



VicHealth

LETTER

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The new frontline of health

From roads, rates and rubbish to community wellbeing



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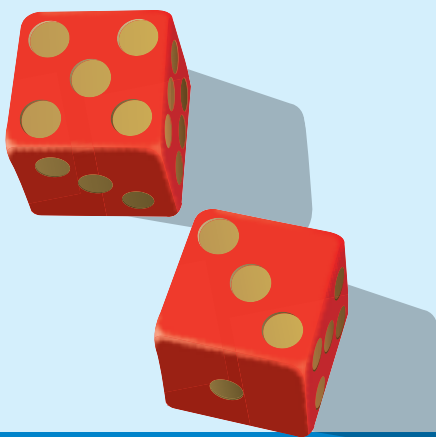
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Why I like paying my rates!

I really appreciate paying my rates. This may sound a little odd, but not when you consider the huge demands and responsibilities of local councils.

Whether it's parklands, street lighting, planning for new buildings, community festivals or strengthening links between different groups in the community, all these elements impact on our health and wellbeing, and they are all the responsibility of councils.

In Victoria in the last 15 years the climate of local government has fundamentally changed. There have been amalgamations, bigger municipalities, new legislation and planning requirements, and rapid shifts in community growth and composition.¹

In recent years, councils have become much more aware of the role that they play in improving the health of their community.

Many have embedded health in their social, economic and environmental planning. They have accepted their leadership role and are investing in health and wellbeing as a priority.

Because of this, local councils are important partners in health promotion. They can directly influence factors like municipal planning, employment, social support, transport and community participation – all of which contribute to good health.²

The most effective way for councils to maximise their investment in health and wellbeing is to develop partnerships and collaborate with other organisations. As a hub of knowledge, resources and networks, councils are increasingly using their unique position to encourage businesses, arts groups, community services, sports groups and others to find the common ground and work together to promote health and prevent ill-health.

This *VicHealth Letter* profiles some of the work being done by local councils across Victoria. It demonstrates how they are responding to local circumstances and meeting the challenges of promoting health at a local level by developing

practical, creative and often brave solutions. Underpinning the work is the shared goal of narrowing the gap between the most disadvantaged communities in Victoria and the rest of the population.

Finding out what matters most within each community is critical. To do this, councils are consulting their residents, and not just the ratepayers, to find out what's important to them. Their views are helping to set the agenda for health and wellbeing.

Measuring each community's wellbeing is also very important. To this end, the *Victorian Community Indicators Project* is developing community indicators that stretch far beyond retail spending and unemployment rates, so that we can measure other things we value that are linked to our health and wellbeing, such as social, environmental and cultural factors.³

Better local knowledge means improved community planning, which in turn means stronger, healthier and happier communities.

Dr Rob Moodie
Chief Executive Officer

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3. See note 1.

Tell us what you think!

We want your feedback about the *VicHealth Letter* so that we can make it even better. The first five people to respond to our survey will receive a free copy of *Hands-on Health Promotion (2004)*, edited by Rob Moodie & Alana Hulme. To find out more, go to: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/vichealthletter

Councils leading the way to healthier communities

Local governments' handling of roads, rates and rubbish may still earn the ire of the community and provide fodder for the media, but in the past two decades priorities and policy development have changed dramatically. People, places, participation and partnerships are now important features of any local government agenda and are central in the planning process.

Local councils are creating environments in which people feel included, can live a healthier life and feel able to use the available services. Importantly, the cornerstone of this process is community engagement. For some councils it is all about long-term economic savings; for others health and wellbeing is about justice.

Clare Hargreaves, a senior policy officer with the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) – the local government peak body – believes the wellbeing of the community has always been at the heart of council decision-making.

Now, however, decision-making is supported by evidence, available through myriad sources including the Victorian Burden of Disease Studies and VicHealth funded research. It shows the health implications of planning decisions on community health and wellbeing; and is particularly useful for assisting vulnerable groups in the community who remain on the margins.

Most councils recognise the long-term value of overlaying 'health and wellbeing' on any plan, whether it's parklands, street signs, new roads or a housing estate.



Twenty years ago the World Health Organisation's Ottawa Charter established the core principles of Health Promotion, which seek to identify and positively affect the root causes, or determinants, of health. These include the social and economic factors that determine health, such as income, education, job, working conditions and quality of housing, which in turn can affect risk factors such as smoking, alcohol consumption, eating habits and physical inactivity.¹

In August last year the new Bangkok Charter for Health Promotion went further by identifying the challenges and ways forward to address the determinants of health in a globalised world. It examined the health effects of widening inequities, rapid urbanisation and environmental damage.²

Importantly, the Bangkok Charter determined that: 'All governments at all levels must tackle poor health and inequalities as a matter of urgency because health is a major determinant of socio-economic and political development'. Interestingly, it acknowledges that an individual's health can also influence their physical activity levels, employment status and wealth; the reverse of health being determined by these influences.

How can governments create change?

By 1990, amendments to the *Victorian Health Act* meant that local government had to develop municipal public health plans (MPHPs). In 2001, the Department of Human Services (DHS) in conjunction with the MAV, produced *Environments for Health*, which gave councils a framework to develop their MPHP.³

According to DHS, 80% of the 79 local governments (46 country and 33 metropolitan) are now implementing a current MPHP, and others have incorporated health planning objectives into their council plans.

Leading The Way, another resource for councils who wanted practical advice on how to embed health and wellbeing



Partnerships and collaboration with other organisations is the most effective way for most councils to maximise their investment in health and wellbeing.

in their social, economic and environmental planning, was developed by VicHealth, DHS and MAV and offered councils a concise and simply written tool for moving forward. The key messages were:

- ▶ Ask questions about improving the health and wellbeing of people in your municipality. If necessary look elsewhere for the answers.
- ▶ Embedding health and wellbeing in planning does not necessarily mean major capital investment.⁴

Ged Dibley, Director of PDF Management Services, who developed *Leading The Way* in 2003, said most councils recognise the long-term value of overlaying 'health and wellbeing' on any plan whether it is parklands, street signs, new roads or a housing estate.

It's a philosophy that the City of Port Phillip has embraced, particularly in its environmental planning. Its Sustainable Transport Framework now rates walking, cycling and public transport ahead of cars in its transport priorities. This has led to a greater focus on footpaths, crossing points, public seating and creating a street environment that is welcoming.

Mayor Cr Janet Bolitho said the appointment of a Walking Officer might be considered extravagant, but council believes it will lead to higher rates of walking, reduced car use and provide opportunities for social gatherings. As well, the council offers walk and talk tours by volunteer local history guides and the Walking School Bus operates in partnership with VicHealth.

The City of Yarra has also shifted its transport emphasis to encourage walking and cycling and has developed programs that will bring people out onto the streets and into the parks. Yarra's Mayor Cr Jackie Fristacky said her municipality, with high-density housing, traffic congestion and high rates of respiratory disease among residents, meant that policies encouraging more sustainable transport and increased physical activity were a high priority. This meant improved footpaths, more street signs and providing drinking water fountains.

The power of partnerships

Both mayors agree that many solutions to health issues can be found in the community.

This view is echoed by Ged Dibley who believes the development of partnerships and collaboration with other organisations is the most effective way for most councils to maximise their investment in health and wellbeing.

"Councils are leaders in their communities; as such they are well placed to identify the issues...but they do not need to act alone. One example might be acknowledging youth homelessness as a problem in your town. It might not be possible for the Town Hall to provide accommodation, but it could mean going out into the community, harnessing the people and services that exist and strengthening their capacity to respond to the problem. Or council may see its role as lobbying the next tier of government for improved services," said Mr Dibley.

One 'partnership' success story around the state is the Walking School Bus – a collaboration that usually involves VicHealth, schools, local government and other community organisations. The Chief Executive Officer of the City of Latrobe, Mr Paul Buckley, said the Walking School Bus not only improved students' health, but has reduced absenteeism.

The Walking School Bus is also an important plank in the four Neighbourhood Renewal Programs that have developed around public housing estates in Moe, Morwell, Traralgon and Churchill.

"There are signs of success with increased participation by residents and a reduction in crime in the areas," said Mr Buckley.

Getting information from the horse's mouth

The City of Yarra's commitment to community consultation has meant offering alternatives to the traditional forums and public meetings to find out what people think about major planning issues. Instead, the council goes out to the people, setting up



Councils are prioritising walking, cycling and public transport ahead of cars, leading to a greater focus on footpaths, crossing points, and street environments that are welcoming.

tents in highly patronised local parks on Saturdays to capture attention and viewpoints.

Five years ago the Golden Plains Shire, nestled between Geelong and Ballarat, asked its residents to help map out the future. Should it rationalise resources, close local halls and recreation facilities – or work to protect and enhance the identity and character of the 35 towns and villages (with populations from 500 to 2500) that make up the shire? Through a series of community forums, community leaders were nominated to work with a facilitator and the councillors in steering the shire's development in the direction the people wanted.

The outcomes have been extraordinary and multi-layered. Three community service hubs in the north, centre and south of the Shire are at various stages of development, with the southern hub in Bannockburn opening in July this year. This centre will house a range of new services and provide a 'hot desk' for visiting regional health services that book the space. Bereft of public transport, the shire now coordinates 20 volunteers who do pick ups and drop offs on demand, and council buses are available for hire. Mayor David Cotsell said the decision to treat each village as a 'precious entity' not only influences every area of planning, but also nurtures a sense of community ownership amongst the people, who came up with many of the ideas that have been implemented.

In the City of Wodonga, the council hosts monthly catch-ups with the Mayor, Cr Lisa Mahood. After asking questions and discussing their concerns, a group of 50 residents travel with Cr Mahood around the municipality by bus to find out what is available for them and what is planned.

In a bid to develop greater social links within certain neighbourhoods, the City of Wodonga also organises, funds and runs street barbecues. The barbecues run two nights a week throughout summer and there is a wait list of streets, nominated by residents.

"Yes, it costs us money", said Cr Mahood. "But it is an important investment when you consider the outcome is a stronger sense of community. We are one of the fastest growing regional centres and we have to do what we can to reach people who come to live here."

Making it last

Ged Dibley toured Victoria in 2003 to promote the *Leading The Way* resource to local government staff and elected councillors. Any opposition to the concept of integrated health planning usually related to funding and the burgeoning responsibilities of local government.

Cost shifting to local government is a valid complaint according to the MAV's Clare Hargreaves and a problem that impacts on the long-term sustainability of many excellent health programs. This may all change now that an historic intergovernmental agreement has been signed, which will affect the future transfer of responsibilities between local, state and federal government.

Whatever the reason – be it cost shifting or the rate base – local governments will never have enough money. Their real strength, however, is their ability to network at a local level and drive partnerships. Many excellent health promotion programs are not sustained after council funding expires, but often a cultural shift has already been achieved. The street barbecues in Wodonga might not continue without the council's impetus and dollars, but the legacy of the program would remain.

Communities are driving change and local governments are responding, some faster than others. But the expectations on local government, from the community, legislators and health agencies, are high.

Victorian Local Government Association CEO Andrew Rowe agrees: "Local governments are at the leading edge of many issues and are developing sophisticated, integrated responses, more so than other levels of government, but there are limits. The key for communities and other agencies is to understand when to advocate for a better local government response, and when to work with local governments in advocating to other stakeholders."

Michele Levine, Chief Executive Officer of Roy Morgan Research, may have surprised local government professionals at their annual conference in February this year when she listed the public's most important issues for local government. They included education, schools, hospitals, police and water supplies – areas not within local governments' jurisdiction.

It's clear that while the community may not fully understand the role and responsibility of local government, they certainly don't see local government as just about rates, rubbish and roads.

Rosie Hoban is a Melbourne journalist. She writes for a number of publications and is particularly interested in writing about people, their lives and how they contribute to their environment, and the social issues that concern them.

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How do you measure a community's health and wellbeing?

When Tourism Australia Chairman Tim Fischer returned home from Bhutan he brought with him a fresh outlook on community, inspired by his experience in a country whose national identity is based around the happiness of its inhabitants.

His discovery led to the 2005 launch of the Gross National Happiness Index (GNHI) – a program which aims to rate and identify key areas of a community's health and happiness. First adopted officially in the Indigo Shire in Victoria, Mr Fischer hopes that the index will be adopted nationally in the near future.

In a media release at the time, Mr Fischer described the towns of Beechworth, Chiltern, Yackandandah and Rutherglen as sought-after places to live and said that the Index would be “a great way for our communities and those outside to know how we are faring on some key variables that really matter”.

The GNHI is only one example of the move towards fact-finding by local governments attempting to quantify the overall community health and wellbeing of their localities. In a trend which sees councils, for the first time, assess the happiness of locals in a direct way, some innovative measures are being taken.

The City of Port Phillip has used some rather unorthodox methods of collecting data for their Sustainable Community Progress Indicators (SCPI) project. “The most important aspect of our indicator project is that residents collect much of the data themselves. Their views set the agenda for health and wellbeing, they help us implement the programs and now they also test the results. We encourage them to use this data to take action on the things they care about”, says Mayor Cr Janet Bolitho. “The value is not found in the measurements themselves, but in the social change they stimulate.”

Port Phillip also surveyed residents on the friendliness and cohesion of their neighbourhoods. Perhaps not surprisingly, almost everyone wanted their neighbourhoods to be more friendly. They also found that many had no strong connection with other people in their street and when people walked past each other on the street they didn't smile at each other, but looked down and away.

In response, the Council introduced a new indicator called ‘Smiles Per Hour’. Using ‘Smile Spy’ volunteers they counted the percentage of people who smiled, nodded, or made any kind of positive greeting towards the volunteer when they passed them on the street. The woman behind the initiative is Carol Tutchener, who is currently studying a Masters of Applied Psychology (Community Psychology) at Victoria University. “I was trying to think of a way people could feel happier,” she says. “I have lived in country areas where people smile back, but in the city, people don't seem to smile at each other as much, so I thought it would be interesting to measure.”

Projects like this are helping to fill the gaps in local level data, giving councils a more comprehensive and useful snapshot of their areas. An increasing array of data is available from diverse sources such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Department of Human Services and the Department for Victorian Communities. The next challenge is to improve the integration of data sources, leading to a more comprehensive and sustainable system of local community wellbeing indicators. ▶▶

Many councils, including the City of Port Phillip, are beginning to assess the happiness of locals in a direct way. Photo: Courtesy City of Port Phillip





In an era when everything seems to be reduced to its economic value, it's important to remember our health and wellbeing are linked to other things. Although we might value areas like culture, the arts and heritage, and democracy and citizenship, few indicators have been identified in these areas.

Professor John Wiseman, Director of the VicHealth Centre for the Promotion of Mental Health & Social Wellbeing at the University of Melbourne, says that one of the important reasons for local governments to use data from community indicators is that it's "a way of engaging local communities in agreeing what's important".

Prof. Wiseman is leading the team behind the *Victorian Community Indicators Project (VCIP; www.communityindicators.net.au)*¹, a VicHealth-funded initiative designed to support local governments develop and use community indicators as tools for measuring health and wellbeing and improving community engagement and planning.

VCIP builds on and complements VicHealth's *Leading The Way* project, which works with Victorian local governments to identify and address the social, economic, environmental and cultural factors influencing health.

"Communities need to understand where their vulnerabilities are – what risks there are to their health and sense of wellbeing. These are different for different communities. How do you know what's important for each community? You ask the locals!", he says. "The process of developing indicators and community plans is an excellent way to inform and involve local people and organisations, and a meaningful task for citizens."

Prof. Wiseman says that community indicators help ensure that the decisions councils make about policies and budgets are based on the best local evidence: both of community priorities, and of the key trends and outcomes in their community – social, economic, environmental, cultural and governance.

The list of proposed initial indicators of local community wellbeing is long and has been broken down into a number of categories.

Under the banner of 'Healthy, Safe and Inclusive Communities', VCIP lists personal health, community connectedness and early childhood development as areas of importance. Personal and community safety, service availability and lifelong learning are in the same category.

Community indicators related to 'Culturally Rich and Vibrant Communities' include participation in arts and creative activities, participation in recreational and leisure activities, and citizen engagement.

Measures of local attitudes about quality of open space, transport accessibility, sustainable energy, housing affordability, air and water quality, waste management and biodiversity provide insights into the quality of the built and natural environment.

In addition to retail spending and unemployment rates, 'Dynamic, Resilient Local Economies' includes indicators of work-life balance.

"The value is not found in the measurements themselves, but in the social change they stimulate."

Having a real say on issues important to us appears under the category of 'Democratic and Engaged Communities'.

The overall mix of indicators, says Prof. Wiseman, needs to succeed on a number of levels. They need to:

- ▶ provide a reasonably concise, conceptually sound mix of objective and subjective measures capable of measuring progress in the health, wellbeing and sustainability of local communities;
- ▶ reflect the range of issues and priorities;
- ▶ include a range of indicators which are capable of giving 'early warning signal' information about future trends and issues;
- ▶ be able to be measured over time and show longitudinal trends;
- ▶ and be consistent with and complementary to relevant State and local government strategic planning frameworks, indicator sets and data collection instruments.

"There must also be strong and ongoing local community involvement and a real sense that they are 'owned' by the local community", stresses Prof. Wiseman.

There is broad support for the creation of a new independent organisation, known as *Community Indicators Victoria*, which will support local governments and communities to identify local wellbeing indicators, and collect, disseminate and analyse data. To be established as part of the new VicHealth Centre for the Promotion of Mental Health & Social Wellbeing at the University of Melbourne, it will help to ensure that local community indicators are used and developed in a more integrated way.

Claire Halliday is a Melbourne-based freelance feature writer, who writes mainly about arts and community-related issues.

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FACTS

In area, the smallest council in Victoria is Queenscliff (8 sq km), while the largest is Mildura (22,000 sq km). The population range is from 3250 people (Queenscliff again) to 210,000 (Casey). For more information, see *Local Government in Victoria 2005* (released March 2006), which brings together information from councils' annual reports to provide a snapshot of the current position of the sector.

Equity for health: what role for local government?

Most people would agree that we all want to enjoy good health and that, as far as is possible, it should be available equally to all.

But there are marked inequalities in health between different groups of people everywhere. Victorians who have particularly poor health include people from lower socio-economic groups, Indigenous people, people from refugee backgrounds, those with disabilities, and people who live in low-income areas.

While some inequalities in health status between people can be explained by genetic or biological factors, many are not. Instead, they are related to inequalities in access to the things that we need for good health, including income, education, and good living and working conditions.

At a local level, councils have the potential to address inequalities in health by delivering equal levels of service and providing opportunities for everyone. More often than not, this means giving disadvantaged groups a real voice as well as more resources and specialised services.

Identify the nature of disadvantage

When it comes to nutrition, disadvantaged communities and some population groups face barriers in accessing a variety of affordable healthy foods. When the typical issues are explained, it's not difficult to understand why.

People living in rooming houses or other poor quality and transient accommodation don't have adequate food storage or cooking facilities. Some localities don't even have fresh food outlets. Frail elderly people or people with disabilities have difficulty shopping for and transporting food. Newly arrived refugees find shopping for food a bewildering exercise when they can't find their cultural staples.

Because there is an established link between disadvantaged locality, community infrastructure and food insecurity, there is the potential for local councils to target programs and activities to specific neighbourhoods that are most prone to food insecurity.

To do this, councils need to have a thorough understanding of what issues exist in their area. This can throw up some

surprises. Swan Hill Rural City Council is one of the authorities that successfully applied for funding under VicHealth's Food For All Program.

According to the council's Food For All officer, Fiona Gormann, Swan Hill hadn't previously thought about its role in improving food security: "The real eye opener for Swan Hill was finding out that 58% of our population cannot always access sufficient nutritious food."

While Swan Hill's Food for All Program is for the whole community, it uses different strategies to reach specific groups, including new settlers and Indigenous Australians.

One way of reaching specific groups is to take the information to the people. Swan Hill is doing this successfully by talking to residents in their usual gathering places, such

Disadvantaged communities and some population groups face barriers in accessing a variety of affordable healthy foods.



Funded by VicHealth and auspiced by the Victorian Local Government Association, the Food Security Network supports the officers and municipalities participating in the *Food for All* program, as well as many other people who are trying to improve access to healthy food for disadvantaged people. For more information visit: <http://www.vlga.org.au/foodsecuritynetwork/>

FACTS



Fundamental solutions to refugee health inequality lie in fostering a safe, tolerant and welcoming environment and improving access to housing, income, meaningful employment and social support.

as parks and resource centres. In addition, by becoming members of the steering group, residents are directly involved in planning and deciding what happens in their community.

Fiona Gormann says that even though the program only began in July 2005, there are already signs that it is having an effect. “The project is linking sectors of the community who wouldn’t normally come together. For example, representatives of the food industry meet with staff from arts, cultural and health services. We are supporting and establishing community kitchens and gardens and this has seen an increase in the number of vegetables grown and distributed to the community.”

But Indigenous Australians face disadvantage beyond nutrition. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples suffer the worst health status in Australia, and have a life expectancy which is 17 years lower than the national average.¹

How do you get to hear the voices of people who are less powerful, isolated, lack social support and are more vulnerable to health problems?

Trevor Pearce, Manager of Mullum Mullum Gathering Place and recipient of the Sir Douglas Nicholls Fellowship for Emerging Indigenous Leaders, says that local government can no longer be innocent bystanders. He says that Indigenous health is not just the concern of state and federal governments and Aboriginal groups. “Local councils represent *all* of their community members. Aboriginal people have a lot to offer. Sometimes local governments don’t recognise this. It’s important for them to ask: What do Indigenous people bring to society that strengthens that society?”

Trevor says that some councils are engaging Indigenous communities very well. In the City of Whitehorse, for example, the council has helped Indigenous people to put a cultural stamp on the community and ensure an Indigenous presence in that community. In addition to asking Indigenous groups

what they need, providing practical assistance to help them celebrate important events, and running community functions, the council helped establish healing gardens. Just as importantly, the council has an Indigenous reconciliation policy.

There is still a lot of work to be done. “Some local government areas have no commitment or desire to engage with Aboriginal communities”, says Trevor. “They may be fearful, lack knowledge, or be unclear about the healing that needs to happen to address and move on from historical events.”

But he is confident of more change, saying that Aboriginal people and the councils who have very good practice models can lead the way.

Work with disadvantaged communities and relevant partners

Every city has particular suburbs or districts that are dealing with high rates of drug use, prostitution and homelessness. The challenge for council is how to manage areas where there is conflict between users and residents without moving anyone out of the area. After all, ratepayers are not the only people who should have a voice.

But how do you get to hear the voices of people who are less powerful, isolated, lack social support and are more vulnerable to health problems? Hearing and responding to the needs of marginalised groups in local communities is difficult because they are often excluded from conventional channels of communication. They don’t read local papers, send letters to their local MP, or come to community consultations.

If you set up a process of working with communities, then people who generally have more money or who have a better education will be the first people who become involved. Developing strategies to target disadvantaged groups needs to be done in conjunction with residents and other agencies and organisations who have an interest in, or responsibility for, improving health for all. Otherwise there is a danger that projects will focus on top-down objectives, which fail to meet local need, rather than shared goals.

John Fitzgerald, one of Australia’s leading researchers into illegal drug use, says that in circumstances like these, it is important for the council to acknowledge that these elements are part of the diversity of life in these areas rather than a source of conflict.

For example, since mid-1995 many people have been going to Smith Street and Victoria Street in the City of Yarra to buy and use heroin. To fully understand the problem, he says you need to speak to a range of people, including drug users, to comprehend the different points of view.

In 2005, five community forums were held to discuss issues associated with drug use in the council area. One of the aims of the forums was to ensure that they reached all those who were most affected by drug activity, including injecting drug users as well as broader members of the community.

FACTS

The State Government is rethinking its approach to delivery of services to ensure they become more localised, better coordinated and relevant to communities. For more information, see *A Fairer Victoria*, the Victorian Government’s social policy action plan: <http://www.vic.gov.au/VictoriaOnline>

Participants with differing views worked together to find ways to address issues. Getting to the point where such diverse groups could work collaboratively meant a significant commitment from council and a willingness to work in creative ways to reach people who would not normally participate in community consultations.

“Council needs to find ways of hearing from these communities – they must provide opportunities for people to speak for themselves by making environments as safe as possible to hold a respectful conversation,” says Fitzgerald.

Lesley Hall, Arts & Cultural Development Officer at the City of Darebin, agrees: “It’s important to get out into the community – to know what’s out there and ensure that diversity is represented.”

She says that in Darebin, consultations around specific art forms are held by the community organisations involved, and that there are also lots of well-promoted broad-based committees that are open to all residents.

“We go the extra mile to engage people in the community. Sometimes this means you have to go beyond the gatekeepers of the community. With the Darebin Festival, for example, we engaged people from emerging communities to organise events. Once we are able to make contact, we build on that.”

For most new arrivals, the first priority is getting a roof over their head. Lesley says that from the word go, it’s also beneficial to get new arrivals involved in creative and cultural opportunities: “It gives them something they can relate to and it gives them joy”.

Target areas of health inequality

The State Government’s Neighbourhood Renewal program aims to narrow the gap between the most disadvantaged communities in Victoria and the rest of the state, and has health and wellbeing as one of its themes.²

Penelope Steuart, Assistant Manager for Policy and Strategy in the Neighbourhood Renewal Team within the Department of Human Services, believes that the program has thrown up some significant lessons for local government when targeting areas with health disadvantages, such as the importance of including local residents that have often been excluded from democratic processes like local area planning, and providing them with a sense that they are able to make a positive contribution to where they live.

These lessons are being put into practice at a local level: the City of Casey has been funded by VicHealth under its MetroActive program to improve the overall health of residents within the Doveton and Eumemmerring area, a district with significant socioeconomic disadvantages and which is very run-down in parts. The project has been examining the specific barriers that stand in the way of these residents getting involved in physical activity programs.

Jill Waddell, the MetroActive project officer at the City of Casey, says that the council has asked residents what

matters most to them and involved them in the audits of the local environment. The council has acted on the information collected by the residents, making the physical environment more conducive to physical activity and setting up low-cost physical activities like walking groups.

Provide targeted support to people

As is the case with other groups on the negative side of the health divide, fundamental solutions to refugee health inequality lie in fostering a safe, tolerant and welcoming environment and improving access to housing, income, meaningful employment and social support.

When people are unfamiliar with a culture, when they are ‘strangers’ in a new land, and when they are recovering from traumatic experiences they need assistance and time for social and psychological readjustment.

Paris Aristotle, Director of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, says it’s critical that refugees feel safe and secure to start a new life. His organisation provides specialised services for refugees, working with a wide range of agencies that support them, from individual refugee communities and community health care centres to schools and local government.

“Local councils make a substantial contribution to helping people rebuild their lives”, says Paris. “They have the capacity to be responsive at a grass-roots level, offering services, centres and resources – the things that help bind and consolidate communities.”

One example of a collaborative approach to creating employment opportunities for refugees is the Swan Hill-Horn of Africa Community Building Partnership, which assists migrants from the Horn of Africa in the Cities of Maribyrnong and Dandenong (in 2005 70% of them were unemployed) to relocate to the opportunity-rich communities of the Murray Mallee. Significantly, when thinking about equity and health, the project is also designed to build the capacity of both the Horn of Africa and Swan Hill communities.

Health equity is everyone’s business

Health is a fundamental human right. Societies that strive to enable all individuals to participate fully in social, economic and cultural life are more likely to have healthy citizens than societies which allow individuals to be excluded, marginalised and deprived. By reaching out to residents, showcasing good practice, creating local solutions and teaching and valuing diversity, local government can go a long way to resolving inequalities.

Andrew Ross is a freelance writer and editor specialising in environment, health and built environment issues.

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The role of art and place-making in health and wellbeing

It has been 28 years since Ron Robertson-Swann's Vault – what must be regarded as Australia's most controversial piece of public art – inspired so much outrage and debate.

In 1981, three years after it was first proposed, the piece that came to be known as The Yellow Peril was finally exiled to a home in the unmade Batman Park. And so began a decade of misery for the world of public art.

Today, the Vault has a new home at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, and although the question of whether Robertson-Swann's sculpture created more division than community cohesiveness remains, local governments across Victoria are now recognising the community health benefits of creating public spaces that are welcoming and attractive. They are embracing public art like never before.

In the Docklands precinct alone, with developers observing the mandatory requirement that 1% of their budget be allocated to public art (including \$800,000 which went to sculptor Bruce Armstrong's 25m-high Eagle in Wurundjeri Way) there has already been \$12 million spent on public art.

Just what defines public art, as opposed to art that is installed in a public place, is an argument that continues to rage. With the increased local government spending on public art in the last decade and community involvement at an all-time high, the familiar cries of mismanagement and complaints of overspending on 'wasted' public funds that were heard booming across council chambers in the 1980s and 1990s have given way to a feeling among the Australian public that art, especially that in and of individual communities, has a very positive way of enhancing community connectivity in a similar way to organised sport but without the same occasional barriers to participation.

For Anna Rogalina, 51, a resident in the Park Towers housing estate in the City of Port Phillip, being given the opportunity to work with fellow residents and an artist to beautify her own small part of the world was something that has benefited her community enormously.

The work – a number of clay relief tiles on a wall within the Park Towers complex – has transformed the area into a

piece of public art that has helped instill a sense of pride in the diverse community.

"Before, it was like we were living in prison," Rogalina, a former art teacher in her Ukraine homeland, says. "It was an ugly wall. Now it is a pride and joy."

Ceramicist Camille Monet, 30, was the artist employed early in 2005 to facilitate the project, and assisted over 100 older residents in the creation of individual tiles which, together, tell the story of the huge variety of cultural backgrounds that make up the community. On the other side of the wall, the younger people who live in the Park Towers complex were invited to express their own stories through a medium more meaningful to them – graffiti.

Art in a public place is different to community art but both can contribute to mental health and wellbeing.



FACTS

An incorrect assumption about public housing is that all tenants are transient. Some do come and go, but others remain for 20 or 30 years, which is consistent with the fact that many people in their lives shift house no more than 15km from where they were born.

The result has been a place that represents the coming together of all members of the community.

"I think it is really well appreciated," says Monet. "A lot of the older residents were worried about being involved. They didn't want to spend a lot of time and effort in creating something for it to be vandalised. The fact that their art is on one side, and the younger people have the other side had made the entire space be respected. So far, there hasn't been any damage. Everyone's really proud of it."

Rogalina agrees. "The graffiti looks absolutely fantastic. There is a gap between generations but we should live together peacefully. I explained to the Russian-speaking people about why it was important to tell their stories this way so they would be encouraged to be involved," she says. "We can't build up our future without thinking about our past and keeping healthy memories."

Local governments across Victoria are recognising the community health benefits of creating public spaces that are welcoming and attractive.

City of Port Philip's Community & Health Development Coordinator, Peter Streker, says that while he can understand people who argue that funding distributed for public art might be better spent in more traditional ways, he believes that projects such as the Park Towers wall do have a very positive impact on community health and wellbeing. The success of individual projects, though, depends on the process.

"The standard of public art varies dramatically, so I believe any blanket statement, either in favour or against it, is presumptuous. The process of developing the art also varies. It is here that, often, you find the most value," he says. "How do you measure the impact of someone feeling proud about their contribution to the community? This value is often invisible."

In a February 2006 paper examining VicHealth's Arts & Environment Scheme (2003–2005) entitled *Reflections and Future Directions*, author John McLeod found that community involvement was a major strength and suggested ways in which the broad commitments of VicHealth in this area of local government could be further developed. The use of professional consultants to undertake the work, McLeod wrote, brought a high level of expertise to projects that short-term community development workers would rarely have the skills to match.

"The advantage of the consultants was that they had a sophisticated understanding of how the project could be realised," McLeod wrote.

These included methods of engaging the community; using personal and individual stories as a basis of a collective artistic expression; and designing and fabricating public art that avoided controversy and represented the community.



Indigo Shire Council's *Outdoor Life* project involved the creation of artwork and interactive spaces, such as the Lake Labyrinth at Lake Sambell in Beechworth (by artists Donna Page & Chris Dormer). Photo: Courtesy Chris Dormer

Chris Dormer, Arts & Culture Development Officer at Indigo Shire Council, says that the way the community embraced *Outdoor Life* – a project supported by VicHealth's Art and Environment Scheme and designed to maximise community access and encourage active outdoor activities for the local community – is a good example.

"*Outdoor Life* is also giving the Beechworth and Chiltern communities a heightened awareness of the role and importance of art and its ability to develop new ways of accessing and using public spaces," she says.

In the City of Yarra, the transformation of the dis-used Collingwood estate underground car park into a viable and exciting new arts venue has been an important step in enhancing community cohesiveness and wellbeing.

"We have been involved in a number of public art projects that have enhanced the environment," says Sue Kent, coordinator at Collingwood Neighbourhood House. "Because the community has been actively involved in making these works there is a sense of community pride and ownership. We have worked on artworks that have decorated the individual floors of the high rise towers directly as the lift doors open.

"Tenants on each floor participated, contributing to either the imagery or the manufacture. The art effectively tackles the overwhelming sense of concrete and warms the space with a sense of community. All of these projects have a direct impact on community health and wellbeing."

According to sculptor Anderson Hunt, the heightened awareness of these benefits to community health and wellbeing have led to a huge increase in local government commissioning local artists to create public art.

"I've only just downed tools on one project and I am starting another," Hunt says. "I guess we have a fairly disjointed connection to our roots and public art is one way to create a greater sense of community."

Hunt says that in the case of some local governments the rush to commission artists to meet increasingly detailed briefs may harm the quality of work. But he believes that, whether created with active community collaboration, or simply a sensitive understanding of the issues that matter by a solo artist, public art is a wonderful addition to public space.

"It can be a way of getting people to have a better appreciation of their own community – the history and the diversity," he says. "That makes people happier to be there."

Claire Halliday is a Melbourne-based freelance feature writer, who writes mainly about arts and community-related issues.

Traditionally, public spaces have been planned and designed by professionals employed by councils who have relied exclusively on their skills. VicHealth's *Arts and Environment Scheme* sought to open up this process to include participation from artists, other workers within council, and members of the broader community.

FACTS

Leading the way to a healthier community

Roll the dice and navigate the challenges of creating a healthier community



Produced with assistance from PDF Management Services Pty Ltd. Illustration by Guy Shield.

Planning matters

How bringing back the milk bar could be good for our health

If some headlines of recent years are to be believed, urban planning is suffering from something of an image problem. ‘Crowded suburbs make you depressed’, ‘Obesity link to footpath shortage’, ‘Urban sprawl makes you fat’, ‘Health risk in cities’ – it seems a far cry from the kind of ‘latté lifestyle’ being peddled by weekend newspaper supplements and liveability rankings.

Municipal planning spearheaded fantastic achievements in health through improving sanitation, sewage and housing standards in the early 1900s. Since then, the relationship between planning and health has become increasingly complicated. Some commentators argue that planning should continue to accommodate Australians’ apparently insatiable appetite for more personal space (in the last 20 years, the average house size has increased by 40%).¹ Others aren’t so sure, and point to health as one reason why planning needs a rethink. In this scenario, modern health concerns about a lack of exercise and rising levels of obesity, and depression through social isolation, provide an opportunity for planners – and the local councils they often work for – to rethink how best to create health promoting environments.

Dr Iain Butterworth, a Senior Researcher at Deakin University, believes that it is possible to detect a shift in approach: “People in general would be glad to lead more active lives if their environments were more supportive. I think this awareness has definitely filtered through into local government urban planning.”

There are a number of projects which have been exploring how best to do this, not least the VicHealth-funded Planning for Health and Wellbeing program that has been run in Victoria through the Planning Institute of Australia.² It has been so successful that there are efforts to introduce it nationally. This suggests that local councils recognise that planning is still a fundamental tool to help them improve health. But to do this, planning needs to work on a number of levels.

Healthy strategies

The idea that planning can be used to create healthy environments is not new. Twenty years ago, the World Health

Organisation’s (WHO) Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion argued for environments which ‘support health’.³ The Healthy Cities and Communities program set up by WHO built on the charter to inject health, wellbeing and ecological sustainability into planning around the world.⁴

Dr Butterworth believes that planners need to ask the following questions when considering the impact of their activities on health:

- ▶ What are the potential unintended consequences of our planning efforts?
- ▶ Are the planning efforts addressing the symptoms of a problem or the root causes?
- ▶ Are planning efforts working on behalf of healthy urban public policy?
- ▶ What are the direct and indirect effects of planning decisions?⁵

These questions are best directed at a strategic level. For example, the City of Wodonga is examining how it can plan for new development that will create environments where people will walk and cycle more and use their cars less. The council is pursuing an approach made popular in the US called New Urbanism.

Wodonga’s mayor, Cr Lisa Mahood, says: “We came to a realisation that we were approving on a daily basis the types of residential developments that were working against community connectedness and social wellbeing”. Like many other places, Wodonga has been planned at low densities, with an assumption that people will drive to facilities outside of their local community, rather than providing local meeting places, shops and services that residents can walk or cycle to.

Cr Mahood feels that Wodonga has not been meeting the needs of the people who live in these areas. “Their health and wellbeing is actually being adversely affected because of the disconnection and isolation created by such urban

FACTS

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is the peak representative and lobbying body for Victoria’s 79 councils. The MAV was formed in 1879 and the *Municipal Association Act 1907* anointed the MAV the official voice of local government in Victoria.



City of Melbourne was awarded the SunSmart Metropolitan Shade Award 2006 for their sustainable shade solution at the ArtPlay play space at Birrarung Marr.

Photo: Courtesy SunSmart, a program of The Cancer Council Victoria, originally supplied by City of Melbourne

development. Because of this we decided we needed to pursue other forms of urban development that helped to build a better community.”

Wodonga is still in the early stages of developing what this might look like, but it is likely to include planning for a range of housing types to meet different lifestyles, and integrating local employment, public transport and other facilities into new neighbourhoods to reduce car travel and the need to travel outside of a local community.

Local councils recognise that planning is a fundamental tool to help them improve health.

The city-wide plan Melbourne 2030 is another example of strategic planning that is well-placed to make links with health. At a recent seminar called ‘How to plan health into Melbourne 2030’ delegates discussed the links between planning and health impact assessment (HIA), which is a tool to help councils understand the health implications of their policies and decisions. This could include examining the health impacts of their planning policies in housing, transport, environment, urban form, and the location of employment, cultural and recreation facilities, and food production.⁶

Healthy suburbs

One recent estimate suggests that ‘McMansions’ – homes with four or more bedrooms – made up 60% of all new houses and apartments built in Australia in the last decade.⁷ These large houses leave little room for backyards and have expectations of high car ownership literally built in.

But some new development is being planned differently. Macedon Ranges Shire Council has attempted to incorporate health concerns into guidelines for developers of proposed residential developments.⁸ The guidelines ‘unashamedly’ encourage developers to ‘prioritise healthy lifestyles and safe communities’ in their proposals for new development. In practice, this means incorporating signs which identify

walking distances to community facilities, shops and open spaces; seating along footpaths; and community art and landscaping in designated parks.

Western Australia has developed state-wide guidance on creating what it calls ‘liveable neighbourhoods’ to ‘combat high car dependency, lack of public transport and poor walking conditions in suburban sprawl’.⁹ The guidance recommends neighbourhoods which are located around a town centre and which are connected to each other via attractive, safe and easy-to-navigate footpaths along streets.

In a unique supporting research exercise the RESIDE project at the University of Western Australia is evaluating the guidelines.¹⁰ The findings so far support Macedon’s attempt to make suburbs as attractive as possible for walking. Professor Billie Giles-Corti, head of the WA research, says: “If people perceive that their neighbourhood is unsafe or unattractive then they are less likely to get out there and walk around it”.¹¹ She argues that if councils want to create environments where people are more physically active they need to:

- ▶ design (and if necessary redesign) attractive and large public open spaces near to where people live;
- ▶ provide footpaths;
- ▶ beautify streetscapes through activities such as tree planting;
- ▶ slow down traffic; and
- ▶ use structure plans to ensure that shops will be located near to where people live.

Planning can help to achieve all of these actions. Creating attractive walking environments has another important health-related spin-off: increased safety. More people walking means that they in effect ‘police’ the street, an observation made by the urban commentator Jane Jacobs over 40 years ago.

Access to ‘restorative’ places to walk (that is, large and attractive parks) has also been identified by Professor Giles-Corti as an important factor in maintaining good mental health in urban areas. The City of Greater Dandenong is using a VicHealth MetroActive grant to improve the conditions for walking in the local area. Tatiana Lunn, the council’s leisure planner, says that the project is confirming that “planning plays an integral part in creating opportunities for people to participate in physical activity”.

One potential side-effect of increasing housing density in suburbs, especially if it is poorly designed and built, is stress caused by other environmental factors like noise and a lack of privacy. These are health concerns that local councils need to make sure they address through enforcing strict planning controls on design. Otherwise, a situation may develop where the solution to one health problem – a lack of physical activity – creates another health concern – poor mental health. As one environmental health officer in an inner-Melbourne council has put it: “Living above a shop is all very nice, but not when its refrigeration unit is going flat out at 2:00 in the morning.”

Healthy communities

Council planners have a crucial role in moving us on from a situation where, according to social planning expert Bernadette George, people are “really just beholden to their car”. As Tatiana Lunn at Greater Dandenong puts it: “The real challenge for us is changing attitudes from a car-dominated environment to one that prioritises pedestrians.”

One way of doing this is to involve communities in strategic and local planning. Too often the ‘windscreen view’ of planning has been adopted, that is, a built-in assumption that residents will have access to a car even though this may exclude children and older people, disabled people and others. Encouraging participation in planning from a diverse range of sectors and interests can help to break down this assumption.

For example, the Municipal Association of Victoria is working with councils to develop healthy ageing plans. This includes involving older people in consultation to ensure that planning and design helps them to continue to participate in local community life.

New research is demonstrating that planning also has a role to play in reducing social exclusion. Associate Professor Anne Kavanagh, from the University of Melbourne, conducted a study of more than 2,300 people from across the city and found that people living in the poorest suburbs are ‘far less likely’ to exercise than those in wealthy ones.¹² The study highlighted that levels of physical activity can be attributed to how a local area is designed. “Basically,” says A/Prof. Kavanagh, “the physical characteristics of where you live do matter.”

Officers at Casey City Council, working with the researcher Cate Burns, have been investigating the role of planning in reducing social exclusion from another angle. They have been analysing whether there is a relationship between healthy eating and food outlets in the local authority area using local data on land use and transport. They discovered that people who don’t

have a car and need to walk or catch the bus are often a long time away from reaching food outlets.¹³ Access to nutritious food is a fundamental aspect of good health, and how planners structure the areas in which we live will influence how easy it is for all of us to eat well.

Back to the future?

The Australian Local Government Association argues that ‘there are substantial benefits for local government to improve the built environment.’¹⁴ One of the primary gains is a more healthy population. Given the successes of 100 years ago, it’s time for councils to use planning to go ‘back to the future’.

Andrew Ross is a freelance writer and editor specialising in environment, health and built environment issues.

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In the shade: how local government can help prevent skin cancer

The City of Melbourne and the City of Whittlesea are the joint winners of the first overall SunSmart Victorian Local Government Shade Award. This accolade was announced in March this year. It was one of four local government SunSmart shade awards organised by The Cancer Council Victoria.

The awards were organised to raise awareness among local councils of the importance of planning for shade. “The winners of the shade awards are leading the way in identifying and practicing shade provision in local government planning,” says Kylie Strong, program manager for SunSmart.

Neville Kurth, Chair of the SunSmart Local Government Shade Reference Group and Bass Coast Shire Council community services manager, says the benefits for local government are two-fold.

“By providing areas of shade, governments have an immediate impact on their communities’ sun exposure. But by modelling SunSmart planning and design, they also help educate communities about trees and shade structures that can be used at home.”

There are a variety of ways that councils can help prevent skin cancer through their practices and policies towards shade, including:

- develop shading plans
- provide signage which conveys important sun-safety messages
- promote attention to shading issues at the design stage of the building process
- schedule events to avoid the most dangerous time of day
- provide shaded areas at public events.

FACTS

Supportive Environments for Physical Activity is a project of the National Heart Foundation that aims to make sure our built environments don’t work against physical activity. For more info, see <http://www.heartfoundation.com.au>

Creating transport choices

Employing 420 mime artists to solve traffic and pedestrian problems in a major South American city might seem a little far-fetched but it has been done and it actually worked!

During the 1990s the Colombian capital of Bogotá was descending into chaos with serious street crime and reckless driving the norm. Bogotá's former Mayor Antanas Mockus used 420 professional mime artists on street corners to improve both traffic and citizens' behavior by shadowing and mocking pedestrians who didn't follow crossing rules and poking fun at reckless drivers.¹

Mockus also introduced an annual car-free day where the streets of Bogotá are turned over to millions of Columbians hiking, biking, skating or bussing their way around the city to promote alternative transportation and reduce smog. In 2002, the idea spread to the Colombian cities of Cali and Valledupar. Other transport improvements in Bogotá included construction of 118 miles of bicycle paths; new broad, smooth footpaths; and rush-hour restrictions which have dramatically cut traffic.

Of course, the mime program sounds like something we might see at the Melbourne Arts Festival rather than a serious solution to serious problems; and most Australians would have trouble imagining Bogotá's crime and pollution crisis of previous decades. But the majority of cities worldwide are now grappling with the effects of growing populations, rising use of private and commercial transport and their impacts on health and the environment.

The walkability of our streets and how safe they are for cycling directly influences our wellbeing.² People's physical health is also affected by motor vehicle emissions, which are responsible for 40% to 90% of air pollutants in Australian air.³

Australian Federal and State Governments have traditionally provided public and private transport infrastructure with local government left to fix the potholes and mend broken footpaths, but local government can do more to address transport and health issues.⁴ Local governments can be effective in integrated or sustainable transport through their role in land use planning, parking and travel demand management which can have enormous impact on physical activity, social connections, safety and the environment.

Many Melbourne commuters are acknowledging rising fuel prices and parking costs and looking for transport alternatives, but population growth – Melbourne will have one million ▶▶



Many Melbourne commuters are acknowledging rising fuel prices and parking costs and looking for transport alternatives.

An analysis of 46 cities found that US cities have the highest level of car dependence, followed by Australian cities. European and Asian cities are the least dependent. While Sydney has become less car dependent, Melbourne could potentially go in either direction.

FACTS



Wide footpaths and attractive, well-lit streetscapes encourage pedestrians but the streets must also be easy to cross.

more residents in the next 30 years – and increased patronage of public transport has already put some parts of Melbourne’s existing rail, tram and bus infrastructure under pressure. The City of Melbourne’s draft Transport Strategy, released in February 2006, advocates greater investment in public transport, including more buses to support rail and investment in rail itself.

That view is reinforced by international examples where cities are investing in rail systems because of

rail’s ability to absorb traffic growth. For instance, Toronto’s (Canada) commuter rail services have removed the need to build six-lane freeways, and in Portland (USA) one light rail line has attracted more than \$1.3 billion in commercial, retail and residential development and removed the need to build eight 42-storey car parks in the city centre and two additional lanes on every highway into the city.⁵

Local government is playing an increasing role in addressing transport issues and offering viable and often creative solutions.

Overseas experience indicates that for transport policy to change mobility patterns and reduce car use, not only must there be a mix of policy elements to reduce the growth in car travel, manage traffic volumes, encourage use of alternative modes and control land use, but all elements must be implemented together.⁶ To encourage people to use alternative transport, physical features such as bike paths and footpaths need to be sufficiently well-maintained, attractive and networked to regular public transport.⁷

Behaviour change is already evident with Bicycle Victoria estimating that more than 12,000 cyclists pass through the CBD each day. Melbourne City Councillor Catherine Ng said despite Council’s efforts to encourage pedestrians and cyclists, real behaviour change required significant State Government investment in public transport. The Council has already improved pedestrian access by widening footpaths and closing several thoroughfares to all but foot traffic during lunch hours but its draft transport strategy offers additional sustainable transport options including:

- ▶ A \$550,000 plan to build a ‘Copenhagen-style’ dedicated two-metre wide bicycle path along Swanston Street between the footpath and car parking spaces with a low one-metre wide kerb separating parking bays from the bicycle path.
- ▶ Removal of some major thoroughfares including King Street, Spencer Street, La Trobe Street and Lonsdale Street which would be designated local access only.
- ▶ Peak hour priority bus lanes in Queen Street and Lonsdale Streets.
- ▶ A 40km per hour CBD speed limit to help reduce pedestrian injuries and improve walking and cycling environments.
- ▶ Alteration of traffic light sequences and traffic lanes giving priority to trams, bicycles and pedestrians.

Cr Ng said all proposals would be examined over coming months, with council due to vote on funding for the Swanston Street bicycle lane plan before the end of June.

The State Government has also introduced a levy on parking spaces within the Melbourne CBD to deter all-day parking and increase use of public transport. Likely to raise \$40 million annually, Cr Ng said the levy would be welcomed if it was used to improve public transport infrastructure or to fund free public transport.

Giving pedestrians the greenlight

Wide footpaths and attractive, well-lit streetscapes encourage pedestrians but the streets must also be easy to cross. The City of Port Phillip, in Melbourne’s inner south, has launched a new project to give children, the elderly and disabled people more time to use pedestrian crossings. The Greenlight Project, developed with VicRoads, increases ‘green man’ time at the Richardson Street crossing on busy Pickles St, Port Melbourne, which is near schools, parkland and medium to high density housing.

Port Phillip’s Sustainable Transport Officer Meg Selman said the demonstration project had been welcomed by the entire community and had also changed the Australian Standard allocated speed for pedestrian crossings from 1.2m per second to 0.7m per second. This means in future, not all future crossings will be designed for use solely by healthy adults. Ms Selman said the Greenlight project was also earmarked for 13 other sites within Port Phillip and would be implemented when VicRoads engineers were able to approve the changes.

Encouraging active children

Car dependency has made many environments hostile to walking and cycling, particularly for children, with studies showing that limitations on their independent travel can influence their attitudes to walking and cycling later in life.⁸ With the current dual epidemics of obesity and a lack of physical activity, environments must be created to reverse the trend of children being driven to school.

FACTS

A cycle taxi cab service in Lewisham, London, offers a pedalled taxi and delivery service to residents of a council housing estate. The service is primarily for elderly people, many of whom reported that this was the only way they could get around their neighbourhood.

VicHealth calculations show that if 60% of primary school children walked or cycled to school, Victorian families would save \$8.8 million each year by avoiding the use of their car. Based on those figures, greenhouse gas emissions could be reduced by 8500 tonnes.⁹

During 2004, Elsternwick Primary School, in Melbourne's inner south, signed up to the highly successful Walking School Bus (WSB) program operated by Bayside Council, but parents soon realised the main crossing point was too dangerous for children to use even under adult supervision. Consequently, most parents continued driving their children to and from school and local residents were becoming more frustrated by the growing traffic snarles.

The school approached Bayside Council which lobbied the State Government department VicRoads on their behalf, saying that the intersection fell under the classification of 'latent demand', meaning that although the crossing point was not currently used, it would be if it was made safer.

Bayside Council's health planner Alison Ridge said the resulting pedestrian priority roundabout doubled the number of children walking to school and halved the number of cars dropping off or collecting children. Ms Ridge said the relationship between the community, the school and the council also improved. "For the local residents it is no longer the case of school equals traffic problems and now the council is seen as part of the solution."

Riding school bus

An innovative offshoot of the WSB program appeared when East Gippsland Shire Council introduced a Riding School Bus (RSB) at Bairnsdale Primary School during 2005. Kaylene Wickham, Walking School Bus coordinator for the Shire, said the first RSB, developed with Bicycle Victoria, was a natural spin-off from WSB for older children still requiring supervised travel to school. "The older kids were saying to us we've had fun walking to school but now we want to ride our bikes," Ms Wickham said.

Up to 10 children meet a trained adult 'driver' and 'conductor' at a central point around 2.5km from the school. They ride to school along a safe route, improving their fitness and reducing car travel. But according to Ms Wickham, the most satisfying outcome occurred when one of the students involved in the RSB made a school speech saying the program showed: "Kids can do their bit for the environment".

Ms Wickham said six other schools in the Shire were keen to start the program with adult volunteers waiting to complete Bicycle Victoria's Bike Ed Assistance training program. Other RSB programs also operate in Bass Shire.

Making choices

Studies show around half of all vehicle trips are less than 5km and most motor vehicle pollutants are emitted in the first 8 to 10 minutes of each journey¹⁰ so making the choice to leave

the car at home for short trips is desirable but that choice can only occur where transport alternatives exist.

Cr Ng said it should be remembered that cars play an important role in improving accessibility to shops and services, particularly in outer urban areas, but it was time to "focus on sustainable transport rather than just building new roads. The government should not stop building roads, but when they do they should include other public infrastructure so people have a choice of transport."

Lisa Bigelow is a freelance writer and editor based in Melbourne. She has recently worked as a communications advisor to the State Government in the areas of Planning and Water.

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10. See note 2.

Taking it to the Streets

From 'walking to the next stop' to 'soccer in the park', VicHealth's hot pink official supporter signs are putting smiles on faces while encouraging people to get active and improve their health and wellbeing.

Official Supporter street stencils and signs are appearing on pavements, footbridges and bike paths across the cities of Bayside, Casey, Darebin, Melbourne, Port Phillip, Yarra and soon Hobson's Bay.

The stencils are part of VicHealth's *Taking It To The Streets* campaign, which promotes walking, cycling and active transport. It also promotes ways of connecting with other people on the street and in public spaces.

Launched in 2005, the campaign encourages individuals and community groups to create their own messages and slogans to appear in their neighborhoods. Local councils then place the stencils in highly visible locations.

Visit <http://officialsupporter.vichealth.vic.gov.au> to see some of the latest slogans adopted for the campaign including 'Official Supporter of Helmet Hair', which is now appearing on a bike path, possibly near you!



Our current travel choices are limited. This is evident every day on our streets, whenever a single motor vehicle holds up a tramfull of people; when a car gets priority over a bicycle; wherever land is given up to a freeway but no train-line is built alongside it; when pedestrians have to go the long way round to minimise delays for vehicles.

FACTS

Building healthy partnerships

Flying solo may have worked for Philius Phogg, but it won't if you are trying to get children involved in local sport and recreation, especially in a community where 26 different languages are spoken.

Fortunately for Moreland City Council, they were able to develop strong partnerships in the area to launch their Active Fawkner project. It has bridged cultural gaps and brought community health groups, sporting clubs and schools together for the first time to deliver the same health and activity message.

Councils can do that. They are a hub of knowledge, resources and networks, and they are increasingly using this unique position to encourage businesses, arts groups, community services, sports groups and others to work together to promote health and prevent ill-health in a more holistic way.

From facilitator and financier to coordinator and implementer, councils are often the essential ingredient to getting a range of projects up and running.

In Moreland, the council had discovered that although there was an existing network of sporting clubs and schools, their volunteer base was shrinking and their facilities were becoming run down. This was coupled with large groups of newly arrived, low-income families arriving in the area.

From facilitator and financier to coordinator and implementer, councils are often the essential ingredient to getting a range of projects up and running.

"First we got local people involved in meetings about creating a vision for Fawkner", says Celia Robinson from Moreland City Council. "We asked the clubs what improvements were needed, what they wanted."

She says that the subject of sports participation came up during the general consultations. "It was a side issue initially – so this shows the value of keeping your ears open during consultations."

"We looked for leaders in the community, those with influence. But at the same time we had to do what the clubs

wanted to do, not just what we wanted to do. You develop trust that way, and you need to develop trust to get the partnership to work." Moreland City Council established the Active Fawkner Network in response to the above issues. It's a network of local clubs, schools and community organisations who are working together to increase participation of young culturally and linguistically diverse people in community sport and active recreation.

Not far away, Melton Shire Council is implementing Common Solutions, a project that is helping it examine its existing youth services and the reasons why some young people 'fall through the cracks'.¹ The project is supporting the council to look at ways to build positive experiences among young people, such as joining sports clubs or developing a positive cultural identity, as a means of protecting them against future risk-taking behaviour, such as drug use, crime or unsafe sex.

The project is a partnership between the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria (RACV), Transport Accident Commission (TAC) and VicHealth. It initially involved an 18-month process of community consultations and a comprehensive literature review, as well as an exploration of the factors that contribute to strong partnerships.

The pilot project with Melton Shire Council began in November 2005 and will run for 18 months. A project officer is working with the council to map existing services and gaps, survey young people and feed this information back into the community.

According to Sam Cockfield from TAC, one of the reasons they are working with Melton Shire Council is because of its willingness to be transparent: "They are willing to look at themselves – the project will provide a level of detail about how their youth are placed and how their services are working in relation to that."

The City of Yarra used its networks to recruit local restaurants and cafés to provide subsidised meals to homeless people. The council had begun a pilot program in 2000, but was having difficulties getting people referred

FACTS

Through the Australian Drug Foundation's *Good Sports Program*, local councils and State Sporting Associations are working in partnership to promote responsible alcohol management within their clubs. VicHealth provides significant support to the program, which is helping to change the booze culture that exists in many sporting clubs. Visit: <http://www.goodsports.com.au/>



Through the Common Solutions project, Melton Shire Council is examining its existing youth services and the reasons why some young people 'fall through the cracks'.

to the program. In 2001, the council revised its approach, securing funding through VicHealth and the Department of Human Services and teaming up with North Yarra Community Health Inc (NYCH) to run the program.

The City of Yarra called for interest through its food business newsletter and approached proprietors directly. The NYCH project worker and council environmental health officers visited the businesses and looked at price, quantity and variety of food available. NYCH tapped into their referral networks and now the program is running successfully. The City of Yarra continues to provide funding as well as maintaining an advisory role.

Katrina Doljanin, Café Meals Program Coordinator with NYCH, says that the partners in the Café Meals Project have regular meetings and receive regular updates. "We also brief people at a higher level of council – councillors and the mayor – and we have worked with council representatives to organise this. On the Steering Committee there is a council representative – they need to be informed and it is important that they take part in the decision-making."

Councils are not only involved in cross-sectoral collaborations in the community. They also encourage internal departments traditionally not involved in health-related projects to get on board.

With the help of SunSmart, run by the Cancer Council Victoria, dozens of councils are planning for sufficient sun protection in public spaces and at events, providing sun protection information to the community, and ensuring council-run facilities adopt sun protection policies and practices.

Program Manager for SunSmart, Kylie Strong, says that she might start by talking to the urban planning, public health and recreation departments of council but then she encourages wider involvement, tapping into existing skills. "It's important to demonstrate to them the skills that exist within each department that can help to improve shade protection", she says.

"We also help councils by giving them examples of frameworks and case studies showing how councils have adopted policies and practices." SunSmart also runs workshops for council staff and provides valuable resources, such as *Shade for Everyone*, a step-by-step guide to plan shade protection in the community.

Kylie says having council representation on their Shade Reference Group has helped them to know how to approach council. SunSmart has also done an audit of council plans to know which councils they need to encourage and which ones can be used as positive examples.

Councils are the closest level of government to the community and are best able to respond to local and diverse community needs and concerns. It's clear that they play a central role in creating healthy environments and conditions in which people can live, work and, perhaps more importantly, thrive.

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VicHealth News



Tell us what you think!

We want your feedback about the *VicHealth Letter* so that we can make it even better. The first five people to respond to our survey will receive a free copy of *Hands-on Health Promotion (2004)*, edited by Rob Moodie & Alana Hulme. To find out more, go to: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/vichealthletter

Subscribe to the website

If you are not already a subscriber to the VicHealth website, we recommend you sign up. You'll get regular updates about what's new on the site, including latest data, open funding rounds, new publications, upcoming seminars and learning events, and lots more. Go to www.vichealth.vic.gov.au, click on 'subscribe' in the top right hand corner and follow the prompts.



NEW VICHEALTH BOARD MEMBERS

VicHealth has three new faces to help Victorians make health a central part of their lives: Dr Sally Cockburn, Dr Mei Ling Doery and law firm senior partner Peter Gordon. The new board members were welcomed by Health Minister Bronwyn Pike on 26 May.

VicHealth's Board of Governance comprises 11 ministerial appointments and three members elected by Parliament. VicHealth thanks outgoing board members Professor Glenn Bowes, Elaine Canty and Dr Judith Slocombe for their contribution and commitment to furthering health. For more information, visit www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/board

FOOD FOR ALL FORUM – ADVANCE NOTICE

'Sowing the Seeds: Getting started on improving food access'

This forum will share the experiences of the *Food for All* program and showcase some of VicHealth's research and projects focused on increasing regular access to nutritious food from non-emergency sources (food security).

Date: 28 August 2006
Time: 8.30am to 4.30pm
Location: The Drum Theatre, Dandenong Town Hall

If you would like to be on the mailing list for this forum, please email modwyer@vichealth.vic.gov.au

BUILDING BRIDGES GRANTS APPROVED

Grants of up to \$20,000 have been approved for activities to improve mental health and wellbeing by promoting positive contact and cooperation between people from migrant and refugee backgrounds and others in the community. *Building Bridges* is a new VicHealth grants scheme that seeks to reduce discrimination and ensure that Victorians from a range of backgrounds have opportunities for social connection and participation. Funding has been approved for activities in a range of settings, including schools and other educational settings, local council services and programs (eg child care centres) and community settings such as neighbourhood houses and community associations. Projects will commence mid-2006.

FUNDING ROUNDS OPEN

Communities Together Scheme

Funding to support the development of inclusive and participatory community festivals and celebrations.

Guidelines and Application Form: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/cts or phone VicHealth on (03) 9667 1333.

Closing date: 30 June 2006

Conference Support Scheme

Small grants for organisations who are implementing health promotion conferences.

Guidelines and Application Form available early July:

www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/conference

or phone VicHealth on (03) 9667 1333.

Closing date: 2 October 2006

Community Arts Participation Scheme

Funding to assist community members to work in collaboration with artists to create a performance, exhibition or public event.

Guidelines and Application Form: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/caps or phone VicHealth on (03) 9667 1333.

Closing date: 20 October 2006

FUNDED CONFERENCES

Through the **Conference Support Scheme**, VicHealth provides limited support to conferences held by other providers. Check the online events calendar (www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/events) for more information about individual events listed below; entries are updated when more information comes to hand. Visit www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/conference to find out more about the scheme.

10–11 August 2006

2006 Rural Victorian Alcohol & Drug Conference, South West Health Care

1–2 September 2006

Community Based Obesity Prevention, Deakin University

6 September 2006

Refugee Relocation in Regional Australia: Best Practice & Policy Initiatives, Victoria University

23–25 October 2006

7th International Walk 21 Conference, Kinect Australia



Winners of the SunSmart Shade Awards for local government, 2006.

Photo: Courtesy SunSmart, a program of The Cancer Council Victoria

AWARDS

2006 Awards for Planning Excellence

Planning for Health & Wellbeing is one of the 15 categories in this year's Planning Institute Australia (PIA) Victorian Division Awards for Planning Excellence. The awards acknowledge excellence, innovation and achievement in urban and regional planning fields. **Entries close 18 August 2006.** There are no entry fees for the *Planning for Health & Wellbeing* category as this particular award is supported by VicHealth. Entry forms and full conditions are available on the PIA Vic website: www.planning.org.au/vic

SunSmart Shade Awards

The City of Melbourne and the City of Whittlesea are the joint winners of the first overall SunSmart Victorian Local Government Shade Award. The accolade was announced in March. It was one of four local government SunSmart shade awards organised by The Cancer Council Victoria. The awards were organised to raise awareness among local councils of the importance of planning for shade. The winners are leading the way in identifying and practicing shade provision in local government planning.

City of Yarra Community Event of the Year Award

Congratulations to the Royal District Nursing Service Homeless Persons Program, winner of the City of Yarra Community Event of the Year Award for its *Where the Heart is...* festival. The festival was funded through VicHealth's *Communities Together Scheme*, which promotes mental health and wellbeing by providing grants to community groups to create inclusive community-driven festivals and celebrations.

NEW PUBLICATIONS



A Winning Game Plan *Creating opportunities in sport and active recreation*

This publication shares experiences from six projects funded by VicHealth to provide opportunities for people to become involved in community sport and active recreation. Copies are available by contacting VicHealth on (03) 9667 1333 or from the VicHealth website www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/apg



Partnership Resource for Community Arts

This resource is to assist community arts organisations undertaking projects with one or more partners. While it is well documented that partnerships provide multiple benefits, it is also frequently reported that 'partnerships can be difficult'. This resource aims to address some of the challenges of working in partnerships, as

well as highlighting the benefits. It was prepared by Effective Change Pty Ltd. Copies are available from the VicHealth website: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/mentalhealthresources



Workplace Stress in Victoria: Developing a Systems Approach

In recent years there has been a rise in stress related behaviours across all spheres of life, particularly in the workplace. As part of its *Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan 2003–2006*, VicHealth is exploring the links between work, stress and broader health outcomes to gauge

the extent of the problem and identify ways of addressing it. We commissioned a University of Melbourne team, led by Associate Professor Anthony LaMontagne, to investigate the effectiveness of using a 'systems' rather than 'individualistic' approach to address the issues. The report provides valuable knowledge for agencies and organisations, large and small, to understand and minimise job stress. Copies are available from the VicHealth website: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/workplacestress



Evidence-Based Mental Health Promotion

To fill a gap in available resources to advance policy, research and practice responses to the promotion of mental health and wellbeing, VicHealth and the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS) commissioned Deakin University to develop a mental health promotion evidence resource. Summary documents are available from the VicHealth

website: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/mentalhealthresources.

The full report is available from DHS at

www.health.vic.gov.au/healthpromotion/quality/mhp.htm.



A Sporting Chance *The inside knowledge on healthy sports clubs*

Regardless of the sport played, successful clubs have a long, strong history, a commitment to including others, and a family and social focus. They value and reward members, communicate and promote regularly, and have policies that cover all bases, from sun protection to healthy

food choices. They provide a valuable service to the local community and give people a place to go for physical and social health. This publication highlights these eight characteristics of successful clubs and provides examples from nine different sports. Copies are available by contacting VicHealth on (03) 9667 1333 or from the VicHealth website www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/sportingchance



Promoting Mental Health *Concepts, Emerging Evidence, Practice*

A Report of the WHO Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse in collaboration with VicHealth and The University of Melbourne. ISBN 92 4 156294 3. This international book brings to life the mental health dimension of health promotion. It describes the concepts relating to promotion of mental health, the emerging

evidence for the effectiveness of interventions, and the public health policy and practice implications. The book can be ordered from the WHO online bookshop: www.who.int/bookorders

OTHER NEWS

DHS/VicHealth Health Promotion Priority Setting Consultations

Between March and April 2006, the Department of Human Services (DHS) Rural and Regional Health and Aged Care Services Division (RRHACS) in conjunction with VicHealth held a series of consultations (8 regional and 1 statewide) across the state regarding the setting of health promotion priorities for 2007–2012. The consultation process, which included the request for written submissions, was based on the 'Health Promotion Priorities for Victoria: A Discussion Paper'. The feedback from the consultation has informed the development of our 2006–2009 strategic plan, which we aim to complete by July 2006. It is envisaged that DHS RRHACS division will use the information to better support evidence-based practice both centrally and through the organisations that they fund.

Evaluation of *Environments for Health*

Since its release in 2001, Victoria's *Environments for Health*, Municipal Public Health Planning Framework, has represented a leading edge approach to supporting quality public health planning at the local government level. Five years on and the Local Government Partnerships Team (DHS) has recently appointed an external evaluation team to assess the introduction of the framework to municipal public health planning and to make recommendations for its future direction. The evaluation commenced in April and will run to October 2006. For further information visit www.health.vic.gov.au/localgov/ or contact Kellie Horton, Local Government Partnership team on (03) 9096 5506 or kellie.horton@dhs.vic.gov.au

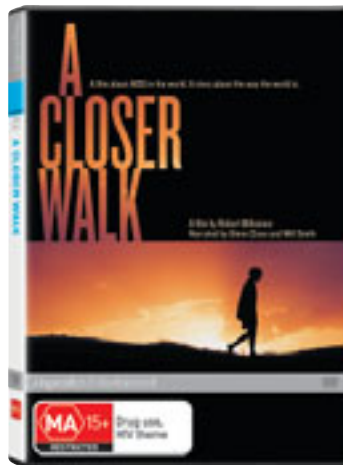


Kids – 'Go for your life'

Campaign Launched 8 June

Building on the Victorian Government's statewide Go For Your Life campaign aimed at motivating Victorians to get the most out of life, the Kids – 'Go for your life' public health initiative will promote healthy eating, physical activity and healthy weight in children. It will focus on creating healthy habits for life by promoting supportive school and early childhood service environments for healthy behaviours, while enhancing the knowledge and skills of families and support staff working with children.

Primary schools and early childhood services can register online at www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au or call 1300 73 98 99 for more information.



New free HIV/AIDS Study Guide released

An inspiring new HIV/AIDS DVD and free accompanying study guide 'A Closer Walk' is now available across Australia. Released by Y.E.A.H – Youth Empowerment against HIV/AIDS, a not-for-profit organisation promoting HIV/AIDS awareness to young people in Australia and New Zealand – the

package offers the opportunity to educate Australian youth about combating the spread of AIDS in our backyard, and connecting young Australians to the global issue. 'A Closer Walk' is directed, written and produced by Oscar nominee Robert Bilheimer, and narrated by Glenn Close and Will Smith. The film explores the intricate relationship between health, dignity, and human rights and features exclusive interviews with the Dalai Lama, Kofi Annan and Bono, combined with stories and portraits of children, women and men living with AIDS across four continents. Visit www.yeah.org.au for your free copy of the study guide and to order a copy the DVD.

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