Increasing participation in physical activity
Local government action guide no. 3

Promoting health and preventing illness in the community

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- promote health and prevent the onset of disease5
- improve individuals’ self-confidence and number of social connections6,7
- improve the wellbeing of local workforces and their productivity through less absenteeism8,9
- reduce local traffic congestion, especially when walking or cycling replaces car trips
- generate economic benefits for businesses in the area (e.g. sporting events)
- contribute to safer communities (e.g. more pedestrians on the streets at night).10

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

www.vichealth.vic.gov.au
A sample council strategy to increase participation in physical activity

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

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

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

Ensure environments for physical activity are safe, inclusive and accessible

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

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

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

References
11. Universal design is a term used when the widest spectrum of users and uses are embedded into the design of the built environment.
12. See the Heart Foundation’s Healthy by Design resources at www.heartfoundation.org.au/active-living/built-environment/benefits-of-regular-physical-activity
14. Bicycle Network Victoria’s new planning checklist will be available as of October 2012 at www.bicyclenetwork.com.au
15. See the Heart Foundation’s position statement on the built environment and walking at www.heartfoundation.org.au(active-living/built-environment/ tropical-climates)