



# IPH response to the Department of Health (ROI) Public Consultation on climate change adaptation for the health sector

**Consulting Body:** Department of Health (Republic of Ireland)

**Submitting Body:** The Institute of Public Health in Ireland

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# Introduction

The remit of the Institute of Public Health in Ireland (IPH) is to work towards healthier societies on the island of Ireland by reducing health inequalities and enabling people to reach their potential to live healthier lives; we do this through work in the area of research, policy analysis, evidence review and advice; and by promoting co-operation for public health between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

## **Background to the consultation**

The Department of Health (DoH) in the Republic of Ireland has identified six climate scenarios with profound health implications. These include UV / sun exposure; air pollution; windstorms; heat / heatwaves; high precipitation/flooding; and cold snaps.

It has invited views on the following:

- Do the six climate scenarios identified represent the highest priority concerns and risks for the health sector?
- Are there climate change-related risks or vulnerabilities that do not feature and should be included, and why?
- Do you have additional suggestions for concrete and cost-effective adaptation actions for the
- health sector?

## Key points

The Institute of Public Health in Ireland (IPH) suggests that the Department's adaptation plan formally recognises two additional climate change-related risks/vulnerabilities: "Risk of increasing inequalities" and "Risks to mental health".

### **Risks of increasing inequalities**

The health risks, and resilience to cope with them, that are associated with the six scenarios are not evenly distributed across our population. As well as people with pre-existing conditions, children and older people; other population subgroups defined by their socio-economic circumstances and where they live and work are also vulnerable. The climate emergency is already increasing social and health inequalities, and it is expected that this will continue as it further aggravates existing vulnerabilities and reduced resilience. The effects are ubiquitous: for example, even though Ireland is ranked as the country with the second highest food security in the world (Global Food Security Index), extreme weather events can threaten local food supplies in ways that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.

The Irish Climate Change Advisory Council (ICCAC) emphasises that, in a just transition to a low-carbon future, policy should respond to these inequalities to ensure climate justice (safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate action), energy justice (ensuring people have access to energy to maintain a decent quality of life) and environmental justice. The ICCAC notes that this will require cross-sectoral and cross-government actions to ensure that incentives offered to support behaviour change – for example; home upgrades, public transport, cycling to work – also reach poorer and more vulnerable communities; and that, if necessary, measures to abate global heating – for example; higher carbon prices - include transfers to those in poverty to address any regressive distributional effects.

In light of Healthy Ireland's second goal, to reduce health inequalities, IPH suggests adding a seventh scenario "Risk of increasing inequalities" to the Department's adaptation plan.

### **Risks to mental health**

The ICCAC recommended the development of the adaptation plan for public health that considers, amongst other issues, the mental health aspects of climate change, including depression and anxiety amongst the farming and general communities. While the six scenarios mainly focus on physical health, the mental health implications of extreme

events are noted in the Department’s briefing paper. However, research suggests that there is also chronic mental stress, including distress and anxiety, associated with the uncertainty of how the climate emergency will unfold. In recognition of the importance of mental health to health and wellbeing in the *Healthy Ireland Framework*, IPH suggests adding an eighth scenario “Risk to mental health” to the Department’s adaptation plan.

### **The development of a sustainable health care sector**

The Irish health system is a significant employer and procurer of materials and services. The HSE’s *Sustainability Strategy for Health 2017-2019* was the first formal step towards achieving a more sustainable health system. This Strategy will contribute to both climate change-related mitigation and adaptation, and IPH suggests it should be updated, its scope expanded to more explicitly include broader public health aspects, and sufficient resources be allocated to ensure its full implementation.

### **A greater health sector role in climate change mitigation action**

In Ireland, the food and beverages sectors are the industrial sectors that are the greatest emitters of greenhouse gases. Reports published this year from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the European Academies Scientific Advisory Council (EASAC) and the Irish Climate Change Advisory Council (ICAC) each emphasise that our food and transport systems contribute significantly to global heating. As well as continuing actions in transport, these reports highlight the urgent need for additional mitigation action to develop more sustainable land management, agricultural practices and food systems.

To a large extent, the nature of our food and transport systems is determined by marketing and advertising, and consumer preferences and demand. While *Ireland’s National Climate Mitigation Plan* aims to stimulate technological advances that can deliver healthy nutrition for consumers, Ireland’s *A Healthy Weight for Ireland: Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016-2025* also recognises that the promotion of healthy diets and more active lives require the development of more sustainable food and transport systems. It aims to address issues of food reformulation, advertising and marketing practices, and consumer preferences and demand. Food loss and food waste are other important issues.

More sustainable food and transport systems will therefore have significant co-benefits for human health and planetary health, and the IPH suggests that the effectiveness of health promotion/improvement efforts and climate change mitigation actions might improve with greater co-ordination. IPH suggests that, guided by relevant evidence (see below), the health sector could:

- Explore opportunities for co-ordination of and greater synergies between all government awareness programmes to optimise relationships between health and environmental messages by:
  - Incorporating health co-benefits messages into Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (DCCA&E) campaigns to increase awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals
  - Incorporating environmental co-benefits messages into Healthy Ireland’s campaigns to promote healthier diets and more active lives
  - Incorporating health consequences into broader planned public education for vulnerable populations on the use of the Environment Protection Agency’s (EPA) Air Quality Index for Health
- Engage with the agricultural, drinks and food sectors in relation to *Actions 34, 101 and 102 of the National Climate Change Mitigation Plan*

### **Data, research and policy**

The Department’s suggested adaptation actions highlight the need for stronger epidemiology, surveillance, research and learning and defined data requirements to effectively monitor climate change impacts and adaptation actions. IPH suggests that information and research infrastructure and activities of the Department of Health, DCCA&E and EPA should be adapted to accommodate this work and its outputs by:

- Extending the suite of indicators in the Social determinants (Environmental Factors) and Health Outcomes (Wellbeing Factors) domains of the Healthy Ireland Outcomes Framework
- Strengthening the focus of the Public Health theme of the joint EPA / HSE’s Sustainability Research Programme

Supporting research that would be required includes:

- Assessment of public awareness of the link between human and planetary health; in particular the links between healthy diets and sustainable food systems, and between active living and sustainable transport systems
- Systematic review of any benefits for health promotion/improvement efforts and climate change mitigation offered by greater co-ordination of, and synergy between, their respective behavior change programmes
- Assessment of likely additional social and health care needs expected as a result of extreme weather events and longer term impacts of the climate emergency

### **In terms of policy development, it would be useful to:**

- Review Ireland’s *Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty in Ireland* and its approach to tackling food poverty to ensure they take into account the health impacts of the climate emergency

- Update HSE's *Sustainability Strategy for Health 2017-2019*, extend it to include broader public health issues, and strengthen the HSE Sustainability Office to implement the updated Strategy
- Include health impact assessments in all climate change mitigation and adaptation initiatives

### **Some additional comments on the Department's suggested actions**

#### All scenarios:

- Continue to advocate a health in all policies approach  
This should explicitly recognise the role of agriculture and the food and drinks, and transport, sectors.
- Emergency management planning  
Again this should incorporate the needs of socio-economically disadvantaged individuals and communities as well as people with chronic conditions, children and older people.
- Surveys of health infrastructure to confirm appropriate levels of resilience  
IPH suggests that this be supplemented by an assessment of additional health and social services needs, including those at the community and primary care levels, expected as a result of extreme weather events and longer term impacts of the climate emergency.
- Monitoring mental health effects of severe weather events  
It is also important to also monitor chronic mental health effects arising from the uncertainty about the climate emergency.

#### UV/Sun exposure and cold snaps

- Full implementation of recently launched *National Skin Cancer Prevention Plan*  
IPH supported the development of the *National Skin Cancer Prevention Plan* and supports its full implementation on an ongoing basis as well as during acute weather events.
- Continuation of the government's assistance for improving the energy efficiency of domestic buildings

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## Sources

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