LGIB /LGA response to the European Commission’s reflections process on the future of EU health policy
11 October 2004

Introduction

1. The Local Government Association (LGA) represents the majority of local authorities of England and Wales – a total of just under 500 authorities. These local authorities represent over 50 million people. The LGA aims to put local councils at the heart of the drive to improve public services and to work with government to ensure that the policy, legislative and financial context in which they operate, supports that objective.

2. The Local Government International Bureau, often simply known as LGIB, acts principally as the European and international arm of the Local Government Association for England and Wales.

3. The LGA has recently submitted papers in response to the UK Government’s consultation on a white paper for health. The comments in those papers have formed the basis of the response to the Commission’s document.

4. Health services and health provision remains very much under the control of each individual EU Member State. However, the LGA welcomes the Commission’s reflections process for a new EU Health Strategy.

5. The LGA believes that the Commission has a role to play in promoting the health of all EU citizens and in providing the resources to assist national and sub-national government in health promotion and in reducing health inequalities.

Good health as a shared responsibility

6. Whilst the LGA welcomes the fact that the Commission acknowledges the need to bring together regional and national authorities, the health community and civil society, there is a glaring omission from the list of relevant partners.

7. The LGA is concerned that there is no mention of the important role of local authorities in the Commission’s reflections document. Local government plays a crucial role in public health in the UK and has a strong ability to act in response to demand for social action at a local level. The LGA believes that this should be recognised in the Commission’s document and in any future work programme.

8. Local authorities have a long history of consulting with their local communities and the leadership of local authorities enables them to work with other partners to make a real difference to the well-being of their communities.

9. Local authorities have always had a key role to play in health promotion and reducing health inequalities, in particular through their role as:
   - community leaders;
   - providers and enablers of services to all people in the community;
   - providing a safety net to socially excluded people; and
   - providers of local information and research.

10. For example, the LGA is working with the UK Government on a shared priority of “promoting healthier communities”¹. The aim of the project is to build the capacity of local authorities to work with partners to promote healthier communities and reduce health inequalities. The project will mean that health inequality issues are incorporated into the everyday work of local authorities.

¹ For more information on the LGA’s shared priority on promoting healthier communities, go to: http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/idx/core/page.do?pageld=77225
What is the role of the EU in achieving good health?

11. LGA welcomes the Commission’s acknowledgement of the many and broad determinants of health and health inequalities. A wealth of evidence suggests that it is the quality of the interactions between individuals, communities and their social and economic contexts that determine health status. Not only do the poorest individuals and communities have the least access to health and other essential services such as housing, education and transport, they may well not be able to access information on adopting healthier lifestyles. This is particularly the case when income levels are very low.

12. The Commission has a role in providing information and facilitating the exchange of good practice to Member States and to local government; the Commission also has role in enabling citizens to make the right choices but in order to do so they need to be better informed and be given understandable messages.

Should all governments ban smoking in public places?

13. The Local Government Association has urged the UK Government to introduce significant restrictions on smoking in public places.

14. The Local Government Association’s position on tobacco control is to support a phased, national approach, working in partnership with the hospitality industry, which would gradually introduce and then increase the proportion of smoke free areas in pubs, restaurants and other similar public places. This is a model that we believe has been implemented successfully in Norway.

What other actions could the EU take on nutrition, obesity and alcohol?

15. One of the primary determinants of many problems such as heart disease, some cancers and stroke is poverty; The LGA believes that the EU should look more at the underlying causes of illness and tackle the origins and determinants of health inequalities. This would enable health authorities and local and regional authorities the opportunity to promote health through all policies.

16. Greater effort needs to be made at EU, Member State and local government levels to educate the public, particularly children, on the lifestyle choices that affect their mental and physical health. The Commission could provide the information and resources to promote health lifestyle choices, food and activity to the general public.

17. In building on the Commission’s Environment & Health Action plan, the LGA believes that it is vital that more attention is given to the impacts of a degraded and degrading environment on human health. Polluted air and water and residues are likely to have a profound impact on public health in the short and longer term.

18. The LGA would welcome a role for the EU to enable the exchange of best practice on health promotion activities between local authorities in different Member States and would also welcome the provision of a strong knowledge base.

19. The LGA reminds the Commission that it will be vital to ensure it provides the adequate resources needed to implement a new health strategy and also ensures that the programme will be accessible to local authorities.

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