

From the Chief Medical Officer  
**Dr Michael McBride**



Dr Shireen Kassam  
King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust  
Haematological Medicine  
Ground floor Hambleton Wing  
Denmark Hill  
London SE5 9RS

Castle Buildings  
Stormont Estate  
Belfast BT4 3SQ  
Tel: 028 90 520658  
Fax: 028 90 520573  
Email: michael.mcbride@health-ni.gov.uk

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Dear Dr Shireen

## **CHANGES TO LEGISLATION TO ALLOW FOR NATIONWIDE CHANGES TO OBESOGENIC AND UNSTAINABLE FOOD ENVIRONMENT**

Thank you for your open letter of 28 May in which you urge NHS leaders and the Government to pass post-COVID-19 legislation to allow for rapid, nationwide changes to the obesogenic and unsustainable food environment in which we currently live.

As you are aware, obesity can contribute to, and increase the risk of, life threatening diseases including heart disease and stroke; type II diabetes; some cancers, including postmenopausal breast cancer; and mental health issues such as depression; and complications in pregnancy. It has also been a key risk factor for individuals during the pandemic.

In Northern Ireland overweight and obesity is a key public health issue because of the long term associated health risks. Not only is a person's physical health put at risk due to the impacts of overweight and obesity, but it can also negatively impact on an individual's mental health and sense of wellbeing.

The importance of a balanced diet in promoting good health is well known, and we fully acknowledge that the cost of overweight and obesity can extend far beyond the public sector and affect individuals, families, communities, the economy, and society as a whole. I note the recommendations within the letter with great interest.

For your information, Northern Ireland currently has a life course obesity prevention framework, A Fitter Future for All 2012-2022, which is overseen by the Obesity Prevention Steering Group. The framework aims to tackle the issue of overweight and obesity throughout all settings and all life course stages but most current indicators show that we still have a long way to go to see any real positive change. The framework, associated papers and progress reports are available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/obesity-prevention>.

The Obesity Prevention Steering Group includes stakeholders from Department of Education, Department for Communities, Department for Infrastructure and Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, as well as local government, the health and social care sector, academics and the community and voluntary sector, who are committed to working together to reduce the rates of overweight and obesity in NI

To further support this work, and in line with key objectives of the regional obesity prevention strategy the Public Health Agency, Food Standards Agency and Safefood have jointly developed minimum nutritional standards for catering in health and social care settings in Northern Ireland. These standards support those working within Health Service catering businesses who want to offer consumers a choice of affordable, healthy and sustainable food. <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/minimum-nutritional-standards-catering-health-and-social-care-staff-and-visitors>

Nutritional Standards for school lunches and other food in schools came into effect in September 2007 and August 2008. Guidance is available and includes practical booklets for schools and leaflets for parents. The Department of Education launched a public consultation earlier this year that proposed updates to these standards. It is planned, subject to the outcome of this consultation and the availability of funding that these changes will be implemented with effect from September 2020

Food is clearly a cross-departmental issue and DAERA is in the early stages of exploring, with other NI Departments and interested parties, the merits, scope and content of a possible future food policy framework which seeks to build strategic alignment across NICS Departments and help shape a future food system for Northern Ireland.

A draft vision for a NI Future Food Policy Framework has been developed in a process involving all NICS Departments. The draft vision is “A transformed food system that protects natural resources for future generations, is economically and environmentally sustainable and provides safe, nourishing, accessible food to people, who make informed healthy choices”.

I note the changes proposed in respect of taxation and broadcast advertising, however it is important to note that these issues are not devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

I hope the above information shows the Department’s, and my own, commitment to improving the long term health of the population. I will continue to work cross departmentally to seek acceptable solutions to many of these issues.

Yours sincerely



**DR MICHAEL McBRIDE**  
**Chief Medical Officer**