

## TITLE

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# Embedding systems thinking

## BACKGROUND

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Numerous calls for the use of systems thinking in public health continue, although ongoing organisational commitment and strong sustainable implementation of systems thinking is challenging in practice. East Gippsland ranks in some of the highest statistics in the state in regard to a range of public health problems and socio-economic indicators and there was a requirement to shift the prevention approach.

In 2016, organisational leaders at the EGPCP and across East Gippsland more broadly agreed to explore and implement a range of systems thinking approaches in response to local complex problems.

Over the past three years, EGPCP have led multiple organisations through the implementation of different collaborative systems thinking approaches in the areas of mental wellbeing, community-based approaches to prevent violence, obesity and drug and alcohol use, amongst others.

EGPCP have employed a range of strategies to embed the use of systems thinking across the region and ensure sustainable use of this approach.

## PARTNERS

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All partners working within East Gippsland contribute to this work, well beyond those who are partnership signatories. These include 30-40 agencies from the following sectors:

- community health
- child, youth and family services
- government departments (e.g. VicPol, Department of Education and Training)
- health promotion
- women's health
- Aboriginal health
- alcohol and other drugs
- mental wellbeing
- sport and recreation
- community

## METHOD

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The use of systems thinking was introduced and advanced by staff at EGPCP. EGPCP continue to provide leadership and guidance regarding implementation, trouble shooting and design, creating an environment that now blends outcomes thinking and systems thinking in a way that organisations can use in a practical way.

Strategies used by EGPCP to embed systems thinking across the East Gippsland region include:

- Hosting a local face-to-face system thinking community of practice – this is attended by organisations across Gippsland and into Melbourne
- Regular exposure and use of new language
- One on one capacity building with organisations
- Enabling identification of collective theories of change and localised measures of change that are meaningful for organisations to understand and use in a practical way
- A regional executive leadership group that encourages innovation and is open to organisational change.

## OUTCOMES

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A transformed workforce, that reaches far beyond prevention and clinical professionals. An environment where adaptation, safe critique, evolution and supportive relationships are the norm.

There has been a substantial shift in the way people work, think and talk about complex problems, including:

- Shifts from action based planning to outcome based planning
- Upskilling workforce in systems skills, tools and methods, resulting in increased number and diversity of systems thinking approaches
- Increased confidence engaging community in prevention design
- Proactive, interested leadership group who are enthusiastic to learn more and bring organisations along in the transition.

In response to a recent survey that asked ‘Has systems thinking changed the way you work?’, 83% (15 out of 18) of people indicated it had.

Partners have described how working in a systems way has changed their practice:

*I have a different view and consider how actions impact on other things, including unintended consequences. It also helps me consider where action can be more effective/efficient (e.g. greater impact with less effort)*

*I think more globally and try to consider how one change might affect other parts of the system or process, and what else might be affected by change. I am more consultative.*

*I understand that if we continue to do what we've always done we will continue to get what we've always got. I am considering issues from a broader perspective.*

*The work may not have changed but the way we conceptualise the work has altered - how we see the system is different. We have redefined the process of getting to the desired outcome.*

Examples of systems thinking in practice include:

- A collective approach to primary prevention in mental wellbeing and social inclusion for families and children.

- Prevention of childhood overweight and obesity across East Gippsland, with members of the community at the forefront of leading action.
- Prevention of family violence and violence against women - working with community to further build on prevention efforts (Save the Children) appropriate to the Omeo Region.
- With various networks including with PCP in the delivery of the East Gippsland Health and Wellbeing Plan.

Ultimately, both local organisations and the broader community have directly benefited from this approach. There is greater engagement from both community members and professionals, with an improved understanding of what each other can offer and a much boarder scope of what is possible. People are genuinely engaged in making change happen.