

PHA conference carbon neutral to the benefit of locals

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Public Health Association and Blueskin Resilient Communities Trust media release, 4 August 2015

Public health is everybody's business. That's the theme of this year's Public Health Association (PHA) conference, being held in Dunedin 7-9 September. The conference will focus on taking action together with civil society to address future public health challenges. But these are more than just abstract ideas. Climate change is recognised by the PHA conference as one of the greatest public health challenges facing us and the Association is walking the talk in reducing the climate impact of its annual conferences.

Conference organisers are committed to minimising greenhouse gas emissions for the conference, and this year have partnered with the Blueskin Resilient Communities Trust (BRCT) to work towards it being carbon neutral. Actions include minimising conference energy use and waste, choosing healthy low-carbon food and reducing vehicle travel.

Some of the simple, low-carbon options chosen also showcase Dunedin. Making the most of the city's easy accessibility to its iconic central buildings and walking tours of local street art are simple ways to give delegates an opportunity to de-stress and get to know their host city in an elegant, low-carbon way.

"We want to lead the way in low-carbon conferencing in Dunedin, demonstrating that it's both possible and fun providing delegates with a healthy and superb local experience," Says Dr Alex Macmillan, of the PHA conference organising committee.

"The partnership with BRCT will provide transparency and credibility in monitoring and analysis, while also developing local skills in carbon neutral planning and measurement."

The Dunedin-based Trust is well-known for its diverse, community-led action on climate change and is right behind the carbon neutral conference.

"The first thing has to be minimising carbon intensive activities and services while ensuring a great conference experience for delegates," says BRCT manager Scott Willis.

"We want conference delegates to enjoy themselves in our great small city, and tread lightly at the same time."

Despite all efforts, it's inevitable a national conference will create greenhouse gas emissions, especially in getting delegates to and from the event. The exact amount will only be known at the conclusion of the conference.

"What we can't reduce we will offset," says Dr Macmillan.

"While the conference committee will be taking responsibility for the carbon cost of the conference itself, we will be helping delegates learn about their own emissions by encouraging them to offset their travel through Forests for Health, a health professional offsetting programme."

In terms of the conference itself, organisers have made an innovative choice for carbon offsetting. Rather than distant tree-planting, they are investing in local energy education and home energy audits which will bring direct public health benefits to residents by improving housing quality and reducing fuel poverty.

BRCT's experience with home performance assessments (HPAs) lead organisers to anticipate a 35 percent reduction in household carbon footprint from each HPA, equating to an annual reduction of 2.8 tonnes per household. Changes in homeowner behaviour mean the annual carbon reduction will repeat for many years, far exceeding the conference carbon contribution.

“In this way, we not only benefit the environment, we also help build warm cosy home, and build intergenerational change,” says Scott Wills.

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