

21 March 2016

HEALTHY FOOD FOR ALL CALLS FOR ALL-PARTY AGREEMENT ON DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL FOOD AND NUTRITION POLICY

The all-island charity, Healthy Food for All, today called on all parties in the recently-elected Dáil to agree to develop and implement the country's first National Food and Nutrition Policy to tackle the issue of food poverty. The call was made in a 'legacy' document which has been circulated to all Oireachtas members and other stakeholders to mark Healthy Food for All's 10 years of operation and the handing over of its work to other groups.

Sinead Keenan, Healthy Food for All Co-ordinator, explained that food poverty — which is defined as the inability to have an adequate and nutritious diet due to issues of affordability and access to food — affects one-in-eight people in Ireland (600,000 people).

“Food poverty is a serious problem for children and young people with one-in-five going to school or bed hungry because there is not enough food in their home. Indeed, a report published in 2012 shows that one-in-six school-aged children report that they never eat a breakfast on a weekday.

“The recent election of the new Dáil and the discussions on Government formation gives us as a country an opportunity to focus on vital issues for the years ahead and Healthy Food for All believes that food poverty should be central in these discussions. We are calling for all-party agreement on the development and implementation of Ireland's first National Food and Nutrition Policy which has as its central aim ensuring that everyone can access and avail of healthy food.”

Sinead Keenan said that the development of this policy needs to involve all relevant Government departments — such as Social Protection, Health, Education and Skills, Agriculture and Community, Environment and Local Government — and be developed in partnership with the food and farming sectors, consumer groups, the community and voluntary sector, international organisations, business and the wider public.

Another key measure highlighted by Healthy Food for All in its 'legacy' document is the need for a coordinated National Food in Schools Strategy.

“While the budget for the School Meals Programme has been increased by the Department of Social Protection, many schools in disadvantaged areas are not able to avail of that funding because they don't have the required facilities in terms of food preparation in place nor access to trained staff. We are calling on the Department of Education and Skills to make additional resources available to schools in disadvantaged areas so that they can put kitchen and food storage facilities in place as well as training staff to prepare and serve food to children

In addition to the development of a National Food and Nutrition Policy, Sinead Keenan highlighted some other measures that need to be taken to tackle food poverty in the period ahead:

- Maintain and highlight food poverty trends on an annual basis: The Department of Social Protection includes annual food poverty figures in its Social Inclusion Monitor and it is vital that this continues so that we can see what progress — if any — is being

made in tackling food poverty and Government can be held to account for its stewardship on this issue;

- Develop a funding stream for Community Food Initiatives: The provision of €2.5 million over five years to ensure that each county has at least one Community Food Initiative (CFI) — CFIs improve the availability and accessibility of healthy food for low income groups through community gardens, cookery/nutrition classes, community cafes and healthy food shopping and budgeting classes.
- Changes to planning policy at local and national levels to include requirement for healthy food outlets: Planning authorities should include access to healthy food in their decision-making processes — such as No Fry Zones in the vicinity of schools.

Mary Van Lieshout, Chairperson of Healthy Food for All explained that the decision to wind down the Healthy Food for All and hand over its work to other groups was made following many months of deliberation by the organisation's board.

“The decision to close was to do with the financial sustainability of the organisation. When HFfA was established we had a commitment from funders to provide support for our three year Strategic Plan. In recent years there has been a shift to **annual funding streams**. This means staff have been spending an inordinate amount of time chasing funding.

“There has also been a shift towards **activity based funding** which means we could get funding for events but not for core funding which covers salaries and overheads such as rent. Funding was often only received late in the year which led to **cash flow issues** and made it difficult for us to plan activities in advance. With staff spending more and more time trying to secure funding there was less capacity to pursue our core objectives,” Mary Van Lieshout concluded.