Understanding and PROmoting Active living in Rural Tasmania: UPROAR

Summary Report

A citizen science project to identify environmental characteristics that influence walkability and physical activity in rural Tasmania

What is the issue?

The environments where people live, learn, work, play and age are important influences on physical activity, health and wellbeing. More walkable environments support more active lifestyles which decreases the risk of developing health conditions like heart disease, type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure. This is particularly important in rural areas of Australia where people are less physically active and poor health is more common.

The Local Government Association of Tasmania and Public Health Services (within the Tasmanian Department of Health) along with researchers from the Menzies Institute for Medical Research (Menzies) worked together on this project to improve their understanding of the factors influencing active living and 'walkability' in rural Tasmanian towns.

This pilot project worked with community members in three rural towns to identify priorities for improving the built and policy environment to support walkability and active living.

How has this project addressed this issue?

This project was co-designed with policy makers and used a citizen science approach, which is public participation and collaboration in scientific research with the aim to increase scientific knowledge. Participating community members identified features of their town that make it easier or harder for residents to be active. They assisted with recruitment, collected data by auditing the physical environment and local policies and programs using established tools and taking photos to capture important town features. Once the data was collated community members attended a workshop to support additional sense-making of data and priority setting and, identified strategies to support dissemination of findings. The combination of audit tools, photos and workshops provided rich data about the three towns.

What have we found?

The three rural towns in this project varied in size (population 300; 850; 2,890 respectively) and region (south, central, north-west). The audit tools measured amenities and physical features as well as policies and programs and generated a score for town-wide amenities and policies and programs. Scoring found that the presence of amenities and physical features that support walkability varied between the towns (26 -74%) while programs and policies scores were consistently low (21-26%). This may have been because the community members who completed the audits were less aware of these elements. Only the larger town had regular physical activity programs available to the community.

The two smaller towns were bisected by a main highway, creating safety concerns relating to traffic, with no measures to support pedestrians to cross. In all towns the condition of and/or lack of footpaths, lack of road shoulders, traffic speed and inadequate signage were identified as barriers to walkability.

> *Having a highway running through the middle of our town is quite dangerous.*

Accessibility for people with limited mobility was also acknowledged as a concern.

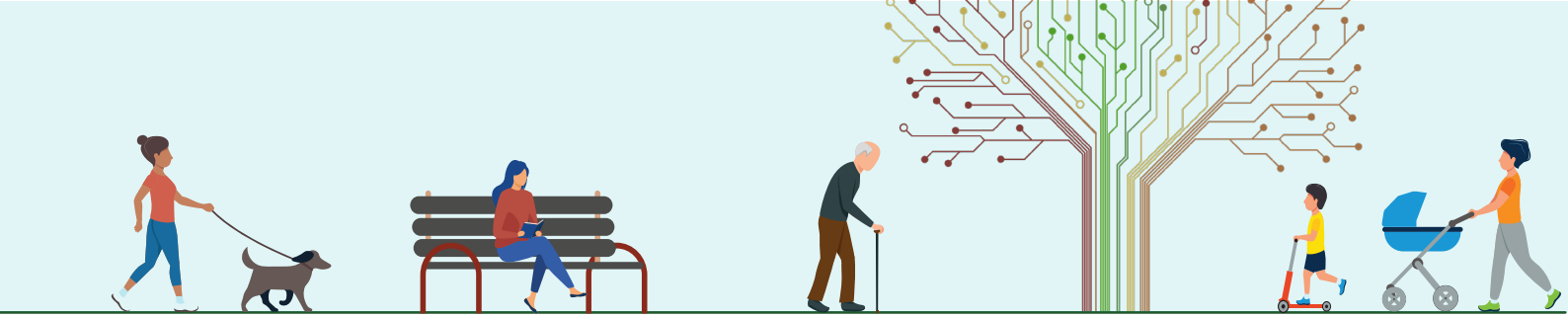
> *Bit of an issue with walkability or accessibility, as some people have wheelchairs or scooters.*

Some people identified a culture that prioritised car users.

> *Cars are far more important.*

Participants identified features such as seating, rubbish bins and dog poo bags would improve walkability.

> *We have lots of people walking dogs so extra rubbish bins along our tracks would be amazing.*



Improving connectivity between existing town features and trails was identified as the highest priority for enhancing walkability in the two towns where workshops were held.

> *Extend what we currently have. Make things link up.*

For some people this was also identified as an important mechanism for enhancing social cohesion.

> *Well it would get this side of the town engaged with the other side of the town, it would allow the young people who seem to live out this way, it would give them the safe option of community engagement as well this side of town.*

Researchers and policy makers recognise the importance of citizens in facilitating community involvement in local knowledge generation and shared priority setting, enabling support for locally identified needs. Findings from this study, can be used to inform further discussions in the towns, planning and decision-making around infrastructure and program-based resource allocation. Efforts to enhance physical and social connectivity were common priorities.

What have we produced?

As a result of this work, we have:

- produced specific reports for each of the three towns
- been invited to present findings at the 2021 Evidence and Implementation Summit in Sydney, Australia, the 2021 International Society of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity annual scientific meeting, and at the Local Government Association Tasmania annual conference and to the Public Health Services Talk series

Next steps

- secured funding from the Medical Research Future Fund for a larger project to examine walkability in rural Tasmania, including the development of an online tool to simplify data collection and generate town reports.

Conclusion

This project has shown that small rural towns can benefit from a range of features and amenities that support active living – not all of which require extensive resources. Connectivity appeared to be the overarching priority for these rural towns to improve walkability and social connection.

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Investigators

Assoc. Prof. Verity Cleland
Menzies, University of Tasmania (UTAS)

Dr Kim Jose
Menzies, UTAS

Mr Oliver Stanesby
Menzies, UTAS

Mr Dion Lester
Local Government Association of Tasmania

Dr Lynden Leppard
Local Government Association of Tasmania

Ms Kate Garvey
Public Health Services, Department of Health

UNIVERSITY of TASMANIA
MENZIES Institute for Medical Research

LGAT Local Government Association Tasmania

Tasmanian Government