

Developing the Public Health and Wellbeing Plan

When, the State Government changed its legislation, requiring Councils' Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans to consider climate change, Community Development staff were initially at a loss.

'How do we go about that?' the community development team asked themselves. One staff member spoke up, 'What about we ask Burke Renouf! Remember, he was leading that project that was seeking to provide us a way to consider climate change in our everyday work processes. This, I think, is exactly what he was talking about' The team agreed and there started a collaboration process, which led to CoGG's Public Health and Wellbeing Plan, being a leader in its consideration of climate change.

Identifying an internal expert to assist them, helped the Community Development team in tackling this new challenge.

Read on to find out more about the process that the Community Development team followed.

Understanding objectives

Local governments play a vital role in delivery health services to their community and influencing the behaviours of their local community, which influence their health outcomes. The objectives of the Public Health and Wellbeing Plan are to set a council's strategy in meeting its core roles to contribute to health protection, promotion and prevention (Geelong Public Health & Wellbeing Plan 2013-2017).

There is also a requirement to consider climate change in the development of the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan. This is to ensure that the potential climate change impacts, that will likely exacerbate existing vulnerabilities within the community – including health vulnerabilities – are managed proactively.

Understanding climate change interactions

A requirement when developing the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan (stated in the Climate Change Act 2010) is to consider climate change impacts, specifically including:

- biophysical impacts
- long-and short-term economic, environmental, health and other social impacts
- beneficial and detrimental impacts
- direct and in direct impacts
- cumulative impacts.

There are potential health impacts from all changes in climate variables – illness exacerbation from heatwaves, mental health impacts from drought, injury and mental health impacts of bushfires. All these impacts can affect the ability of the Public Health and Wellbeing Plan to meet its objectives to contribute to health protection, promotion and prevention in its community.

The Hedge - Project overview

In quotes "Use of internal and external experts to understand issue further"

The process

For the 2013 revision of the Geelong Public Health and Wellbeing Plan (GPHWP), CoGG had a great guidance on how to consider climate change. The Department of Health released a guidance document on how to include the consideration of climate change in the development of the MPHWP in 2012. But as highlighted earlier, the Community Development team were aware of and could on internal and external experts.

Internal adaptation expert member of PCG

The first step to considering climate change was to include Burke Renouf, CoGG's internal adaptation expert, on the Project Control Group. This was to ensure that climate change considerations were made throughout the development process.

Understand climate change impacts on Geelong's vulnerable

From there, CoGG developed an outlined of how climate change may affect the Geelong's community's health and wellbeing, one of the first things that the Department of Health guidance material suggests.

Using the content from the CoGG Adaptation Strategy along with some advice from an RMIT adaptation expert, Dr Hartmut Funfgeld, CoGG was able to draw together an outline of the what climate change may mean for Geelong's most vulnerable. From this understanding the following challenges of climate change for Geelong included:

- Higher risk of heat related asset failures (from building cooling systems to road surfaces)
- Higher rates of infectious and water borne disease as well as increased rates of heat related stress and mortality particularly among the aged and 'at risk' populations
- Higher peak flows through stormwater systems combined with increased rates of blockage and silting
- Faster deterioration of building stock
- Planning challenges for coastal areas and increased need for expensive beach re-nourishment
- Increased insurance costs
- Reduced availability of sporting fields.

Workshop to understand who is vulnerable and actions to implement

Then a workshop was held with relevant staff within CoGG to consider how the objectives set out in the Adaptation Strategy in relation to managing the impacts of climate change on vulnerable people, could be achieved through the GPHWP.

The Adaptation Strategy objectives included:

- identify and track vulnerable sectors and/or groups
- educate residents who are vulnerable to climate change on the potential impacts and appropriate responses.
- assist vulnerable residents to prepare for climate change.
- Establish procedures to assist vulnerable people in climate-related emergencies
- Ensure Council policies and programmes do not unnecessarily or disproportionately impact vulnerable groups.

The participants were divided up working on an objective each, and answering the following questions:

- How can this objective be considered in the GPHWP process?

- What information/actions/decisions are needed to make progress against the objective, as part of MPHWP?

The workshop was facilitated by Dr Hartmut Funfgeld.

The hedge

The final GPHWP included a discussion of the potential impacts of climate change on Geelong's vulnerable. It also included two actions to:

- Review the organisation's preparedness for the challenges presented by climate change and urban heat impacts, particularly in relation to vulnerable populations (action 1.4).
- Develop and implement a food policy for Geelong that addresses all facets of the food system, including the socioeconomic determinants of health and the impact of climate change (action 2.3).

Since the Plan, both of these actions have been implemented, contributing to further adaptation work within CoGG.

Meeting adaptation objectives

Through including two actions related to managing the impacts of climate change (reviewing organisation's preparedness for managing heatwaves and developing a food policy), the Plan has sought to hedge against some of the potential impacts of climate change.

The action to review the preparedness of the organisation for heatwaves is a flexible and reversible action, but most importantly a no regrets action – it will provide benefit no matter the future as heatwaves are occurring now.

The food policy is also flexible, reversible, maintains future options and is again another no regrets action – there are many benefits of developing a food policy outside of responding to climate change.

These actions are not large actions, but a clear process was used to consider climate change, and CoGG has started to hedge against the potential impacts of climate change on the community health and wellbeing.