

Joint Committee on Children & Youth Affairs: Childhood Obesity

Opening Statement : Department of Health, 26 September 2018

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Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Committee

I want to thank you for this opportunity to present to the Committee on this important topic of childhood obesity, which is a public health priority.

The Committee will be aware of the Government's National Obesity Policy and Action Plan, which was launched in 2016 under the auspices of the Healthy Ireland agenda.

This Policy, which takes a 'whole system' approach, and covers a ten-year period up to 2025, was developed with a high degree of consultation, including with children and young people.

Childhood obesity is a key priority under the Policy, as is reducing the inequalities we see in obesity rates, where children (and adults) from lower socioeconomic groups have higher levels of obesity.

While recent data suggests a stabilisation in levels of overweight and obesity in children and adults, and any positive direction in the trends is welcome, there is certainly no room for complacency.

Being a healthy weight is no longer the norm, and the Obesity Policy seeks to drive a society-wide change in norms around healthy lifestyles, and healthy environments, to prevent a significant range of health complications, and to reduce the overall burden for individuals, families, the health system, and the wider society and economy.

I will concentrate in this opening statement to report to the Committee on some early progress and priorities in implementing the Obesity Policy.

As with all our work under Healthy Ireland, cross-Departmental and cross-sectoral co-operation is fundamental to our approach to implementation.

This involves in particular working with the other two Departments here today, but also across Rural and Community Development, Sport, Planning, Social Protection, as well as local authorities, the health services, the education sector, and, most importantly, engaging with citizens and communities across the country.

The Department of Health has established an Obesity Policy Implementation Oversight Group, comprising of officials from a range of other Departments as well as key academic and health agency representation.

Sub-groups on Reformulation and on Healthy Eating have been established as initial priority areas for action.

Work has commenced on a Roadmap for Reformulation of foods and drinks to reduce sugar and fat content, and engagement with the industry will be a key factor in delivering on that.

In addition, a voluntary code of practice for food and beverages promotion, marketing and sponsorship has also been developed involving representatives from the food industry, advertising sector, statutory agencies, and various Government Departments. This Code was published in February and work is underway to operationalise it.

A Sugar-Sweetened Drinks Tax commenced on the 1st of May this year, and work is underway with the Department of Finance on evaluation of this measure.

New Healthy Eating Guidelines and Food Pyramid resources have been published, and widely disseminated, including to all primary and post-primary schools.

New Nutrition Standards for the School Meals Scheme have been introduced.

Work has commenced on developing Healthy Eating Guidelines for the 1-5 year old age group, which will be a valuable resource for parents and carers in the future.

In the HSE the Healthy Eating, Active Living programme is supporting work in the education sector, as well as with parents, families and communities in delivering a more co-ordinated approach to prevention and early intervention in child obesity.

This includes a five-year communications campaign, called START, which is being delivered in collaboration with the HSE and safefood, with a focus on supporting parents make healthy choices around food and activity

A first Clinical Lead for Obesity, Professor Donal O'Shea was appointed in 2017. Health assessments (including weight checks) were introduced in the GP under-6s contract. The HSE is also implementing a national Breastfeeding Action Plan which is very important and relevant to this topic.

Under the broader Healthy Ireland agenda, a number of other major initiatives support the Obesity Policy:

- The National Physical Activity Plan is one of the key developments arising from Healthy Ireland, and implementation of that Plan is well underway in collaboration with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and a range of other stakeholders.
- The Healthy Ireland 2018 Communications campaign aims to encourage people to make a small, healthy change under three themes – Healthy Eating, Physical Activity and Mental Wellbeing, and we are working with a range of national and local partners to deliver a range of communications and citizen engagement activities.
- The Healthy Ireland Fund, which was initiated in 2017 has supported a range of actions at both national and local level, many of which are targeted at children and which aim to support the Obesity Policy and the Physical Activity Plan

Finally, I am pleased to advise the Committee that the Government recently agreed to establish a Healthy Ireland Office in the Department of Health to build on the progress to date, and further strengthen cross-Government collaboration on the implementation of Healthy Ireland.

This development will bolster our collective efforts to implement key policies including the Obesity Policy, all aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of our population.

I hope the members of the Committee finds this brief update useful, and I am pleased to answer any questions that you may have.

Thank you for your attention.