

# **Submission to the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs on the topic of: Tackling Childhood Obesity**

**National Youth Council of Ireland**

**National Youth Health Programme**

**June 2018**

## **1. Introduction**

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) is the representative body for 51 voluntary youth organisations in Ireland, 380,000 young people, 40,000 volunteers and 1,400 paid staff (NYCI, 2012)<sup>1</sup>. NYCI functions to represent the interests of young people and youth work organisations. NYCI's role is recognised in legislation (Youth Work Act) and as a social partner. NYCI aims, through its member organisations and its representative role to empower young people to participate in society as fulfilled confident individuals. The work of the Youth Council is based on principles of equality, social justice and equal participation for all. In achieving these aims, the NYCI seeks the emergence of a society in which young people are valued citizens who can make a meaningful contribution to their community.

**1.1** The National Youth Health Programme (NYHP) is a partnership between the National Youth Council of Ireland, the HSE and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The NYHP's work has, and continues to be informed by key strategic and policy developments within the Health Sector. The HSE Health Promotion Strategic Framework (HSE, 2011)<sup>2</sup> promotes a 'settings based approach' for health promotion in Ireland. The youth setting is identified in the Strategic Framework as a key setting for health promotion. The NYHP works to develop and build the capacity and sustainability of youth health promotion across the youth sector in line with evidence based and evidence informed practice. This is achieved through;

- Building a culture of health and wellbeing across the youth work sector
- Working in partnership with NYCI member organisations and the wider youth work sector
- Supporting the practical application of learning and continuous professional development that enhances the knowledge, skills and approaches of youth workers, volunteers and their services
- Putting the health and wellbeing needs of young people at the centre of our thinking

The NYHP endorses a settings based approach, focusing on the broader determinants of health rather than simply addressing individual and behavioural risk factors. The approach is underpinned by values such as empowerment, public participation, equity and partnership.

### **Key Strategic Themes NYHP**

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| <b>1.</b> Support the development of effective, sustainable, evidence informed and evidence based youth work settings which are focussed on enhancing the health and wellbeing of young people across Ireland | <b>2.</b> Facilitate the wide scale application of effective and sustainable health promoting and service improvement practices within youth work organisations | <b>3.</b> Use our unique position to identify and collate the youth work sector experiences of youth health issues in order to inform national policy and achieve better outcomes for young people |
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**1.2** The NYHP supports the youth work sector in preventing obesity, promoting physical activity and enhancing wellbeing through the implementation and accreditation of the Health Quality Mark (HQM).

The HQM currently supports 26 youth work organisations throughout Ireland to develop and deliver a ‘whole organisational approach’ to promoting health. This occurs within the organisations through 4 distinct approaches and meeting 12 criteria. These 4 approaches are based on the World Health Organisation’s Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion action<sup>3</sup> and include:

- Developing personal skills through health education
- Partnerships with others
- Creating supportive environments
- Policy development

The 12 criteria to achieve HQM status include:

- Health Promotion Policy
- Role description for health promoter and terms of reference
- Organisational health promotion strategy (includes a youth health promotion strategy and a workplace health promotion strategy)

- Youth participation structures
- Peer health promotion initiative
- Resource bank for health promotion
- Training plan for staff/volunteers and management
- Intersectoral working and partnerships
- Model of good practice for health promotion activities (needs assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation)
- Health and safety policy and procedures
- Ensuring and promoting equality and inclusiveness
- Child protection policy and procedures

The HQM is awarded to organisations at bronze, silver and gold status depending on the number of criteria met and implemented by organisations.

- 12 criteria – Gold HQM
- 8 criteria – Silver HQM
- 2 criteria – Bronze HQM

## **2. Background**

Preventing and tackling obesity within youth work organisations is an ongoing process, using a sustainable, holistic approach rather than implementing individual programmes and one-off events. To improve the health of young people, all HQM organisations give consideration to the broader social determinants of health (Dahlgren and Whitehead, 1991)<sup>4</sup> and the context of young peoples' lives rather than simply addressing individual and behavioural risk factors. Youth work organisations provide an informal yet developmental space for young people to learn the practical skills that can support a healthy weight e.g. food preparation, cooking, and growing fruit and vegetables. Much of this work is supported by a health promotion and/or healthy eating policy. Some organisations also tackle food insecurity by providing food for vulnerable young people. An example of this would be the work carried out by No4 Youth Service, Galway and their partnership with the Food Cloud (Read more: <http://www.youthhealth.ie/sites/youthhealth.ie/files/GDYS%20Programme.pdf> ). Not only does the programme aim to enhance the young person's practical skills and knowledge in relation to nutrition and healthy eating, the programme provides healthy, nutritious meals to young people who may not have the resources to acquire such a meal outside the service.

In addition, some HQM organisations have in place a strict policy on energy drinks, which are negatively influencing not only a young person's physical health but also, their social and mental health due to disturbances in sleep. According to some youth workers',

*'A new area of concern is the use of energy drinks with high level of caffeine. These are causing sleep disturbances and contribute to behaviour problems or attention'.*

**2.1.** Physical activity plays an important dual role in the youth work sector. Engaging young people in physical activity supports youth work organisations to help them meet their recommended physical activity guidelines, maintain a healthy weight and support general wellbeing. It also supports organisations to fulfil their remit to enhance the personal and social development of the young person as youth workers use physical activity as a tool for developing life skills such as communication and leadership in young people.

In a rapid needs assessment on physical activity conducted in 2016/2017 by the NYHP, 80% of youth workers surveyed reported that physical activity was delivered in their organisation once a week.<sup>5</sup> However, youth workers also identified a number of areas where they need further support to engage and maintain young people's participation in physical activity:

- Physical activity training was identified as a need among the youth work sector
- Only 20% had an excellent level of knowledge of physical activity and its benefits
- 60% of youth workers stated barriers in delivering physical activity e.g. space and transport
- 60% of youth workers stated that certain groups such as teenage girls and vulnerable young people are extremely difficult to engage in physical activity
- 90% identified a need for more resources to increase young people participation in physical activity

Youth organisations occupy a unique space in the lives of young people in that their attendance and participation in programmes is voluntary and complements their formal or vocational education. Further feedback from the NYHP's needs assessment shows that physical activity in this informal setting is generally non-competitive. The youth workers take the young people's

interests in to account when planning activities and focus on utilising the resources that exist in the local community where possible, which were identified as enablers of physical activity.

**2.2.** It must be highlighted that, obesity and lack of physical activity not only affects a young person's physical health, it can also influence their sexual, social, mental and emotional health. In addition, new technologies, online platforms and social media are all influencing what young people eat, how they view food, how they view their bodies, physical activity, and their self-belief and confidence. According to Gordon (2017)<sup>6</sup>, online personnel are heavily influencing the purchase behaviour of the young people in Ireland. Two recent rapid needs assessments carried out by the NYHP (Young Men's Health Report, 2018<sup>7</sup> and Mental Health Needs Consultation, 2015<sup>8</sup>); found that body image (90%) and confidence (76%) are issues affecting the young people in Irish society today.

*'Online and social media, influence how young men view their bodies'*

*'Young people have unhealthy relationships with physical activity and food. Young men think that weight exercise will solve everything- body image for the girls, but sexual issues, sexuality, dealing with body image'. – Youth Worker*

Therefore, to tackle the growing epidemic of obesity in Ireland, it is essential to take a holistic approach and resource and equip the settings where young people engage. Specific recommendations are outlined below.

### **3. Policy Context**

The work that NYHP carries out in relation to tackling obesity, fits under various national policies and strategies, which include:

- Healthy Ireland 2013-2025 (HI): The framework for improving health and wellbeing of the Irish population. The vision of HI is where everyone can enjoy physical and mental wellbeing to their full potential, where wellbeing is valued and supported at every level of society and is everyone's responsibility.

Action 2.1, Action 3.1, Action 3.4, Action 3.9, Action 4.8, Action 4.9

- A Healthy Weight for Ireland: Obesity Policy and Action Plan (2016-2025): strives to empower individuals, families and health communities to enhance their own skills to improve their health. Action 1.2, Action 3.4, Action 6.7, Action 9.1
- Get Ireland Active! National Physical Activity Plan for Ireland: to increase physical activity levels across the entire population thereby improving the health and wellbeing of people living in Ireland. Action 1.4, Action 1.7, Action 6.37.
- Better Outcomes Brighter Futures 2014-2020: To make Ireland the best small country in the world in which to grow up, raise a family and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled. Outcome 1: Active and Healthy: All children and young people are physically healthy and able to make positive health choices, have good mental health, and have a positive and respectful approach to relationships and sexual health.
- National Youth Strategy 2015-2020: To enable all young people to realise their maximum potential, by respecting their rights and hearing their voices, while protecting and supporting them as they transition from childhood to adulthood. Outcome 1, Objective 1: Active and Healthy: Young people enjoy a healthy lifestyle, in particular with regard to their physical, mental and sexual health and wellbeing.
- Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes 2014: 7 potent mechanisms
  - Communication skills: essential for a successful transition to work or training, for independence, and to access a range of life opportunities, to attainment, in forming positive relations and in reductions in re-offending
  - Relationships: A beneficial change in young people's relationships with older adults through their participation in positive activities can be transferred to academic learning and may lead to better outcomes
  - Confidence and agency: Enables young people to recognise that they can make a difference to their own lives, that effort has a purpose, and is important to key outcomes such as career success. There is evidence of a link between positive outcomes and self-confidence.

- Resilience and determination: If society intervenes early enough, it can improve cognitive and socio-emotional abilities and the health of disadvantaged children. Effective early interventions can promote schooling, reduce crime, foster workforce productivity and reduce teenage pregnancy. Self-discipline has been highlighted as a vital factor in building academic achievement, significantly better than IQ.

#### **4. Recommendations**

A holistic and comprehensive approach to the prevention and management of obesity is essential to halt the rising rates of obesity in Irish society. It must be recognised that the various dimensions of health all play a contributing factor in the prevention and management of obesity and it is not specific to physical health. Young people need to recognise and be supported to develop their knowledge and competency regarding healthier lifestyle choices through to developing their practical skills and accessing reliable information. The National Youth Health Programme propose the following recommendations:

- Continued support and promotion of the National Youth Council's HQM (Health Quality Mark) within the youth work sector which provides youth work organisations with the opportunity to embed health promotion practice within their services and be recognised as a quality youth health promoting setting on a national level
- Ensure strict adherence to the Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland (ASAI) guidelines for online influencers to illustrate to young people payment for their promotion of particular products
- Run a national campaign to highlight and promote confidence, self-belief and positive body image among young people and young adults, especially young girls
- In line with action 13 identified in Get Ireland Active, develop and provide a programme of continuous professional development in physical education specific for the youth work sector. Having CPD in this area would allow youth work organisations to continue, within their setting, to confidently tackle and prevent the epidemic of obesity among young people
- Allocate additional resources to the youth work sector to support their work in enhancing young people's knowledge and skills with regard to healthy eating and active

living. This recommendation is in line with step9 action 2 (9.2) in the 'A Healthy Weight for Ireland: Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016-20205

## 5. References

1. National Youth Council of Ireland. (2012). Assessment of the Economic Value of Youth Work. Dublin. Available at [http://www.youth.ie/economic\\_value](http://www.youth.ie/economic_value)
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6. Gordon, 2017. In Ireland, do bloggers influence consumer behaviour from a millennial perspective? National College of Ireland: Thesis
7. Rapid Needs Assessment on Young Men's Health (2018), National Youth Health Programme (Available from the National Youth Health Programme)
8. Rapid Mental Health Needs Consultation (2015), National Youth Health Programme (Available from the National Youth Health Programme)