



Heart
Foundation

Bellingen Shire Council

Healthy Planning



Healthy plan making



Overview

This case study describes the outcome of a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to healthy planning. It illustrates an example of how a regional council, on the North Coast of NSW, with modest prospects of growth can fund appropriate changes to the urban form, through the incorporation of healthy planning principles within standard planning policies and instruments.

Overall this action has increased active living opportunities for local community members, contributing to their longer term better health. Specific information on how this has been achieved is detailed to provide assistance to other councils that might be interested in this approach.

The inter-sectoral collaboration between Bellingen Shire Council and the North Coast Area Health Service, and facilitated by the Heart Foundation has enhanced integration between planning and health disciplines. This in turn has forged positive working relationships and introduced new ways of thinking to both Council and Area Health Service staff.

The benefits for both organisations are significant. For Bellingen Shire Council, this approach has assisted Council to deliver on its Management Plan goals of community wellbeing, sustainable growth and enhanced quality of life. For Health Service staff, the relationship with Council has provided a new way of achieving practical changes to the built environment that have the potential to deliver significant public health benefits.

Theme – Healthy Plan Making

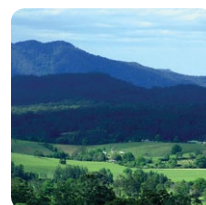
There is a clear link between the health of people and their environments. The environments in which we live influence not only our levels of physical activity but also our food choices, safety, social connection and participation, and exposure to pollutants. These in turn are key factors in understanding the incidence of many contemporary health problems from obesity, diabetes and heart disease, to some cancers, depression, injury and asthma.¹

The way in which environments influence physical activity is well documented. City and neighbourhood planning and design elements, such as street layout, land use and transport systems affect whether or not it is easy for people to walk or cycle to participate in active recreation, active transport or use public transport.²

In Australia, Local Governments have the power to legislate within their own jurisdictions to modify the built environment through planning controls, the effects of which can be long lasting. In NSW, these powers exist in regard to Local Environment Plans (LEP) and Development Control Plans (DCP). As a consequence these plans can play a crucial role in promoting healthy lifestyles by creating opportunities for active living and social connection, as well as delivering initiatives that are tailored to local community needs. Partnerships with public health professionals assist to connect planning and health at the local level, and create healthy, sustainable, evidence based planning policies into the future.³

Special Features

- A strong emphasis on inter-sectoral collaboration between planning and health, which was initially fostered during a Healthy Planning Workshop hosted by the NSW Premiers Council for Active Living on the North Coast of NSW.
- Inclusion of specific healthy planning provisions in a number of Council's planning instruments, such as their LEP, DCP, Developer Contributions Plans and Pedestrian Access and Mobility Plan.
- Introduction of innovative planning controls which provide funding for the construction of sustainable infrastructure (cycleways, footpaths, shared paths etc) and community facilities. This is particularly important for a small regional Council like Bellingen, which has limited developer contributions and thus reduced scope to fund new work.
- Initiatives that have been designed for the local context. For example, Bellingen, like many regional areas is not well served by public transport, with most residents reliant on private vehicles to travel outside or between the main towns in the Shire. However considerable effort was made by the Council to reduce car reliance in the local town centres, by increasing active transport options so that people can walk or cycle from their homes to local shops and services.





Funding

Infrastructure funding has been provided for through the introduction of a number of provisions in Bellinghen Shire Council's planning controls. These include:

- **Draft Bellinghen Town Centre Public Domain Developer Contributions Plan 2010**

Bellinghen Shire Council's blanket requirement of commercial developments to provide for car parking (formerly in *Off Street Vehicle Parking Code – DCP1*) has been removed, with only major new developments needing to provide additional parking (*Clause 5.6.1 – Bellinghen Shire Development Control Plan 2010*). This change creates an opportunity to levy commercial developments, not for parking but for alternative public facilities that support healthy planning goals, through the *Draft Public Domain Developer Contributions Plan*. This includes facilities that promote useability and accessibility of CBD areas for pedestrians and cyclists, such as seating, drinking fountains, bicycle racks, street trees and shade structures etc. In this way, developer contributions can help to create a more pedestrian-friendly public domain, and support broader healthy planning goals.

- **Local Roads and Traffic Infrastructure Developer Contributions Plan**

The cost of car parking for the Shire as a whole has been reviewed and an appropriate levy included in the *Local Roads and Traffic Infrastructure Developer Contributions Plan*, with the cost distributed across all local residential development, rather than required of a small number of commercial developments.

This plan levies contributions from developers for 'on-road' infrastructure improvements (including on-road cycleways and footpaths), with items included in the proposed project schedule that will help improve the local road network for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users.

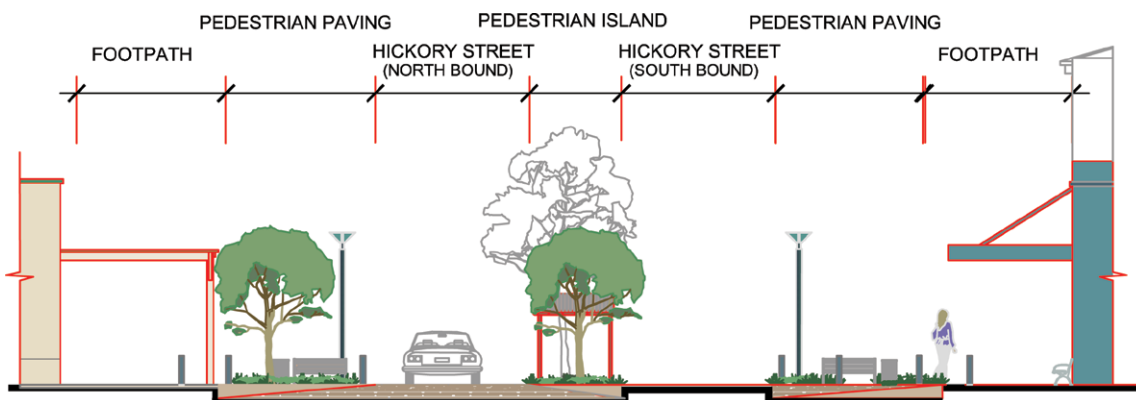
- **Community Facilities and Open Space Developer Contributions Plan**

Under this plan, approximately 80 per cent of the adopted rate will be allocated to the construction of a network of shared off-road pathways (suitable for walking, cycling and electric scooters). This decision was made following an assessment of existing community infrastructure and likely future demand from the local community. The plan also provides for improvements in parkland, such as shaded plantings, park furniture, mulch, paving, signage, drinking fountains etc. This, together with the provision of connecting pathways, aims to make existing parks and recreation areas more attractive and accessible.

Costs

Costs for capital expenditure on open space and landscape infrastructure have been funded through the above mentioned funding streams. To gain an accurate estimate of the implementation costs, item costs were calculated then combined to provide an estimated square metre rate for each project.

Infrastructure maintenance costs are ongoing, not provided for by the developer contributions funding, and have been written into the recurrent Council budget, to be reviewed and updated over time.



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Outcomes

Plans and Policy

Belling Local Environmental Plan 2010

Opportunities to insert locally developed provisions into the LEP are generally limited by a need to meet the Department of Planning's 'standard instrument' requirements, and use the Department's model clauses. However some specific clauses that strengthen the statutory basis for healthy planning have been included, such as:

- The requirement that DCPs for urban release areas must provide for 'an overall transport movement hierarchy showing the major circulation routes and connections to achieve a simple and safe movement system for private vehicles, public transport, pedestrians and cyclists', and also for 'a network of passive and active recreational areas'.
- The LEP also makes neighbourhood shops permissible within residential areas (to encourage people to walk to a local shop rather than driving to the town centre).

Council sees these provisions as providing broad support for the healthy planning approach specified at the DCP level.

Belling Shire Development Control Plan 2010 provisions

The recently adopted DCP provides design criteria for new development that aims to move away from the planning trends of recent decades, where new subdivisions featured poor connectivity, and will instead create an environment that encourages walking and cycling. The Heart Foundation's publication, *Healthy by Design: a planner's guide to environments for active living*, was used to identify possible provisions, which include:

- Creating a legible street layout and improving connectivity by returning to a grid-style pattern for layout of new streets and restricting use of cul-de-sacs (*Clause 3.7.5(a) & (b) – Subdivision pattern & connectivity*).

- Requiring lots to face public open space to improve passive surveillance and safety for pedestrians and park users (*Clause 3.7.5(c) – Subdivision pattern & connectivity*).
- Providing footpaths or shared pathways of sufficient width and quality to allow safe and comfortable passage for people in wheelchairs, people with prams, learner cyclists and people walking comfortably side by side (*Clause 3.7.6 – Infrastructure requirements: Footpaths and/or shared footpaths & cycleways*).
- Providing passive surveillance and safety for pedestrians through subdivision design (*Clause 3.7.3 Lot orientation and frontages*) and dwelling design (*Clause 1.6.5 & Clause 2.6.8 - Urban Design*) that results in dwellings addressing and overlooking the street frontage.
- Removing car-parking requirements for minor commercial developments in CBD areas (*Clause 5.6.1 Parking requirements within designated CBD areas of Urunga, Belling and Dorrigo*) to reduce the focus on vehicles in these areas and provide an alternative mechanism to levy for pedestrian friendly improvements.

Pedestrian Access and Mobility Plan (PAMP)

The importance of achieving a connected pedestrian network has led to Council focusing on addressing 'missing links' within the overall network, and prioritising those provisions in the PAMP to improve the accessibility and legibility of the pedestrian network as a whole.

Developer Contributions Planning

See Funding.

Benefits

- Healthy planning principles have been embedded in Council planning policies, which have the potential to provide significant public health benefits for many years to come.
- Given that healthy planning issues span across a variety of Council departments, the approach has helped to increase communication between different groups of staff within Council.

"The healthy planning work has helped to set up a pattern of communication across the Council. I think it's happened with healthy planning, because you've got the planning aspects of it, you've got the contribution plans, but you've also got the on-ground delivery of the outcomes which is traditionally an engineering role."

– Council Strategic Planner

- The healthy planning collaboration has strengthened the relationship between Bellingen Shire Council and the North Coast Area Health Service. An 'ongoing connection' has been established which has led to collaboration on various presentations and other projects following on from the initial healthy planning work.
- Council staff feel that the project and the newly developed relationship with the Area Health Service has helped build their evidence base on how town planning can contribute to health outcomes, while providing increased credibility to their planning:

"Some of the things that we're doing will significantly change the way that development is done in this area. And it's at that point where I think it will be good for Council to have the support of the Heart Foundation and Area Health Service to say, 'look, these are the reasons why'. It will add that extra level of legitimacy and credibility."

– Council Strategic Planner

- For Area Health Service staff, the process of collaboration has helped identify opportunities to make some of their existing health initiatives more effective by working with Council.
- The healthy planning initiatives have created an opportunity for council and community groups to work positively together, with the healthy planning initiatives being well supported by the community.

Equity and Access

Accessibility was an important consideration in the review of Council planning policies, as reflected in Bellingen Shire Council's *Community facilities and open space developer contribution plan*, which provides a clear rationale for the emphasis on funding connected and accessible shared pathways:

*'As the Shire's population continues to age future demand is likely to be focused on the provision of services and facilities that support improved access and mobility. [...] The increased use of personal mobility scooters and need to assist the less able in the community to lead independent lives through the provision of dual use share ways, highlights the importance of developing and constructing an all weather off street path network.'*⁴

Ongoing Monitoring

As part of the *Community Facilities and Open Space Developer Contributions Plan*, funding was allocated to the *Bellingen Shire Open Space & Community Facilities Study*, which provides a shire-wide assessment of current provision and future demand for community and recreation facilities in order to help guide future planning and allocation of developer contributions.

It provides a basic quality assurance system by identifying key projects for future funding, setting target completion dates and management structures. The draft study which has a focus on achieving healthy planning outcomes, has been publicly exhibited and will be finalised in 2011.

A further proposed initiative is the development of a healthy living information package for land purchasers. As part of this, an audit of existing facilities such as footpath networks will be undertaken. This will provide a 2011 benchmark against which the footpath and open space network can be compared in years to come as development proceeds, funds are collected and works completed in accordance with relevant Contributions Plans.

Sustainability

The impact of these healthy planning controls will be significant and long lasting in their effect. Not only have healthy planning principles been integrated into Council planning policy, but funding mechanisms for the development of the necessary infrastructure have also been established.

Through the ongoing relationship developed by this work, a number of further initiatives to progress healthy planning in the local area have been identified, including:

- **Community Strategic Plan**

Although still being refined, some of the key objectives emerging in the new ten year strategic plan that Council is developing in line with recent NSW Division of Local Government requirements, include items relating to local food production, the connectivity of urban environments and the importance of quality open space.

- **Healthy living information for land purchasers**

When Council issues a Section 149 certificate (a requirement of the Conveyancing process), it could be accompanied by a local information package highlighting walking and cycling paths, parks, public open space, bus stops and so on, with the aim of encouraging new residents to use these facilities. Council is currently considering the possibility of this project being completed by a student planner as part of a work experience placement.

- **Community gardens**

During the project, both Council and Area Health Service staff members became involved in the Local Food Futures Alliance. Council is now in discussion with local community members about the establishment of a community garden in Bellingen.

Learnings

A number of factors appear to have enabled the success of this project:

- Healthy planning is supported by a number of Bellingen Shire Council plans, including the current Management Plan, which aims to achieve 'Sustainable growth, conservation of environmental resources and enhanced quality of life' and 'Community wellbeing and equitable access to adequate community services and facilities'.⁵
- The timing of the collaboration coincided with Council's review of planning controls, as required by NSW Government planning reforms. This presented a perfect opportunity to incorporate healthy planning principles as part of this review.
- Both Bellingen Shire Council and NCAHS staff agreed that the facilitation role of the Heart Foundation was beneficial to the project, as it helped to bridge the gap between local government planning expertise and health expertise. They also agreed that the decision to set up a regular meeting schedule between the projects partners, gave the project momentum and individual accountability.
- As many proposed works are dependant upon the future levying of developer contributions, a lack of development activity will obviously affect timeframes for the delivery of these projects. Council may need to investigate alternative strategies should this occur.
- To date, the prevailing community attitude towards the use of public land for alternative forms of recreation, such as community gardens has been mixed. It is hoped that any establishment of such a garden is accepted as a legitimate use of community land. This issue may be mitigated in the future if the land is expressly reserved for this purpose at the DCP / Master plan or subdivision stage, ensuring surrounding landowners are aware of the proposed use at purchase.



Resources

- Healthy Spaces and Places: a national guide to designing places for healthy living
www.healthyplaces.org.au
- Healthy By Design: a planner's guide to environments for active living
www.heartfoundation.org.au/active_by_design
- Development and Active Living: Designing Projects for Active Living.
A Development Assessment Resource and Navigational Tool
www.pcal.nsw.gov.au/local_government

References

1. Capon AG and Dixon JM, 'Creating healthy, just and eco-sensitive cities', NSW Public Health Bulletin, Vol. 18; Nos. 3-4, 2007, pp: 37-40.
2. Australian Local Government Association, National Heart Foundation of Australia and Planning Institute of Australia 'Healthy Spaces and Places: A national guide to designing places for healthy living' Planning Institute of Australia, August 2009. Available at: www.healthyplaces.org.au
3. Thompson S, 'A planner's perspective on the health impacts of urban settings', NSW Public Health Bulletin, Vol. 18; Nos. 9-10, 2007, pp: 157-160.
4. Bellingen Shire Council: Community facilities and open space developer contribution plan p. 21.
5. Bellingen Shire Council: Management Plan 2010 – 2014.

Acknowledgements

The Heart Foundation would like to thank Bellingen Shire Council and the North Coast Area Health Service for their contribution to this resource.





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