ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC HEALTH OBSERVATORIES
AND HEALTH DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Local Basket of Health Inequalities Indicators

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Justine Fitzpatrick and Bobbie Jacobson, London Health Observatory
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Introduction

New targets for reducing health inequalities were announced in February 2001, and subsequently reformulated into a single national public service agreement (PSA) target reflected as a priority in the Department of Health’s *Priorities and Planning Framework* (PPF) as:

“by 2010 to reduce inequalities in health outcomes by 10 per cent as measured by infant mortality and life expectancy at birth”

The *Tackling Health Inequalities: Programme for Action* was produced in July 2003. It describes how the Government’s ambitious strategy for tackling health inequalities outlined in the Cross Cutting Review will be implemented. It also includes 12 national headline indicators for monitoring health inequalities and reinforces the need for a local basket of health inequalities indicators.

This work has been undertaken by the London Health Observatory (LHO) on behalf of the Association of Public Health Observatories (APHO) and the Health Development Agency (HDA). This report follows on from work commissioned from Matrix MHA that identified a wider directory of indicators currently in use. This wider directory was the subject of a consultation by Gateway Consulting. This report takes into account the findings from the consultation and presents a revised basket of local health inequality indicators.

The basket of indicators is seen as a tool under development. It is envisaged that it will develop over time, new indicators will be added and definitions will be refined when necessary. The indicators are largely taken from indicators currently in use, however, as these indicators were not explicitly designed for measuring inequalities in health, there are obvious gaps that
need addressing. Further indicators that are currently not available at local level are stressed as important for development.

The full report on the local basket of indicators, including the indicator list is available from the London Health Observatory website at www.lho.org.uk/HIL/Inequalities_In_Health/Basket_Of_Indicators/Basket.htm

2 The purpose of the local basket of health inequalities indicators

The main purpose of the local basket of indicators is to help support local action to achieve the Government’s national inequalities targets for life expectancy and infant mortality, by highlighting information relevant to addressing the targets and assisting local areas with monitoring progress towards reducing health inequalities. It is envisaged that local areas will choose which indicators to use and monitor over time based on locally agreed priorities. The most appropriate indicators for tracking local action should be chosen. The indicators in the basket are not mandatory, and local areas will wish to supplement indicators selected from the basket with additional locally available and relevant indicators, including those published in other indicators sets.

The use of indicators to support health equity audit is illustrated in a companion report produced jointly by the Association of Public Health Observatories and the Health Development Agency *Health Equity Audit Made Simple.* [http://www.lho.org.uk/HIL/Inequalities_In_Health/Basket_Of_Indicators/DevelopingBasket.htm](http://www.lho.org.uk/HIL/Inequalities_In_Health/Basket_Of_Indicators/DevelopingBasket.htm)

The basket aims to meet the requirements of a wide range of users, both technical and non-technical, at local level and to have a wide range of uses.

Changes in the indicators can be measured over time for a given authority. However, if changes in a health indicator are measured over time without any reference to a comparator then health inequalities are not being measured, just health gain. Therefore, all the indicators in the local basket of health inequalities indicators must be measured with reference to a comparator.
The local basket of health inequalities indicators

The local basket of health inequalities indicators contains an initial set of 70 indicators. It contains measures of health status or health outcomes, measures of the determinants of health, measures of access to services and process measures. The indicators have been divided into the following categories:

- Employment, poverty and deprivation
- Housing and homelessness
- Education
- Crime
- Pollution and the physical environment
- Community development
- Lifestyle, including diet, smoking and physical activity
- Access to local health and other services
- Accidents and injury
- Mental health
- Maternal, infant and child health
- Older people
- Tackling the major killers

The indicators in the basket have been selected from the wider directory devised from indicators already in local use produced by Matrix MHA. They were selected on the basis that they have passed the technical and further criteria for inclusion. In addition, indicators from further national indicator sets have been added to the basket as long as they meet the criteria.
All of the indicators currently in the basket can be measured at local authority (LA) or primary care trust (PCT) level. However, many of the indicators are also measurable by further dimensions of inequalities within local authorities and primary care trusts, although, much of these data are not currently analysed or reported in a systematic way. Dimensions of inequality include: small geographic areas, gender, age, socio-economic group, disability or ethnicity.

Many of the indicators are routinely published at local levels. Where this is the case the web reference for obtaining the information is shown. Some indicators are currently unpublished and the data require extraction and analysis – either locally or centrally for all localities. Over time data for as many of the indicators as possible will be made centrally available from one website. However, no additional burden will be placed on local areas to provide data centrally where data are currently only collected locally.

### 4 The technical criteria

All potential indicators were selected according to the following criteria:

- **Criterion 1**
  Is the indicator routinely published at local authority or PCT level?

- **Criterion 2**
  Is the indicator updateable at at least 3-yearly intervals?

- **Criterion 3**
  Is the indicator robust enough to detect changes over time?

- **Criterion 4**
  Can the indicator be interpreted?

- **Criterion 5**
  If not routinely published, are the data to calculate this indicator routinely collected at PCT/LA level?
Further selection criteria

In addition to the technical criteria set out above, other issues were taken into consideration when selecting the local basket of indicators:

- The local basket of indicators should cover the major health priority areas set out in the latest NHS *Priorities and Planning Framework*¹, the wider determinants of health and must cover process as well as outcomes.

- Indicators should cover the four overarching themes of the *Programme for Action* on health inequalities: supporting families, mothers and children; engaging communities and individuals; preventing illness and providing effective treatment and care; and addressing underlying determinants of health.

- The local basket of indicators should include a selection of indicators that are relevant to all localities. However, there will also need to be a degree of flexibility so that the basket reflects the problems and priorities that exist in individual localities.

- The local basket of health inequalities indicators must be able to track both long and shorter-term drivers of health inequalities.

- It will need to address the measurable dimensions of inequality e.g. socioeconomic group, age, sex, geography, ethnicity, and the health of vulnerable groups such as disabled people, refugees etc.

Gaps in the local basket of health inequalities indicators

Although the indicator set presented is reasonably comprehensive there are a number of obvious gaps, such as a lack of:

- Reliable measures of health related behaviour at local authority level and below including diet, physical activity and the prevalence of smoking, drinking and drug taking.
• Routinely available indicators of social capital and community development.

• Reliable measures of risk factors such as obesity, high blood pressure at local authority level and below.

• Indicators closely related to delivery.

• Indicators representing some dimensions of inequality. More measurable indicators that can be monitored for different socio-economic and ethnic groups and to assess health inequalities among disabled groups are needed.

A list of indicators proposed for further development to try and fill these gaps are discussed in the full report.

References


About the organisations

The Association of Public Health Observatories

The Association of Public Health Observatories (APHO) has been established since June 2000, and has a main focus of facilitating collaborative working of the ten Public Health Observatories (PHOs) in England and Wales. The APHO was set up with the following aims:

- To be a learning network for members and participants
- To be a single point of contact for external partners
- To be an advocate for users of public health information
- To coordinate work across public health observatories

Joint working is facilitated by:

- Each PHO taking the lead in a defined area to avoid duplication at regional and national level;
- Acting as a major public health resource raising the public health profile at regional and national levels; and
- Developing collaboration through links at regional national and international levels

Further information about the APHO and its work can be obtained from www.pho.org.uk
London Health Observatory

The London Health Observatory (LHO) was set up in 2001 following the Government White Paper: *Saving Lives Our Healthier Nation*. The LHO brings together the information and know-how needed to analyse and research health in the capital. It also has a role to help all those working to improve the health of Londoners to make better use of health and health-related information. The LHO is part of a national network of Public Health Observatories and has a lead role on health inequalities, social exclusion and regeneration.

**Further information** about the LHO and its work can be obtained from www.lho.org.uk

The Health Development Agency

The Health Development Agency (HDA) is the national authority providing information on what works to improve people’s health and reduce health inequalities in England. It gathers evidence and produces advice for policy makers, professionals and practitioners, working alongside them to get evidence into practice.

**Further information** about the HDA and its work can be obtained from www.hda.nhs.uk