

Healthy choices: policy directive for Victorian public health services – Short summary – 2025

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/resources/publications/call-to-action-health-sector-to-lead-in-healthier-food-and-drink-choices-for-visitors-and-staff) <<https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/call-to-action-health-sector-to-lead-in-healthier-food-and-drink-choices-for-visitors-and-staff>>.

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.

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. This positive result was maintained in 2024, with 99% (79/80) of health services meeting the policy directive food and drink requirements by the end of 2024. (See Healthy choices: policy directive for health services – Short summary reports at <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/healthy-choices-policy-directive-and-guidelines-for-health-services>> for further detail).

This document builds on past Summary reports and provides a summary of the outcomes of Healthy choices: policy directive implementation in 2025, the second year of the 'maintenance phase' of policy directive implementation, and four 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 (Available at < <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/healthy-choices-policy-directive-and-guidelines-for-health-services> >).

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 at [HEAS](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/healthy-choices-policy-directive-and-guidelines-for-health-services) <[heas.health.vic.gov.au](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/healthy-choices-policy-directive-and-guidelines-for-health-services)>.

A picture of the retail food services within health services

Number of health services/sites

As of November 2025, **80** Victorian public health services with **493** 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 75 (94%) health services, with 146 sites (30%) sites with an 'in scope' food service, as follows:
 - 59/75 (79%) health services / 88/146 (61%) sites with one or more in-house retail outlets
 - 38/75 (51%) health services / 87/146 (60%) sites with one or more vending machines
- In total, there were 480 total 'in scope' food services (373 vending machines and 107 in-house outlets) (excluding privately/commercially managed outlets).

Notes:

- Staff ordering off the patient/resident menu is grouped together with in-house retail from a policy perspective.
- Number of vending machines reported have increased from 364 in 2024, to 373 in 2025. There was an increase of one in-house retail outlet over that period.
- Privately/commercially managed retail outlets are not in scope of the Healthy choices: policy directive. However, it was previously self-reported that 28% health services / 10% sites have commercially managed outlets.

Location of food services

Out of the health services that have food services:

- A higher proportion (48%) of rural/regional health services have in-house retail outlets, whereas only one metropolitan health service did
- The option for staff/visitors to order from the patient/resident menu is more common for rural/regional health services – 60% of rural/regional health services, compared to only one metropolitan health service
- All metropolitan health services (100%) have vending machines compared to 38% of rural/regional health services, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1 - Food service type by location

| | Metro (n = 15) | Rural/regional (n = 60) |
|--|----------------|-------------------------|
| In-house retail (including staff ordering patient/resident menu) | 2 (13%) | 57 (95%) |
| Vending machines | 15 (100%) | 23 (38%) |

Note: Whilst privately/commercially managed retail outlets are not in scope of the Healthy choices: policy directive, it was previously 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 31% of sites), and 78 (51%) of them had in-house managed retail outlets (including 51 hospitals where staff can order from the patient/resident menu), and 74 (48%) of them had vending machines
- 175 public sector residential aged care services (PSRACS) sites (representing 36% of sites), and 7 (4%) of them had in-house outlets, and 6 (3%) of them had vending machines
- 110 integrated community health service sites (representing 22% of sites), and 4 (6%) of them had in-house retail outlets, and 5 (5%) of them had vending machines
- 51 mental health sites (representing 10% of sites), and only 2 (4%) of them had vending machines, and they did not have in-house retail outlets, as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 – Food service types within different health service types

| | Hospitals (n = 154) | PSRACS (n = 175) | Integrated Community Health Services (n = 110) | Mental Health (n = 51) |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Total in-house retail | 78 | 7 | 4 | 0 |
| Vending machines | 74 | 6 | 5 | 2 |

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 or nearby food services.

State-wide results

Overall results

All 80 (100%) “in scope” health services completed reporting of progress against the Policy directive over September-November 2025.

Overall, as at the end of 2025, 100% (80/80) 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% (59/59) of health services with in-house managed retail outlets (including staff ordering from patient/resident menu) met the requirements.
- 100% (38/38) 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).

In addition, Table 3 indicates 480 (100%) food services (107 in-house retail and 373 vending machines) met the Policy directive.

Table 3: 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=107) | 107 (100%) |
| Vending machines (n=373) | 373 (100%) |
| Overall (n=480) | 480 (100%) |

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; this positive success was maintained in 2024; and maintained and improved in 2025. This last year was an exceptional year, with not only all services reporting, but also 100 per cent of services meeting all the Policy directive requirements.

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 key implementers 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 the 'healthy choice being the easy choice', thereby supporting the healthy eating priority within the *Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2023-2027*.

A key policy principle will be to support 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.

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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