

EUROPEAN COMMISSION GREEN PAPER:

*Promoting healthy diets and physical activity:
A European Dimension for the prevention of overweight,
obesity and chronic diseases*

A response from
 **WeightWatchers®**

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on behalf of Weight Watchers**

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1. Overview

- 1.1. Weight Watchers is Europe's largest weight management organisation. Since 1967, the organisation has helped millions of people across Europe successfully lose weight and control their weight for good. Weight Watchers warmly welcomes the European Commission's Green Paper and supports its efforts to address obesity and overweight across Europe.
- 1.2. Weight Watchers is delighted to have the opportunity to contribute to the Green Paper as part of the consultation process. We feel that the philosophy, success and understanding of weight loss makes us ideally placed to provide an informed, constructive and balanced insight into the challenge that is represented by obesity, and the role to be played by the Commission and Member States in combating it.
- 1.3. Our forty year history of working with individuals wanting to manage their weight has given us a unique insight into a variety of aspects of weight loss. Notably, this includes the elusive behaviour and support dimension, through the Weight Watchers programme which can be followed by attending community based weekly meetings, or more recently at-home and on-line. We have growing experience in working in partnership with health care services, through public/private collaboration. Weight Watchers also has in-depth knowledge of the role of food products within the ever growing food supply, and specifically in the development and marketing of healthier alternatives to traditional high calorie foods. We have analysed all these different aspects of the Weight Watchers programme and identified the elements that have a clear relevance and application for anyone looking to develop public policy in this area.
- 1.4. We have presented these elements below in a manner that reflects the structure and objectives of the Green Paper and takes into consideration the mandate of the EU in this area. As directed, we have addressed the questions posed by the Commission with straight-forward answers, backed up by a clear evidence and argument behind it and concrete proposals for future action.
- 1.5. Some of the content of this document has already been presented to individuals working in DG SANCO as part of Weight Watchers consultation efforts on the Nutrition and Health Claims Regulation, and the work of the Platform on Diet, Health and Physical Activity.
- 1.6. Weight Watchers would be happy for its submission to be made public, and very much looks forward to seeing the outcomes of the public consultation, and to playing a long-term advisory role to the European Commission and other institutions as it develops its strategy in this area.

2. Our Philosophy, Success and Understanding

2.1. The Weight Watchers programme incorporates four key pillars:

- **healthy eating**, with a flexible personalised plan, using portion control and normal foods, to achieve a moderate energy deficit
- increased **physical activity**, building regular and sustainable activity into everyday life
- a **behavioural approach**, using techniques from motivational interviewing and health behaviour change
- **regular contact and support** (weekly) for weight maintenance

- 2.2. Weight Watchers is a community weight loss service. It offers its members an effective, non-medical intervention, held in familiar local community venues, which they can easily access at times and locations which are suitable for them. There are no waiting lists.
- 2.3. Weight Watchers has good evidence that people following the programme lose significant amounts of weight¹ and can maintain that weight loss over long periods of time^{2,3}.
- 2.4. For example two published studies have shown that over 50% of Weight Watchers members who reached their goal weight, maintained a weight loss of 5% or more over 5 years.^{2,3} Even 5% weight loss produces significant health benefits^{4,5} and these results are impressive compared to other weight loss interventions. Indeed Weight Watchers has the best quality evidence base amongst all the commercial slimming programmes in the US⁶
- 2.5. Weight Watchers targets lower socio-economic groups and successfully attracts people in 'hard to reach' communities. It is currently researching and planning to enhance its services for men and people from different ethnic minority groups.
- 2.6. Personal support is an essential feature of successful weight loss⁷ and Weight Watchers provides this through its meetings. More than 12,200 meetings are held weekly in the 14 countries across Europe. Each week, members receive both individual support from their leader and group support, encouragement and motivation from their peers. Weight Watchers leaders are trained in motivational aspects of behaviour change based on Miller and Rollnick's work on motivational interviewing^{8,9}. As a consequence each leader has the skills to make a difference in a short period of time.
- 2.7. Weight Watchers has a membership of over one million people in the UK, and over 12,200 Weight Watchers meetings have been established across Europe.

3. Portion Control

Question: When providing nutrition information to the consumer, what are the major nutrients and categories of nutrients, to be considered and why?

Answer: Information on specific nutrients such as total energy, fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt is important for weight control, with clear, simple and consistent food labelling. Greater emphasis needs to be placed upon recognising, informing and helping the consumer understand the impact of the quantity of the food they eat and the key role of portion control in the prevention of the overweight, obese and chronic diseases

- 3.1. The Weight Watchers programme is based on the principles of healthy eating which are consistently recommended across European countries. Weight Watchers members are encouraged to consume more fruit, vegetables and starchy foods (particularly wholegrain varieties) whilst reducing intakes of fat (especially saturated fat), sugars and salt.
- 3.2. The **POINTS** system has been developed as a simple strategy to help members change their eating habits and lies at the heart of the Weight Watchers philosophy. **POINTS** values are calculated for any food or drink, based on calories and saturated fat content. These can then be calculated and taken from the 'bank' of **POINTS** for an individual depending on their starting and target weight.

- 3.3. Foods and drinks which are calorie dense have high **POINTS** values compared to those which are low in fat and sugars (e.g. lean meat, potatoes, rice, vegetables and fruit). For example, a 75g portion of cooked rice has a **POINTS** value of $1\frac{1}{2}$; 165g of chicken fillet has a **POINTS** value of $2\frac{1}{2}$; and a serving of green salad has a **POINTS** value of 0. Compare this with a jam doughnut which contains a **POINTS** value of $5\frac{1}{2}$.
- 3.4. Through the **POINTS** system members learn to eat more healthily and balance their energy intake from foods (and alcohol) against output through physical activity
- 3.5. As a means of supporting people trying to change their eating patterns, Weight Watchers has teamed up with over 30 food producers across Europe who manufacture products under the Weight Watchers name. The products are clearly labelled with a **POINTS** value reflecting the calorific and saturated fat content of the food in the UK or calorific and total fat content of the product in the rest of Europe. The calculations are slightly different but in most cases equate to the same value.
- 3.6. Because of the important role that these products play in the diets of Weight Watchers members, it is vital that their **POINTS** value is clearly and accurately measured and communicated if they are to help people manage their weight and keep faith in the programme.
- 3.7. To achieve reasonable **POINTS** values, Weight Watchers defines strict portion sizes for all food products. The **POINTS** value of a product is established according to the likely consumption of that product as part of a normal diet, rather than according to its weight. The principal of portion control is central to the support that Weight Watchers provides for changing dietary habits..
- 3.8. For example a Weight Watchers ready meal such as Chicken, Tomato and Spinach Lasagne being low in fat with a **POINTS** value of 6 for a 400g portion.
- 3.9. All Weight Watchers UK Ltd branded foods are clearly labelled on the front of pack in the trademark **POINTS** value per portion together with the calories and saturated fat or total fat depending on country per portion in recognisable lozenges. This immediately informs the purchaser of the amount a portion would contribute to their personal daily **POINTS** allowance.

Proposal: Weight Watchers calls upon the European Commission and Member States to recognise the key role of portion control in obesity prevention and place greater emphasis in the development of future labelling policy. This includes the use of claims as foreseen in the current Nutrition and Health Claims Regulation.

4. Consumer Behaviour

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

Answer: Truly informed choices require a high level of understanding amongst consumers of the many elements that influence their ability and motivation to manage their weight. This not only requires sound knowledge about appropriate diet and physical activity but also insight into the many underlying factors (often habits) which affect eating and activity behaviour. This understanding should focus on the behaviours of the individual themselves, and the thoughts, feelings and actions needed to alter this behaviour in order to manage their weight effectively.

- 4.1. In its Green Paper, The Commission organises its strategy for combating obesity and overweight along the two pillars of diet and physical activity. Whilst these are clearly two critical elements of weight management, evidence consistently shows that weight loss is best achieved not only by changes in diet and physical activity but also with behavioural support.
- 4.2. The findings from the Diabetes Prevention Programme⁴ and Finish Diabetes Prevention Study⁵ make a strong and convincing case for a behavioural approach. These prospective studies showed that significantly fewer obese patients developed type 2 diabetes following effective weight control. In both studies the lifestyle changes which resulted in weight control were achieved through behavioural interventions.
- 4.3. Weight Watchers has years of expertise in helping people change behaviours; what they eat, how much activity they do and how they live their lives. Our objective is to help people change these lifestyle habits through support, education and so called 'behavioural techniques'. Weight Watchers puts special focus on supporting changes in eating, physical activity and other habit patterns because research indicates that these are the essential elements of long term weight control

Proposal: Weight Watchers calls upon the European Commission to exercise its pan-European networks and mandate for health promotion initiatives to educate and inform consumers of the significant advantages that can be had in weight management through changes in individual behaviours. Developing skills in behaviour change – for consumers as well as those in a support role (eg. health professionals, sports and leisure workers) – will be an essential element of implementing a behavioural approach.

5. Public-Private Partnerships

Question: What contributions can public-private partnerships make towards consumer education?

Answer: A significant contribution. The Weight Watchers referral scheme in the UK has already demonstrated that collaboration between the public sector and a reputable private organisation can be highly effective, particularly where the industry contributor can fill major gaps in public sector resource, expertise and training.

- 5.1. Weight Watchers has been working with health professionals in the UK to support their fight against obesity. Over the last two years four local health authorities have piloted a scheme to refer their overweight patients to Weight Watchers meetings.
- 5.2. Local health services purchase subsidised Weight Watchers services to enable their patients to attend at no (or lower) cost to themselves. The results of these pilots are most encouraging and suggest that all partners are highly supportive of such schemes which result in at least one third of referred patients losing over 5% of their initial weight over a course of twelve weeks.
- 5.3. The proportion of patients achieving such weight losses was much higher (59%-75%) in those who completed 12 weeks or more. Based on these pilots, Weight Watchers UK now offers this service nationwide to the health service.
- 5.4. Pilot partnership projects between Weight Watchers and the National Health Service have been running across England and some of these interventions are located in areas

of real deprivation. Evaluative information is starting to emerge and provide insight on both the process and outcomes of a referral scheme.

- 5.5. Qualitative data from the pilot scheme in Islington Primary Care Trust indicated that General Practitioners, practice nurses and the dieticians involved in the scheme acknowledged that they did not have the time to offer patients the intensive input needed for effective weight loss interventions.
- 5.6. In addition, in 2002 Weight Watchers Germany established a network of physicians in response to the perceived lack of facilities for the long-term weight management of their patients. As part of the scheme, about 20.000 doctors make use of the free information material they receive, as well as the password protected website where doctors can find the latest research and studies for special indications. Surveys showed that about 80% of the general practitioners and gynaecologist in Western Germany (50% in Eastern Germany) recommend Weight Watchers to their overweight patients.

Proposal: Weight Watchers calls upon the European Commission to encourage Member States to identify cost-effective opportunities to partner with industry in a manner that relieves the economic burden of obesity. Particular attention should be paid to schemes that address the needs of people in socially and economically deprived communities.

6. Contact

For more information on the Weight Watchers Referral Scheme or other aspects of Weight Watchers' weight loss programme, please contact: Nicola Wraight, Weight Watchers UK, Tel. 00 1628 415216 e mail nwraight@weight-watchers.co.uk.

7. References

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