Tip sheet
Municipal public health and wellbeing planning

Committees, groups and advisory mechanisms

What is the tip sheet for?
Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans (MPHWPs) by their nature are wide in scope. They cover the built, social, economic and natural environments and span actions across different business units of council, other tiers of government, the community sector and the private sector. MPHWPs therefore rely on working with stakeholders to:

• develop a shared understanding of the issues
• agree on solutions and integrated approaches
• take action
• monitor and evaluate results.

This tip sheet is designed to assist health planners consider their options for MPHWP advisory mechanisms.

What are MPHWP advisory mechanisms?
MPHWP advisory mechanisms vary considerably across local councils. While terms vary, for example, advisory committees or reference groups, more importantly these mechanisms have quite different memberships and purposes. Some have arguably moved beyond simple advisory roles to collaborative partnerships and alliances.

These differences reflect explicit council policy, for example, a community engagement policy might dictate consumer representation or policy might assign a councillor with portfolio responsibility. At other times the structure and composition might reflect historical practice or organisational culture, for example, lack of internal cohesion might discourage the inclusion of external stakeholders.

In broad terms, advisory mechanisms offer councils a range of benefits in relation to developing and implementing their MPHWPs. This includes providing a forum to:

• share information and perspectives from a mix of expertise
• promote integration of roles
• encourage ownership and nurture champions in different work areas and sectors
• add credibility to the analysis of local needs and validation of local solutions
• demonstrate a commitment to working in partnership with stakeholders
• provide leadership.

What can an MPHWP advisory mechanism do?
It can be resource intensive to establish and maintain a MPHWP advisory mechanism. Similarly, participation in such mechanisms requires other internal business units or external organisations to commit their time and resources. It is therefore necessary to be clear about what you are trying to achieve and what you are asking of those invited to participate.

The kind of role they have might be influenced by council’s approach to community engagement more generally. The following illustrates the range of roles participants might be invited to take.
This should help to clarify whether an internal, external or both forms of mechanisms is required. Remember, the advisory mechanism will not be the only way you can engage with the community and other stakeholders.

To clarify the role and functions of the mechanism, think about the different phases of the planning cycle and the part it might play in each. Consider the following questions:
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<th>Question</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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| What purpose will the mechanism serve?                                 | Collect and share information  
                                | Generate ideas  
                                | Promote joint ownership of the plan  
                                | Demonstrate leadership |
| What do you expect to the group to do?                                  | Advise council  
                                | Plan together with council |
| What do you expect of members?                                         | Provide expertise  
                                | Represent interest groups  
                                | Guide community engagement |
| Who is it accountable to?                                              | Senior manager or management group |
| What will it produce?                                                  | A strategic document  
                                | Progress reports |
| When will the mechanism commence and conclude?                         | Duration of the plan development  
                                | Duration of four year cycle |
| How often will it meet?                                                | Monthly meetings, as required - in line with planning milestones |
| How will the mechanism be reviewed or evaluated?                       | Survey of members  
                                | Discussion with group |

Many councils have a range of advisory mechanisms that provide support to council in a number of areas that influence health and wellbeing. These are sometimes established to support other plans, for example, a positive ageing strategy; some are ‘standing committees’, for example, youth councils or access committees. If these are working well it makes sense to capitalise on the existing expertise and relationships by linking these mechanisms in some way.

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<th>Question</th>
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<td>Are there any other council or community mechanisms that might contribute to MPHWP development and implementation?</td>
<td>Youth participation group, access committee, Municipal Early Years Plan Reference Group</td>
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| How will the MPHWP mechanism integrate its activity with these?        | Representative included  
                                | Communication strategy  
                                | Integration of actions arising from other mechanisms |

The answers to these questions can be written up into terms of reference.
Who should the members be?

Members for internal mechanisms are likely to come from most business units of councils. It will be particularly important to think about levels of influence as well as practitioner expertise. ‘Navigating for health and wellbeing: A resource for integrating health planning in local councils’ (DH, 2009), provides some useful insights into the contribution of different business units. This can also be used to consider what internal membership you would want to bring to an external mechanism. The list of external stakeholders is very broad and can include:

- Primary Care Partnerships
- Community health services
- Divisions of General Practice
- Department of Health
- Department of Human Services
- Hospitals
- VicRoads
- Schools
- Department of Planning and Community Development
- Traders associations
- Education and training providers
- Environmental interest groups
- Service clubs
- Police
- Community-based organisations
- Recreation and leisure group
- Resident groups
- Department of Education, Employment and Early Childhood Development.

It is unlikely that all potential stakeholders will warrant being invited into an advisory mechanism. The stakeholders you invite should be based on the purpose of the mechanism and what you expect it to do. Also think about their needs as stakeholders – What is in it for them? For example, if one of its purposes is to give the MPHWP a high profile and influence, it will be important to attract people who are in senior roles. When you invite people to participate you will need to:

- approach the right people – the ones you want to attend
- explain what you are proposing to achieve and what the commitment involves
- put your case in terms that they will recognise and appreciate.

The size of the group should also be guided by its purpose. For example, a group that is expected to make decisions should be kept reasonably small (7-12), while it is possible to make a group intended to generate and test ideas twice this size.

It is also useful to consider who chairs an external mechanism. A councillor with portfolio responsibility for health and wellbeing can lend a high profile to such a role and provide credible demonstration of council’s commitment to the process. Otherwise, a senior manager is important. In cases where the mechanism has moved towards partnership or alliance, that is, members share responsibility for collaborative action, the role might be decided by the group.
Putting the mechanism into action

The first time you meet it is important to recognise that you are building a relationship and commencing to work as a team. Use the following checklist to ensure that the following tasks are undertaken. This might form the basis of your agenda.

1  Establish clear objectives -
   Outline the terms of reference. Ensure each organisation or business unit understands how they contribute. Check this is consistent with their goals.

2  Establish communication and decision-making parameters -
   Clarify how decisions within the group might be made. Clarify how the group will communicate their activity internally and back to their organisation or business unit.

3  Develop a work plan -
   Clarify what needs to be done: what and how. Assign tasks based on roles and responsibilities: who. Agree reasonable timeframes for work to be done: when.

4  Agree on a meeting schedule -
   Agree on a meeting schedule against the work plan, ensuring that most people can be there.

5  Check that the mechanism is working -
   Review the mechanism as a routine part of your MPHWP cycle. You can check how it is progressing by getting individual members to answer these questions:
   - Is the role of the mechanism clear?
   - Is the specific way my organisation or business unit contributes to the objectives clear?
   - Is this consistent with my organisation’s or business unit’s goals?
   - Does senior management in my organisation or business unit support my participation?
   - Is the work of this mechanism communicated back to my organisation or business unit?
   - Do I understand the roles and contribution of other members?
   - Is communication and decision-making timely and effective?
   - Do all members do what they say they will and achieve targets and milestones?
   - Are the achievements of the mechanism recognised? Are the successes celebrated?

Acknowledgements

This tip sheet was developed by PDF Management Services Pty Ltd for the Victorian Department of Health in the Southern Metropolitan Region, with funding provided by the Public Health Development Unit.

For further information about municipal public health and wellbeing planning in the Department of Health’s Southern Metropolitan Region visit: http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/operations/regional/southern/regional-programs/public-health

May 2010.
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