

Environmental

Developing a Children's Environment and Health Strategy for the United Kingdom

Raquel Duarte-Davidson ⁽¹⁾, Alexander C Capleton ⁽¹⁾, Sue O'Connell ⁽¹⁾, Stacey Wyke ⁽¹⁾, Tina Endericks⁽²⁾ and Gary Coleman ⁽¹⁾

- 1 WHO Collaborating Centre, Chemical Hazards and Poisons Division.
- 2 Chief Executives Office, Health Protection Agency, London.

With special thanks to Simon Dyer ⁽³⁾ and Poul Peterson ⁽⁴⁾

- 3 Department of Health, Toxicology & Radiation, Wellington House, London.
- 4 Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA), Chemicals and Nanotechnologies Division, Nobel House, London.

email: cehape@hpa.org.uk

Introduction

The European Environment and Health Process, led by the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe, aims to support WHO Euro Member States as they plan and implement national and international environment and health policies. This process includes a series of five-yearly ministerial conferences on environment and health. The most recent conference took place in 2004 in Budapest and resulted in Ministers from across the WHO Europe Member States, including the UK, signing up to the Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe (CEHAPE). This plan commits them to the development of national Children's Environment and Health Action Plans (CEHAP) to protect the health of children and young people from environmental hazards.

The Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe (CEHAPE) consists of four Regional Priority Goals, focusing on water sanitation and health; injuries, diet and physical activity; air pollution; and biological, chemical and physical hazards (Box 1).

The four Regional Priority Goals address the main causes of the environment-related burden of disease across the 53 WHO European Region member countries. Rather than being prescriptive, the Regional Priority Goals allow individual countries to focus on the priorities that are most relevant to them. Therefore, in taking this forward the UK should focus on the areas that will bring about the most benefit to health in the UK's child and young adult population.

Why Children and Young People?

In the UK there are around 14.8 million children and young people aged 0-18 years, comprising approximately 25% of the population (ONS, 2006).

Children and young people (Box 2) can be especially vulnerable to infections and environmental exposures during development and growth, and receive relatively greater exposure than adults due to behaviour patterns, lack of awareness of risks, relative size and biological metabolisms.

Box 1: CEHAPE Regional Priority Goals

Regional Priority Goal I: Water, Sanitation and Health

To prevent and significantly reduce the morbidity and mortality arising from gastrointestinal disorders and other health effects, by ensuring that adequate measures are taken to improve access to safe and affordable water and adequate sanitation for all children.

Regional Priority Goal II: Accidents, Injuries, Diet and Physical Activity

To prevent and substantially reduce health consequences from accidents and injuries and pursue a decrease in morbidity from lack of adequate physical activity, by promoting safe, secure and supportive human settlements for all children.

Regional Priority Goal III: Respiratory Health, Indoor and Outdoor Air Pollution

To prevent and reduce respiratory disease due to outdoor and indoor air pollution, thereby contributing to a reduction in the frequency of asthmatic attacks, in order to ensure that children can live in an environment with clean air.

Regional Priority Goal IV: Chemical, Physical and Biological Agents

To reducing the risk of disease and disability arising from exposure to hazardous chemicals (such as heavy metals), physical agents (e.g. excessive noise) and biological agents and to hazardous working environments during pregnancy, childhood and adolescence.

Source: WHO (2004)

Box 2: Definition of children and 'young people'

Children and young people are those under the age of 19 years, including the foetus. The reproductive capacity of adults and the health of the breastfeeding mother are also taken into account where this may affect the health of the child or young person.

Developing a Children's Environment and Health Strategy for the UK

Progress to Date

The importance and health benefits of having a clean and healthy environment have long been recognised in the UK. Many initiatives have led to a significant reduction in mortality and morbidity over the past century, including improved water and sanitation provision, air quality, nutrition, vaccination campaigns, housing quality, including reducing overcrowding, and many others. However, although these have been successful there is still more to be done. Also, it is difficult to quantify the environmental related burden of disease, especially as this often has a cumulative effect and long-term impact.

The UK Children's Environment and Health Action Plan will help provide a coherent cross-government approach towards improving children's health from environmental factors. To ensure this is effective it is important to

have a good understanding of the current activities and to highlight gaps and priority areas to be taken forward. A multi-stage process has been followed involving an initial scoping study and baseline assessment of children's environment and health in the UK, looking at each of the four Regional Priority Goals and over-arching issues, with the aim of highlighting best practice and areas where further work may be required to completely address the commitments under each of the Regional Priority Goals. During 2006/07 a review of current activities was undertaken, the findings from which will be summarised and made available at the Health Protection Agency's (HPA's) website in September 2007 (HPA, 2007a). This information has been used to inform the development of the UK's Children's Environment and Health Strategy which will be out for consultation in the autumn of 2007 and will also be made available on the HPA's website (HPA, 2007b).

This Strategy will provide an indication of the areas that may need to be considered as high priority in the future, focussing on specific settings such as schools and homes and seeking to build on the many activities already underway. This is particularly important as many activities are taking place in England and the Devolved Administrations at local, regional and national levels that are already contributing to the UK meeting the Regional Priority Goals. However, some actions will be unique to children and to this strategy and will need to be taken forward separately.

Overseeing the Process

Overall responsibility for the Children's Environment and Health Strategy in the UK rests with the Department of Health (DH), and activities are overseen and co-ordinated by an Interdepartmental Steering Group on Environment and Health. This is chaired by DH and comprises representatives from a wide range of Government Departments, Agencies and the Devolved Administrations (Box 3). The Department of Health and the Interdepartmental Steering Group requested that the HPA act as the lead Agency and has been tasked with the development of the Strategy and background documents for the development of the UK's Children's Environment and Health Action Plan.

Box 3: Interdepartmental Steering Group on Environment and Health Membership

- Cabinet Office
- Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)
- Department of Health (DH; Chair)
- Department for Children, Schools and Families, formerly the Department for Education and Skills (DfES)
- Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)
- Department for Business, Enterprises and Regulatory Reform; formerly the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI)
- Department for Transport (DfT)
- Health Protection Agency (HPA)
- Environment Agency
- Food Standards Agency (FSA)
- Northern Ireland Department of Health, Social Service & Public Safety
- Northern Ireland Environment and Heritage Service
- Scottish Executive
- Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA)
- Welsh Assembly Government (WAG)

Involving Young People

One of the key elements of the Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe is the involvement of young people and within the UK they have been engaged from an early stage. A number of workshops have been run with groups of young people from different backgrounds

to identify what is important to them. These findings have been used to help develop the UK's strategy and will be fed into the action plans.

Next Steps

The next step in the development of the Children's Environment and Health Strategy is a public consultation of the Strategy in order to engage and get feedback from interested parties, including young people, to ensure that the areas highlighted are the most appropriate and that these will make a significant contribution towards improving children and young people's health in the UK. The consultation process will take place in the autumn of 2007 and the document will be posted on the HPA website (<http://www.hpa.org.uk>); invitations will be sent to a wide range of stakeholders requesting feedback. Comments received through this consultation process will be considered in revising the Strategy, which will be published in its final format in the spring of 2008.

As previously mentioned, it is intended that the outcomes of the strategy will be implemented within the UK primarily at a local and regional level, with coordination being provided centrally (either from UK Government or Devolved Administrations), where appropriate. An important element of the success of this initiative will be the engagement and involvement of those with local and regional responsibility for public health to ensure action is taken at a local level to address environmental hazards that are of relevance to children and young people locally. Relevant public health professionals include Directors of Public Health in Primary Care Trusts, Public Health Observatories, Local and Regional Services of the HPA, Environmental Health Officers, and Local Authorities in general. A process to ensure issues are taken forward consistently will need to be considered.

Implementation, monitoring and evaluation of new and on-going initiatives identified within the strategy is central to enable monitoring of progress towards improving children and young people's health and to ensure positive change takes place. Whilst it is recognised that some initiatives will be regionally or Devolved Administration focused to meet specific needs within particular geographical areas, there still remains a need for the overall coordination and monitoring. The evaluation will be an important element to ensure delivery and means of delivering this will need to be considered when developing the more detailed action plan that may follow from the strategy consultation process.

References

- HPA (2007a) *Development of a UK Children's Environment and Health Strategy. Background Document*, available [Sept 2007] at: <http://www.hpa.org.uk>
- HPA (2007b) *Children's Environment and Health Action Plan. The UK's Children's Environment and Health Strategy: a Consultation Document* available [Sept 2007] at: <http://www.hpa.org.uk>
- ONS (2006) T01: United Kingdom: estimated resident population by single year of age and sex; Mid 2005 population estimates, available [Nov 2006] at: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk>
- WHO (2004) *Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe. Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, Budapest, Hungary, 23-25 June 2004*

Acknowledgements

The Health Protection Agency gratefully acknowledges the Department of health and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for funding this work, the members of the Interdepartmental Steering Group (Box 3) for their valuable contribution in taking forward Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe activities and the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe. Initial work was undertaken by the Institute for Environment and Health at Cranfield University and their contribution is also gratefully acknowledged.