

Increasing participation in physical activity

Local government action guide no. 3

Promoting health and preventing illness in the community



Local governments play a major role in supporting the objectives of the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* by protecting, improving and promoting public health within their municipality. By integrating action across the social, cultural, built, economic and natural environments, council policies and practices can make major contributions to economic prosperity, community cohesion and population health outcomes.^{1,2}

Councils can make an impact on their residents' levels of physical activity by coordinating their work across areas such as:

- infrastructure, street facilities, paths and trails
- open spaces and the natural environment
- active recreation, community programs and participation in community events.

This guide is one of ten outlining a range of evidence-informed actions that councils may consider when preparing their Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans and other strategies. The proposed strategies are consistent with national and state health promotion priorities and prevention frameworks, including *The Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2011–2015*.

Why is increasing participation in physical activity a public health and wellbeing priority?

Physical inactivity has been estimated to cost Australia more than \$719 million a year,³ and account for:

- 6.6 per cent of the burden of disease and injury in Australia, rating second after tobacco smoking
- 22 per cent of heart disease, 11 per cent of stroke, 14 per cent of diabetes and 10 per cent of breast cancer
- 16,178 premature deaths per year in Australia.⁴

Increasing participation in physical activity and reducing time spent sitting may:

- promote health and prevent the onset of disease⁵
- improve individuals' self-confidence and number of social connections^{6,7}
- improve the wellbeing of local workforces and their productivity through less absenteeism^{8,9}
- reduce local traffic congestion, especially when walking or cycling replaces car trips
- generate economic benefits for businesses in the area (e.g. sporting events)
- contribute to safer communities (e.g. more pedestrians on the streets at night).¹⁰

While physical activity can benefit everyone, certain groups are less likely to participate: women, Aboriginal people, or people that are older, were born overseas, have a lower socioeconomic status or have a disability.³

A sample council strategy to increase participation in physical activity

Strategic goal

Council is committed to promoting participation in physical activity by helping people engage in active travel, sport and active recreation.

Objectives and actions

Create opportunities for people to participate in active travel, sport and active recreation

- Ensure programs delivered by council are inclusive and welcoming for all.
- Develop initiatives to encourage active travel (e.g. walking to school, cycling familiarisation programs, access to maps).
- Encourage less sitting and more physical activity within workforces (e.g. walking meetings, shower and change facilities, taking the stairs, standing work stations).
- Use sport and active recreation settings to improve the wellbeing of residents (e.g. increasing participation among newly arrived communities, volunteer skill development).
- Communicate the location of and access options to local natural environments (e.g. beaches, parks).
- Provide accessible information about local sport and active recreation opportunities.

Ensure environments for physical activity are safe, inclusive and accessible

- Ensure all new and refurbished sport and recreation facilities meet the universal design principles¹¹ and sport-specific standards.
- Locate new community facilities near public transport or consider transport options when planning.¹²
- Use tools and audits such as the Victoria Walks walking audit¹³ and Bicycle Victoria's *Planning checklist for cycling*¹⁴ to review and improve street connections to shops, sports centres and parks.¹⁵
- Ensure paths meet accessibility standards for people with mobility and vision impairments.
- Encourage the highest quality urban design to create open spaces with good surveillance, safe pedestrian access, walking paths, trees for shade and accessible public amenities.

Develop partnerships to reduce duplication and to create better sport and active recreation opportunities

- Work with sports clubs to encourage and facilitate the implementation of health promoting policies.
- Work in partnership with community organisations to increase the number of quality sport and active recreation opportunities.¹⁶
- Work with other partners such as VicRoads, police and user groups to improve safety for all road users.

References

- 1 Blane, D, Brunner, E & Wilkinson, R, 1996, *Health and social organisation: Towards a health policy for the 21st century*, Routledge, London, p. 12.
- 2 Wilkinson, R & Marmot, M, 2003, *Social determinants of health: The solid facts* (2nd edn), www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-publish/abstracts/social-determinants-of-health.-the-solid-facts
- 3 See VicHealth's *Participation in physical activity: Research summary* at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/Publications/Physical-Activity/Sport-and-recreation/Participation-in-physical-activity
- 4 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008, *Australia's health: The eleventh biennial health report of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare*, AIHW, Canberra.
- 5 Dunstan, D, Barr, E, Healy, G, Salmon, J, Shaw, J, Balkau, B, Magliano, D, Cameron, A, Zimmet, P & Owen, N, 2010, 'Television viewing time and mortality', *Circulation*, vol. 121, no. 3, pp. 384-391.
- 6 Chau, J, 2007, *Physical activity and building stronger communities*, NSW Centre for Physical Activity and Health, Sydney.
- 7 VicHealth, 2010, *Community attitudes survey: Healthy community sporting environments*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.
- 8 World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe 2012, *Benefits of regular physical activity*, <http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/disease-prevention/nutrition/a-healthy-lifestyle/benefits-of-regular-physical-activity>
- 9 Owen, N, Healy, GN, Matthews, CE & Dunstan, DW, 2010, 'Too much sitting: The population health science of sedentary behaviour,' *Exercise and sport sciences reviews*, vol. 38, no. 3, p. 105.
- 10 Department of Sport & Recreation, 2008, *Benefits of physical activity*, Government of Western Australia, Perth, www.dsr.wa.gov.au/445
- 11 Universal design is a term used when the widest spectrum of users and uses are embedded into the design of the built environment.
- 12 See the Heart Foundation's Healthy by Design resources at www.heartfoundation.org.au/driving-change/current-campaigns/local-campaigns/Pages/victoria-healthy-design.aspx
- 13 An objective assessment of environmental attributes. See www.victoriawalks.org.au/How_to_assess_walkability
- 14 Bicycle Network Victoria's new planning checklist will be available as of October 2012 at www.bicyclenetwork.com.au
- 15 See the Heart Foundation's position statement on the built environment and walking at www.heartfoundation.org.au/active-living/built-environment/pages/active-transport.aspx
- 16 See VicHealth's *Partnerships analysis tool* at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/partnerships