



Towards Zero Growth

Healthy Weight Action Plan





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Minister's foreword



The Australian Capital Territory prides itself on being the healthiest place in Australia, with longer life expectancy, lower rates of major illness and more active and healthy lifestyles than other jurisdictions. Nevertheless, like many wealthy urban populations around the world, our collective health is threatened by dramatic increases in overweight and obesity.

The proportion of children in the ACT who are overweight or obese is 25%. For adults it has risen to 63.6%, from just 22.9% in 1995. As a result, a growing number of people are at risk of premature cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, arthritis and a host of other conditions which can cost years of healthy life. On top of the individual costs, the growth in obesity also puts added pressure on the health system as it responds to higher rates of major, preventable illness.

Despite these stark facts, Australia has so far failed to stem the growth in obesity and its associated risks. What has become progressively clearer is that obesity is far more than a traditional 'health' issue. Its causes, and therefore its solutions, reach into our urban environments, transport systems, regulatory frameworks, schools, workplaces and homes. There are also strong connections between better physical health and other government priorities such as school performance, workplace productivity, public transport use and less pollution and road congestion.

The ACT Government has set a target of 'zero growth' for obesity in the ACT and the Healthy Weight Action Plan will guide our policies toward this goal. The plan has been developed by a taskforce drawn from across government and sets out a range of actions under

six themes. The ACT Medicare Local, University of Canberra, the National Heart Foundation of Australia and a number of non-government organisations made valuable contributions to the taskforce and I would like to thank each of them for working with us through this process.

The action plan establishes local action to build on the work of the National Partnership Agreement on Preventive Health, the work of clinicians and non-government bodies, and on the many ACT programs already in place under our Healthy Weight Initiative. It will take the healthy weight agenda beyond the Health portfolio and improve coordination across government. Our goal is to use all arms of government to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

The success of the Healthy Weight Initiative will depend on it connecting with the right people in our community and delivering the behavioural change that's needed. It will not lessen individual responsibility for good health or dilute the core message that a balanced diet and regular physical activity are the key ingredients to healthy weight. Its goal is to provide the environment, knowledge and incentives to permanently improve the health of ACT residents. In time we want to do much better than 'zero growth' – we need to turn the clock back on our obesity statistics.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katy Gallagher". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Katy Gallagher MLA
Chief Minister
Minister for Health

Call for action

The picture of overweight and obesity in the ACT

The rising level of overweight and obesity among the population represents one of Australia's biggest public health challenges. While rates in the ACT are slightly below the national average, almost two-thirds (63.6%) of ACT adults are overweight, while one in four is obese¹. Rates of overweight and obesity in the ACT community have increased dramatically over the past 20 years. In 1995 just below a quarter (22.9%) of ACT adults were overweight and 7.2% were obese².

The ACT has also seen an increase in rates of overweight and obesity among younger children. One in four year six children in the ACT are overweight or obese³. In 2010, 15.7% of kindergarten children in the ACT were measured as overweight or obese, increasing from 14.6% in 2009 and 12.8% in 2008⁴. While rates of overweight and obesity in children have not increased as rapidly as in adults, this figure is too high to prevent exposing large numbers of children to the risk of developing serious disease and chronic health conditions in adulthood.

Why this is an issue?

Poor diet, physical inactivity, overweight and obesity all significantly contribute to the growing chronic disease burden. Carrying excess weight places individuals at risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, musculoskeletal conditions and some cancers⁵.

It is well established that obesity is associated with early death. Research estimating the impact of obesity on life expectancy found a loss of between two and ten years, similar to the life expectancy loss from smoking⁶.

Generally speaking, the more body fat a person carries, the higher the health risk. People who are obese are twice to three times more likely to suffer from cardiovascular diseases, such as heart attacks or strokes, and seven times more likely to suffer from diabetes than people with a healthy weight⁷.

Chronic conditions currently account for approximately 80% of the burden of disease and injury in the ACT⁸. Increasing levels of overweight and obesity in the ACT negatively affect people's quality of life and place significant pressure on our health system. While the government is looking at ways to quantify the additional pressure on the ACT health system, trends from other jurisdictions give a good indication.

A recent study in South Australia found that the percentage of public hospital costs directly attributable to overweight and obesity was projected to increase from 4.6% in 2007-08 to 5.6% in 2032-33. This amounts to a 2.24 fold increase, or \$165 million, in expenditure attributable to overweight and obesity over a 25 year period. Taking the national view, the direct and indirect costs of obesity and obesity-related illnesses in 2008/09 were estimated to be \$37.7 billion⁹. In this case, direct costs were counted as medical costs associated with treating obesity, while indirect costs included the impact of people being absent from work and being less productive in the workplace when compared with people who are neither overweight or obese. Absenteeism due to illness was found to be 14% higher in obese employees when compared to employees of a healthy weight in the working population¹⁰. This results in an impact on the economy through productivity losses.

Based on the available evidence, it is very likely that the impact of overweight and obesity on quality of life, primary health care and the ACT economy are growing. The ACT community cannot afford inaction.

What is behind the rise in overweight and obesity?

The fundamental cause of overweight and obesity is an energy imbalance between energy consumed and energy expended. Our modern, sedentary lifestyles have resulted in lower rates of physical activity and higher intake of high energy foods, which together significantly increase the likelihood of people becoming overweight or obese.

While some of these changes are a result of individual choice, our daily environments have undergone changes over the last couple of decades so that energy-dense foods are easily available and physical activity has become less common in our daily lives. Many people have sedentary jobs, most homes have one or two cars and their use is often more convenient than public transport and quicker than cycling or walking. In leisure time, televisions, computer screens and other electronic devices keep us sitting down. High fat and high sugar foods and drinks are easily accessible, widely promoted and affordable to most — often more so than non-processed, fresh food.

The availability and increase in consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks deserves special mention, as they contain 'empty kilojoules', meaning they contain lots of energy but have no nutritional value. There are sixteen teaspoons of sugar in a regular 600 millilitre bottle of soft drink and about nine teaspoons in a standard sports drink. The average volume of soft drink consumed each year in Australia increased from 47 litres per person in the 1970s to 113 litres per person in 2006¹¹. In the ACT, one in five children consume at least six cups of sugary drinks per week¹²

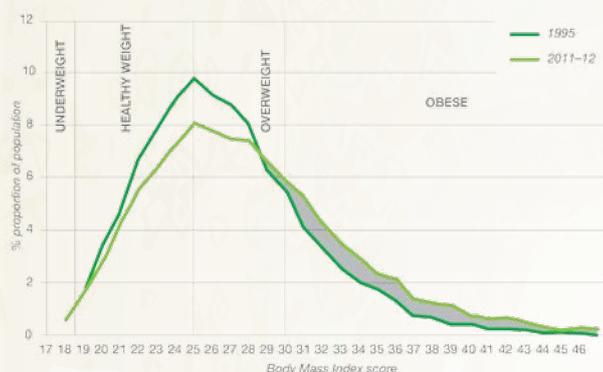


The case for prevention

Over the past two decades, a large proportion of the population has shifted from the healthy weight group to the overweight group, and even more from the overweight group to the obese group. This is shown in Figure 1, where the shaded area under the curve shows the increase in the proportion of the population that is obese. Intensive medical therapy, such as bariatric surgery, may sometimes be required for people with medical conditions or severe obesity but physical activity and a balanced diet are the fundamental requirements for a healthy body weight.

Figure 1: Body Mass Distribution, Persons 18 years and over across Australia, 1995 and 2011-12

FIGURE 2.1: BODY MASS INDEX DISTRIBUTION, PERSONS 18 YEARS AND OVER, 1995 AND 2011-12



Note: Shaded area depicts the increase in proportion of population that is obese
Source: ABS¹

Source: Australian National Preventive Health Agency (ANPHA). State of Preventive Health 2013. Report to the Australian Government Minister for Health. Canberra; ANPHA, 2013.

Even a small degree of weight loss can bring health benefits such as lowered cardiovascular risk. Multiplied across the ACT population, these small effects can have a large impact on the burden of disease in the community and the overall cost of providing health services.

Preventing illness from excess weight does require individual action and primary healthcare providers have a key role to play in assisting overweight and obese people to manage their health risks. However, to achieve change across the community, government can provide opportunities and incentives for physical activity or improved diet and make individual action easier.

The Healthy Weight Action Plan contains actions to reduce the availability of energy dense, nutrient poor (EDNP) foods, improve access to infrastructure for active recreation or transport, and reduce the promotion of unhealthy foods. These types of measures are a challenge for government and demand close consultation with business and community groups. Where they can be achieved, the payoffs are significant. Delivering in these areas is likely to create more cost-effective and far-reaching benefits than individual interventions, which is why they form the ACT Government's focus.





Why do we need action
beyond the health sector?

When people think of health, images of hospitals and community health centres often spring to mind. However, our health is shaped by the way we live our daily lives in our neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces. As a result, many of the factors that influence what we eat or how active we are – for example how accessible and attractive footpaths and cycle paths are, or the availability of healthy food in schools and the community – lie outside of the traditional reach of the health sector.

While individuals must make the daily choices around their health and wellbeing, governments can assist in supporting healthy decision-making by making healthier options more available and making the healthy choice the easy choice.

Through the Healthy Weight Initiative, action will be taken to improve opportunities to be physically active, promote healthy choices in the workplace, and improve the way products are advertised or presented in shops and our communities. Each ACT Government directorate is engaged in activities that will make healthier choices easier across Canberra. Some examples of actions include making public spaces more amenable for physical activity, improving the food environment in our community and workplaces, and enhancing the way that physical education is delivered in schools.





**Building on
Canberra's strengths**

**The Healthy Weight Initiative builds
on Canberra's strengths as a city
and a community.**

Environment

Canberra is proud to be a healthy, safe and inclusive city. Its unique environment creates many opportunities for people to be active in their daily lives. Canberra possesses well planned and extensive cycle and walking networks to enable people to ride or walk for transport. Opportunities for active recreation in Canberra are abundant, and include parks and reserves, sporting ovals, mountain biking and BMX tracks, swimming pools, tennis courts and basketball courts. Healthy, fresh, affordable food is readily available and within reach for the majority of people.

Health status

As a whole, the ACT community enjoys the benefits of good health and continues to have the highest life expectancy in the country. The 2012 Chief Health Officer's Report shows there have been continued decreases in smoking and long-term illicit drug taking, that ACT children are showing improvements in their physical activity levels, and childhood immunisation coverage rates have remained above the national target.

The ACT population is relatively affluent and well educated, and these socio-economic factors contribute to residents having good health compared to Australians generally. However many of us continue to live in a way that is not as healthy as it could be, with flow on effects for rates of chronic disease. Nine out of ten (90.1%) ACT adults do not eat sufficient vegetables, more than 40% do not eat enough fruit and 43% are not sufficiently active¹³.

Partnerships

The ACT Government has a strong network of partners in prevention who are all playing a part in combating rising levels of overweight and obesity. These range from professional bodies – including non-government organisations, the ACT Medicare Local and research partners at the ANU and University of Canberra – to amateur organisations, clubs, businesses, industries and individuals who are passionate about making Canberra a healthier, more active place to live.



The Healthy Weight Initiative will build on substantial obesity and overweight prevention efforts already underway in schools, preschools, sporting groups, workplaces and communities. A significant proportion of these are delivered under the National Partnership Agreement on Preventive Health.

The ACT Government recently revised the \$2.1 million 2014 Health Promotion Grants Program to focus on programs which reduce obesity. The shift in focus was in response to extensive community consultation which showed a high level of support for initiatives to improve physical health, particularly among children.

Current childhood focussed programs operating in schools, childcare services and sports clubs include:

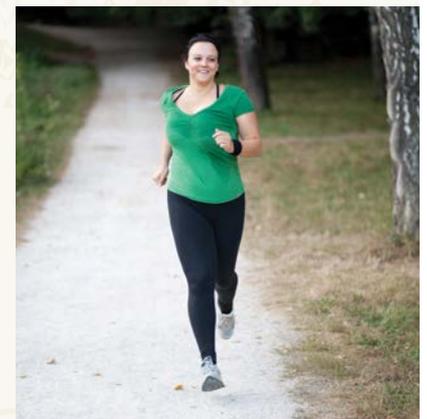
- Ride or Walk to School – encouraging active transport habits from a young age
- Kids at Play – encouraging fundamental movement skills and physical activity in the early childhood sector
- Healthy Food at Sport – increasing the availability of healthy food choices and promoting water as the drink of choice to children and young people through sports canteens
- It's Your Move ACT – working with high schools and researchers to encourage students aged between 12 and 17 to participate in physical activity and eat well.

Programs to promote and support healthy living in adults include:

- the 'Get Healthy Information and Coaching Service®' — a free, confidential telephone service to help support ACT adults in making changes related to healthy lifestyles and maintaining a healthy weight
- Healthier Work – a workplace service encouraging and supporting ACT workplaces to implement staff health and wellbeing programs
- Public sector health promotion – developing an ACT Government Workplace Health and Wellbeing Policy, a staff health and wellbeing policy in ACT Health and a healthy food and drink choices policy for staff, volunteers and visitors to ACT Health facilities
- the Healthy Communities initiative – a tailored program to reduce the prevalence of overweight and obesity among adults not in paid employment in the inner north of Canberra.

In addition to these activities the Healthy Weight Initiative builds on a strong foundation of policies and strategies in place to build a healthy city. *The Canberra Plan: Towards our Second Century* placed high importance on quality health care and the need to future proof our health system in order to meet future health care needs. *Transport for Canberra*, the foundation for transport planning for the next 20 years, includes a focus on increasing the number of people using active travel such as walking, cycling and public transport. The *ACT Planning Strategy* supports *Transport for Canberra* in making cycling, walking and public transport more attractive modes of travel.

Current activities



Action

Targets

The primary goal of the Healthy Weight Action Plan is to keep rates of overweight and obesity in the ACT to at or below their current level – the goal of ‘zero growth’. This priority stems from the National Partnership Agreement for Preventive Health targets agreed by all states and territories with the Commonwealth – a national goal to hold the increase in the percentage of children and adults with unhealthy weight to less than 5% above the baseline value¹⁴.

Because the ACT’s collective weight will take some time to change, the first key measure of success will be changes in the behaviours which drive obesity. If these changes are sustained, it is likely that weight loss will follow. School performance, workplace productivity and use of public transport infrastructure should also rise over time.

At the individual level, even small amounts of weight loss can reduce the risk of developing diseases associated with overweight and obesity. Even if people do not get to an ideal weight, losing five kilograms can bring immediate benefits. Over time, if the ACT can reduce the average weight of people by several kilograms, rates of cardiovascular mortality and other obesity related diseases will start to decline.

Focus areas

The ACT Government has identified six areas which target the many factors contributing to obesity and overweight, with a broad goal of increasing physical activity and improving nutrition both within the government and across the ACT.

These actions follow an extensive process carried out by a whole-of-government taskforce, setup to make sure all arms of government play a part in responding to this government priority. The taskforce included representatives from all ACT Government directorates and key non-government and academic organisations with expertise in obesity as a public health issue. As a result of this approach the actions have strong support throughout government and will be implemented across traditional agency boundaries.

The six themes are:

- food environment
- schools
- workplaces
- urban planning
- social inclusion
- evaluation.

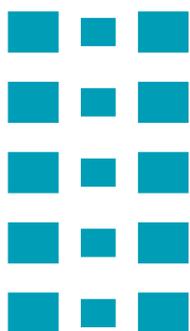
The themes will be led by implementation groups from different ACT Government directorates. These groups will examine implementation, including costs, necessary consultation and regulatory impacts, and report quarterly to the Chief Minister on progress.



Food environment

Lead agency: ACT Health

Food choices are shaped by the environment around us – our shops, workplaces, schools and through the media. Often this environment makes it too easy to choose unhealthy foods and can crowd out healthy food messages from other sources. Therefore the government is building on existing initiatives of health awareness and promotion and moving towards implementation of more substantial environmental measures.



Schools

Lead agency: Education and Training Directorate

Action in schools is a high priority because good nutritional and exercise habits, if learned early, can make a lasting contribution to good health throughout life. Research also shows that physically active children perform better in the classroom, which is an important flow-on benefit¹⁵.

Work is already underway in many schools to increase the number of children taking active modes of transport to school, support school canteens to provide healthy food choices and build physical activity into the school day.



Workplaces

Lead agency: Chief Minister and Treasury Directorate

Workplaces play an important role in shaping the lifestyles of adults, most of whom spend about half of their waking hours at work. The food which is available in the workplace, the availability of facilities that support physical activity and workplace culture all have a strong influence on people's food and exercise choices. Evidence shows that healthier workplaces enjoy the benefits of higher productivity, lower absenteeism and better staff morale¹⁶.

The government is working to lead by example and improve the health and active culture of government workplaces and facilities. The workplaces theme is also exploring new incentives, recognition and support for private sector workplaces to excel in this area.



Urban planning

Lead agency: Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate

There is growing recognition that the built environment influences levels of physical activity, whether for transport or recreation. Good urban planning can shape our neighbourhoods to encourage active recreation and the active travel options of walking, cycling and public transport. As Canberra undergoes future development and urban renewal, the government will work to embed active living principles in its transport and urban planning processes.



Social inclusion

Lead agency: Community Services Directorate

Although overweight and obesity affects 63.6% of the ACT population, obesity rates are highest in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage¹⁷. There is a need for educational and incentive-based initiatives to improve skills in buying and preparing healthy foods, and to build greater confidence among some in the community.

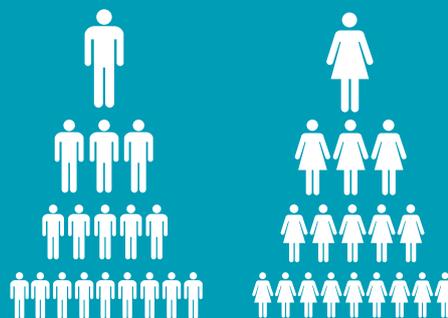
By targeting better nutrition and physical health as part of its broader social equity agenda, the government will build on the wide range of programs already in place to assist those experiencing disadvantage.



Evaluation

Lead agency: ACT Health

Accurate and timely information about the health of the ACT population, health risks and health services is crucial for planning and evaluating actions aimed at preventing overweight and obesity. Policy makers, planners, health practitioners and other community members can all benefit from information and evaluation tools which support better decision making at all levels. As information improves different public health stakeholders will increasingly see options for collaboration in future efforts to encourage active and healthy living.



List of actions

Table 1 contains actions which fall predominantly within the government’s regulatory control and can be implemented following appropriate consultation. Table 2 contains actions whose implementation will require higher levels of industry, community or inter-governmental consultation and may require a staged process of implementation.

Table 1 – Implementation to be guided by consultation

Action	Theme	Comments
Implement a Chief Minister’s Award scheme that rewards healthy workplaces and food outlets.	Workplaces	Award schemes have been shown to be an effective, affordable and affirmative strategy to inspire change at the individual and group level. There is scope to create a new scheme and/or build on existing awards such as the annual ACT Public Service Awards for Excellence.
Improve the availability of healthy food and drink choices and reduce unhealthy choices at ACT Government workplaces, facilities and government-funded events.	Workplaces	Government leadership in promoting healthy food and drink choices is important to effect change – to model the behaviour it is advocating. ACT Health is leading work in this area and its learnings will inform broader implementation.
Implement a program of health risk assessments for ACT Government staff and explore options for extending this to the private sector.	Workplaces	Providing a personalised health risk assessment increases individual knowledge of health risk factors and motivation to change behaviours. Implementation may include linking the assessments to a competition or exercise/nutrition program.
Create new incentives for ACT workers and/or workplaces to participate in physical activity or active travel.	Workplaces	Workplace incentives have been shown to complement other initiatives to encourage more physical activity as part of workplace culture. More detailed analysis for the ACT will explore the costs/benefits involved in its application.
Promote and prioritise active travel through the implementation of the <i>Transport for Canberra</i> plan and master planning processes.	Urban planning	Good public infrastructure supporting active travel is a key feature of the government’s approach to transport and master planning. Canberra already has one of the best walking and cycling path networks in Australia and this action will build on existing strengths.
Incorporate active living principles into the Territory Plan Codes and the Territory and Municipal Services Standards for public realm design and development works.	Urban planning	Given the links between the urban and built environments, the government will work to give greater legislative backing to active living principles in the ACT planning system.
Develop and implement an ACT Government school food and drink policy with supporting guidelines that will mandate the implementation of the National Healthy School Canteen Guidelines in all ACT schools.	Schools	It is widely accepted that schools can make a major contribution to improving the health and wellbeing of both students and staff. This action aims to build on existing policies to implement a mandatory, ACT-wide policy to increase the supply of healthy food in all schools.

Action	Theme	Comments
Improve the measurement, capacity to deliver and curriculum support for physical education in all ACT schools.	Schools	Continuous improvement in physical education in schools is not only a high priority because of direct benefits to childhood and adolescent health, it also has clear links with learning and academic performance.
Improve awareness, skills and capability across the ACT in buying and preparing healthy food.	Social inclusion	An education campaign to help people make healthier food choices can have lasting benefits for entire families. This action aims to build on past ACT initiatives which included the provision of nutritional information in supermarkets and education sessions for parents with low incomes and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
Restrict the advertising of unhealthy foods within the government's regulatory control.	Food environment	Australian experience suggests state or territory-based regulation of television advertising is problematic, however the ACT Government will examine its regulatory control across advertising mediums. There is a particular need to address marketing directed at children in close proximity to schools, playgrounds and child care centres.
Develop and maintain a web-based information resource for workplaces, primary care providers and the community about opportunities to improve physical activity and nutrition levels.	Evaluation	A trusted, consolidated information source for healthy lifestyle advice and relevant government, community and commercial activities would provide a valuable tool for individuals and health professionals. Success of the website will depend on it being relevant, up-to-date and easy to understand.
Collect and evaluate usage and demand data about walking and cycling infrastructure to guide actions that increase use.	Evaluation	A larger evidence base will improve the business case for future investments in walking and cycling infrastructure. It will also help identify priority areas and factors which support active travel.



Table 2 – Implementation to be guided by detailed regulatory impact analysis and consultation

Action	Theme	Comments
Improve the availability of free drinking water in public places and food outlets.	Food environment	Easy access to free drinking water can reduce consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and have a direct impact on obesity and overweight. The ACT Government is already increasing the number of public water fountains and will work with local businesses to further increase the availability of free water.
Create new incentives for targeted populations to increase the uptake of healthy food and/or active travel options.	Social inclusion	Targeted healthy choice incentives have shown strong results overseas, particularly with low income households where obesity rates are often higher. Leading Australian researchers have also recommended this approach. Implementation may include joint initiatives with local food markets, retailers or community groups who provide existing support services to low income groups.
Enact a mandatory code for supermarkets to require at least one checkout aisle be identified as free of energy dense, nutrient poor (EDNP) foods.	Food environment	Reducing the visibility of energy dense nutrient poor foods in checkout aisles reduces the likelihood of impulse buying at the point of sale. The same factors mean that greater visibility of healthy foods in checkout areas will encourage more purchases of these foods. The ACT will seek to work with retailers at the local level and will advocate nationally for broader implementation.
Regulate the sale of sugar-sweetened drinks.	Food environment	Given their high levels of sugar and 'empty kilojoules', combined with high rates of consumption, sugar-sweetened beverages are a major factor in obesity rates. Exploring options for regulation will include consultation with industry stakeholders and through national forums and campaigns.
Create car parking and other incentives which encourage active travel (walk/cycle/bus) and discourage private transport for entire journeys into town centres.	Urban planning	Where cheaper, long-stay parking is available in connection with convenient public transport or active travel options, there is significant scope to reduce car use, particularly for long journeys into town centres. This action also offers the flow-on benefits of reduced congestion in town centres and reduced carbon emissions.
Update requirements for new commercial buildings to contain facilities which encourage physical activity and improve access to these facilities for existing buildings.	Workplaces	Facilities that support physical activity include secure bicycle storage, showers, lockers, change rooms and gyms. Open stairwells with prompts for building users are also a simple motivator for raising the level of physical activity.
Improve the collection and assessment of biometric data in General Practice.	Evaluation	General Practice provides an ideal setting for stronger preventative health action on obesity and overweight. Improving data capture in General Practice offers new potential for identifying and evaluating healthy weight initiatives.

Implementation

The six implementation groups will examine options for implementation of all actions and report to the Chief Minister on a quarterly basis. Some actions can be implemented relatively quickly as part of usual government business. Others will require detailed development work such as a Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS), bid for budget resources or business and community consultation before final decisions can be taken and implementation can begin. This action plan is a living document and will be updated as the government considers new opportunities to further the healthy weight agenda.

A marathon, not a sprint

In contrast to the rapid increases over the past decade in the rates of obese and overweight people in the ACT, reversing the trend is likely to take much longer. It will be an incremental, sometimes contested policy process, but an achievable one.

A similar challenge has faced successive governments seeking to reduce smoking in Australia. Achievements at both the national and Territory levels in changing regulations and cultural norms around smoking provide encouragement that the challenges of overweight and obesity can be overcome.

To see a marked reduction in overweight and obesity across the population will require sustained changes to the way people live and a permanent cultural shift away from the unhealthy lifestyles that have become normal. It's for these reasons that the government acknowledges its own target of 'zero growth' is extremely ambitious.

Measuring success

The Healthy Weight Initiative includes measures to increase the ability of the ACT Government to collect information about the success of the actions proposed in the plan.

ACT Health will also work as part of the National Health and Medical Research Council Partnership Centre: Systems Perspective on Preventing Lifestyle-related Chronic Health Problems (the Prevention Partnership Centre) to conduct an overarching evaluation of the Healthy Weight Initiative. With funding in excess of \$20 million over five years, the Prevention Partnership Centre involves large scale collaboration between Australia's leading chronic disease researchers and policy makers. The experience and expertise of the Prevention Partnership Centre will be invaluable in evaluating the success of the Healthy Weight Initiative.

Finally, a successful reduction in average weight across the population will show in a reduction in the rate of people developing diseases associated with obesity. This would require weight loss to occur across the population, but even a small improvement in percentage terms would be a great gain for the collective wellbeing of the ACT, reducing the strain on health services and improving the quality of life for thousands in the community.

Endnotes

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