

Health Protection and Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans

Guidance note – December 2020

Health protection functions

The Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2019-23 recognises effective health protection as key to achieving good health and wellbeing.

Councils and in particular their Environmental Health Officers play an essential role in preventing illness and protecting their communities' health through their health protection functions as outlined in the Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008, the Food Act 1984, the Tobacco Act 1987, and the Environment Protection Act 1970/2017 and associated codes, guidelines, regulations and policies. Council Environmental Health Officers do this through surveillance, investigation, education and enforcement, targeted towards preventing disease and creating health-supportive environments. These functions are a core part of council's operations and day to day business.

While Councils may like to reference these functions in the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans (MPHWPs), best practice planning would focus on areas for improvement or change that will deliver improved public health outcomes during the four year cycle. For example, rather than including in the plan that Council provides a childhood immunisation service, specify in the plan a target for improving the immunisation rate in a population cohort or geographic area.

Maintaining and building on Council health protection functions is vital to achieve the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan priorities and should be part of the MPHWP.

The following areas present opportunities to improve practice and tackle the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2019-23 priorities.

Surveillance

Surveillance activities inform identification, management and prevention of disease, hazards and environmental risks, and inform the proactive measures that can be taken to reduce risks and protect/promote community health.

Statewide and divisional level surveillance allows risks and hazards to be identified and managed that may not be identified at a municipal level. It is also used to monitor the effectiveness of interventions e.g. the Primary Production and Processing Standard for Eggs and statewide raw egg sampling initiatives. These activities can then inform prevention efforts to achieve the objectives of the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2019-23 and MPHWP.

Examples of health protection surveillance programmes that councils should consider for inclusion in MPHWP.

- Complete food sampling as required by Section 32A of the Food Act 1984 (a gazetted number of samples is required) and participate in Statewide or regional food sampling programs
- Monitoring and analysis of regulatory data relevant to environmental hazards such as: theming of nuisance complaints, domestic wastewater management plan activities, aquatic facility water quality complaints, Blue Green Algae management strategies where Council is the local water manager, domestic and commercial private drinking water investigations.
- Provision of Food Act Reporting Data
- Vector borne disease surveillance and monitoring programs including management and action plans

Tobacco

Legislation governing tobacco products and smoking continues to contribute to the decline of smoking rates in Victoria, and to a growing awareness of the harm associated with smoking and second-hand smoke. The recently introduced Tobacco Amendment Act 2016 amends the Tobacco Act 1987 to introduce a smoking ban on outdoor dining areas and to regulate e-cigarettes and shisha tobacco in Victoria.

These new reforms have strong community support and will contribute to reducing smoking rates and tobacco-related harm.

Council may consider setting actions that support public education enforcement of the Tobacco Act such as:

- Utilise a DHHS service agreement through MAV to undertake tobacco control activities.
- Implement a monitoring program in high density commercial areas/food districts to support targeted public area enforcement activities.
- Ensure all legally defined smoke free public areas are appropriately identified with approved signage.

Immunisation

Section 24(f) of the Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 requires that a Council co-ordinate and provide immunisation services to children living or being educated within the municipal district. Councils contribute significantly to the delivery of immunisation services and this has been referenced in previous MPHWP, however many previous plans have not clearly articulated the Councils objectives to improve the public health outcomes from their immunisation service by maximising coverage rates.

Actions for MPHWP

- Engage Council Immunisation Unit and embed their school entry immunisation target into the MPHWP and monitor progress towards the school entry immunisation target.
- Review best practices emerging from the Statewide immunisation reference group and regional immunisation initiatives and implement effective strategies to achieve target coverage rates

Integration of health protection and health promotion

Opportunities exist for councils to further integrate their prevention efforts, build capacity and improve practice by incorporating Environmental Health Officers and technical officers into the wider prevention effort.

Environmental Health Officers interact and engage with vast cross sections of the community and council stakeholders and have good access to the food industry and its workers. These linkages have been used by various councils to run integrated health promotion programmes such as.

- The Best Bite program in Mornington Shire Council¹
- Healthier Oils Initiative²
- Glen Eira Food Business Awards³

These programmes range from surveillance on the availability of healthy food, to food system issues affecting lifestyle disease and industry-based health promotion. This type of work has historically fallen out of the scope of traditional health protection activities but these projects have explored synergies to improve promotion and prevention efforts. The integration of Environmental Health Officers into wider health promotion enables partnerships with other sectors that may otherwise be difficult to achieve.

¹ <http://www.mornpen.vic.gov.au/About-Us/Business-Economy/Business-programs/Best-Bites>

² https://www.latrobe.vic.gov.au/Community/Community_Initiatives/Healthier_Oils_Program

³ <https://www.gleneira.vic.gov.au/about-council/news/latest-news/council-hosts-2019-food-business-awards>