

Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations

A submission to the Environment and
Planning Committee

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About the National Ageing Research Institute

The [National Ageing Research Institute \(NARI\)](#) is a not-for profit research institute that aims to improve older people's health and wellbeing. NARI is a recognised centre of excellence for research and research translation with extensive networks in the ageing sector both nationally and internationally. Our vision is a world where older people are respected, healthy and included. We create and share knowledge to make a difference for older people. We are a national leader in ageing research, producing work of international significance to apply to real lives and advocate for older people's rights at all levels of government.

We have a dynamic, experienced multidisciplinary team with a proud 40 year history of rapid translation of evidence into policy and practice to enable better outcomes for older people. NARI has undertaken extensive work and research in health, community and residential care settings in a range of areas including dementia, healthy ageing, social isolation, mental health, depression, anxiety, falls and balance, pain, and elder abuse, with a strong focus on older people from diverse backgrounds across all our research areas

Responding to the inquiry

The Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee invited submission and input from community and organisations regarding the environmental infrastructure, particularly parks and open space, for Melbourne and regional Victoria now and into the future.

The Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee identified that the rapid population growth of Melbourne and key regional centres has brought many benefits but also poses challenges to the preservation of existing environmental infrastructure. More recently, COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of access to local parks, open space and other forms of environmental infrastructure.

Given the rate of population growth and population ageing, and the associated demand on health services, environmental infrastructure will have far-reaching implications to promote and provide opportunities for physical activity and social connectedness for generations to come.

NARI, as a national leading research institute, is pleased to respond to this inquiry and provide input and expertise from our extensive research and community work with older people. Our substantial experience and expertise in working closely with local governments enable us to positively impact on the built environment to better suit the ageing population.

It is therefore believed that the information provided in this submission can further support future work around age friendly outdoor space to also enable older people to engage in physical and social activities.

NARI is keen to work closely with the Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee to assist with future work around the environmental infrastructure that Victorians need as the population grows in Melbourne and key regional centres.

Australia's ageing population

The proportion of older people in the Australian population is increasing rapidly. In 2017, approximately 3.8 million people (15% of Australia's total population) were aged 65 and over, by 2057, it is projected there will be 8.8 million older people in Australia (22% of the population)¹. Older age is often associated with various comorbidities and chronic conditions adversely affecting older people's health and wellbeing. Physical activity is very important for the maintenance of physical function, good health, cognitive (brain) function and independence in older age. However only 25% of older people engage in sufficient level of physical activity for health benefits². This highlights the importance of providing suitable opportunities for older people to engage in physical activity outdoors. Outdoor spaces are often under recognized and ignored as valuable settings for older people to undertake physical activity.

Benefits of outdoor space for older people

COVID-19 has presented a very challenging time for the Australian community but even more so for older people. Older people are more likely to experience severe health implications, social isolation, physical deconditioning, and loneliness and have a greater risk of death due to COVID-19. Open spaces, green, nature and parks are vital for our physical and mental health^{3,4}. As many indoor activities and leisure facilities are closed, the outdoor built environment and outdoor spaces are a necessary alternative for maintaining our physical health. Consequently, outdoor spaces have played a significant part in supporting the Australian population in this difficult time. Older people can greatly benefit from exposure to nature and parks⁵. Well-designed outdoor environments can promote physical activity, psychosocial well-being and socialisation, which are essential for ageing well⁶⁻⁸. Furthermore, the health of older people compared to other age groups may be more influenced by their local outdoor environments and neighbourhoods as a result of age-related decreased mobility and physical function⁶. Therefore, the design of the neighbourhoods and public spaces must take into consideration the physical needs of older people to enable all age inclusive participation.

Parks and outdoor leisure spaces are often designed to suit children and young people. Outdoor gyms (exercise stations/pods) have also become very popular in recent years as a means to promote physical activity. However, most existing outdoor equipment is suitable for younger adults with very few that are specifically designed to be used safely by older people⁹. With the expected older population growth, we need to rethink how parks can best be designed so that they offer place for older people as well. Our work in the past few years has shown that older people can benefit from installation of specialised equipment leading to physical and social gains⁹⁻¹⁴. Older people are in greater need of the health benefits that green environments can provide (e.g., promote physical strength, improve mental health and cognition), especially at present, but they may be constrained in visiting due to their mobility limitations. Therefore, other aspects around location and accessibility are also important to consider in order to reduce the physical barriers to accessing outdoor built environments (e.g. suitable ramps, handrail support, walkable pavement, proximity of amenities such as toilets). Providing safe, equitable and inclusive outdoor environments for all ages can promote good health for the whole community.

NARI's work around age-friendly outdoor space and partnership with local governments

Many play spaces and sports facilities are built by local governments. NARI has partnered with several local governments (Wyndham City Council, Whittlesea City Council, Ballarat City Council, Banyule City Council) to create [age-friendly outdoor spaces](#) for older people. These not only enable older people to engage in physical and social activities but also contribute to healthier and more liveable cities and communities in Victoria. We frequently provide advice and consultation to

interstate local governments and stakeholder organisations, and have developed [a practical guide](#) to assist with the decision making process. We have noticed increase interest by the community and local governments to develop age friendly outdoor spaces in recent years which is a great indication for increase awareness for the needs of older people.

Through our collaborative framework we aim to (1) promote safe outdoor spaces for older people to be physically and socially active for their wellbeing; (2) build capacity and awareness in the community to better understand the needs of older people; (3) foster partnership and engagement with stakeholders, community, industry, local government, and academic institutions to create a change in the built environment design to better cater for older adults.

Recommendations

- The Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee should take into account the growing older population to enable inclusive, equitable and accessible spaces for older people to engage in safe physical and social activities.
- The design of outdoor public spaces, including parks, leisure spaces and outdoor exercise equipment should be inclusive of all ages and abilities. This can be achieved by incorporating suitable 'equipment/amenities' for older people such as seating with armrests, surface accessible for people with walking aids or wheelchairs, covered area for rest, and suitable equipment to cater to a range of abilities.
- The location of an outdoor leisure public space needs to be carefully chosen to maximise accessibility and usability of all ages. Intergenerational spaces and co-location with community facilities are encouraged to foster socialisation and intergenerational interaction, while also carefully allowing safe usage by all ages.
- The decision around the design and associated infrastructure plan should be informed by research evidence supported by community consultation with older people. Engagement with relevant experts/organisations as well as involvement of older people in the discussion can further enhance the decision making process.
- NARI recognises the important role of local governments in providing safe, healthy and sustainable environments to protect and secure the health and wellbeing of all Australian and hence is keen to work closely with local governments to better support older people.

Supporting references

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