

4 July 2024

**Department of Infrastructure, Transport,  
Regional Development, Communications and the Arts**

Via email: [urbanpolicyinput@infrastructure.gov.au](mailto:urbanpolicyinput@infrastructure.gov.au)

Dear Colleagues,

**Draft National Urban Policy**

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the draft National Urban Policy for Australia (the Policy).

VicHealth was established under the Tobacco Act 1987 (Vic) with a mandate to promote good health for all Victorians, including providing evidence-based policy advice. We are a pioneer in health promotion, with a long and strong history of working with our partners, stakeholders, and Victorians to discover, implement and share solutions to the health problems facing Victorians and Australians. Together, we work to keep people healthy, happy and well – preventing chronic disease and reducing the burden of poor health on everyday Australians.

This submission outlines VicHealth's support for a national urban policy framework to better align the vast number of urban policies, plans, programs and projects across the country, and promote health, wellbeing and equity in our urban places. We make several recommendations to strengthen the Policy and offer our support in driving the agenda for healthier, more liveable, equitable, and sustainable urban environments here in Victoria.

**About VicHealth's 10-year Strategy**

VicHealth released a 10-year Strategy<sup>1</sup> in 2023, with a vision to transform Victoria's health outcomes and evolve our approach from tackling individuals' behaviours and determinants of health to reshaping systems for a healthier, fairer Victoria. To

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<sup>1</sup> Vic Health (n.d.) [VicHealth Strategy](#), VicHealth website, accessed 2 July 2024

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achieve this, we are focused on reshaping neighbourhood and built systems, food systems, and commercial and economic systems.

VicHealth have been interested in the relationship between the built environment and health since the 1990s, including producing a report in 1999 on “moving to healthier people and healthier places – opportunities for health promotion in the transport sector”<sup>2</sup>. We are proud to confirm a continued and long-term focus on healthy neighbourhoods and built environments, as outlined in our Strategy.

Over the next 10 years, VicHealth is committed to working with all levels of Government, partners, stakeholders, and communities to influence and reshape neighbourhood and built systems. We know this is critical to addressing the growing number of barriers Australians face to accessing and achieving good health and wellbeing. The focus is to enable increased physical activity, improve social connectedness, and address systemic discrimination and racism in our communities in the environments where Victorians live, work and play.

This action will be driven through developing strong partnerships with local and state governments, government agencies, sporting organisations, schools, and environmental, cultural, creative and arts groups.

### **Support for self-determination**

VicHealth supports the Australian Government’s efforts to engage First Nation’s people in the development of this Policy. Enabling greater self-determination and better protecting Country will improve all outcomes, including health, for First Nations people in Australia and all Australians.

Our recommendations (outlined below) closely align with the recommendations outlined in Murawin’s report, which was prepared following its consultation with First Nation’s people as part of the development of the draft Policy. The report (referenced in the draft Policy) includes 15 recommendations across three categories:

- Embed specific, quantifiable, key elements of a liveable city.

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<sup>2</sup> Sitlington, J (1999) [Moving to Healthier People and Healthier Places](#), VicHealth, accessed 2 July 2024

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- Enhance opportunities for key principles in successful urban initiatives.
- Strategies to increase traction for the anticipated outcomes of the National Urban Policy.

### **VicHealth strongly supports a focus on promoting health, wellbeing and equity in our urban environments**

More Australians are living with illness than ever before. In 2023, Australians lost 5.6 million years of healthy life due to living with illness (non-fatal) and dying prematurely (fatal)<sup>3</sup>. Chronic diseases such as cancer, mental health conditions and substance use disorders, musculoskeletal conditions, cardiovascular diseases and neurological conditions cause the greatest burden, with these five disease groups accounting for more than 64% of the total burden of disease in 2023<sup>4</sup>. Alongside the burden of disease, health inequity across Australia is increasing<sup>5</sup> and the health impacts of climate change are expected to worsen<sup>6</sup>. Whilst individual social and economic factors (e.g. age, genes, income) and health care play a large part in health outcomes, it has long been recognised that the physical environment (built and natural) affects health<sup>7</sup>.

Urban environments can greatly enhance quality of life, health and wellbeing for residents, through providing greater access to health-promoting destinations, such as education, employment, green and blue space (such as parks, lakes and rivers), healthcare, community services, sport, recreation, culture, entertainment and healthy food sources. When designed well, urban environments can also facilitate healthy behaviours (e.g. physical activity, healthy food choices, social connection), increase time spent in nature, nurture relationships, and create more opportunities for joy.

However, urban environments can also be harmful to people's health, primarily through exposure to health risk factors such as vehicle traffic, air pollution, social isolation, physical inactivity, urban heat island effects and greenhouse gas

<sup>3</sup> AIHW (2023) [Australian Burden of Disease Study 2023](#), AIHW website, accessed 2 July 2024

<sup>4</sup> AIHW (2023) [Australian Burden of Disease Study 2023](#), AIHW website, accessed 2 July 2024

<sup>5</sup> AIHW (2024) [Determinants for First Nations people](#), AIHW website, accessed 2 July 2024

<sup>6</sup> Victorian Department of Health (n.d.) [Your health - biennial report](#), Victorian Department of Health website, accessed 2 July 2024

<sup>7</sup> Snow, J (1855) *Mode of Communication of Cholera*

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emissions driving climate change. Housing and working conditions can also help or harm health, and can be influenced by urban policies, plans, programs and projects.

VicHealth therefore strongly supports the draft National Urban Policy's focus on promoting health, wellbeing and equity throughout the document. Each of the goals and objectives in the draft Policy are key to improving quality of life, health and wellbeing in our urban places, therefore we also support the interconnected approach to goals and objectives outlined in the draft Policy.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation 1: that the final Policy is developed in alignment with the outcomes and targets of other Australian Government policies**

VicHealth acknowledges and supports the need for a national urban policy framework to better align the vast number of urban policies, plans, programs and projects across the country, and better link research, policy and practice.

To support this, VicHealth recommends that the final Policy is developed in alignment with the outcomes and targets of other Australian Government policies, including the *Transport and Infrastructure Net Zero Roadmap and Action Plan*, the *National Obesity Strategy 2022–2032* and *National Preventive Health Strategy 2021–2030*.

### **Recommendation 2: that the vision in the final Policy reflects the need for growth to enhance health, wellbeing and equity within ecological limits**

We note that the Australian Government is working with State and Territory Governments to reinstate a vision for sustainable growth in cities. VicHealth works closely with the Victorian Government and local governments across Victoria, and we recommend that the vision reflects the need for growth to enhance health, wellbeing and equity within ecological limits. This is critical to enabling an environmentally safe and socially just space in which future generations of Australians can thrive.

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### **Recommendation 3: the inclusion of a national framework of evidence-based indicators to help measure progress and monitor implementation of policies, plans, programs and projects across Australia**

VicHealth believes the draft Policy could be strengthened by a national framework of evidence-based indicators to help measure progress and monitor implementation of policies, plans, programs and projects across Australia. This would make the Policy more tangible and help State and Local Governments to apply the National Urban Policy in practice. There are several resources available that could support the development of indicators:

- **The Australian Urban Observatory (AUO) Digital Platform** - the AUO has been researching connections between the lived environment and public health since 2006 and has developed 42 indicators across 9 domains of liveability, including an overall Liveability Index, as well as Walkability, Social Infrastructure, Transport, Food, Alcohol, Public Open Space, Employment, and Housing<sup>8</sup>.
- **The 2016 Lancet Series on Urban Design, Transport, and Health** - this 3-part research series explores how integrated multisector city planning, including urban design and transport planning, can be used as an important and currently underused force for health and wellbeing within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, and proposes a set of city planning indicators that could be used to benchmark and monitor progress<sup>9</sup>.
- **The Lancet 2022 Series on Urban Design, Transport and Health** - this follow-up research series to the 2016 Lancet series on urban design, transport and health shows how the indicators proposed in original series can guide decisions about what must change in order to create healthy and sustainable cities, and how research can be used to guide urban policy to achieve urban and population health. They provide tools that other cities can use to replicate the indicators and explores “where to next” to create healthy and sustainable cities, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Australian Urban Observatory (n.d.) [Australian Urban Observatory](#), Australian Urban Observatory website, accessed 2 July 2024

<sup>9</sup> The Lancet (2016) [Urban design, transport and health](#), The Lancet website, accessed 2 July 2024

<sup>10</sup> The Lancet (2022) [Urban design, transport and health](#), The Lancet website, accessed 2 July 2024

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- **The Global Observatory of Healthy and Sustainable Places** – global, multi-institutional, transdisciplinary initiative providing evidence-based spatial and urban policy indicators to advocate for and track progress towards healthy and sustainable cities for all<sup>11</sup>.
- **The Urban Liveability Checklist (NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence in Healthy Liveable Communities)** – a set of validated built environment indicators that promote health and wellbeing. The checklist, which is the culmination of a five-year research program, has been designed as a simple and short tool for planners to apply in established or proposed urban areas to assess its liveability and potential to improve health and wellbeing<sup>12</sup>. This checklist has informed the development of healthy urban planning targets for planning proposals, Development Control Plans or Development Applications (DAs) in the South Western Sydney Local Health District<sup>13</sup>. This serves as best practice example of using evidence-based indicators to inform policy and practice.

#### **Recommendation 4: the inclusion of an urban design principle to help integrate urban policies and plans and facilitate positive outcomes in our urban places**

VicHealth believes the Policy would benefit from an urban design principle, noting that urban design is a critical component of our urban places. Urban design seeks to integrate a range of complex urban policies and plans. It can be the difference between a house and a home, a road and a street, and a plan and place, and is therefore crucial to facilitating the positive social, economic, and environmental outcomes that this Policy is seeking.

Some resources which may be useful:

- **Healthy Active by Design (the Heart Foundation)** – provides best-practice, evidence-based resources and guidance to support industry professionals

<sup>11</sup> Global Observatory of Health and Sustainable Cities (n.d.) [Global Observatory of Health and Sustainable Cities](#), Global Observatory of Health and Sustainable Cities website, accessed 2 July 2024

<sup>12</sup> RMIT Centre for Urban Research (n.d.) [The Healthy Liveable Communities Urban Liveability Checklist](#), RMIT Centre for Urban Research website, accessed 2 July

<sup>13</sup> South Western Sydney Local Health District (2024) [SWSLHD Position Statement Healthy Urban Planning & Placemaking in South Western Sydney Local Health District](#), accessed 2 July 2024

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and decision makers to create more walkable, liveable neighbourhoods for heart health<sup>14</sup>.

- **MY Neighbourhood (UN-Habitat)** – provides an extensive check list of urban design principles that are applicable in diverse cultural and geographical contexts at the neighbourhood scale and provides indicators for urban monitoring against the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the UN-Habitat New Urban Agenda targets<sup>15</sup>.

### **VicHealth can help to drive the agenda for healthier, more liveable, equitable, and sustainable cities**

Over the next 10 years, VicHealth are committed to working with all levels of Government, partners, stakeholders and communities to influence and reshape neighbourhood and built systems. We would therefore like to offer our support in driving the agenda for healthier, more liveable, equitable, and sustainable cities here in Victoria. There are several ways we could support the implementation of the draft National Urban Policy in Victoria:

- We can advise the Victorian Government on the latest evidence on the impact of urban environments on health and wellbeing.
- We can convene Victorian health promotion stakeholders and partners around the National Urban Policy.
- We can support organisations in Victoria to deliver health promotion research, projects, and events that help to drive forward the agenda for healthier, more equitable and sustainable cities, through investment, education, and advice.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the draft National Urban Policy. We are open to discussing our submission in greater detail, including how we can support implementation of the National Urban Policy.

Kind regards

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<sup>14</sup> Heart Foundation (n.d.) [Healthy Active by Design Designing for heart health](#), Heart Foundation website, accessed 2 July 2024

<sup>15</sup> UN-Habitat (2023) [MY Neighbourhood](#), UN-Habitat website, accessed 2 July 2024

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