing the impact of heatwaves is significant.

Predicted changes in our climate have obvious implications for our liveability and wellbeing, with more extreme weather events potentially damaging our infrastructure and houses and disrupting our access to food and other resources. An increase in bushfire risk, days of extreme heat and severe storm events will affect the more vulnerable groups in our community – the elderly, young children and low income – as they have the least capacity to adapt. Just as it is important to create accessible and inviting public spaces, the more our city can introduce measures that mitigate or ameliorate such risks, the more secure and pleasant our city will be for all its citizens.

Things to think about

At the broader scale, our continued liveability will be dependent on what we can afford as a community; to this end we must measure the long term financial and environmental costs of our city, not just the investment costs. Issues around retaining and enhancing our liveability and wellbeing are being considered in the design of our new suburban areas, but must also be addressed in our existing areas.

Challenges in the future design of the city include:

- creating opportunities to make physical activity a convenient, integral part of our lives
- easy interaction with the natural environment and with each other
- providing safety and a sense of security
- controlling exposure to noise, extreme temperatures, air pollution and ultraviolet radiation.

Given the complex range of factors which can contribute to good health, it is important to work together to consider health outcomes.



Further reading

For planning for health and the built environment:

<http://www.healthyplaces.org.au>

For information about the Australian National Preventive Health Agency:

www.anpha.gov.au

For broad discussion of child-friendly cities:

<http://www.childfriendlycities.org/>

For information about age-friendly cities:

www.who.int/ageing/ade_friendly_cities

www.cotansw.com.au

Endnotes

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- 5 ACT Social Plan 2011 www.cmd.gov.au p25
- 6 Australian Local Government Association, Heart Foundation of Australia, Planning Institute of Australia (2009) *Healthy Spaces and Places: A national guide to designing places for healthy living* <http://www.planning.org.au/policy/policy-guides> and <http://www.healthyplaces.org.au/site/>
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- 8 ACT Healthy Children's Initiative: A proposed approach 2010/11 – 2014/15.
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- 14 ACT Planning and Land Authority (2009) *Crime Prevention through Environmental Design General Code* <http://www.legislation.act.gov.au/ni/2008-27/copy/79522/pdf/2008-27.pdf>
- 15 Australian Local Government Association, Heart Foundation of Australia, Planning Institute of Australia (2009) *Healthy Spaces and Places: A national guide to designing places for healthy living* <http://www.planning.org.au/policy/policy-guides> and <http://www.healthyplaces.org.au/site/>
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- 17 National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy – Setting the evidence-based research agenda for Australia (A literature review), Department of Health and Aged Care, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1999.p238
- 18 Cooper Marcus, Clare and Marni Barnes, Eds. (1999). *Healing Gardens: Therapeutic Benefits and Design Recommendations*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
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- 21 Coutts, A, Beringer, J and Tapper, N, Investigating the climatic impact of urban planning strategies through the use of regional climate modelling: A case study for Melbourne, Australia, *International Journal of Climatology*, vol 28, 2008, pp 1943–1957.