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Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Health and Ageing
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

**Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Health and Ageing – Inquiry into Obesity in Australia**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing Inquiry into Obesity in Australia.

This submission is made jointly on behalf of the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA), the National Heart Foundation of Australia and the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA), which are partners in the development of a national planning guide promoting the relationship between the built environment and health outcomes. The project "*Healthy Spaces and Places*" has received funding assistance and support from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

Key themes that the partners would draw to the attention of the Inquiry are:

- 1. Innovative partnership approaches are required to address complex health issues such as different professionals and organisations working together**
- 2. Significant research evidence exists on the relationship between the design of the built environment and health outcomes**
- 3. A national approach to addressing obesity is required**
- 4. Addressing health outcomes through the built environment can also have benefits to broader sustainability outcomes**

Project Partnership

The development of the *Healthy Spaces and Places* project is a unique partnership. It combines the diversity of interests from the three organisations for additional gains for leveraging knowledge, advocacy and networks. It illustrates the importance of planning and health related professionals working together as well as those working in local government to develop solutions to physical and mental health, well-being and injury prevention concerns and issues. A Memorandum of Understanding underpins the partnership.

The **Australian Local Government Association** is the national voice of local government, representing 609 councils across the country. In structure, ALGA is a federation of state and territory local government associations. Since 2001, membership has included the Government of the Australian Capital Territory which combines both state and local government functions. Key activities include: representation of local government on national bodies and ministerial councils; providing submissions to government and parliamentary inquiries; raising the profile and concerns of local government at the national level; and providing for local government to inform the development of national local government policies.

The **Heart Foundation** is Australia's leading heart health charity with a vision to see Australians enjoying the best cardiovascular health in the world. Key activities to support our mission include funding world class research into the causes and treatments for heart disease, providing comprehensive information and guidance on how to minimise risk from heart disease, and funding innovative prevention programs. The Heart Foundation works closely with all levels of the community to implement policies and programs that improve the cardiovascular health of Australians. This includes the Heart Foundation's work with Governments, planners and with local governments to change neighbourhoods to create healthier communities.

The **Planning Institute of Australia** is the professional association representing urban and regional planners and related professions in Australia and overseas. PIA has around 4,500 members with PIA divisions operating in each state and territory in Australia. Around half its members work in local government, 30% for the private sector and the remainder in State and Commonwealth Government and universities.

How can the built environment promote active living?

The built environment can promote active living through design elements such as:

- Suburbs and neighborhoods that people can walk easily around, and to key facilities such as schools, shops and public transport
- Provision of walking and cycling facilities (footpaths and cycleways)
- Facilities for physical activity (eg swimming pools)
- Activity centers with a variety of uses
- Transport infrastructure and systems, linking residential, commercial and business areas

Over the last 10–15 years, there has been a growing awareness and understanding of the possible effects cities, built environments and urban design have on people and their health. In particular, there has been much interest in the relationship between the quality and form of the built environment and people's propensity to be active regularly and stay healthy.

Research has been undertaken in a range of disciplines that independently concludes a relationship between the built environment and health. Medical research, health promotion and health prevention, urban studies and planning, and transport planning and research have each articulated conceptual perspectives of this issue but have been independent and not well integrated across areas.

There is an accumulating body of evidence on how aspects of urban form are likely to influence physical activity and that changes in environments could be one effective intervention that can contribute to population health benefits. At this stage, the growing body of evidence suggests that significant action needs to be taken now.

Physical activity choices made by different parts of the population, such as children and older adults, and their perceptions of barriers will be differently influenced by the urban environment.

Given Australia's growing burdens of disease, its ageing population and the role that regular physical activity has in managing and reducing the risk factors of many preventable diseases, the design and management of the built environment of where we live, work, play, shop or learn is now recognised as a significant means of promoting regular physical activity.

In making day-to-day decisions from the strategic planning levels of state or metropolitan plans, to the detailed design of master planned neighbourhoods or centre redevelopment proposals, planners and other built environment professionals have an important role in improving the health of the people who live in these communities.

Research is showing that regular physical activity improves people's physical and mental health and wellbeing. Regular physical activity locally also engenders a sense of belonging in a community and is a fundamental building block of improving social capital.

Supporting work across Australia

Healthy Spaces and Places is looking to complement the substantial initiatives currently being undertaken by state, territory and local governments together with industry and community sectors across Australia, such as the NSW Premier's Council for Active Living, the 'Liveable Neighbourhoods: A Western Australian Government sustainable cities initiative' and the National Heart Foundation (Victoria) *Healthy by Design: a planners' guide to environments for active living*.

It is not intended to duplicate this work. Rather *Healthy Spaces and Places* is designed to provide a national perspective for addressing the nexus between health and the built environment.

Sustainability considerations

Communities where consideration for people's health is part of the planning process create a more sustainable community by contributing to outcomes such as reducing car emissions, creating safer communities and more socially connected communities.

The creation of built environments that support walking, cycling and public transport also create environments that:

- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions
- Are pleasant to live in
- Improve social capital by encouraging interaction
- Support local economies and businesses

Local government plays a vital role in fostering the wellbeing of local communities. As the sphere of government closest to Australians, it is best able to identify the local needs of the communities it represents. Local government plays an important role in public health and conducts numerous activities in health protection and health promotion that positively impact on the reduction of chronic disease within communities. This is done by a combination of factors, including education about healthy lifestyles and by providing infrastructure that promotes physical activity.

Having adequate local community infrastructure to promote social inclusion and physical activity in local neighbourhoods, is essential to achieving a range of good public policy outcomes. For example, when cycleways, parks and gardens, and pedestrian paths are maintained, they result in active communities.

Local Government is pleased that the Federal Government has recognised the need for a Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program (commencing 2009-2010) as announced in the Federal Budget 2008-09. It is hoped that the Program will assist local governments to renew ageing community infrastructure. Local government owns and manages around \$12 billion worth of community infrastructure, much of which was constructed in the 1960s and 1970s and has now reached the end of its economic life. In its 2007-08 and 2008-09 pre-budget submissions, ALGA proposed the establishment of a Local Community Infrastructure Renewals program of \$1 billion or \$250 million per annum for at least 4 years. Local government is keen to see this infrastructure updated, and promote its use as a constructive way of enhancing the health of all Australians.

Conclusion

Consideration of the increasing incidence of obesity in Australia requires a number of different approaches to ameliorate the long term impacts. It is suggested that the due consideration of the relationship between people's health and the built environment is one such approach.

Further information on the *Healthy Spaces and Places* project including the Discussion Draft is available at [click here](#)

Fact sheets about the project are attached to this submission.

Please contact Anne Moroney, Project Manager for the Healthy Spaces and Places project on 02 6262 5933 if you would like to discuss any of these issues further.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Di Jay', with a horizontal line extending from the bottom of the signature.

Di Jay
Chief Executive Officer
Planning Institute of Australia
13th June 2008