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The logo for the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) is a heraldic crest featuring a shield with a five-pointed star, topped by a helmet and crest with wings. The shield is supported by two figures. The text 'Chartered Institute of Environmental Health' is positioned to the left of the crest, with a thin, curved line separating the crest from the text.

Press Release

6 November 2007

Embargoed 00.01

Government must act to tackle dietary related ill-health

Increasing numbers of people will suffer from dietary related ill-health and obesity unless there is a rethink by government in Northern Ireland on how existing resources are allocated and agreed targets are achieved, is the stark warning from leading public health organisations this week.

The comments by the Public Health Alliance (PHA) and the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) follow the launch of a two-year study into food poverty and policy.

Despite high level awareness-raising campaigns on healthy eating many people are still failing to consume the Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) of fruit and vegetables while maintaining diets high in fats, salt and sugar, especially those in vulnerable circumstances.

Such diets will exacerbate rates of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, some cancers, hypertension and the existing obesity epidemic.

Director of CIEH Northern Ireland and Co Chair of the PHA Gary McFarlane said:

"It is clear from this work that the healthy eating messages are getting through, people understand them but this is not translating into change because of issues such as a lack of money, and limited access and availability of healthy food.

"The vision of *The Programme for Government* is a 'better future for all'. If we are to tackle food poverty seriously this government must take the matter seriously.

"Failure to address the real issue of food poverty in Northern Ireland will lead to significant preventable health problems in the population as well as escalating costs within the health service."

The *Food Poverty – Fact not Fiction* report uses data for Northern Ireland extracted from the Food Expenditure Survey 2005, the latest literature and surveys into diet and

nutrition, as well as interviews with both key stakeholders and vulnerable groups likely to be suffering food poverty.

The study finds that core issues prevent people acting on already understood healthy eating messages. These include a lack of money, inadequate storage facilities, poor literacy and numeric skills to read and understand food labels and limited access to healthy food options among lower socio-economic groups, as well as a lack of skills to cook and prepare healthy food and the predominance of convenience culture is conspiring against people wishing to implement a healthy diet.

Key recommendations from the report include:

- The absolute need for joined up government across key policy areas including health, education and sustainable development
- A rethink of existing resource allocation and distribution
- Sustained financial support for proven initiatives on the ground addressing the practical issues of affordability, access and skills
- A new government food subsidy scheme directed towards those most disadvantaged, such as a food voucher scheme, incorporating sustainability issues
- Food poverty is influenced by planning decisions: there must be adherence to and monitoring of PPS5 to ensure out of town locations are a last resort for retailers
- Government must consider policies to encourage the variety of fruit and vegetables in local shops
- Greater emphasis needs to be given to food standards work carried out by local authorities. The capacity for environmental health services to work with retailers in this regard needs to be harnessed and encouraged by the Food Standards Agency (FSA). Further work is required to develop appropriate priorities in this area
- There needs to be further development of simplified food labelling schemes such as the FSA traffic light system
- Large food retailers need to radically rethink their policies on delivery of food shopping
- Those responsible for public transport need to improve frequency of service, particularly for less developed and rural areas

The study was conducted by the PHA in collaboration with the CIEH, the Institute of Public Health in Ireland and the University of Ulster and was funded by *safefood*.

Notes to editors

- Food poverty is characterised by having a lack of money, inadequate shopping facilities and poor transport culminating in people being denied healthy food choices or being unable to eat an adequate diet

- While specific figures for those living in food poverty do not exist, according to the British Household Panel survey 2003/04 20 percent of the NI population and 25 percent of children is in income related poverty
- The Public Health Alliance (PHA) for the island of Ireland is an independent, voluntary alliance of individuals and organisations who share a commitment to working together for a healthier and more equitable society by improving health
- The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) is the professional voice for environmental health. It ensures the highest standards of professional competence in its members, in the belief that through environmental health action people's health can be improved
- The CIEH represents over 10,000 members working in the public, private and non-profit sectors. For more information about the CIEH visit www.cieh.org

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