

A Healthier Future- A Twenty Year Vision for Health and Wellbeing in
Northern Ireland. 2005-2025
DHSSPS

fpa response. March 2005

fpa welcomes the opportunity to respond to this DHSSPS consultation. **fpa** works to enable people to make informed choices about sex and to enjoy sexual health, free from exploitation, oppression and harm, so we would clearly hope to see some prominence given to the area of sexual health in a document purporting to be a regional strategy for health and wellbeing. Unfortunately it fails to mention the promotion of sexual health as even one of its priorities, so there is little chance of its achieving any strategic gains in this area.

fpa would also take issue with an extremely narrow frame of reference set out in the Introduction, which views health and social services as a refuge for the ill, vulnerable and abused. Following on this the 'vision' of how services might develop over the coming 20 years can't help but look pretty uninspiring and lacklustre.

In its policy direction the document focuses on high incidence of heart disease, accidental death and teen pregnancy, along with low cancer survival rates and rates of breast feeding. Focusing, to the exclusion of all else, on teen pregnancy in a health context, certainly indicates a seriously skewed perspective. There is no analysis of the relationship between socio economic deprivation, poor or non existent relationship and sexuality education (RSE), inadequately resourced sexual health services and the corresponding negative outcomes. Given the fact that promotion of a positive sexual health message can have such an impact on the overall health of the entire population and that this in turn has lifelong repercussions as well as generational implications, it gives serious cause for concern that this strategic document completely ignores sexual health except from a narrow and reactionary standpoint.

Transforming attitudes, behaviour and the sexual health profile of the population of Northern Ireland is achievable through enhancing public awareness, ensuring good sexuality and relationship education for all children and young people in both school and community settings, as well as providing appropriate and accessible health services which meet diverse needs. Unfortunately what this document outlines bares a strong resemblance to a siege mentality in health terms. It makes no attempt to integrate thinking around the determinants of health with health promotion and appropriate and accessible service provision. Consequently the predominant message emerging from this draft strategy is one of dealing with growing stresses, working with increasingly limited resources and what would be best described as 'fire-fighting'.

Taking a long term strategic view of sexual health and wellbeing should provide an opportunity to rethink, to redesign and to plan with a view to achieving widespread, sustainable, positive outcomes, but this document displays little or no ambition in this respect. Consequently it is difficult to envisage it having any real impact, let alone a dynamic and transformative one. A radical transformation is precisely what is needed to address long term and deeply engrained negative sexual health patterns, in a society which has traditionally displayed significant political and cultural resistance to a positive sexual health message. **fpa** takes the view that this significant and fundamental shortcoming must be redressed if this health strategy is to have any credibility or produce any worthwhile outcome.

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