

## MEMORANDUM TO THE BOARD

### AGENDA ITEM

# Waikato District Health Board: Urban environments position statement

**Date:** February 2014  
**Review date:** February 2017

#### Introduction

New Zealand is one of the most urbanised countries in the world. Almost 60% of the Waikato DHB population live in urban areas<sup>1</sup>. It is important that the health determinants of our urban settings should be optimised to achieve the best possible public health outcomes.

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

#### The Waikato District Health Board's position

The Waikato DHB will provide public health advice to local governments and other key stake holders to help optimise the nature of environmental aspects which have a significant effect on the health of people living in urban environments. Waikato DHB will look to engage with local governments at an early stage to ensure health perspectives are present at all stages of policy development.

The Waikato DHB will support and promote the use of the health impact assessment tool to support the development of urban environments that promote good health. Health impact assessments have been used successfully on urban development plans in the district, and more extensive use of the tool supports Ministry of Health directives<sup>2</sup>.

The Waikato DHB will support local government initiatives aimed at improving population health through urban planning. This will be achieved by providing evidence based support and information in areas where there is greatest potential for health gain to be realised.

#### Background Information: Urban environments

For the majority of the variable factors which influence health outcomes for individuals and populations, control resides outside the health sector. These factors include educational attainment, employment, financial status, diet, exercise, housing, and social support. Many of these factors are controlled or strongly influenced by the decisions made by local governments,

Quality urban environment development planning can help enable access to services, particularly for high need population groups. Higher standards of health care, education and training, sport and recreation facilities, arts and cultural opportunities, information communication technology and transportation can be made more available through quality urban development, and social networks can be supported.

There are opportunities to improve the planning for 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 communities.

The broader health and wellbeing aspects to urban environments also need to be acknowledged. A well designed urban environment supports good health outcomes through improved social connectedness and community cohesion<sup>3</sup>.

Quality urban planning can help prevent negative health outcomes for populations living in urban environments. These can include: traffic congestion, overloaded urban infrastructure, a lack of distinctive cultural identity, social isolation, and reduced physical activity which is an identified risk factor for obesity, diabetes and heart disease<sup>4</sup>. There is also a need to ensure access to health and other services is not compromised in urban environment planning processes.

The health implications, both positive and negative, need to be identified and weighed up at the planning stage whenever any alterations to the urban environment are required, or when new development is planned

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Waikato District Health Board 2012/13 Annual Report,

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Health, Draft PHU Annual Plan Guidance for 2014/15

<sup>3</sup> Public Health Advisory Committee (2008) Review on International Evidence Linking Health and the Urban Built Environment. Wellington: Ministry of Health  
Wellington: Public Health Advisory Committee.

<sup>4</sup> Public Health Advisory Committee. 2010. Healthy Places, Healthy Lives: Urban environments and wellbeing. Wellington: Ministry of Health.