

**Meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on
Children and Youth Affairs**

On Childhood Obesity 10th October 2018

Opening statement

Mr Colin Ryan Senior Planning Adviser DHPLG

I am pleased to have the opportunity to meet with you today to assist your Committee's deliberations in relation to tackling childhood obesity.

In particular I understand that the committee, as part of its deliberations, wishes to discuss two planning issues relevant to the topic, namely:

1. The appropriate planning considerations relating to the location of proposed fast food outlets in the vicinity of school premises; and
2. The availability of public spaces for children's activities.

By way of introduction, it is important to state that the overall thrust of national planning policy is to promote the development of good places to live, work and play.

A key part of the place-making agenda is to ensure that, through our planning processes, we take all the necessary steps to encourage, facilitate and integrate physical activity for citizens of all ages and physical abilities and mobility into the design of our existing and future communities.

In practical terms one of the best ways of achieving this is to prioritise forms of development that benefit from good accessibility in terms of walking and cycling facilities and to continually strive for the improvement of such facilities in both existing and newly developing areas.

This is in the overall context of an increasing population in the national population (1 million extra by 2040) with the number of people aged 15 or under predicted to continue to increase until the early 2020's and decline only slowly thereafter.

While national and strategic planning policy is set out in the National Planning Framework, Regional Economic and Development Strategies and local authority development plans, the key operational planning document that deals with the issues under consideration by the committee is the statutory guideline for planning authorities on Local Area Plans issued by the Minister in 2013 .

Section 5 of these Guidelines offers advice as regards the structure and content of local area plans and sets out a range of policies that can be put in place to promote and facilitate active and healthy living patterns for local communities.

These include:

- promoting walking and cycling as modes of transport;
- accessibility to public open spaces, recreational and sports facilities;
- proximity of new development to sustainable travel modes;
- provision of play areas; and
- careful consideration of the appropriateness of the location of fast food outlets in the vicinity of schools and parks.

A practical effect of these Guidelines with regard to fast-food outlets is that consideration can be given to the appropriateness of their location in the vicinity of schools and parks, for example in newly developing areas, while at the same time taking into account wider land use considerations such as the clustering of uses in close proximity to each other to allow for access by foot or bike.

However, with regard to the many schools located in or near existing developed town centres, the practical implications of restricting fast-food outlets in these kinds of situations needs to be carefully considered, in view of the mix of existing uses typically found in urban areas.

Moreover, in focusing on limiting the exposure of school going children to the availability of fast food there could be unintended consequences regarding the location of future schools, in that they may be located in less central locations with knock-on implications for promoting non car accessibility.

In addition, planning policy with regard to the location of fast-food outlets needs to be considered also within the wider policy context of practical steps that can be taken to more widely promote and facilitate active and healthy living patterns by enhancing scope for activities such as walking, cycling and sports and active leisure pursuits and their associated facilities.

For example, ensuring effective pedestrian and cycle networks can develop between residential areas and between those areas and schools and locations where shops and local services are provided should be a priority. In reality, the development or even the retention of such links, that are so essential to maximising physical activity, can be highly contentious locally as many of the members here may attest to.

Regarding the availability of public spaces for children's activities, our general planning policy approach has been and will continue to be one that actively promotes their provision.

Planning policy has over a long period of time sought to support the delivery of a range of public spaces commensurate to the scale of development, from informal open spaces up to regional parks which allow for a range of activities.

Furthermore in the light of increased population, this means that the continued provision and enhancement of facilities and amenities for children and young people, such as playgrounds, parks and sportsgrounds, remains necessary and will need to be maintained at similar levels for the foreseeable future.

It also means that, with a significant proportion of future population growth occurring within or close to the current built-up footprint of settlements, it will be possible to maximise the use of existing facilities near where children and young people live, through the provision of enhanced facilities.

As I referred to previously, a key planning issue, is the integration of healthy living into the built environment, which allows for the informal incorporation of improved fitness into every day life.

To assist in achieving this objective the Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets (DMURS) has been produced. This provides practical guidance to assist in the design and development of active and safe neighborhoods for walking and cycling. In this regard it is important to

emphasise the need to integrate good, appropriate, linkage for walking and cycling to public spaces, particularly those at the level that serve a town or large urban settlement where more formal physical activities such as field sports are undertaken. This allows for children or young adults, as appropriate, to access these facilities without necessarily relying on the car.

From a planning perspective, a key consideration in promoting active and healthy lifestyles, physical activity and combating one of the causes of obesity is improving accessibility within our urban settlements for non-car based modes of transport. At the same time, however, we have to recognise that there are a range of uses which are appropriate for urban settlements in order them to serve all members of the community.

I am happy to take questions.