

HSC Nutritional Standards: executive summary

The importance of a balanced diet in promoting good health is well known. Due to rising levels of obesity and the associated negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of the population in Northern Ireland (NI), it is essential to promote and provide healthier food choices.

As part of the implementation of “A Fitter Future for All” (the regional obesity prevention strategy 2012 to 2022), food provision within Health and Social Care (HSC) settings has been highlighted as an important area for development:

- in terms of food provided to staff and visitors throughout healthcare facilities
- in leading system change and modelling good practice that will improve standards across Northern Ireland and help shift the norm of food offerings to become healthier

In 2017, through the Regional Obesity Prevention Implementation Group, the Public Health Agency (PHA), the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and safefood, in partnership with HSC colleagues, produced Nutritional Standards for catering for staff and visitors in HSC settings. The Standards build on the current valuable work that is underway within HSC Trusts to encourage healthier eating amongst staff and visitors and will strengthen activities at a regional level. One of the revised short term outcomes of “A Fitter Future for All 2019 to 2022” (Department of Health. A Fitter Future for All Outcome Framework Revised for 2019-2022. Belfast 2019.) refers to full implementation of the Nutritional Standards for catering and vending in HSC settings by 2022, and to promote roll out to local Government and the wider public sector.

The principles that guided the development and implementation of the Nutritional Standards (reviewed and updated in 2022) are summarised below.

The Standards are food-based standards modelled on the Eatwell Guide. The Standards apply to all facilities that serve food or beverages to staff or visitors operating within HSC settings. This includes catering facilities, privately-owned retail units and vending machines.

The Standards are to be adhered to when food contracts are being specified in the procurement process (the sourcing, buying and provision or tendering process), and should be applied when planning menus and serving food.

The FSA are working in partnership with District Councils to develop nutritional standards for use in council catering establishments. This will include nutritional standards, vending standards and procurement guidance. The outcomes of this work will help to inform implementation beyond HSC settings, with the aim of rolling out nutritional standards across the wider public sector in Northern Ireland.