

ENHANCING SEXUAL WELLBEING IN SCOTLAND: A SEXUAL HEALTH & RELATIONSHIPS STRATEGY. PROPOSALS TO THE SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE November 2003

In August 2002, the Minister for Health and Community Care appointed an expert Reference Group to draw up a strategy to improve sexual health in Scotland. The resulting draft strategy '**Enhancing Sexual Wellbeing in Scotland: A Sexual Health and Relationships Strategy**' comprises over one hundred recommendations for the Scottish Executive. In response, the Scottish Executive has launched a public consultation on the proposals, ending on **27th February 2004**.*

The draft strategy sets out a long-term, integrated, socially-orientated programme for change. In doing this, it links this sexual health policy to other related policies. It also includes a range of initiatives and services at both a national and local level. The draft strategy does not specifically deal with resource issues as these will depend on what proposals the Scottish Executive accepts.

Key proposals

Five proposals are emphasised as the key to effective implementation of the draft strategy :

1. **Providing national leadership** in the form of a National Sexual Health Programme Co-ordinator and the creation of a ministerially-led National Sexual Health Advisory Committee to oversee the implementation of the strategy.
2. **Providing local leadership** through NHS Boards' Sexual Health Strategies reflecting local need, supported by a Sexual Health Co-ordinator and Lead Clinician and informed by a multi-agency strategy group.
3. **Setting clear national and local targets and goals** by developing shared standards of care between service providers at all levels. The Strategy suggests that the public consultation be used to consider the value of developing national standards.
4. **Using existing mechanisms** such as local Health Plans to ensure delivery of targets.
5. **Monitoring progress** to ensure delivery at national level by the newly established National Sexual Health Advisory Committee and at local level by the Director of Public Health in every NHS Board.

Main issues for children and young people

For children and young people in Scotland, the draft strategy recommends widespread changes in culture, education and health services in relation to their sexual health. The following outlines its key themes:

The importance of a broad and holistic approach to sexual health

The draft strategy takes a holistic and open approach to sexual health, recognising the wider influences on sexual health and highlighting the link between social disadvantage, inequalities and poor sexual health. In order to address these issues, the draft strategy seeks a cultural shift and change of attitude in Scotland by proposing:

- national policies on social justice and social exclusion include actions to address sexual health
- the Scottish Executive develop an action plan to combat stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV and sexuality
- a comprehensive communications strategy be developed by the National Sexual Health Advisory Committee to convey key messages and challenge gender and sexual stereotypes
- national and local media work by NHS Health Scotland and NHS Boards should promote the use of barrier contraception

These combined proposals aim to achieve a more open culture, where children and young people learn respect for themselves and others and are able to discuss issues relating to sexual health in a supportive, non-judgemental climate.

Sex and relationships education (SRE)

The draft strategy takes this idea further in the development of sex and relationships education (SRE) and service provision. To ensure a consistent approach towards the provision of SRE throughout Scotland,

* Responses should be sent to:

The Scottish Executive Health Department, Public Health Division, Branch 2, Sexual Health and Relationships Draft Strategy, Mailpoint 3E (South), St Andrew's House, Regent Road, Edinburgh EH1 3DG
or via email: sexualhealthstrategy@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

the draft strategy recommends that all local authorities fully implement the McCabe Report*, define sex education as sex and relationships education and, in line with pre-school guidelines and 5-14 health guidelines, introduce SRE in pre-school, building upon this through to school leaving age. The draft strategy's key educational aim for young people is:

- that *all* young people have access to formal and informal learning opportunities to enable them to develop the skills and knowledge to make informed choices about their sexual health and behaviour

The draft strategy acknowledges parents' influence on their child's sexual values and skills and recommends:

- the need for partnership between parents, schools and health services
- that parents be actively involved in the development of SRE in schools in line with the McCabe Report recommendations
- NHS Boards develop programmes for parents and carers to improve their communication skills around sexual health and relationship matters

Paragraphs 4.11 – 4.19 of the draft strategy propose a consistent approach to SRE in schools across Scotland in accordance with the McCabe Report. According to the draft strategy, SRE programmes should be:

- delivered by professionals specifically trained to deliver SRE who are supported by adequate training and links to other sexual health professionals
- linked to other relevant areas of the school curriculum

Developing closer links between schools and clinical services

The draft strategy asserts that SRE is most effective when linked to health services for young people but suggests that there is no single model to achieve this.

Helping learning to be lifelong

For the 16-24 age group, the draft strategy proposes:

- Local Sexual Health Co-ordinators should guarantee that proposals to develop outreach services to the tertiary education sector are included in NHS Board sexual health strategies
- NHS Boards and Community Health Partnerships work with further and higher education, community education, youth work services and the wider voluntary sector to develop successful sexual health promotion for young adults

Service Provision: reducing STIs and unintended pregnancy

The draft strategy recommends:

- that young people be supported by easily accessible, confidential sexual health services which provide counselling and information
- providing better information and improved access to services and referrals to alternative services
- increasing public awareness of health services' confidentiality arrangements
- improving the availability of contraception and termination services across Scotland
- extending the availability of free condoms, particularly for high risk groups
- the development of national and local targets for detection and treatment of STIs
- widening the availability of chlamydia postal testing kits
- HIV testing should be offered to everyone presenting at GUM clinics
- the Scottish Executive should support a pilot project to provide comprehensive services, including counselling and medical follow-up, for victims of sexual assault and rape

Issues to consider for consultation:

The draft sexual health strategy presents a unique opportunity to support positive and comprehensive measures to improve Scotland's sexual health. However, there are a few initial points to consider:

- Although the McCabe Report recognises consultation with pupils as a key element of a supportive SRE programme for secondary school pupils, there are no specific recommendations in the draft strategy on consulting with children and young people on the delivery and provision of SRE.
- The draft strategy recommends that links between schools and clinical services be developed through consultation with young people and their families yet there are no specific recommendations on how such a consultation process should be developed.
- The Sex Education Forum in England has provided a vehicle to work towards good quality SRE as an entitlement to all children. Discussions are taking place on the establishment of a similar forum in Scotland.

For further information on the sexual health strategy consultation please contact Ingrid Fitzsimons, Children in Scotland, Princes House, 5 Shandwick Place, Edinburgh EH 2 4RG tel: 0131 222 2412

* The McCabe Report is the Report of the Working Group on Sex Education in Scottish Schools, published in June 2000. Issues covered include roles of parents and young people, young people with special educational needs, social inclusion, view of teachers, principles, aims and key components of sex education. A copy of this report is available from: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library2/doc16/sess-00.asp>