

Budget 2021/22 – More room to get Australia moving.

On Tuesday 11th May, the Australian Government released the 2021-22 budget. For a summary of the Budget content and its impact on public health and exercise and sport science industry can be found at our partner Exercise Sport Science Australia (ESSA)¹ as well as Public Health Association Australia (PHAA)²

This open letter outlines the position of Australasian Society for Physical Activity (ASPA) in response to the 2021-22 budget for Australia.

The ASPA welcomes the acknowledgement of Mental Health, Preventative Health, and Sport within the budget. Support for the ongoing investments should be commended, including to Sport Australia Sporting Schools program, the prioritisation of vulnerable communities and women, access to Mental Health treatment and support, major sporting events and the endorsement of ageing and aged care.

But we need to go further:

ASPA calls for the Government to commit to urgent prioritisation of a funded and comprehensive National Physical Activity Plan that goes beyond sport. Australia is falling behind comparable nations due to the absence of such a plan.

ASPA supports encouragement of physical activity throughout life, amongst all aspects of our society, where we live, work and play. This position is evidence-based and reinforces the positive and powerful role physical activity can have in transforming lives. Physically active communities are fitter, healthier, happier, more resilient, and more productive.

Greater investment is urgently needed in a system that supports Australians to be physically active for good health and economic benefits. Such investment would bring exceptional returns. Investment is required beyond sport and elite sport, including funding for infrastructure that supports walking, cycling, public parks and sport fields, supporting neighbourhood design that supports walking and cycling, public education campaigns, healthcare consults and school physical activity programmes.

Often overlooked, physical activity investment brings economic return for Australia. If we invested in building a more active Australia, the Australian global gross domestic product could be increased by AU\$576 billion³. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg forecast a deficit of \$106.6 billion in 2021-22 with future projections as high as \$57 billion in 2024-25. Physical activity can make an important contribution to reducing health care costs from preventable chronic diseases which dominate mortality, morbidity and health care costs in Australia - including coronary heart disease, diabetes, stroke, dementia, breast and colon cancer, and mental ill health.

¹ https://www.essa.org.au/Public/News_Room/Media_Releases/2021/ESSA_Summary_of_Australian_2021_2022_Budget.aspx

² <https://www.phaa.net.au/documents/item/5151>

³ Hafner M, Yerushalmi E, Stepanek M, Phillips W, Pollard J, Deshpande A, Whitmore M, Millard F, Subel S, Van Stolk C. Estimating the global economic benefits of physically active populations over 30 years (2020–2050). *British journal of sports medicine*. 2020 Dec 1;54(24):1482-7.

As Australia continues to navigate its path beyond COVID-19, it would be remiss to deny the posing threat that COVID-19 it continues to place on Australian freedoms. Recent global evidence reinforces the benefits of physical activity for reducing the severity of COVID-19., including a reduced risk of severe COVID-19 outcomes and reduced chance of hospitalisation and death.⁴

For the whole community physical activity plays an essential role in building inclusive, strong, and resilient people.

There is no doubt that Australia’s post COVID-19 world will benefit from Physical Activity and Sport due to the essential contribution to individual and community, health, wealth, and wellbeing. Whilst the ultimate impacts of COVID-19 continue to unfold, a lack of bold leadership in physical activity could accelerate the inactivity trajectory significantly affecting population health and wellbeing.

For all of the reasons outlined above ASPA calls for the Government to go further and commit to urgent prioritisation of a funded National Physical Activity Plan that goes beyond sport. Australia is falling behind comparable nations due to its absence of such a plan.

⁴ Sallis R, Young DR, Tartof SY, Sallis JF, Sall J, Li Q, Smith GN, Cohen DA. Physical inactivity is associated with a higher risk for severe COVID-19 outcomes: a study in 48 440 adult patients. British journal of sports medicine. 2021 Apr 8.