Health Equity

Strategy 2019–2023

At a glance

Some people face greater barriers than others to enjoying a healthy life. That's why VicHealth has a focus on health equity throughout our work. It's about levelling the field between people who can more easily access the drivers of good health and those who face barriers to those drivers. We want to achieve the highest level of health for *everyone*.

VicHealth's health equity framework, Fair Foundations, recognises the underlying determinants that support or hinder good health, and identifies those determinants of health inequity that must be addressed so that all Victorians can experience good health and wellbeing.

Over the next four years, we will focus on applying Fair Foundations by:
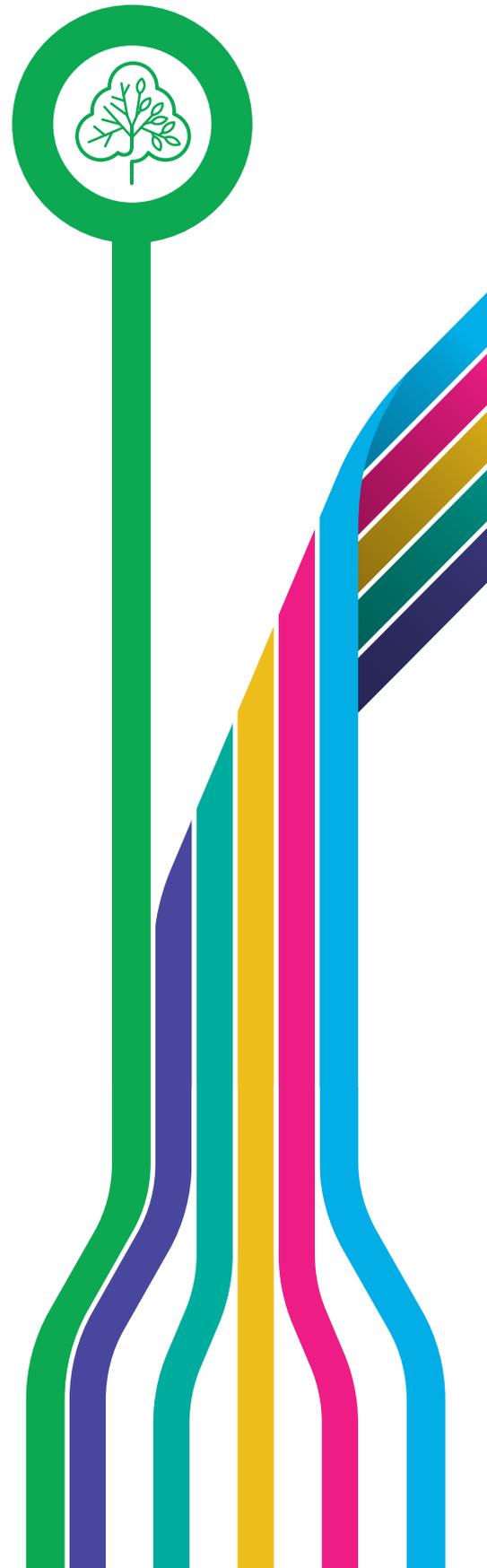
• putting equity at the heart of our work

• supporting action by the health promotion sector

• influencing the determinants of health inequity through partnerships.

In 2013, we released our Action Agenda for Health Promotion, which set our strategic direction for the 10 years to 2023. Health equity is one of three strategies that span all five of our strategic imperatives to improve the health of all Victorians.

In the first six years, we have:

• funded research to understand health inequities in Victoria, helping us design program and policy responses to address them

• focused on funding programs that target different population groups experiencing health inequity. This includes physical activity and arts programs that support social connection, enhance mental health and wellbeing, and increase skills and confidence to improve employment prospects.

More information about VicHealth's work on health equity from 2013 to 2019 can be found at Health Equity Strategy 2017–19 and VicHealth's framework for health equity.

What we aim to achieve

Putting equity at the heart of our work

To ensure that we prioritise and deliver on our commitment to health equity, we will embed it within the day-to-day work across our organisation.

To put equity into everything we do, VicHealth will:

- ensure health equity is considered at all levels of our organisational practice – from operations through to governance

- embed clear principles to address health inequity in our projects and programs, including giving priority to working directly with population groups who face the greatest barriers to health and wellbeing

- ensure that differential impacts are measured in all VicHealth's work – adjusting or realigning our approaches to achieve health equity whenever required

- monitor trends in the determinants of health across the broader population, and use this knowledge to inform our future work.

What will success look like?

Health equity is an integral part of VicHealth's work at every level.

FOCUS AREA

Supporting action by the health promotion sector

VicHealth will work with the health promotion sector to strengthen our collective capacity to address health inequities and to continue integrating health equity into practice across the sector.

To support greater action by the sector, VicHealth will:

- identify and address gaps in the health promotion sector in relation to health equity knowledge and application

- deliver forums and events and develop resources that share experiences and learnings from those within the sector who are working to address health inequities

- explore opportunities to support the dissemination of research and practical expertise in applied approaches to address health inequity

- promote opportunities for the health promotion sector to partner with researchers to trial applied solutions to address health inequity.

What will success look like?

A sector more knowledgeable about health equity and better prepared to trial solutions to reduce health inequities.

FOCUS AREA

Influencing the determinants of health inequity through partnerships

No single sector or organisation alone can address the broad range of social, economic and environmental determinants of health inequity – highlighting the need for partnerships of all kinds to bring about real change.

To influence the determinants of health inequity through partnerships, VicHealth will:

- draw on existing health promotion partnerships to advocate for policies that address the determinants of health inequities

- foster new partnerships outside the health promotion sector to advocate for policies that address the determinants of health inequity

- explore opportunities to collaborate across sectors to measure the health equity impact of policies that influence the determinants of health inequities.

What will success look like?

A range of strong partnerships in and beyond the health promotion sector that are working to influence the determinants of health inequities.

Supporting Evidence

VicHealth's long history of leading work in this area includes the development of the Fair Foundations Framework (the Framework), which draws on the World Health Organization's 2008 Commission on Social Determinants of Health (WHO 2008) for its conceptual framework. The Framework details the underlying drivers and determinants of health inequity:

- **socioeconomic, political and cultural context** – institutions, structures and processes that give rise to processes of social stratification or ranking, through which the population is assigned to different social positions according to income, occupation, education, gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, Aboriginality or place-based or locational disadvantage (VicHealth 2015). This ranking of people by social position results in different social groups experiencing greater or reduced access to the major determinants of health outlined below as daily living conditions

- **daily living conditions** – the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, including factors such as early childhood development, education, work and employment, housing, and community connections. The quality of these conditions experienced by different social groups is highly variable and can be protective of, or damaging to, people's health (VicHealth 2015)

- **individual health-related factors** – the health-related knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of individuals and social groups result from, and are responses to, their socioeconomic, political and cultural context, social position, and experience of daily living conditions (VicHealth 2015).

Eliminating health inequities will require action to address the drivers and determinants of health equity at all levels of the Framework. Most of these determinants are socially produced and are outside the direct control of those in the community whose health is negatively affected.

Addressing the socioeconomic, political and cultural context and the daily living conditions that are the main contributors to health inequity is clearly not just the responsibility of the health sector or solely within the influence of health policies. Action to reduce health inequities requires cross-sectoral collaboration and a cross-government approach through which health is considered in all policies (Donkin et al. 2018).

We know that it is possible to address these deep influences on health and wellbeing. Current efforts to improve gender equality and to advance the Treaty process in Victoria, as well as increased recognition of the impact of racism on people's health, provide tangible examples of work that is changing the socioeconomic, political and cultural context and challenging the process of social stratification for greater health equity.

Improving health equity also requires targeted interventions that are co-designed with those communities experiencing barriers to health and wellbeing. Targeted interventions should be based on the general principle of 'nothing about us without us' (Jürgens 2008; VicHealth 2014), and should consider the wider determinants of health and the potential protective factors for communities.

Health equity depends on empowered, respected and inclusive communities. Everyone has a right to participate in decision-making that affects their wellbeing, and to determine what is best for them, their families and their communities. In of itself, participatory decision-making can begin to challenge the unequal distribution of power and resources across social groups and therefore, to bring about greater health equity.

References

Donkin A, Goldblatt P, Allen J, Nathanson V & Marmot M 2018, 'Global action on the social determinants of health', *BMJ Global Health*, vol. 3, e000603, doi: https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2017-000603.

Jürgens R 2008, *"Nothing about us without us" — Greater, meaningful involvement of people who use illegal drugs: A public health, ethical, and human rights imperative*, international edn, Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, International HIV/AIDS Alliance, Open Society Institute, Toronto.

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WHO (World Health Organization Commission on Social Determinants of Health) 2008, *Closing the gap in a generation: Health equity through action on the social determinants of health*, World Health Organization, Geneva.