

## Communities4Walkability: A citizen science project in rural Australia

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*Community members as citizen scientists identify environmental characteristics that influence walkability and active living in rural areas.*

People who live in places where it is easy to get around by walking – ‘walkable’ places – are more likely to be healthy and active than those who live in places where walking and other forms of active transport are difficult.

Although we know a lot about how walkability shapes physical activity in cities, small rural towns are a more unique context to investigate. Long-term conditions like heart disease and diabetes and unhealthy lifestyle behaviours are more common in some rural areas.

A research team from the University of Tasmania, along with colleagues at both RMIT and Deakin universities, are working together with policymakers from local and state government to better understand walkability in rural areas.

There are no existing tools for measuring walkability in rural communities that can be easily used by community members and don’t require specialized skills or training. The [Communities4Walkability](#) project is developing an online walkability audit tool for rural communities in Australia. It brings together members of the public, planners, community development officers, health promotion practitioners, decision makers, and policy makers. The aim is to co-design and test a practical online audit tool that can be used by anyone to measure walkability in rural areas.

The online walkability audit tool will be trialled by community members in ten rural towns across the island state of Tasmania, Australia. Community Champions in each town will report on local:

- Town-wide walkability features such as schools, amenities, recreational facilities, parks, and playgrounds;
- Policies for example, requirements for bikeway/pedestrian infrastructure in new developments;
- Programs like community recreation departments that offer physical activity programs.



They will also identify small (1-2km) segments of the town for auditing and support the recruitment of Citizen Scientists.

Citizen Scientists are local volunteers who will use the tool to audit their allocated segment. They will record walkability features such as footpaths, buffers and shoulders, land use, and destinations. They will take photos of aspects of their own segment that may hinder or support walkability.

Data collected through the online tool will be brought together by the research team. These data will be combined with the captured photos to inform a multi-stakeholder community workshop. Community Champions, Citizen Scientists, and other members of the public will participate in these community workshops.

Through sense-making activities they will prioritise aspects of the local environment that most negatively impact on walkability and physical activity. This information can then be used by local communities to advocate for changes to improve walkability and increase physical activity. The research team will support community members to develop advocacy skills to act as agents of change. The project directly aligns with the World Health Organization’s Global Action Plan on Physical Activity’s (GAPA) strategic objectives of creating active environments, active people, and active systems. The project has been co-designed with policy makers from state and local government and uses a citizen science approach (example in Figure 1).



Figure 1. Community involvement in the project

Our team's pilot research project in 2020 worked with community members in three rural Tasmanian towns. The findings (Figure 2) showed that small rural towns would benefit from a range of features and amenities to support active living, most of which would not require extensive resource. These included improved access to hiking trails, better signage, slower traffic speed, and more seating along walking routes.

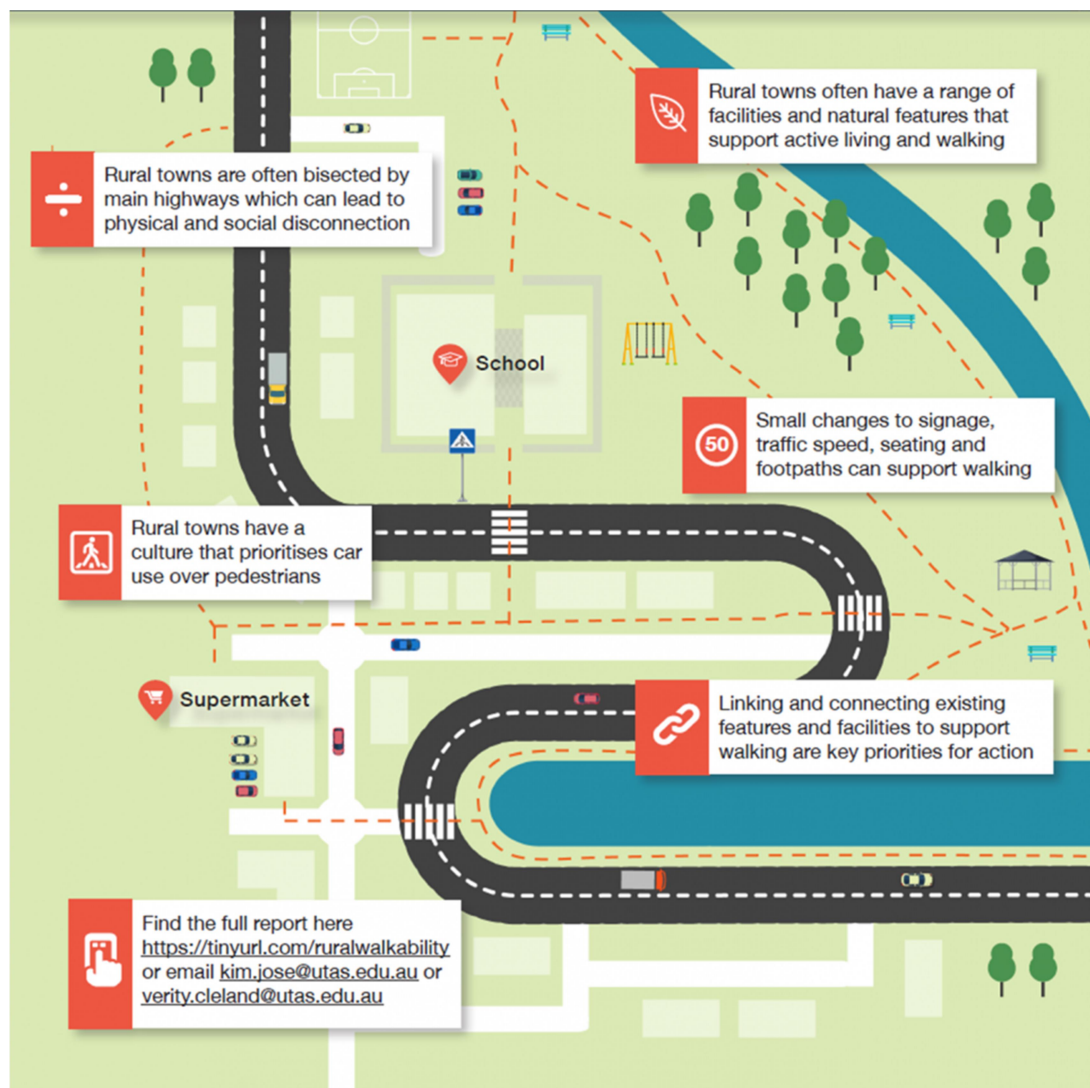


Figure 2. Key findings from our 2020 pilot project

Connectivity was an overarching theme, with several communities bisected by main highways, resulting in both physical and social disconnections. Community members from these towns felt that addressing the physical disconnection – for example through better or safer crossings – would lead to greater walkability and improved social connections.

The Communities4Walkability project will equip community members, decision-makers, and policymakers with a simple tool to collect and interpret locally relevant information. Together a set of principles or recommendations for supporting walkability in rural communities will be developed with a vision of the process and tool being relevant and applicable for use with small towns globally.

**Take home messages:**

This project will address an unmet need by developing and testing a simple walkability audit tool for use in rural areas.

Co-design principles and a citizen science approach is supporting genuine involvement with communities and responsiveness to local need with policymakers.

The creation of locally relevant data by communities and for communities may lead to greater engagement and increased impact. The easy-to-use online walkability tool will enable rural communities around the world to collect data about the features of their local environment that impact on walkability and active living, and identify key priorities for action.

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Published on April 13, 2022

<https://www.ispah.org/communities4walkability-a-citizen-science-project-in-rural-australia/>