



National Federation of Women's Institutes-Wales

Response to the Inquiry into Childhood Obesity

Background

The National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) is an educational, social, non-party political and non-sectarian organisation. It was established to ensure that women are able to take an effective part in their community, to learn together, widen their horizons, improve and develop the quality of their lives and those of their communities and together influence local, national and international affairs. The NFWI has an unrivalled reputation as a voice of reason, integrity and intelligence on issues that matter to women and their communities. The organisation has some 210,000 members in 6,500 Women's Institutes across England, Wales and the Islands. In Wales we have 16,000 members and about 500 WIs.

The NFWI has a long-standing history of commitment to improving the nation's diet and health and has for some time been concerned about the dramatic rise in childhood obesity and the decline in time spent by children playing and learning outdoors.

At the 2003 NFWI AGM, members passed a resolution urging HM Government to regulate the promotion to children of foods that contribute to an unhealthy diet and to ensure increased opportunities for exercise and practical food education in schools. Furthermore in June 2006, members passed a resolution 'sport for a healthy population' urging HM Government to "recognise that participation in sport is an essential factor in the creation of a healthy population; ensure the re-establishment of competitive (mainstream) sport in the curricula of all schools; and take such steps as necessary to reverse the decline in the availability of sporting facilities for all citizens..."

The need to re-instate home economics to the National Curriculum

NFWI-Wales strongly feels that the removal of cookery skills from the NC in the early 1990s has played a part in contributing to the current levels of obesity, there are now two to three generations of people who do not have the skills in preparing and cooking food. This has led to a poorer diet and subsequently an alarming rise in obesity rates and other chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and some cancers.

The Welsh Health Survey, published in 2010 found that 57% of adults and 35% of children were overweight or obese, and increases in the levels of such illnesses not only affect the individuals concerned and their families, but also puts pressure on the NHS and society more generally. A Welsh government-commissioned study by Swansea University calculated that obesity was costing the NHS in Wales £73m each year and it has been said that we are facing a public health problem that is comparable with climate change both in its scale and complexity.

NFWI-Wales believes that in order to promote healthy eating generally, it is imperative that changing young people's perception of food includes practical work to learn about food and basic cooking skills. Food theory is no substitute to practical food education. In terms of learning, there is considerable support for the proposition that activity is important. Learning, particularly regarding food skills is better when the learner is active rather than passive. In addition it is argued that frequent practice – and if possible, practice in varied contexts, is necessary for learning to take place. We recognise the

commitment of the Welsh Government to supporting the Welsh Network of Healthy Schools. With the Government's priority in reducing the impact of poverty in education, much more needs to be done to address food poverty and lack of food skills for children and families as this impacts on ability to learn.

If people are to have control of what they eat, they need the skills in shopping, preparing, cooking food and budgeting. The NHS Public Health Wales website states that the best way to prevent becoming overweight, or obese, is by eating healthily and exercising regularly, and yet these essential basic skills continue to be overlooked.

We recognise that children in primary and secondary schools have some experiences of learning about food however we feel that this provision is inadequate. While some practical cooking work is undertaken as a module of Design & Technology and food also features in Science and Personal and Social Education, we do not believe that this is sufficient for children to leave school with the confidence to cook.

NFWI-Wales urges the Welsh Government to seriously consider the re-introduction of cookery skills to the National Curriculum. This will ensure that children leave schools with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about the food they eat and how to cook meals from scratch rather than depending on pre-packaged food to feed their family. This will also result in savings to the family food bill.

Poverty

NFWI-Wales is concerned about the rising levels of child poverty. This provides an additional barrier to reducing the level of childhood obesity in Wales as a result of children not being able to afford to take part in a hobby or activity such as swimming. According to Save the Children, around 200,000 children are living in poverty in Wales.

Rising food prices during the current economic climate is causing a crisis in which people are eating less and eating less healthily. A recent report also identified that one in five people in Wales have skipped a meal because they could not afford to buy food.

Many of the most vulnerable groups in society are dependant on more expensive pre-packaged foods and less able to prepare varied healthy meals on a low income. The Kellogg's 'Hard to Swallow, The Facts about Food Poverty Report' found that the UK's poorest households are not able to maintain a healthy, balanced diet and are being forced to cut back on fruit by 20% and vegetables by 12% and the NFWI report 'Food for Thought: Global and National Challenges of Food Security' states that in 2011-2012 128,687 people were fed using food banks, nearly double the previous year. The Trussell Trust has also reported that the number of people using food banks in Wales has more than doubled in the last year. A recent report in The Guardian suggested that the UK has entered a 'nutritional recession' in which people's diets become less healthy as they seek out cheap and filling foods at the expense of healthy diets. An estimated 900,000 fewer people were eating the recommended five daily portions of fruit and vegetables in May 2012 than two years previously, while consumption of fats and sugars has soared.

NFWI-Wales projects

Get Cooking

Since the late 1990s, NFWI-Wales has been delivering the Get Cooking project to provide people with basic food preparation skills; teach ways of obtaining a varied, healthy diet on a low budget; and to demonstrate that the basic preparation of food, cooking and eating can be enjoyable. The project, currently targeting parents, involves WI tutors holding practical classes in basic food preparation and cooking as well as food budgeting to small groups over a 6 week period.

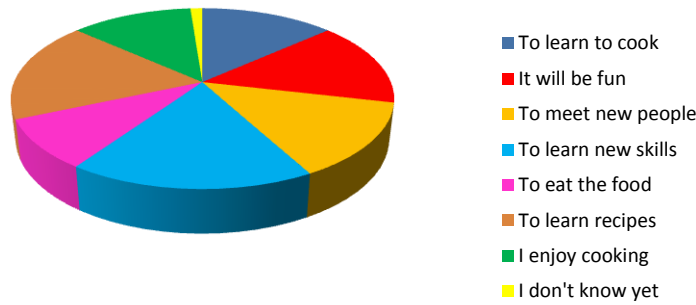
Influences in the home can greatly impact on the decisions children make with regard to food consumption. In order to start addressing childhood obesity, it is essential to educate parents about the importance of healthy eating and for them to play their part in influencing their children to consume healthy meals at home as well. Experience tells us that many parents understand the messages on eating healthily and '5 a day' however, many do not know how to prepare and cook the

ingredients, plan their meals to avoid wasting food and save money on their food bills, and therefore rely on ready meals high in salt, fat and sugar.

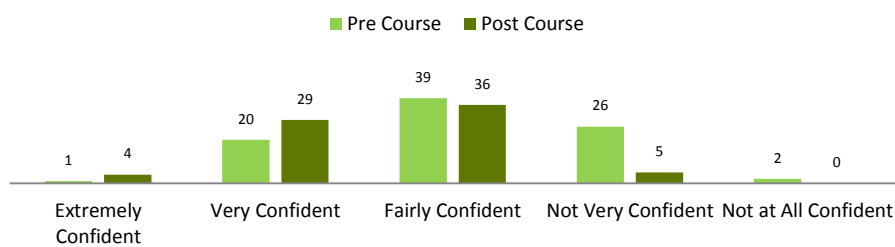
During the delivery of the WI Get Cooking courses, it was found that the courses targeted at young mothers had the greatest impact in changing behaviour as the mothers were able to put the skills they had gained into practice when preparing meals for the family.

From our evaluation of the project during the last six years, the evidence suggests that the project has had a positive influence on the eating habits of families as the following demonstrates:

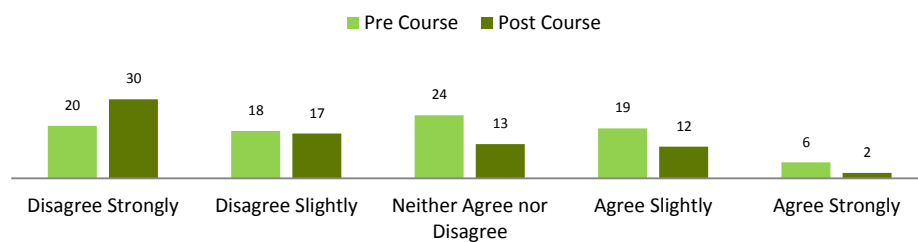
Why take this course?



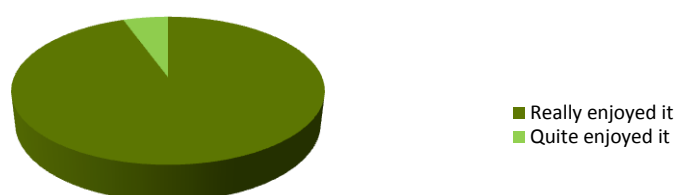
How confident are you at cooking?



It's cheaper to buy meals ready prepared than to cook it yourself?



Did you enjoy the course?



The following are short case studies highlighting the positive impact of Get Cooking on families (names have been changed):

Carol has a little girl aged 2 and is pregnant with her second child. She doesn't work. As a result of the course Carol feels that she has a lot more confidence with cooking, especially baking – which was a skill that she hadn't had before. She now has a store cupboard stocked with basic baking ingredients. This has helped with budgeting as when she looks at the cakes in the shops she knows she can make cheaper and better herself. The tutor demonstrated budgeting skills by breaking down the cost of dishes by portion so that it was easier to make comparisons. She enjoyed the course because it helped her to see how easy it is to make nice meals which aren't as expensive as you'd thought and it's much better to know what's going into your food. She is braver now with adapting recipes and is confident to take a basic method and alter it a bit to suit her taste and experiment. She hopes that her daughter will pick up how easy it is to cook things and will follow her example.

Rachael has a son, aged 2, and a daughter, aged 3 months. She works as a part-time shop assistant. Rachael feels that the course has made her more confident as she is now more likely to 'get in there and have a go – if it goes wrong, it doesn't matter!' She stated that she thinks about cooking more and now plans her meals ahead – 'Instead of shopping randomly, I'm now thinking about recipes and what ingredients I'll need.' She feels that her attendance on the course means that her children will eat more healthily as she can now make meals from fresh ingredients – 'I now know more ways of getting good food into my kids!'. Her son loves the pasta recipe and regularly stands on a stool and helps in the kitchen – 'He likes to see it all happening!' Rachael enjoyed the course because there was a good atmosphere and the tutors weren't 'stuffy', they were patient and kind. It was fun and relaxed and was nice socially as much as anything else. She's not sure how much the course has helped with her budget as although she understands the principles better, she also prides herself on cooking with good quality ingredients, which she feels tend to cost more, but are worth it. She stated that all the recipes used on the course were new to her.

Daphne has six children, four sons aged 21, 16, 4 and 10 days, and two daughters aged 23 and 10. She doesn't work. Daphne feels that the course will impact positively on her family's health because she buys more fruit and veg now, and she pays much more attention to what she's buying when she goes shopping. She said that they eat together at the table more now because she tends to cook one meal that everyone can enjoy whereas previously she was feeding the children separately and then eating with her husband afterwards. Daphne feels that the course has impacted positively on her budgeting as she is more mindful of what she is buying and how much it costs. She stated that she experiments more with food these days and especially likes making her own soups.

Sharon has a daughter, aged 19 who is expecting Sharon's first grandchild, and she also has two sons aged 10 and 11. She doesn't work. Sharon says that the Get Cooking course has quite literally changed her life. She is cooking from scratch every day, and much more confident in the kitchen. She mentioned that the family hardly ever eat takeaways any more because now they make their own 'takeaway' food – curries, kebabs and pizza. She also feels that her shopping habits have changed because she is buying much more fresh food rather than pre-packaged meals. She has noticed a change in her children's health – specifically she mentioned that one of her sons suffers from ADHD and that he has become calmer since their eating habits have changed. She's also noticed a reduction in her grocery bills. Sharon said that she used to cook 'the same old things all the time, and now it's a different meal every day!'. She mentioned that her sons love to get involved in the kitchen and as a result of the course they are spending more time together as a family and they communicate more, 'It used to be the case that the boys were upstairs playing on the X Box and I'd be downstairs on my own. It's brought us together.' Sharon says that the tutors were fantastic and it was lovely to learn that cooking good food from scratch doesn't take as long as she'd thought.

Further information about the project including a DVD with footage of courses in action is available from the WI website:- <http://www.thewi.org.uk/wi-in-wales/current-projects/get-cooking>

Welsh Government's Get Cooking Bus

During the last 5 years, WI Get Cooking tutors have worked closely with the Welsh Government's Get Cooking Bus which has been visiting primary schools across Wales. Our tutors have been attending the community sessions and identifying groups of parents who would benefit from a Get Cooking course. This relationship has been extremely successful and has ensured consistency in the messages around healthy eating, food preparation skills and food safety.

NFWI-Wales strongly believes that the Cooking Bus plays a vital role in educating children and communities in healthy eating and food preparation skills and has responded to the review of Health Improvement Programmes undertaken recently by Public Health Wales urging that the success of the Cooking Bus is recognised and the future of the initiative protected.

Gardening with Schools

In response to our concerns about the rise in obesity levels amongst young children, NFWI-Wales established the Gardening with Schools project in 2005 to provide an opportunity for children to get active by gardening, whilst at the same time, learning about the origin of food and the importance of healthy eating. During the project, over 100 primary schools were supported by WI members to develop their school gardens / establish vegetable or wildlife areas and to carry out general garden maintenance. As part of the initiative, WIs also gave demonstrations on the preparation and cooking of the vegetables grown by the schoolchildren. Feedback from the schools was positive and children in particular commented on how much they enjoyed tasting the produce they had grown.

At the end of the project in 2008, a case studies booklet was produced illustrating some of the successful gardening projects established across Wales by WIs and their local schools. The case studies booklet can be downloaded from the WI website:-

<http://www.thewi.org.uk/wi-in-wales/past-projects/gardening-with-schools>

Sport

In order to motivate more girls to take up sport, NFWI-Wales believes that the media has a key role to play through increasing coverage given to females in sport and physical activity in the local press and on local radio and television.

Women and girls make up 51% of the population but this is not reflected in the level of media coverage for female athletes and participants in sport and physical activity. In an image conscious age where people are motivated by what they see, it is important to present positive images of women and girls involved in sport and physical activity to encourage others to get involved. It is also important to present the diversity of women and of activities available on both a participation and a performance level, encompassing both the player who plays for their school or turns out for her local hockey club every week as well as those who achieve representative honours on a regional or national level.

Playing fields have a vital role in contributing towards the health and wellbeing of communities. For some, playing fields for either sport and / or recreation may be the only facilities that they have access to providing free access to open spaces and providing children with the opportunity to keep active outdoors. Removal of such facilities can impact on the health and wellbeing of children and could in effect contribute to a reduction in physical activity levels.

Conclusion

In conclusion, NFWI-Wales hopes that the Health Minister and Education Minister will review the current provision of cooking skills on the National Curriculum and consider the need to re-introduce cooking skills in line with the provision that was delivered in schools prior to the 1990s. If no change is implemented, generations of children will continue to leave schools without the ability to cook and the consequences on the health of the population are grave.

In light of the success of the Welsh Government's Cooking Bus, NFWI-Wales strongly believes that this is a resource that should be protected and hope very much that work of the Cooking Bus will go from strength to strength over the coming years.

Sport in school must continue to be prioritised as well as external initiatives to encourage children to exercise such as the free swimming during schools holidays. We urge the media to give greater coverage to girls and women in sport as a means of motivating more girls to continue to take an active part in sport as they get older. In addition, playing fields must be protected as they are instrumental in providing children with open space to enjoy the outdoors and exercise.