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Member for Kurrajong

Minister for Climate Change and Sustainability
Minister for Justice, Consumer Affairs and Road Safety
Minister for Corrections
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Senator Richard Di Natale
Chair
Select Committee into the Obesity Epidemic in Australia
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Senator Di Natale

Richard

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee inquiry into the Obesity Epidemic in Australia.

The attached ACT Government submission has been prepared for the Committee's consideration. The submission addresses the general Terms of Reference and highlights the ACT Government's ongoing commitment to reducing obesity.

Should you require further information in relation to the attached submission, please contact Dr Paul Kelly, Chief Health Officer, ACT Health, on telephone (02) 6205 0883.

Yours sincerely

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Acting Minister for Health and Wellbeing
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ACT Government Submission
to the
Select Committee
into the Obesity Epidemic in Australia

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Obesity in the ACT

High prevalence of overweight and obesity among the ACT population represents a significant public health challenge. The proportion of Canberra adults who are overweight or obese has increased from 40 per cent (in 1995) to 63 per cent (in 2014/15).¹ Despite recent improvements, childhood obesity has also increased, with one in four Canberra children now overweight or obese.

Childhood obesity is associated with immediate health problems, including asthma, sleep disturbances, psychological ill health, bone and joint complications, and earlier onset of conditions such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease. Too often, obesity in adulthood has its origins in childhood, highlighting the importance of intervention and prevention during the early years of life.

The ACT Government's Commitment to Reducing Obesity

The ACT Government continues to invest in whole-of-government efforts to prevent and reduce overweight and obesity. This has included, most recently, the *Towards Zero Growth: Healthy Weight Action Plan* (the Action Plan), which was launched in 2013.²

The Action Plan provided a framework for integrated strategic action across government in partnership with non-government stakeholders to prevent and reduce the prevalence of obesity. The focus of the Action Plan was on encouraging and enabling healthy lifestyle behaviours in both adults and children, with an emphasis on improving the food and active living environments to make the healthy choice the easier choice.

Initiatives under the Action Plan have contributed to important improvements in risk factors among the ACT population, including:

- zero increase in the proportion of overweight and obese children from 2011/12 to 2014/15,
- fewer children regularly consuming sugary drinks,
- children eating the recommended two serves of fruit per day, and
- some progress in the proportion of children walking and cycling to school, and adults using active travel.

¹ ACT Health 2016, *Healthy Canberra*, Australian Capital Territory Chief Health Officer's Report 2016, ACT Government, Canberra ACT

² ACT Government 2013, *Towards Zero Growth: Healthy Weight Action Plan*, Canberra ACT
<http://www.health.act.gov.au/sites/default/files/Towards%20Zero%20Growth%20Healthy%20Weight%20Action%20Plan.pdf>

The ACT Government has committed to build on these achievements through the development of a comprehensive Preventive Health and Wellbeing Plan. The Plan will include a focus on addressing obesity, poor nutrition, physical inactivity, smoking and harmful alcohol consumption and, like the Action Plan, will extend beyond the health sector to encourage collaboration across all facets of government and the broader community.

In taking this forward, the ACT Government committed \$4 million over four years from 2017-18 to transforming the way it works with people, community groups, businesses, the education and research sectors and across the whole of government to understand the challenges faced in creating the right environments that promote and protect healthy and active living in local communities.

A Call for Coordinated Action

It is important to recognise that obesity prevention initiatives in the ACT, as in other jurisdictions, are influenced and potentially limited by national-level activity. Currently, with the exception of a number of initiatives being progressed in the short-term through the Council of Australian Governments Health Council,³ there is little coordinated national action to address overweight and obesity. A national strategic framework, led by the Australian Government, would ensure a coordinated, sustainable and effective response, and recognise the significant levers that are available to the Australian Government in relation to obesity prevention. Opportunities to leverage research and existing work in international jurisdictions could also inform this work.

The establishment of an ongoing, dedicated principal committee or similar Commonwealth-state forum would contribute to engagement, information sharing and joint decision-making. Learnings from the ACT's *Towards Zero Growth: Healthy Weight Action Plan* suggest that, to be effective, a national framework would need to be coordinated across all levels of government and across diverse portfolios, including Health, Education, Sport and Recreation, Planning, Transport and Treasury. The framework would need to support the delivery of programs and policies in key settings, including schools, workplaces and the urban environment, and facilitate continued engagement with industry to influence the availability and consumption of healthy food. In addition, it is important to consider social determinants of health as key factors, along with physical activity, active travel, consideration of the structure of workplaces in terms of work/life balance and the role urban design plays in creating and maintaining accessible public spaces and natural environments to support healthy connected communities.

³ Council of Australian Governments Health Council Communique, 7 October 2016
https://www.coaghealthcouncil.gov.au/Portals/0/CHC%207%20October%202016_Meeting%20Communique_1.pdf

National social marketing campaigns would play an important role in supporting these activities by encouraging and motivating individuals and their families to make healthier choices. Noting the results from the 2011-12 Australian Health Survey which showed that, on average, just over one-third (35 per cent) of total daily energy reported as consumed was from 'discretionary' choices,⁴ there is a particular need to encourage consumers to eat from the five food groups in accordance with the *Australian Dietary Guidelines*. The Guidelines currently underpin the ACT Public School Food and Drink Policy and act as the core resource to support schools and the wider environment with food and drink classification processes.

Measures to reduce children's exposure to the marketing of unhealthy food and drinks would also be vital. Nationally, unhealthy food and drinks comprise between 60 and 90 per cent of all food and drinks promoted across multiple media channels, including television, outdoor media, children's magazines, websites and sports sponsorships.⁵ Such marketing can undermine healthy eating messages and contribute to normalising 'junk' food consumption. It is particularly important to protect children as they are easily influenced by marketing, and the dietary patterns established in the early years of life are often carried through into adulthood.

Data, Research and Evaluation

The ACT's *Towards Zero Growth: Healthy Weight Action Plan* was underpinned by ongoing population data collection, evaluation and research. This included aligning local expertise with the best available national and international evidence on strategies to prevent and reduce obesity through the Australian Prevention Partnership Centre (TAPPC). Investing in evaluation and monitoring provided important information on the effectiveness of strategies implemented under the Action Plan, including what worked and why.

An ongoing commitment to population health research, evaluation and monitoring should be a key feature of any national approach to obesity prevention. Drawing on the ACT experience, this would ideally include continued support for models that bring together researchers with policy makers to identify new ways of understanding and responding to Australia's obesity epidemic.

The important role of the Australian Government in measuring and reporting on population health outcomes must also be recognised. Continued investment in population health research infrastructure, including the Australian Bureau of Statistics national survey program, will be critical to providing the data needed to guide future obesity prevention strategies and target interventions to priority populations. A commitment to regular, ongoing national data collection and reporting will be key.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014, Australian Health Survey: Nutrition First Results – Food and Nutrients, 2011-12 <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4364.0.55.007~2011-12~Main%20Features~Discretionary%20foods~700>

⁵ Kelly, B. et al 2007, Television food advertising to children: the extent and nature of exposure. *Public Health Nutrition*, 10(11): p. 1234-40