

EU WORKING GROUP ON SPORT AND HEALTH

DRAFT RESPONSE TO COMMISSION GREEN PAPER: PROMOTING HEALTHY DIETS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Introduction to EU Working Group on Sport and Health

At the informal meeting of EU Sports Ministers on 19-20 September 2005 the UK Presidency proposed the creation of a working group of 8-10 Member States (including the UK and Austria, the successor Presidency), plus the Commission. This proposal originated from the Luxembourg Presidency's decision to put the role of sport in promoting a healthy lifestyle onto the agenda for the EU Sports Ministers' meeting in April 2005.

The Working Group's membership consists of Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the UK and the Commission (DG-Education and Culture). According to its Terms of Reference, the aims of the Working Group are to:

- consider best practices in Member States concerning the integration of sport and physical activity into health, education, economic and other policy areas to encourage healthy lifestyles and combat obesity as early as possible;
- identify ways to ensure the exchange of information about such best practices among Member States;
- identify ways to improve coordination between different levels of government and civil society, the sport movement in particular, in order to use sport and physical activity more effectively as a means of enhancing health and tackling many diseases;
- help to develop initiatives, with active assistance from the Commission, that have an added value from a European point of view, *inter alia*, by maintaining a close link with the work of the [“EU Platform on Diet, Physical Activity and Health”](#) set up by DG SANCO in March 2005.
- report its findings and conclusions to EU Sport Directors at their meetings, beginning with the meeting to be held under the Austrian Presidency in March 2006.

In addition, the Working Group has agreed to provide a coordinated response to the consultation on the Commission's Green Paper on promoting healthy diets and physical activity. This paper has been compiled by the UK and includes contributions only from the Member States participating in the Working Group. The views outlined here represent those of the individual Member States and do not represent a collective view of the Working Group.

Member states' comments are listed in an order corresponding to the Green Paper's sections and the questions that they asked

I. State of play at European level

One member state felt that the Green Paper had neglected to recognise that the role of sport in combating obesity had been on the agenda of the informal meeting of Sports Ministers in Luxembourg in April 2005, and that the Ministers' subsequent declaration had led to the UK Presidency's proposal to set up an EU Working Group on Sport and Health in cooperation with the Commission.

Another member state thought it important to have an estimate of the total economic costs and lost man-hours caused by overweight and obesity for the EU as a whole, to emphasise the enormous impact of these problems.

IV.1 European Platform for Action on Diet, Physical Activity and Health

Member states regarded the Platform as an interesting initiative, but wanted to strengthen representation of the sport sector, to achieve a better balance between stakeholders and members specialising in the fields of health and physical activity. They thought that information about the Platform's work should be widely disseminated in the field of sport/physical activity, to raise awareness of the problems under discussion and to encourage other stakeholders to join the ongoing actions.

IV.2. European Network on Nutrition and Physical Activity

Member states' views on this topic were very similar to those on the European Platform.

IV.3. Health across EU policies

– 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 healthy choices easy choices?

The Community should do everything in its power to make healthy diets and physical activity socially meaningful and desirable aims. Exercise and sport are an essential factor in regional development. Investment in sport tourism adds value to regional economies and creates jobs. Sport infrastructure also benefits the local population which again has positive effects on activity behaviour and the reduction of the appertaining health costs. Exercise and sport should therefore also be integrated into regional policies.

– Which kinds of Community or national measures could contribute towards improving the attractiveness, availability, accessibility and affordability of fruits and vegetables?

The adoption of a high-quality strategy that combined media campaigns, tax reliefs and incentives for the production, transportation and distribution of such products.

– On which areas related to nutrition, physical activity, the development of tools for the analysis of related disorders, and consumer behaviour is more research needed?

One member state took the view that more research was needed on the 0-3 age-group, which it considered to be one of the most important periods for building up motor skills and laying the foundations for an active lifestyle. The research could focus upon the relative contributions towards these goals of the different environments that young children experience.

Another member state thought that research was needed on the whole range of European citizens' behaviour with regard to exercise and sport, especially the impact of sociocultural factors. Age and gender-specific differences as well as socio-economic factors with influence on exercise and sport behaviour should be analysed and explored. In this process the analysis of enabling as well as impeding factors would be of special relevance.

IV.4 Public Health Action Programme

– How can the availability and comparability of data on obesity be improved, in particular with a view to determining the precise geographical and socioeconomic distribution of this condition?

Body mass index should be used to measure obesity; at the same time, member states should agree on standardised laboratory procedures to determine the rate of false and true positives in different regions. The socioeconomic distribution of obesity implies that categorisation would be the same all over Europe. It would be necessary to deal with issues surrounding the protection of personal data in order to develop a longitudinal survey of the problem. For instance, if Cole reference standards (BMJ, 2000) were applied, would it be possible to follow up and share information among EU member states?

– How can the programme contribute to raising the awareness of the potential which healthy 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?

One member state felt that adequate information campaigns were the solution. These campaigns should raise awareness and at the same time demand for both individual and collective responsibility. The member state thought that all channels were appropriate for disseminating the evidence, but that more attention should be paid to television and the Internet

Another member state considered the contribution made by exercise and sport for reducing the risk of chronic diseases - for the individual citizen as well as for society as a whole – would be most effectively expressed in terms of the financial gains and savings that accrue from increased physical activity and the corresponding improvements in public health. Because of the scarcity of available data, however, this benefit was largely underestimated. Therefore it is absolutely necessary to take specific measures to visualise the benefits for society from exercise and sport. The creation of satellite accounts for sport (similar to tourism) would make it possible to

depict the benefits for the health economy. This would require a uniform strategy across member states.

The member state proposed the creation of awards for exercise programs using quality seals, information campaigns on the importance of exercise and sport, the establishment of “exercise networks“ through “exercise managers“ and partnerships between the business world and the media for the successful implementation of comprehensive exercise initiatives.

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

The focus of messages about the health benefits of good dietary habits and physical activity should be parents, who in turn influence the habits of their children. GPs and other healthcare professionals have a key role to play in spreading these messages.

IV.5. European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)

No comments.

V.1. Consumer information, advertising and marketing

No comments.

V.2 Consumer education

– How can consumers best be enabled to make informed choices and take effective action?

Key messages should highlight the benefits of sport and physical activity not only in terms of improving one's health but also improving one's well-being and happiness.

– What contributions can public-private partnerships make toward consumer education?

No comments.

– In the field of nutrition and physical activity, which should be the key messages to give to consumers, how and by whom should they be delivered?

It is necessary to bear in mind that information is one of the variables that may produce behaviour change. But perhaps the most important variable is perceived efficacy in dealing with the problem. The solution is to think of easy and practical tools for people to take action. For example, increase the number of meals and decrease their size, use the food pyramid and observe variability. Another key

variable is availability. Individuals may be willing to become more active but if they do not have a gym near by, that could be an obstacle to behaviour change.

It should be defined clearly which type of and how much physical exercise and sport is healthy. Key data such as pulse rate, intake of calories, and the amount of muscle training from healthy exercise and sport should be communicated in as simple as possible a way taking into account the latest research results from sport and medical science.

V.3 A focus on children and young people

– What are good examples for improving the nutritional value of school meals, and how can parents be informed on how to improve the nutritional value of home meals?

No comments.

- What is good practice for the provision of physical activity in schools on a regular basis?

One member state noted that its programme offering 2 hours of high-quality PE or school sport per week was an excellent example of national good practice in this respect.

Another member state suggested that physical activity in schools should:

- Be daily, at least 3 times a week
- Be spread over the week
- Have sufficient real duration
- Be of at least moderate intensity with peaks of high intensity
- Be coached by highly qualified teachers
- Aim at the emotional well-being of pupils
- Offer links to extra-curricular sports activities

A third member state also suggested that it might be useful to prepare a paper demonstrating how physical activity in schools might be increased, including curricular and extra-curricular measures; the paper could be disseminated through all available national educational channels (eg Ministry of Education, school offices, associations of teachers and headmasters); EUPEA (European Physical Education Teacher Association) could be also involved in this process.

A fourth member state suggested promotion of sport for children should begin between the start of kindergarten and the end of primary school in close partnership with kindergartens, schools. and sport clubs.

During the pre-school phase children should be offered provision of targeted supplementary exercise in coordination with parents and possibly also the childcare institution (kindergarten, primary school). The key objective of these additional units of exercise should be the targeted promotion of the children's basic motor skills. With

regard to health prevention the objective would be to encourage and further develop children's enjoyment of exercise.

In addition to regular physical education pupils should have available further opportunities for exercise, play, and sport, e.g. in the form of afternoon/after-school activities. The objective would be to develop close cooperation between schools and sport clubs to this end. Children and adolescents could receive better support from qualified teachers and coaches, while any apprehensions that children felt about becoming involved in sports clubs could be overcome in this way.

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

It is vital to educate children and young people in PE classes about the importance of nutrition, while giving them examples of the vital role of physical exercise for health. Schools are also in a position to enable young people to understand what it is they are eating by teaching them to read and understand information about ingredients on food packaging. Moreover, there is an urgent need to disseminate scientifically proven intervention programmes for overweight and obese children and young people.

Nutritionists should be assigned to groups of schools to work with their canteens, while vending machines in schools could sell water and fruit.

– How can the media, health services, civil society and relevant sectors of industry support health education efforts made by schools? What role can public-private partnerships play in this regard?

No comments.

V.4 Food availability, physical activity and health education at the work place

– How can employers succeed in offering healthy choices at workplace canteens, and in improving the nutritional value of canteen meals?

No comments.

– What measures would encourage and facilitate the practice of physical activity during breaks, and on the way to and from work?

One member state proposed the following measures:

- National governments to support the construction of sports-facilities in working places (eg through tax relief or direct subventions)
- Employers to offer coached courses
- Employers to offer showers and changing rooms
- Employers to count part of the time spent in physical activity in the workplace as contributing towards hours worked
- Employers to offer secure bicycle parking areas

- Employers to set up sports teams to participate in competitions
- Employers to organize annual sports events for employees and their families
- Employers to offer reduced fees at fitness centres for employees
- Employers to offer free membership of fitness centres as a bonus or for long service

Another member state felt that it was essential for employees have access to adequate shower facilities, clothing and bicycle storage and changing rooms; similarly, safe walkways and cycle lanes were regarded as necessities. In their own experience at least, organised physical activity during breaks had not made any big advances. On the other hand, flexible working hours enabled employees to engage in sports during normal working hours and to replace the time spent in sports at another time. Favourable working conditions were decisive in this area.

A third member state felt that employees could be educated about the importance of everyday physical activity such as walking and climbing stairs for a healthy lifestyle.

In the view of a fourth member state, company health schemes should include sports medicine examinations with individual assessments and consultations, information on health, nutrition plans, exercise programmes, as well as information on opportunities for participation in healthy exercise with the objective of boosting the quality of life and work. Such initiatives could help to improve employee's performance and the self-confidence, improving the climate in the workplace, corporate communication and cooperation and reducing sickness absences. In the long term costs resulting from ill-health would be reduced and the image of the individual company would be enhanced.

V.5. Building overweight and obesity prevention and treatment into health services

– Which measures, and at what level, are needed to ensure a stronger integration aiming at promoting healthy diets and physical activity into health services?

One member state said that it had learned from experience that public healthcare was not able to take care of this area alone. However, the pooling of knowledge and expertise between health and sport administrations had produced promising results.

A second member state said that it had created a cross-departmental task force including the sports and health ministries to address these issues. One of the aims was to improve physical activity and nutrition knowledge among healthcare providers in order to develop their counselling capabilities.

At the national level, a third member state thought that the positive effects of physical activities for the individual and for the welfare state and public health system, especially in terms of the savings that result from comprehensive health promotion.

Solutions should be proposed for the implementation of exercise initiatives in national welfare and health systems, such as:

- health insurance contribution payments subject to the extent and the quality of corporate sport activities,
- financing schemes based on insurance,
- integration of all local authorities, including the statutory stipulation of preventive care measures for health promotion,
- including exercise programmes in private insurance and medical care
- use of exercise programmes not just in preventive but also in curative health (as a supplement to appropriate forms of therapy)

V.6 Addressing the obesogenic environment

– In which ways can public policies contribute to ensure that physical activity be “built into” daily routines?

One member state supported financial support for, and promotion of mass participation in sport through regional and local policies.

– Which measures are needed to foster the development of environments that are conducive to physical activity?

Member states suggested the following measures:

- Dedicated paths for walking and cycling
- A “walk to school” campaign, involving parents, local government employees, and police in accompanying pupils to school on foot.
- Creating safe and dry bicycle-parks, “bike-and-ride” schemes
- Creating a network of playgrounds, open spaces and other recreation facilities
- Closing school-areas to traffic at the beginning and end of the school day
- Reduce school-bus-service (eg stopping no less than 1km from the school)
- Local sport facilities and opportunities for exercise

V.7 Socio-economic inequalities

One member state put forward the following proposals to combat socio-economic inequalities as a barrier to physical activity:

- reduced membership fees for sports clubs
- time-limited free membership in sports clubs for beginners
- involving local offices for social services in:
 - the information process about physical activity
 - the consulting process about physical activity

The same member state noted that there were pronounced inequalities in physical activity according to gender; further measures were therefore needed to encourage

girls and young women to do more physical activity. It was also known that people with disabilities, from ethnic minorities and lower socio-economic groups have traditionally lower rates of participation in sport and physical activity than the national average. Programmes and interventions should therefore be specifically targeted at these groups at a local level. These comments also apply to section V.8 below.

A second member state thought that political approaches practicing positive discrimination and adequate strategies were needed in order to promote equality and inclusiveness.

A third member state took the view that the right conditions should be created, in particular at the level of the local community, that allow for uninhibited access to exercise and sport opportunities for all (independent of age, ethnic minority, gender, income status etc.). Adequate framework programmes and financial incentives should follow at the regional and state level. At the Community level, member states could share information about successful programmes.

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

– Which are the most important elements of an integrated and comprehensive approach towards the promotion of healthy diets and physical activity?

One member state thought that such an approach should:

- make use of existing settings (eg schools, sports clubs, youth clubs, clinics)
- be mostly based at the local level
- use positive rather than negative slogans (obesity vs. active and healthy lifestyle)
- have programmes across all age-groups
- have a mix of self-taught programmes and measures and of guided/organized courses and events
- have a mix of regular solutions and of greater events
- have PR-sustained programmes

A second member state took the view that healthy diet and physical activity should always be presented together, at the same level and with equal importance; the concept of energy balance should be emphasized as crucial. Access to both should be provided both at national and community level; but people were also responsible for changing their individual and collective behaviour.

Another member state felt that the objective of such an approach should be for responsible, body-conscious individuals to choose a healthy lifestyle of their own free will. It would help to integrate exercise and sport into everyday life if they were easily accessible.

– Which role at national and at Community level?

One member state felt that adequate programmes should be created and financial means provided both at the national and Community levels.

V.9. Recommendations for nutrient intakes and for the development of food-based dietary guidelines

– In which way could social and cultural variations and different regional and national dietary habits be taken into account in food-based dietary guidelines at a European level?

One member state took the view that dietary guidelines should not be too specific; it was also crucial to respect cultural issues.

– How can the gaps between proposed nutrient targets and actual consumption patterns be overcome?

No comments.

- How can dietary guidelines be communicated to consumers?

No comments.

– In which way could nutrient profile scoring systems such as developed recently in UK contribute to such developments?

No comments.

V.10. Cooperation beyond the European Union

– Under which conditions should the Community engage in exchanging experience and identifying best practice between the EU and non-EU countries? If so, through which means?

Member states thought that it would be useful to learn from the experiences of non-EU countries that have achieved an increase in participation rates in sport and physical activity. These countries could be asked how this increase was achieved and how much money was invested.

V.11. Other issues

– Are there issues not addressed in the present Green paper which need consideration when looking at the European dimension of the promotion of diet, physical activity and health?

One member state felt that a consensus upon the definition of key concepts such as “physical activity”, “sport”, “exercise” and “health” should be reached at European level, to form a basis for future work.

A second member state was strongly of the view that the Green Paper did not address the benefits of exercise and sport for the economy, in terms of the savings that

accrued from improved public health. According to recent research it can also be expressed in monetary dimensions. This visualisation of the economic benefit through cutting health costs leads to the creation of awareness on the value of exercise and sport and can lead to motivation for individual health promotion. At the same time decisionmakers would learn that every investment into this area produces a multiple return. As neither exercise nor sport feature in the European Union's framework programs no programmes for the promotion of mass participation in sport could be launched at the European Union level. However, this, in particular, fails to adequately promote the potential of mass sport for health promotion.

– Which of the issues addressed in the present Green paper should receive first priority, and which may be considered less pressing?

One member state felt that the issues addressed in sections V.3, V.2 and V.8 of the Green Paper should be given priority.

A second member state thought that the greatest priority needed to be given to the promotion of the benefits from sport for society through its positive effects on cutting health costs. This would make it possible to raise awareness among decision-makers which could in turn be translated into adequate investment in sport and physical activity.

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