

Urban Environments

Introduction

The following is a position statement on urban environments prepared by Population Health for Waikato District Health Board (Waikato DHB).

The Waikato District Health Board's position

The Waikato DHB supports urban environment related initiatives that incorporate healthy urban planning strategies that consider the potential to improve health and wellbeing and create health supporting urban environments. The Waikato DHB encourages territorial authorities to consider the public health risks as well as the potential for positive health and wellbeing gain, when looking at urban environment/development initiatives.

The Waikato DHB will provide public health advice to regional/territorial authorities and other key stake holders to help positively influence the planning and development of healthy urban environments in matters such as roading, air pollution, access to services and social cohesion. The Waikato DHB believes that health impact assessment can support the development of urban environments that positively impact upon the health and wellbeing of the population living in these communities and help to minimise potential public health risks.

When the Waikato DHB is involved in supporting urban environment-related matters, the focus will be on providing support and information in areas where there is potential for greatest health gain to be realised. The Waikato DHB has expertise within its organisation which would be able to consult with transport agencies to undertake health impact assessments as part of policy development processes. The Waikato DHB supports this interaction.

Urban environments impact on health

Urban environments and roading infrastructure

The layout of streets and roads can often have an effect on health, for example, presence of cul-de-sacs can promote driving instead of walking due to the walking distances to services, and can make the provision of an efficient public bus system difficult¹. Large scale roading developments can also create greater risk of noise pollution for people living in the local area.

Urban environments and traffic, domestic and industry related air pollution

Air pollution has adverse health effects, meaning that urban environments should be created to minimise the effect of air pollution on the population by considering location of dwellings in relation to major pollution sources such as industrial activities or busy roads. However domestic heating is the main source of air pollution in the Waikato region, thus planning initiatives should also be in place to ensure clean domestic heating is used (refer Waikato DHB Position Statement: Housing and Air Quality and Waikato DHB Position Statement: Transport).

Date Issued: August 2009	Review Date: August 2012	Version 1.0
Adopted by Waikato District Health Board: 14 October 2009		Page 1 of 2

Urban environments and access to services

Quality urban environment development planning can help enable access to services, particularly for high need population groups. High standards of health care, education and training, sport and recreation facilities, arts and cultural opportunities, information communication technology and transportation should be available to all.

There are opportunities to improve the planning and access to these services in new and existing residential areas, particularly where there is a high level of disadvantage such as low socio-economic status. An ageing community, for example, will mean changing the way we provide services that impact on housing, transport and home support, allowing people to remain active and independent in their community (Refer Waikato DHB Position Statement: Transport).

Urban environments and social connectedness

The broader health and wellbeing aspect to urban environments also needs to be acknowledged. A well designed urban environment also supports good health outcomes through improved social connectedness and community cohesion. Arterial roading developments can result in community severance as they limit social networking. Public transport initiatives can be designed to help promote social connectedness by enabling people access to their friends and family.

Summary

Quality urban planning can help us avoid some of the problems of poorly designed developments experienced in the past. These problems have included: traffic congestion, overloaded urban infrastructure, a lack of distinctive cultural identity, social isolation, and reduced physical activity an identified risk factor for obesity, diabetes and heart disease”ⁱⁱ. There is also a need to ensure access to health and other services is not compromised in urban environment planning processes.

With over three quarters of the Waikato DHB population living in urban areasⁱⁱⁱ, it is important that the public health implications of living, working and playing in urban environments be considered by public health and where appropriate addressed.

In summary, urban environments need to be designed while considering the impact on health and wellbeing of the effected population, particularly those population groups most at risk of poor health outcomes (e.g. children).

ⁱ Public Health Advisory Committee. (2008). Re-thinking urban environments and health. Wellington: Public Health Advisory Committee.

ⁱⁱ Ministry for the Environment. (2005). New Zealand Urban Design Protocol. Retrieved June 16th 2009 from the ‘Ministry for the Environment’ website: <http://www.mfe.govt.nz/publications/urban/design-protocol-mar05/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Waikato DHB Population Health. (n.d.) Population Health Planning Resource 2007 - 2012. Retrieved June 17th, 2009, from ‘Waikato DHB’ website: <http://www.waikatodhb.govt.nz/file/fileid/7843>

Date Issued: August 2009	Review Date: August 2012	Version 1.0
Adopted by Waikato District Health Board: 14 October 2009		Page 2 of 2