

Draft response to Commission Green Paper on diet and nutrition

7 March 2006

Background

1. The Local Government International Bureau (LGIB) and the Local Government Association (LGA) welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate on the content and direction of a future EU strategy for diet and physical activity.
2. The LGIB and LGA believe that the European Commission has a role to play in improving the public health of all EU citizens but is of the firm belief that it is at the local level where any EU-wide strategies will become effective and come into fruition.
3. We also support the Council conclusions dated 6 June 2005, which state that tackling obesity requires a multi-sectoral approach at local, regional, national, European and global levels.
4. Within the UK, there is now an open recognition that sustainable long-term improvement in the health of the nation will be more cost effectively delivered by the wider social and economic programmes run by local authorities.
5. Public health and strategies to improve public health will always impact upon local communities and it is important that decisions be made through local authorities, as democratically accountable bodies.
6. Local government has an important role in the prevention of obesity and improving nutrition and physical activity levels of their local communities.

Summary

7. LGIB and LGA ask the Commission to continue to recognise that local authorities make a vital contribution to the promotion of nutrition and physical activity and:
 - have an elected and legitimate mandate to represent the interests of local people and to act in response to demand for social action at a local level;
 - play a crucial role in supporting and influencing the wide range of agencies and organisations that make up civil society; and
 - work in partnerships with voluntary organisations, schools and health organisations (including the National Health Service) to improve the nutritional intake and increase physical activity of those living in their local community.
8. Local authorities ask the Commission to ensure that there is the opportunity for them to engage in the Commission's follow-up work to the Green Paper and to exchange examples of good practice.

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Commission questions

What are the concrete contributions which Community policies, if any, should make towards the promotion of healthy diets and physical activity, and towards creating environments which make health choices easy choices?

9. A Commission strategy could seek to enable local authorities throughout the EU improve the public health of their communities by providing information on public health issues and by facilitating and providing resources for the exchange of good practice between local communities in different Member States.
10. We would also welcome moves by the Commission to mainstream this issue into other areas of EU competences so that the issue is not seen purely as one for DG SANCO; transport, the environment, procurement are just some of the areas in which policy can impact (positively and negatively) on public health and on obesity and nutrition levels.

How can the health and consumer protection programme contribute to raising the awareness of the potential which health dietary habits and physical activity have for reducing the risk for chronic diseases amongst decision makers, health professionals, the media and the public at large?

11. The LGIB and LGA would welcome provision in the new programme to make resources available for local authorities to assist them in beginning and continuing their work in raising awareness of the importance of physical activity and good nutrition. The Programme could also provide resources to allow a real exchange of ideas and good practice between local authorities in different Member States.

Which are the most appropriate dissemination channels for the existing evidence?

12. It is at local level where the messages of healthy diets and physical activity can be targeted to the specific local community. Messages provided at the European level can be more easily digested when “filtered” down to local communities, and set into the specific context of different local communities – for example, messages to inner city and urban communities may differ from messages to small town or village populations.

What are good examples of improving the nutritional value of school meals, and informing parents on how to improve the nutritional value of home meals?

What is good practice of fostering healthy dietary choices at schools, especially regarding excessive intake of energy-dense snacks and sugar-sweetened soft drinks?

13. Local authorities are well placed to work with other local stakeholder to improve the nutritional value of school meals. This is already happening in local authorities in England and Wales, but more support is needed from the national government and from the European Commission.
14. Cleveland and Redcar Borough Council are working in partnership with local families and professionals to support children and young people (aged 0 – 19) to develop healthy eating practices which will become embedded for life:
 - delivering an effective and consistent approach to healthy eating practices whilst ensuring that individual cultural and dietary needs are met;

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- raising awareness with children, young people, parents/carers and professionals to develop a positive approach to food, nutrition and oral health education;
- encouraging responsibility and accountability of parents/carers and professionals in offering healthy choices to children and young people;
- promoting healthy eating and oral health as necessary and enjoyable aspects of the lives of children and young people in order to allow them to make independent and informed choices.

15. Funded by the six local authorities and 10 primary care trusts in Greater Merseyside, Heart of Mersey is England's largest coronary heart disease prevention programme. A *Food and Health Strategy for Greater Merseyside* aims to promote a coordinated approach to increasing people's access to healthy food, with a particular focus on children.

- Supporting those working with schools to improve the nutritional quality of school meals and all aspects of food in the school day eg vending, teaching of cooking skills;
- Supporting public sector bodies to adopt 'healthy food policies' for all aspects of food provision (eg hospital/workplace canteens) and procurement within these organisations, as part of their role as corporate citizens;
- Developing and marketing the Greater Merseyside Food Charter Award to caterers to ensure that healthier food is provided in school and workplace canteens, community cafes, restaurants etc.;
- Developing campaigns to harness public support on issues such as better school meals and removing unhealthy snacks and sweets from supermarket checkouts;
- Developing social marketing campaigns on healthy eating messages.

The food and health strategy can be accessed at: www.heartofmersey.org.uk

In which ways can public policies contribute to ensure that physical activity be "built into" daily routines? Which measures are needed to foster the development of environments that are conducive to physical activity?

16. DG SANCO should look at how the Commission can contribute to the sustainable development strategy and consider how the EU can effectively promote 'healthy sustainable lifestyles' and in particular focus on the production and consumption links to poor health, such as promoting healthy / environmentally sustainable modes of transport through the transport streams of the Cohesion Fund and appropriate legislation.

17. The European Commission could:

- Encourage green spaces - The EU should work in partnership with local authorities to promote good practice for healthy lifestyles at a local level. Local Authorities directly promote a better quality of life in local communities. For example, they can make provisions for 'green spaces', which create public spaces for recreation, protection of biodiversity and enhances the environment for surrounding areas.
- However programmes, such as Edinburgh City Council's 'Urban Forest Programme' (http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/edinburgh_urban_forestry), require greater national and European encouragement and support. Mechanisms should be identified within the strategy, such as funding and training opportunities.

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- Engage with local partners - The strategy could identify ways to support the voluntary implementation of The Aalborg+10 commitments established by the European Sustainable Towns and Cities Network. These include commitments such as 'local action to protect and promote health and wellbeing' of their citizens and also recognises 'the interdependence of transport, health and environment' and commits to 'reduce the impact of transport on the environment and public health'
- Address health inequalities – The EU should ensure that it addresses the often significant issue of health inequalities and should support and facilitate the exchange of experience in reducing health inequalities.
- Local planning – The EU could look to outline further means of support in the strategy that will assist national and local governments to implement their 'national environmental health action plans' (NEHAPs) and 'Local Environmental Health Action Plans' (LEHAPs)

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