Policies for tackling obesity and creating healthier food environments in Ireland: Food-EPI 2020

Current policies & priority actions

Executive Summary

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Preface

Suboptimal diet is responsible for an enormous burden of suffering and premature deaths globally. In Ireland, as in other developed countries, the impact of poor diet on the burden of non-communicable disease (NCD's) is immense. Poor diet is the single biggest risk factor for NCDs, exceeding the combined effects of tobacco, alcohol, and physical inactivity.

This highlights the urgent need for effective population level interventions to promote healthier diets globally and in wealthy developed countries such as Ireland. In the past, our efforts to tackle obesity and promote healthier diets have relied heavily on health education strategies and counselling interventions in clinical settings.

Unfortunately, these high-risk interventions that assume a high level of individual agency - a high level of control over our dietary choices, are of limited effectiveness. It is now clearly understood that to prevent diet-related chronic disease, we need to understand and address the "foodscape", the wide range of interconnected factors such as food production, processing, marketing, and distribution, that characterise our food system, and largely determine our dietary intakes.

On behalf of the School of Public Health, UCC and the HRB Centre for Health & Diet Research, I am delighted to welcome this report which presents the results of the first Irish Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI). Food-EPI is an initiative of the INFORMAS Network (International Network for Food and Obesity/NCDs Research, Monitoring and Action Support). Dr Janas Harrington working with colleagues in the School of Public Health and with Dr Stefanie Vandevijvere from the Scientific Institute of Public Health (Sciensano) in Belgium have assessed the Irish Government's level of implementation of policies and infrastructure support for improving the healthiness of the food environments in Ireland and benchmarked our performance against international best practice.

We are grateful to all of our colleagues in Ireland and internationally who have contributed to this landmark report. I hope the findings from this work will help change the discourse on food and health in Ireland and ultimately drive system level change on food policy towards health and environmental sustainability at national and local government level and in the private sector.

Professor Ivan Perry
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Executive Summary

Governments worldwide recognise the importance of a good diet for health and wellbeing and the prevention of chronic disease, including obesity. The prevalence of obesity, particularly amongst children, represents one of the biggest public health challenges globally[1,2]. In Ireland, one in five primary school children are overweight or obese[3]. Supporting and encouraging people to respond more healthily to an environment which promotes obesity is essential to reduce the burden of disease and adverse economic costs associated with obesity[2]. It is well established that food choices are heavily influenced by the food environment[2]. One of the main drivers of the obesity epidemic has been identified as the food system, which includes increased supply of cheap, palatable, energy dense foods; increased food mobility leading to increased distributions and convenience and more persuasive and pervasive food marketing.

Monitoring the level of implementation of government food policies and benchmarking against international best practice is imperative for progress towards better nutritional health and to create food environments that foster healthy living and address the specific needs of vulnerable groups in Ireland. Thus, a concerted effort by policy makers to develop robust policies is necessary to reverse the trend of deterioration of our food environments and move to establishing healthier food environments for all.

Approach

This report presents the results of the first Irish Healthy Food Environment Policy Index (Food-EPI). Food-EPI assessed the Irish Government's level of implementation of policies and infrastructure support for improving the healthiness of the food environments against international best practice. The Food-EPI is an initiative of the INFORMAS Network (International Network for Food and Obesity/NCDs Research, Monitoring and Action Support) and was conducted between January 2018 to June 2020 with a panel of independent and government public health experts. The Food-EPI Ireland was conducted in collaboration with research groups from other European countries as part of the JPI Policy Evaluation Network (PEN) (https://www.jpi-pen.eu/).

The Food- EPI is a six step process:

1. **Identify all food environment policies in place in Ireland.**

2. **Validate and verify this information with Government officials & establish an expert panel.**

3. **Conduct an online survey with the expert panel to rate the implementation of the Irish policies against international best practice.**

4. **Host an expert panel workshop to discuss the policy rating, to identify policy and infrastructure support gaps and to recommend potential actions to address these gaps.**

5. **Refine the identified actions for policy and infrastructure support.**

6. **Conduct a second online survey with the expert panel to prioritise the identified actions based on importance, achievability, and impact on social inequalities.**

Expert Opinions

The expert panel consisted of 20 representatives from academia, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, Safefood, HSE, and charity organisations. The panel rated the extent of implementation of policies on food environments and infrastructure support by the Irish Government, using an extensive collection of evidence validated by government officials.

The experts identified and prioritised actions needed to address critical gaps in government policies and infrastructure support and reduce the rates of NCD's in Ireland, with respect to health inequalities. In total 22 policy actions and 18 infrastructure support actions were recommended.

Results

The assessment of the implementation levels of priority policies and infrastructure support showed some areas of strength. Across the infrastructure support domains, Ireland rates well against international benchmarks in ensuring the public has access to nutritional information and key documents through freedom of information legislation.

Ireland is also at international best practice in monitoring overweight and obesity prevalence in the population and occurrence rates for the main diet-related NCDs and their risk factors. Implementation of evidence-based, food-based dietary guidelines, and mechanisms to co-ordinate multi-sectoral action to ensure policy coherence of diet-related NCD prevention policies. Ireland also rated well for implementing procedures to support evidence-informed policy-making.

However, of concern was the high number of food environment policies which were rated as having 'low' implementation compared to best practice, including:

I.   the need for greater emphasis on reducing the marketing of unhealthy foods to children on social and non-broadcast media,

II.   limited use of fiscal policies to support healthy food choices,

III. limited support for communities to reduce availability and accessibility of unhealthy food outlets,

IV.   limited support for private companies to promote healthy foods in their workplaces,

V.   provision of income support programs for healthy foods,

VI.   the need for evidence-informed labelling for front-of-pack and menu boards,

VII. the need for food composition targets/standards for processed foods.

Four implementation gaps were identified relating to government policy on key aspects of the food environment:

I.   a lack of government action on the introduction of targets for out-of-home meals,

II.   failure to restrict the promotion of unhealthy foods to children on food packaging,

III.   no discernible progress towards establishing public sector procurement standards for food service activities to provide and promote healthy food choices,

IV.   failure to implement policies that encourage availability of outlets selling nutritious foods.

Priority recommendations

The government is strongly urged to act on the recommended priority actions, with particular reference to 5 policy actions and 5 infrastructure support actions, to improve the health outcomes of Irish citizens, with particular focus on those in disadvantaged or vulnerable groups.

Five policy actions and five infrastructure support actions were identified as having the highest priority for implementation by the Irish Government.

Policy Actions Necessary to Support Healthy Food Environments

1. School Food Policies
Implement nutrition standards for all schools including tuck shops operating therein. All school-based health promotion should be delivered by health professionals. An Inter-school nutrition forum should be established with support by appropriate governing bodies.
2. Income Support
Establish a committee with a cross-governmental structure to monitor and evaluate food-related income support programmes for vulnerable population groups.
3. Healthy Food Subsidies
Ringfence revenue from tax on unhealthy foods to improve public health initiatives and provide healthy food subsidies targeted at disadvantaged groups in the community.
4. Zoning Laws
Introduce zoning legislation "No Fry Zones" to prohibit the placement of unhealthy food outlets within 400m of primary and secondary schools.
5. Public Sector Healthy Food Choices
Implement a comprehensive policy on nutrition standards for food and beverage provision in public sector. Monitoring of existing policies and guidelines for effectiveness in provision and promotion of healthy food choices should be conducted.

Infrastructure Support Actions Necessary to Support Healthy Food Environments

1. Transparency in Policy

Create a committee which monitors implementation of policies and procedures that ensure open and transparent approaches in the development and reviewing of food and nutrition policies and within the legislative process.

2. Political Support

An Taoiseach to demonstrate visible leadership and commitment to the "Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016-2025 (OPAP)" and commit to garnering cross-party support for the policy.

3. Engagement Platforms with Civil Society

Establish a formal platform between government and civil society - encompassing community groups, NGOs, academia, and the Citizens' Assembly (public), to increase engagement and participation in the planning and implementation of food and public health policies.

4. System-based Approach

Establish a forum consisting of local and national government, policy experts, public health experts and academia to facilitate information-sharing and knowledge transfer. The forum would identify priority areas and implement evidence-based policies to improve the food environment and health outcomes.

5. Health Impacts in Policy

The government to prioritise an evidence-informed national food and nutrition policy with explicit consideration given to the health impacts on vulnerable groups in Ireland and the determinants of health. This requires cross-departmental commitment to reducing health inequalities.

Food Provision, Prices, and Retail were three significant areas within the food environment identified for immediate action by the government. The expert panel has advocated for the implementation of nutrition standards in schools and the public sector to ensure the promotion and provision of healthy food choices. The experts expressed concern about food poverty, prioritising government action that would see healthy food subsidies and the establishment of a committee with cross-departmental support to supervise food-related income support programmes, both targeting disadvantaged communities. The introduction of zoning legislation to prohibit fast food outlets from opening near schools must be a commitment of the government.
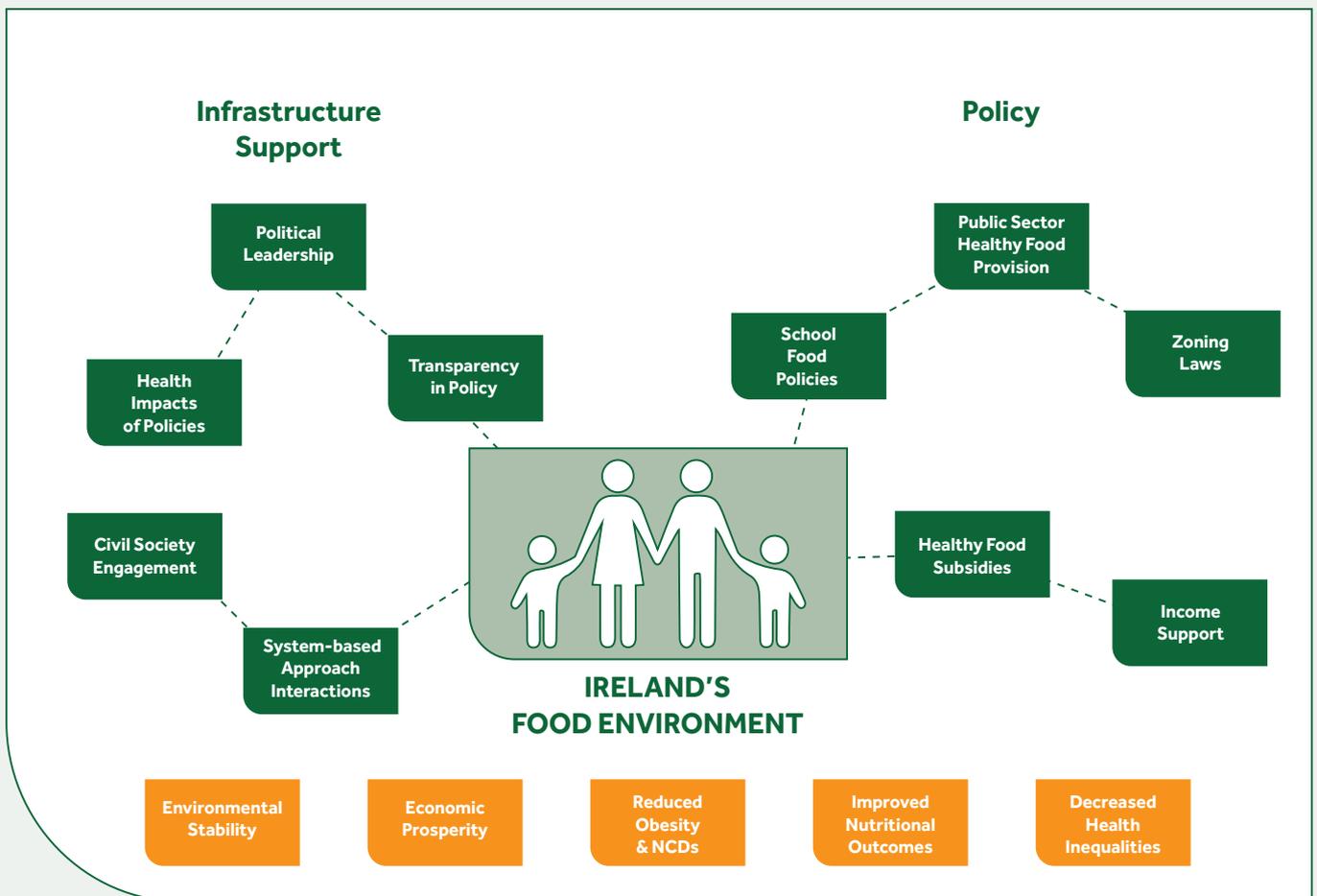
The Irish experts were clear that for meaningful progress to be made, there must be clear leadership by An Taoiseach with cross-party support for the national obesity policy "A Healthy Weight for Ireland: Obesity Policy and Action Plan, 2016-2025". The Obesity Policy and Action Plan aims to assist individuals achieve better health, with particular focus on reducing levels of overweight and obesity. The government's commitment to act on the prevention of overweight and obesity is documented in the 'Ten Steps Forward'. The actions set out within the steps correspond with some of the priority actions proposed by the Food-EPI experts. For example, creating healthier school food environments, guidelines for urban development planning to address the obesogenic environment, food promotion and government leadership that will engage and co-ordinate multi-sectoral action[3].

Other infrastructure supports prioritised by the experts include transparency during the formulation and implementation of food and nutrition policies and greater engagement between

government and civil society to inform policy development. Experts recommend the creation of a forum for the collaboration between public health experts, policy makers, academics, and government to facilitate knowledge transfer and identify priority evidence-based policies to improve the food environment. The final priority actions include a national nutrition policy for Ireland with explicit consideration by government given to the health impacts on vulnerable groups, and guidelines to ensure all food-related policies are aligned to assess health outcomes and reduce health inequalities.

The current health status of people living in Ireland, lifestyle factors and inequalities in health outcomes must be urgently addressed through food environment reform. The food environment is greatly shaped by the policy environment, and policy action is needed by government to create healthier food environments. Ireland has an excellent opportunity to improve the diets of the Irish population, prevent obesity and diet-related NCDs, and the associated rising healthcare costs by investing in highly cost-effective policies and programmes, which have demonstrated success in a number of countries. This will clearly require a much greater government effort than has been evident to bring Ireland in line with international standards for a healthy food environment. Progressive, evidence-based, and equitable food policies must be adopted to tackle the unhealthy and unequal food environments in Ireland.

Figure 1: Priority actions for a Healthy Food Environment in Ireland

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