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Report on the health impact assessment of the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy in greater western Sydney

In 2006, the NSW Department of Planning finalised its Sydney Metropolitan Strategy, a strategic framework for managing the city over the next 25 years. The Strategy's intent is to enable the NSW Government and the market to confidently respond to economic growth and housing and infrastructure need, to strengthen and secure Sydney's economic competitiveness, and to make Sydney a better place to live.¹

For more than 5 years, regional government and non-government organisations in western Sydney have been advocating for change in urban development across greater western Sydney to improve the health of residents. These organisations – which include the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (which represents 11 local councils), the area health services, and the Centre for Health Equity Training, Research and Evaluation – are currently collaborating on a health impact assessment (HIA) of the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy within this region.

The premise of the HIA was that the success of policies for the management of a city should be measured in terms of the environment and the health of its residents, rather than measures of transport movements and economic development.

The objectives of the HIA were to:

- raise awareness of health and well-being as important criteria for urban development policy;
- gather and analyse the best available data on urban development decisions and health and well-being relevant to Sydney;
- make recommendations about the strengths and weaknesses of the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy which can also inform future planning instruments in NSW; and
- facilitate an on-going dialogue between development stakeholders about health and well-being issues.

To achieve these goals it was essential to engage decision-makers in urban development. This was achieved through the formation of a reference group of 40 stakeholders drawn from industry, government, academia and community. The reference group, supported by consultants, identified dimensions of the urban environment (including urban form, transport and economy) and determinants of health (including physical activity, food access and social capital) for Sydney. The approach aligned with the World Health Organization's 'The Solid Facts: Social Determinants of Health'.² The reference group has been crucial in identifying specific issues for Sydney's future development. These include location of employment, the need for timely delivery of transport and social infrastructure, access to shops and services at a local level, and the value of preserving agricultural lands.

The HIA was funded by NSW Health. The final report will be available in mid-2007. Further information is available from Colin Berryman, Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils, Blacktown.

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