

How to set up a climate-health program in a PHN: the SNHN experience

November 2021

We have received a number of enquiries from primary care providers and PHNs about our Climate-Health program, and so have summarised our actions in this short guide.

About Sydney North Health Network (SNHN)

SNHN is the PHN for the Northern Sydney region. We serve a population of nearly 1 million people and cover nine local government areas. Our purpose is to improve health and medical services for our community, particularly for people at risk of poor health outcomes. Like many other PHNs, we work in close partnership with councils, community organisations, other health providers and our state health department colleagues.

Getting started on climate change and health

Our staff, partners and community were becoming increasingly concerned about climate risk, particularly after the Black Summer bushfire smoke of 2019/20 which exposed people in our region to hazardous levels of air pollution for months. Our community is also concerned about extreme heat, increasing frequency of storms and other climate-health impacts. Climate action is part of our core business to protect and promote health and address health inequities.

Developing our Climate & Health Strategy

Our Director of Commissioning led the formation of a small Climate Health Steering Group, which worked in partnership with the [AHHA](#) to develop our [Climate & Health Strategy](#) in 2020. The Strategy sought to apply a 'climate lens' to the five priority areas of our Strategic Framework: *Community Activation, System Transformation, Commissioning, Member & Provider Support and An exceptional organization*. The Strategy sets out the opportunities that the primary care sector has to use its leadership position in communities to raise awareness of, and act to reduce the impacts of climate on health.

Appointing a Climate Risk Lead

We created a new "Climate Risk Lead" position (initially 0.4FTE) and appointed a public health doctor with interest and experience in climate change and health. The same person is actually employed in a similar role at [Northern Sydney Local Health District](#) which is a useful partnership across primary and tertiary care, and we hope will facilitate several joint projects. We know that other PHNs are looking to employ general practitioners or other primary care providers in their regions in equivalent roles, either part-time or full time.

Engaging our stakeholders

Our Climate Risk Lead facilitated workshops with our Clinical & Community Councils, our staff and our stakeholders. At the Stakeholder Workshop more than 50 primary care providers, local government staff, community members, NSLHD colleagues and others participated. Our Climate Risk Lead presented about: climate change as a health issue, the PHN's responsibility and opportunity to act and relevant case studies about addressing climate-health risks. Then participants were divided into six discussion groups (each facilitated by a SNHN staff member) and their feedback and ideas were sought about projects, actions, and priorities for SNHN. Their responses are summarized in our [Stakeholder Report](#) – which sets out SNHN's commitments including priority actions for the next 6-12 months. Some of these actions have already been achieved, with our Climate & Health webpage and some resources launched in November 2021.

SNHN Climate Champions

Climate risk is interconnected with our existing PHN work in many areas, including mental health, social prescribing, commissioning, health inequities etc. Therefore our staff are seeking to integrate climate risk across the organization. We have formed a group of eight interested staff which represent most areas of our organization, who are tasked with embedding climate risk in their team's work (e.g. Health Pathways, GPs in Schools, commissioning, partnership with councils) and on briefly reporting back on their team's actions and ideas at our monthly all staff meetings.

Climate and Health Reference Group

Starting with the Stakeholder Workshop participants, we formed a group of ~50 interested primary care providers, council staff and community members. The purpose of this group will be to provide feedback on ideas and proposals, pilot resources and work on specific climate-health projects.