Briefing Paper on Health Inequalities for Elected Members of Local Government

Introduction
The social and economic circumstances in which people live strongly influence their chances to be healthy. Factors such as housing, transport, environment, education and employment are just some of the functions of local government that influence health.

Research has established that people living in poor social and economic circumstances are likely to face more illness during their lifetime and die at a younger age than those who are better off. In Ireland, there is a six year difference in overall life expectancy between people in the highest social groups compared to those in the lowest[1]. Such inequalities are unjust and unfair.

This paper supports elected members of local government to ensure that the decisions in which they are involved have a positive impact on health, especially the health of vulnerable groups. By acting on the information provided in this leaflet, councillors can contribute to better quality of life for their constituents with healthier decision making in areas such as safer environments, increased education opportunities, better housing stock and improved public transport availability.

A strategic approach to tackling health inequalities
Three issues underpin action to address health inequalities:
1. A partnership approach encompassing community engagement and interagency cooperation.
2. Awareness and understanding of the existence of health inequalities, informed by good quality, accessible, well coordinated data. Become informed about health inequalities in your area by consulting:
    - INIsPHO www.inisphoedata.ie
    - Pobal www.pobal.ie/WhatWeDo/Deprivation/Pages/AreaProfiles.aspx
3. Awareness and understanding of the current and potential structures and processes within local government to tackle health inequalities. Ensure health inequalities are incorporated into the work of existing partnerships such as Strategic Policy Committees, Social Inclusion Measures Groups and City/County Development Boards. For example, the issues laid out in the County and City Development Plans have enormous implications for health and health inequalities. Conducting a health impact assessment of the draft plan can help to ensure that potential negative impacts are minimised at the planning stage.

Facts and action on health inequalities in specific areas of council responsibility
Housing:
People's health and well-being is compromised if they don't have access to a home which provides adequate privacy, adequate space, adequate security, adequate lighting and ventilation, adequate basic infrastructure and adequate location with regard to work and basic facilities – all at a reasonable cost.

Fuel poverty continues to be a major issue of concern for many people, especially the elderly. Living in cold and damp housing contributes to the extra winter deaths which occur each year in Ireland.

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[1] IPH Inequalities in Mortality 2001

Councillors can work with their housing department to ensure that energy efficiency schemes are benefiting the most vulnerable groups in their communities.

Service charges are one of the causes of debt amongst low income families. Councillors can work with their housing department to ensure that service charge waivers are managed in an appropriate and equitable way.

Housing maintenance is a major issue for people living in Local Authority housing. Speedy and efficient responses to complaints can significantly reduce stress and other negative health impacts.

Active transport
Over reliance on cars means that people are losing out on one of the best ways to incorporate physical activity into everyday life as well as contributing to poorer air quality and increased risk of traffic injuries. People are more likely to walk, cycle and use public transport if they consider these options to be safe and convenient. Councillors can work with planning and transport departments to ensure that local environments facilitate sustainable transport options and that people have more choice in how they travel around their local area.

Safety in the public realm
Crime and fear of crime can have an extremely negative effect on mental health and quality of life, especially for vulnerable groups. A poorly maintained and underused public realm contributes to making an area unsafe. Councillors can work with relevant council departments as well as the Gardai to ensure that areas are designed to reduce criminal and anti-social behaviour through a number of methods including: appropriate street lighting; "eyes on the street" building design; cross community dialogue; mechanisms to slow down traffic and; encouraging more footfall in an area.

Outdoor recreation space
People who live within a short walking distance of attractive, well maintained parks are more likely to be healthier, both mentally and physically, across the life span; however those who live in rural communities as well as deprived urban areas are less likely to have access to these facilities. Councillors can work to ensure targets for recreational space are met and that such spaces are appropriate for different groups within the community.

Food
Access to food is a basic human right but cost, quality and sustainability issues associated with food are of growing concern for many people. Councillors can work with the planning department to ensure there is an appropriate mix of convenience stores and supermarkets, as well as allowing space for allotments and community gardens.

Conclusion
Local government services present a real opportunity to tackle health inequalities.

Further information
Institute of Public Health in Ireland - www.publichealth.ie
Community Action Network - www.canaction.ie
Nexus Research - www.nexus.ie