



HEALTHY BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

Regional opportunities and resources to assist

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Regional Australia is often forgotten and wrongly marginalised in a nation largely focused on the urban. This is particularly the case in relation to healthy built environments which can be challenging to implement at the regional level. Vast distances and hot dry conditions reinforce this. But the regions offer many opportunities for planners to work alongside communities and health colleagues to create health supportive places.

Back in 2017, I wrote about some of the major health challenges for rural and regional communities, highlighting that rates of chronic disease are greater.¹ Residents who do not live in cities are

more likely to exhibit risk factors for these diseases, including being overweight and having low rates of physical activity. And to make matters worse, those in rural and regional areas have poorer access to a range of medical services compared

to their urban counterparts. This reality reinforces the urgent and ongoing need to create health supportive environments across regional Australia.

Healthy planning in the regions

The Hunter New England Local Health District (LHD) has made a significant contribution to promoting regional health and wellbeing with its 'Liveable Communities Program'.² Focusing on 'liveability' in the region's neighbourhoods, towns and cities, there are four principles at the centre of this Program: connectivity; sustainability; accessibility; and flexibility. The legacy of this work is a comprehensive suite of



Figure 1: Unique and beautiful natural landscapes in regional Australia support healthy living – this coastal path on the NSW North Coast encourages recreational use by walkers and cyclists of every age. (Source: Author)

guidelines, all freely available via the web, to assist regional planners implement health supportive built environments.

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Northern NSW has also been actively advocating for healthy built environments for well over a decade. The LHD's 'Healthy Places and Spaces' webpage includes initiatives championing local healthy food availability, active transport, smoke-free outdoor spaces and healthy planning of towns and neighbourhoods.³ Of further interest is the collaboration between the LHD, the Heart Foundation and Bellingen Shire Council. This resulted in specific healthy planning provisions being added to local planning instruments and a focus on active transport in the region to support non-car-based travel.⁴ In December last year, the LHD held a community forum bringing together a range of stakeholders including local government planners, health providers and community organisations to reflect on successes and future challenges.

And covering the entire state, the NSW Government Architect (GA) has recently released 'Draft Urban Design Guidelines' for regional centres.⁵ This is part of the 'Better Placed' suite of documents, including 'Greener Places'. Further, the Guidelines strongly reaffirm the commitment of the GA to healthy place making, noting that they are 'A guide for creating healthy built environments in regional NSW'.

The Guide links with the Department of Planning and Environment's nine regional plans beyond Sydney and emphasises diversity in the natural landscapes, climatic conditions and communities who live and work in regional localities. The Guide sets out seven urban design priorities for the regions encompassing historic cultural assets; integration with natural landscapes; revitalisation of town centres; balancing urban growth and responsiveness to climate impacts. In terms of healthy living priorities, connectivity, walkability and cycling are emphasised.

Specific regional contexts are provided, and in the future, case studies will be developed. This is an exciting initiative with the potential to enhance the importance and effectiveness of good regional planning in NSW. As it is a draft, comments are still being collected, so have your say in shaping the final document.

Caring for Country

An important component of regional planning is the continuing connection of Indigenous communities to the land. The GA's Regional Guidelines recognise this, as well as acknowledging the belief of Aboriginal people that 'if we care for Country, it will care for us'. A recent 'Lancet' editorial strongly reinforces this truth, making the point that while 'Land, culture, and health are inextricably entwined in many Indigenous societies the intensity of depth of spiritual connection to land... is unique to Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples'.⁶ Those creating healthy places in diverse regional localities must recognise the centrality of Country, and work to bring everyone from the community together in order to address regional challenges and embrace the many opportunities ■

Endnotes

- ¹ Thompson, S. 2017 'Healthy Built Environments: Beyond the city – supporting health in regional and rural localities', New Planner, September: 24-25.
- ² <http://www.hnehealth.nsw.gov.au/hnep/communities/Pages/Liveable%20communities.aspx>
- ³ <https://nswlhd.health.nsw.gov.au/health-promotion/healthy-places-and-spaces/>
- ⁴ <https://www.healthyplaces.org.au/userfiles/file/Case%20Studies/Case%20Study%20-%20Healthy%20Planning%20Bellingen.pdf>
- ⁵ <https://www.governmentarchitect.nsw.gov.au/guidance/regional-urban-design>
- ⁶ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(18\)30266-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(18)30266-3/fulltext)

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