

A Healthier Future - a 20 year vision for Health & Wellbeing in Northern Ireland 2005 - 2025

1. Context

The Health Action Zone welcomes the development of the 20-year vision for Health & Wellbeing in Northern Ireland and has been involved in a number of different levels in contributing to the development of this final draft document.

1.1 North & West Belfast Health Action Zone is a partnership of statutory, community, voluntary and independent organisations working to address inequalities in health and wellbeing. The partnership has developed and matured since its inception in 1999 - influencing strategic agendas within partner organisations and working collectively with local communities to deliver improvements in health and wellbeing. The term health and wellbeing is used in an holistic sense and indeed the partners usefully distinguish the different elements and emphasis of the programme as:

- Health - a broad definition and focused on the determinants of health;
- Action - using concerted and co-ordinated actions to address persistently difficult issues which impact on social exclusion, a key outcome is the development of new ways of working; and
- Zone - using energy and directing attention within the geographical boundaries of North & West Belfast in order to effect change in those areas or communities of greatest need.

This approach has demonstrated the value of such work over the past few years, as well as highlighting the potential of the Health Action Zone as a vehicle for 'other initiatives' - using the mature partnership and understanding that are now in place.

2.0 Response to Consultation Questions

Question 1 - Does the vision adequately describe the Health & Social Services that will meet our future needs and aspirations?

The document is necessarily broad, comprehensive and visionary, and in general terms this is to be welcomed. There is some concern about a number of important gaps in the document:

1. Insufficient emphasis on the importance of community development approaches to promoting health and wellbeing;
2. An absence of reflecting the needs of ethnic minorities, those without English as a first language, and migrant populations;
3. The vision of Health & Social Services leading the debate on health development is insufficiently strong. Whilst it is acknowledged that the first theme is entitled 'Investing for Health and Wellbeing' this could be strengthened and integrated in other parts of the document.
4. There needs to be a stronger focus on preventative services and investing for health in general as a core responsibility and priority within the HPSS core business.

Question 2 - A Healthier Future focuses on major themes: Investing for Health and Wellbeing; Involving people; Responsive integrated services; Teams which deliver; Improving quality; and Making it happen. Do you agree that it is appropriate to focus on these themes and are there others that should be addressed by the regional strategy?

In general terms these themes are to be welcomed. As highlighted earlier the emphasis in some of the themes could be strengthened in order to help make the connections and delivery a real possibility. Other themes missing include: the theme of leadership in order to drive and deliver the agenda; as previously mentioned the emphasis on Involving People needs to make stronger emphasis of the role of community development in health. This is true only in the delivery of services but in addressing need, developing neighbourhood approaches, advocacy and lobbying, networking, as well as delivery of services.

Question 3 - A Healthier Future identifies 16 future policy directions. Do you believe these are the right policy directions to achieve the vision set out in the document?

The policy directions outlined in the document are to be welcomed. There is, however, concern that there is a need for stronger emphasis and acknowledgement of the policy direction of Investing for Health. This public health policy, lauded in other parts of the United Kingdom, has to date been insufficiently resourced, requires other departments' contribution, and is at risk of being reduced in importance in order to address Priorities for Action. Central to this debate is the emphasis on community development and community approaches to tackling health and wellbeing, alongside the development of capacity within Health & Social Services to rise to the challenge of working in different ways to tackle complex problems. Policy direction number 10 also needs to be

broader and include ethnic minority groups and other disadvantaged groups.

Question 4 - A Healthier Future identifies a number of key actions and outcomes. Do you believe that these are the right action and outcomes to achieve the vision set out in the document?

There is broad support for the key actions and outcomes set out in the document, reference earlier comments.

Question 5 - A Healthier Future identifies the need to reduce smoking as a key element in improving the health of the population of Northern Ireland and sets out 3 main options.

- The Health Action Zone has given unanimous support for option C. There is clear evidence of the impact of tobacco smoke on environmental risk to health and is a clear public health priority, one in which the Health & Personal Social Services can give leadership.

Question 6 - Are the proposals for taking the strategy forward adequate?

The key issue here is how the strategy will link to other important strategies led by both Health & Personal Social Services and other government departments and their strategies. The challenge is to integrate and reinforce areas of action in order to promote the goal of health and wellbeing. This will require determined leadership, energy, and commitment.

Question 7 - Are the equality issues adequately addressed?

It is difficult in such a comprehensive document to be sure that all aspects of equality have been addressed. Presumably the department will wish to undertake a formal equality impact assessment on the strategy.

3.0 Other specific comments on the document.

3.1 The Health Action Zone welcomes reference to the Health Action Zone as an important means of bringing together key players who can contribute to improving health and wellbeing and tackling areas of inequality. However, the reference which relates to the establishment of Education Action Zones (which I believe came from information forwarded by North & West Belfast HAZ) has now changed significantly and it will be important if this reference is

included that it is clarified. Currently the proposals for Education Action Zones have changed significantly from their original intention and are a much smaller project driven initiative. Unlike the original proposal which focused on a 7 - 10 year view of educational disadvantage, the current initiative is funded for a 3-year period only.

3.2.1 Involving People - Caring Communities

The advantages of engagement go beyond service provision. This section needs to be expanded to reflect the broader base of involving people and communities in their health and wellbeing. As referenced earlier in Question 2 this activity can cover a wide range of areas, not only service provision.

3.2.2 It is welcomed that reference is made to building on the existing policy Mainstreaming Community Development. However, it is also regrettable that support for community based approaches to tackling health and wellbeing will no longer be funded as a result of recent decisions. The Investing for Healthier Communities grant programme, a model of good practice, is no longer funded through DHSSPS. Whilst the document highlights the need for strong citizen advocacy arrangements 'in partnership' and community development health and wellbeing, this does not sit easily with recent decisions.