



## Community wellbeing across Melbourne's north

This document progresses the work undertaken by the NCA to identify key issues of significance in relation to community wellbeing for all seven member Councils.

Community wellbeing is a broad concept that encompasses mental health, homelessness, climate change and active living, among other things. This document draws on the priorities identified in the Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plans (MPHWPs) developed by each Council and proposes an approach to identify four priorities as the basis for NCA collaboration and advocacy over the next five years.

### Context

A number of factors influence decision making on which elements of community wellbeing should be selected as the basis for collaboration and advocacy:

1. *Population growth:* Whittlesea, Mitchell and Hume are forecast to experience significant growth over the next 20 years, creating additional demand for infrastructure and services. Inner urban councils are also experiencing population growth and increased pressure on their infrastructure.
2. *Geographic variation:* The region includes urban, peri-urban and regional settings, each with varying levels of physical infrastructure and access to services.
3. *Demand for health services:* Northern Health, based in Epping, has the busiest emergency department in Victoria and one of the busiest maternity wards. The hospital is under significant pressure from the growing population in Melbourne's outer north and, at peak times, is at capacity. Forecast population growth will create greater demand on this facility. Also, peri-urban and regional areas are experiencing significant challenges in attracting and retaining locally-based health professionals to deliver primary and secondary health services.
4. *Socio-economic disparity:* A high level of diversity exists across the region, with a corresponding need for culturally safe and appropriate services that are available, accessible, appropriate and affordable. In addition, the significant socio-economic disparity within and between municipalities has important implications for disadvantaged communities and health equity, given the correlation between socio-economic status and health outcomes.
5. *Policy reform:* Government responses to the recommendations of the Victorian Royal Commission into Mental Health Services and the Commonwealth Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety will have a significant impact on the funding, delivery and governance of key services.
6. *COVID-19:* The pandemic continues to have a significant impact on community wellbeing as evidenced by increasing financial hardship, the increasing number of family violence incidents, and the strain on the health and wellbeing service system.



7. *Climate change*: This is creating and will continue to create new health and wellbeing challenges including extreme weather events, the emergence of diseases that have not historically been locally present (e.g. Japanese encephalitis), food insecurity and impacts on the health workforce, among other things.

### Health and wellbeing priorities

Councils recently finalised their MPHWP, based upon the analysis and consultation on local needs and priorities. Figure 1 shows the key priorities (identified by most Councils) that could be the basis for collaboration and advocacy.

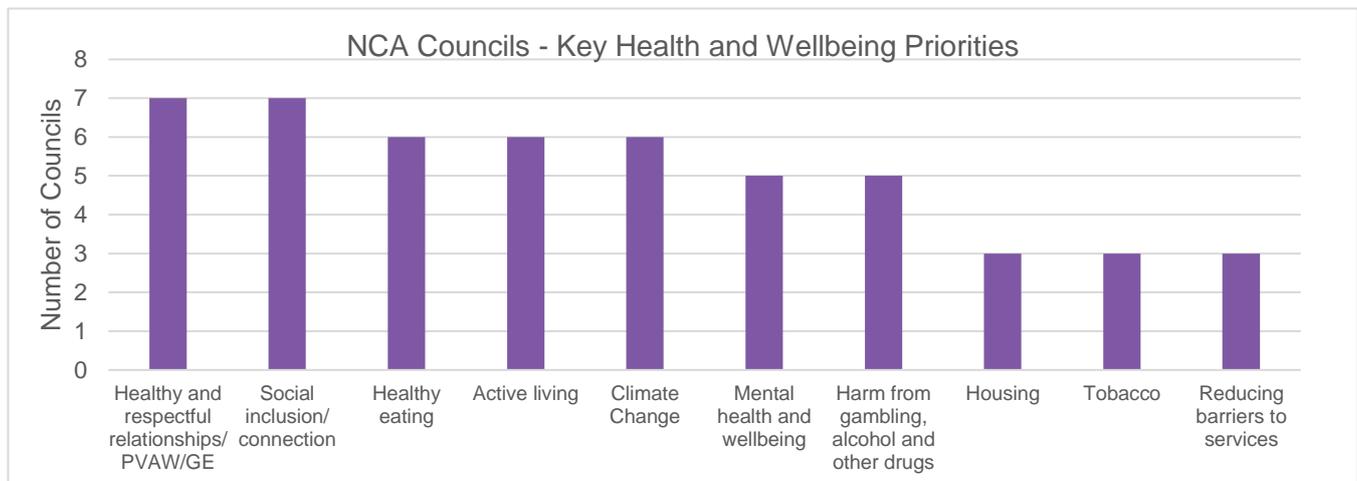


Figure 1 – NCA Councils: Key MPHWP priorities

The selection of a limited number of priorities as the basis for collaboration and advocacy will support enhanced alignment of Council resources and increase the likelihood of achieving the desired outcome.

One approach is to select those health and wellbeing priorities that have been identified by the most Councils.

A more nuanced approach may be to identify two priorities with a *direct and immediate impact on health and wellbeing*, and two priorities with a *strategic focus on the policies, systems and structures that support health and wellbeing*. Suggested criteria for each are outlined below:

#### Direct and immediate impact

- Which health and wellbeing priorities have been the most adversely affected by the pandemic?
- Which health and wellbeing priorities are likely to have the greatest immediate impact on an individual’s physical and emotional safety?

#### Strategic focus

- Which priorities, if they remain unaddressed, will result in poorer health and wellbeing outcomes across Melbourne’s north in the long term?



The assessment of each priority against these criteria is at Attachment 1. The assessment suggests the following priorities as the basis for collaboration and advocacy for the next three to five years.

## Priorities with a direct and immediate impact on health and wellbeing

### Prevention of violence against women/family violence

- The prevention of violence against women, family violence and gender equality have been a major policy focus of the Victorian Government since 2015. Despite this focus, the rate of family violence incidents has increased across many LGAs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within Melbourne's north, the highest LGA rate of incidence is more than three times that of the lowest LGA.
- The majority of gendered violence is against women and results in deep, lasting impacts for those affected and their loved ones. Opportunities exist to advocate for increased resourcing for both primary prevention and support services, and for regional, long-term, partnership-based approaches to working with communities in multiple settings to shift the values that enable violence to occur.

### Mental health

- Mental health was a policy priority for the Victorian Government prior to the pandemic, and the pandemic resulted in a substantial increase in the number of people experiencing mental health issues. The mental health system is under significant pressure due to increased demand for services and the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health workforce.
- The government's response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System creates new opportunities for Councils to influence the design and commissioning of mental health services, especially in relation to culturally safe and appropriate care, and care for young people.
- Opportunities exist for regional collaboration with service providers, government agencies, primary health networks and communities to enhance the impact of primary prevention efforts.

## Strategic issues requiring sustained action over the long term

### Access to services

- The high level of diversity and localised disadvantage across the region requires advocacy for health and wellbeing services that are available, accessible, affordable, and culturally safe and appropriate.
- Projected growth in the region will create significant new demand for health services including general practitioners and allied health providers (primary), specialists (secondary) and hospitals (tertiary). As previously noted, the Northern Hospital is reportedly at capacity, and peri-urban and regional localities face particular challenges in attracting and retaining local health practitioners. Sustained, long-term advocacy will most likely be required to ensure these challenges receive the appropriate policy attention from state and federal governments.
- Opportunities exist for regional collaboration to more effectively address modifiable health risks (e.g. harmful use of alcohol and other drugs, mental health, sedentary lifestyle) and the determinants of health (e.g. homelessness, social isolation) to reduce the incidence of chronic health conditions and mitigate the demand for associated health services.



## Climate change

- The health impacts of climate change resulted in it being identified as priority in the *Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2019–2023* and led to the pilot *Health and Human Services Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan 2019–2021*.
- Key impacts include direct health impacts (e.g. bushfires, heatwaves, floods), indirect health impacts (e.g. water quality issues), social determinants (exposure of housing to heat and cold, economic impacts of climate change) and impacts on the health and human service system (staff health and wellbeing).
- Local government is ideally situated to lead place-based and regional efforts that reduce risks and build resilience to acute shocks and chronic stressors. A Greener North is one such example of a regional initiative that aims to increase forest cover canopy and reduce the urban heat island effort.



## Attachment 1. Assessment of key health and wellbeing priorities

### *Priorities with a direct and immediate impact on health and wellbeing*

Seven priorities have been identified as having an immediate impact on health and wellbeing. Each has been assessed in the table below. A higher total score indicates higher priority. Scoring: Low (1), Medium (2), High (3).

Priority	Adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic		Immediate impact on physical and emotional safety		Total
	Score	Comments	Score	Comments	
<b>Violence against women/ family violence</b>	3	Significant increase in violence against women and family violence due to financial stress and lockdowns.	3	Significant impact on personal safety (physical violence) and emotional wellbeing (emotional violence, controlling behaviour).	6
<b>Social inclusion</b>	2	Increased isolation and loneliness during lockdowns; reduced opportunities for social inclusion.	2	Moderate due to impact of social connection and support.	4
<b>Healthy eating</b>	2	Increased in unhealthy eating (snacks, comfort food) due to stress. Reduced access to fresh food due to supply interruptions; however, increase in home cooking.	1	N/A	3
<b>Active living</b>	1	Unable to attend gyms during lockdown; however, increase in walking.	2	Impact of regular exercise improving mental health, reducing incidence of chronic conditions (e.g. diabetes).	3
<b>Mental health</b>	3	Significant increase in people experiencing mental health issues.	3	Significant impact on functioning (e.g. capacity to undertake day-to-day activities, secure/retain employment). Self-harm	6



				and suicide in some cases. Significant proportion of the population affected.	
<b>AOD/gambling</b>	2	Increase in alcohol consumption.	3	Significant impact on the individual affected and those closest to them.	5
<b>Housing – affordability, instability, homelessness</b>	1	People experiencing homelessness were temporarily housed (now ended); however, financial stress increased housing stress for some.	3	Secure housing increases personal safety, sense of belonging, ability to access services and secure/retain employment.	4
<b>Tobacco</b>	1	No significant change in smoking behaviour.	1	Chronic health impact	1

*Strategic issues requiring sustained focus and investment over the long term*

Two priorities have been identified as requiring sustained policy attention and investment over the long term. These priorities have a significant impact on all the health and wellbeing priorities listed in the table above, as well as other health and wellbeing priorities identified by individual Councils.

Priority	Justification
Access to services	Policy and investment are required to ensure that tertiary health services are available and accessible as the population continues to grow, and that policies are (re)established to attract qualified health practitioners working in primary and secondary health to peri-urban and regional areas. Improving access to services must address health equity issues that exist among vulnerable population cohorts who generally experience poorer health outcomes (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; people who are from culturally diverse backgrounds; people who identify as LGGBTIQ+; people who are experiencing housing instability and homelessness; people with a disability; people of refugee and asylum seeker background).
Climate change	Climate change presents a range of health and wellbeing challenges including direct and indirect health and workforce impacts. The impacts of extreme weather events (e.g. heatwaves, bushfires) on health and wellbeing are likely to be more prevalent.