



Healthy Food for All

access | availability | affordability

**Healthy Food for All
Opening Statement
Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children
9th March 2010**

Introduction:

We welcome the opportunity to present the work of Healthy Food for All to the Joint Committee on Health & Children. Healthy Food for All is represented at the Joint Oireachtas Committee by the HFfA Chairperson Marjo Moonen and HFfA Project Co-ordinator, Sinéad Keenan. We are joined by Dr. Mary Flynn, Chief Specialist Public Health Nutrition with responsibility for the study on the Cost of Healthy Eating and is also a member of Healthy Food for All's Advisory Committee

Healthy Food for All (HFfA) is an all-island multi-agency initiative which seeks to ensure that everyone on the island of Ireland has enough of the right foods necessary for good health. Food is central to the experience of poverty, even in a developed country such as Ireland.

The initiative works with statutory, non-governmental and business organisations in Ireland and Northern Ireland to promote our agenda, and is also involved with international bodies. HFfA works to combat food poverty by promoting access, availability and affordability of healthy food for low-income groups.

Food poverty is defined as the

"inability to have an adequate and nutritious diet due to issues of the affordability of and access to food" (Dowler, 1998).

Healthy Food for All works in partnership to promote healthy eating and to reduce food poverty. We aim to support the provision of healthy foods at local level and to support national schemes and policies to improve healthy eating. The aim of Healthy Food for All is to end food poverty on the island of Ireland. We operate on three interconnected levels:

1. **Community** - support community and sectoral initiatives which promote availability and access to healthy and affordable food for low-income groups, with a focus on community food initiatives and direct food provision, including school meals;
2. **Network** - fostering an all-island learning network to identify best practice on promoting healthy food for low-income groups and to develop links with similar organisations in the UK and Europe
3. **Policy** - promoting awareness of food poverty across all relevant aspects of public policy, with a focus on affordability, access and availability of food.

Link between Food Poverty and Health Inequalities

Healthy eating is a determinant of good health and helps to prevent heart disease, stroke, cancers and obesity. Poor diet is one reason why people on a low income have a greater chance of getting these conditions. Low income, inadequate housing, lack of access to education and healthcare and poor nutrition are social determinants of health and contribute to health inequalities in society.ⁱ People on low incomes have a greater chance of getting conditions such as heart disease, cancers and obesity at a younger age and have an increased risk of dying younger as a consequence. The need for households on low incomes to have a 'healthy diet', which helps protect against these conditions, is therefore crucial. Food poverty disproportionately affects people living on low-income and vulnerable groups including lone parents, migrants and older people. Research in Ireland shows that those in the lower social classes are more likely to be overweight or obese:

- 2 out of 3 adults are overweight with 23% of these obese
- More than 1 in 5 children aged 5-12 are considered overweight or obese
- One in four seven-year-old children are overweight in Ireland, making it the most prevalent childhood disease (Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative, 2009).

There is a social gradient in health – the lower a person's social position, the worse his/her health is likely to be.

Choosing a diet rich in fruit and vegetables is especially vital because they are low in calories, high in fibre, bulk up the diet and help combat obesity. Fruit and vegetables also contain a multitude of protective substances, which help provide protection against heart disease, stroke and cancer. Protective foods such as fruit and vegetables are expensive, whereas harmful foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt are more affordable. Similarly, lean meat, which is a good low-fat source of iron, is more expensive than processed fatty meats, which are also high in salt. The World Cancer Research Fund recommends that excessive consumption of this type of meat should be avoided in order to reduce the risk of bowel cancer in particular.

The purpose of healthy eating advice is to translate nutrients into foods and guide people towards food choices that will provide all of their nutrient (e.g. vitamins, minerals, fibre) and calorie needs for good health and disease prevention. Healthy eating is a necessary part of preventing lifestyle-related diseases such as heart disease, stroke, cancers, obesity and their related complications. Given that people from lower socio-economic groups have greater difficulties accessing a good diet, healthy eating messages must be targeted to these groups.

There is a lot of advice on eating healthily. An obvious issue is what is the cost of a healthy diet and is it affordable for those on a low income. There is little point in giving people healthy eating advice if they don't have the resources to implement it in the first place.

What is the Cost of a Healthy Diet?

Affordability affects the choice and amount of food that can be bought. While low-income households spend a proportionately higher share of their income on food they have a poorer diet both in terms of food and nutritional intake (Friel & Conlon, 2004). Healthy Food for All published a Policy Briefing on **The Affordability of Healthy Eating for Low-Income Households** (October 2009) based on **Food Safety Authority Ireland (FSAI)** research into the cost of a healthy diet. The research examined the cost of obtaining a healthy diet for the four most typical households (CSO) and priced each diet in three different grocery store chain outlets to determine the range of overall cost of healthy eating:

- A healthy diet costs €82.20 per week for a couple and €132.40 per week for a family of two adults and two children when bought in a multiple supermarket. It costs a lone parent with one child €54.80 per week and €32.40 for an older woman living alone.
- The largest cost items are fruit and vegetables (33-37% total food cost), followed by lean meat and fish (29-34% total food cost).
- It is twice as expensive to purchase a healthy diet in a local convenience store compared to a multiple supermarket. A discount store is on average 16% cheaper than a multiple supermarket.
- When purchased in a multiple supermarket, healthy foods cost between 14 and 30% of weekly social welfare and child benefit, depending on household size. This rises to between 23 and 56% if bought in a local convenience store and falls to 12 to 25% if purchased in a discount store.
- It is up to ten times cheaper to provide calories in the form of unhealthy foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar than it is in the form of protective foods such as fruit and vegetables and other important foods such as lean meat and fish.
- For a teenager, the cost of healthy eating is €32.90 per week using a multiple supermarket, as compared with €17 for a younger child. For a male teenager the cost of healthy food bought in a local convenience store is greater than his total child income support.
- Cost of healthy eating for households with children took up the largest proportion of the Social Welfare Benefit

Problems Accessing Food Stores in Disadvantaged Areas

Access to food is often problematic as retail options, transport and storage/cooking facilities are often limited. As a result low-income households have to shop at local convenience stores, where prices are higher and there is a narrower variety of food. Often in deprived areas transport is an issue, with poor public transport links leading to households relying on taxis.

A key issue highlighted in the study of the cost of a healthy diet is the choice of store where food is bought. There are often difficulties for low-income families in accessing the cheaper food stores. These are illustrated in a case study of a disadvantaged area in north county Dublin which is served by one small shopping centre within the catchment area which has 6 takeaway outlets, 2 pubs and off licenses, 1 small convenience store and no supermarket. 25% of households in this area have no car. Public transport is limited and a trip for some to the nearest major retailer includes a 20 minute journey including two different buses. In an area where the population over 65 has doubled between the last 2 censuses this poses a great challenge. The quality of protective foods available in local shops tends to be more expensive and limited due to shorter shelf life, lower profit, a perceived lack of interest or a shortage of storage options.

Healthy Food for All Response

Community Food Initiatives (CFIs)

Besides affordability and accessibility, a third issue restricting people's healthy food options is the availability of healthy food. Over the years, various government reports have proposed the establishment of local food projects, or what we call CFIs, to target low-income groups. CFIs are a common idea in the UK and European countries, but are relatively untried in Ireland. Therefore, HFfA in partnership with **safefood** are currently running an experimental programme for CFIs in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Community Food Initiatives can address key priorities for tackling food poverty by

- ensuring good quality, affordable food is easily accessible
- addressing gaps in dietary knowledge
- supporting bottom-up approaches to food provision and consumption
- improving the quality and extent of food distribution and provision
- addressing the issue of social participation of food
- provides local employment
- empowers local communities to address local barriers

Demonstration Programme

In 2008 Healthy Food for All was awarded additional funding by **safefood** to set up a **Demonstration Programme of Community Food Initiatives** which provides funding to seven Community Food Initiatives across the island of Ireland. The programme aims to increase the range and effectiveness of CFIs using a community development approach. There is a large emphasis on shared learning and identification of the resources and supports necessary for the development of CFIs on a sustainable basis. The learning from this programme will inform the work of HFfA. The funding received from **safefood** covers:

- 3-year programme funding 7 projects up to a maximum of €75,000/£70,000 per project
- Development Worker to provide support to projects and coordinate the programme
- Extensive evaluation of programme
- Networking and promotion of shared learning
- Builds on existing community infrastructure

The outputs of this programme will include:

- Raising the profile and awareness of projects
- Identification of good practice
- How operate in diversity of settings/target groups
- What supports are required

School Food Initiatives

HFfA is also supportive of the provision of healthy food in schools especially those in low-income communities. There are additional reasons why we should intervene here:

- poor nutrition during the formative school years is likely to have long-term effects in later life
- poor nutrition impacts on children's capacity to learn in school
- food can improve children's attendance at school by lessening days off sick

- food can also improve the social capital of a school, by developing children's social skills and creating a positive and attractive learning environment
- can encourage changes in the food consumed in the home

Currently, we have up a number of schemes supporting food provision in schools which represents substantial public investment.

- Urban School Meals Scheme
- School Meals Local Projects Scheme
- EU School Milk Scheme
- Food Dudes Programme
- EU School Fruit Scheme

We are working with these funders and the schools to identify best practice and to improve the quality of provision. To this end, we researched and published a Good Practice Guide for School Food Initiatives. This guide has been circulated to all DEIS schools and is available for download from our website www.healthyfoodforall.com. Through the dissemination of the Good Practice Guide on School Food Initiatives HFFA is building on the extensive School Meals Programme and promoting the implementation of the School Food Programme to support local school meals provision. Schools are a key setting for instilling healthy eating practices for life.

We are currently finalising a Good Practice Guide on Community Food Initiatives which is due for publication Spring 2010. These Guides are designed as practical toolkits to assist groups to manage sustainable food initiative which address the food needs in their area.

Conclusion:

There are many examples of positive initiatives tackling the barriers constraining a healthy diet. However, we need to go beyond a piece-meal approach to have a co-ordinated government policy on food and nutrition. Ensuring a healthy diet for low-income groups requires a cross-sectoral response across a range of government departments, as well as the statutory, business and community and voluntary sectors. Support for Community Food Initiatives which address local barriers to healthy eating is essential. This can only occur within a overarching government policy on food and nutrition. Central to such a policy would be a right of all citizens to nutritious and healthy food. Reducing health inequalities will ensure a healthy standard of living for all and will strengthen the role and impact of ill health prevention.

Healthy Food for All's **Policy Briefing on the Affordability of Healthy Eating for Low-Income Households** has highlighted the fact that healthy eating is challenging for households on low incomes, particularly for those families with children. This finding is of particular significance because the immediate and long-term consequences of poor nutrition at a young age are far-reaching.

Recommendations to Promote Healthy Eating for Low –Income Groups

1. Make universal access to healthy food the cornerstone of government food and nutrition policy.
2. Welfare payments and child benefit should not be decreased as this would make healthy food more difficult to obtain for welfare recipients.
3. Access to the cheaper grocery outlets should be improved for low-income households. This can be addressed through the revision of retail planning guidelines and by enhancing local transport systems.
4. Alternative non-commercial ways of providing healthy food should be explored. This includes the development of community food initiatives, such as food cooperatives, and the expansion of school food initiatives based on healthy eating guidelines for children.

Appendix 1: Extent of Food Poverty in Ireland

Many low-income households know what are healthy food options but face a number of constraints in exercising these choices. Research shows that low-income households are less able to comply with dietary recommendations even though they spend a proportionately higher share of their income on food. Low-income households are over twice as likely to experience food poverty as the whole population (35% v 15%).

Food deprivation experience varies for different groups, with:

- Almost 50% of lone parent households
- 36% of unemployed
- 23% of foreign nationals
- 20% of those aged under 16
- 29% of those classified as ill or disabled

experiencing some kind of food deprivation.

The official measure of poverty in Ireland is based on a combination of a low-income measure and deprivation indicators – four of the indicators are food related. Using this official measure the EU Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) for 2006 for Ireland showed:

- Approx. 15% of the Irish population experience some type of food deprivation
- Approx. 35% of those on low income (<60% of median income) experience food deprivation
- Approx 7% of the low-income population experience “intense” food deprivation (CSO, 2006)
- Almost 1 in 5 school children report going to school or to bed hungry because there is not enough food at home (Doyle 2009)
- Almost 10% of the population were unable to afford to have family or friends around for a meal once a month (CSO 2009)

In order to keep the data up to date the figures in the table below have been adjusted in line with the new cost of living in February 2010 to allow for changes to welfare rates in Budget 2010 and the decrease in food prices by 6.4% in the period April 2009-January 2010.

Table 1: Updated cost of a healthy diet and as percentage of weekly welfare income post Budget 2010*

Household composition and calorie needs	Multiple supermarket	Discount store	Local convenience store
Family 1: man, woman and two children; 8,200 calories per day	€ 132.40 (29.1%)	€ 114.80 (25.2%)	€255.4 (56.2%)
Family 2: man, woman without children; 4,400 calories per day	€82.2 (25.2%)	€65.8 (20.2%)	€154.7 (47.4%)
Family 3: single woman with one child; 3,400 calories per day	€54.8 (14.1%)	€45.4 (11.7%)	€109 (23.4%)
Family 4: elderly woman; 1,800 calories per day	€32.4 (21.1%)	€27 (17.5%)	€54 (41.9%)
Five-year-old boy; 1,400 calories per day	€17 (26.5%)	€16.40 (25.6%)	€37.1 (57.7%)
Fourteen-year-old boy; 2,400 calories per day	€32.9 (52.2%)	€33.5 (52.1%)	€64.5 (100.3%)

* Original figures adjusted by -6.4% in line with food price trends from April 2009 to January 2010 (Source: CSO)

¹ Clare Farrell, Helen McEvoy, Jane Wilde and Combat Poverty Agency (2008), *Tackling health inequalities – an all-island approach to social determinants*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency/Institute of Public Health.