



Working together to improve the health of young people

We all want the best for our young people. And giving them the best possible start to a healthy and happy life is number one priority. Parents/carers have the most important role in this - but you can be supported by schools and other professionals.

The Highland Council and NHS Highland are working together to provide this support through the 'Your Choice to Healthy Living' initiative.

'Your Choice to Healthy Living' involves a number of initiatives in schools throughout Highland. Key to this healthier living approach is that all schools in Highland will become 'Health Promoting Schools' by 2005.

A Health Promoting School is one that enables pupils, staff, parents and the wider community to take action for a healthier lifestyle, in school and the local community. This is about what the content of the curriculum, but it's also about eating sensibly and physical exercise. Further, it's about taking better account of mental health, emotional health, spiritual health and the school environment.

Many of schools in Highland have already embraced the 'Health Promoting School' approach. For example, at School we are already planning or involved in:

- *Breakfast clubs to help with childcare and nutrition*
- *After school clubs giving childcare and informal education*
- *Access to good quality water for pupils and staff at all times.*
- *Tooth brushing in school*
- *Improved and nutritious choices in school meals*
- *Child safety project with multi-agency input from emergency services*
- *Anti-bullying projects*
- *Pupils council*
- *Parenting support*
- *Drugs Education*
- *Smoking cessation and prevention*
- *Increased physical activity*

Many of these initiatives involve community participation and leadership. They need positive community role models from the local adult population. All of us at the school value our work with parents and others in community to make these initiatives a continuing success.

The *Your Choice ...* campaign promises not to preach to you! It is a positive campaign - about making decisions based on good information and increasing the opportunities we have to live healthy and happy lives.

But if we are to be healthy we must change what we eat and drink, how we work and play and how we think about ourselves and our environment.

Highland is not significantly different from other parts of Scotland in relation to our record of health. In some important aspects, however, our region has relatively poorer statistics:

- *A high number of Highland's young people die, from a range of causes, at an early age*
- *A higher proportion of Highland children is admitted to hospital as a result of road traffic accidents than in Scotland as a whole.*

- A higher proportion of Highland children has tooth decay than in Scotland as a whole.
- Pregnancy rates amongst 16-19 year olds are higher than the Scottish average.

THE KEY CHALLENGES

The key challenges facing Highland in 2003 are:

- **Nutrition**

In common with most parts of Scotland our diet does not contain the necessary balance. In particular, low intake of fruit and vegetables and relatively high consumption of fatty foods cause long term problems to emerge at an early age.

- **Exercise**

A large proportion of Highland's population is not active. Local research shows that the amount of exercise that many young people have is declining.

- **Self-esteem**

Schools have made major efforts to create a more positive ethos and raise self-esteem for all pupils. These efforts will be enhanced and extended. We need to support those who are most at risk of mental ill-health. We need also to influence those most likely to adopt health-risk taking life-styles: smoking, drinking and drug-taking.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES

Highland is well placed to meet these health challenges with excellent partnership working between The Highland Council, NHS Highland and voluntary agencies. As examples:

- By 2005 every school in Highland will be a Health Promoting School.
- New guidelines have been introduced for school meals, and we are transforming school canteens.
- The extension of the Highlife Card has meant greater use of leisure facilities.

- The Sport Co-ordinators Scheme has seen increases in participation, and it is now being extended.
- The Cultural Pledge will see greater involvement of young people in activities which should promote self esteem, confidence and well being.
- Other initiatives such as Health Living Centres, Dialogue Youth and new facilities in places such as Ullapool, Glenurquhart and Ardnamurchan mean that opportunities for a more active lifestyle are already being extended.

SETTING TARGETS

It is important to set some challenging targets for this generational change of lifestyle. The most important target of course, with the support of parents, is to win the hearts and minds of the young people of the Highlands.

Here are some of the targets we are setting ourselves in *Your Choice to a Healthy Lifestyle*:

- Increased uptake of school meals.
- Decrease in the consumption of chips and fizzy drinks in schools.
- Removal of less-healthy foods from tuck-shops.
- Introduction of Healthy Vending in Schools and Leisure Centres.
- Provision of fruit, vegetables and milk at break times in schools.
- Re-introduction of free milk in Caithness Primary Schools as a pilot
- More water consumption in schools.
- More Breakfast Clubs.
- Increased Highlife Club membership with a particular focus on young people.
- Introduction of health and fitness checks, with advice about appropriate activity and sporting opportunities.
- More peer support for certain groups: smokers, the obese, low achievers, etc.

We have a real opportunity to make Highland a role model for a community-based approach. The community's concern for its own health will be at the centre of that success.

