£1.4m PROGRAMME TO TACKLE CHILD OBESITY LAUNCHED

First-ever national weight management programme in UK

A new Welsh Assembly Government-funded programme designed to help overweight and obese children manage their weight and become fitter, healthier and happier will start being rolled out across Wales from today.

The £1.4million scheme will target around 2,000 children aged between 7-13 years old and their families over the next three years.

It’s the first time that this type of scheme for children will have run on a national level in any country.

By international standards Welsh children are comparatively more overweight or obese than in other nations. Around one in five 13 year olds are overweight or obese and many obese children grow up to be obese adults.

Families will take part in a free 10 week course with others in a similar position, combining practical learning about healthy eating – including shopping on a budget – and stimulating active enjoyment of physical activity.

Rather than focusing on weight loss, the programme uses an interactive learning approach to teach parents, carers and children weight management skills.

Families will also be offered follow-up contact including reunion events and telephone support.

The programme – *Mind, Exercise, Nutrition... Do It!* or MEND for short – was devised by experts in child health at the world-renowned Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children and the University College London Institute of Child Health.

Launching the programme, Dr Tony Jewell, the Chief Medical Officer for Wales, said:

“Being overweight can be tough for children both physically and emotionally. Caring for an overweight or obese child can be difficult too, especially if they lack confidence or feel depressed because of their size.

“We have evidence that shows the programme raises individuals’ self esteem and supports them in making healthier choices.

“It’s vital that we tackle the obesity issue. Welsh children’s rates of obesity are already too high and are increasing. Overweight or obese children are also more
likely to be overweight or obese adults. More than half – 57 per cent – of all adults in Wales are already overweight or obese.”

The programme has already been run on a limited basis in four areas of Wales.

11 year old Catherine attended a programme run in Flintshire. Catherine had been bullied at her primary school. Being quite tall and little above a healthy weight for her age and height, she felt self conscious at school. Her perception of her weight increased her anxiety and lowered her self confidence.

Catherine found meeting other children with overweight issues reassured her. Catherine and her mother found there was lots of useful information to learn on the programme presented in a really accessible way.

Catherine’s mum Maxine said:

“Since the programme Catherine has joined a fencing club and is much more active. Her confidence has greatly improved and she has enjoyed making new friends. I enjoyed attending too as it was really reassuring to meet other parents of children who were overweight and to share experiences with each other.”

“Catherine lost 6cm from her waist and reduced her body mass index over the 10 weeks. I’m so pleased as she’s continuing to apply what she learnt on the programme to maintain her new healthier lifestyle.”

Paul Sacher, founder and research director, MEND, said:

“Many parents of bigger children don’t realise that their child is above the healthy weight range for their height and age, or put it down to ‘puppy fat’ that will disappear as their child grows older.

“However, being overweight or obese as a child is a serious condition. Overweight children suffer physically and emotionally and it can lead to serious health problems in later life.

“MEND programmes help boost children’s self-esteem while changing the way everyone in the family thinks about what they eat and being active. Children and parents also meet others who are in a very similar position so they form their own supportive network.”

For families that are not able to be included in the MEND programme, a range of resource materials to inform families on how to eat more healthily and introduce more physical activity into their lives is being rolled out through the Assembly Government’s Health Challenge Wales programme. The programme encourages people to take small steps to eat a healthier diet and take more physical activity.
Notes to editors:

1. A photocall will be held to launch the programme **today (Monday 19 January)** from 16:30-18:00 hours at Abertillery Sports Centre, Alma Street, Abertillery NP13.

Dionne Martyn (aged 13) and her mother Ellen Anstee, who participated in one of the pilot programmes will be available for interview when they take part in their physical activity session, along with physical activity trainers who will teach courses in the programme. Also present and available for interview will be Dr Jane Wilkinson, Deputy Chief Medical Officer for Wales and Paul Sacher, founder of the MEND programme. **Please note that materials from the photocall will be embargoed until 00:01 hours Tuesday 20 January.**

Case studies from other parts of Wales are available on request.

2. The *Mind, Exercise, Nutrition, Do It!* (MEND) programme is a community and family-based programme for overweight and obese children aged 7-13. The programme involves families working with health and physical activity professionals on courses such as healthy eating, physical activity and behavioural change, building self-confidence of the child. It is being rolled out under the Welsh Assembly Government’s Food and Fitness plan which sets out a wide range of actions to support children and young people in being more physically active and eating healthily.

More information about the programme is at [www.mendprogramme.org](http://www.mendprogramme.org) or on 0800 230 0263 where parents can also register to join a course in Wales. The website also includes a 'BMI calculator' where parents can see if their child is a healthy weight and see whether they would benefit from the programme.

**Results**

In the MEND randomised control trial families who completed the programme found:

- Average BMI reduction at 6 months = 1.9kg/m²
- Average waist circumference reduction at 6 months = 4.3 cm

Results maintained at 12 months
3. Funding totalling £1.399 million is being allocated to the MEND programme until March 2011 (£264,000 in 2008/09; £385,000 in 2009/10 and £750,000 in 2010/11).

4. In addition to the circa 2,000 families, that will benefit directly from the MEND Programmes in Wales, 525 Health education and social care professionals across Wales will receive specific awareness training and tips on how to support families with obese children.

5. The scheme started on a limited basis in September 2008, with four programmes run in Flintshire, Pembrokeshire, Conwy and Gwent with 47 children and their families participating. Pilot sites were selected according to health inequalities needs. From this month, 19 further programmes will run per school term, with 21 programmes per term running from September 2009. Courses will run in Anglesey and Gwynedd, Conwy and Denbighshire, Wrexham and Flintshire, Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire, Swansea, Neath Port Talbot, Bridgend, Vale of Glamorgan, Cardiff, Gwent, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Powys, over the three year period. Each area has between one and three sites.

6. More information on help and advice on how families can be more physically active and eat well, plus a link to activities and events across Wales, can be found at the Health Challenge Wales website at www.wales.gov.uk/healthchallenge

   Other Assembly Government schemes already in place to encourage healthy eating and physical activity for children and young people include free swimming for the under 16s, healthy free breakfasts in schools, the expansion of community food co-operatives and community nutrition education programmes.

7. For Welsh Assembly Government media enquiries, contact the Press Office on 029 2089 8012 / 8100 / 8890. General/public enquiries to: 0845 010 3300 (English) or 0845 010 4400 (Welsh). For media enquiries on the MEND programme specifically, contact Caroline Swain on 020 7231 7225 or 07515 612 251.