Section 2

The Importance of Physical Activity
2.1 The Evidence and Trends

The World Health Organization has identified physical inactivity as the fourth global risk factor for mortality causing an estimated 3.2 million deaths worldwide each year.\(^5\)

In its plan to prevent and control non-communicable diseases, the World Health Assembly urges Member States to implement national guidelines on physical activity for health and encourages them to develop and put into practice policies and interventions that:

- develop and implement national guidelines on physical activity for health
- introduce transport policies that promote active and safe methods of travelling to and from schools and workplaces, such as walking or cycling
- ensure that physical environments support safe active commuting, and create space for recreational activity.\(^6\)

The increasingly sedentary lifestyle of large sectors of the population in many developed countries, including Australia, and the consequent decline in physical activity is a major concern resulting in significant health, social, economic and environmental consequences.

High levels of inactivity can have serious consequences resulting in a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and cancer. It is estimated that over 16,000 Australians die prematurely each year as a result of physical inactivity – nearly 2,000 of those in WA.\(^7\)

The cost of physical inactivity to the Australian economy is estimated to be around $14 billion ($1.4 billion in WA) and productivity loss equates to 1.8 working days per employee per year at a cost of $458 nationally.\(^8\)

Internationally, a study, *Prevention for a Healthier America*, concluded that an investment of $10 per person per year in proven community-based disease prevention programs including physical activity could save the country more than $16 billion annually within five years. This is a return of US$5.60 for every $1.\(^9\)
Trends in Western Australia

Adults
The findings from the Physical Activity Levels of Western Australian Adults 2009 Survey, commissioned by the Physical Activity Taskforce, are encouraging and show that the downward trend in levels of physical activity appears to have been averted. However, increasing levels of body weight and obesity, as well as the fact that there is still 40% of the Western Australian adult population not active enough for good health, remain a significant concern. Since 1999, the number of Western Australians above a healthy weight has increased by 11%.

Other concerning results include:
- 9% decline in people walking for recreation since 1999
- 10% decline in people walking for transport since 2006
- only half of physically-active adults walked more than 10 minutes for recreation
- one in five walked more than 10 minutes for transport in the previous week.

Interestingly, those respondents who were ‘insufficiently active’ and ‘inactive’ rated their local neighbourhoods less positively, and furthermore the use of streets and footpaths was lower in 2009 than in all previous survey years.

40% of the adult population in WA is not active enough for good health.

Children and Adolescents
Findings from the 2008 Child and Adolescent Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey (CAPANS), which gathers information on physical activity participation, dietary intake and body measurements, also raise concerns.

The trends from this and the 2003 survey identified that less than half of school students reported undertaking the recommended minimum 60 minutes of physical activity daily for good health. Participation was lowest amongst secondary school girls with only 10% meeting the national guideline. Key findings from the 2008 survey include:
- The percentage of participants meeting the daily physical activity guidelines (60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day) are:
  - 41% of primary boys and 27% primary girls
  - 38% of secondary boys and 10% secondary girls.
- Almost all respondents reported participating in sport, exercise, dance, active play and school sport or physical education over the seven days prior to the survey.
- The numbers of students reporting at least one session of active transport (i.e. walking or cycling) in the seven days prior to the survey included:
  - 46.5% of primary boys and 43.1% of primary girls
  - 50.9% of secondary boys and 43.2% of secondary girls.

Less than half of all WA school students reported undertaking the recommended minimum 60 minutes of physical activity daily.
Other Population Groups

Physical activity interventions have the potential to positively impact at-risk population groups through reducing chronic disease and improving social outcomes. In particular, research has shown that environmental (e.g. location, cost, facilities and safety) and social factors (e.g. support networks) are often barriers to participation and must be considered to increase physical activity rates, specifically for those in low socio-economic status groups. These groups generally participate less in physical activity and should be considered as target groups. Policy and interventions should be tailored to meet their specific needs, removing barriers to ensure access and equity.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

- 58,711 people (3% of the total population) are identified as being of Aboriginal origin. The Metro/Wheatbelt has the largest number of Aboriginal people (29,076 or 41%) followed by the West Kimberley (13.35% or 9,475).12

- One third of Aboriginal adults reported participating in sport or physical activities – 38% men and 23% women. Physical recreation decreased with age – men between 15 to 24 years had a participation rate of 53%, which decreased to 18% for men aged 45 years and over. Of all Aboriginal women aged 15 to 24 years, 36% took part in sport and physical activities, while this rate decreased to 11% for women aged 45 years and over.13

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD)

- In 2006, of the state’s usual resident population, 531,747 people (27.1% of the population) were born overseas. The majority reside in the Perth, South West and Lower Great Southern statistical areas.14

- The total of WA’s population speaking a language other than English at home is 12.4%. In 2010, those who spoke a European language other than English at home recorded a similar total participation rate in sport and physical activities to those who spoke only English (85%); while those who spoke a non-European language at home had a lower total participation rate (78%). Those who spoke a European language other than English at home had the highest regular participation rate (56%).15

Female Adolescents

- In the 2008 Child and Adolescent Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey, only 10.1% of secondary school girls in WA met the recommended national guidelines for physical activity.16

Low Socio-Economic Status (SES)

- Trends regarding levels of participation in sport and recreation in Australia indicate that households with an income in the highest quintile have a participation rate of 80%, while those in the lowest quintile have a rate of 45%. This may be attributed to higher education levels leading to higher income and increased understanding of the benefits of sport and active recreation.

- People with a Bachelor degree are more likely to participate (77%) than those who attained only Year 10 or below (49%).17
2.2 The Influences and Barriers

External factors such as increased urbanisation and changes in technology have contributed to increased levels of physical inactivity. Individuals are increasingly spending more time travelling in cars as a mode of transport. Perth has one of the highest rates of car use in the world. Every day, Perth residents make more than 400,000 private car trips of less than one kilometre (equivalent to a 10 minute walk). In contrast, non-motorised forms of transport not only offer the potential to increase physical activity but also reduce environmental harm.

The demographic profile of WA, as well as changing trends, impact on rates of urbanisation, and consequently the choices people make in regard to transport options. Population growth will also place increased pressure on urban facilities and potentially impact on people’s ability to be physically active. The key influences impacting the active living agenda include:

- **Economy**
  Will affect the active living agenda in differing ways – from State Government budget efficiency requirements, the global financial situation, the effects on low socio-economic communities, and, conversely the expected economic developments in India and Asia.

- **Political**
  Strong advocacy and integrated planning, legislation and policy development will be required to ensure long term ongoing bipartisan support for the active living agenda.

- **Population Growth**
  Will generate demand for additional facilities, services and infrastructure as well as a move towards increased infill development. The ageing population will also impact on the planning and design of communities, and programs to increase accessibility and reduce potential for isolation.

- **Technology**
  Has the potential to further reduce the levels of physical activity and create more sedentary lifestyles but should also be seen as an opportunity to impact positively on individuals, families and communities through increased communication options.

- **Urbanisation**
  Will further the need for well planned, compact, connected and conducive environments that support and encourage physical activity.

- **Workforce**
  The projected labour force requirements, particularly from the resource sector, can present lifestyle challenges on physical activity levels especially for those fly-in fly-out and shift workers.

The barriers

Incorporating physical activity into daily routines can sometimes be difficult and there are a number of common barriers to participation in active living. In particular, technological advances and increased conveniences, making life easier, have lessened the need to be active. It is important to understand the reasons why some people choose to be active and others do not, so that creating strategies to overcome them can be better targeted to support and encourage physical activity as part of a daily routine.

Every day, Perth residents make more than 400,000 private car trips of less than one kilometre.
The diagnosis of physical activity in WA identified the following barriers:

### Facilities and Services

**Geographical Spread**
- High car usage over active transport

**Safety**
- Perception of unsafe streets & parks
- Media influence
- Lack of widespread infrastructure for physical activity

**Workplaces**
- Lack of physical activity & changing room facilities
- Lack of opportunities for incidental activity
- Occupational Health & Safety

**Partnerships / Common Goal**
- Some local councils & government departments not aiming to increase physical activity
- Partnerships restricted to key organisations & staff, rather than widespread

**Access to Electronic Entertainment**
- Screen time versus physical activity
- Portability

**High Sport Emphasis**
- Elite, commercial & competitive sports
- Lack of incidental & lower level activities

**Lack of Volunteers**
- Difficult to recruit & retain volunteers for sport clubs & unstructured sport
- Support participation of younger volunteers

**Legislation and Policy**

**Financial Disincentives**
- Benefits of company cars / tax breaks
- No incentives for public transport

**Funding Methods**
- Short term funding
- Insufficient funding
- Time consuming applications

**Planning Policy**
- Inconsistent implementation & enforcement between local governments
- Open to interpretation

**School Policy**
- Variable commitment / prioritisation by school
- 2 hour legislation interpreted differently

**Communication and Marketing**

**Work / Life Balance**
- Time constraints
- Longer working hours
- Working parents
- Fly-in & fly-out workers

**Culture / Norms**
- Society norms e.g. young girls & sport
- Acceptance of behaviours e.g. cycling clothes at work

**Role Modelling**
- Lack of accessible visible role models e.g. young adults / teens, peers, teachers
- Parental behaviour

**Lack of Individual Motivation / Prioritisation**
- Personal cost-benefit equation not sufficiently motivating
2.3 The Benefits

Increasing physical activity levels benefits individuals, families and communities. Active people are more connected to their community and active communities are more cohesive, productive and less dependent on the car.

Active living also reduces the risk of breast cancer, depression and falls. Some of the key benefits to be gained from a more physically active community are wider than physical and mental health benefits alone and include social, environmental and economic outcomes.19

**Economic**
Physical activity improves productivity, reduces absenteeism in the workplace and supports overall economic growth. Growing participation in active lifestyles increases the need for services and facilities that help support growth in the sport and recreation business as well as other associated industries including tourism, transport and retail. Increased levels of physical activity in the community reduce the need for medical intervention and the subsequent demand for health services resulting in lower health costs.

**Environmental**
Active communities and those participating in modes of active transport reduce the need for vehicle dependence and therefore the burden of traffic congestion, noise and carbon emissions, improving the impact on the environment.

**Health**
Being physically active is essential to improving physical and mental health. It helps to reduce chronic disease and other risk factors such as being overweight and obese, and is important in the management of a range of health conditions. People who are active are happier, healthier and live longer.

**Social**
Active people participate more in community activities which in turn strengthens community cohesion, improves social capital and reduces isolation. Physical activity is an important element of social interaction, building stronger communities through networks, volunteering and individual friendships. Active living also supports a sense of place and connectedness to the community.
The Multiple Benefits of Physical Activity

**Health**

**Increases**
- Fitness, stamina and energy
- Lean muscle, muscle strength and bone density
- Flexibility, coordination, balance and development of a wide range of motor skills
- Improved immune system
- Healthy ageing, mobility, independence and quality of life in older adults
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Concentration

**Reduces**
- Chronic illness and disability
- Mortality rates and risk of dying prematurely
- Risk of coronary heart disease, cardiovascular disease and stroke
- Risk of diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure
- Risk of colo-rectal and breast cancer
- Risk of asthma
- Risk of osteoporosis and symptoms of arthritis
- Body fat, overweight and obesity
- Falls and injuries in older people
- Risk of developing dementia
- Feelings of fatigue, depression, stress and anxiety
- Risk of menstural symptoms, constipation and back pain
- Risk of postnatal depression
- Demand on health services

**Supports**
- Improved sleep and rehabilitation
- Weight management
- Cognitive functioning, memory, learning and better performance at school
- Improved mood, quality of life, sense of wellbeing and long term health

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**Social**

**Increases**
- Active and vibrant community hubs
- Social skills and networks
- Social capital and community connections
- Access to services and resources
- Independent living
- Improved communication, team building, leadership and cooperation skills
- Volunteering
- Community participation in recreational and social activities

**Reduces**
- Social isolation and loneliness
- Antisocial behaviour

**Supports**
- Stronger, connected communities
- Community inclusion and public enjoyment
- Community cohesion and capacity building
- Crime prevention
- Cultural links through activities

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**Economic**

**Increases**
- Tourism
- Retail
- Business and employment opportunities
- Investment opportunities
- Productivity and growth

**Reduces**
- Vandalism costs
- Absenteeism
- Workplace accidents/injury and workers compensation claims
- Health care costs and claims
- Pressure on insurance premiums for employers
- Staff turnover
- High costs of passenger transport and infrastructure

**Supports**
- Local business
- Attracts workforce
- Active and healthy employees and workplaces

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The benefits of physical activity are well documented and while this list is not exhaustive it encompasses a collective consensus of evidence based outcomes.