



Community Activation Program

Evaluation summary

The Community Activation Program was an innovative VicHealth initiative that aimed to assist less-active people to become more active. We partnered with five Victorian councils to create and ‘activate’ under-used public spaces within local communities, increasing access to opportunities for physical activity and social connection.

Reported levels of physical activity increased as a result of the program, and the vast majority of surveyed community members felt that the new or activated public spaces made it easier for them to be physically active and more socially connected in their community.

Councils reported many positive outcomes from the program, with one council retaining the activated site and several influencing major town and park redevelopments.

In this summary

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- The councils and their projects: an overview
- How we evaluated the program
- What the program achieved
- The council experience and project learnings
- Conclusion and recommendations

Community Activation Program: overall outcomes



5

Councils/
community spaces



417

Hours of physical
activity delivered



430

Events
delivered



1,091

Days of
activation



23,830

Participants (planned
and unplanned
activities)



65

Partnerships
developed to
deliver project

Active spaces to inspire physical activity

Regular physical activity is one of the most important factors in promoting good health and preventing chronic disease (AIHW 2008). However, less than a third of Australians currently engage in sufficient physical activity to provide health benefits (ABS 2012).

Encouraging regular physical activity is one of VicHealth's key focus areas, as outlined in the Action Agenda for Health Promotion 2013–23 (VicHealth 2013). Embedding physical activity within everyday life through participation in sport, arts and active recreation is important in getting more Victorians physically active. However, limited access to safe, accessible and inclusive places and spaces to be active can be a barrier to achieving healthy physical activity levels (VicHealth 2010).

To address this barrier, VicHealth implemented the Community Activation Program. Delivered over 12 months between June 2015 and end of June 2016, it involved partnerships with five Victorian councils. The councils were supported by total VicHealth funding of around \$240,000 to transform and activate local spaces.

VicHealth's innovative approach to community activation builds on internationally proven models of 'place making' or 'tactical urbanism'. These models describe low-cost and short-term interventions that catalyse longer-term change in the community. Unused (or under-used) public spaces were transformed to create vibrant, safe and accessible places for meeting up, getting active and having fun. Each space was then 'activated' by offering a diverse range of physical activity opportunities to engage and inspire less-active local people to become more physically active. Some activities were organised (programmed and facilitated) and some were unstructured (free use of available equipment).

KEY PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

- Create new sites within local communities that increase access to opportunities for physical activity and social connection.
- Embed community activation approaches into the work of councils to support active communities in the long term (e.g. through changes to planning processes, practices and policies).

VicHealth program partners

VicHealth engaged CoDesign Studio, a social enterprise design consultancy, to provide expert support to the development of the program and in building the capacity of councils to transform and activate their sites. They provided expert advice to each council throughout their project to get the best outcomes for the transformation and to consider the long-term outcomes for their site.

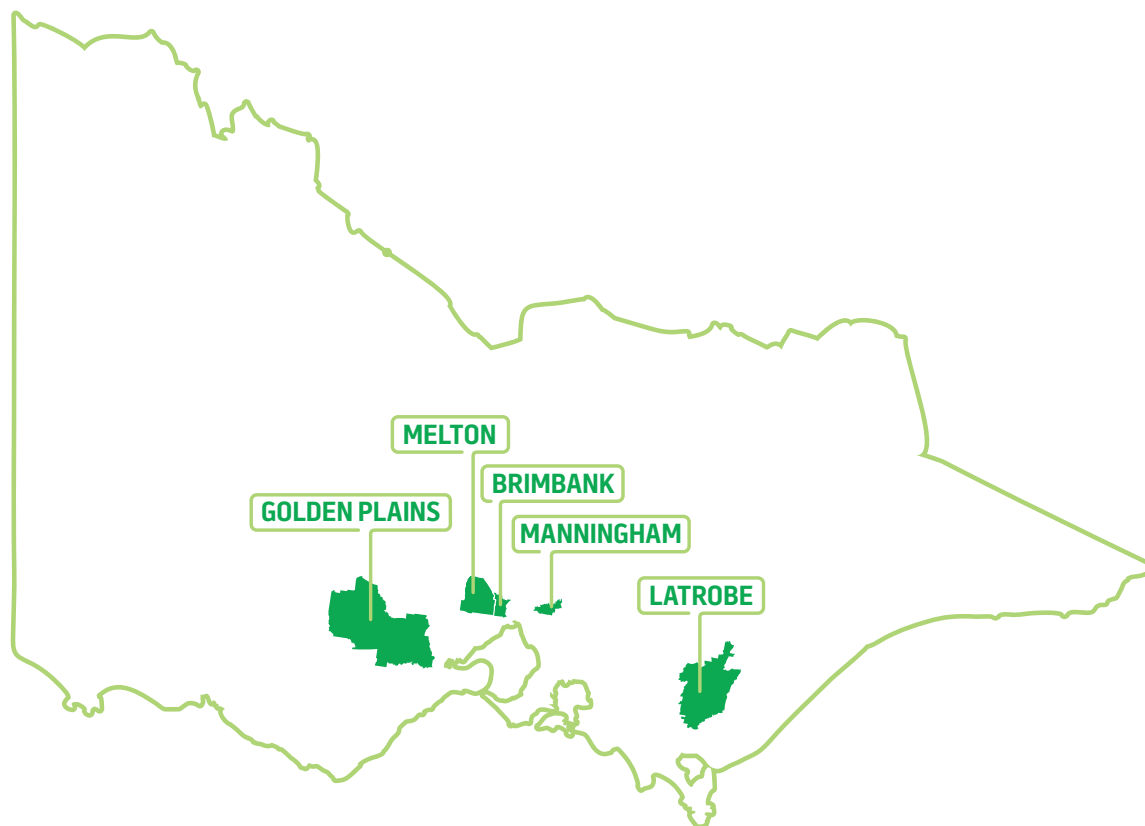
In a separate but concurrent initiative, VicHealth supported the councils to work with arts organisations to deliver a series of free, outdoor arts programs to assist in 'activating' their transformed sites.

The Arts Centre Melbourne, Circus Oz and the Australian Ballet partnered with VicHealth and the councils to deliver events between September 2015 and May 2016. These events aimed to promote physical activity and mental wellbeing by bringing people together to be involved in active and participatory arts activities.

The councils and their projects: an overview

Below is a summary of each of the five council activations.

See page 10 for more information about each of the councils and their projects.



Brimbank City Council

What? B-active@Pollard



Brimbank Council created a 'pop-up' leisure centre in a centrally located park in Sunshine. The council used shipping containers for storage of equipment and as wet-weather activity venues, and provided pole art gardens, knitted fences and a sports and recreation area.

Why? Council wanted to ensure residents had equitable access to safe, high-quality open spaces that could contribute to community health and wellbeing. Although Pollard Gardens was a central site, many in the community avoided it because of the presence of people regularly drinking in the park. Council wanted to bring the community back into the park and use the program to inform future permanent works.

When? September 2015 – May 2016.

Target audience: Mothers with young children, and young people.

Activation: Tai chi, BodyPump, Zumba, volleyball, kids' fitness, circus delivered by local providers, partners and the council.

What now? Approval and funding secured to turn the space into a permanent playground, with construction beginning mid-2016.

Golden Plains Shire Council

What? @ the heart



A Bannockburn carpark and grassed area were transformed into an adventure park with nature- and water-based play areas, art installations, giant games and a dedicated synthetic turf area for fitness activities and games.

Why? A high local population of young people and families with young children prompted the council to engage women and families with the transformation of a site that already attracted a wide variety of people and hosted a range of community activities.

When? September 2015 – May 2016.

Target audience: Families and women.

Activation: Unstructured (e.g. giant Jenga and Kerplunk games, bocce) and organised (karate, yoga, dance) activities delivered by local providers and clubs.

What now? This project was intended to be long-term from the outset. Funding submissions were made to permanently transform the space for active recreation, which have now been successful. A new project involves the development of a mobile activation trailer to activate other sites within the Shire.

Latrobe City Council

What? Tarwin Pop-up Park



A centrally located plaza and road in Morwell was transformed with synthetic turf, temporary landscaping, tables and seating and a space for physical activity opportunities.

Why? Although a busy and central retail shopping precinct and pedestrian area, the Tarwin Street area was dominated by motor vehicle traffic, with little to encourage the community to stay or enjoy the space. Part of Tarwin Street was closed to create a more pedestrian-friendly space.

When? September 2015 – March 2017 (currently active).

Target audience: A broad range of community members.

Activation: Unstructured (e.g. giant chess, play equipment, bocce) and organised (e.g. tai chi, yoga and dance classes, walking groups, demonstration sports, music) activities delivered by the council and local providers.

What now? The space has been extended to March 2017. Council will develop a business case for consideration in respect to the park becoming permanent. A community-supported governance structure will also be established for Tarwin Park.

Manningham City Council

What? MC² Plaza Park Project



The plaza forecourt of Manningham City Square was transformed with pallet seating and stage, art elements (e.g. wooden tree art installations), sporting equipment (e.g. table tennis), community piano, grassed area, sandpit, footpath games, exercise stations and spaces for fitness, movement and sporting activities.

Why? Manningham City Council chose the busy site as it had enormous potential and recreational appeal for community engagement, but needed more activation to realise its potential.

When? September 2015 – April 2016.

Target audience: A broad range of community members.

Activation: Unstructured (e.g. use of sporting equipment) and organised (e.g. seasonal and annual run events, dance, music, backyard games, bowling, hula-hooping, yoga, tai chi, Zumba, golf) events and programs provided by the council with collaboration from local providers and clubs.

What now? Although the site has largely returned to its original state, some elements have been retained (e.g. table tennis, community piano).

Melton City Council

What? The Corner @ McKenzie



Vacant land in Melton was transformed into a 'backyard space' with a shipping container 'lounge room', moveable furniture, structural buffers, moveable objects for play and light exercise, comfortable surfaces and artistic elements (e.g. a stage was constructed using large, brightly-coloured geometric shapes from pallets).

Why? Council wanted to create a vibrant and safe town centre with spaces to provide opportunities for a diverse range of activities and events to address low community physical activity levels.

When? September 2015 – March 2016.

Target audience: Whole of community.

Activation: Predominantly by scheduled council activities supporting families to participate in physical activity sessions (e.g. fitness sessions, yoga, family fun days, tai chi) and the Active Arts Program (e.g. The Australian Ballet, Circus Oz workshops and arts performances).

What now? Council's Melton Town Centre Redevelopment Project is currently being undertaken and is due for finalisation in late 2017. Evaluation findings from The Corner will be used to inform how the redeveloped area is used and activated. Resources from The Corner (e.g. giant games and seating) will be used by various council teams at a range of local programs, events and activities.

How we evaluated the program

The program was evaluated to measure its success in achieving its aims and objectives. In particular, the evaluation was designed to answer to what extent and how the program:

- was effective in contributing to increases in physical activity and social connectedness
- contributed to the creation of new spaces to increase access to opportunities for physical activity
- contributed to changes in council policy and practice for site activation.

A range of both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to inform the evaluation through event record forms, personal story forms, time-lapse video, post-activation survey questionnaires and council progress and final reports. Reflection workshops were held both within individual councils and collaboratively, involving the five councils, VicHealth and the program evaluator.

A note on data limitations

Two councils (Brimbank and Manningham) were unable to administer the post-activation survey, and results reported from the post-activation survey are therefore based on data collected across the other three councils.

Although derived from a small sample, this data provides some indication of participants' use and enjoyment of the space, as well as how it may have contributed to levels of physical activity and perceptions of social connectedness.



What the program achieved

Over the five spaces transformed in five councils, a total of 430 activities were delivered through the Community Activation Program, representing 778 hours of planned activity and 23,830 participants in planned and unplanned activities.

Many participants surveyed reported **positive shifts in physical activity levels**, and the majority intended to remain more physically active following their participation in local community activation projects. **Nine out of ten community members** surveyed felt that the space transformed through the program made it easier to be physically active and to be **more socially connected** within their community.

Community Activation Program: community responses

Of participants surveyed,

2 in 3

intended to remain more physically active (59%).

9 in 10

felt that the space made it easier to be physically active (89%).

9 in 10

felt that the space made it easier for them to be more socially connected in their community (93%).



Each council had its own rationale for participating in the program, and the five council projects were delivered in very different contexts in terms of site location, type of space, available resources, transformation and activation programming. For this reason, a direct comparison has not been made between projects. Rather, the outcomes from each project have been considered collectively to inform the overall evaluation of the program. From the post-activation surveys collected, almost all community members surveyed rated the experience of participating in their local project ‘excellent’ (71%) or ‘good’ (28%), and this finding is supported by the personal stories collected from a selection of participants across all five projects.

Key findings follow, and individual council experiences are described in the next section.

Participation

The program demonstrated high levels of community engagement through participation in activities delivered at the activated sites.

A total of 21,586 people participated in the organised activities made available through the program. A further 2244 people were recorded using the spaces outside of organised activities, although this is likely to be a very conservative estimate: the ‘snapshot’ data collection may not be indicative of true unstructured use. Across all projects:

- more females participated than males
- the program was most effective in engaging adults (aged 20–59 years) and children aged up to 12 years
- families with young children (an identified target audience for two of the five projects) were well represented.

An important finding was that the projects reported attracting a diverse range of participants, many of whom had never attended a council-run event before.

Despite the fact that three in five programmed events focused on physical activity, the activities that attracted the largest audiences were primarily audience-based, rather than activity-based. In part, this is likely to be because most physical activity participation events were relatively small in scale (e.g. Zumba), while audience-based events could be much larger, in particular the events facilitated through the Active Arts Partnership events (see p. 2). Although some of these events were audience-based, they involved interactive elements designed to engage and inspire participants, offered opportunities for people to get up and move, and were important in introducing and attracting the community to the transformed spaces.

Physical activity

Increasing community access to opportunities for physical activity was a key objective of the program, and the program delivered promising outcomes across the five councils.

Collectively, the spaces transformed through the program engaged 181 people per hour through organised activities, and 18 people per hour in unstructured activities (e.g. playing giant games or table tennis). Overall, **more than 400 hours of physical activity were delivered across the five council projects.**

The post-activation survey showed promising trends in increasing participants' physical activity levels, and participants overwhelmingly reported that the creation of new spaces enabled them to be more physically active. Encouragingly, **59 per cent of surveyed community members also reported that they intended to remain more physically active** following their participation in events facilitated through the program.

Social connectivity

The sites transformed and activated through the program provided places for people to meet and connect, and catalysed engagement with others.

All councils involved in the program reported positive outcomes for social connectivity as a result of the transformed spaces. Most participants surveyed reported always or often engaging with another person or people while using the space, and **the vast majority (94%) felt that the program contributed to social connectivity within the local community.**

Communications and promotions

Effective promotion of sites and activities was important in engaging participation by local communities, and local and social media were critical channels for communicating to the public.

Overall, the program achieved **273,984 unique impressions on social media sites, 5880 visits to project web pages, 990 articles presented through the media** (print, radio and online), and 268 individuals providing unsolicited feedback to councils.

Sustainability and long-term change

Along with the creation of new sites to increase community access to physical activity and social connection opportunities, the program aimed to embed community activation approaches into local council processes, practice and policy. In addition, councils were asked to consider how the spaces could have greater permanence and foster change in their communities in the longer term.

The projects have resulted in some positive shifts within councils around the value of the activation approaches employed as part of the projects.

- While no direct changes in policy were reported at the time of evaluation, two councils will be looking to develop policy and processes to support their community activation work locally (e.g. park governance).
- Three of the spaces transformed through the program have now been supported as part of more major town and park redevelopments. In these cases the learnings from the sites will be considered as part of the redevelopment of the spaces.
- One site has been extended until March 2017 following strong support from the community and many local traders to keep the space.
- A number of additional small-scale spaces have been proposed across three councils.
- One council has developed the innovative idea of a mobile trailer to undertake space activation projects to small towns across the community, with local residents being given the skills to activate their own communities.

The council experience and project learnings

For the councils involved, the program represented a new approach to planning open spaces created challenges in navigating existing council policy and processes. Because of these challenges, establishing the support of senior management and councillors at the outset of a project was a key recommendation from the evaluation of the program. Expert briefing in tactical urbanism concepts may help these groups to understand the approach.

Despite these challenges, councils highlighted the value of the temporary and low-cost nature of the community activation approach in allowing different ideas to be tested quickly. These characteristics helped to mitigate early concerns – if a project didn't work, it could be easily, quickly and cheaply removed. The trial nature of the projects also reduced barriers relating to perceptions of risks, such as vandalism and theft. Councils reported little or no vandalism across the projects, an outcome that has helped to change negative attitudes towards space activation projects.

The council projects were very collaborative, involving significant internal partnerships such as with staff in communications and media, events, community development and planning, and in council depot. This internal collaboration enabled several councils to overcome internal bureaucratic barriers to project delivery, and many reported an increased collaborative culture as an important outcome.

At the time of evaluation, none of the five councils reported any immediate change to internal policy or procedures. However, they did report that the positive outcomes from the projects were already influencing the development of new plans and strategies across health promotion, planning and transportation departments. Most reported positive changes in internal attitudes to and support for space activation projects.

Beyond these internal factors, key themes and practical considerations identified by the councils involved in the program are discussed below. Outcomes for each of the council projects are described later in this section.

Project design

Key elements of project design are site choice and transformation, and activation planning. The five councils involved in the program highlighted a number of learnings and key considerations that can inform future community activation projects.

Choosing a site

Most councils chose sites that had good visibility and access by public transport and active transport networks. Spaces located within or near other community destinations, or those that already had significant 'passing traffic' had a higher potential to attract users, particularly outside of planned events.

Ensuring spaces could provide adequate protection from the weather was an important learning for councils. Exposed sites were more likely to require significant investment in infrastructure, leading to increased costs and potential delays in project delivery. Where such investment was not made, councils found that a lack of shade and/or inclement weather negatively affected participation levels.

Transforming and activating the site

With different objectives and target audiences, the transformation and activation of the five sites was context-dependent and varied. While programmed activities in many cases introduced and drew community members to the sites, the transformations were designed to maximise engagement and unstructured opportunities for physical activity and social connection.

Councils found flexible spatial layouts to be beneficial, as they were able to support a range of events and engage a diverse range of community members (e.g. different age groups and culturally and linguistically diverse populations). In particular, flexible layouts supported community use of the transformed space outside of planned and organised activities and events. Spaces should be proactively designed to support diversity through the nature of the transformation and the programming of activation activities.

In activation programming, some councils reported that clashes with other community events may have created competition for participants. However, other councils intentionally and successfully timed programmed activities to coincide with existing local events. This highlights the importance of early planning and community engagement to avoid clashes while identifying opportunities to collaborate with local groups and businesses.

Project planning and delivery

As already highlighted, councils experienced a range of internal and external barriers to the implementation of a new (community activation) approach, and the timeframes allowed for the projects proved challenging for all involved. In particular, experience highlighted the need to allow sufficient time for:

- project planning and design
- navigating internal policies and processes (especially where new staff are recruited to deliver the project)
- planning diverse activities to attract a broad audience.

This up-front planning, along with early community engagement (see p. 6), was found to be vital to the success of projects, and could have prevented many of the issues encountered by councils. For example, road closures required early and significant engagement and advocacy and appropriate timeframes to navigate local laws, and council policies and procedures.

In light of these program timeframes and existing council policies and processes, project facilitators had to be flexible and creative in their approach to successfully deliver the ‘simple, quick’ activation projects. This involved maintaining a balance of council approvals, permit applications, internal policies and practical realities. Although the need for agility was challenging for many project facilitators, it also resulted in professional development among council staff.

As highlighted earlier, internal collaboration was key to the successful delivery of these projects, and the program experience highlighted the benefits of both a dedicated project facilitator and team members with event management, community development and engagement and evaluation skills and experience.

Involving the community

The community activation approach was new not only for councils, but also for the communities in which the projects took place. Adequate and timely communication and engagement was needed for communities to appreciate the value and opportunities of the projects, and most councils acknowledged that this should have been planned and implemented earlier.

Engagement

Early engagement of and collaboration with the broader community (including traders, community groups and other relevant stakeholders) was felt to be vital in gaining support for the projects. Most councils reported barriers that could have been overcome with earlier engagement of these groups. Despite this, strong community participation in both the planning and delivery of the transformed sites was reported by four of the five councils involved in the program. Overall, the projects appeared to foster a strong sense of community ownership and pride.

In many cases, communities have expressed strong interest in extending the projects or running similar projects in the future, with expressions of interest and ideas for new projects submitted to councils. Unexpectedly, councils also found that the projects were able to facilitate community engagement beyond participation in events and use of the transformed sites: in some cases they enabled councils to better understand broader issues affecting the community.

Collaboration

External partnerships proved key to the successful delivery of projects and helped to create a sense of community ownership and pride in the project. Across the program, external collaborations helped to both transform (e.g. with site furniture built by a local Men’s Shed, yarn-bombing by a local knitters’ group) and activate (e.g. through events facilitated by local clubs and groups) the project sites.

Councils noted particular benefits where collaborations were developed to deliver events that benefited both parties.

Communication

Beyond engagement and active collaboration, communication with the broader community and promotion of the sites and activation activities were considered an important contributor to the success of projects. Effective communications are vital for facilitating community participation, in particular for those members who do not usually participate in council-run events. Planning for these should be done early with a detailed communications strategy. Councils involved in the program reported that, in particular:

- strong branding of the spaces proved very beneficial in terms of communication and promotion within the community
- social media was an important tool for promoting the project and activation activities.

CASE STUDY

Brimbank City Council – B-active@Pollard

Pollard Gardens is located next to the burgeoning Sunshine Arts Precinct, and within walking distance of four schools and the train station, but the community avoided the site because of issues associated with the presence of people regularly drinking in the park. Brimbank City Council's Creating Better Parks strategy sought to ensure equitable access to a range of safe, high-quality open spaces that contribute to the health and wellbeing of the community.

Council wanted to promote the beauty of Pollard Gardens and bring the community back into it. They felt that the Community Activation Program aligned with their current commitments and viewed it as an opportunity to test ideas to inform future permanent works.

A total of 1509 people used the transformed space during 91 organised events held over 192 days.

Although the project's impact on participants' levels of physical activity or feelings of social connectedness could not be quantified, the personal stories collected suggested positive outcomes in both of these domains.

Community engagement and communication was significant, with 12,434 unique impressions through social media, 38 articles in mainstream media, 2268 visits to the project's website and 20 people providing unsolicited positive feedback to the council.

Sixteen internal and external partnerships were developed as part of the project, and an internal working group comprising council staff from community planning, arts, urban design, media and communications and early years resulted in a lot of energy and goodwill that contributed to the project's success.

Through the project, the project officer was able to build strong relationships with local residents and park users (including the people who drank regularly in the park), even though the negative community perceptions of the site were felt to limit participation in events.

Internal barriers were encountered in delivering the project (e.g. policies and procedures that did not support this type of approach), but changes in the council's attitude towards projects such as these was reported as a positive outcome of the Community Activation Program. Brimbank City Council has approved funding to redevelop Pollard Gardens.

“

I saw this [program] as a stepping stone back into physical fitness and wellbeing. After attending the Tennis Australia Cardio workshop I went on and did the facilitator training, and have led cardio tennis in Pollard Gardens for the last few months. I have made it a goal to do more physical exercise and be more involved in the local community. Participating in the program has given me a stronger sense of community belonging. The activities brought people together and gave us a reason to visit the park.”

B-active@Pollard – Participant

“

I like exercising in the natural environment and to meet other people. This has helped me feel a sense of community which I don't generally have. People drive around everywhere and you don't see your neighbours.”

B-active@Pollard – Participant

CASE STUDY

Golden Plains Shire Council – @ the heart

In planning its community activation project, Golden Plains Shire Council noted that its population includes a higher proportion of young people (aged 0–19 years) and families with young children than the state average. As women are more likely to have insufficient physical activity levels compared to men, and individuals with dependent children may have less time to engage in physical activity, these groups were identified as key targets for the project.

The site, co-located with the Bannockburn Cultural Centre and the local library, was chosen for visibility and accessibility. The area already attracted a wide variety of people and was the venue for a range of community activities.

A total of 1633 people were recorded using the transformed space during 49 programmed events held over 251 days.

The events held by established organisers (e.g. through the Active Arts Partnerships) attracted the most participants, with school-run and family-based activities also popular. While physical activity event and participant numbers were relatively low, the project appears to have significantly increased physical activity levels among participants, with the vast majority of those surveyed agreeing that those changes were directly attributable to the project.

A total of 19 internal and external partnerships were formed during the delivery of the project, with local community groups representing important external partners.

During the activation period, the primary use of the space changed from ‘a space to move through’ to ‘a space for physical activity’. Outside of organised activities, the footpath and the artificial turf were noted to be the most-used elements of the space, used for walking and playing games.

The nature of the project created the flexibility to try new things, evolve, and experiment when some elements were not working as well as expected. This provided a good context for learning and improvement among council staff.

Community involvement in project planning was considered an important part of the process that built strong engagement, and the rare opportunity to host major arts companies and events (through the Active Arts Partnerships) was greatly appreciated.

The project has since been awarded federal funding (and matched funding from Golden Plains City Council) through a National Stronger Regions grant to deliver a major redevelopment, including a paved plaza for events and gatherings, public toilets, a play space, paths and walkways and landscaping. Council has also proposed the development of a mobile trailer to undertake space activation projects in other areas, such as small towns.

“

Before the changes to the site, Sarah* and her family would only use the space to attend the farmers’ market or to just pass through on the way to the library. Sarah was involved in the ‘ideas generation’ workshop, and her family assisted with the site transformation. Once the changes were implemented, Sarah was attracted to the space by the wide range of activities and equipment left on site. The family would attend @the heart a couple of times per week for general play, meeting up with friends and family and joining in the organised events.”

@ the heart – Project team member

*The names in these examples have been changed for privacy reasons.

CASE STUDY

Latrobe City Council – Tarwin Pop-up Park

Morwell as a whole, and in particular its western areas (in which the project was delivered), are characterised by high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. Although a busy and central retail shopping precinct and pedestrian area, the Tarwin Street area included a number of shops that had been vacant for years. The space was dominated by motor vehicle traffic, and there was previously little to encourage the community to stay or enjoy the space.

A total of 1588 people were recorded using the transformed space during 99 organised events held over 247 days, and participants in the Latrobe project had the highest average of physical activity per participant (20 minutes).

Physical activity events made up 60% of those offered throughout the activation period, and children (aged up to 12 years) made up almost half (47%) of participants.

Data from the post-activation survey suggested that the space was effective in attracting those who had not used the space before, and most reported using the space both during and outside of organised events. More than two-thirds of community participants surveyed agreed that the space positively influenced their physical activity levels, and 83 per cent reported that it was effective in helping people engage with others.

Across the community, support for the project was high, with various council departments responding quickly to issues as they arose, and local traders and volunteers taking ownership of setting up and packing up equipment daily.

Strong branding and ongoing publicity contributed to the success of the project, with 197,081 unique impressions achieved through social media, 141 articles in internal and external media, and 2873 visits to the council's website. More than 200 people provided unsolicited feedback to the council, 98% of which was positive in nature.

The site choice was considered successful: the transformation of the space created a vibrant and positive image of the area and increased pedestrian traffic.

Latrobe City Council has extended the park until 31 March 2017. The business case is to be developed in respect to making the park permanent.

“

[The transformation has been] wonderful, colourful and a nice place for people to meet.”

Tarwin Pop-up Park – Owner of Tania's Deli Café (staff helped with the upkeep of the park by storing the park's beanbags and furniture in their store, taking it out and bringing it in each day.)

“

Billy* is a shy 9 year old who attended Nicky Bomba's performance at Tarwin Park. He was invited to play on stage with Nicky. Since attending Tarwin Park, Billy's mother has noticed him being more confident, and he has gone on to successfully audition for his school band, and is listening to a wide range of music.”

Tarwin Pop-up Park – Project team member

CASE STUDY

Manningham City Council – MC² Plaza Park Project

The Manningham City Square is a community hub that houses a range of health, welfare disability and arts organisations, as well as a library and café. While the site had enormous potential and recreational appeal for community engagement, activation was lacking.

A total of 14,693 people were recorded using the transformed space during 70 organised events held over 219 days.

Family-based events were particularly well attended, with most attracting more than 1500 participants. Culturally and linguistically diverse groups were well represented across activities, accounting for about 40% of participants. The diversity of planned events contributed to the community's active participation in the project.

The pallets, sandpit and pavement games were popular elements of the space, and walking was the most frequently observed physical activity outside of organised events. Chatting and playing the piano were key social activities observed.

Manningham City Council developed 32 new partnerships through the development of the project, and internal and external collaborations contributed to its successful delivery. Engaging an external designer to develop the project's branding gave it its own identity, which played a significant role in event marketing and communications.

There is now greater council and external support for this type of project. Since the delivery of the project, community members and groups have been approaching the council to discuss their ideas for space activation in different local areas. The current space is proposed for retention, but funding has not yet been secured.

“
Meredith* noted that previously there was nothing in the space to entice her and her family, but the community living in the area come to the park a lot now.”

MC² Plaza Park – Project team member

“
Shirley* thought the space was beautiful, and she was happy that she was experiencing it, as was her [autistic] son. She felt that any community space is valuable to join people together, but this space is different from other venues.”

MC² Plaza Park – Project team member

*The names in these examples have been changed for privacy reasons.

CASE STUDY

Melton City Council – The Corner @ McKenzie

Overall, the City of Melton is less physically active than the Victorian population as a whole. The council recognised a number of barriers to increased activity levels, including a lack of family-friendly, weekend and after-hours opportunities. They wanted to create a vibrant and safe town centre comprising a series of smaller spaces to provide opportunities for a diverse range of activities and events to engage all community members. The chosen site had good access through existing public transport and active transport networks.

A total of 2163 people used the transformed space during 121 organised activities held over 182 days. Another 108 people were recorded using the space for unstructured activities. During the activation, the space was more likely to be used for physical activity than for relaxing or moving through.

Activities for families and children were popular, with these groups accounting for 70 per cent of participants. Approximately a quarter of participants were of low socioeconomic status, and about 18% were from culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

Existing council activities with an established participant base were also well attended, as were physical activities delivered as part of the Get Active in the City of Melton initiative. The provision of a space that engaged families through a series of activities – including those connected with existing local events – engendered a sense of pride among the community.

The need for earlier and better engagement of and communication with all stakeholders (including staff, local traders, community groups and community members) was identified, with the council noting that the design and programming should be informed by the community in order to meet its needs and motivations.

Retention of the space is being considered as part of the town revitalisation plan. Conversations about how to deliver future low-scale, small township activation projects have commenced, and the outcomes of the project are informing work with different departments across the council.

“
My daughter definitely made new friends, which was fantastic! I recognised a few faces at events towards the end.”

The Corner @ McKenzie – Participant

“
I’m very happy to have the opportunity to get involved in such a great initiative. It’s great to see that Melton City Council is investing time and effort into building our community.”

The Corner @ McKenzie – Participant

“
The vibrancy of the space is what attracted me to it. I like seeing the children interacting in their own community... I’m sad to see [the active space] go.”

The Corner @ McKenzie – Participant

Conclusion and recommendations

The VicHealth Community Activation Program has created a wealth of experience, which can be shared with councils considering similar initiatives. It has demonstrated strong community benefits in terms of opportunity for physical activity, promoting social connectedness and engaging the community beyond simply participating in events. As a new and novel approach, the program highlighted key barriers and learnings that will assist the councils involved, and others, to plan and design future community activation initiatives.

Each council project was planned and implemented with a different rationale that affected the site choice, transformation and activation activities. These differences demonstrate how community activation projects can be used to achieve a range of objectives, such as revitalising a space or community, testing novel and innovative ideas before committing to major investment, providing infrastructure for new communities and facilitating broader community engagement.

The key finding from the evaluation of the program was the importance of initial planning, and allowing sufficient timeframes for planning and delivery of projects. However, the shared challenges faced by the councils involved were largely overcome by the ability of council officers to collaborate and build relationships (both internal and external) and to be flexible and creative in their approach.

Encouraging outcomes include the retention and extension of project spaces, a reported change in council attitude to activation approaches and the development of innovative models for furthering the concept.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In planning for community activation projects, it is important to:

- establish support from senior management and councillors from the outset
 - consider expert briefing in tactical urbanism to ensure key decision-makers understand that approaches such as these require flexibility and adaptability in terms of internal approvals, processes and policies
- consider available staff resources to deliver the project and identify gaps and how these will be addressed
 - consider appointing a dedicated project officer to focus on delivery (could be external or part-time)
 - ensure project delivery teams comprise staff with event management, community development and engagement and evaluation skills and experience
- give careful consideration to the choice of site and design of spaces
 - consider protection from sun, wind and rain, as exposed sites are likely to require significant investment in infrastructure, leading to increased costs and potential delays in project delivery
 - politically sensitive elements of projects, such as road closures, require more extensive consultation (both internal and external) from the outset of the project
- program a series of events designed to attract a diverse range of users
 - consider, for example, the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- balance physical activity-based events and audience-based events
 - while audience-based events are very effective in introducing the community to new spaces and engaging them in the project, greater emphasis should be placed on programming physical activity-based events
- consider existing local events to avoid clashes and identify opportunities for collaboration with local groups and businesses
- develop a communications strategy at the outset of the project
 - engage the wider community, including local businesses, from the beginning
 - effectively use social media to engage with the broader community from the outset and across the delivery phase of the project.

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 - The Change Collective
 - Victorian Planning Authority

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Victorian Health Promotion Foundation
PO Box 154 Carlton South
Victoria 3053 Australia
T +61 3 9667 1333 F +61 3 9667 1375

vichealth@vichealth.vic.gov.au
vichealth.vic.gov.au
twitter.com/vichealth
facebook.com/vichealth

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