

National Assembly for Wales

Children and Young People Committee

CO 07

Inquiry into Childhood Obesity

Evidence from : NUT Cymru

**About NUT Cymru:**

NUT Cymru represents primary and secondary school members and is the largest teaching union in Wales. We welcome the opportunity to contribute evidence to the Children and Young People's Committee inquiry into childhood obesity.

**1. The extent of childhood obesity in Wales and any effects from factors such as geographical location or social background;**

Details provided by the Welsh Health Survey which was carried out in 2010 demonstrate that the number of overweight or obese children has not changed much in four years. There was a slight reduction in 2008 and 2009 only for it to increase again in 2010. This suggests that the Welsh Government's strategy for reducing this number has not worked. The fact that 36% of the children in Wales (who took the survey) are overweight or obese, with this figure reducing to 19% for obese only is a shocking statistic.

An improved, healthier diet and regular exercise will lead to a reduction in the number of overweight and obese children in Wales. More emphasis should be put on children's diet with regular exercise being an added bonus. We would draw your attention to the work of Dr Robert Lustig, Professor of Clinical Pediatrics, in the Division of Endocrinology and Director of the Weight Assessment for Teen and Child Health (WATCH) at University of California, San Francisco, and particularly his lecture in March 2011 on the obesity epidemic <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0z5X0i92OZQ> Also, Zoe Harcombe has also lectured and written books on the Obesity Epidemic and her work needs to be studied in order to find a way forward in combatting obesity in Welsh children (<http://www.zoeharcombe.com/>). <http://www.theobesityepidemic.org/>

Geographical location and social background have a huge effect on the health of children in Wales. It is not a myth that many socially deprived and poor areas have high obesity rates. Many families on limited income cannot afford to buy the healthy, nutritious food that their children need so they turn to less nutritious, cheap processed food. The majority of these foods are high in sugar and carbohydrate.

This places greater emphasis on the provision of quality, nutritionally balanced school meals. However, we are concerned that the rigid application of Welsh Government rules can be counter-productive. Some members report young children being distressed as they are prevented from having butter or spread on bread at lunch time. However, food served as part of breakfast clubs is not subjected to the same standards (apparently as a consequence of such clubs receiving European funding). There is either a serious misunderstanding of the

standards to be applied in schools, or current policy pays insufficient regard to the need to encourage young children to eat healthily, rather than make lunch time a time of distress.

**2. The measurement, evaluation and effectiveness of the Welsh Government's programmes and schemes aimed at reducing the level of obesity in children in Wales specifically:**

- Health related programmes including Change4Life, MEND,

The statistics cited in point one above suggest that these have limited impact.

- Programmes related to nutrition in schools including Appetite for Life,

Appetite for Life has been up and running since 2008 and in the five years obesity levels have remained high. While the principles behind it are excellent, if it recommends that children eat high levels of carbohydrates (which will nearly all be processed carbohydrates such as pasta or bread) then obesity levels will remain constant. The 'eat well' plate recommended by the British Dietetic Association has to be blamed for this.

See also our comments in relation to school meals above.

- Cross cutting programmes for example leisure and sport related programmes (Creating an Active Wales); planning policy;

Getting children active is an excellent idea for them to have a healthier lifestyle but exercise alone will not reduce obesity levels unless the children's diet is changed. With a change in diet and an increase in physical activity, our obese and overweight children have a chance of losing weight and getting back some essential self-esteem. Our healthier children can have an active and healthy childhood. Being healthy is a way of life and needs to be encouraged if obesity rates in our children are going to fall.

**3. The barriers to reducing the level of childhood obesity in Wales;**

In socially deprived areas, children are not going to get the nutritious food that they need as the cost is high and their parents cannot afford to buy this type of food. Deprivation is a significant barrier to reducing the obesity level in Wales.

Having multinational companies such as McDonalds, Kellogg's and other food manufacturers sponsoring sporting activities for children is not the way forward. Whilst it is good that money is being invested in trying to get our children active, it sends out completely the wrong message when companies like this promote sporting activity as they are indirectly targeting the children with their processed food products. Other more ethical sponsors or sources of funding would be a way forward.