



A coordinated response in advocating to local government gambling and alcohol policy to take a public health approach.

<p>Aim</p>	<p>To influence local government policy on health priority areas such as alcohol and gambling, and to advocate that these policies and subsequent action plans take a strong public health approach.</p>
<p>Rationale</p>	<p>Meaningful, specific and proactive local government policies that take a public health approach are crucial to the health and wellbeing of both individuals and the community. Local government can influence the conditions needed for good health, such as the natural, built and social environments in which people live, learn, work and play. Local Government play a crucial role in supporting the objectives of the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 by protecting, improving and promoting public health.</p> <p>The initial drafts of Wodonga Council’s policies on alcohol and gambling allowed the possibility of increasing the number of alcohol outlets and electronic gaming machines (EGMs) in Wodonga, potentially exacerbating issues related to addiction, family safety and community well-being.</p>
<p>Partnerships</p>	<p>Gateway Health teams: Domestic and Family Violence, Alcohol and Drugs, Headspace, Gamblers Help and Health Promotion.</p> <p>External stakeholders: Vic Health, Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, Victorian Local Governance Association, Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), Alliance for Gambling Reform (AGR) and Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation.</p>
<p>Links to local policy / initiatives</p>	<p>Alignment with both Council Plans of <u>Wodonga Council</u> and <u>Wangaratta Council</u>, which incorporate their Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans.</p> <p>Alignment with the <u>Gateway Health Strategic Plan 2023-2029</u>.</p> <p>Alignment with the <u>National Alcohol Strategy 2019 – 2028</u>.</p> <p>Alignment with the <u>Wodonga Local Drug Action Team</u>.</p>

Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Influence council policy and decisions through submitting comprehensive, evidence-informed proposals to shape council policies and decisions.• Advocate for public health-oriented policies through promoting the adoption of new and revised policies that emphasize a public health approach and focus on harm minimisation.• Engage community and key stakeholders in the development of public policies.
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Policy titles were revised to emphasis harm prevention: For example, the "Wodonga Council Gambling Policy" was renamed to "Wodonga Council Gambling Harm Prevention Policy," and the "Wangaratta Council Gambling Policy" became the "Wangaratta Council Policy to Reduce Gambling Harm."• Shift in policy intent to a public health approach: The overall intent of the policies were redefined to reflect a public health perspective. For instance, the initial Wodonga Council draft gambling policy included a goal of "maximizing opportunities for gambling to deliver social and economic benefits." This aim was removed and the intent was shifted to protecting the community from gambling harm and highlighting the financial losses associated with EGMs, as opposed to financial gains.• Improved language and tone emphasising community wellbeing: The language used in the policies was refined to reframe gambling-related harm, focusing on it as a broader public health issue rather than an individual responsibility.• Enhanced contextual clarity and evidence-informed background: The policies now include more contextual clarity and are supported by evidence-informed background information.• Clear implementation plans with deliverables: Implementation plans were developed with clear, actionable deliverables and time frames.• Stronger regulations in council planning schemes: Stronger regulations on alcohol and gambling establishments were incorporated into the respective Council Planning Schemes.• Policy shift on ratepayer funding: Policies were revised to prevent ratepayer funding for projects or events involving alcohol or held at venues with EGMs.• Long-term commitment to gambling harm mitigation: Wangaratta Council signed up as a member organisation of the Alliance for Gambling Reform, ensuring long-term sustainability and support for ongoing efforts to mitigate gambling-related harm.

Further outcomes

- Strong partnership with the Alliance for Gambling Reform: This collaboration has resulted in their spokesperson, Rev Tim Costello, being scheduled as a panelist for the Wodonga Community Advocacy Panel in August 2024.
- Enhanced relationship with VicHealth: This strengthened partnership has led to a health promotion staff member being invited to join the state-level working group to re-establish the "Leading the Way" Healthy Communities resources for Local Government, in partnership with the Municipal Association of Victoria.
- Advisory role for other councils and community health organisations: The Health Promotion team provided guidance to other councils and community health organisations within the Gateway Health catchment area in developing their alcohol and gambling policies.

The story

Gateway Health recognises that addressing the harm inflicted by gambling and alcohol on individuals and communities requires action at all levels of government. Local government plays a crucial role in planning and advocating for strong measures to reduce gambling and alcohol harm.

A number of factors contribute to gambling and alcohol harm at the population level, including:

- Individual psychological and behavioural factors: Stressful living circumstances and socioeconomic conditions.
- Environmental factors: The availability and proximity of gambling and alcohol opportunities.
- Technological factors: The ease of availability to online access to gambling and alcohol.
- Socio economic circumstances: Lower socio-economic areas have a disproportionately higher number of alcohol outlets and gambling venues.
- Recreational and entertainment options: The lack of alternative activities to gambling and alcohol in many areas.
- Regulatory environment: The governing frameworks for gambling and alcohol at all levels of government can either enhance or mitigate the harms associated with gambling and alcohol.

Gambling and alcohol harm often, but not always, correlate with or cause, poor mental health, family violence and substance abuse. This harm can also occur in isolation.

To effectively prevent and reduce gambling and alcohol harm, approaches must acknowledge this complexity and address these factors through multi-faceted interventions.

In late 2023, Wodonga Council released draft alcohol and gambling policies open for public feedback. These draft policies appeared to give equal importance to both enhancing the economic and social benefits of gambling and alcohol, and managing the harm caused by these activities.

- Maximise opportunities for both gambling and non-gambling activities to bring overall benefits to the Wodonga community. This includes facilitating a diverse range of activities that cater to the interests and preferences of community members, while also considering the potential social and economic advantages associated with both types of activities.

Excerpt from Wodonga Council draft gambling policy.

Seeing an opportunity to improve these documents, the Health Promotion Team coordinated a comprehensive Gateway Health response as part of the Wodonga Council's formal feedback process. Detailed input was gathered from various internal teams at Gateway Health, including Family and Domestic Violence, Alcohol and Drugs, Headspace, Gamblers Help and Health Promotion.

External key stakeholders were also consulted to inform the Gateway Health submission. They included VicHealth, the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, the Victorian Local Governance Association, the Municipal Association of Victoria, the Alliance for Gambling Reform and the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation. The Health Promotion Team also supported a number of these key stakeholders in submitting their own feedback.

The Gateway Health submission referenced the directives of Wodonga Council Plans, priorities and strategies. The submission also included best practice interventions, current research and practical applications of Gateway Health's suggested alterations, such as specific planning scheme amendments. This comprehensive approach resulted in a very thorough, rigorous and actionable submission.

To amplify the community voice, the Health Promotion Team encouraged and supported a number of local community members to submit their personal and family experiences of alcohol and gambling harm.

This coordinated response ensured that factors such as policy links, examples from other similarly sized councils, budget considerations, community voice and practical actions were comprehensively addressed.

The draft alcohol and gambling policies were presented to Wodonga Council at the December 2023 meeting for final determination. Based on the Gateway Health submission and community feedback, the draft documents presented for endorsement were significantly refined and were unanimously accepted.

Shortly after Wodonga Council endorsed their Gambling Harm Prevention Policy, Wangaratta Council released their draft gambling policy for public feedback. In a relatively short turnaround time, and based on Gateway Health's previous work, Gateway Health was able to provide a detailed submission to Wangaratta Council. Wangaratta Council invited Gateway Health to speak to their submission at a Councillor briefing in February 2024.

This presentation gave Gateway Health an opportunity to discuss key recommendations in the submission and answer any question from Councillors.

The main discussion points at this presentation included:

- Decreasing community harm from gambling: Emphasis on minimizing gambling-related harm rather than focusing on potential community gains. Preference for the 'no detriment test' over the 'net community benefit test'.
- Broad impact of gambling: Challenging the misconception that gambling only affects vulnerable individuals; it is a widespread community issue.
- Myth busting economic and social gains: Debunking the perceived benefits of gambling, highlighting the substantial harms instead.
- Articulating the costs of gambling harm: Explicitly detailing the financial impact on the community – the latest data shows that \$30,000 (1) is lost every day to gambling in the Wangaratta LGA. This statistic was not clearly articulated in the draft policy.
- Return on investment (ROI) considerations: Consideration of the ROI for joining the Alliance for Gambling Reform in a context of fiscal constraints due to rate capping. Challenging the concept, pushed by the gambling industry, that community benefit from gambling. In reality, benefits of gambling accrue to corporations, their shareholders and governments (often without redress for affected communities). In addition, gambling diverts expenditure from local small business who cannot compete with the heavily subsidised food and drink options at gambling venues.

Similarly to the process at Wodonga Council, the final gambling policy presented to Wangaratta Councillors had been significantly refined based on the Gateway Health and community submissions. The Wangaratta Council Policy to Reduce Gambling Harm was then unanimously accepted at the March 2024 council meeting.

1 -LGA EGM statistics - <https://www.vgccc.vic.gov.au/resources/information-and-data/expenditure-data>

What difference did we make?

Revised drafts of all three policy documents were significantly improved and unanimously accepted by both Wodonga and Wangaratta Councils. Therefore it is hoped that these revised policies will translate into reduced harm associated with gambling and alcohol.

An unintended but highly beneficial outcome emerged from the collaboration with VicHealth to inform the submissions. During this process, the Health Promotion Team connected with the VicHealth Lead Policy Advisor. As a result, a member of the Gateway Health Health Promotion Team now sits on VicHealth's state working group for redesigning the "Leading the Way" Healthy Communities resource package. This is a key project, specifically targeted at Councillors, that aims at enhancing local government's understanding of how social, economic and environmental factors impact community health and wellbeing.

One of the goals of this working group is to integrate some of this resource into the newly mandated training for Councillors set to begin in early 2025.

Evaluation & lesson learnt

Interestingly, upon reviewing the submissions Wodonga Council received, it was evident that all were from organisations and individuals Gateway Health had encouraged and supported to provide feedback. If no feedback had been received, it is highly likely that both draft policies would have been accepted by council in their original form.

This example proves just how vital it is for Gateway Health to stay abreast of which policy items are set to be reviewed at councils within our catchment zone. By doing so, we can ensure that both the community voice and our expertise are considered when councils are creating public policy.

At the Wodonga Council meeting where the policies were endorsed, Councillors emphasized that the Gateway Health submission and expertise were crucial in achieving meaningful changes to both documents.

This successful advocacy process has also helped other managers within Gateway Health better understand the importance of health promotion and the crucial role Gateway Health can play as a strong advocate.

Having a single coordinator for the feedback submission process was critical. The process involved a great deal of coordination to secure high-quality input from various Gateway Health teams, noting that many of the staff providing feedback were managing full client caseloads.

The submission process to Wangaratta Council was smoother, largely because the Health Promotion Team had completed the majority of the research work beforehand.

The success of this particular advocacy process was specifically helped by the fact that one member of the Health Promotion team had worked as a Councillor and council officer, thus has extensive knowledge and expertise relating to councils' regulatory functions and council decision making processes.

This advocacy process referenced the 'Leading the Way' Healthy Communities resource which informed the successful submissions. The invitation to be on the state working group to rewrite this resource, means the Health Promotion Team will have direct input into the revised version.

Recommendations & next steps

- Continue to engage with councils on the implementation of new and revised policies, to advocate that a public health approach is understood and can be taken.
- Leverage this success to influence similar policies in the Hume region through both the Hume Region Health Promotion Network and the Hume Advocacy Community of Practice.
- Continue to collaborate with VicHealth to integrate health promotion training into mandated Councillor training programs.
- Due to the extensive work required to put together a comprehensive submission, Gateway Health needs to consider the most effective way to support staff to coordinate these advocacy processes.

Conclusion

The advocacy efforts of Gateway Health, in particular the Health Promotion Team, have led to significant policy changes in both Wodonga and Wangaratta Councils. This highlights the importance of comprehensive community feedback and strategic engagement with local councils. Moving forward, Gateway Health aims to leverage this success to influence broader regional policies and advocate for the integration of health promotion principles into local government policy.