

A Personal Responsibility Perspective to Behaviour Change

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1 Introduction

The concept of voluntary behaviour change has now been applied throughout Australia and elsewhere and appears to have achieved substantial reductions in kilometres and hence greenhouse gas emissions.

The way in which these changes have been achieved has usually been through discussions or interactions with individuals – sometimes in the context of the household and sometimes in the context of workplaces or schools. There are also a few examples of using “community mechanisms” (i.e. the ability of people in the community to diffuse messages in a non-organised way). An example of this approach to reduce kilometres has been to use the Tipping Point model (Tideman et al., 2006).

One of the basic components of some applications of voluntary behaviour change is that of *personal responsibility* where people are asked to take personal responsibility for problems that are troubling them. The personal responsibility approach to voluntary behaviour change usually requires an exploratory conversation in which the conversationalist asks the person to identify a problem they personally experience as a result of the ‘common good’ problem that is being addressed. For example if the overall aim of a program is to reduce kilometres, the conversationalist might begin by asking ‘when was the last time you were in a car and wished you weren’t?’ leading to a discussion about being late for a meeting because of not finding a park. This might then lead to the conversationalist facilitating the person to work out a way to solve that themselves (i.e. taking responsibility for being late). This is in contrast to the conversationalist suggesting a solution.

We believe that focusing on personal responsibility means that it is possible to consider expanding the voluntary behaviour change approach described in this paper to be used as a way for industry/business and governments to approach change.

This paper is aimed to raise the level of debate on behaviour change and to challenge the communities of research and practice into considering new ways of thinking and to add value to current processes by new approaches and experimentation.

2 Behaviour change – theoretical approaches

There is a wide range of theories of behaviour change and they help to set the context for this discussion.

Theories are important in providing models for understanding and ways of dealing with issues. In science a theory is a logical explanation or, capable of being tested and predicting future observations – and of being tested through experiment (Hawking 1988). In human behaviour the theorists tend to use the same definition.

The variability and diversity of human behaviour has meant that theories in this realm can seem to conflict with one another. We would argue that this can add to their value because they enhance the debate about behaviour change and also encourage new ways of approaching it.

Examples of theories of behaviour change include¹:

- **The 'rational man' theory** – these focus on the notion that people rationally seek to maximise their welfare, and that we assess choices in terms of costs and benefits.
- **Individual level theories** – these focus on understanding behaviour by looking at the influences and processes involved in individuals' decision-making. Examples range from classical condition theory (e.g. Pavlov, 1927) to theories of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) to the consumer information-processing model of economists Tversky and Kahneman (1974) to the more recent theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1985) and the stages of change model (Prochaska and DiClemente (1983).
- **Interpersonal behavioural theories** – these stress the interpersonal environment including social networks, social support, role models and mentoring. The key message of these theories is that people change not only because of their personal characteristics but because of interactions with people around them. They include social cognitive theory developing from the seminal work of Bandura (1986), the social networks and support theory begun by House (1981), theories of social influence and interpersonal communication begun by Kelly and Thibaut (1978) and attribution and balance theories based on the work of Heider (1958).
- **Community theories of behaviour** are based on understanding how groups, organisations, social institutions and communities function. They include social capital theory (e.g. Bourdieu (1986) and Putnam (1995)), diffusion of innovations (e.g. Rogers 1995) and Gladwell's (2000) Tipping Point theory.

In travel behaviour change programs some of these theories have been used, while others have built on the work of Fergusson et al (1999) with lessons from health promotion and on the principles of persuasion (e.g. Cialdini, 2001). These are described in more detail in Seethaler and Rose (2003).

2.1 Behaviour Change – a personal responsibility approach for individuals

In the work reported here we describe observations of the way in which we have seen behaviour change – and a model that has been found useful to bring about reductions in kilometres (and other social, economic and environmental changes) on a large scale.

To describe change through personal responsibility, we have called it 'helping people to help themselves'. This framework is based on the community development approach first described by Kotler and Zoltman (1971). We have defined it as “change that occurs when individuals make choices for personal reward without a top-down mechanism, i.e. regulation of any sort, or feeling of external compulsion” (Ampt 2003).

Figure 1 is a way of illustrating the processes that we believe occur when individuals make voluntary changes based on identifying a problem and taking personal responsibility.

¹ These are summarised well in Halpern et al., 2004.

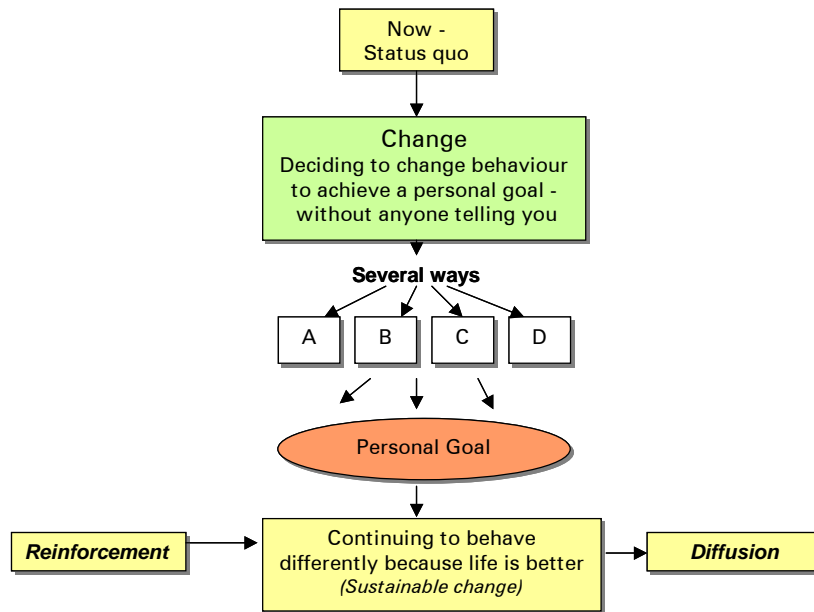


FIGURE 1 THE CONDITIONS SURROUNDING INDIVIDUAL VOLUNTARY BEHAVIOUR CHANGE
(SOURCE: AMPT 2003)

In the first instance an individual decides to make a change so that he or she will improve their personal life in some way. The change may be triggered by any of the following:

- Arriving at a point where the negative effects of an existing activity reach a certain level of intolerance;
- Realising for the first time that it is possible to change;
- Hearing of someone else who has changed – especially a “trusted other”
- Experiencing a change moment e.g. new job, house, partner
- Feeling that change is fashionable or wanting to keep up with new social norms.

Since voluntary behaviour changes in travel almost always achieve a personal goal in terms of improvement in lifestyle, or behaviour that is more congruent with values, they are likely to be sustainable in the sense of long-lasting. This process of sustainability is assisted by *reinforcement* activities such as further benefits derived from the change and/or supportive infrastructure changes. Since the behaviour change has been a positive experience for the individual, the benefits, or news of the benefits is passed on to others and the positive message of the change is diffused throughout the community (*diffusion*).

The way in which this approach has been most often implemented is in household-based TravelSmart type projects in Australia (e.g. Tideman et al, 2006, Ampt et al, 2004). In these interventions, conversations are held with individuals where an initial part of the conversation is designed to get the person thinking about a problem in their own use of the car, e.g. ‘when was the last time you were in the car and wished that you weren’t? The next step is to check whether they have already thought of a way to change that situation (even if they rejected the method). The conversation then goes on to help them to work out a way to solve that problem (helping them to help themselves).

The key tenet of this approach to behaviour change is that it is giving people **personal responsibility** for changing behaviour to improve a small aspect of their life - one that is proving irksome.

Examples of individuals making voluntary travel behaviour changes through the personal responsibility approach are many, but we cite three observations here.

2.1.1 The problem was clear but seemed insoluble

Susanna's² problem was clear. She was driving four children to three schools in the west of Sydney, getting home from this trip at 11am and having to leave again at 1pm to pick up the first child. This meant that she was not passing her TAFE course, something that was very important to her being the first in the family to reach that level of education. When asked if she had thought about a solution, she immediately mentioned that she had thought of letting two of the children walk to school – but rejected the idea immediately because of the road hazards.

Building on this, the conversationalist asked whether letting the children walk would still be a possibility if a safe route was found. The answer was yes, and the TravelSmart team were able to find a very safe route – one that Susanna had not thought of because it did not follow the route taken by the car.

The conversationalist also worked through the steps that Susanna and her family would need to take to actually make the change: practising walking the route on the weekend, working out which day would be good to start, and so on.

The outcome was that the children walked to school, Susanna started to pass her subjects, the achievement was reinforced to herself (by achieving good marks) and by others (particularly her course leader), and she also started to tell others about the fact that she had found a solution. In other words she not only took responsibility for changing behaviour but began diffusing the message and empowering others to think about their ability to change as well.

Several theories could be used to explain the success of this approach. For example, Rogers (1995) stresses the importance of innovation as well as the benefit of 'addressing an issue that ... others perceive to be a problem'.

2.1.2 Initial facilitated change, subsequent learning the skill

Also as part of a travel behaviour change program, this time in Adelaide, Marilyn² had expressed the frustration that she seemed to spend so much (unpredictable) time parking that she was always running late to her Monday meeting – and had never read the advance reading. She worked out with the conversationalist that one way to solve this would be to take the bus to work – so that she could get the reading done on the way.

After she started taking the bus occasionally she also reported that she found walking at each end of the trip had served another purpose in shedding a few kilos.

She told us that some months after this, she moved her job to Salisbury (about 20 kms from Adelaide and very difficult to reach by bus) so she had begun to drive. And the downside was the creeping back of the kilos. So she worked out a new solution. She searched locally for shops and a small supermarket, bought a personal shopping trolley, and began doing almost all her shopping on foot. Away went the kilos!

What Marilyn had done exhibits another key attribute of the behaviour change described here – not only taking responsibility to change in the first place, but also to learn the skill of applying the principles to further change.

² Not the real names

2.1.3 Slowing the traffic – taking individual responsibility

David Engwicht (e.g. Engwicht, 2005) advocates behaviour change in many talks and books. He argues strongly that small actions by individuals can change the way other people around them use space. In fact, he expands on this to elucidate ways in which the state or governments can allow for and encourage voluntary behaviour change (see Section 2.5).

He recently met a man in Seattle (James²) who heard one of his talks on how to create 'mental speed bumps'. Engwicht maintains that the speed of traffic on residential streets is governed, to a large extent, by the degree to which residents have psychologically retreated from their street. Simply reversing this retreat creates mental speed bumps in the street.

After hearing one of Engwicht's talks on how to create mental speed bumps, James went home and decided to have dinner on his front lawn twice a week. The results were incredible, with motorists not just slowing down but actually stopping their cars to come over and have a conversation with him and his family.

What happened here? James took responsibility, made a change, received positive reinforcement and continued to work out other changes.

He decided to try a new experiment: he began leaving valuables on his front porch and in the front yard. Remarkably nothing went missing in a two year period. However, his neighbour who had security grills on his windows was robbed three times.

We believe the reason is rather simple and shows the power of behaviour change in itself being a diffusing mechanism. Valuables left in the front yard contain a message: 'I, the owner of this home, believe that you are a trustworthy person.' On the other hand security grills, locked doors and high fences also contain a message, 'I, the owner of this home, believe you are a thief and totally untrustworthy'. Treat someone as trustworthy they are much more likely to reciprocate the trust than if you treat them as untrustworthy and as a thief. This is the principle of reciprocity that forms part of the social influence and interpersonal communications theories of the followers of Kelly and Thibaut (1978).

2.2 Personal responsibility in a community setting

As we have just seen, behaviour change can be instigated by a facilitative conversation with individuals. Behaviour change can also be instigated by individuals in a community setting. While this sometimes happens spontaneously (often called self-organisation³) it can also be facilitated as part of a wider program of change. It can occur within

- a group of people in the community with a **common interest** who interact with each other on a more or less regular basis take responsibility to change, or
- a **geographical community** (e.g. a neighbourhood) – again with a common interest (living in the same general area) - take responsibility to change.

These are similar, but we have differentiated them because in the former, the group tends to get together and communicate periodically, while in the latter there is not necessarily a communication process in existence.

To explore the conditions surrounding behaviour change in a community setting, and then to explore the match with Figure 1, let us tell another story.

³ **Self-organization** is a process in which the internal organization of a system, normally an open system, increases in complexity without being guided or managed by an outside source.

2.2.1 A community builds a playground

As part of a 'Living Neighbourhood' project in Christies Beach, South Australia (Ampt,1999) that aimed to reduce kilometres travelled and in doing so to reap non-transport benefits, participants were asked a series of three questions: 'what is it like to live in Christies Beach?', 'what would make it better?' and 'have you thought what you could you do about it'?

These questions can be seen in order as:

- setting the scene
- finding the problem
- giving the context of personal responsibility.

The answers led to a clear message from many people that they were travelling a long way to find a playground that was ideal for kids of all ages. With facilitation from the project team for the first 3 months, but thereafter completely on their own, the people in Christies Beach built their own playground.

They found a community development organisation that facilitated the design and construction of community playgrounds. The US consultants began by coming to Adelaide and getting kids at local schools to draw and contribute their imagination of a 'wonderful playground'. On the evening of the workshops, the consultants had drawn the first plans and parents and children could shape them further. But of course the consultants had to be paid, so before they arrived they had told the people in the Christies Beach community that they would need flights and accommodation – and to begin by asking Qantas and the local motel. To the amazement of the locals, they got positive responses on both counts – and so the process of building funds and building the playground began.

The people in the playground building team went to Council to ask where a playground could be built, inspected nine sites and chose three, from which one was finally selected. They then began talking to Council about the way in which the playground could be built. Note they did not ask for money! After a short time there were five Councillors taking part (as citizens) in the planning and offering Council money – which in the end the community took.

After 18 months the playground was ready to build and in 5-6 days it was built with 3000 volunteers and the supervision of the consultant (who was fully paid).

What had happened? A community had a problem that would usually have been solved by approaching a local authority to solve it. They took responsibility and solved it themselves. In doing so they got to know people in the community, and did what theorists would call building social capital.

2.2.2 Can the framework for individual change fit changes in a community setting?

Reviewing the changes that occurred in Christies Beach and comparing them against the framework described in Figure 2, it would appear that all stages appear to be valid for the community initiated change – with an additional community goal being satisfied (or as Rogers (1995) would put it - addressing an issue that is perceived to be a problem.

There were options for change (ask the Council to build the playground, find a different solution). The personal goal was in fact a goal not only for individuals but also for the community in that it built social interactions and inclusion of many people who previously would not have believed it possible to achieve something like this. The project had clear self-reinforcement for the participants (e.g. 'Guess what I did today, I designed a constitution!')

and received praise from many segments of the community. To the best of our knowledge, many of the participants have now diffused the message that it is possible to bring about change as individuals and are actively involved in other projects in the community.

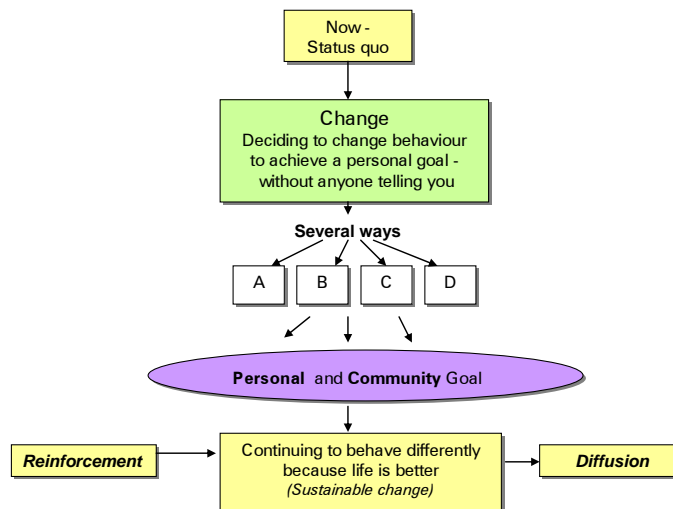


FIGURE 2 THE CONDITIONS SURROUNDING BEHAVIOUR CHANGE IN A COMMUNITY SETTING

2.3 Personal responsibility approaches in an organisational setting

The question arises whether voluntary behaviour change focused on personal responsibility can also work in situations where 'top-down' processes have often been the norm. While it is common in today's workplaces for management to encourage participatory planning, it is often not as simple as it seems. While many organisations are keen to get input into their planning, and even allow the employees to shape the changes (e.g. TravelSmart Workplace programs), it is much less common to encourage/facilitate staff to take responsibility for bringing about change themselves.

Some Travel Plans or Green Transport Plans are examples of behaviour change approaches that actually limit personal responsibility.

The type of Travel Plan we are referring to would be one where an organisation carries out a survey to find out 'what would encourage people to use their car less to get to/from work or as part of work'. Once the results are available, the organisation then puts in place as many suggestions as possible of those people who contributed. While this might give many valuable assets to the employees (ranging from better showers to interest free loans for public transport tickets), it does not usually increase personal responsibility for change or actually 'help people to help themselves'. The showers appear and help some people but they are more likely to be owned by the manager who had them installed than the users. There will be some reinforcement and diffusion (the showers are good and made it easier for me to ride to work) but very little that stems from taking personal responsibility.

Another story illustrates the opportunity for facilitating personal responsibility as part of voluntary behaviour change as a way of implementing a Travel Plan. In this situation in Transport SA in Adelaide in 1999 each of 7 Section Heads chose 1 or 2 champions in each of their sections. A facilitator worked with these champions to do the following:

- learn how to have conversations with their colleagues to work out what were their key frustrations with getting to work by car as well as on business trips,
- learn how to develop a strategy that included the ideas of their colleagues, and

- be supported in their ideas, but encouraged to take personal responsibility for change.

This approach to change had many outcomes – devised and supported by the champions themselves. One of the outstanding successes was the idea of a personal assistant in the assets section. Many people had identified that they were always going to meetings at two other locations in Adelaide, that they realised other people must be going there too, that parking was difficult, but that they knew nothing about buses, and so on. She realised that Transport SA had a spare bus and suggested the idea of having a shuttle between these locations. She and her colleagues ran a naming competition, organised with personnel to have light duties people drive it – and to this day the Green Transporter runs between the 3 sites on a regular basis.

What happened? Members of the organisation decided to make changes to benefit themselves and their organisation. One of the goals they achieved was that it was not only easier for them to get to meetings, but it took away parking problems and often gave them time to chat with other colleagues on the way. The change has been continued because users have diffused the message over time, hence reinforcing its value. In fact the CEO at the time, while supportive of the principle, was somewhat reluctant to use the bus – until one diffuser of the message pointed out that the bus got to the Minister's Office 10 minutes before most meetings and there was time for a smoke break. Once he found a personal benefit, he became a convert – and in turn reinforced the message.

The establishment of a shuttle bus was the idea of a staff member and was organised by the champions. It could equally well have been simply implemented by management. We would argue that this suggests that the long-standing result is because of the approach that gave people personal responsibility and helped people to help themselves.

2.4 How can governments support personal responsibility in change

Halpern et al., 2004 argue that there are three key factors that have encouraged the growing interest in personal responsibility and the division of responsibilities between state and individual.

- 1) **The achievement of major policy outcomes requires greater engagement and participation from citizens than traditional ways of delivering public services - Governments can't do it alone**. Higher levels of spending and better run public services can achieve improved outcomes. But in the long-run, improvements depend as much on changes in personal behaviour: for example in health on better diets and more exercise and in transport on people's willingness to use cars less and differently.
- 2) **There are strong moral and political arguments for protecting and enhancing personal responsibility**. Most of the dominant traditions of social and political thought in Australia value individuals' and communities' ability to take control and act in their own best interests as goods in themselves (social capital). If other things are equal, they tend to see it as better for governments to empower people in the community as much as possible rather than making decisions on their behalf.

Personal responsibility increases the potential to be law-abiding and achieve a positive role in the community. Empowerment means developing a sense of value and self-worth, and confidence in the ability to create a positive future. (West Australian Department of Corrective Services, 2007)

- 3) **Behaviourally based interventions can be significantly more cost-effective than traditional service delivery**. In the UK there is good evidence across a range of policy areas – for example in health, education and crime – of the cost-effectiveness of

behavioural interventions' (for example a change in diet that avoids a heart attack is better *and* cheaper than dealing with the consequences of poor diet with heart surgery) (Halpern et al, 2004).

There is increasing evidence of this in Australia as well, e.g. Rolls, J. 2001 in reducing peak energy demand and in law (Ipp, 2004). The impetus for the Greenhouse Gas Abatement (GAP) funding of TravelSmart project nationally was also based on the cost-effectiveness of behaviour change as an approach.

Although there is no recent evidence, in an early World Values Survey (1990-93) about 60% of the Australian public felt that 'people should take more responsibility to provide for themselves' versus 'the government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for'.

However, even given the idea that governments and citizens support the idea of behavioural change approaches in the public sector, it is an interesting question as to how this might happen. Our experience suggests that in most cases it is a matter of governments creating conditions (often top down directives, organisational structures or policies) that make it possible for individuals and communities to take responsibility. The main examples seem to be in health (e.g. Gross, 2006)⁴, crime-prevention (e.g. West Australian Department of Corrective Services, 2007) and education (e.g. home-school agreements).

How could this work in the area of transport?

2.5 Creating a climate for behaviour change – potential government responses in transport

In this section we discuss two examples of how it might be possible for governments to create institutions or practices that give incentives to personal responsibility. The first is already occurring in The Netherlands and the second is a new experiment in Wodonga, Victoria.

2.5.1 Roads without line-marking

In The Netherlands a Dutch engineer, Hans Monderman, has removed all traffic control devices from over 30 villages in the north of the Netherlands – an extreme example of giving people personal responsibility

As he stood with David Engwicht at a major intersection in Oosterwolde that had been converted from a major traffic intersection with traffic lights into a town square. Hans explained (Engwicht, personal communication, 2005):

'When I designed it people asked, 'But where will the cars park? There are no white lines telling us where to park.' I replied, 'I don't care where you park'. So they said, 'What if people park inappropriately'? And I replied: 'Well if the village has a problem with where people are parking, let the village sort it out. It is not my job to try and forecast every potential problem the village may have in the future and try to pre-empt what may or may not be a problem through design'.

Hans continued, 'Why are planners and engineers so frightened of conflict? Conflict is a normal part of the democratic process in the social world. When we try to eliminate conflict by over-regulating physical design we actually weaken the evolution of a robust and vibrant social world'.

⁴ Gross – referring to Medicare - in fact argues that personal responsibility is weakened by subsidies.

For Hans Monderman, the design of space can either weaken or strengthen the democratic process and the level of personal responsibility. Over-regulated space takes away the need for people to negotiate directly with their neighbours. By removing traffic control devices this approach puts car drivers in eye contact with the other users of the space. By so doing, he establishes a direct social relationship rather than one mediated by an engineer.

In a recent paper Michael (2006) argues that rules and regulations have a tendency to deskill people in ethical decision making:

‘Despite the recent rash of corporate scandals and the resulting rush to address the problem by adding more laws and regulations, seemingly little attention has been paid to how the nature (not the substance) of rules may or may not affect ethical decision-making. One might suppose that where law is largely absent, behavior is pretty bad. Yet it turns out to be nearly the other way around. The two areas where law is arguably the *largest* presence in ordinary life – driving cars and paying taxes – are probably the two areas where there is the largest amount of self-conscious cheating.’

It could well be argued that we are breeding uncivil behaviour by the way we relate to the public through design and through our social programs. Every public seat bolted to the ground is a breeding ground for uncivil behaviour. Every “Keep Left” sign on a traffic island deskills drivers. One of the most powerful ways to get behaviour change is to treat people as if they are actually capable of ethical, responsible decision making.

The example given here does not imply that street signs should be removed from all cities in Australia. It is designed to stimulate a new way of thinking and to encourage exploration of new ideas in both theory and practice.

2.5.2 A bold experiment

How might this new approach to behaviour change translate on the ground?

The City of Wodonga has employed David Engwicht to rebuild the main street in the CBD. It is planned in a way that solicits significant behavioural change. Here are just three elements:

- Instead of having to build new public toilets there is a program ‘Merchants with Heart’ in which merchants compete for providing the best loo that shoppers have free access to without needing to buy something. This program is being expanded to include other public services such as baby change facilities, quiet reading areas, spaces for small meetings, etc. Merchants are being treated as if this level of civility is the norm.
- Initially there will be no large, iconic, monumental design elements. Instead the street will be treated as a series of ‘ever-changing outdoor lounge rooms’. All elements will be movable – art, seating, kiosks, entryways, even the traffic lanes. Visitors will be encouraged to participate in the shaping of the space on a day to day basis. Each ‘room’ will have a major makeover three or four times a year – curated by a local resident, a school class or a famous artist. This design approach is deliberately aimed at building a sense of trust and ownership.
- A cross-department working group within the City of Wodonga to reduce regulations governing activities such as busking, holding stalls or displaying goods on the footpath.

At the very heart of this project is the triggering of an outbreak of civility that we believe will trickle down to the speed people drive at in each other’s neighbourhoods and even to how often they drive. It understands very clearly that the design of a space and the regulations that manage that space either build personal responsibility, civil behaviour, or they put us on a slippery slope of mistrust.

3 Conclusions

In a time when travel behaviour change is an important component of addressing climate change, we believe that academics, decision makers and practitioners need to continue to question existing frameworks.

We have reviewed the way in which voluntary travel behaviour change has been used taking a personal responsibility approach. We have concluded that the approach has led to longevity of change, supported by reinforcement and diffusion – particularly when individual, communities and organisations are facilitated to encourage taking personal responsibility.

We have then raised the question of whether the approach could be developed further to be used by governments - noting three supportive factors – governments 'can't do it alone', the strong moral reasons in our culture that promote personal responsibility, and the likely cost efficiencies of authorities creating conditions for behavioural change.

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