

Evaluation of Environments for Health Municipal Public Health Planning Framework

The *Environments for Health* framework is steering a significant shift in local health planning across Victoria.

Transforming the way local government thinks about and plans for health and wellbeing

This document highlights the main findings of a comprehensive evaluation of the framework conducted in 2006. The framework was developed through partnership between the Public Health Branch of the Department of Human Services, the Municipal Association of Victoria, the Victorian Local Governance Association, local government and other stakeholders.

About Environments for Health

The *Environments for Health* framework was launched by the Public Health Branch of the Department of Human Services (DHS) in Victoria, 2001. Its aim was bold and exciting: to enable local councils to become leaders in promoting community wellbeing using a cutting-edge approach to quality health planning.

Focusing on the determinants of health that lie within the built, social, economic and natural environments, this framework guides the development of Municipal Public Health Plans (MPHPs), a function of local councils determined by the Victorian Health Act. It emphasises the central role that local government plays in creating communities and environments in which people can thrive. Local government has direct influence over some of the most powerful influences on health and wellbeing known, such as

employment, social support, land-use planning, transport and access to cultural activities, so is ideally placed to have a profound impact on the quality of life of its citizens.

Five years after the launch of *Environments for Health*, the Public Health Branch of the department commissioned its evaluation. How useful has the framework been? What real difference has it made to the way local government thinks about, plans for and contributes to community health and wellbeing? Have local councils been supported effectively to implement the framework? An external evaluation team from Deakin and Melbourne Universities was appointed to help answer these questions. The full report is available at <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/localgov/mphpfr/eval.htm>

Environmental dimensions



Built/physical



Economic



Social



Natural

Source: PDF Management

What the evaluation showed

The framework was evaluated using four approaches: document analysis (reviewing 62 MPHPs), one-to-one interviews (with 73 key informants), an online survey (eliciting 108 responses) and community forums at five councils.

The results showed that *Environments for Health* has had a major impact on the way local government thinks about and plans for health and wellbeing. Local councils are starting to consider the actions they can take in each of the built, social, economic and natural environments to improve the health and wellbeing of their local community.

“Government bodies often do plans that divide things up, separating arts from health from community services—but that’s not how people in the community live. This framework aligns council services much better with how we live our lives. A broader view of health is where it’s at.”
Local government employee

Overall, the evaluation indicates that when it comes to implementing local area health planning based on the social model of health, Victoria is leading the way, nationally and internationally. Similar programs in the US, UK and The Netherlands, for example, report much less progress than has been achieved by local governments here in Victoria.

This is an impressive accomplishment made possible by the willingness of local government to embrace the framework and pioneer its use.

1. Changing the way local government thinks about health

Environments for Health has been highly influential in broadening local government’s concept of health, alongside other initiatives supporting a social model of health.

- More people in local government now understand that health incorporates many aspects of wellbeing that go beyond preventing ill health and providing services.
- Over 70% of respondents agreed that *Environments for Health* had increased the level of understanding of how the four domains (built, social, economic, and natural environments) impact on health and wellbeing.
- The four domains helped people from these respective areas to see their role in promoting wellbeing, and therefore better understand the need to incorporate health planning into whole-of-council planning.

2. Improving the way local government plans for health

All local councils in Victoria now have a MPHP. This full compliance represents a 15 per cent increase since 2000.

Approximately two-thirds of respondents said that the *Environments for Health* framework had a moderate to substantial influence on their councils’ MPHPs.

While their content varied considerably, the majority of MPHPs reviewed showed clear evidence of a more sophisticated approach to health planning.

- Health was defined broadly rather than simply by the absence of disease (in 84% of plans).
- The social, economic, natural and built environments were incorporated as determinants of health (84%).

- Quality data was referenced (94%).
- Community members and relevant agencies were consulted for nearly all the plans, with over half using consultative committees, often drawing on broad council and community representation.
- Approximately 90% of MPHPs linked to other council plans.

This represents a considerable and positive shift in the quality and focus of local health planning. While older-generation MPHPs might have focused solely on regulatory functions such as sanitation, food safety and immunisation, they are now broader and more likely to incorporate a focus on areas such as transport, safety or the design of public spaces.

The extent to which the MPHPs were being acted upon varied considerably. The degree of implementation seemed to depend on a range of factors, including a council’s priorities, culture, resources and skill-base. Some respondents considered effective partnerships, both internal and external, to be the key to moving from theory into action.

3. Paving the way for integrated action... is it happening yet?

Integration between council plans has started to happen but it’s not consistent across all councils. For example, while 79% of the MPHPs were linked to the Corporate Plan only 37% of respondents thought that this integration was evident in practice.

This may be due to the long time-frame, strong leadership and consistent effort needed to bring about the change in orientation needed to fully implement the *Environments for Health* framework.

The Two Towns Trail project

Baw Baw Shire Council has successfully used an integrated planning approach to improve the wellbeing of its community. The council recognized that a cycle-walking trail between the two towns of Drouin and Warragul would create a friendly, attractive link that could be used for commuter, social and recreational purposes. The trail would encourage physical activity and so the physical fitness of residents and visitors. Using MPHP Good Practice Funding in 2005, Baw Baw launched the Two Towns project. Through broad consultation and integrated planning, the project achieved its goal of identifying a preferred route and completing the detailed design.

Application of the Environments for Health Framework

| Built | Social | Economic | Natural |
|--|---|--------------------|--|
| A new walking and cycling route and facilities | Supporting recreation and physical activity | Supporting tourism | Showcasing the scenic beauty of the area |

It brought together the shared goals of the *Bicycle and Walking Track Strategy*, the *Warragul Growth Management Strategy* and the *Municipal Public Health Plan*. Eleven business units of council participated in the project, ranging from Tourism and Engineering to Aged and Disability Services and Capital Works. Key external partners included members of the Active Communities Network.

For more case studies from the MPHP Good Practice Program, visit <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/localgov/goodprac/round3.htm>

Supporting and Resourcing Implementation of Environments for Health

On the whole, respondents appreciated the existing tools and support mechanisms provided to support the implementation of *Environments for Health*. The framework itself was described as easy to understand (87% agreed), and links to supporting material helped to identify relevant references and models (94% agreed). The ‘four domains’ concept was considered simple, memorable and effective. Limitations of the framework included a lack of focus on health inequalities and marginalised groups.

Some of the supplementary initiatives that support the implementation of *Environments for Health* were considered particularly valuable. These were *Leading the Way* (VicHealth), the Good Practice Program (DHS), *Healthy by Design* (Heart Foundation), and Planning for Health (Planning Institute Australia). Support from Primary Care Partnerships and the department’s regional offices was also found to be useful.

Respondents identified the types of resources and support they felt they needed to keep moving forward with *Environments for Health*. These included:

- more help with the transition from planning into implementation, monitoring and review;
- ongoing training, induction and networking for councillors, senior management and other staff to support the social model of health and integrated planning;
- resources and activities that speak the language of other sectors, and communicate effectively with all levels within council;
- more practical examples of actions that could be taken under each of the four domains, particularly economic; and
- skills to help raise the status of MPHPs.



Summary of Evaluation Recommendations

Framework document

- Broaden framework into 'Environments for Health and Wellbeing'
- Better link *Leading the Way* and *Environments for Health*

Quality and health impact of MPHPs

- Provide tools which point towards effective intervention packages across the four environments
- Develop and support funding incentives, including more specific support for rural areas
- Identify and address health inequalities

Engaging non-health areas of councils

- Develop tools (e.g. *Healthy by Design*) for the economic environment
- Support and implement Health Impact Assessment, assisting non-health sectors to understand the impact of their actions on wellbeing
- Compile community participation guide including resources, tools and examples

Integration of planning

- Support whole-of-government approaches to local government planning, especially between Department of Planning and Community Development and DHS, and develop guidelines and tools for integrated planning
- Strengthen the strategic links between MPHPs and PCP Community Health Plans

Workforce development

- Provide training for different audiences and ensure training resources are ongoing
- Train and recruit multidisciplinary planners

Where to from here?

The department is working through the evaluation recommendations to set priorities and determine next steps for *Environments for Health*. A number of key initiatives currently underway that address some of the recommendations are outlined below.

In response to a recent review of the Health Act it is proposed that new public health legislation will move the MPHP from a three-year to a four-year planning requirement. This will align the planning cycle of MPHPs with Council Plans. It is also proposed that local councils would have the opportunity to apply to the Secretary of the department to incorporate MPHPs into the Council Plan or other strategic plans. This responds to a major recommendation from the evaluation of *Environments for Health*, which specified the need for more support for integrated planning within local government.

The recent establishment of statewide health promotion priorities for 2007–12 provides an important opportunity to build on the strengths of *Environments for Health*. A new overarching health promotion framework, currently in development, will guide implementation of the priorities.

This new framework will strengthen the links between *Environments for Health* and other key health promotion policy initiatives such as the *Integrated Health Promotion Resource Kit*, recognising the key role of local government in creating healthy public policy.

The department's investment in five new 'Go for your life' community obesity-prevention initiatives from January 2007 relies on the lead role of local government and Primary Care Partnerships in creating healthy local environments. In addition, funding has been provided to twelve local councils who have employed Local Government Coordinators to drive local action for Kids—'Go for your life'.

By supporting local partnerships to address the environmental determinants of healthy eating and physical activity through policy and program implementation, the department is developing the capacity of local government to address key health and wellbeing issues in their community.

Other initiatives and resources being developed include:

- A suite of resources to assist policy makers and practitioners design and implement effective interventions to address the seven health promotion priorities. Each resource will review evidence on key interventions and highlight strategies for policy and practice that will strengthen health and wellbeing of local communities.
- Research projects exploring the link between the economic environment and health (more information at www.health.vic.gov.au/localgov/research.htm)
- A best-practice Health Impact Assessment (HIA) guide and support for a number of HIA projects across Victoria.
- Address the challenges of short-term, non-recurrent funding, by proposing that non-recurrent funding such as the *Good Practice Program* be moved to a longer-term funding model.

Through these initiatives and regular communication with local government, the Public Health Branch of the department is supporting local councils to continue their groundbreaking work in bringing *Environments for Health* to life.

For more information visit www.health.vic.gov.au/localgov/ or email healthpromotion@dhs.vic.gov.au