

Healthy choices: policy directive for Victorian public health services – Short summary – 2024

Introduction/Background

As healthcare facilities with a high profile within the community, health services have an important leadership role in providing their staff, visitors and patients/residents with healthy food and drink options.

This leadership role is recognised within the 'Healthy eating' priority in the *Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2023-27*; which prioritises implementation of policies that promote the uptake of healthy foods and drinks in key public settings (including in health services, schools, early childhood services, workplaces, sport and recreation settings and events). This also aligns with the COAG Health Council's [Call to action: health sector to lead in healthier food and drink choices for visitors and staff](https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2022/07/call-to-action-health-sector-to-lead-in-healthier-food-and-drink-choices-for-visitors-and-staff.docx) <<https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2022/07/call-to-action-health-sector-to-lead-in-healthier-food-and-drink-choices-for-visitors-and-staff.docx>>.

The *Healthy choices: policy directive for Victorian public health services* (Healthy choices: policy directive / Policy directive), introduced in 2021, applies to in-house managed retail, all catering and all vending (see next page for further detail). It aims to improve the opportunity for staff and visitors of public health services to access a variety of healthy food and drinks options.

Health services were given time to meet this Policy directive, with it being phased in over two years, and a supportive and flexible approach taken with policy implementation.

Since the release of the Policy directive, the Healthy Eating Advisory Service (HEAS) have been providing comprehensive support to all health services to assist them meet and report on the Policy. This has included one-on-one meetings, and development of a wide range of implementation tools, videos and resources to assist with implementation and reporting. HEAS is delivered by experienced dietitians and nutritionists at the National Nutrition Foundation, with support from the Victorian Government. Visit the [HEAS website](https://heas.health.vic.gov.au) <heas.health.vic.gov.au> for more information.

With the support of HEAS, 88% (71/81) of health services (in scope) implemented and achieved the first phase of the Healthy choices: policy directive by the end of 2022 - providing and promoting healthier drinks, and not selling or promoting sugary drinks in their in-house managed food outlets, vending machines and staff/visitor catering (See [Healthy choices - policy directive for health services: Short Summary 2022](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-05/healthy-choices-policy-directive-for-victorian-public-health-services-short-summary-2022-.docx) <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-05/healthy-choices-policy-directive-for-victorian-public-health-services-short-summary-2022-.docx>> for further detail).

Further, by the end of 2023, 99% (80/81) of health services (in scope) implemented and achieved the second phase of the Healthy choices: policy directive, meeting the requirements for both drinks and food - offering healthier food and drinks, and not selling or promoting sugary drinks in their in-house managed food outlets, vending machines and staff/visitor catering (See [Healthy choices: policy directive for Victorian public health services: Short Summary 2023](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-04/healthy-choices-policy-directive-for-victorian-public-health-services-short-summary-2023-access.docx) <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-04/healthy-choices-policy-directive-for-victorian-public-health-services-short-summary-2023-access.docx>> for further detail).

This document builds on the first and second phase results, and provides a summary of the first year of the 'maintenance phase' of the Healthy choices: policy directive implementation – three years after the initial policy release.

Summary of Policy directive scope and requirements

The Policy directive applies to all public health services across all of its sites and facilities (hospitals, integrated community health services, public sector residential aged care services (PSRACS) and some mental health services) and covers:

- in-house managed retail food outlets, such as cafes, kiosks, restaurants (as well as items purchased by staff and visitors from patient/resident menus)
- **all** vending machines
- **all** catering provided by the service to staff and visitors (includes catering ordered through both in-house and commercial providers).

Note: Whilst privately/commercially managed outlets are not in scope of the Policy directive, health services are encouraged to apply this policy to **all** retail food outlets, including their privately/commercially managed outlets.

The Policy directive **does not** apply to inpatient/resident meals (except those for staff/visitors to purchase) and food/drinks that staff/visitors bring from outside the facility to share or for their own consumption.

Policy directive requirements:

Phase 1 involved meeting targets for drinks (including removing sugary drinks from sale), while Phase 2 added targets for foods, as seen in the table below:

Timeline	Target
Phase 1: 30 Sept 2022	Drinks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vending and in-house retail food outlets: No RED drinks to be available or promoted/advertised. At least 50% GREEN drinks, and no more than 20% drinks containing artificial or intense sweeteners (classified AMBER) are available. • Catering: No RED drinks are provided (with majority of options to be GREEN).
Phase 2: 30 Sept 2023	Food: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vending and in-house food retail food outlets: At least 50% GREEN foods and no more than 20% RED foods are available. No RED foods to be promoted/advertised. • Catering: No RED foods are provided (with majority of options to be GREEN).

These targets are required to be maintained from 2024 and beyond, as seen in the *Healthy choices: policy directive for Victorian public health services*, updated in January 2025 (See [Healthy choices - policy directive for health services](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-02/healthy-choices-policy-directive-for-health-services-january-2025.docx) <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-02/healthy-choices-policy-directive-for-health-services-january-2025.docx>>).

Health services are also encouraged to have free drinking water (for example, water fountains, jugs of tap water) readily available and promoted.

Guidance on implementing the Policy directive is available on the [HEAS website](https://heas.health.vic.gov.au) <heas.health.vic.gov.au>.

A picture of the retail food services within health services

Number of health services/sites

As of November 2024, **80** Victorian public health services with **494** individual sites/services were “in-scope” for the Healthy choices: policy directive. (Note: *Number of health services reduced from 81 in 2023 to 80 in 2024 due to the merging of two health services into one.*)

Number and types of food services

- There were 74 (93%) health services, with 142 sites (29%) sites with an ‘in scope’ food service, as follows:
 - 58/74 (78%) health services / 87/142 (61%) sites with one or more in-house retail outlets*
 - 39/74 (53%) health services / 84/142 (59%) sites with one or more vending machines
- In total, there were 470 total ‘in scope’ food services (364 vending machines and 106 in-house outlets) (excluding privately/commercially managed outlets**).

Notes:

*Staff ordering off the patient/resident menu is considered equivalent to in-house retail.

**Privately/commercially managed retail outlets are not in scope of the Healthy choices: policy directive. However, it is reported that 28% health services / 10% sites have commercially managed outlets.

Location of food services

- A high majority (95%) of rural/regional health services have in-house retail outlets, whereas only two metropolitan health services did; and
- All metropolitan health services (100%) have vending machines compared to 41% of rural/regional health services, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1 - Food service type by location

	Metro (n = 15)	Rural/regional (n = 59)
Have in-house managed retail	2 (13%)	56 (95%)
Have vending machines	15 (100%)	24 (41%)

Note: **Whilst privately/commercially managed retail outlets are not in scope of the Healthy choices: policy directive, it is reported that 15 metropolitan and 7 rural/regional health services had a total of 71 commercially managed outlets.

Food service type by health service type

There were:

- 154 hospital sites (representing 32% of sites), and 77 (50%) of them had in-house managed retail outlets, and 74 (48%) of them had vending machines.
- 176 PSRACS sites (representing 35.5% of sites), and only 7 (4%) of them had in-house outlets, and 4 (2%) of them had vending machines.
- 110 integrated community health service sites (representing 22% of sites), and only 3 (3%) of them had in-house retail outlets, and 4 (4%) of them had vending machines.
- 51 mental health sites (representing 10% of sites), and only 2 (3%) of them had vending machines. They did not have in-house retail outlets.
- 3 (0.5%) dental health services were “in scope” but do not have any in-house managed retail and vending machines. One of these services has commercial retail, which is out of scope for this report.

Whilst PSRACS and integrated community health services were less likely to have in-house managed retail outlets and vending machines on site, residents/staff/visitors of these services often access other co-located food services on site.

State-wide results

Overall results

All 80 (100%) “in scope” health services completed reporting of progress against the Policy directive over September-November 2024.

Overall, as at the end of 2024, 99% (79/80) of health services (in scope) implemented and achieved the Healthy choices: policy directive requirements, meeting the targets for both drinks and food (offering healthier food and drinks, and not selling or promoting sugary (RED category) drinks in their in-house managed food outlets, vending machines and staff/visitor catering).

More specifically:

- 100% (58/58) of health services with in-house managed retail outlets (including staff ordering from patient/resident menu) met the requirements.
- 98% (38/39) of health services with vending machines met the requirements.
- 100% (80/80) of health services met the requirement to have a catering policy (reporting that their service has a policy that ensures catering is supplied in line with Policy directive requirements).

Further detail

- Table 2 indicates 469 (99%) of food services (in-house retail and vending machines) met the Policy directive.
- Tables 3-4 outline the percentage of GREEN (best choices); AMBER (choose carefully), including AMBER artificially sweetened drinks; and RED (limit) drinks and food offered across all food service types, and compares this with the Policy directive requirements (targets).

Table 2: Number and percentage of food services (in-house retail and vending machines) that met the Policy directive for drinks

Food service type	No. / % Met
In-house retail (n=106)	106 (100%)
Vending machines (n=364)	363 (99%)
Overall (n=470)	469/470 (99%)

Table 3: Average percentage of GREEN, AMBER and RED drinks

Food service type	Average % GREEN drinks	Target	Average % AMBER drinks	Implied target	Average % AMBER artificially sweetened drinks	Target	Average % RED drinks	Target
In-house retail	78.5%	At least 50%	13.3%	0-50%	8.2%	No more than 20%	0%	0%
Vending machines	82.3%	At least 50%	2.2%	0-50%	15.4%	No more than 20%	0.1%*	0%

* Only one vending machine did not meet targets.

Table 4: Average percentage of GREEN, AMBER and RED foods

Food service type	Average % GREEN foods	Target	Average % AMBER foods	Implied target	Average % RED foods	Target
In-house retail	61.3%	At least 50%	28.1%	30-50%	10.6%	No more than 20%
Vending machines*	59.4%*	At least 50%	23.7%*	30-50%	16.9%*	No more than 20%

Summary and discussion

The Healthy choices: policy directive, introduced in 2021, built on the *Healthy choices: policy guidelines for hospitals and health services*. The Department of Health took a flexible and supportive approach to policy implementation, with it being phased in over two years; and extensive resources, tools and support provided by the Healthy Eating Advisory Service (HEAS).

The outcomes of Policy directive implementation and reporting have been remarkable. Due to the hard work and commitment of health services, and the support provided by HEAS, not only have all services reported on the directive every year since its introduction - the majority of services met the Phase 1 drinks targets in 2022; close to all met Phase 2 food and drinks targets for in-house retail outlets, vending machines and catering in 2023; and this positive success has been maintained over 2024. In fact, there was a gradual improvement over time, with an increased number of services meeting the targets from 2022 to 2023, and an increase in the proportion of healthier drinks in 2024.

This outstanding example of full adoption of a Department policy by health services likely indicates the phased approach to the implementation of a new policy was successful, the tailored support provided by HEAS was crucial, the support provided by a key implementer within each health service was integral, and a policy mandate drove compliance.

This transformation of the retail environment within health services holds the potential to drive meaningful improvements in access to healthier choices and reducing the burden of diet-related diseases, and ultimately enhance the overall health and wellbeing of the Victorian population. It also supports greater variety and choice for staff/visitors, and 'healthy choices being the easy choices', thereby supporting the healthy eating priority within the *Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2023-2027*.

While health services celebrate their success with meeting the Healthy choices: policy directive, a focus on 2025 and beyond will be on supporting services to sustain and maintain this positive policy outcome. The HEAS team will continue to provide support to health services with policy implementation and reporting. This will include the launch of a new online training module on maintaining policy success in 2025.

Victorian public health services are commended for their leadership and commitment to increasing healthy food and drinks for staff and visitors through the Policy directive.

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