

Response to Reducing health inequalities - issues for London and priorities for action

September 2007

1. Summary

The Federation of Irish Societies (FIS) welcomes the publication of *Reducing health inequalities – issues for London and priorities for action* and were pleased to play a role in its creation. Our submission of evidence during the period of consultation for this report outlined the major health issues faced and the significant health inequalities experienced by the Irish community in the UK.

As a second-tier charity representing over 110 Irish community organisations, many of which provide direct health or health-related services in London, FIS's primary focus was on the *Individual and Community Participation for Health* section of the report. As representatives and advocates for the wider Irish community in the UK, we also paid specific attention to the *Responding to Existing Health Inequalities* section of the report.

We are pleased that the evidence FIS provided on the key health issues faced by the Irish community has been referenced in the report, specifically on incidences of mental illness, higher mortality rates and cardiovascular and respiratory conditions which the report states are higher amongst minority ethnic communities. FIS is disappointed, however, that these have not been expressly identified as problems faced by the Irish community. In our experience, unless the Irish are explicitly identified within the broad category of ethnic minority they tend to be overlooked by the providers of services and the authors of policy.

In this regard FIS is keen to see the health inequalities strategy encourage moves away from colour conceptualisation in relation to ethnicity. The black-white binary frequently misused by PCTs and statutory services does not encompass the diversity of minority ethnic groups in the UK and needs to end if we are to fully address health inequalities.

We note that the report identifies working with minority ethnic communities as a key factor in addressing health inequalities in London and we welcome the Mayor's commitment to working with voluntary and community sector organisations to achieve this.

FIS looks forward to continuing to work closely with the GLA for the benefit of the Irish community and all Londoners. We warmly welcome the priorities and actions identified to address these throughout the report, and are committed

to playing our part in working in partnership with the Mayor of London to successfully implement these.

2. Specific policy commitments to deal with the identified priorities

Individual and Community Participation for Health

i) The GLA should convene an ethnic minority Health Forum. This should be made up of the key organisations involved in delivering services and/or representing ethnic minority communities. The role of this Forum should be to advise the Mayor's policies and strategies on tackling health inequalities and to act as a champion for healthy living and health promotion within their respective communities. Non-visible ethnic minorities like the Irish community are frequently overlooked because of colour conceptualisation around ethnicity, and it is important to include a range of groups from across ethnic minority communities in this Forum.

ii) Health promotion and marketing campaigns should be targeted at specific health problems within respective minority ethnic communities. They should be incorporated into a dual strategy of changing communities' health behaviour and also informing GPs, PCTs and other health professionals of the key health issues faced by minority ethnic groups. For example, the Irish community suffer from higher incidences of coronary heart disease, lung cancer and stroke and would therefore benefit from a promotional campaign that encouraged them to use stop smoking services to address this. Likewise, information that Irish people are more likely to suffer from these illnesses should be made available to statutory service providers so that they are able to encourage early access and intervention.

Responding to Existing Health Inequalities

i) Specific services for the Irish community should be commissioned on a cross-borough or pan-London basis. Voluntary service-providers who work with the Irish community should not be restricted to limiting their services to sole boroughs but should be encouraged to work across borough boundaries and commissioned to do this. This is particularly important for the Irish community in terms of mental health provision, housing provision and other aspects of social care.

ii) Early intervention is essential to addressing Irish health inequalities. A key plank of the strategy for reducing health inequalities should be the provision of culturally-sensitive training for NHS and PCT staff and other clinicians and GPs. A training package for the Irish community should be funded by the GLA and authored in partnership with Irish community organisations through FIS.

3. Early action to demonstrate positive steps towards reducing health inequalities

Individual and Community Participation for Health

- i) The Mayor should visit an organisation or project which provides health services for Irish people.
- ii) The Mayor should produce a series of guidelines for statutory services which identify examples of best practice in commissioning, drafting race equality schemes and involving communities and community organisations in setting local strategic priorities for PCTs.

Responding to Existing Health Inequalities

- i) The Mayor should request an audit of the existing health picture of communities in London, specifically statistics based on *2001 Census* data, the *Health Survey for England 2004*, and the *Health of London Reports* since 2001. This audit should aim to produce a complete health picture for London in a format that enables geographic location, ethnicity, employment status, age and a range of other factors to be cross-referenced to ensure that an accurate picture of the health of Londoners is available to commissioners and service provision planners.

4. Involvement in delivering the strategy

FIS is absolutely committed, as per our statement of aims and objectives, to improving the quality of life of Irish people in Britain. We are committed to achieving this in partnership with our colleagues across the broad spectrum of voluntary, statutory and business sectors.

FIS hopes to play an integral role in delivering the Mayor's Health Inequalities Strategy within the community we represent. We would welcome a meeting with colleagues in the GLA to discuss practical ways of achieving this, and to share information about models of best practice and current examples of health projects which are already addressing inequalities within the Irish community.

FIS Director, Eithne Rynne, currently sits on the HIS Integrated Impact Assessment Steering Group, and, along with FIS Health Development Officer Conor McGinn and FIS Chair Dr Mary Tilki, will be responsible for taking this forward within our organisation.