

Creating Supportive Environments for Physical Activity: Encouraging Walking in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Physical activity is an important contributor to health and well being. Lack of physical activity has been implicated in a wide range of conditions including heart disease, mental health and diabetes. In recent years, increasing recognition of the benefits of regular, moderate-intensity physical activity has highlighted the role of incidental physical activity that can be incorporated into daily life, such as walking to the local shops or to school, as positive action toward achieving good health and well being.

But how easy is it for people to include such levels of physical activity in their daily lives? Research by the National Heart Foundation has shown how the physical and social environments can impact on people's ability to be out and about, on foot or by bike, in their local area. The importance for roads to be shared equitably between pedestrians, cyclists and motorists, for a mix of destinations within walking distance of people's homes and for people to feel safe in and part of the local community was highlighted by research participants.

It was apparent that designing and providing environments that enable people to lead physically active lives requires an integrated approach to planning that involves cross-sector collaboration between those disciplines responsible for structural environmental change, such as urban design, land use and transport, as well as health. Local government, as the level of government closest to local communities, plays a pivotal role in the provision of such supportive environments. Environmental, social and economic benefits are to be gained from taking action to ensure that local neighbourhoods, towns and cities support vibrant community life.

This paper will present the National Heart Foundation's Supportive Environments for Physical Activity project, which aims to increase environmental support and opportunities for people to lead physically active lives. Experience in establishing partnerships, particularly with local government, will be discussed.

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Introduction

Supportive Environments for Physical Activity (SEPA) is a project of the National Heart Foundation that aims to increase environmental support and opportunities for people to lead physically active lives, with the longer-term aim of improving cardiovascular health. It seeks to achieve this by working with local governments, other agencies and communities in planning for and providing environments that are supportive of physical activity.

The SEPA project is soundly based on qualitative research at the local community level that sought to determine how easy is it for people to be able to include physical activity in their normal daily lives. For example, is it possible for children to walk to school? Is it possible to travel to work by bicycle or by a combination of public transport and bicycle? If it is not possible, why not? What needs to change in the environment to make this possible?

SEPA promotes the structural environmental change required to make it easier for people to include walking, cycling and other incidental physical activity in their daily lives. It responds to the research in which people told us how the physical and social environments can impact on people's ability to be physically active as part of daily life. A supportive environment for physical activity is one that provides destinations for local pedestrian and cycle journeys; minimises risk of injury to pedestrians and cyclists; and provides a high standard of pedestrian and cycle facilities. Environments that enable people to be active are also socially inclusive and encourage people to feel safe in and part of their local communities.

The SEPA project, which began as a health initiative, has shown that the urbanised environment is in fact a public health issue that requires the response of a range of sectors, not just health. Land-use and transport planning are amongst those sectors that have been identified as collaborative partners to improve individual and public health.

SEPA is a long-term project since the planned impact and outcomes of the project - environmental support for physical activity and improvement in public health - are dependent on structural change that will take several years to complete.

Qualitative Research in the City of Marion, South Australia

Background

Physical activity is promoted by health authorities such as the National Heart Foundation as a desirable activity for long-term health. In line with policy based on sound research findings, the National Heart Foundation recommends regular, moderate-

intensity physical activity as positive action towards good health and well being. Physical activity has been shown to have a positive influence in a wide range of conditions including cardiovascular, mental health, some cancers, diabetes and osteoporosis.

The amount of physical activity that people actually do has been studied over the last decade in the National Heart Foundation's Risk Factor Prevalence Studies and in other studies such as the Pilot Survey of the Fitness of Australians. Despite widespread awareness and acceptance of the importance of physical activity as part of healthy behaviour, these surveys found that many Australians are not as physically active as they should be for positive health outcomes. Only about half of the adult population achieve sufficient physical activity for health benefit, with many not active at all. More recently, the SA Physical Activity Survey 1998 (Department of Human Services) has shown these trends have continued. Of concern also is the increasing trend toward overweight and obesity amongst children and youth.

These earlier surveys and studies looked at some of the reasons why people do not achieve sufficient physical activity for health benefit. Factors such as lack of time, lack of motivation and existing injury or health conditions were cited as barriers to physical activity. However, more focused research was needed into environmental factors that may influence physical activity during the course of a normal day. In recent years there has been increasing evidence and widespread recognition that any regular moderate-intensity physical activity, not only that which is deliberate sporting or intense activity, is beneficial for health. This evidence highlights the importance of regular, moderate-intensity physical activity that can be incorporated into aspects of daily life such as work, school, shopping, leisure and recreation. Current recommendations as per the National Physical Activity Guidelines for Australians (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care) are to put together at least 30 minutes or more of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, preferably all, days of the week.

SEPA reflects the 'new' public health approach that emerged in the eighties and draws on the principles of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion. The Ottawa Charter, developed by the World Health Organisation in 1986, provides a strategic framework for disease prevention and health promotion that goes beyond the traditional focus on influencing individual behaviours. The Ottawa Charter recognises that health is not just the responsibility of the health sector, that there are inextricable links between health and the environment, and that healthy public policy is crucial to allow people to be healthy.

Research methodology

The initial qualitative research that has shaped and informed the SEPA project was conducted in 1996 as a partnership between the National Heart Foundation (SA) the University of SA and Flinders University of SA, with the support of the City of Marion (a local government area of metropolitan Adelaide in South Australia).

The research was funded by a grant from the (then) Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services. Using a qualitative research methodology and framework, the views of people with direct experience of the City of Marion were sought to find out about their experience of living, working and using the facilities in and around Marion

in their daily activities. Research participants were asked to discuss their daily activity considering the following:

- What are the good things about your area?
- What do you think makes it difficult to walk or cycle (combined with public transport where necessary) to get to work, do the shopping, get your children to school or day care, for recreation, or as part of your normal daily routine?
- What would you like to see changed?
- Who (person or organisation) do you think should be responsible for these changes?
- How do you think that these changes might occur?
- How do you think you could get involved in this process?

Research findings

The research findings, published in the report, *Exercise in Daily Life: supportive environments*, show how the arrangement of community structures, services and facilities can affect the ability of people to lead physically active lives. To be out and about in their local area, people spoke of the need for footpaths, lighting, seating, shade and shelter; of the importance of somewhere to walk to, a destination like a local deli or a post box. Safe road crossings, their location and even whether the phasing of traffic lights gave sufficient time for pedestrians to cross were also mentioned. The availability of public transport was also an issue in being able to access destinations a further afield, for example, due to the demise of the corner shop or local store. Other factors such as litter, graffiti or signs of vandalism or neglect were also of import. These critical factors for active daily living were summarised as three main themes: “sharing the road” on an equitable basis between pedestrians, cyclists, motorists and other road users; having “destinations” within walking distance of people’s homes; and, “community spirit” – feeling safe in and part of local communities.

Of significance was the research participants identification of a wide-ranging set of inter-related physical and social environmental factors that highlight the role of urban design, land use and transport planning in influencing people’s ability to include incidental physical activity as part of daily life. Physical activity is increasingly being factored out of everyday living. Urban land-use and transport planning that places priority on and increases reliance on the car as the primary mode of transport, as well as other technological ‘advances’ in a number of areas have contributed to sedentary living. However, there are ways to factor physical activity into daily living.

The research in Marion indicated that in planning and providing environments (infrastructure, services and facilities) that support people to be physically active easily, if the needs of the slowest pedestrian and the learner cyclist are taken into account, many diverse issues are addressed and the environment will most likely be supportive for all.

Interpreting and acting on the research

Understanding local government responsibilities and identifying principles for collaboration.

Several key issues emerged from the research phase and form the fundamental tenets of the SEPA project. These are integrated planning, cross-sector collaboration and community participation. Designing and providing environments that support people in

leading physically active lives requires integrated planning and cross-sector collaboration between a range of disciplines responsible for structural environmental change within both the public and private sectors, including urban design, land use and transport planning. The involvement of local communities is essential to create the policy and plan action that leads to environments that are supportive of physical activity.

A key objective of the SEPA project has been to gain long term commitment by councils to action on supportive environments, recognising that local government is the level of government closest to local communities and, therefore, best placed to influence the local environment and respond to community needs.

There is an inherent and sometimes statutory responsibility for local government to inform and maintain ongoing dialogue with their communities and to facilitate local decision making. Councils are also responsible for the formulation and implementation of policies, coordination of resources and the distribution priorities for local areas, supply and maintenance of social and physical infrastructure, and administration of development assessment. These fields of responsibility ensure that local governments are critical partners in proposals to improve environmental quality.

For effective collaboration to occur SEPA identified five prerequisites:

- A shared understanding of health and the aims of the collaboration
- An approach that generates interest among the collaborative partners
- A clear understanding of the goals and activities of the organisations collaborating together
- Planning with, not for an organisation
- Recognition of the community as fundamental in the collaborative process.

Collaboration with the City of Marion

The City of Marion Council recognised the research findings as “core to council business”. Council seconded the SEPA project officer at that time to work in the council offices for 6 months to assist council in effecting change. The research findings were incorporated into Council’s “Strategic Directions” document. In addition, guidelines for environmental support for physical activity for the City of Marion were developed. A pilot project eventuated in which SEPA principles were incorporated into statutory requirements for the rezoning of an old Drive-In site in Marion to allow residential development to occur, involving amendments to the Development Plan.

Encouraging action on SEPA (SA and beyond)

Developing SEPA Guidelines for Local Government

Following the initial research phase and subsequent work with the City of Marion council, the National Heart Foundation explored the potential for a generic set of planning guidelines for supportive environments for physical activity that could be used by local governments in different localities, including interstate. This involved workshops with selected councils in South Australia, specifically the City of Salisbury, City of Campbelltown and the Rural City of Murray Bridge.

The workshop format was developed to introduce the concept, principles and issues pertaining to SEPA and to explore the potential of the guidelines as a tool to assist councils to implement SEPA in their local government area. The workshops also provide the opportunity for council staff across business units to come together to explore SEPA principles in the context of their council's particular circumstances and priorities. Feedback from councils during this phase was used in the development of SEPA Guidelines for Local Government document.

The SEPA Guidelines for Local Government were published in September 1999. The guidelines describe the rationale and principles of SEPA and offer a set of objectives with related actions that can be adopted towards developing supportive environments. The objectives and actions have been developed under four categories, which are based on the findings of the project research conducted in the City of Marion. These are Streets, Destinations, Pedestrians and Cyclists, and Development Layout. The objectives describe what an environment that supports physical activity would look and function like in relation to the four categories. For each objective, a number of actions have been devised that will contribute to meeting the objectives and, ultimately, the creation of environments that support active living. The guidelines have been developed as a tool for implementing short and long-term policy objectives that will contribute to the facilitation of supportive environments for physical activity. They are designed to encourage an 'all of government' approach.

Building partnerships with local government

Following the workshops, support is offered to councils to assist them to develop plans to improve physical activity opportunities in their local government area. This requires lobbying of policy makers, strategic planners and operations managers across local government. Our aim is for councils to take ownership of SEPA and apply the principles, objectives and actions outlined in the SEPA guidelines to develop plans to improve physical activity opportunities that accord with their current direction and priorities.

The City of Salisbury was the first council to participate in the SEPA project, with a workshop held with council staff in April 1998. Following the workshop, the City of Salisbury expressed its long-term commitment to action on supportive environments for physical activity. Council has incorporated SEPA principles into policy and strategic documents such as the City of Salisbury Recreation Strategy and City of Salisbury Health Policy and Strategy. A cross-departmental team has been set up specifically to address progress of SEPA in Council. SEPA is to be trialed as a pilot redevelopment project as part the Pooraka Neighbourhood Plan.

SEPA has also been introduced to small rural communities, with a series of workshops held with the District Councils of Elliston, Streaky Bay and Le Hunte on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula.

Transferability

In addition, the SEPA project has generated interest around Australia. Most notably Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales have looked at the SEPA project for its potential in addressing physical inactivity in their respective States. The Victorian

Division in particular has developed partnerships with two Victorian councils, Maribyrnong and Whittlesea, to implement SEPA in their local government areas.

Supporting strategies

Supporting strategies were developed to complement those adopted to encourage action by local government. These supporting strategies include advocacy for policy and legislation where appropriate to create environments supportive of daily physical activity, and for the inclusion of healthy planning policy supportive of daily physical activity in university curriculum for planning students. To achieve this we have engaged in collaboration with other agencies and initiatives, particularly Active Australia, to lobby relevant commonwealth and state government agencies to encourage the development of an integrated transport policy that takes account of the needs of pedestrians and cyclists. We also work with staff and students at the University of SA School of Geoinformatics, Building and Planning to ensure that appropriate planning principles are incorporated into tertiary education. Of importance also, is communication between action groups, planning authorities, health agencies, local government and others working in community planning. We also encourage support of community action that aims to create supportive environments.

Onkaparinga Physical Activity Project

A major outcome of the SEPA project has been the development of the Onkaparinga Physical Activity Project (OPA). The OPA project is a collaborative partnership between the National Heart Foundation, Noarlunga Health Services, City of Onkaparinga, Southern Division of GPs and the SA Land Management Corporation. OPA aims to increase participation in everyday physical activity in the Adelaide suburb of Seaford and surrounding areas. The OPA project is a trial project, aiming to develop a range of strategies that will continue to support and encourage regular physical activity participation. In the context of the OPA project, increased participation in walking as part of everyday life is the focus for physical activity. OPA strives to provide a community environment where people in the community can, and do, walk regularly for practical (eg walking to the shop) and/or leisure (eg walking with friends) reasons. To encourage walking, OPA is working with the City of Onkaparinga council and local communities to develop a network of sign-posted walking trails that motivate and encourage people to walk by improving access to services and facilities while enhancing community health and well being. OPA is also assisting Council to improve the design of local environments, to increase the degree to which they support physical activity opportunities.

Conclusion

Evaluation

SEPA is a very long-term project with a number of measures in place to evaluate progress. Short-term measures are changes in decision-making processes, local strategic policies and operational plans. Long term measures are attitudinal change within local government and raising awareness of the connection between health and transport issues. To assist with this evaluation, it is intended that audits be conducted for comparative purposes over time in specific communities within the local government area of participating councils. The SA Physical Activity Survey conducted

in 1998 by the Department of Human Services in South Australia and projected to be repeated, possibly in 2002, used quantitative measures of physical activity levels, including a set of nationally developed, standardised questions, as well as quantitative measures. The results from this are baseline measures for SEPA. The survey deliberately over-sampled in Onkaparinga, Salisbury and Eyre Peninsular council areas. In these areas, significant SEPA work is underway. As well as the quantitative measures from the state surveys process evaluation, indicators such as partnership progress, guideline and policy development and use of the SEPA Guidelines are important.

Outcomes

There have been a number of outcomes to date. The SEPA project has researched barriers to and enablers for physical activity as part of active living and published the results. SEPA Guidelines for Local Government have been developed to assist local governments to achieve supportive environments for physical activity. These guidelines have been acknowledged by the planning practitioners' professional body in South Australia, the Royal Australian Planning Institute (SA), receiving a Commendation in the Community Planning Category of the 1999 Excellence in Planning Awards. The organisational constraints to implementing the guidelines have been explored and identified. Good cross-sector collaborative partnerships capable of instituting change to policy formulation and implementation have been established. Partnerships have been developed with several councils and associated bodies to incorporate elements of the SEPA project into a variety of council policies. The Onkaparinga Physical Activity Project (OPA) is well established as a pilot project. Input into urban planning and design courses at the University of SA continues.

Facilitating factors and barriers to working with local government

For the successful implementation of SEPA it is firstly necessary to have a project team that has an understanding of local government responsibilities and planning processes. This is best achieved by forming a project team whose members have multi-disciplinary backgrounds. Through project experience, we have found that there are key facilitating factors in a council's decision to act on SEPA. Firstly, the organisational culture and structure of council can be a major barrier to the action on SEPA in that it may inhibit the collaborative approach advocated by SEPA. This is a particular reason to encourage the establishment of cross-sector teams in council. It is essential to have the commitment and involvement of CEOs, Managers, Elected Members and Staff across council for the project to be successful (ie sustainable) in the long term. Another key factor is the support of a staff member who is a strong proponent of the aim and approach of SEPA. However, while it is important to have at least one staff member as the proponent of SEPA in council, it is equally important that the responsibility for progressing SEPA within council is not solely on that individual. SEPA should be embedded in council policy, strategic and operational plans, and cross-departmental teams should be established, so that it becomes the responsibility of council as a whole to take action on SEPA.

It is important to acknowledge that there are external pressures as well internal pressures that impact on local government, eg compulsive competitive tendering, amalgamation and rate capping. The general changing nature of local government can mean that local government is different from state to state and council to council.

Councils can express concern regarding resource implications. However, adopting SEPA does not necessarily mean additional expenditure or added workload for staff. SEPA is a different, collaborative way of approaching current and future issues in councils. In addition, there are economic as well as social benefits to be gained from the SEPA approach.

We have also found it necessary to emphasise that physical activity is a public health issue that is the responsibility of planning in the broadest sense. To do this, we address the definition of physical activity, stressing that physical activity includes *incidental* physical activity, that which is unplanned and part of daily routine, as well as physical activity that is planned or structured. With this definition of physical activity, the street networks become the setting for physical activity as well as recreational trails, parks, gyms and other purpose-built facilities. In doing so, we highlight the role of staff from across council units.

Future plans

Increasingly, the need for a cross-sector approach in which sectors such as transport and urban planning work in collaboration with the health sector on public health issues such as physical activity is being understood and promoted. The National Heart Foundation will continue its collaborative work with local government and other agencies on environmental support for physical activity through the SEPA project. Future objectives of the project relate to working with local governments to build SEPA into policy documents and to develop strategic indicators to track the policy impact over time in a comparable way. Work will also focus on the issue of environmental support for active living in rural and remote areas and for different target populations. Advocacy at commonwealth and state government levels as to the importance of the development of policy integrating transport, health and environment that is appropriate to Australia will also be a priority.