

NCB Member Briefing

Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives: A Cross-Government Strategy for England

HM Government, published 23 January 2008

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_082378

Background and Overview:

This strategy is intended to support the government's delivery of its long-term commitment to reversing trends in obesity and weight gain among the population, with an initial focus on children. It forms part of the government's new Public Service Agreement (PSA) on child health and well-being: to reduce the proportion of overweight and obese children to 2000 levels by the year 2020.¹ The Strategy also builds on targets set in 2004 for tackling child obesity in order to halt the year-on-year rise in obesity among children aged under 11 by 2010. The Strategy acknowledges that government action alone cannot resolve the scale and complexity of the problem; individuals, community and industry must be involved. Based on evidence from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) and others, five main policy areas are identified where government action is likely to succeed: to promote children's health; to promote healthy food; to promote physical activity; to provide incentives more widely to promote health; and to provide effective treatment, advice and support. Across the five main areas proposed are: transformation of opportunities for children to make healthy choices; support provided by information; and practical help, where needed.

The strategy constitutes a first step in a sustained programme to support children in maintaining a healthy weight and lifestyle; continue to examine emerging evidence on what more the government can do; and invest in research to deepen knowledge of the causes and consequences in the rise of excess weight. Assessment of progress will be published annually to develop and intensify the policy focus.

The strategy announces that the government will make an additional £372 million available for promoting the achievement and maintenance of healthy weight over the period 2008–11. This will supplement the £1.3 billion investment in school food, sport and play; and the £140 million for Cycling England for 2008–11.

The Challenge and New Ambition – A Healthy Weight for All (Chapters 1 and 2)

The challenge: A third of children are currently obese or overweight and the government Office for Science's Foresight programme suggests that without action, this will rise to two-thirds of all children by 2050. The rate of increase is far greater than in other European countries. Obese children are present in all socio-economic groups. Obesity leads to diseases such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease and liver

¹ HM Treasury (2007) *PSA Delivery Agreement 12: Improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people*

disease that ultimately curtail life expectancy, put pressure on families and have significant social and economic costs. The document identifies the impact of parental behaviour on children; the difficulty for children to make healthy choices where others in the family and community maintain unhealthy behaviour; reduced levels of physical activity in children; and the impact of new forms of technology, TV and the urban environment on restricting children's well-being.

New Ambition: This builds on initiatives including new food-based standards in schools, School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme 5-A-Day, the *Travelling to School* project and changes to food labelling. The government aims to move away from a sole focus on obesity to one of 'promoting healthy weight and healthy lives', although the initial focus will remain on tackling the obese and overweight. A further shift in approach recognises that weight is a problem for adults as well as children, although the paper says that the evidence supports an initial focus on children and the importance of early years and children's services as an avenue for change.

Indicators: The Department of Health (DH) and Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) will be jointly responsible for child obesity. The first three years of the 12-year period stipulated, 2008—11, will be monitored through the inclusion of child obesity as one of the indicators in the child health PSA. Indicators of BMI in Reception and Year 6 will be used to measure development, but to avoid focus solely on these age groups, the government commits to publishing an annual report setting out performance in:

- Children in Reception Year: overweight and obesity levels
- Children in Year 6: overweight and obesity levels
- Young adults: overweight and obesity levels (based on Health Survey for England data)
- Adults: overweight and obesity levels (based on Health Survey for England data)

Because changes to Body Mass Index (BMI) can take some time to become apparent, BMI indicators will be complemented with a range of early indicators of success, based on the evidence of what causes or correlates to weight problems. These are likely to include: take up of school meals, portions of fruit and vegetables consumed daily per child; and number of school children doing at least two hours of sport per week.

Achieving the Ambition (Chapter 3)

Immediate plans for children are outlined under the following 5 main policy areas:

1. Children - Healthy growth and healthy weight:

Pregnancy and early years: The provision of information on child health to parents during pregnancy and the first years of life will be supported through the following measures:

Early identification of at-risk families

- (Continued) Provision of advice on healthy weight gain in pregnancy to mothers identified as overweight or obese at 12-week assessment

Promoting breastfeeding as the norm

- Investment in an information campaign to promote the benefits of breastfeeding as part of a wider programme of campaigns on healthy development

- Support for a national helpline for breastfeeding mothers
- Promoting breastfeeding in maternity units by creating conducive environments
- Pilot and roll out World Health Organisation (WHO) growth standards
- Developing a code of best practice for employers and businesses to support the practice of breastfeeding

Guidance for professionals working with children

- Guidance on breastfeeding and support groups

Support for families

- Investment of a further £30 million to enable the *Family Nurse Partnership* to be piloted in more areas
- Evaluate effective provision to support vulnerable children and families

Children and Young People: The strategy outlines the responsibilities of schools to provide a healthy environment for children and young people to learn and develop. In addition to the duty of schools to promote well-being of pupils (guidance due early 2008) and a commitment in the *Children's Plan* in developing strong school level indicators, including child obesity, are the following measures:

Healthy eating culture and active childhood

- The government now expects all schools to adopt food policies to promote healthy eating, including lunch box policies and eating arrangements
- £225 million investment in playgrounds and a national strategy on play (due first half of 2008), as stipulated in the *Children's Plan*

More children cycling

- Improving infrastructure and cycling skills in selected areas where child obesity is a particular problem, funded by £140 million for Cycling England

Information to support parents

- Give better information about children's health by providing parents with results for the National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) which weighs and measures children in Reception and Year 6
- Invest £75 million in an integrated evidence-based marketing programme to inform, support and empower parents to make informed changes to their children's diet and lifestyle. The programme will include 'simple universal messages' for all families and will emphasise activities and opportunities in the local area

2. Promoting Healthier Food Choices:

The Food and Drink Industry

- The paper states the need for more to be done by the food industry to change and support people's ability to make healthier choices. The government will work with industry leaders and other relevant stakeholders to finalise a Healthy Food Code of Good Practice as a challenge to the industry as a whole
- Promote flexibilities contained within planning regulations to enable local authorities to manage the proliferation of fast food outlets near schools

Food advertising and marketing

- To bring forward the Ofcom review on advertising of unhealthy foods for children to re-examine restrictions already in place and their impact; and encourage promotion of healthy eating messages

3. Building physical activity into our lives:

Promoting participation in physical activity

- The government proposes support for a 'Walking into Health' campaign which will aim to get more people walking
- Set up a working group with the entertainment technology industry to develop tools to enable parents to manage time children spend playing sedentary games online
- The government will review its overall approach to physical activity through the HM Treasury-led development of a new physical activity strategy, aligned with its ambition on healthy weight. It will seek to ensure the agenda is pushed through Sport England, the opportunity presented by the 2012 Olympic Games and by establishing a new body: 'Active England', to drive through the government's commitments to wider physical activity

A supportive built Environment

- Promote 'active travel' and increased walking and cycling over car use: to promote healthier living and provide additional benefits for climate change and the wider environment
- Improve infrastructure by working with planners and architects, developing exemplars of best practice and using the planning policy review to build on the 'healthy communities' agenda set out in the *Children's Plan* to improve public spaces for play
- £30 million is committed during 2008–11 to the Healthy Community Challenge Fund in which a number of interested local authorities will improve infrastructure in 'Healthy Towns'

4. Creating Incentives for Better Health:

Employer Incentives

The paper emphasises the workplace as key to promoting health. The government will:

- Work with employers and employer organisations to develop ways of promoting wellness
- Explore how sport and leisure facilities can be made more available to families under flexible working conditions
- Pilot well-being assessments throughout the NHS in spring 2008

Incentives across Society

The government plans to rework the incentives for individuals and public bodies to encourage action now that will benefit the future, but states more work is needed to understand what kind of incentives work. Now it will:

- Build up its knowledge of what would help families to change their behaviour
- Pilot approaches of using financial incentives to encourage healthy living and lifestyle change

5. Personalised advice and support:

Personalised Support for All

- Develop the already launched NHS choices website to give personalised advice on diet, activity and how to maintain healthy weight
- Support the commissioning of more weight management services with provision of extra funding
- Ensure healthcare professionals are equipped to support adults and families, and develop a 'Let's Get Moving' resource pack

Delivering Change (Chapter 4)

In order to deliver long-term effective change, the strategy emphasises the need for 'everyone to play their part': individuals, families; teachers, schools; doctors, nurses and the wider health service; food and advertising industries. As part of this broader emphasis the government highlights the need for a 'wider cultural shift', including changes to parenting behaviours that lead to childhood overweight and obesity. This agenda informs the government's plan for a £75 million marketing programme to communicate 'universal messages' about healthy lifestyle and well-being. The messages will be tailored to at-risk families and products will be developed for those who have the greatest need.

The strategy is clear that any plans on child obesity should be closely aligned to local Children and Young People's Plans (CYPPs). The role of staff from a wide range of organisations will be critical in addressing child obesity and related training programmes already in place will be built upon to spread good practice. The government will also publish guidance for Primary Care Trusts, local authorities and other local organisations supported by the Obesity National Support Team established in September 2007.

Investing in Our Knowledge (Chapter 5)

Building on the use of NCMP data for accountability of performance in tackling obesity, the government will develop comprehensive data to track trends in weight of people of all ages. There will be investment in further research to strengthen understanding of the causes and consequences for children in the rise of obesity. The Obesity Observatory, established in December 2007, will assess development, strengths and weaknesses of the Obesity task force.

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