



# Public health planning and environmental health

## Introductory fact sheet

The air we breathe, the water we drink, and the food we eat are all part of our environment and can have a direct impact on our health. As we live, work, and play in our environment we may be exposed to microbiological (viruses, bacteria, parasites), chemicals, radiation and physical hazards. Sometimes our interaction with the environment may be harmful to our health.

If our surrounding environment is unhealthy, then our health can also suffer. Different exposures may be linked to disease (including cancer), injury, disability, physical health conditions and premature death. An individual's susceptibility to disease and illness can differ from one person to another based on their age, sex, intensity and duration of exposure, and overall health.

The World Health Organization estimates that as much as 24% of global deaths are attributed to environmental health risks which are largely preventable<sup>1</sup>.

Common environmental health risks managed by local governments include, but are not limited to:

- food safety (food retailers, hospitals and aged care, childcare facilities, primary producers, consumers)
- water safety (aquatic facilities, recreational waterways, drinking water, cooling towers)
- onsite wastewater and recycled water
- air, land, water contamination
- asbestos and other hazards (chemicals, pesticides)
- event safety
- vector borne disease control
- public buildings and safe housing (mould, overcrowding)
- natural disasters (bushfires, floods and cyclones)

As the WA population rapidly grows, we have seen an expansion of environmental health risks that need to be managed:

- residential developments are encroaching upon agricultural, industrial, mining and environmental areas, introducing new hazards or exposures to people moving to the area
- urban infill poses risks and challenges with heightened population density
- emergence of new technologies and diverse business activities brings forth novel risks to the community
- exotic vectors and diseases are entering through Australian borders
- rising trends in new food products and manufacturing techniques, with WA receiving large volumes of imported food products from across the globe

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. [Preventing Non-communicable Disease By Reducing Environmental Risks Factors](#), Geneva, 2017.

- climate change is escalating, amplifying the frequency and intensity of hazards such as bushfires, cyclones, floods and heatwaves.

It is essential that state and local governments continue to invest in and manage environmental health services which play a critical role in preventative health. This includes the:

- enforcement of regulations and guidelines
- management of surveillance, monitoring and assessment programs and
- public education, health promotion and health advocacy which are designed to provide clean air, safe food and water, and a hazard free environment.

## Policy context

To support local government in developing their local public health plans, a series of environmental health factsheets have been developed to illustrate potential strategies that local governments may incorporate into their plans. These strategies are intended to address environmental health risks identified during the health profiling stage.

Environmental health is a key priority of the State Public Health Plan, intersecting between each of the main objectives: Promote | Prevent | Protect | Enable | Aboriginal health and wellbeing | Equity and inclusion.

Local governments can implement strategies that can directly enhance environmental health outcomes across each of the State Public Health Plan's objectives.

## Environmental health workforce

Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) are recognised as leaders in maintaining environmental public health standards within local government. It is essential for the environmental health workforce to be involved in the public health planning process.

Local governments across Australia are required by legislation to employ EHOs who have the appropriate qualifications and skills to be authorised to enforce environmental health legislation on behalf of the local government. EHOs also undertake a range of other education, surveillance, monitoring, health promotion, risk assessment and advocacy work on behalf of local government.

There is currently a critical shortage of EHOs in WA. 56% of local governments are experiencing recruitment difficulties, more than any other occupation<sup>2</sup>. This poses a risk to the management of environmental health risks and the preventative health function of local governments.

Integrating environmental health workforce strategies into public health planning is essential to ensure local governments are equipped to meet current and future public health challenges. A strong and sustainable environmental health workforce contributes directly to disease prevention, community wellbeing, and the protection of human health.

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<sup>2</sup> [2023 Local Government Workforce Shortage Survey in Western Australia](#), Local Government Professionals, Western Australia, 2023.

The [Chief Health Officer](#) issues guidelines on the skills and qualifications that must be considered for the appointment as an Environmental Health Officer in WA under the *Public Health Act 2016* and *Food Act 2008*<sup>i</sup>.

The WA Department of Health, through the Environmental Health Directorate, has a long-standing partnership with the environmental health services within local government as co-regulators under environmental health legislation. This close partnership has ensured that local governments' employ persons with the necessary skills and qualifications to enforce public health legislation within a local government district.

## Environmental health functions of local government

### Statutory functions

Local governments, through their EHOs, are authorised powers under a suite of environmental health related legislation designed to protect public health. These include:

- Public Health Act 2016 / Health (Miscellaneous) Provisions 1911 and its subsidiary [environmental health regulations](#)
- Food Act 2008 and Food Regulation 2009
- Environmental Protection Act 1986
- Local Government Act 1995
- Emergency Management Act 2005

These laws govern various medium to high environmental health risk activities common to WA and are applicable to both businesses and individuals engaged in specific risk activities.

When managing environmental health risks, law enforcement is generally considered a last resort because the primary aim is to achieve compliance through education, awareness and collaboration rather than disciplinary action.

A graduated enforcement approach, starting with education and advisory measures are more readily used to help individuals and businesses understand their responsibilities and the importance of protecting public health. Resorting to legal action is reserved for situations where there is repeated non-compliance or a serious risk to public health, thus ensuring enforcement is proportionate and fair while maintaining a focus on prevention and positive behavioural change.

### Education, surveillance, risk assessment, health promotion and advisory functions

Education, surveillance, risk assessment, health promotion and advisory functions form a substantial component of the work undertaken by EHOs. EHOs regularly engage with the community, businesses and other stakeholders to provide guidance on best practice for safeguarding individual and public health. By prioritising education over punitive measures, individuals and organisations are empowered to proactively address health risks.

Common non-statutory functions include:

- provision of policy advice for land use planning and development to minimise future or costly health impacts
- managing programs and services such as the Fight the Bite and Play it Food Safe campaigns and food safety training for food businesses

- participating in monitoring and surveillance activities such as mosquito trapping and surveillance, and water and food sampling programs
- health promotion and risk communication activities for various health hazards common to a community
- environmental disease investigations such as Legionnaires' disease
- incident management such as responding to food poisoning outbreaks, sewage overflows and harmful algal blooms
- risk assessments of various health risks that may arise within a community
- advocating for the adoption of policies, plans, and laws that benefit environmental health improvements
- environmental health emergency and disaster preparedness and response (including climate change)
- partnership establishment to address complex environmental health challenges

## Environmental health strategies

There are numerous projects, programs and initiatives that local governments can incorporate into their public health plans that support improved environmental health outcomes. The suite of environmental health factsheets provides examples of potential strategies to consider.

| Public health planning and environmental health factsheet series                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
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| <p>These factsheets are intended to be read as a complete package and not considered in isolation. The factsheet series comprises:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Access to safe food and water</li><li>• Emergency management and environmental health</li><li>• Environmental health planning and development</li><li>• Environmental health workforce</li><li>• Promoting safe community events</li><li>• Reduce harm from environmental health hazards</li></ul> |

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