

***A Collaborative Exploration of Population Health
Across the HSE National Clinical Programmes
Plain English Summary***



Document Information

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We are dedicated to continuous improvement and learning, and we highly value your feedback on this document. Your insights provide an opportunity to refine our work and further enhance its impact.

About National Health Service Improvement, Public Health

The National Health Service Improvement Team aims to improve population health and health equity by designing, testing, implementing and learning from health service improvements. We do this through system leadership, taking an evidence-led approach and building improvement capabilities across the health services. At regional level, we work collaboratively with Departments of Public Health and other stakeholders, including patients, communities, and professionals in health and allied services, to address the health needs of the entire regional population. At national level, we focus on specific priority cohorts, including underserved populations, working closely with people with lived experience and other stakeholders, to deliver targeted interventions that address the unique needs of these groups. The National Health Service Improvement team can be contacted at: NationalHealthServiceImprovement@hse.ie

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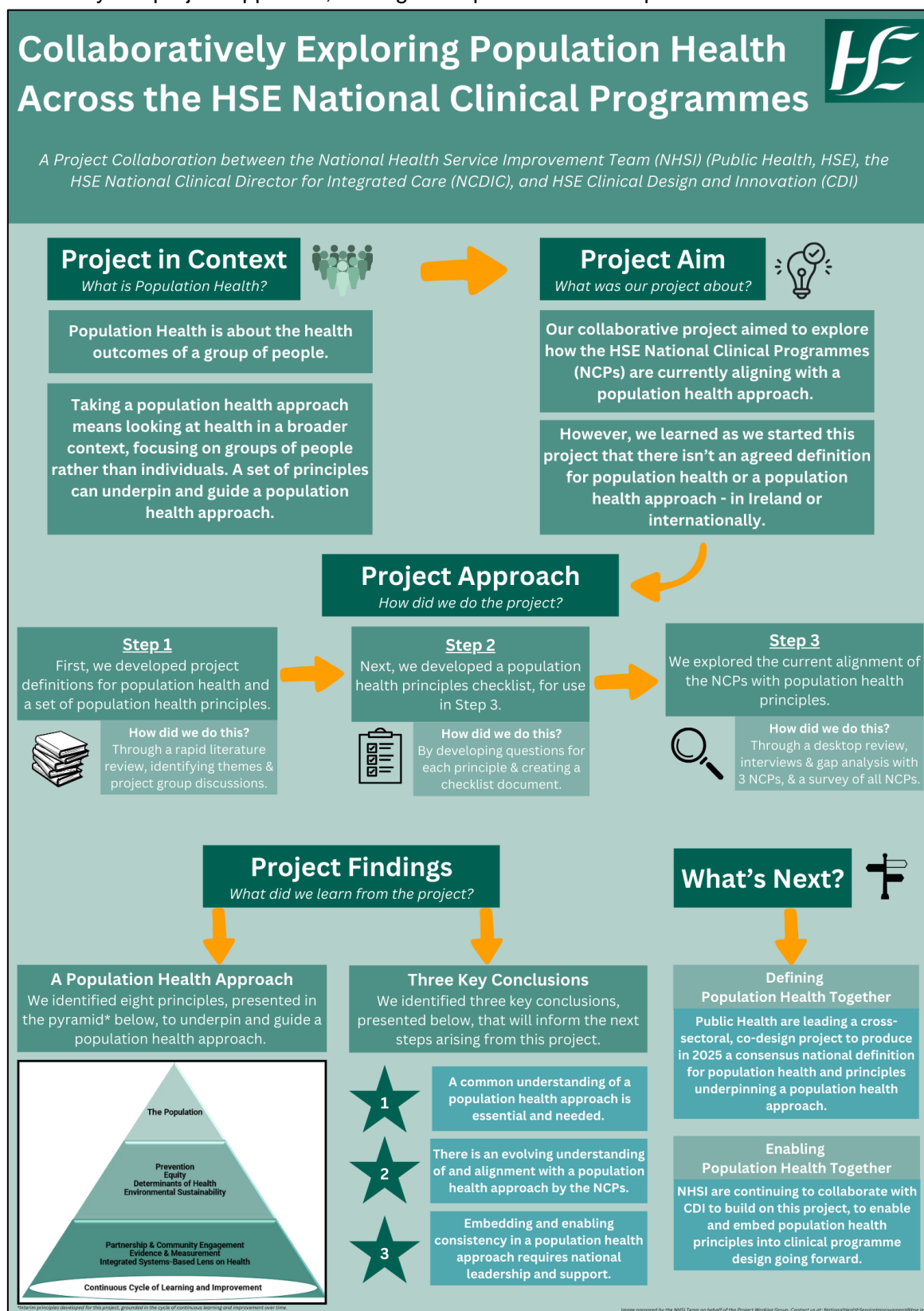
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About this Document

This document is a short plain English summary to accompany the report 'A Collaborative Exploration of Population Health Across the HSE National Clinical Programmes – A Project Learning Report'. This document describes for the reader both the key steps of the project as a journey and important learning points. We have used the Health Service Executive (HSE) 'Guidelines for Communicating Clearly using Plain English with our Patients and Service Users' to support the development of this summary (1).

Project at a Glance

The image below presents the project 'at a glance', showing the project context and its aim, followed by the project approach, findings and planned next steps.



Starting the Journey

What is Population Health, and a Population Health Approach?

Population health is about the health of a group of people (2,3). A population health approach considers the health and healthcare of groups of people rather than just individuals and works to address the root causes of ill-health rather than just treating symptoms and conditions (4). In Ireland the current plan for healthcare, Sláintecare, includes the importance of a population health approach and taking account of population needs when planning and delivering health services. It's important to note though, that there isn't one single agreed definition for population health or for a population health approach.

What was this project about?

The Health Service Executive (HSE) National Clinical Programmes (NCPs) were set up in 2010 and play an important leadership role in clinical design and innovation (5). The NCPs have made important progress in improving health service design and delivery in Ireland (6). Our project looked at how the NCPs are thinking about population health and including population health principles in their programmes and also looked to find opportunities to build on this. Our project should help guide us in how we can best support a population health approach in clinical programme design in the future, so that the programmes can have the biggest impact on the health of their population(s).

Because there isn't one single agreed definition for population health or for a population health approach, an essential first task in this project was to develop definitions for both 'population health' and 'a population health approach'. This is also our first step in a journey towards a national consensus definition and approach for population health.

Who was involved in the project?

Our project was a collaboration between the National Health Service Improvement (NHSI) Team, Public Health, HSE, the HSE National Clinical Director for Integrated Care (NCDIC), and the HSE Clinical Design and Innovation (CDI), for the HSE Chief Clinical Officer (CCO). The members of our Project Team and Project Working Group are included in Appendix A of the learning report.

Key Steps in the Project Journey

Overview

Our project journey had five key steps that were taken between March and December 2024. These steps are summarised in **Figure 1** below, followed by a short description of each step.



Figure 1. The Project Journey: Five Key Steps.

Step 1: Build the Project Collaboration and Agree the Project Approach

We formed a Project Team within the NHSI Team, and a collaborative Project Working Group. The Working Group included the NHSI Project Team, the NCDIC, CDI and the National Clinical Advisor and Group Lead (NCAGL) for Chronic Disease. The Project Team led on and did the work of the project on behalf of the NHSI Team. The Working Group had the important role of providing oversight and input throughout the journey of the project. The Project Team developed a project proposal in collaboration with the Project Working Group. We had three key project goals, and these are described next as Steps 2, 3 and 4.

Step 2: Goal 1 - Define Population Health

Our first goal was to define population health, and a population health approach, for the project. This was particularly important as there wasn't a national or international definition already available for us to use. We did a rapid review of the studies on this topic and identified key themes. From this work, and through discussions as a Project Working Group, we developed definitions for population health and principles of a population health approach. We used these definitions for the rest of the project.

Step 3: Goal 2 - Develop a Population Health Principles Checklist

Our second goal was to develop a tool that could be used to look at how the NCPs currently align with a population health approach. We developed this tool as a checklist, using the population health principles identified in Step 2. We developed questions for each principle to form the checklist. We produced the checklist as a Microsoft Word document and also developed it into Microsoft Excel-based tool to use in Step 4.

Step 4: Goal 3 - Explore How NCPs Currently Take a Population Health Approach

Our third goal, the biggest part of the project, was to explore how the NCPs currently think about and include a population health approach in their work. There were two key parts to this. Firstly, we focused on three NCPs chosen by CDI for the project. To do this, we reviewed published programme documents (their Models of Care and Clinical Pathways), and interviewed NCP Clinical Leads and Programme Managers. We then considered our results to identify any gaps that might represent possible opportunities to develop and enhance a population health approach for NCPs in the future. The second part was a survey of all NCPs, led by CDI. In this survey, CDI asked NCPs to share what population health principle(s) they felt their current and planned programme documents (for 2024) aligned with.

Step 5: Identify and Share the Learning from the Project

Bringing all of the project results together, we identified three key learning points from the project that are described in the 'Reflections from the Journey' section of this summary. We prepared an internal project report for the CCO and used this to prepare a second project report to share the learning from the project with an external wider audience. We then wrote this summary, based on our second learning-focused report.

We also identified that a self-assessment tool could be a useful guide for the NCPs, to help them identify opportunities to build a population health approach into their programmes. We are currently developing this tool as of the date of this summary and more detail on this is included in the 'Next Steps Ahead' section at the end of this summary.

Learning from the Journey

A Starting Point in Defining Population Health

Definitions

We developed two definitions for population health for this project, based on the literature review and discussions as a Project Working Group. The first definition focused on the health of a population group. A straightforward version of this is shared below:

- *Population health is the overall health of a group of people. This includes their physical, mental and social health and well-being. Population health is shaped by many different factors. These factors include income, environment, healthcare, behaviour and culture, among others. Population health is also impacted by how these factors are spread across a group of people.*

The second definition focused on a population health approach. A straightforward version of this is shared below:

- *A population health approach is about improving the health and well-being of a group of people. It is also about preventing ill-health and making health more equal. The approach looks at the factors that shape our health, like income, environment, healthcare, behaviour and culture. It is a way of working together across different fields, guided by actions that are supported by evidence.*

Population Health Principles

We identified eight population health principles that underpin a population health approach. This was also based on the literature review and discussions as a Project Working Group. These eight principles are:

1. A Population Perspective to Improving Health
2. Prevention
3. Equity in Health
4. The Determinants of Health
5. Partnership and Community Engagement
6. Environmental Sustainability
7. Integration of Care
8. Evidence and Measurement for Population Health Improvement

A short explanation of each of these principles is presented below.

Principle 1: A Population Perspective to Improving Health

Explanation: A population health approach aims to make all members of a population healthier, not just those who attend healthcare services.

Principle 2: Prevention

Explanation: A population health approach focuses on preventing illness and promoting overall health and wellbeing (physical, mental, and social) throughout a person's life. It includes all types of prevention: stopping illness before it starts, detecting it early, and managing it to reduce complications.

Principle 3: Equity in Health

Explanation: A population health approach helps make health more equal by working to reduce or remove unfair and avoidable differences in health among people. It focuses on supporting underserved groups in the population.

Principle 4: The Determinants of Health

Explanation: A population health approach understands and tackles the various factors that affect people's health. It recognises that these factors are many, complex, and interconnected, and they can influence health both on an individual level and within the broader community.

Principle 5: Partnership and Community Engagement

Explanation: A population health approach relies on partnership, teamwork and cooperation among different groups and sectors. It understands that improving health is a shared job that requires everyone to work together. Partnerships and community involvement are essential to ensure that the voices of those that need, use and deliver services are represented and central to work undertaken.

Principle 6: Environmental Sustainability

Explanation: A population health approach focuses on environmental sustainability by considering the environment. It aims to meet today's health needs without harming the ability to meet future needs.

Principle 7: Integration of Care

Explanation: A population health approach focuses on organising and coordinating care based on the needs of the whole community, so that the right care is provided in the right place, at the right time. It is also about looking at health as a whole system.

Principle 8: Evidence and Measurement for Population Health Improvement

Explanation: A population health approach is guided by measuring important data. This information helps make informed decisions and plans for improving health and reducing inequalities. Measuring results also ensures that different sectors are held accountable for health outcomes.

We also developed a picture to show how these principles can combine together to form a population health approach (**Figure 2**). At the base of the pyramid, we included that the approach should be grounded in ongoing learning and improvement over time.

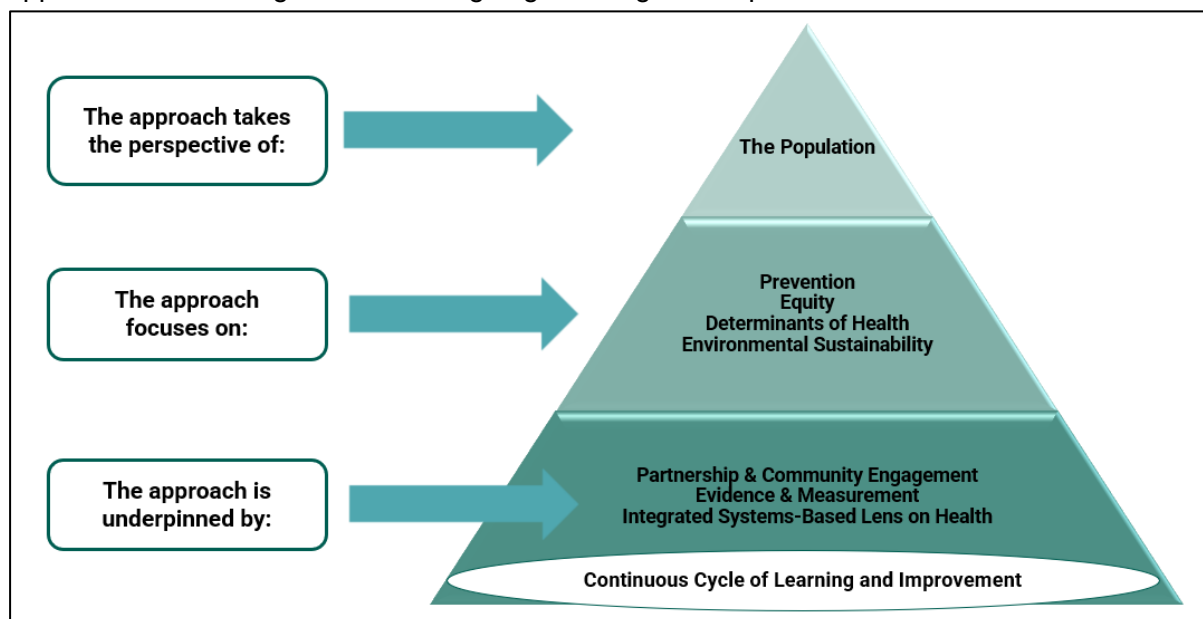


Figure 2. A Population Health Approach, developed for this project.

Key Learning Points from Exploring Population Health Alignment

We identified three key learning points from exploring how the NCPs currently align with a population health approach.

Learning Point 1

We need a common understanding of what population health and a population health approach means.

Explanation

To design and deliver the project, our first goal was to define what population health and a population health approach meant, since there is no agreed definition nationally or internationally. Using the principles identified, we found that while the NCPs are considering the principles of a population health approach in their work, there are differences across the programmes in the awareness and understanding of them. We also found that there were some differences in how the principles are included and applied in the design and activities of the programmes. These differences can depend on the characteristics of each NCP, such as the population and health condition(s) the programme focuses on, and other factors such as resources and capabilities of the programme.

It's important that everyone working to improve population health has a shared understanding of what a population health approach means. While it may not look exactly the same for every programme, a consistent approach that can be adapted to different populations is crucial. There is a need to create a national definition and approach for

population health, which is part of the 'Next Steps Ahead' described at the end of this summary.

Learning Point 2

There is a growing understanding and inclusion of a population health approach across the NCPs.

Explanation

While population health isn't a new idea, it is becoming more of a focus of health policy, health service planning and delivery. In this project, we found that the NCPs are growing in their understanding of and alignment with the principles of a population health approach. We also found that some principles, like equity and integration of care, have long been important components of the work of NCPs, while others are more recent considerations, such as environmental sustainability.

The gap analysis we completed in this project identified potential opportunities to build on to support a population health approach across the NCPs. The learning report presents opportunities specific to each of the eight principles, but the opportunity that spans across all principles is the need to create a shared understanding and awareness of what population health and a population health approach mean. In the future, this will help integrate population health principles in NCP design, planning and delivery, which is important to help achieve the biggest impact on improving population health.

Learning Point 3

It's important that there is national leadership to support and sustain a consistent population health approach.

Explanation

Our project illustrated the important role of national teams to support and sustain a consistent approach to improving population health. National leadership, collaboration, and clear guidance are essential to create a shared understanding of what a population health approach means, and to support NCPs to incorporate and maintain population health principles in service design and delivery. This work can also be used by people working in the many different roles, groups and sectors that are trying to improve population health, locally, regionally and nationally.

The Next Steps Ahead

Starting the Population Health Journey

Defining Population Health Together

As we've highlighted in this summary, there is currently no agreed definition of what population health or a population health approach means, either in Ireland or internationally. To address this gap, Public Health have begun a project to collaboratively design a national definition for population health and key principles of a population health approach with a wide range of stakeholders. This work aims to provide a clear and shared understanding of these concepts in Ireland in 2025.

Continuing the Journey

Supporting and Embedding a Population Health Approach in Clinical Design

In addition to the learning report, there are a number of next steps planned to support NCPs and others in understanding and working towards a population health approach. We are developing a 'Population Health Alignment Self-Assessment Tool', to help each NCPs to self-assess their own population health approach, and to identify opportunities to build their approach into their programmes in the future. In addition, CDI has started a project with Trinity College Dublin as an academic partner to design and develop a service and quality improvement framework for planning and implementing clinical designs, using an evidence and participation-based approach, and this work will include population health principles.

The Destination

A Health Service Aligned with a Population Health Approach

This project and its next steps are essential to continuing the journey to achieve a population health approach to healthcare. There is an important role for national leadership to support and sustain establish and enable a consistent population health approach across NCPs as well as other groups and sectors working to improve population health. Continued collaboration and designing together with stakeholders will be essential to making this a reality and ultimately achieving the biggest impact on population health.

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