



Engaging a local council to promote physical activity: the case of dog walking in the 10,000 Steps Rockhampton project

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Introduction

In response to increasing levels of sedentariness among adult Australians, the 10,000 Steps Rockhampton Project aimed to develop and implement a series of strategies that, through a process of partnership with local agencies, would result in sustainable increases in levels of physical activity in this regional Queensland centre.¹

Based on the work of King and colleagues,² and the New South Wales guidelines for creating more active communities,³ one of the most important initial priorities in the 10,000 Steps project was to engage support from, and develop partnerships with, local government. However, the traditional roles of local government in regional Queensland have focused on collecting revenue to support local infrastructure, town planning, and the prevention and control of infectious diseases through environmental risk management (rates, roads, rats and rubbish).⁴

There is, nonetheless, a clear role for local government in terms of the provision of safe places to be active, such as footpaths, cycleways, parks, and facilities for active recreation.⁵

In terms of physical activity promotion, focus groups conducted with Council employees in Rockhampton confirmed that these employees perceived their role to be confined to the provision of infrastructure (e.g. sporting facilities, parks) and to safety issues such as provision of lighting and safe footpaths. There was a strong perception that it was not the Council's role to promote activity.⁶ The focus groups did, however, identify unrestrained dogs as a cause for concern, and further research found that Rockhampton City Council regularly received calls from residents regarding nuisance dogs (dogs that roam and/or bark persistently), with about 1,200 dogs being impounded each year.⁷ In addition, a community-based survey for the 10,000 Steps Rockhampton Project had found that 46 % of respondents

Abstract

Issues addressed: In terms of increasing population levels of physical activity, local municipal councils have a key role to play in creating activity friendly environments. The primary aim of this paper is to describe the process of initial engagement of the Rockhampton City Council in the 10,000 Steps Rockhampton project, through development of a strategy to promote responsible dog walking.

Methods: Pamphlets promoting human and dog walking in the context of the 10,000 Steps Rockhampton project were distributed to 8,000 dog owners with the annual dog registration renewal notice. In addition, all dog-related outlets in the city were asked to display a large poster and make pamphlets available to the public.

Results: Although the posters were widely displayed, a random sample telephone survey (n=420) revealed that only one in five residents remembered receiving a pamphlet and only a small proportion of people reported increased dog walking.

Conclusions: Notwithstanding this disappointing result in terms of behaviour change, the initial engagement with the Council resulted in substantial subsequent collaborative work to promote increase physical activity in this regional Queensland city.

Key words: Exercise, barriers, community, coalition.

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So what?

Promoting dog walking is one way to find common ground with a local city council for promoting physical activity.

identified dogs as a barrier to walking in their neighbourhood.⁸ The identification of this 'dog problem' provided common ground for the research team to engage the local Council in the 10,000 Steps project. While our overall goal was to begin to develop a partnership for physical activity promotion in general, we decided to work with the Council to address the perceived problem of uncontrolled dogs.

Our previous work relating to barriers to physical activity among older people had identified the issue of dogs as both barriers to ("... a dog used to chase me and have a go at me... that is frightening...") and motivators for physical activity⁹ (I walk the dog - every day for 30 to 45 minutes - at her pace - up a very steep hill - rain hail or shine...). Bauman and colleagues¹⁰ have also reported that dog ownership can be a motivator for physical activity; they found that 46% of households owned a dog and that, on average, dog owners walked 18 minutes more each week than non-dog owners. However, more than half of all dog owners had not walked their dogs at all in the past week. The main aim of this paper is to describe the process of our

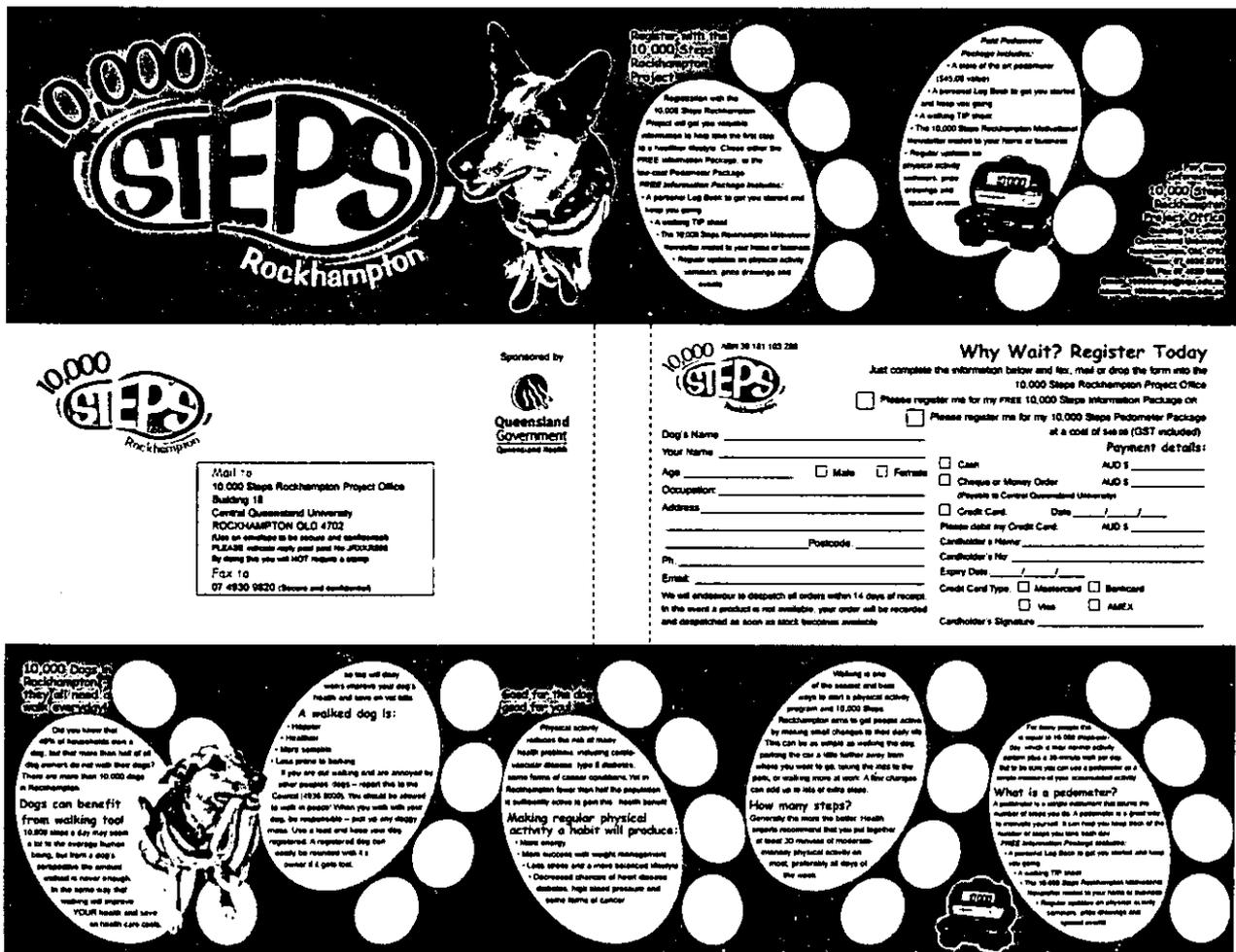
initial engagement with the Council, through the development of a strategy to promote responsible dog walking in the community. A secondary aim is to describe the self-reported efficacy of using a brochure to promote dog walking in the local community.

Methods and findings

In order to capitalise on the common ground identified during initial discussions with Council representatives, it was decided that we would work with the Council to develop and distribute a pamphlet and other materials that would help to raise awareness of the benefits of dog walking (for both dogs and their owners) and to encourage recipients to increase their own and their dog's level of physical activity.

In light of the evidence that inclusion of behaviour change strategies could enhance the impact of written health promotion materials,¹¹⁻¹³ we decided to develop a pamphlet to outline the benefits of regular walking for both dog owners and their dogs, as well as behavioural strategies for overcoming barriers to regular

Figure 1: The dog and human walking promotion brochure distributed to more than 8,000 Rockhampton households with the annual dog registration renewal notice.



activity, such as lack of time, motivation and company. The pamphlet also promoted the use of pedometers as a way to track physical activity throughout the day and offered registration to the 10,000 Steps Rockhampton Project (see Figure 1).

Just over 8,000 brochures were sent to individual households with the annual dog-registration renewal forms. This represents 46% of the 19,000 households in Rockhampton. Owners of unregistered dogs (thought to number about 2,000) could not be targeted directly through the pamphlet campaign. Twenty-nine local providers of resources or care services for dogs were also contacted and asked if they would display a promotional poster for dog walking (see Figure 2) and make the dog-walking pamphlet available in a prominent position in their organisation, clinic, or store. Almost all (93%) agreed to do this. A half-page feature in the Saturday issue of the local newspaper (distribution 60,000) was used to reinforce the information included in the pamphlet and the poster.

The level of funding for the 10,000 Steps project was sufficient only to provide an overall evaluation of the whole project, and not of individual strategies that contributed to it. However, an opportunity arose as part of a larger annual omnibus survey (Central Queensland Social Survey, CQSS), to ask a small randomly selected sample of Rockhampton residents ($n=420$, response rate 43.3%) about their recollection of the '10,000 dogs' pamphlet, four months after the completion of the mail-out and poster campaign. While acknowledging the limitations of the post-test evaluation, the researchers considered this a valuable opportunity to explore the efficacy of the pamphlet strategy.

Of respondents with a dog in the household ($n=193$, or 46%), about one-fifth ($n=41$, or 20.2%) recalled receiving the promotional brochure with their dog registration renewal notice. Of these, 17% ($n=7$) indicated that they had increased their dog walking in response to receiving the pamphlet.

Discussion

International research has shown that interventions using print media can produce short-term physical activity behaviour change, particularly if they include the use of behaviour change strategies. However, a recent Brisbane study found that only 7% of people who received a directory of physical activity opportunities (which was mailed to people over 50 years in the south Brisbane region) rang a number to find out more about the activities available to them.¹⁴ Hence the findings of our study confirm previous ones that have suggested that use of print materials alone is unlikely to be an effective approach to behaviour change.

More importantly, the process of developing and implementing the dog-walking campaign served to help engage the local Council as an active partner in the larger 10,000 Steps

Rockhampton Project. This initial engagement provided important foundations for the development of subsequent collaborations aimed at improving opportunities for physical activity in the community. These have included creation of a series of signed walkways in the city (and production of maps that have been mailed to households); a free pedometer loan scheme administered by the Council libraries; adoption of the 10,000 Steps Workplace Challenge, and participation in the Local Physical Activity Task Force.

The development of partnerships with a local council is not an easy task, particularly because physical activity is not directly linked to the core business of local government. However, building collaborative partnerships is imperative to the success of community-wide physical activity interventions. This project showed that initial engagement and ongoing collaboration could be achieved through innovative strategies and opportunistic as well as mutually beneficial initiatives.

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Figure 2: 'Just Walk Me' poster displayed in all organisations that provided pet and pet-related services in Rockhampton.



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