Definition
The following definition is based on international best practice, a substantive literature review by Monash University’s Department of Health Social Science, and consultation with the Victorian health sector and key stakeholders. It is aimed at creating a clear purpose and shared understanding around population health planning in Victoria.

Population health planning is integrated and collaborative cross-sectoral planning that aims to improve the health and wellbeing of whole populations, reduce inequities among and between specific population groups, and address the needs of the most disadvantaged. Effective population health planning requires community, inter-sectoral and whole-of-government engagement, collaboration and action to address the broad range of determinants that shape health and wellbeing.

This definition can be used for area, regional and subregional planning, or by individual agencies. It will continue to be developed as approaches to population health planning evolve.
Context

Despite significant advances in healthcare, rates of poor health and chronic disease continue to escalate alongside socioeconomic inequalities and disadvantage, often clustered in communities. To see real improvement in the health of populations, all levels of government, all sectors and industries, communities and individuals must work together.

Interest in population health planning has grown out of concerns over how to improve the health status of specific populations or sub-populations at a community level, rather than just addressing personal risk factors. For example, to focus on physical activity only for those in high-risk weight categories is less effective in achieving optimal health outcomes for whole populations than focusing on creating environments in cities and neighbourhoods that are conducive to physical activity for everyone.

The contemporary view of population health planning requires us to move beyond the concept of ‘the health of a population’ to also encompass multifaceted approaches that actively address the determinants of health. It requires shifting the focus of planning from single-agency service planning to integrated and inter-sectoral planning, through shared goals and actions to address population needs. At another level, population health planning seeks to reduce health inequities among and between specific population groups by recognising that individuals are exposed to different types of environmental, economic, cultural and social factors.

International Policy

Effective action to improve health outcomes requires an integrated policy approach. International approaches to sharing the responsibility for health across portfolios include the Zagreb Declaration for Healthy Cities and Health in All Policies, Prospects and Potentials. These strategies advocate for government agencies to work together across sectors to develop integrated solutions to current and future policy challenges. They set the scene for integrated population health planning based on the values of equity and justice, and health and social wellbeing.

The Public Health Agency of Canada is an international leader in population health planning. In 1994, the Canadian federal, provincial and territorial ministers of health officially endorsed a population health approach to planning. In addition, the World Health Organization has published seminal documents that review the key social, psychological and environmental factors that impact on health. The WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health final report states that:

“...determinants and conditions of daily life constitute the social determinants of health and are responsible for a major part of health inequities. The unequal distribution of health-damaging experiences is not in any sense a ‘natural’ phenomenon but is the result of a toxic combination of poor social policies and programmes, unfair economic arrangements, and bad politics.”

Local Perspective

Government policies, organisations and legislation inform population health planning in Australia. National health reform has introduced Medicare Locals and the National Health Performance Authority. The National Partnership on Preventive Health has resulted in the Prevention Community Model, in partnership with the Victorian Government and the Australian Preventive Health Agency.

The Victorian Health Priorities Framework 2012-2022 and the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2011-2015 both emphasise a collaborative approach targeting the social, political and economic determinants of health. The legislative requirement for Victorian local governments to produce health and wellbeing plans provides an important building block in population health planning.

VHA Population Health Planning Framework

A population health approach to planning is based on the vision, six core planning steps and six guiding principles represented in the diagram below. Specific approaches to population health planning will differ depending upon the partnerships developed and the communities and populations being targeted.
Vision
Population health planning aims to improve the health of the whole population while reducing social and health inequities in sub-population groups. Both approaches are needed, as a sole focus on whole of population interventions can increase health disparities.

Guiding Principles
1. Valuing equity
   Population health planning seeks to reduce health inequities by addressing unfair differences in health and social opportunities, access and outcomes.

2. Addressing social determinants
   Action on social determinants can improve health outcomes, prevent poor health and reduce avoidable differences in health status that exist between sub-population groups.

3. Building capacity
   The development of skills, structures, leadership and resources to support sustainable population health planning.

4. Building leadership
   Key leadership competencies must be identified and developed.

5. Working in partnership
   Population health planning relies on strong and sustainable cross-sectoral partnerships. It requires an understanding of the levels of partnership and mechanisms to support sustainable partnerships.

6. Working with community
   Community participation is essential to ensure that population health decisions and actions are appropriate.

Planning Steps
1. Create the leadership team
   The inter-sectoral and collaborative nature of population health planning requires organisations to create a leadership team. The team’s key task is to define a clear vision and scope for the population health planning process.

2. Analyse the planning context
   This sets the foundation for all future planning activities. The context is the pre-existing set of circumstances, constraints and opportunities that affect health planning processes.

3. Identify and prioritise the issues
   This involves selecting and collecting quantitative and qualitative data on health status and social determinants. This data is used to identify the issues and inequities that impact on the health of the community.

4. Identify and prioritise actions
   Evidence-informed actions, including upstream actions, are agreed at an area-based level to address issues identified in the previous step. The likely impact of these actions on health inequalities should be considered.

5. Take action
   Agreed actions should be included in stakeholders’ organisational plans to ensure they are effectively resourced and implemented.

6. Evaluate the outcomes
   A planned evaluation strategy is required to determine if:
   - desired health outcomes are being achieved
   - health inequities are being addressed
   - planning processes are effective
   Evaluation also contributes to the evidence base relating to population health planning.

Resources
The following resources are available on the VHA website at www.vha.org.au:
- VHA framework for population health planning
- resources toolbox outlining the planning steps and the guiding principles
- web-based learning module
- links to relevant resources
- glossary of terms

Acknowledgements
The VHA would like to thank the VHA Population Health Planning Steering Group and Working Group, which have comprised representatives from the Department of Health, Municipal Association of Victoria, General Practice Victoria, Rural Workforce Agency Victoria, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, local governments, primary care partnerships, and health and community services organisations. These groups have contributed generously to the VHA project.

References