National strategy(ies)

The Northern Ireland Executive Strategy for Children and Young People for 2017 to 2027 is in draft form at the time of writing (see ‘Current debates and reforms’ [1]). In its current form, one of its key aims is to improve the physical and mental health of children and young people in Northern Ireland – a key parameter of well-being as described in the Children’s Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 [2].

A Fitter Future for All: Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022 [3] is an all-age strategy which aims to:

Empower the population of Northern Ireland to make healthy choices, reduce the risk of overweight and obesity related diseases and improve health and wellbeing by creating an environment that promotes a physically active lifestyle and a healthy diet (p. 7).

It follows the Fit Futures [4] strategy which focussed specifically on tackling obesity in children and young people. The new strategy however seeks to tackle the issue across the life course. For children, the strategy has set an overarching target of a 3 per cent reduction of obesity and a 2 per cent
reduction of overweight and obesity by 2022. It also sets out two overarching long-term objectives across the life course to:

- increase the percentage of people eating a healthy, nutritionally balanced diet
- increase the percentage of the population meeting the Chief Medical Officer guidelines on physical activity.

Detailed short-term outcomes for children and young people are set out in the updated Outcomes Framework 2015-2019 (see pages 9 to 11).

Target groups include those in lower socio-economic groups and living in areas of deprivation. In addition, interventions aimed at young children are considered particularly effective, as a form of early intervention.

An overarching steering group has been established to monitor progress and cross-Departmental action. Underpinning this, the Public Health Agency has established a group to drive forward implementation and delivery. Specific actions are allocated to different departments and organisations.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) offers a GCSE in Food and Nutrition and an A level in Nutrition and Food Science.

The all-age alcohol and drugs strategy has spanned two phases from 2006-2011 and 2011-2016. The most recent update report on the strategy, from July 2016, refers to the continuation of monitoring and annual updating of the strategy.

The phase two strategy emphasised the role of education and prevention. It stated that a significant amount of prevention work had been:

carried out within the formal education and youth setting, i.e. schools and clubs. There has also been an increasing emphasis on developing and promoting prevention work in the community and neighbourhood setting, with a greater emphasis on informal and outreach approaches, especially in respect of ‘hard-to-reach’ groups and areas typically described as disadvantaged (p. 30).

The fourth annual update describes children, young people and families as being among the key target groups of the strategy. Within this, organisations involved in delivery are encouraged to focus on specific sub-groups, identified as being particularly vulnerable as part of the local needs assessment.

The main objectives include:

- reducing the level, breadth and depth of alcohol and drug-related harm to users, their families (including children and young people), their carers and the wider community
- increasing awareness, information, knowledge, and skills on all aspects of alcohol and drug-related harm in all settings and for all age groups
• promoting opportunities for those under the age of 18 years to develop appropriate skills, attitudes and behaviours to enable them to resist societal pressures to drink alcohol and/or misuse drugs

• continuing to effectively tackle the issue of availability of illicit drugs and young people’s access to alcohol.

An all-age tobacco control strategy was published by the then Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (now Department of Health) in 2012. Children and young people are one of the three priority groups.

Under Objective 1 (fewer people starting to smoke), the strategic priorities for children and young people are:

• preventing those under the legal age of sale from accessing tobacco products through legislative measures

• ensuring that educational establishments, from primary through to tertiary level, are educating and/or appropriately supporting awareness raising amongst children/young people as to the harm caused by tobacco.

Under Objective 2 (more smokers quitting) the strategic priorities for children and young people are:

• increasing awareness of specialist cessation services

• undertaking research to determine how to increase the uptake of cessation services by young people

• considering how to address particular needs of children in care and young offenders, amongst whom smoking prevalence rates are higher.

Under Objective 3 (protecting people from tobacco smoke), the priority for children and young people is:

• consideration of legislation banning smoking in cars (for an update, see here [10]).

The Public Health Agency [11] is responsible for implementation, with the assistance of a multi-agency implementation group to oversee and drive forward the actions outlined in the plan in cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders.

The Sexual Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan [12] covered the period 2008-13. It was extended to 2015 by an addendum [12]. While it aimed to promote the sexual health of the entire population, young people under 25 years and especially those who were looked after [13] (in the care of a public authority) or leaving care, were identified as a group particularly at risk.
Encouraging healthy lifestyles and healthy nutrition for young people

The Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (now Department of Health) published a joint food in schools policy in 2013. This adopts a ‘whole-school approach’ to all food provided in grant-aided schools, promoting healthy eating among children and young people at school and developing skills and knowledge to encourage and support healthy eating outside of school.

The policy supports the obesity strategy, A Fitter Future for All (see National strategy [15]).


School food: top marks [17] (now rebranded as ‘School Food (Try Something New Today)’) is a school food initiative by the Department of Education (DE), the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency (PHA). In support of this programme, the PHA published School food: the essential guide [18] which contains a series of practical guidance booklets designed to help schools improve pupils’ nutrition and implement healthier eating and drinking practices.

An evaluation report [19] on the programme was published in 2010.

Summary evaluation reports [20] were published by the Public Health Agency in 2016.

At local level Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs [21]) provide funding for a range of projects aimed at making communities safer and which can also improve the health and wellbeing of people for example involving young people in activities such as drug and alcohol awareness sessions.

The Northern Ireland Drugs and Alcohol Campaign funds a website provided by the NUS-USI (The National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland).

Many other services are provided at local level. An example of a project focusing on sexual and reproductive health from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is HYPE. The HYPE team provides young people with information, knowledge and skills to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health and well-being by increasing their access to health education, information and services.

The charity, Breakthru [24] is funded by the Department for Communities through the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to deliver Alcohol and Drug awareness programmes for all ages. Similar schemes exist through other Health and Social Care Trusts.

Health education and healthy lifestyles education in schools

‘Personal Health’ is a key element of the curriculum. The Statutory Curriculum at Key Stage 3: Rationale and Detail [26] (for ages 11-14) states (p. 6):

This involves helping young people to understand not only their physical health but also their social, mental and emotional needs at different ages; what it takes to develop sound and caring relationships and to live harmonious and fulfilled lives at home, at school, at work and at leisure.

Teachers should help pupils to:

live a healthy lifestyle and make healthy choices; contribute positively to their peer group; and learn
the skills of parenting. Teachers can assist this by providing frequent opportunities, within and beyond the curriculum to consider choices and their consequences, including striking the right balance between sensible enjoyment and risk; and to develop strategies to resist undue pressure and challenges from peer groups, authority figures, the media and public opinion.

The Learning for Life and Work [27] statutory Area of Learning for Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16) includes the contributory element of Personal Development. The minimum content requirements [28] for this include that pupils should be enabled to:

- explore the concept of health as the development of a whole person, for example, defining what makes up a whole person, the need to develop physical, mental, social, moral, cognitive etc.

- investigate the influences on physical and emotional/mental personal health of, for example, immunisation, regular physical activity, personal hygiene, diet, stress, addiction, life/work balance etc.

- develop understanding about, and strategies to manage, the effects of change on body, mind and behaviour, for example, puberty, body image, mood swings, etc.

- investigate the effects on the body of legal and illegal substances and the risks and consequences of their misuse, for example, effects on behaviour, physical and mental health, life and work changes etc.

- develop preventative strategies in relation to accidents in the home, school and on the road, for example, safe practices in relation to appliances and equipment, chemicals, machinery, vehicles, road safety; knowing what to do in the event of cuts, burns, fire and emergency first aid etc.

- develop strategies to promote personal safety, for example, responding appropriately to different forms of bullying, abuse, physical violence; developing safe practice in relation to the internet, getting home; understanding and managing risk, the place of rules and boundaries etc.

Insync [29] is a teaching resource for exploring Personal Development issues in years 8, 9 and 10 (ages 11-14).

Teen Building [30] is a home economics resource which explores the emotional and nutritional needs of teenagers. It also gives pupils the opportunity to practise and develop practical cookery skills.

The Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland [31] has worked with schools and universities to find out young people’s’ attitudes to food, and produced support materials to help them make healthy and safe food choices when they leave home.

In 2007, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) launched Core Food Competences for Children Aged 5-16 years, developed in consultation with the British Nutrition Foundation (BNF). BNF, along with Public Health England (PHE), FSA Northern Ireland, FSA Scotland and the Welsh Government, reviewed the original framework to ensure that it was up-to-date and reflected key areas of priority
for children and young people in relation to their education, life skills and health. The updated framework [33], which was published in 2014 and reviewed in 2016, provides a framework to support teachers and learners when teaching about the themes of diet and health, consumer awareness, cooking and food safety for children and young people.

The British Nutrition Foundation [34] runs an Education Programme, ‘Food: a Fact of Life’ [35] in fulfillment of its charitable objectives. The programme provides free resources about healthy eating, cooking, food and farming for children and young people aged 3 to 18 years and support the curriculum throughout the UK. Resources [36] to support the competences are available in ‘Food route: a journey through food’.

Specific guidance [37] on drugs education is available from the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment.

At Key Stage 4 in the curriculum (for ages 14-16), the Learning for Life and Work [27] statutory Area of Learning includes the contributory element of Personal Development. Pupils should be enabled to:

- develop their understanding of relationships and sexuality and the responsibilities of healthy relationships

- develop an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of parenting.

The minimum requirements include opportunities to:

- explore the qualities of relationships including friendship, for example, conditions for healthy relationships, types of relationships, healthy boundaries, gender issues in relationships, etc.

- explore the qualities of a loving, respectful relationship, for example, how choices within a relationship affect both physical and emotional development, friendships etc.

- develop coping strategies to deal with challenging relationship scenarios, for example, sibling rivalry, caring for relatives, domestic violence, teenage rebellion, child abuse, sexism, change in family circumstances, coping with rejection, loneliness and loss, etc.

- develop strategies to avoid and resolve conflict, for example, active listening, assertiveness, negotiation, mediation etc.

- explore the implications of sexual maturation, for example, sexual health, fertility, contraception, conception, teenage pregnancy, childbirth etc.

- explore the emotional, social and moral implications of early sexual activity, for example, personal values, attitudes and perceptions, the law, sexually transmitted infections, the impact of underage parenting etc.

There is specific guidance [38] on relationships and sexuality guidance from the Council for Curriculum,
Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). This includes a resource directory.

**Peer-to-peer education approaches**

Services provided at local level may use the peer education approach, e.g. Belfast Health and Social Care Trust’s HYPE [23] team provide young people with information, knowledge and skills to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health. Peer education helps ensure that such programmes reach isolated and vulnerable young people.

**Sexpression:UK** [39] is a student-led independent charity that empowers young people to make decisions about sex and relationships by running sex education workshops in schools and community settings.

**Collaboration and partnerships**

In the area of drugs and alcohol, five all-age Drug and Alcohol Coordination Teams (DACTs [40]) operate across Northern Ireland. These comprise representatives of all the key agencies or sectors (i.e. health, justice, housing, education, community, service providers, service users, etc.) with a responsibility for, and experience of, addressing alcohol and drug issues.

**Raising awareness on healthy lifestyles and on factors affecting the health and well-being of young people**

The Public Health Agency [11] provides all-age information through several different microsites on different topics, e.g. for smoking cessation [41]. It also hosts the sexual health Northern Ireland [42] website.

RAPID [43] is an all-age community-led initiative supported regionally by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the Public Health Agency, and locally by Drug and Alcohol Coordination Teams and Policing and Community Safety Partnerships. RAPID raises awareness of the risks and harms to individuals, to families and to communities of using and misusing drugs. Further information [45].

At local level, the five Health and Social Care Trusts provide information and advice services. The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, for example, apart from the all-age advice and information provided on its website, collaborates with the South Eastern Regional College (SERC [46]) in the provision of a Youth Health Advice Service. SERC Health [47] is available on a drop-in basis to 16- to 25-year-olds across the region, not just to SERC students.

There are five Drug and Alcohol Coordination Teams (DACTs [40]) across Northern Ireland, one for each Health and Social Care Trust area. These can provide information and advice on drug and alcohol related issues.

The Public Health Agency [11] is the main body responsible for health promotion campaigns.

In 2015 it ran a sexual health campaign ‘Choose to protect yourself [48] – always use a condom’, aimed at older teenagers and adults.

In 2013 it ran a smoking campaign [49] which focused on family impact and hoped to have a positive impact on both adult smoking rates and the uptake of smoking by children and young people in the longer term.