

Response to the report of the National Assembly for Wales Audit Committee's report on:

Increasing Physical Activity in Wales

Committee Report AC(3) 06-08 – July 2008.

Recommendation i.

a. Identify which government department is taking the lead on the Climbing Higher strategy and increasing physical activity in Wales.

Recommendation Accepted

The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to developing a fresh approach to work on physical activity which will revise and extend the existing Climbing Higher strategy. We will publish a revised strategic action plan on physical activity in the New Year that will set out targets and supporting actions. The development of the action plan will be led at official level by the Department of Public Health and Health Professions (DPHHP). It will be an important element of our broader public health strategic framework "A Healthier Future" which is being led by the Chief Medical Officer. The action plan will encompass the contributions of all those Assembly Government departments which have a contribution to make to this critical policy agenda. This includes the Heritage Department and the very successful programmes managed by the Sports Council for Wales. The development of the action plan will be led at official level by the Chief Medical Officer who will report on a regular basis to the Heritage Minister who will continue to be responsible for policy and strategy on sport and physical activity within the Welsh Assembly Government Cabinet. The Chief Medical Officer will work with Heritage Department officials in supporting the Heritage Minister in this role. We see this sort of arrangement as a natural part of the joining up which is required in cross cutting policy areas of this nature right across the Welsh Assembly Government.

b. Establish a high level steering group to provide much needed leadership, as recommended by the Auditor General.

Recommendation Accepted

The Welsh Assembly Government has set up a senior steering group to oversee the development of the new strategic action plan for promoting physical activity. This group will also be charged with improving the co-ordination of the delivery of programmes which impact on the physical activity agenda. The group will include senior policy officials from the Department of Public Health and Health Professionals (DPHHP); Heritage Department; Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), Environment, Sustainability and Housing (ESH); Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS); Department for Constitutional Affairs, Equality and Communications (CAEC); Department for Social Justice and Local Government (SJLG) and the Department for the Economy and Transport (DE&T). The group will be chaired by the Chief Medical Officer who is also leading on the development of the broader

Public Health Strategic Framework for Wales.

c. Nominate a senior individual to champion physical activity work across the Assembly Government and to liaise with other stakeholders in overseeing and coordinating all physical activity work in Wales; as recommended by the Auditor General.

Recommendation Accepted

The Welsh Assembly Government recognises the critical points made by the Wales Audit Office and is anxious to ensure that there should be a significant improvement in the co-ordination of government policy interventions aimed at promoting physical activity. In addition to the senior level steering committee we will, therefore, also be nominating a senior official who will lead collective work promoting and co-ordinating the work on physical activity. The post holder will be charged with improving the co-ordination and impact of the policies on physical activity going on right across the Welsh Assembly Government. The individual will report directly to the Chief Medical Officer.

d. Define roles and responsibilities clearly across the Assembly Government and partner organisations involved in the delivery of the physical activity agenda, as recommended by the Auditor General.

Recommendation Accepted

This response makes clear that the Heritage Minister will remain responsible for policy on physical activity within the Cabinet and that at official level the work underway right across the Welsh Assembly Government will be co-ordinated by the Chief Medical Officer. The new strategic action plan for promoting physical activity will define roles and responsibilities for the delivery of physical activity actions both within the Welsh Assembly Government and across our external partner organisations. The new action plan will also make clear how our work on physical activity fits into the wider Public Health Strategic Framework and how delivery is achieved. It will also confirm the crucial contribution of the Sports Council as well as the work which other key partner organisations are commissioned to undertake.

e. Consider the possibility of placing some sort of statutory duty on local authorities in relation to provision for physical activity.

Recommendation Partially Accepted

This matter will be kept under review but for the time being Ministers do not believe that there is a requirement for additional statutory tools to carry forward the physical activity agenda. Local authorities are already under a statutory duty to produce health and well being strategies. Ministers are anxious to see a greater prominence given to the need to promote physical activity in the development of these local strategies. Mechanisms for achieving this will be an important feature of the new action plan.

Recommendation ii

We recommend that the Assembly Government and its delivery partners should instigate a public awareness-raising campaign that clarifies the message that even engaging in small amounts of exercise will be beneficial to health.

Recommendation Accepted

The Health Challenge Wales campaign for 2008-2009 will highlight the benefits of physical activity as part of its work. There will be a particular focus on encouraging more of the sedentary population to try a little exercise as a start to improving their health. Health Challenge Wales works through the media and partner organisations across Wales. Further developments of the campaign will be informed by evaluation.

Recommendation iii

We recommend that the Assembly Government expedites work on the action plan.

- a. sets out how departments and sponsored bodies will coordinate and report on activities that contribute to increasing physical activity**
- b. is consistent with other work being undertaken on the public health strategic framework**
- c. is consistent with the funding that the Assembly Government intends to provide**

Recommendation Accepted

Work is already underway on a number of fronts. The thematic sub-group of the Public Health Strategic Framework examining physical activity has now met 3 times. There will be extensive engagement with a range of key partner organizations through the autumn in order to prepare the new action plan which will take account of the recommendations set out above. This engagement and consultation will be an essential to secure the necessary support of these partner organisations. The intention is that the new strategic action plan for promoting physical activity should be developed alongside the new Public Health Strategic Framework. The intention is that these documents will be published in the Spring of 2009 and be complementary.

Recommendation iv

We recommend that the Assembly Government and its delivery partners should carry out a fundamental review of funding for physical activity; as recommended by the Auditor General. The review should include:

- a. An assessment of the funding that currently supports the leisure centre infrastructure in Wales.**
- b. Consideration of the optimum level of facility provision required and the level of funding needed to sustain it.**
- c. Funding support for the voluntary sector.**

Recommendation Partially Accepted

WAG will review its physical activity funding programmes as part of the development of the revised strategic action plan for the promotion of physical activity. This will include the funding provided to voluntary organisations. We will also want to draw upon the evidence base developed by the Sports Council for Wales following its review of local authority leisure centre infrastructure provision.

However the Welsh Assembly Government believes that it would be a mistake to link the promotion of physical activity too tightly to the funding and provision of specialist sports facilities. The challenge is to encourage people to build physical activity into their normal daily routines, for instance through walking and cycling.

Recommendation v

We recommend that the Assembly Government implement the recommendations in relation to the Free Swimming initiative made by both the Auditor General and the evaluation report produced by the University of Wales Institute Cardiff.

- a. The Assembly government should set national targets for participation against the scheme's objectives.**

- b. The Assembly Government and Sports Council should evaluate whether the scheme has delivered value for money.**

- c. Funding provided by the Welsh Assembly to local authorities should be linked to performance.**

- d. Local delivery plans for Free Swimming should contain all the required information to ensure that all key criteria have been met, including consistent evaluation mechanisms.**

Recommendation Partially Accepted

The Welsh Assembly Government commissioned the review of the Free Swimming pilot, via the Sports Council for Wales, in order to assess the effectiveness and learn lessons from the scheme. The working group which was established as part of the scheme has considered the evaluation report findings and what steps need to be taken to enhance the impact and effectiveness of the scheme and has presented those findings to the Welsh Assembly Government for it to consider. As part of this work, we will also undertake work to evaluate the value for the money of the scheme during the pilot phase. We expect all this work to lead to a new understanding with local authorities including the development of consistent evaluation mechanisms. Ministers will also be invited to consider the implications for funding of the programme moving forward taking into account the evaluation report and the value for money of the pilot phase. Decisions will also need to be taken on the balance between national and local targets and on mechanisms by which funding might be tied to performance.

Recommendation vi

We recommend that, in addition to its usual initial response to our report, the Assembly Government provide this Committee with an update report, tracking progress against each of our recommendations, within 12 months of the date of our hearing (ie no later than 5 June 2009).

Recommendation Accepted

We would welcome the opportunity to provide the Committee with an update report based on the recommendations in this report by no later than 5 June 2009.