



Public health planning and climate change

Built and natural environment

The impacts of climate change pose significant challenges and risks to communities. Responding to these risks presents opportunities to make improvements to local environments that will benefit the health and wellbeing of the community as well as the environment. Local governments can embed sustainability, climate change and public health considerations through the planning and design of the local built and natural environment.

Built and natural environment opportunities can be considered under three main themes:

- Providing infrastructure for active (e.g. walking, cycling), accessible (e.g. use of mobility aids or wheelchairs) and public/group transport.
- Adoption of nature-based solutions such as greening of urban areas or use of water-sensitive urban design (WSUD).
- Encouraging incorporation of sustainability and climate resilience principles within buildings.

Facilitating sustainable transport is a tangible action local governments can take. Increasing walking, cycling, wheeling and public transport infrastructure reduces reliance on private car travel. This supports obesity prevention efforts and reduces carbon emissions and air pollution. Such strategies lead to sustained increases in the levels of physical activity in all age groups across the community. An increase in physical activity is associated with improvements to both physical health and mental well-being. Improving access to safe, shaded, and connected walking, wheeling and cycling options, particularly around public transport and key service precincts, also supports local living, social equity, and inclusion.

The provision of urban green and blue spaces, such as public parks, nature reserves, community gardens, street trees, or waterways, can increase liveability and play a vital role in reducing emissions and mitigating the adverse health impacts of urban heat islands. Access to clean drinking water fountains is a priority. These spaces also help lower exposure to air pollution, provide shade and protection from ultraviolet (UV) radiation, support physical activity, create opportunities for people to connect with nature, and support cultural, mental and social wellbeing. It is essential to appropriately consider potential public health risks of enhancement of local waterways and providing water features. These risks include blue-green algal blooms, water safety concerns, aeroallergens, and mosquito-borne diseases.

Some local governments already have environmentally sustainable provisions within their policies. Supporting the electrification of homes and local government spaces also reduces health risks associated with exposure to indoor air pollution from gas appliances. Councils can consider building on existing State or Federal government requirements to avoid building in flood prone areas or optimising resistance of housing or public buildings to heat extremes, bushfires, or storms. Local governments in partnership with community organisation or other areas of government can provide support for energy efficiency, electrification and thermal comfort upgrades for existing homes in their municipalities – typically targeted support for low-income households or those with existing chronic health conditions.

Example strategies that could be implemented are included in the table below:

Examples
Improve the safety, quality, accessibility, and connectivity of walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure to encourage active, group and public transport, particularly near activity centres.
Consider increased pedestrian and separated cycling lanes; bus stop, footpath and cycle lane shading; speed limit reductions; zebra crossings; traffic calming measures; road space reallocation; bike-boulevards; a community transport bus in rural areas; and car share and bicycle parking targets.
Actively involve community members with diverse lived experiences in planning and governance processes for built and natural environments including Aboriginal Elders, the elderly, disabled people (including invisible disabilities, disabilities that impact mobility and deaf / blind people) and young people.
Implement urban greening and cooling strategies such as drinking water fountains and increases to tree canopy cover and vegetation (green corridors, street trees, shade at playgrounds and in public open space). Prioritise areas where heat vulnerability and risk are highest. Consider working with other local governments to facilitate support.
Conserve or expand natural environments to support biodiversity, enabling connection to nature and associated mental well-being benefits.
Develop (or enhance) grants or incentives for community members, households, businesses or community groups to engage in urban greening programs including tree-subsidies, tree-retention or protection programs, verge-plantings, and community gardens
Implement a local environmentally sustainable design (ESD) planning policy and/or participate in state-wide ESD policy.
Implement a water-sensitive urban design policy in new community and public infrastructure projects.
Facilitate grants or incentives for electrification of local businesses and households. Consider additional resilience options in rural areas in case of electricity grid failure.
Develop and implement, or support, programs that improve energy efficiency and thermal comfort, maintain safe indoor temperatures, and reduce financial strain in homes (for example, through energy efficiency programs focused on vulnerable households).
Support community and business led initiatives to reduce emissions (for example Power Purchasing Agreements, bulk buys, energy efficiency programs, and community energy projects).
Upgrade public lighting, such as lights on main roads, residential streets, and in parks, using the most energy-efficient technology.
Provide public infrastructure for fast electric vehicle charging. In regional areas this can enable more equitable uptake of electric vehicles and increase visitors providing a positive impact on the local economy.
In partnership with community organisations co design and facilitate community workshops, education sessions and workshops for community members, businesses, and organisations on sustainable, low-carbon, and climate resilient design and retrofitting for homes, neighbourhood precincts, and business.

This document has been adapted from [Tackling climate change and its impacts on health through municipal public health and wellbeing planning - Guidance for local government, 2024](#), Department of Health, Victoria.

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