



Be Active program evaluation highlights

Improving physical activity outcomes in local communities

Introduction

VicHealth, in partnership with Sport and Recreation Victoria, worked with five Victorian local Councils over three years (2012–2015) to address the lack of safe, accessible and inclusive environments that restricted people's ability to take part in physical activity.

The Be Active program aimed to increase physical activity participation in children, older people and families, and improve civic engagement through volunteerism.

The five participating Councils were City of Greater Bendigo, City of Greater Geelong, Knox City Council, Latrobe City Council and Wodonga City Council.

Be Active ran in tandem with the Victorian Government's Healthy Together Victoria initiative, to boost local governments' efforts to achieve increased physical activity participation in their communities.

The program involved two interconnected stages of implementation: strengthening local policy and planning, including Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans (MPHWPs) which are a requirement under the Victorian *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008*; and the delivery of innovative strategies to increase participation in physical activity and civic engagement through volunteering within local communities.

Be Active was evaluated by the Centre of Excellence in Intervention and Prevention Science (CEIPS) using interviews with participating Councils, records of Council activities, a content analysis of MPHWPs, and project documentation.

Key highlights and outcomes

Strengthening Council policy and planning

A key focus of Be Active was to strengthen physical activity and volunteering within each Council's MPHWP for 2013 to 2017. This involved an initial assessment of the local policy environment, including key players and processes for policy development.

Across the five councils, it was found that:

- physical activity and volunteering were both strengthened within Councils' MPHWP for 2013 to 2017
- evidence was used to inform actions to support physical activity within a wide range of Council plans and strategies, including transport, open space, volunteering, ageing and recreation.

Creating and strengthening networks and partnerships

Partnerships are important in health promotion. Physical activity is a complex issue, which requires a comprehensive response across a number of areas within Council, as well as the engagement of relevant community partners and stakeholders.

Having these strong networks and partnerships enabled greater commitment across Council's key areas of work as well as external stakeholders to inform, exchange ideas, collaborate and strengthen community initiatives to improve physical activity outcomes.

The Be Active evaluation showed:

- a more coordinated and committed workforce across whole-of-Council strengthened both their planning and the delivery of interventions to improve community physical activity participation
- an increased engagement and collaboration with external local partners on planning and implementing community initiatives. This included schools, workplaces and sporting organisations.

Increasing participation in physical activity and volunteering

A range of new and innovative initiatives were delivered to inspire children, families and older people to be more physically active in their daily lives.

A focus on active travel was consistent across each of the participating Councils. However, a wide range of local initiatives were delivered to increase participation in physical activity, which included:

- active travel, walking and cycling initiatives
- workplace initiatives
- initiatives focused on children, families and older people.

Through Be Active:

- a range of new and innovative initiatives were delivered, which inspired children, families and older people to be more active
- local initiatives were delivered to improve people's civic engagement through volunteering and increasing local volunteer numbers to contribute to active participation outcomes.
- small scale or pilot projects demonstrating new and innovative approaches proved to be effective ways to get stakeholder 'buy in'.
- Council leveraged a range of statewide physical activity initiatives, such as VicHealth's Walk to School, Premier's Active April and Healthy Together Victoria initiatives.

Learnings – the six key approaches

Key learnings from Be Active approaches to strengthening physical activity and volunteering included:

Leveraging

Running in tandem with the Victorian Government's Healthy Together Victoria initiative meant that Be Active local programs were able to leverage the focus, resourcing and Council commitment.

Councils also leveraged statewide opportunities such as VicHealth's Walk to School month, to achieve a greater impact.

Flexibility of delivery

Providing Councils with a flexible approach enabled them to implement activities that reflected their local context, while still focusing on the overall outcomes of increased physical activity participation and civic engagement.

It also gave Councils the ability to respond to local requirements and take advantage of local opportunities.

Commitment

Commitment was assured as actions were embedded within longer term Council policies, plans and strategies, supporting outcomes to be sustained beyond Be Active's three-year program period.

Innovation

Pilot projects to demonstrate new and innovative approaches relevant to the local setting were effective in obtaining stakeholder 'buy in'.

Partnerships

Internal collaboration towards shared objectives meant a strong alignment in the work across Councils.

Be Active also enabled Councils to establish new partnerships with external stakeholders.

Workforce capacity

The increased knowledge about physical activity and the increase in capacity in Councils supported their commitment to Be Active.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Local Councils

- Ensure cross-Council teams are involved in the development of Council policies, plans and strategies, including future MPHWP.
- Continue to strengthen physical activity and volunteering within future MPHWP as a key Council plan to improve health and wellbeing within communities.
- Embed physical activity within a range of Council plans and strategies, including transport, planning, open space and recreation, to enable a more comprehensive approach to support physical activity participation.
- Use evidence to inform policy and planning, including initial gap and opportunity analysis.
- Ensure strong links between local physical activity evidence, Council policies and strategies and Council programs to ensure a coordinated and aligned approach to improving health outcomes.
- Use small scale or pilot projects to demonstrate new and innovative approaches, while gaining stakeholder 'buy in'.
- Ensure relevant key partnerships are established with external stakeholders to support and enable delivery of local physical activity initiatives.
- Connect and leverage existing physical activity initiatives at a local level, such as those with either a community wide or setting specific focus, such as schools or workplaces, to enable greater impact in physical activity outcomes.
- Seek out and engage experts from outside of health promotion to provide different perspectives and stimulate new thinking to addressing complex community health challenges.
- Increase workforce knowledge and capacity to inform approaches to improve health outcomes.

Federal and State Government, non-government organisations and community partners

- Align goals and objectives of funding and partner initiatives with those of Council priorities and any existing community initiatives, to leverage investment outcomes.
- Enable flexibility in the delivery of initiatives to allow for adaptation to the local community context, Council operations and local partnerships.
- Encourage a culture of innovation and piloting new approaches to address key health priorities.
- Facilitate the sharing of learnings, approaches and project outcomes across similar Councils, with partners or communities.
- Align local government physical activity investments and initiatives with the *Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2015 to 2019*.



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

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

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