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**Response to Consultation on the Commission Nutrition and Physical Activity
Green Paper from the North West Physical Activity Task Force**
15 March 2006

Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases

The North West Health and Physical Activity Task Force (NW PATF) was set up in September 2004 to “To increase the levels of physical activity in the North West by influencing the cultural, social, physical and political environment to make it more conducive for people to lead physically active lives.”

The NW PATF has an action plan, but in relation to the EU Consultation on Nutrition and Physical Activity, we feel that key areas for EU support and intervention should focus on cycling and walking measures, workplace health and research.

IV.2 Health across EU policies

Transport Policy: Cycling and walking both as recreation and utility activities are likely to have the most impact on physical activity, the NW PATF therefore requests policy measures at EU level, which can support, promote and ultimately increase population walking and cycling levels. We feel that more could be done at European level to promote healthy transport, also contributing to the sustainable development agenda. Increasing car use is creating a less active population, and bringing a cycle of loss of green spaces, particularly amongst the most deprived communities. Some areas of Europe have developed some real and practical examples of good practice of active transport and these should be disseminated, promoted and integrated into coherent active transport policies at the EU level.

Linked to the above transport policy is planning and urban design policy. There are a range of examples across the EU where good design policy as improved the ‘walkability’ of urban areas, which can have the added bonus of reducing crime and improving community cohesion. Town planners and housing policies need to incorporate, quiet street zones, play areas and green space into new developments and regeneration programmes.

Research policy. The NW PATF requests a strong focus on physical activity research in order to build our knowledge base on effective interventions. Investment in this area of research at a national and European level has been lacking. Small-scale local evaluation of local projects is not providing us with robust evidence of what works to change behaviour.

In addition to this, the Research should look at environmental pan-European approaches to physical activity in built environments. In order to learn from countries with best practice, we should be focussing on countries with leptogenic environments rather than obesogenic ones, as these offer the greatest opportunities for learning. This may include looking at countries outside of the European Union, where the trend is different. Research should also look at long-term outcomes and not just short-term ones.

Research across a range of different academic sectors is also required including, psychology, environment, transport, social marketing, urban design etc as physical activity is a complex behaviour, knowledge needs to be pooled across a range of political, social, cultural and environmental influences.

The NW PATF would like to stress the need for sustainability into research funding, as often good work is lost when funding ceases; also that the link between research and practice in this field should be strengthened. Research funding should be increasing available to non-clinical research, as social interventions are of significant importance in addressing areas around both nutrition and physical activity. In order to evaluate interventions it is necessary to develop a tool that may be used across different situations, thus allowing comparisons with consistency.

The NW PATF believes that the EU should play a role in bringing together existing research and dissemination of results, as well as creating an environment for consistent baseline data collection.

IV.4 The Public Health Action Programme

Consistent measurement of obesity and physical activity needs to be agreed across the EU if meaningful comparisons are to be made.

The National Institute for Clinical and Health Excellence (NICE) is a possible model for the dissemination of effective interventions.

V.3 A focus on children and young people

It is vital that children develop positive attitudes to being physically active from a young age. This needs to begin with the under 5s and their families, both at home and in educational settings. As well as provision of good quality sport and physical education in school, children and young people should be encouraged to take part in free play and informal sport before school, during breaks and after school. Developing safe routes to school is another key opportunity to build physical activity into the day. Sustrans in the UK are the leading organisation in the UK for developing programmes to support cycling and walking.

V.4 Physical Activity and health education in the workplace

Work place health offers opportunities not yet fully explored with the purpose of increasing physical activity. This includes physical activity during working time and breaks as well as travel to and from work. Flexible working hours can also enable people to take part in physical activity at the start or at the end of the working day.

Sport England and the Department of Health in the UK are currently investing money in a range of workplace interventions. The EU should examine their findings and support dissemination of the results. There is ample evidence that the health of the workforce can have serious implications for the economy, both in terms of

productivity and incapacity benefit. The Regional Economic Strategy in the North West has acknowledged the importance of a physically active workforce by including actions to increase physical activity in the region, with Sport England as the lead agency. The EU may wish to use this as and examine this further in relation to EU economic policies.

V.6 Addressing the obesogenic environment

The EU should increase coherence between its complementary policies, such as transport, sustainable development and urban issues, which together have a huge affect on physical activity by providing incentives for green and healthy urban planning. The Commission should also increase learning from good practice within Europe on these issues, and provide incentives for change.

However, the obesogenic environment also includes food and diet issues, not just physically activity-friendly environments. A key area of work for the NW PATF is the development of a “Healthy Stadia” programme to ensure that people can watch or play sport in a healthy environment e.g. environments where people watch or take part in sport such as leisure centres, sports clubs and sports stadia need to provide healthy choices and safe walking and cycling facilities to avoid ‘mixed’ messages.

The NW PATF would be happy to provide more information on this innovative area of work.

V.7 Socio-economic inequalities

Many of the previous issues highlighted around safer, greener, cleaner streets, urban areas and green spaces are particularly pertinent for areas of low socio-economic deprivation and cannot be addresses in isolation. Integrated and cohesive policies around regeneration need to ensure that local people not only feel safe to walk and play in their local neighbourhoods but also want to walk and play there. This is particularly important for older people who need to maintain activity levels for their physical health but also for their social and mental health.

V.8 Fostering an integrated and comprehensive approach towards the promotion of healthy diets and physical activity.

It is important to bear in mind the mental health aspects of these issues, not only negative impact of obesity on mental health, but also the positive benefits that are brought about by physical activity.

V.10 Cooperation beyond the European Union.

Since obesity and low physical activities is an issue in many counties worldwide, it makes sense to share experiences, knowledge and identify best practice on an international level. NICE and the Physical Activity Collaborating Centre is one mechanism for engaging with other international bodies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the US.

V.11 Other issues

The NW PATF suggests the following priorities:

- The NW PATF welcomes and supports the Commission in its work in this area, and would encourage reform in several of its Policy areas currently having a major impact on the increase in obesity such as transport policy and planning
- The NW PATF calls for an increase in the possibilities for research in this field particularly around physical activity.
- The NWPATF also suggests that workplace health should be a priority for the EU, particularly in relation to the economy

Response submitted by:

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