

Sustaining healthy communities in a changing climate

COUNCIL NAME

The Western Parkland Councils (Blue Mountains, Camden, Campbelltown, Fairfield, Hawkesbury, Liverpool, Penrith and Wollondilly)

WEB ADDRESS

wpcouncils.nsw.gov.au

SIZE

8,089 square kilometres

POPULATION

1.15 million people

FUNDING PROGRAM

Increasing Resilience to Climate Change

Overview

What are the links between the health of humans and the health of the planet? And how can councils take action to help communities adapt to climate change and improve health at the same time? These were just two of the underlying questions explored in an ambitious research partnership project between local government and Local Health Districts (LHDs) in the Western Parkland City (WPC).

The Western Parkland City is at a pivotal moment as unprecedented investment in infrastructure and the development of an international airport transforms one of Australia's most important urban economies.

Yet the global pandemic has also laid bare the fundamental challenge of socio-economic and health inequalities across the region. Building resilient communities is a major challenge – and this challenge has been heightened by the rapid succession of shocks and stresses, drought, bushfires, storms and floods felt by the communities.

The Western Sydney Health Alliance is an organisation consisting of representatives from the Western Parkland councils, South West Sydney and Nepean-Blue Mountains Local Health Districts and Public Health Networks. The Alliance worked in collaboration with Western Sydney University, Centre for Health Equity Training, Research and Evaluation (CHETRE) and the Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA) to co-design a guide to help its members, other local governments and health organisations to integrate health impacts into planning processes.



Background

Health and wellbeing can be affected by a changing climate. Heatwaves, air pollution, injuries from extreme weather events, changing patterns of disease from mosquitoes or ticks, and contaminated food or water are just some examples.

In Western Sydney, which already experiences up to 20 days of extreme heat each year, the impact on human health can be acute.

One survey of 700 Western Sydney residents in 2020 found that 11.2% of people sought medical care on days of extreme heat, and 23.5% felt their health condition was made worse from the heat. As [AdaptNSW's climate snapshot](#) predicts the number of days over 35°C each year will rise considerably in the decades ahead, the Western Parklands Councils decided to take action.

Implementation

With the support of a grant from the Increasing Resilience to Climate Change program, the Western Sydney Health Alliance commissioned two pieces of research to inform the development of a guide, or toolkit, to help local governments prepare.

The first research piece, [a review of local council strategies for climate, health and wellbeing](#), was undertaken by Western Sydney University in collaboration with CHETRE and the University of NSW.

WSU's researchers undertook 70 hours of interviews with councils and surveyed 12 health alliance partner organisations. An audit of relevant council planning and policy documents was undertaken, and local, national and international examples examined to uncover lessons. The results were collated and analysed, and presented in a report which identified enablers, barriers and opportunities.

The research provides a better understanding of the immediate and long-term health impacts of extreme urban heat, severe storms, floods and bushfires. While some of these are obvious, others are less so. Hot nights, for instance, can lead to poor sleep quality and consequent impacts on cognitive ability and even blood-stream absorption of medicines.

Following this, the Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA) designed and delivered workshops with representatives from all eight councils, and local health districts and public health networks. These workshops uncovered insights into how the research could be translated into practical guidance for councils and their LHDs.

CAHA produced a report with guidance and evidence for local government and health organisations. This document, along with the initial research of existing council actions underpin the 'toolkit' for councils and health organisations.

Outcomes

This project has established an evidence base for the health impacts of a changing climate, and provides a raft of clear-cut, easy-to-adopt actions and strategies for local governments to develop and implement with support from their health partners.

An audit of all relevant council planning and policy documents in the Western Parklands Councils that reference climate change, sustainability and resilience was completed and published.

The toolkit aligns recommended actions using the four themes of the Western Parkland Councils' Delivery Programs: Infrastructure and Collaboration, Liveability, Productivity, and Sustainability.

Just some of the recommendations include developing a vulnerability map to identify groups most at risk from health and climate hazards, setting walkability and active transport targets, and increasing tree canopy and green infrastructure to more than 40%.

Case studies illustrate how councils are already taking action and provide inspiration. The final toolkit is now available to all councils to guide further action. A community of practice will lead implementation and monitor its adoption.

Key Learnings

Covid-19's disruptions led to considerable fluctuation in human resources, as many health partners on the projects were seconded to pressing pandemic-related projects, others were sick, and some workshops were held virtually due to lockdowns. The constraints imposed during Covid-19's peak demanded flexibility and adaptability from the project team.

Adaptability was also required to achieve the project's primary objective – a user-friendly guide or toolkit for councils and health organisations that addressed the health impacts of a changing climate.

The resulting guide not only helps local governments and health organisations to address community health impacts of a changing climate, but also supports net zero targets, proposes innovative interventions, and advocates for more collaboration with communities.

More information

[Read the University of Western Sydney research paper.](#)

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