

Submission to the Northern Ireland Executive

Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-2021

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The Institute of Public Health in Ireland

The remit of the Institute of Public Health in Ireland (IPH) is to promote cooperation for public health between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in the areas of research and information, capacity building and policy advice. Our approach is to support Departments of Health and their agencies in both jurisdictions, and maximise the benefits of all-island cooperation to achieve practical benefits for people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Key Points

- People living in most disadvantaged communities experience the worst health outcomes and have the lowest life expectancy. IPH welcomes the overall purpose of the Programme for Government in tackling disadvantage and driving economic growth.
- IPH endorses the outcomes based approach outlined in the draft Programme.
- IPH supports the commitment to cross-sectoral and cross-departmental working. The new structures and departments offer an opportunity for innovative ways to develop and embed collaborative working.
- IPH recommends a *Health in All Policies* approach to the development of the final Programme for Government to improve population health and health equity.
- The Programme for Government should take account of demographic changes in its planning and delivery of services for an ageing population.
- Tackling inequalities across the work of various departments should be a priority of the Programme for Government, if health outcomes are to be improved and inequity reduced in all aspects of life.

Introduction

IPH welcomes the opportunity to respond to the draft Programme for Government to help shape the future for the people of Northern Ireland. IPH welcomes the overall purpose in tackling disadvantage and driving economic growth for Northern Ireland. IPH would encourage the Northern Ireland Executive to consider how disadvantage impacts on the outcomes they seek to achieve and the measures required to ensure outcomes are achieved equitably for all members of society.

IPH endorses the outcomes based approach outlined in the draft Programme; in particular, IPH welcomes the focus on the impact the Programme for Government will have on the people rather than a focus on Government actions. IPH believes the cross-sectoral engagement and participation outlined in the draft Programme is a pragmatic way forward in seeking to work collaboratively to achieve the stated outcomes. The use of indicators to measure progress is an important element of Programme for Government both in terms of accountability and in determining the effectiveness of the approaches adopted.

As an all-island organisation, IPH would also encourage the Northern Ireland Executive to explore and maximise opportunities for North South working. Such opportunities are conducive to sharing learning and experiences and are often more efficient and effective ways of working.

Cross-sectoral and cross-departmental working

IPH is strongly supportive of the Northern Ireland Executive's commitment to cross-sectoral and cross-departmental working and considers this to be an effective way of achieving both short and long term goals.

As an all-island agency, IPH has many years of experience working with local government, academia and community and voluntary sector organisations across both jurisdictions, with successful outcomes. An example of this has been establishment of the North South Alcohol Policy Advisory Group, facilitated by IPH. This multi-sectoral

group which has representation from a number of government departments in both jurisdictions, has worked together to inform and influence the development and implementation of alcohol policy across the island, producing reports, developing resources for healthcare and educational professionals, establishing an all-island research project and hosting a knowledge exchange event. This model of working demonstrates the effectiveness of collaboration and the tangible outputs which can be achieved when partners from a variety of sectors and government departments work towards the same goal.

IPH welcomes the creation of the new structures/departments, which offers a unique opportunity for innovative ways to develop and embed collaborative working. There are currently many good examples of collaborating working in the delivery of government strategy. One such example is the multi-sectoral steering¹ and implementation² groups affiliated with *A Fitter future for All – Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022* (DHSSPS, 2012). These groups are exemplars of effective collaborative working as evidenced in the progress being made in this complex and challenging area of public health (DHSSPS, 2015a).

Health in All Policies

IPH would advocate that the Northern Ireland Executive adopts a *Health in All Policies* approach to the development of the final Programme for Government and subsequent action plans. *Health in All Policies* is an approach to public policies across sectors that systematically takes into account the health implications of decisions, seeks synergies, and avoids harmful health impacts, in order to improve population health and health equity (WHO, 2014). This approach was first adopted by the South Australian Government and has the endorsement of the World Health Organization (WHO, 2010).

¹ Obesity Prevention Steering Group

² Regional Obesity Prevention Implementation Group

IPH has been working with the Department of Health to promote a *Health in All Policies* approach through the All Departments Officials Group of *Making Life Better*. IPH will continue to support the Department in the identification of a suitable policy or strategy which could be used as an exemplar for showcasing the application of *Health in All Policies* in the development of future government policies. There is considerable merit in adopting a *Health in All Policies* approach in the development of the final Programme for Government in order to improve population health and reduce inequalities which has far reaching benefits in terms of achieving many other outcomes within the Programme.

Social determinants of health

It is well known and understood that health is influenced by many factors, most of which lie outside of the remit of healthcare and health services. Factors such as poverty, employment, housing, education and lifestyle patterns have a significant impact on health status and health outcomes and these are included within the Programme for Government. These factors contribute to significant health inequalities, which are still very prevalent in many areas of Northern Ireland (DHSSPS, 2015b). For individuals and families living in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland, breaking the cycles of poverty or unemployment can appear impossible. However, IPH believes this Programme for Government provides an opportunity to address many of these issues and their underlying causes. It is essential that the indicators reflect the key aspects of health status and outcomes and the measures accurately capture the data in a timely and efficient manner.

Tackling health inequalities

One of the core functions of IPH is supporting the development of policies to reduce health inequalities. IPH welcomes the overarching outcomes within the Programme for Government which seek to create a more equal society, help people to enjoy long, healthy and active lives, give children and young people the best start in life and deliver high quality public services. Achievement of these outcomes will be challenging, yet they have the potential to make an important contribution to the quality of life for the most disadvantaged members of our society and can help to reduce health inequalities. IPH

believes that a commitment to tackling disadvantage, as outlined in the overall purpose of the Programme for Government, is essential if health outcomes for everyone are to be improved and inequalities reduced, not just in health, but all aspects of life.

Inequalities in health, education and employment are generally well understood with strategies in place to help reduce inequality. However, IPH believes the Programme for Government needs to consider inequalities in other areas of life, which are perhaps less evident, but, have significant implications nonetheless. For example, access to public transport, opportunities for active travel and physical activity and internet connectivity and usage. Inequalities by age and location (urban versus rural) are particularly relevant in these contexts and can have a significant impact of a person's quality of life in terms of access to services, employment, education and communication. IPH would urge the Executive to consider the wider implications of the outcomes, indicators and measures outlined in the Programme for Government in the context of addressing disadvantage and working towards a more equitable society.

Public health focus

IPH believes the Programme for Government should have a strong public health focus, with a particular emphasis on prevention and early intervention. The Northern Ireland public health framework, *Making Life Better*, has been an important step forward in seeking to improve health and wellbeing among all citizens in Northern Ireland and in helping to reduce health inequalities. IPH believes this framework should be a priority for the Northern Ireland Executive with significant investment to ensure the vision of *Making Life Better* is achieved.

It is also important that in its selection of health related indicators and measures the Northern Ireland Executive is cognisant of the complex nature of public health and the importance of socio-demographic factors relating to data. The opportunity of our increased life expectancy is one of society's greatest achievements – and while many older people enjoy the benefits of increased longevity a growing number of older people unfortunately face the effects of a decline in physical and mental function, loneliness,

social exclusion and poverty in later lives. All countries face major challenges to ensure that their health and social care systems are ready to make the most of this demographic shift. However, an ageing population has implications, not just in health and social care but also housing, transport, employment, planning and the design and delivery of services both regionally and locally.

Ageing is a life-long process and healthy ageing and maintaining independence in old age requires a life-course approach. Public health interventions can have a positive impact on the quality of ageing in terms of health outcomes and overall quality of life. In particular, a public health approach can help take account of the differences in health and disability by age group and gender and can help identify suitable interventions for people in low socio-economic classes and understand more fully the differences in health and disability between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Demographic change

The projected demographic changes in our population are well documented, and to some extent implicit within the Programme for Government. However, greater consideration needs to be given to the implications of demographic change and the impact on the design, planning and delivery of services. In the development of the Programme for Government and subsequent delivering plans, IPH would recommend that planning for demographic change is a priority and issues relating to the challenges and benefits of an ageing population are duly considered. There are many benefits associated with the dividend of longevity; an ageing population can make a meaningful contribution to society, both socially and economically, in terms of their knowledge, skills and experience which can be passed on to younger generations. However, with increasing numbers of older people, it will be essential to plan for long term care of older people and provide the necessary services and support to deal with increasing prevalence of conditions such as dementia and cancer (Prince et al 2014; Donnelly and Gavin, 2015).

Research and data

Having considered the indicators and measures proposed outlined in the draft Programme, IPH would recommend that a robust research and data strategy is developed to ensure gaps in data are fully addressed. It will important that the data for each indicator can be collected over the lifetime of the Programme for Government and beyond to ensure patterns of change over longer periods of time to be observed.

Concluding comments

Whilst this document pre-dates the outcome of the European referendum, it will be important to consider the implications of European legislation and directives for Northern Ireland as the UK exits the European Union.

Delivery of the Programme for Government is a complex task requiring a collaborative and joined up approach. The outcomes of this Programme for Government should not be viewed in isolation, but rather, should be connected as far possible to ensure optimal achievement of the overall purpose in tackling disadvantage and driving economic growth for the population of Northern Ireland.

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