

Building Healthy Communities Together – An Alignment Strategy

Collaboration between the County of Grey and
the Grey Bruce Health Unit

Prepared Fall 2016

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Introduction

Where we work, live, and play is vitally important to the quality of our lives. A “Healthy Community” provides all people with the ability to make choices that offers opportunities to: affordable housing, transportation, healthy and nutritious foods, recreation, education and employment, medical and social services, clean air and water and a safe environment within an inclusive and socially cohesive atmosphere.

Municipalities, in partnership with Public Health and other community stakeholders, can positively improve the health and well-being of residents by adopting a Health in All Policies approach. Health in All Policies focuses on developing a common vision while implementing a shared decision making model across sectors. It is about considering the health impacts of all policies, programs and services and working together towards positive community change. Through collaborative discussions across all sectors, key health issues can be identified and solutions developed.

The health of individuals and communities is significantly influenced by complex interactions between social and economic factors, the physical environment and individual behaviours and conditions. These factors are referred to as the determinants of health, and together play a key role in determining the health status of the population as a whole.

The determinants of health include:

• income and social status	• social support networks
• education and literacy	• employment/working conditions
• social environments	• physical environments
• personal health practices and coping skills	• healthy child development
• biology and genetic endowment	• health services
• gender	• culture

A few key health issues in Grey Bruce include:

- high rates of obesity and physical inactivity
- regular heavy drinking, substance misuse and tobacco use
- low levels of education, employment and income
- limited access to transportation, healthy foods and affordable housing

Background

Over the past several decades, there has been a gradual movement towards enhanced collaboration between the municipal and public health sectors. Driven by guiding documents such as the Ottawa Charter, the Ontario Public Health Standards and Ontario's Provincial Policy Statement both Public Health and the County are not only encouraged to address the social determinants of health but to align programs and services to ensure the best possible outcomes.

Membership on the Upper Tier Alignment Strategy includes front line staff, management and leaders from both organizations. This includes, but is not limited to, the County CAO, Director of Planning, Medical Officer of Health, Director of Operations, Population Health Manager and Health Promoter. The group has been meeting regularly since 2011 in an effort to strengthen:

- municipal and public health connections
- local programs and services
- community design and planning
- local, regional and provincial policy

Process


Meetings among alignment members typically occurs 3-4 times per year. Meeting locations rotate between organizations and chairing responsibilities are shared with one co-chair from each organization. Minutes are typically provided by administrative support or a designate from the host organization. Meeting materials are shared electronically while larger relevant documents are posted on an easily accessible and secure website (Grey Docs) for easy viewing. Work plans are developed annually with priorities outlined for the year. Generally, anywhere from 3-6 major projects are addressed within the 12 month period.

There are five key building blocks to Healthy Community Approach that the alignment aims to achieve:

- Community/citizen engagement;
- Multi-sectoral collaboration;
- Political commitment;
- Healthy public policy; and
- Asset-based community development

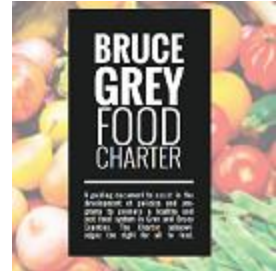
Outcomes

The following provides a snapshot of several projects undertaken collaboratively by the two organizations over the past several years.

1. Active Transportation (2011 – ongoing) Public Health has supported the development of the County’s Transportation Master Plan as a member of the Technical Advisory Steering Committee. Both parties also worked collaboratively to host a “Solutions for Active Transportation” workshop and to support the development of a local “Complete Streets” report. 
2. Land Use Planning (2011 – ongoing) County and Public Health staff have worked to promote World Town Planning Day by co-presenting to several local elementary and secondary schools. The Grey Bruce Health Unit provides comments on land use development proposals as circulated by the County where appropriate. Collaboratively, the two organizations organized and hosted a workshop profiling the “Healthy Rural Communities Toolkit.”
3. Baby Friendly Initiative (2016 - ongoing) Grey County has partnered with Public Health to ensure buildings are welcoming of breast feeding moms. Signage has been posted in several County buildings to indicate this support. 
4. Public Consultation (2014 – 2015) The Grey Bruce Health Unit led consultations through their “Community Conversations” project and findings were included in the strategic planning exercises for both organizations. The County has actively involved Public Health in public consultations for their Official Plan review, as well as ATV use on County roads.
5. Smoke Free Outdoor Spaces (2011 – 2014) With Public Health support, Grey County was an early adopter of a variety of smoke free legislation. These by-laws not only preceded the provincial requirements but also exceeded the setbacks required provincially. These bylaws protect the public from second hand smoke at venues such as parks, playgrounds and municipal entranceways. 

6. Bruce Grey Data Information Sharing Collaborative (BG DISC) (2015 – ongoing) BG DISC is a collective of organizations that seeks to share vital, rural community data to support the well-being of the community. The collaborative will increase access to local relevant data, build community partnerships and increase capacity for decision making.

7. Bruce Grey Food Charter (2014 – 2015) – The Bruce Grey Food Charter acknowledges the basic right to food. It envisions a food secure region that has a vibrant and sustainable food system. In the summer of 2015, Grey County endorsed the Bruce Grey Food Charter as part of their commitment to agriculture and food which are identified in both the County and Economic Development Strategic Plan as vital to the County's economic viability.



8. County Elected Officials Orientation (2014) Public Health has developed election materials to raise the awareness of local elected officials to the concept of Health in All Policies. These materials aim to better inform decisions makers of the role municipal government has in shaping the health of their community. These materials are distributed to all election candidates during their fall campaigns and are included in the orientation packages of those officials who successfully secure a seat on Council.

9. Grey County Economic Development Advisory Committee (2015 – ongoing) The Grey Bruce Health Unit has been invited, as one of seven members, to represent the broader economic interests of Grey County. The Health Unit will represent the “Healthy Communities” perspective on the Committee. The purpose of the group is to support the County’s goal of “expanding the prosperity base” and assist with the implementation of the “Made in Grey” Economic Development Strategy.



10. County Housing Initiatives (2011 – ongoing) Several joint projects have been initiated within County owned housing complexes. One initiative was to apply for Ministry funding to explore best practices in bed bug mitigation. This project was met with considerable success. In addition, the two parties have partnered to host smoking cessation workshops, hold falls prevention education sessions and offer a variety of services through the Alpha Street Family Resource Centre

Feedback Survey and Discussion

The Grey County and Grey Bruce Health Unit Alignment Survey was developed based on a developmental evaluation approach to capture significant outcomes and impact of work to date and gather feedback to highlight opportunities and support future directions.

Methods

The feedback survey, consisting of six open ended questions, was distributed electronically in November 2016 to current members of the Grey County and Grey Bruce Health Unit Alignment project. Along with the survey link, a draft version of the Grey County and Grey Bruce Health Unit Alignment Report was shared. A reminder was sent one week later to encourage responses.

Membership of the Grey County and Grey Bruce Health Unit Alignment group, as of Fall 2016, consists of six members of senior leadership, management and staff, with 4 representatives from public health and two representatives from Grey County.

Survey responses were reviewed and emerging themes for each question were identified. Preliminary themes from the initial three survey responses received were presented to the entire group at an in person meeting. Notes from discussion were incorporated into the findings and themes with a focus on opportunities for success. Next steps were then formulated.

Overall 4 out of 6 participants responded through the online survey and the remaining two participants provided responses and feedback through the in person group discussion.

Findings

What is working well and what has contributed to that success?	
Theme / Key Point	Description
Strong Joint Leadership	Multiple participants described the commitment and strong leadership from both organizations, including senior leadership, management and staff. One participant noted that when personnel changes the collaboration continues.
Commitment and Respect	Multiple participants described the commitment from both organizations and the mutual respect between the two organizations.
Common Agenda and Shared Vision	This was a common theme stemming from both the survey and discussion. Participants described common goals of both organizations that support the health and wellbeing of our residents and healthy communities. Having a terms of reference contributes to this.
Communication	Multiple participants commented on the open dialogue and ability of both organizations to keep each other up to date on various initiatives. One participant also noted that County Councilors who sit on the Board of Health are able to bring information back to County Council in a timely manner.
Key Project Areas / Focus	Multiple participants agreed that having key projects or areas of focus was working well. (Examples: Recolour Grey Official Plan Update, Grey County Transportation Master Plan, Complete Streets Project). One participant highlighted the practice of having goal and plan for each year.
Bringing evidence-based research forward	One participant commented on using evidence as a contributing factor to success.

Barriers to Success	
Theme / Key Point	Description
Resources and Time	Multiple participants articulated time and resource as a barrier to success. Participants suggested more dedicated time and resources would allow for cross – pollination and time to learn and understand structure and process of the other organization.
Limited dialogue between meetings.	Limited dialogue between meetings was identified by one participant as a barrier.
Rural Geography	Rural geography is an added cost to everything that we do and limits face to face opportunities.
Changing Policy Takes Time	Policy change takes time - we need to recognize and embrace this.
Changes in Leadership	Changes in leadership within both organizations have slowed progress slightly.

What has been the most significant change in achieving healthier communities?	
Theme / Key Point	Description
Moving Healthy Communities and Health in All Policies Forward	Multiple participants commented on discussions and changes in perspective related to Healthy Communities and Health in All Policies. Examples shared was the joint contributions to the Healthy Community Partnership and the Healthy Communities Conference.
Active Transportation and Built Environment	Initiatives related to areas such as walkability, active transportation, linkage to transit and mixed use development.
Smoke Free Outdoor Spaces Bylaw	The smoke free outdoor spaces bylaw was identified by multiple participants as a positive step in protecting the health of residents.
Substance Use	Raising awareness of risky alcohol consumption and support for people overcoming addiction.

Advice for others taking on this type of work.	
Theme / Key Point	Description
Build Relationships	It takes time, effort and skills to build relationships.
Bring Stakeholders Together	Create the space and opportunity for stakeholders to come the table and discuss issues and opportunities.
Look for Common Goals	Listen to what is important to others at the table and find synergy and ways to assist others in solving their own problems.
Commit Staff Time	Time at both the management and staff level helps to move policy work forward.
Consider Health in Decisions	Always apply a health in all policy lens or ask yourself, will this policy / project help achieve a healthier community?
This is important work. It requires time, effort and skills to build relationships and effective partnerships. You need to start now!	

Emerging Issues and Opportunities for Success	
Theme / Key Point	Description
Align areas of common vision and outcomes.	Develop a common agenda.
Develop a common language and use similar terminology.	Example: Healthy Communities
Identify key areas and projects that are likely to have the most impact.	Suggested examples include; a health in all polices approach that functions across organizations and departments and Healthy Communities initiatives, Official Plan reviews have been important opportunities in the past and will continue to be in the future.
Education for officials on Healthy Community and Health in All Policies concepts.	Share information with municipal leaders in plain language so that they can speak to it.
Designate staff time and resources.	Staff time and resources could be used to identify key projects and move health in all polices forward throughout the organizations.
Continue to Provide Rural Perspective on Policy Development	Grey Bruce can continue to be a leader in providing rural perspectives and examples of policy.
Collaborate When Possible	Between organizations, with other stakeholders and with academic institutions.
Seek Creative Solutions	We need to do things differently to still be able to provide great quality services in changing times.
Respond to the emerging shift in demographics	
Measure changes related to collective impact and policy.	Use efficient metrics and find a way to feed those back into the planning. Promising examples are Bruce Grey Data Information Sharing Collaborative and Community Foundation Vital Signs report.
Monitor issues that arise at the lower tier level and identify those that could be addressed county wide.	Use widespread communication of consistent messaging.

The themes identified through the feedback survey and group discussion identify some important principles in the process of working together to create healthy communities. The issues addressed by this work are often complex and require creative solutions that fit the rural context of our area. The themes and principles identified can continue to guide future directions and collaboration. The following recommendations for next steps are based on the feedback survey and subsequent discussion;

- 1) Form a smaller working group to further explore the details of how to do this work
- 2) Identify key focus and project areas with the most synergy and potential for impact
- 3) Designate staff representatives to act as liaisons and provide ongoing support

Recommendations

The Grey Bruce Health Unit and the County of Grey, in collaboration with partner municipalities, should consider the following recommendations to encourage and support healthy community development:

- Establish a knowledge transfer strategy to increase understanding of the built, natural and social environment among public health, municipal staff and municipal leaders
- Use the Healthy Rural Communities toolkit to highlight components of a healthy community and outline an evidence-informed approach to address these components across all sectors.
- Establish clear direction for decision makers, senior staff and front line workers to enhance collaborations that support healthy community development. Determine common agenda, shared vision and maintain Terms of Reference.
- Designation of specific leads from each organization to promote a relationship of mutual trust, clarify communication channels between organizations and ensure joint leadership.
- Ensure both Public Health staff and County staff have a comprehensive understanding of organizational structures, processes, strategies, language and linkages to best identify opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration.

Additional Resources

[Bruce Grey Food Charter](#)

Bruce Grey Data Information Sharing Collaborative

[Health in All Policies Municipal Election Documents](#)

[Community Conversation Highlights Report](#)

[Municipalities Influencing Health](#)

[Healthy Rural Communities Toolkit](#)