

Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs

Childhood obesity

Opening Statement: Department of Children and Youth Affairs

September 26th 2018

Introduction

Chairperson, Committee Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to present to the Committee today on the matter of tackling childhood obesity.

The Committee will be aware of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, which was launched in 2014.

This whole-of-Government policy framework identifies a range of measures to improve outcomes for children and young people, including measures to address childhood obesity.

Since its publication and through its implementation structures, childhood obesity has been identified as a priority for cross-sectoral action. The Department of Health leads on this with the support of other Government Departments, including the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Better Outcomes Brighter Futures has facilitated new opportunities to strengthen cross-sectoral engagement and buy-in, in particular through Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) across the country.

The DCYA is committed to supporting the Department of Health with this and its wider work in this area. DCYA was delighted to be able to assist the Department of Health in the development of the Obesity Policy by facilitating children and young people themselves to input to it and shape its content. DCYA is represented on the Oversight Group that has been established to oversee implementation of this Policy. It is also represented on the healthy eating sub-group.

For this opening statement, I will concentrate on relevant areas of work, which DYCA has progressed.

Early Childhood Education and Care

As the Government Department with lead responsibility for early childhood education and care or ECEC, we recognise we have a role to play in ensuring that publically funded ECEC services seize the opportunities they are presented with to positively influence children's outcomes.

We know that, for children attending these services on a full-time basis in particular, ECEC provides a significant proportion of a child's daily food intake – as much as 70 percent. We also know that the universal free pre-school programme, ECCE, is availed of by 96 percent of children in this country from the age of 2 years 8 months and provides a significant opportunity to influence healthy eating habits from this early stage.

We have in place Regulations, which stipulate that services must ensure that all children in attendance at ECEC services receive a nutritious diet, which takes account of individual needs and preferences. The Tusla Early Years Inspectorate inspects against these Regulations.

Under these Regulations, ECEC services are required to develop a Policy on Healthy Eating in line with resources developed by Department of Health, the HSE and safefood, specifically:

- Food and Nutrition Guidelines
- Serving Size Guidelines
- Sample 3 Week Menu Plan

Siolta, the National Quality Framework for ECEC also recognises the importance of proactively promoting the development of healthy eating habits in children whilst supporting their enjoyment and appreciation of eating as a positive social experience. Within these standards, services are encouraged to inform children and raise awareness with parents and families about healthy eating.

Play and Recreation

Increasing play and activity are key elements in the treatment and prevention of childhood obesity and, under the Regulations, ECEC services must also promote safe physical play and activity – both indoors and out. The DCYA has administered a number of annual capital grant schemes for ECEC services to support the purchase of outdoor play equipment so to encourage outdoor play and activity.

More broadly, since its establishment in 2011, the DCYA has supported play and recreation through:

- Establishing the Local Authority Play and Recreation Network to bring a more coordinated approach to supporting play and recreation at local level.
- Providing annual funding for play and recreation initiatives, including support for the annual National Play Day and National Recreation Week events that raise the profile of play and recreation at local level.
- Administering the DCYA Capital Grant Scheme for Play and Recreation to support the development or refurbishment of play and recreation facilities.

Prevention and early intervention

In recognition of the importance of early childhood for laying the foundations for later development, where positive behaviours such as a healthy diet and weight are established, the DCYA has, in partnership with Atlantic Philanthropies, progressed a range Prevention and Early Intervention initiatives. These have added to the evidence base on how to improve children's outcomes and in particular, how to tackle childhood obesity.

The evaluation of one particular initiative – Preparing for Life - found that at age 4, children in that programme were less likely to be overweight. 23% of the children of families receiving this programme were overweight at 48 months, compared to 41% of children that did not.

Work on mainstreaming the learning from this and other initiatives is now underway with the support of Tusla.

National Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families

The DCYA is in the process of finalising the National Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families. This ten-year Strategy will focus on the first five years of a child's life. As with Better Outcomes Brighter Futures, one of the goals of this Strategy will focus on children's health and the issue of childhood obesity will be given priority.

We have been working very closely with the Department of Health to identify potential actions to add to the significant programme of work already committed to under the Obesity Policy.

Among the areas for consideration are strengthening the role played parents and families and the wider community, including ECEC services, where early development unfolds for most young children.

The Strategy will be published by the end of this year.

Conclusion

Thank you for your time and attention and I am happy to discuss any issues raised.

Ends