

Centre for Primary Health Care and Equity

Research that makes a difference

**Influencing Healthy Planning and
Policy Development**

in

Local Government:

Summary Report



Suggested Reference

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Executive summary

This summary report outlines the main findings and recommendations from a research project investigating how 'Healthy Planning' fits within contemporary strategic and land use planning activities in NSW local Councils and Shires (herein Local Councils). A descriptive case study approach was taken, based on naturalistic inquiry investigating the reality of current Council activity - which may or may not explicitly recognise healthy planning principles. The focus of the research was first on the progress of plans or policies relating to healthy planning within Councils and second on participants understanding concerning healthy planning principles. Two Councils of the 41 Metropolitan Sydney Councils were involved in the research. The two councils identified key organisational documents relating to healthy planning, firstly a policy, and within the second council a plan, to be the focus of the research.

11 interviews with a range of council staff involved in the policy and plan formed the basis of the research data collection, supported by a review of relevant documents. Participants were first asked questions relating to the development and progress of the policy and plan in councils. They were then asked questions directly related to healthy planning principles identified in the 'Healthy Spaces and Places' project developed by the Planning Institute of Australia, the Heart Foundation, and the Australian Local Government Association. Data were analysed to provide the Heart Foundation with a practical understanding of the reality of progressing policies and plans within Councils and the reality of progressing healthy planning principles within Councils.

The main implication of the research for the Heart Foundation is to build on its recognised credibility as an influential non-Government organisation that has strong connections to the community. The Heart Foundation is therefore in a position to take a leadership role in working with communities, local Councils and other sectors to influence the planning of healthy environments that affect the lives, wellbeing and health of communities in NSW and nationally. This requires going beyond the provision of healthy planning principles to actively working with communities to influence their local Councils, providing local support for Councils to include healthy planning in their business, and taking an advocacy role at the state government level.

The main findings of the research against each research question were as follows:

- **What influences the development and progress of plans and policies within Councils?**

The development and progress of the plan and policy in Council followed a cycle of stages, with opportunities for the Heart Foundation to influence each stage.

'Getting the issue on the agenda' involves:

- influencing, or linking to, how Council sees and wants to market itself, and communicate its business, to the community and others.
- influencing the local community, raising the profile of healthy planning in the media, and influencing the policy development and planning and development assessment requirements issued by the State Government.
- recognising that healthy planning appears connected to a current shift in Councils toward strategic as well as operational policy development and planning.
- awareness that the issue is on the agenda once it is adopted within the management plan, or equivalent, of Council.

‘Developing policies or plans’ requires:

- champions across Council who are skilled, knowledgeable and motivated to undertake and support the work.
- understanding other policies and plans being developed in Council to avoid duplication and look for gaps.
- getting buy-in from other Council sections and the community by encouraging them to comment on the policy or plan.

‘Supporting Council to adopt policies or plans’ requires

- being tactical when positioning the document within the structure of Council.
- framing issues as a good news story for the Council.
- getting buy in from Councillors to adopt the document and from the executive to assist the document reaching Councillors.

‘Implementation of policies or plans’ requires linking the issues in the policy or plan to Council’s operational activities and sections responsible for these activities.

- **What aspects of healthy planning principles do Councils consider when developing policies and plans? What language do Councils use concerning the principles?**

Both the policy and plan contained elements of the healthy planning principles. However participants were generally not familiar with the principles. There was felt to be overlap between the principles and other principles such as crime prevention. All participants felt that the language used in the ‘Healthy Spaces and Places’ principles was similar to that used in Councils. However they also expressed a need to move away from jargon to providing practical and relevant local detail and information. It was suggested that the state of knowledge concerning healthy planning is such that there needs to be a streamlining of the increasing numbers of guides that are being developed so that the messages are clear and not conflicting.

- **What information do Councils use to guide the preparation of plans and policies?**

Both Councils carried out extensive research using a range of relevant information to inform the plan and policy.

- **Where do Councils go for technical advice and support when preparing their plans?**

Technical input from in-house colleagues was the main source of support. A range of other support was also discussed, including the Heart Foundation Local Government Awards. Information, evidence and data demonstrating the links between healthy planning and health outcomes was highlighted as important but currently absent. The suggestion was made that the Heart Foundation was in a good position to take on an advocacy and lobbying role to ensure the state government considers healthy planning.

- **How do Councils monitor and evaluate the implementation of their plans?**

Participants across both Councils felt that monitoring and evaluation was something that could be focussed on more and improved.

- **What are the similarities and differences between the two Councils that are relevant to the progression of healthy planning principles?**

Both Councils are similar in size, location and population diversity. The reported differences are principally due to the differences between developing plans and policies. In relation to the healthy planning principles both Councils are subject to significant pressure to develop new release areas as they are on the urban fringe of Sydney. However there is recognition of the need to focus more on developing existing areas to provide long term balanced growth.

Recommendations for the Heart Foundation

The Heart Foundation is recommended to work at three levels: State Government, Local Government, and internally. The main recommendations at each level are:

State Government
<p>For an entry point to working at the NSW State Government level, the Heart Foundation should conduct a review of previous strategic documents for inclusion of health, healthy planning and related concepts such as wellness, wellbeing, health inequalities and the determinants of health.</p>
<p>Based on the results of this review, the Heart Foundation should aim to influence the inclusion of healthy planning principles in future strategic documents, such as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • regional plans • 10 year community strategic plans • NSW Growth Centre Commission plans (now situated within the Department of Planning)
<p>To achieve a goal of influencing the State Government to progress healthy planning, the Heart Foundation should use its position as a respected Non-Government Organisation to take an advocacy role for healthy planning at the State (and Federal) levels. This should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying to support or improve the activities of the State Government (for example the master planning associated with the Growth Centre’s Commission, the NSW Department of Planning and the NSW Department of Local Government) that facilitate or constrain the ability of local government to implement healthy planning, • Influencing the state government to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ facilitate the inclusion of healthy planning principles as standard practice for developers in NSW, and ▪ to provide incentives for developers to retrofit older areas in ‘urban fringe’ Councils that are subject to pressure to develop new release areas to balance long term growth and infrastructure provision.

Local Government

For an entry point to working with NSW Local Government, the Heart Foundation should identify Councils across NSW to work with by reviewing current management plans or equivalent (including future 10 year community plans that will replace management plans) for the inclusion of healthy planning principles or related concepts such as wellness, wellbeing, health inequalities and the determinants of health. This should be updated every 5 years.

Once this review has identified potential Councils to work with, the Heart Foundation should work locally with Councils to:

- uncover:
 - i. what other plans and policies connecting to healthy planning principles exist or are being developed (for example social plans, recreation strategies),
 - ii. the involvement, interest and capability of various Council sections that have a role in progressing healthy planning, and
 - iii. what value the inclusion of healthy planning principles can add to Council's policy and planning processes
- identify how healthy planning principles can be incorporated in strategic planning and operational activities – for example policies promoting wellbeing and 10 year community plans, Master Plans, Local Environment Plans, Development Control Plans, Development Assessments, Social and other impact assessments.
- identify if technical support is required, including the provision of data and information assistance at a local level to inform the monitoring and evaluation of plans and policies.
- provide support for healthy planning across the business of one or two Councils, leading to case studies of good healthy planning practice in NSW
- facilitate the use of health impact assessments on local Council policies or plans

To influence awareness and incorporation of healthy planning by Councils, the Heart Foundation should develop a marketing strategy concerning healthy planning and local government. This strategy should focus on the added value of health planning for Councils, for example specifying improved outcomes for community wellbeing and encouraging healthy planning in Councils' business as a positive news story. The strategy should focus on the following:

- developing a media communications plan oriented at local Councils (but including the influence of State Government),
- developing a community information strategy concerning healthy planning and the role of local government tailored to different groups in the community (e.g. elderly, youth, people with disability, CALD, unemployed). This should include community advocacy strategies such as the communities' influence on and input into Council's policy development and planning,
- engaging with Councils' executive and middle management, for example through workshops, to make clear links between generic principles with strategic implications and their practical 'on the ground' value for Councils.

Heart Foundation Internally

The Heart Foundation should invest in building further internal capacity to undertake cross-sectoral healthy planning work. This should be in addition to developing and synthesising the evidence base linking healthy planning and heart disease.

To take a leadership role in streamlining the increasing number of guidelines and information sources concerning healthy planning principles, the Heart Foundation should:

- identify agencies nationally and in NSW that are developing guidelines and/or information concerning healthy planning principles, for example Crime Prevention By Design, NSW Bicycle Guidelines,

- investigate the possibility of streamlining all guidance and / or consistently incorporating healthy planning principles into these

A suite of projects and activities are recommended to encourage healthy planning in NSW:

- continue and extend the Heart Foundations local government awards, enhancing the financial component for best practice,
- provide a regularly updated information clearinghouse of a range of information, research and data concerning healthy planning principles,
- commission research to generate local evidence concerning the links the healthy planning principles to health outcomes,
- develop tools to enable local Councils to generate local data concerning healthy planning in their LGA, and incorporate in the information clearinghouse.

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