



**HEARTY
LIVES**
Carrickfergus

SCOPING EXERCISE AND CONSULTATION TO INFORM THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EARLY YEARS TOOLKIT PROMOTING A HEALTHY START

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Context

The Hearty Lives Carrickfergus Project is funded for three years by the British Heart Foundation (BHF) and managed by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT). The project was developed in partnership with the NHSCT and the former Carrickfergus Borough Council (CBC) which is now part of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council (MEABC). Hearty Lives Carrickfergus is also supported by the BHF and the Public Health Agency (PHA).

The Project funding targets the Carrickfergus, Whitehead and Greenisland communities, supporting the development of new and effective ways of working to highlight the impact of obesity. There are three primary target groups, one of which is parents and families with children aged 0-4 years.

One of the three overarching Project aims is to Develop an evidence based multi-sectorial approach to enable families with young children (aged 0-4 years) to develop knowledge and key skills to prevent obesity and reduce risk of Cardio Vascular Disease (CVD). With this in mind, the Project accessed additional funding from the Public Health Agency to carry out a literature review and fieldwork looking into issues around diet and nutrition and physical activity of preschool children and their families.

The Hearty Lives Paediatric Dietitian and the Evaluator/Researcher, supported by the Manager, carried out the assignment. This report presents the following; the context; highlights from the literature review, data analysis from 93 surveys, highlights from focus groups with mothers and grandmothers and recommendations for an Early Years Healthy Start Toolkit.

Obesity in children

Research shows that rates of obesity tend to rise in association with increasing social disadvantage in developed countries, including Northern Ireland. Being overweight or obese has a significant impact on children, both whilst they are young and in older life. This includes:

- Affecting child's growth, physical, social and emotional development
- Increased risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar

- Social and psychological bullying, low self-esteem, depression
- An obese or overweight child is more likely to take this into adulthood contributing to the transgenerational cycle of obesity.
- Higher risk of early death than those who only become obese in adulthood

The Literature Review

The literature review demonstrated that the Scoping Exercise is in line with the Northern Ireland policy context. For example:

- One of the five priorities in the Programme for Government 2011-15 is *Creating Opportunities, Tackling Disadvantage and Improving Health and Wellbeing*¹.
- The first priority of the Health and Social Care (Commissioning Plan) Direction (Northern Ireland) 2012² is *to improve and protect health and well-being and reduce inequalities, through a focus on prevention, health promotion and earlier intervention*.
- The 10-year public health framework, Making Life Better³, aims to secure more coherence cross-departmentally with a focus on upstream interventions that will improve health and tackle health inequalities. It seeks to improve health and wellbeing along the life course from early to old age by addressing disadvantage through and across a wide spectrum of service provision and support.
- The NI Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity⁴ highlights that obesity continues to be one of the most important public health challenges across Northern Ireland.
- The Fitter Futures for All framework directs outcomes in relation to overweight and obesity through four life courses, including pre-conception, antenatal, maternal and early years. The Framework notes that there is a need not only for a population based approach, but also to complement this by targeting actions and interventions for groups with proportionately high rates of overweight and obesity specifically people in lower socio-economic groups living in areas of deprivation. It notes that interventions aimed at young children and pregnant women may have a significantly higher impact, but that services need to be what the communities want and need.
- The Health Survey Northern Ireland (first results for 2013/14) showed that 25% of children (aged two to ten years old) were found to be either overweight or obese (18% overweight and 7% obese). 61% of adults were found to be either overweight or obese (37% overweight, 24% obese), this has increased from 56% in 1997.
- A number of the NICE Public Health Guidelines are relevant to cardiovascular disease and obesity; there are also NICE Guidelines relating to behaviour change and community engagement.

¹ Programme for Government 2011-15 building a better future. Belfast: Northern Ireland Executive, 2011

² The Health and Social Care (Commissioning Plan) Direction (Northern Ireland) 2012

³ Fit and Well Changing Lives - 2012-2022. Belfast: Department of Health, Social Service and Public Safety (DHSSPS), 2012

⁴ Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022, Department of Health, Social Services, and Public Safety

In 2010 the Scottish intercollegiate Guidelines Network published the *Management of Obesity – a national clinical outline*⁵. The Guidelines relevant to obesity of children noted that treatment programmes for managing childhood obesity should incorporate behaviour change components, be family based, involving at least one parent/carer, and aim to change the whole family's lifestyle. Programmes should target decreasing overall dietary energy intake, increasing levels of physical activity and decreasing time spent in sedentary behaviours (including screen time).

Data for Carrickfergus, Whitehead and Greenisland show that;

- Cardiovascular disease is the main cause of death in Carrickfergus Borough
- Obesity is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease
- By the time children reach 5 years of age, 1 in 5 are overweight
- 1 in 20 children are very overweight in Carrickfergus
- Two wards within the Borough have female life expectancy rates consistently below the Northern Ireland average.
- 25% of children (aged two to ten years old) were found to be either overweight or obese (18% overweight and 7% obese). 61% of adults were found to be either overweight or obese (37% overweight, 24% obese), this has increased from 56% in 1997⁶.
- The School Nurse Health Appraisals with children entering P1 in September 2014 living in the Carrickfergus Local Government District area showed:
 - The underweight percentage of children is higher than the NHSCT or NI average.
 - Children falling within the normal weight spectrum is a lower percentage than the NHSCT or NI average.
 - 8.1% of children were classified as being obese, which is 2.6% higher than the NHSCT or NI average⁷.

Good practice models presented in the Scoping Exercise Report included examples of programmes across Northern Ireland and the UK. Regional programmes addressing diet and nutrition and physical activity targeting families with children aged 0 to 4 years old seem to be limited.

Consultation

A number of different methodologies and approaches were taken during the Scoping Exercise, seeking to engage with a range of stakeholders in ways that would make participation in the consultation accessible. These included;

- A two-page Survey for completion by Parents with children aged 0 to 4 years old focusing on physical activity, feeding, and screen-time. This was distributed through a range of outlets including libraries, parent and toddler groups, the Civic Centre reception desk, and by the Hearty

⁵ <http://www.sign.ac.uk/pdf/sign115.pdf>

⁶ Health Survey Northern Ireland: 2013/14

⁷ Child Health System via PHA Health Intelligence Unit

Lives Carrickfergus team when engaging with parents. 93 Surveys were completed and returned.

- Seven focus groups facilitated at Parent and Toddler groups which involved 35 people.
- Face-to-face interviews with key stakeholders to gain a bigger picture of what is available for children under five and their parents in relation to support services, programmes, and advice about physical activity, diet and nutrition, and antenatal and postnatal exercise.

Highlights from the Scoping Exercise

Themes from consultation with parents and carers:

- Prolonged bottle feeding beyond the age of 12 months
- 50% incidence of early weaning at less than six months of age
- Positive experience reported by mothers about parent and toddler groups which were deemed to be accessible, supportive and sharing experiences
- Parents seem to prefer structured activities which would seem appropriate due to the increasing incidence of overweight and obesity in adults who are by definition unlikely to be undertaking regular exercise or an active lifestyle. More structured activities, engaging parents and children, may result in parents being able to embed positive physical activity behaviours and habits in their offspring, contributing to stemming the transgenerational cycle of obesity.

Issues relating to activities:

- Consideration of cost, which can be prohibitive to parents engaging their children in physical activities especially in families with two or more children.
- Crèche facilities would encourage mums and parents to be more active
- Consistent and appropriate opening times of venues which support physical activity.
- There is a perceived lack of opportunities for early years across the community. When looking at opportunities for families with young children it would appear that this perception is valid.

Learning points for health professionals:

- There is an assumption of knowledge that parents and carers know what to do.
- Frequent reports from parents that they are not being listened to or taken seriously
- There is a lack of consistency in the advice given, which leads to insecurity and ultimately a lack of confidence in information received
- Health care professionals are often not the first point of contact for parents as they are not seen as being easily accessible in comparison to other support networks. Parents often seek information from different sources including; other parents and family members, the internet, or people in the community.
- Some non-statutory organisations and networks are more readily trusted (although it is possible that they may not be best placed to give relevant, evidence based and appropriate information)
- Poor support and facilitation of breast feeding; the implication is that it is easier to see what a baby feeds from a bottle than spending time supporting a breastfeeding mum to ensure her baby is feeding appropriately.

Summary of the learning from the Scoping Exercise

The consultation has demonstrated positive and negative experiences, lifestyle choices, and opportunities. It is evident from the consultation that;

- Additional activities and programmes for families with children aged four and under would be welcome in Carrickfergus, Whitehead, and Greenisland.
- There is a need for mothers, fathers, grandparents, and carers to easily access relevant, professional information about physical activity and diet and nutrition for their children.
- Parent and Toddler Groups are valued by parents and carers: support for these groups is vital to ensure that high quality, evidence based and accurate information is shared within this supportive environment.
- Parents want to do the best for their children, but sometimes do not know what the 'best' choices are, or do not receive the support they need to put positive lifestyle choices into practice.

Taking into account the findings from the Scoping Study, Hearty Lives Carrickfergus has identified the need for an Early Years Toolkit promoting a Healthy Start for babies and young children with a focus on physical activity and diet and nutrition.

Introducing the Early Years Toolkit: Recommendations

There is a gap in current resources in terms of a Toolkit focussing on a Healthy Start for Early Years. It is strongly recommended that a multi-disciplinary working group is established to develop the Early Years Toolkit promoting a Healthy Start to support those working in a professional or voluntary capacity with families with children aged 0 to 4 years. Clear terms of reference and timescales should be established, and approved by the Hearty Lives Carrickfergus Steering Group. Consideration should be given as to how the Early Years Toolkit can be embedded within the agreed outcomes of the Northern Obesity Partnership (NOP), seeking to sustain the Hearty Lives legacy.

Taking into account feedback from parents, grandparents, carers, and stakeholders given during the Family Scoping Study, the recommendations for the Early Years Healthy Start Toolkit are summarised below:

1. The Early Years Toolkit should be collated as a reference document for both statutory, community and voluntary staff and organisations to ensure the information shared is consistent and evidence based.
2. The Early Years Toolkit will provide an excellent vehicle to ensure that the right information is provided to the right person in the right place at the right time
3. A partnership approach is of paramount importance for any work undertaken with this target audience. The local evidence collected and analysed during the life of the Hearty Lives Carrickfergus Project (including the data presented in this Report) further supports the need for a multi-sectoral approach to enable families with young children aged 0-4 years to develop key skills to prevent obesity and reduce the future risk of CVD.