

LEAP: Localities Enhancing Arts Participation

Building social connection through the arts

There are so many reasons to encourage greater involvement in the arts, one of the most vital being that it's good for your health.

VicHealth recognises that for the individual participating, the benefits include the pleasure that comes from engaging in an activity with clear and creative results, an increased sense of belonging to a group in which new knowledge has been gained, or indeed a newfound sense of expression or voice gained through arts participation. Evidence indicates that participation in arts activity contributes to reduced crime, increased employment rates, and enhanced educational performance. (Baraket 2005, Mills and Brown 2004, White 2006). All of these issues become important when we begin to focus on improving the wellbeing of our local communities.

Whilst Victorian Population Health Surveys consistently identify low participation (65%) and attendance (48%) rates in local community groups and events, strong evidence exists which identifies the positive effects of an individual's social support and social networks on enhanced mental health outcomes. This link has been supported in studies with adolescents, adults and older people, as well as those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bond, Butler, Thomas et al 2007; Brugha, Weich, Singleton et al 2005; Caron, Latimer, Tousignant 2007; Fiori, Antonucci, Cortina 2006).

The role of the arts in contributing to building social networks and participation in cultural activities is also emerging with indications that the arts can be instrumental in helping people and communities overcome poverty and social exclusion. (Arts Council England, 2005, Berkman and Glass, 2000).



As more research into this area is undertaken, acknowledgement that the arts has an important impact on both community cohesion and the collective confidence and effectiveness of a community having its say is increasing. For this reason VicHealth is going local and has, after a highly competitive process, chosen three local governments to embark on a multi-year journey that will use arts and cultural activities to increase participation and decrease social isolation within their communities.

This ambitious and innovative program is called **Localities Enhancing Arts Participation**, or **LEAP** for short.

The **LEAP** initiative places three Victorian communities at the forefront of a complex arts and health promotion intervention which is aimed at increasing participation in arts-related programs and, ultimately, bringing individuals together as a community.

The participating councils will work with VicHealth and the School of Population Health at the University of Melbourne to design, record and evaluate, over a three year period, the benefits that participating in the arts have on health.

More information about LEAP: Localities Enhancing Arts Participation is available on the VicHealth website at: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/leap

The three project sites, **Casey, Ballarat and the Central Highlands** and **Mildura**, represent a cross-section of outer-suburban growth corridor, rural/regional and remote municipalities. **LEAP** is an evolution of VicHealth's arts engagement programs, and participation in this ground-breaking pilot program will build on current knowledge about the value to health of strengthening sustainable local networks, organisations and partnerships.

LEAP will engage individuals and communities who have not previously been involved in arts activities as the vehicle for achieving this very positive outcome.

City of Ballarat

with Ararat Rural City Council, Golden Plains, Hepburn, Moorabool and Pyrenees Shires

In order to ensure ongoing support to strengthen the sustainability of existing and future arts and cultural activities across the region, the participating Local Governments will establish a Central Highland Arts Network (CHAN).

Sustainability, in this context, includes promoting participation in the arts to communities and individuals who might not have previously participated, especially as a method for gaining the self-confidence to express their views in creative ways.

CHAN will incorporate modern technologies in mapping and promoting cultural activities across the region, and identifying target areas and populations across six shires for future engagement. Additionally, CHAN will establish a professional arts residency portal to maximise community participation and engagement in both creative activities and diverse cultural experiences.

By building new connections between the arts community and other sectors, such as education, sports community and workplaces, CHAN will be better able to encourage and support professional development opportunities for local artists. The positive benefit of this will be to uncover the creative pulse often left languishing or undiscovered – inspiring communities to take a chance, let their voices be heard and create a multi-faceted expression of regional culture.

City of Casey

As Victoria's most populous and fastest-growing municipality, the City of Casey is taking a long-term strategic focus to ensure that the service and infrastructure needs of the community are met. Casey's innovative program will utilise the proven methods behind the success of their award-winning Leisure Facilities & Development Plan to respond to arts and cultural needs within the area.

Each week, the municipality's population grows by a staggering 125 new residents. To ensure the smooth growth of this constantly expanding constituency, the Casey Arts Development and Facilities Plan will provide the models and strategies for initiatives that drive development in the arts. Initiatives that will be strategic, inclusive, promote participation and foster partnerships, and provide the skill-development opportunities that will see this municipality blossom.

In partnership with local and State organisations, Casey's connection with LEAP will see the delivery of a range of programs, services, facilities and events that will encourage residents of all ages, nationalities and locations to participate in artistic pursuits, leading to improved mental health and social connectedness within the municipality.

Mildura Rural City Council

Situated in Victoria's north-west, Mildura Rural City covers around 10% of the state's area. The region is renowned for its big skies, rich earth and welcoming locals.

It also – and proudly – has enjoyed a long-standing reputation as a significant centre for the arts. A reputation that Mildura aims to boost even further with the expansion of the target audience of its arts and cultural programs set to include and engage both individuals and groups who have not previously participated in existing programs.

By working across diverse sectors, such as employment and education, Council aims to promote the positive sides to arts participation and establish a strong and sustainable support base across the entire region.

In addition to complementing the redevelopment of the multi-million dollar, Federally-funded Mildura Arts Centre Complex, program activities as part of the LEAP initiative will extend arts and cultural activities into key regional settings. It is an exciting project and one that will use the arts as a vehicle for creating enthusiastic, supportive communities who have strengthened their own social connection through positive, interesting participation in the arts.

For more information contact VicHealth
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