**Press Statement Wednesday 9th December 2015**

**Varadkar launches national survey of School Children Health Behaviour**

Minister for Health Leo Varadkar has launched a national survey of school children’s health behaviour, the first of its kind for four years.

The Health Behaviours in School Children (HBSC) survey 2014 shows that overall health levels are good. There are encouraging findings on consumption of fruit and vegetables, teeth cleaning, and a drop in smoking levels and consumption of sweets and soft drinks.

However, many children said they find it easy to get cigarettes, too many children are going to bed hungry, and there are concerns about levels of cyber bullying.

A total of 13,611 pupils were surveyed with questions on topics like general health, food and dietary behaviour, exercise and physical activity, self-care, smoking, use of alcohol and other substances, bullying including cyber bullying, and sexual health behaviours.

Minister Varadkar said: “Lifestyle patterns are set an early age. Chronic diseases like diabetes, cardiac disease and others can develop out of lifestyle choices. The survey gives us an insight into the attitudes and behaviours of children on very important issues. There are lots of positive findings, with a rise in fruit and veg consumption, and a drop in sweet consumption. The reported levels of general health are good. But there are some worrying findings on drinking, smoking, and hunger. This information will be very useful in adapting the Government approach to the realities of young people today.

“We have made real progress on smoking but this Survey shows us we have much more to do in eliminating access to cigarettes. The Public Health (Alcohol) Bill which we are also launching today will be an important step in restricting advertising to young people and limiting their access to cheap alcohol. Future measures including the Obesity Policy and Action Plan and the first National Physical Activity Plan will also help us to keep the focus on weight and overall health.”

Some of the key findings in the main survey include:
·        Reported levels of fruit and vegetable consumption have increased.
·        Consumption of sweets and soft drinks has decreased from 2010.
·        Reported levels of physical activity remained stable between 2010 and 2014.
·        The overall proportion of children who reported being in a physical fight has decreased from 2010. More girls and older children report being victims of cyber bullying.
·        There was an overall decrease in reported levels of smoking and drunkenness and an increase in levels of never drinking between 2010 and 2014. Many children reported that it is easy to buy cigarettes or get someone else to buy cigarettes for them in most shops in the area where they live and go to school.
·        There are still worrying levels of children going to bed hungry and skipping breakfast being reported.
·        More girls, older children and children from higher social classes reported brushing their teeth daily or more frequently.
·        20% of children do not wear seat belts.
·        The percentage of 15-17 year olds who report that they have ever had sex has increased from 23% in 2010 to 27% in 2014.

**Further information**

The survey is a World Health Organisation (European) collaborative study that takes place every four years. It aims to gain new insight into young people’s health and wellbeing, health behaviours and their social context. The survey consists of a main study covering children in 5th class to 5th year who were aged 10 to 17 years and a ‘Middle Childhood Study’ covering children in 3rd and 4th classes who were aged 8.5 to 10.5 years.

The survey was conducted in 230 primary and post-primary schools. In primary schools, 3rd to 6th class groups were included, while in post-primary schools all classes, with the exception of Leaving Certification group were sampled. New to the 2014 HBSC survey from the four previous surveys completed since 1998 were two sets of questions. The first was on smoking exposures and perceptions and the second was on issues that were considered important to children themselves. A series of participative workshops were held with members of Comhairle no nÓg from all over the country during which children identified what was important about their lives and developed new questionnaire items to assess these issues.

The survey was conducted by the Health Promotion Research Centre at the National University of Ireland, Galway on behalf of the Department of Health. The HBSC international survey is run every 4 years. The 2014 survey is the fifth time that data of this kind has been collected nationally from school children. Previous surveys were conducted in 1998, 2010, 2006 and 2010.

**Main Findings**

**Main Study (10 to 17 year olds)**
·        General Health and Wellbeing: Reported levels of general health were stable between the year of the last survey in 2010 and 2014. More boys and younger children reported better general health with a greater proportion of children from higher social classes reporting excellent health and high life satisfaction.
·        Food and Dietary Behaviour: Reported levels of fruit and vegetable consumption have increased. There are reported higher levels of consumption among girls, younger children and children from higher social classes. Consumption of sweets and soft drinks has decreased from 2010. An increase in the proportion of children who were currently dieting from 2010 was reported. There was no change in the proportion of children who reported never eating breakfast on week days, while the proportion of children who reported going to school or to bed hungry remained stable from 2010. However, they are still worrying levels of children going to bed hungry and skipping breakfast.
·        Exercise and Physical Activity: Reported levels of physical activity remained stable between 2010 and 2014. More boys, younger children and children from higher social classes reported higher levels of exercise and physical activity.
·        Self-Care: These levels are stable since 2010. More girls, older children and children from higher social classes reported brushing their teeth daily or more frequently. While reported seatbelt use was higher among girls and younger children, the reported indicator that nearly 20% of children do not wear seat belts is disappointing.
·        Substance Use: This covers tobacco, alcohol and cannabis use. There was an overall decrease in reported levels of smoking and drunkenness and an increase in levels of never drinking between 2010 and 2014. Smoking, alcohol use and cannabis use were more commonly reported among boys and older children. Exposure to second hand smoke was common at home and in the family car. Many children reported that it is easy to buy cigarettes (33% of boys, 26% of girls) or get someone else to buy cigarettes for them in most shops in the area where they live and go to school (58% of boys, 59% of girls).
·        Sexual Health Behaviours:  Responses show that 27% of 15-17 year olds reported that they have ever had sex, an increase from 2010 (23%). Of these, 33% reported that they used the pill at last intercourse, while 73% reported that they used condoms at last intercourse. These results are important in the context of the recently launched sexual health strategy by the Minister. That health strategy aims to, among other things, raise awareness of sexual health issues, and improve education by training teachers, youth workers and healthcare professionals.
·        Physical Fighting and Bullying: The overall proportion of children who reported being in a physical fight has decreased from 2010. Children who reported bullying others in school has also decreased from 2010. The proportion of children who reported ever been bullied in school remained stable from 2010. More girls and older children report being victims of cyber bullying.

**Middle Childhood Study (3rd and 4th Class Children)**
·        General Health and Wellbeing: Overall, reported levels of general health remained stable between 2010 and 2014. No gender or social class differences were found for reported levels of excellent health or feeling very happy with life at present.
·        Food and Dietary Behaviour: Overall, there was an increase in reported fruit and vegetable consumption and a decrease in sweets and soft drinks consumption between 2010 and 2014. The proportion of children reporting not eating breakfast on any day of the week increased between 2010 and 2014. More boys reported not eating breakfast on any day of the week than girls. Children in higher social classes reported eating more healthy foods (fruit and vegetables).
·        Exercise and Physical Activity: There was an overall decrease in reported physical inactivity levels between 2010 and 2014, with fewer children from higher social classes reporting physical inactivity. Reported levels of exercising four or more times a week remained stable since 2010.
·        Self-Care: Overall, reported levels of self-care remained stable between 2010 and 2014. Girls and children from higher social classes more commonly reported brushing their teeth daily or more frequently. A higher proportion of girls reported always wearing a seatbelt when in a car.
·        Substance Use: There was a decrease in the overall proportion of children who reported ever smoking between 2010 and 2014. A higher proportion of children in lower social classes reported that they are current smokers.
·        Bullying: The proportion of children who reported ever been bullied in school remained stable from 2010 and 2014. There were no statistically significant differences between boys and girls or across social class groups for ever being bullied.

**Ends**