

Response to Green Paper

“PROMOTING HEALTHY DIETS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: A EUROPEAN DIMENSION FOR THE PREVENTION OF OVERWEIGHT, OBESITY AND CHRONIC DISEASES”

The All Island Community Nutrition and Dietetic Partnership Group welcomes the opportunity to respond to proposals and questions set out in this Green Paper. The group is composed of community dietitians throughout the whole island of Ireland. The group works to facilitate better population health through optimal nutrition, utilising the skills of community dietitians in collaboration with other health professionals and key stakeholders throughout Ireland.

Community Dietitians are uniquely placed to assist in the development of national, regional and local strategies in line with European initiatives. They work collaboratively with a range of partners to maximize nutritional health and well-being, and to enhance the skills of others through training and capacity building. They act and contribute to the development and implementation of the strategic nutrition agenda at local, regional and national levels. The group acts as a link for community dietitians between North and South of Ireland and provides a conduit to share and develop best practice, resources, training and research, to avoid duplication of resources and ensuring better value for money.

Whilst Community Dietitians have already begun to establish links to share best practice in Ireland, there are also links with professional bodies in Europe through the European Federation of Dietetic Associations (EFAD)

In general, the All Island Community Nutrition and Dietetic Partnership Group welcomes the move towards a more preventative approach to the problem of overweight and obesity. Early intervention is important and nutrition and physical activity should be an integral part of all programmes ranging from the promotion of optimal nutrition in pregnancy, infancy and throughout the lifecycle.

Health Across EU Policies

Good nutrition is fundamental to health development. Unhealthy diets are an increasing concern in almost all European countries. Obesity among adults and children is recognised as a critical issue. In the European Union 10-25% of children are clinically overweight (European Strategy for Child and Adolescent Health and Development WHO Europe 2005). This All Island group therefore recommends that “Early Years” should receive priority attention in targeting of nutrition resources and that it be mandatory to include nutrition in all programmes dealing with children and adolescents.

Thus:

- Nutrition advice should be available to all mothers preconceptionally, and during pregnancy.
- The promotion of exclusive breastfeeding for the first 26 weeks of life AND the creation of an environment that supports breastfeeding mothers should be actively resourced and supported.
- Regular updates for relevant health professionals on the current nutrition messages for infants and children should be the remit of a Paediatric Specialist Dietitian.
- Advice and training for parents on correct weaning practices and the establishment of good food habits in early childhood should be mandatory in all parenting programmes.
- Special nutrition programmes should be targeted at disadvantaged and at risk parents and children. Child Poverty is still a significant issue with 23.4 per cent of all children aged under 18 living below the 60 per cent median income poverty line in 2001. (Food Poverty and Policy Combat Poverty Agency 2004). Cross governmental approaches are needed to ensure well integrated and co-ordinated solutions are achieved. Such departments should include agriculture, health, education, housing, transport, leisure etc.
- Food insecurity and inadequate diet are central issues for low income households in Ireland. Interventions are necessary to improve access to quality food at community levels, in schools, in hostels and resource centres. Joint programmes for nutrition and physical activity need to be robust, evidence based and delivered by appropriately trained personnel.

Extensions of existing programmes to improve cooking skills for disadvantaged groups and for school children especially “Early School Leavers” should be made.

- Schools at all levels including Preschools should be encouraged to set up school nutrition action groups (SNAGs) which can address the school’s approach to improved nutrition. A SNAG is a whole-school approach which involves participation from parents, children, staff, dietitians, catering and other relevant health professionals. Examples of ongoing work include the development of healthy eating policies, break-time initiatives, schemes to address school meals/lunch boxes and vending machines. These are developed in consultation with all the aforementioned as appropriate and can then be adopted into schools’ management systems.
- Departments of Education should be giving the lead to schools and colleges in the establishment of healthy eating and vending machine policies in all educational establishments.

Children and adolescents should have input into the development of school food and nutrition policies and should be consulted as to their requirements and concerns.

- At Government level legislation should be put in place to prevent children and adolescents being targeted for food advertising campaigns and the promotion of toys and inducements by food manufacturers should be prohibited.

Pricing policies on “unhealthy” foods, with concomitant price reductions on fruit & vegetables and high fibre products should be examined. “Buy one and get one free” promotions should not apply to soft drinks, bars and sweets etc.

- Stronger legislation needs to be put in place to refute the subtle trickery and Marketing of Foods for Children, highlighted in the recent report carried out by the Food Commission for Which? This research shows how children are the targets of unscrupulous companies utilising new technology, mobile phones, viral marketing techniques etc to influence children’s food preferences and choices

It would be very worthwhile to see the recommendations for immediate and long-term action on healthy lifestyles education, information and communication as outlined in the paper, Obesity in Europe – 2, Waiting for a Green Light for Health? Europe at the crossroads for diet and disease. IOTF Position Paper – September 2003.

Development of a common easily accessible teaching tool could be explored e.g. in N. Ireland Balance of Good Health is used whilst in Republic of Ireland the Food Pyramid is used. It is an important opportunity to explore this tool so that it can be applicable to multi-ethnic groups also.

At an all-island level there is also much scope to share research data e.g. through respective Nutrition & Dietetic Associations and through various All Island Institutions such as The Institute of Public Health.

We hope these comments will be of value.

Eleanor Duff
Manager of Nutrition & Dietetics
Causeway Health & Social Services Trust,
1A Coleraine Rd.,
Ballycastle,
Co. Antrim BT54 6EY, N Ireland.

Olive Carolan
Community Dietitian Manager,
HSE Dublin North East,
Co. Clinic,
Navan,
Co. Meath. Ireland

Joint Chair of All Island Community Nutrition & Dietetic Partnership Group

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