



PRESS RELEASE

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Healthy Food Must be More Accessible for Low-Income Groups – HFfA

Eating healthy food should not be the preserve of the well-off. That's according to Healthy Food for All (HFfA), which today (18.10.10) launched a guide aimed at promoting healthier eating habits in disadvantaged communities.

The guide – 'A Good Practice Guide for Community Food Initiatives' – provides advice on how to set up community food projects that would improve the availability, affordability and accessibility of healthy food for low-income groups.

Examples of community food initiatives include food cooperatives; community cafés, food-growing projects; breakfast and after-school clubs; and community-based training courses in nutrition and healthy eating.

Speaking at the launch of the guide today, Dr. Eddie Rooney, Chief Executive of the Public Health Agency (PHA), said all communities should have access to healthy foods at prices they can afford.

"Research shows the poorer you are, the more likely you are to experience bad health, and food and nutrition are key determinants of health," he said. "We know the greatest obstacles to accessing a healthy diet are shortage of money and the cost of nutritionally adequate food. Community food initiatives aim to address these obstacles. Essentially, they promote good health by making it easier for people to make healthy food choices.

"The Public Health Agency is delighted to be part of this initiative. Eating well is one of the most important things we can do to improve and help protect our health, including helping to prevent many of the health problems that are common in Northern Ireland today, such as cancer, heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure and dental decay. Engaging with communities to deliver nutrition initiatives, such as the PHA's 'Cook It!' programme, which is included in the guide, where people can develop their cooking skills and increase their knowledge of nutritional issues is essential to achieving improvements in the health and wellbeing of our people."

Supporting local communities to address their food needs is more urgent than ever before, according to HFfA: research shows that one in five boys and one in four girls in Northern Ireland are overweight or obese in their first year in primary school (age four to five) and, amongst 12- and 15-year-olds, incidences of being overweight and obese have increased by over a quarter in 10 years.

"The obesity epidemic currently being experienced here – and throughout the developed world – disproportionately affects the poor and disadvantaged," said Dr. Rooney. "Low-income households spend a higher proportion of their incomes on food, but have greater difficulties accessing healthy, affordable options. Even those who know the healthy options can be greatly restricted by financial and physical constraints.

"Obviously, the recession is compounding food poverty problems. In many poorer households, money spent on food is the only flexible budget item, so it's the first thing to be reduced if money gets tight or bills for other expenses – such as rent or electricity – increase. The less disposable income families have, the less likely they are to enjoy a healthy diet."

Speaking at today's launch, Marjo Moonen, Chair of HFfA, said there were a number of other reasons why certain communities experience high levels of food poverty.

"Those affected may lack suitable cooking and storage equipment; there may be no local shops selling affordable food; transport to shops may be inadequate; or people may lack the relevant knowledge and skills," she said. "Food poverty is a



growing problem, and we believe it will only be solved through a combination of government policy changes and bottom-up approaches to food provision and consumption.

“Community food initiatives can combat food poverty by making good-quality, affordable food more accessible to local communities. They can also address gaps in dietary knowledge and skills, and improve the quality and extent of food distribution and provision in local areas. For example, some community food initiatives teach local residents how to grow their own fruit and vegetables; others provide training for parents in how to prepare healthy family meals on a low budget.

“Community food initiatives have positive economic impacts, as well as the obvious health benefits. They stimulate economic activity within local communities and support local food suppliers and producers. They can also lead to environmental improvements: transforming a patch of waste-ground into a community garden, for example, means locals benefit not only from the healthy food produced but also from a greener and more aesthetically pleasing environment.”

The HFfA guide published today aims to help communities set up and sustain food initiatives, so they can have better access to safe, sustainable, nutritious food, with a positive impact on the well-being of people in their local area. The guide contains case studies of community food initiatives already operating successfully throughout Northern Ireland, including the ‘Dig it and Eat it!’ project in Belfast; the Bogside and Brandywell Community Health Forum in Derry; and community cafés in the Footprint’s Women Centre in Belfast and the East Belfast Mission.

“Healthy Food for All is encouraging local communities to take things into their own hands with this new guide,” said Marjo Moonen. “Hopefully, it will help communities to address the current imbalanced and unfair situation, whereby nutritious food is much more accessible to higher earners than to those on lower incomes. The guide will serve as an extremely useful resource for community development and youth workers; community dieticians; health professionals; local authorities; and – indeed – the public at large.

“It provides very practical, step-by-step information for community groups interested in setting up food projects. Healthy Food for All is looking forward to seeing far more food initiatives in communities throughout the island of Ireland over the coming years.”

‘A Good Practice Guide for Community Food Initiatives’ is available to download from:
www.healthyfoodforall.com/good_practice_guides.htm.

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Notes:

Healthy Food for All (HFfA) is an all-island multi-agency initiative seeking to promote access, availability and affordability of healthy food for low-income groups. Its over-riding aim is to end food poverty on the island of Ireland. The core work of HFfA is funded by **safefood**, the North-South body responsible for the promotion of food safety and healthy eating on the island of Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland’s Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs, Food Safety Authority of Ireland and Health Service Executive. The Public Health Agency is a member of the Advisory Board of HFfA and Dr. Eddie Rooney wrote the foreword to the new ‘Good Practice Guide for Community Food Initiatives’. See www.healthyfoodforall.com for further information.