



PREMIER'S COUNCIL
FOR ACTIVE LIVING
NEW SOUTH WALES



Building stronger communities through physical activity: a practitioner's resource



Overview

We know that communities with more physically active people are more socially connected and healthier places to be. This resource is designed to assist practitioners to map the various elements that must be considered when implementing a physical activity program aiming to enhance community development. A comprehensive report providing detailed methodological, case study and policy background to the resource is also available on the NSW Premier's Council for Active Living (PCAL) website at www.pcal.nsw.gov.au

Background

The development of a practitioner's resource to guide the use of physical activity for community development is the main outcome of a research project carried out in 2007 by PCAL. This project reviewed contemporary literature and local case studies which used physical activity as a tool for developing social capital and promoting community development in NSW.

The project analysed a range of NSW policies, the most significant of which was the NSW State Plan. The policy analysis clearly identified how physical activity can be used as a key performance indicator for the progression of this Plan.

Several successful physical activity programs were then examined. Common critical success factors included:

- **Locally focused**, i.e. used local facilities, partnerships, local membership and programs which are highly valued locally, or mobilised local resources such as knowledge, skills and commitment of community members. The program was small enough to care about its members – having more money did not necessarily make an organisation more effective.
- **Group cohesion and inclusion**, encompassing community spirit, cooperation and collaboration. The program brought people together to pursue health and wellbeing and common goals, extending support networks and capacities to cope.
- **Broad community engagement**, integrating contribution, expanded social networks and democratic processes. The program provided opportunities for people to continue to actively and meaningfully contribute to the community.
- **Individualised programming**, by being flexible and responsive, and taking into account and managing physical capability. The program contributed to personal development by providing opportunities to increase fitness and enhance knowledge, skills, confidence and self-esteem.
- **Sustainable** through partnerships to provide funding, expertise, in-kind support, recruitment of community members and use of local facilities. Programs integrated into existing community assets and provided evaluation and feedback to participants, and were embedded within an organisational policy context.

This practitioner's resource reflects information gained throughout the research project, and aims to assist practitioners plan, implement and evaluate physical activity programs that build social capital in communities.

This resource has been designed for use in a multiplicity of applications including program and policy settings and at grassroots delivery of physical activity or community development programs. It encourages community-based physical activity programs to be planned using a bottom up approach. Programs can be planned to meet identified needs, develop partnerships, build and support social networks and promote community members to develop their own capacity for physical, social, economic and cultural wellbeing.



The importance of physical activity

Physical activity has been identified as an essential component of every Australian's life, essential to combating obesity and in promoting healthy and fulfilled lifestyles. Physical inactivity is a serious health problem that results in poor health outcomes including obesity, heart disease, stroke, type II diabetes, some cancers, depression and more (PCAL, 2007).

How much physical activity is required?

Current Australian guidelines suggest:

- Adults should be active every day in as many ways as they can
- Adults should complete 30 minutes or more of moderate intensity activity on most, or preferably all, days of the week
- Children and young people (five to 18 years) should participate in at least 60 minutes (and up to several hours) of moderate-to-vigorous intensity physical activity every day
- Children and young people should not spend more than two hours a day using electronic media for entertainment (e.g. computer games, internet, TV), particularly during daylight hours.

About the Premier's Council for Active Living

The NSW Premier's Council for Active Living (PCAL) aims to encourage more people in NSW to be more active every day. We do this by working with our government, business and community partners to:

- Promote greater involvement in active living across all population groups in NSW
- Build and strengthen the physical and social environments that facilitate and support active lifestyles, from individual, incidental everyday activity, to more formal activities such as fitness and sports programs
- Ensure that government policies and strategies provide every opportunity for the citizens of NSW to embrace active living throughout their whole lifecycle.

PCAL comprises senior representatives from various government agencies, as well as representation from business and the community sector. It provides an important forum for interagency and intersectoral collaboration through the promotion of Active Living Principles and their implementation.



Success factors for physical activity programs

This section links the critical success factors with the process of planning a physical activity program that promotes and builds community development.

Connecting with communities

Every community is different and is comprised of its own unique mix of people, places, services and networks. Before beginning any physical activity initiative it is imperative to understand the dynamics of the community and tailor the program to suit the community. Recognising community capacity draws upon the strengths (capacities) and abilities of the community, rather than focussing on the deficiencies. Approaches that focus on the deficiencies tend to focus on the problems, the weaknesses, and the shortcomings of a community. By focussing on the capacity of a community, the skills, interests and experiences can be identified and built upon.

This approach helps identify the strengths upon which future approaches and programs can be based. One of the most important concepts of community capacity is identifying and using resources within the community and building upon these.

Using a community capacity approach has several advantages as a method of addressing key issues in a community. These can include strategies that promote:

- **Participation and inclusion** – where all members of the community are involved in planning and implementing the solution
- **A holistic approach** – acknowledging the interdependence that exists between groups within communities at the local, national and international level
- **Diversity** – the diversity within communities is acknowledged and built upon to ensure new approaches can be integrated into the culture of the community
- **Responsiveness** – community development approaches have to be dynamic, to respond to the differing needs of communities as they arise
- **Sustainability** - building community capacity has sustainable qualities because the groups and organisations develop the abilities and resources to maintain community 'owned' initiatives.

Considering program sustainability upfront

Sustainability means identifying how the program can be maintained long term. The introduction of new programs or interventions to address physical activity and promote community development can face some immediate obstacles. These may include funding, staffing, facilities and other resources required to make them work and to sustain them into the future. Too often, programs are introduced into communities with short term funding. The programs can be successful in generating a lot of interest and even participation, however once the funding runs out, so too may the program.

It is well-published in public health literature that integrating public health approaches into the existing structures of a setting (such as schools, workplaces or communities) is one of the most effective means of achieving sustainability.

Creating identifiable links between policies such as the State Plan may also promote longevity, particularly if you can demonstrate that your program is contributing to the outcomes or performance indicators within the Plan.

Working with a range of partners can also promote sustainability through the provision of funding, expertise, in-kind support, recruitment of community members and use of local facilities.

Integrating programs into the existing assets of a community can assist with their effectiveness and overall success.



Community participation

Participation is a crucial element of building strong and connected communities. Participation can occur in several ways, depending on the characteristics of the community.

There are two key types of participation. Active participation offers members of the community an opportunity to 'have a say' through events such as community meetings, forums, surveys and talkback radio. Passive participation can relate to reading a newsletter, attending a function or providing financial support. Integrating both types of participation is important when designing a physical activity program that aims to promote community development.

Effective participation is a key step in connecting with communities. It will help to define the possible future actions for a community-based physical activity program and identify areas where governments, non-government organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations can assist. Participation will also identify opportunities for individuals.

There are several opportunities for communities as a whole and individuals to participate in planning a physical activity program to promote community development. Any program development process may want to consider these points as guiding principles.

At a **community level**, factors promoting participation can include:

- Encouraging programs that target family units
- Encouraging community-wide activity or events
- Providing opportunities to link people into their community
- Ensuring the program considers issues such as financial security
- Ensuring programs support the most disadvantaged in the community
- Encouraging programs that promote coping or lifeskills
- Increasing physical activity opportunities for all ages and physical capabilities
- Promoting programs that consider the provision of safe and walkable environments
- Developing supportive policies to close the gaps between the 'have' and the 'have-nots'
- Ensuring parallel goals to increasing health such as the protection of environments, including the reduction in air pollution by the support of active transport
- Providing relevant and reliable information on physical activity and community-based activities
- Ensuring programs give people a sense of belonging and of being valued
- Promoting programs that support parents in their roles
- Developing programs that enable the majority to have input into decision making; and
- Ensuring cooperative programs and collaborative solutions, across and within existing groups and organisations are developed.

At an **individual level**, factors promoting participation can include:

- Getting involved in the life of their community
- Taking some reasonable steps towards a healthy lifestyle
- Helping someone else participate in the physical activity program
- Linking people with appropriate physical activity programs
- Volunteering to assist with the facilitation of the physical activity program; and
- Becoming informed.

Participation can be shaped into identifying the 'assets' or 'strengths' of a community to address the physical activity needs of a community.



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Developing a successful program

The following six simple steps enable the key physical activity/community development needs of a community to be identified and an appropriate physical activity program to be implemented.

1 Research your community

Collecting data

Collecting data enables required information to be sought about the community. The data collected will depend on the program's aim. There are several methods to undertake this process, including:

- Community-based surveys
- Community meetings
- Focus groups
- Content analysis (of local media, reports, local government documents etc.)
- Interviews
- Project evaluation reports; and
- Observation (of use of facilities such as parks, bike ways, public transport).

Some of the data required may already exist; other data will need to be collected. Existing health or epidemiological information relating to the community such as existing reports, local government surveys, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data or census reports may be available.

Finding out what already exists

It may be useful to conduct an audit of existing physical activity programs to prevent duplication of effort. The audit may also provide useful information on programs conducted in adjoining communities. While it is important to ensure the community participates in the development of their own program, the structures, resources and learnings of physical activity programs conducted in other communities, can be built upon for implementation in the targeted community. Refer to www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au for more information on existing programs.

2 Reporting the results back to the community

Feedback to the community is crucial. This will assist with maintaining trust and encouraging ongoing participation. People appreciate the feedback based on their consultation. It is also an important way of fostering further interest in the next step of planning the program.

3 Ensuring community buy in

For a physical activity program to promote community development, it is important that the community be offered the opportunity to direct any community-based strategy. One of the easiest ways to achieve this is to establish a committee that can direct the development of any strategies. Establishing partnerships with other organisations has been shown to be effective when running community-based physical activity programs. Some examples of people to include on a committee include:

- Local government
- State/Commonwealth Government agencies
- Schools
- Healthcare professionals
- Youth groups
- TAFE colleges and universities
- Urban planners
- Child care workers
- Business owners or managers
- Service clubs
- Police
- Local media.



4 Develop the program

The community would now work together to identify how a physical activity program can be introduced. Key considerations may include:

- Integrating the activities into existing services, facilities and programs. This can include using parks, school facilities, pools, halls and walking tracks. It may be useful to consider activities or events where your target group already gathers, e.g. new parents may regularly visit the GP or Health Centre, young people may congregate at shopping areas, older people may gather at craft groups.
- Ensuring target groups have been identified and can tailor activities to suit their needs.

Other considerations include:

- OH&S/Safety – is the site suitable and are there procedures in place in the event of injuries?
- Funding – how much will be needed and where can it be accessed?
- Sustainability – what will happen when required funding expires?
- Who is going to run the program?
- Where will it be held?
- When will it be held? Is there already a time when people get together that the activity can be integrated into?
- How long will it run?
- What should people wear?
- What other activities can occur alongside the program, e.g. social activities combined with walking groups, education sessions, training activities or social events such as movie nights, BBQs, book clubs?
- How will people get there – what transport options are available?
- Are there any permits needed from the local council?
- How will the program be promoted?
- How will the program be evaluated?
- Who will take the enquiries?
- What equipment do we need?

5 Implement the program

Be guided by the community. After conducting the activity the first few times, try to seek feedback from the participants about what they liked and what they would like changed. This can be an informal chat and will also help to bring the group together.

It is important that a timeline be developed to guide the program's implementation. This can also include points for regular evaluation, for example, after the first three months to ensure the program is continually meeting the needs of the community.

6 Evaluation

Evaluation will help to assess how the program is going. This need not be a complex process. The most important item to consider is the objective of the evaluation. Is it about the participant's satisfaction? Is it how to increase participation? Is it about people's level of wellbeing since the program began? Is it about the community relationships that have formed? Is it about people's general levels of fitness and other physical activities?

There are several methods for conducting evaluation. It is useful to use a similar process as in the initial stage, to permit comparison with the information originally obtained. Again, www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au has useful information on this topic.



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References

NSW Premier's Council for Active Living (2007). Why Active Living Statement: www.pcal.nsw.gov.au

Additional resources and reading

Community development, community capacity and social capital

Community Capacity Index Manual (Bush, Dower and Mutch, 2002): www.health.nsw.gov.au

Indicators to Help with Capacity Building in Health Promotion (NSW Health, 2000): www.health.nsw.gov.au

Community Action Planning and Information Resource (CAPIR) (Qld Health, 2002): www.health.qld.gov.au

Physical activity

Centre for Physical Activity and Health: www.cpah.health.usyd.edu.au

Healthy and Active Kids: www.health.nsw.gov.au

Healthy Kids website: www.healthykids.nsw.gov.au

National Physical Activity Guidelines for Australians: www.ausport.gov.au

NSW Sport and Recreation publications: www.dsr.nsw.gov.au or phone 13 13 02

NSW Premier's Council for Active Living: www.pcal.nsw.gov.au

World Health Organisation physical activity information: www.who.int/moveforhealth

Further information

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