

Evaluation of the Healthy Eating Nova Scotia Strategy

Executive Summary

In 2005, Nova Scotia became a Canadian leader in population health by launching the first ever provincial healthy eating strategy. *The Healthy Eating Nova Scotia* (HENS) strategy has a vision of improving the nutritional health of Nova Scotians, contributing to both improved health outcomes and reduced health disparities in our provincial population.

Over the past five years, significant investments in capacity and other resources have been provided and/or leveraged by a variety of government departments and other stakeholders to support the actions identified in the strategy. Along with the development and enhancement of inter-sectoral partnerships, these investments have resulted in numerous critical outputs at a province-wide and local level, as well as the building of momentum toward shared responsibility for the priorities outlined in the strategy (breastfeeding, children and youth, fruit and vegetable consumption, food security).

In an effort to learn what has worked well for implementation of HENS, the Evaluation and Research Working Group of the HENS Guiding Group (HENS GG) prioritized a first-phase evaluation for the HENS strategy and contracted the Applied Research Collaborations for Health (ARCH) team at Dalhousie University to complete this work. Three evaluation activities were undertaken between June and December 2010: 1) a document review of high-level processes related to HENS; 2) an electronic survey with HENS stakeholders; and 3) key informant interviews that included past and present members of the HENS GG. The Health Science Research Ethics Board at Dalhousie University approved this evaluation. The integrated findings

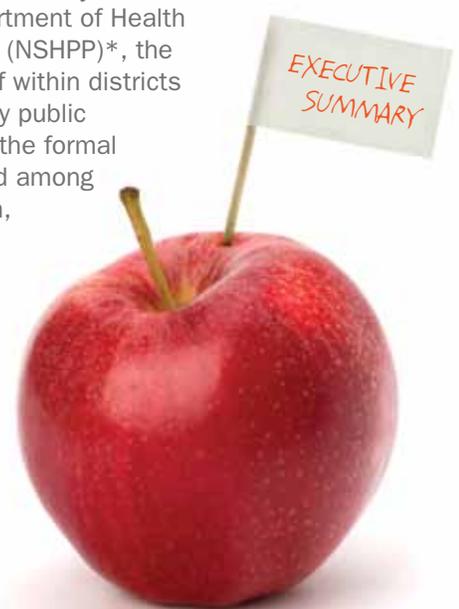
from these three activities form the basis for recommendations made to the HENS GG in support of ongoing implementation of the strategy.

Findings

The document review found that significant investments have been made across the five strategic directions of HENS, namely: 1) leadership; 2) community development and infrastructure; 3) knowledge development and translation; 4) public policy; and 5) health communications. These investments were further confirmed through the HENS stakeholder survey and the interviews with key informants. Three themes related to these five strategic directions also emerged from this evaluation and are summarized as follows:

Leadership and momentum

Momentum for the HENS strategy has been supported with generally effective formal leadership structures provided by the former Nova Scotia Department of Health Promotion and Protection (NSHPP)*, the HENS GG, dedicated staff within districts (typically positions held by public health nutritionists), and the formal partnerships between and among these entities. In addition, working groups within the four priority areas (breastfeeding, children and youth, fruit and vegetable consumption, food security)



*In January 2011, the Nova Scotia Department of Health Promotion and Protection (NSHPP) merged with the Department of Health (DoH) to become the Nova Scotia Department of Health & Wellness (DHW). Since this evaluation took place prior to the merger, this report and accompanying documents refer to NSHPP for past activities, and DHW for future activities. It is understood that DHW will remain the lead government department in support of HENS.



have made significant contributions to the work of HENS over the past five years. The strategy has begun an evolution into implementation that is broader than these formal structures; this can also be attributed to formal and informal partnerships at a province-wide and local level, as well as a general recognition (cultural shift) of the importance of environments that support healthy eating.

Communications and clarity

As the activities related to the strategy grow and broaden, communications become increasingly vital. This includes broader communication (to continue to build efforts toward shared responsibility) and communication within and between the formal leadership structures. Communication and clarity were important themes throughout the evaluation, but in particular for the public health nutritionists, especially as it relates to their role and the allocation of HENS-related funding to the districts. This needs to be sensitively balanced with reference to the relationship between NSHPP and the districts and expectations surrounding this relationship (see recommendations below).

Achieving Outcomes

Notable achievements were recognized. These include new and enhanced cross-sectoral partnerships; acquiring resources to support the work of HENS; in-kind contributions; and healthy public policy developments. The unique relationship between NSHPP and the community to support public policy development and other HENS-related activity is another notable achievement. Work needs to continue in evaluation and

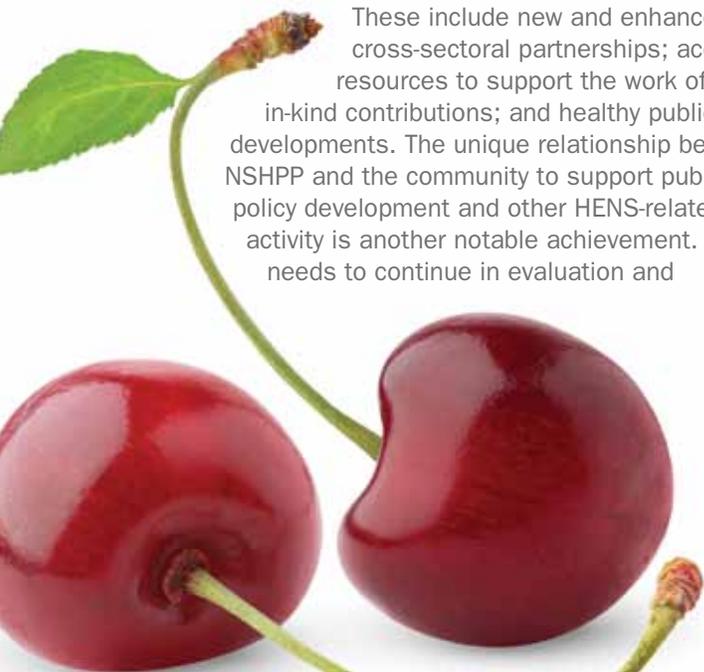
research and developing policies that will impact sectors outside of health and education, as well as continued investments in policies that have already been developed.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations for the HENS GG that are consistent with the integrated findings from this initial evaluation of the implementation of HENS. These recommendations are grouped under the broad headings of leadership and communications.

Leadership

- We recommend that the “formal” leadership structures of the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness (DHW); the HENS GG; and public health (led by public health nutritionists and their formal partnerships) continue to play a strong leadership role for the advancement of the HENS agenda in this province. Collectively, these have been valuable and effective at building momentum for action in relation to HENS. We recognize that the strategy is broadening its reach and taking on a “life of its own” through the ongoing partnerships at a province-wide and community level (both informal and formal). Nonetheless, these formal structures continue to play a critical role.
- We recommend that the role of public health in supporting HENS be clarified. Developing a formalized communication structure among the public health nutritionists is also encouraged. This will help facilitate consistency of activities across the province, improve communications





and assist in problem-solving. Public health nutritionists have specific core competencies; a formalized communication network allows for the recognition of these competencies and lends a collective voice to the activities that support HENS within this framework. The formalized public health nutrition structure may also help in communicating role clarity related to public health nutrition and in expectations surrounding province-wide versus district level HENS-implementation (including HENS-funding allocation). Positive changes within the public health system related to nutrition may begin by facilitating these formal public health nutrition structures.

- We recommend that the role of non-government organizations (NGOs) and other community organizations in supporting HENS be better understood and expanded. NGOs and community organizations play a critical and valued role in supporting HENS-related activity that includes leadership positions through the HENS GG and HENS-related working groups. We recommend that the HENS leaders continue to support and further the leadership and engagement of NGOs and community organizations in HENS. This work will include initiating ongoing dialogue related to organizational capacity to participate and facilitating “making the links” where contributions can either be developed or strengthened. This will support continued advocacy for the healthy eating agenda, leveraging of resources and the “life of its own” transition.



“The Healthy Eating Nova Scotia (HENS) strategy has a vision of improving the nutritional health of Nova Scotians, contributing to both improved health outcomes and reduced health disparities in our provincial population.”

- We recommend that DHW should continue its financial commitments to strategy implementation and focus on continued collaboration at the provincial level (cross-departmentally) and, through its role on the HENS GG, support other organizations to see the value of the HENS strategy and where they can contribute. As a member of the HENS GG, DHW also offers the links to both provincial and national activity. The people representing DHW have been most crucial in the support that this department has provided.
 - We recommend that the HENS GG reaffirm its membership based on the direction of the strategy and expertise required for oversight (e.g. policy developments and/or initiatives). Diversity should be addressed beyond geographical representation and to expand beyond the dietitian/nutritionist role. As well as general oversight, the HENS GG should maintain its key roles in networking and advocacy, communications and broader HENS evaluation and/or research links. More decision-making power by the HENS GG should be explored within these contexts.
- an annual, high-level reporting of HENS-related activity to the HENS GG, who would then be tasked with broader dissemination. More frequent communications about activities/initiatives in relation to the strategy will facilitate ongoing (high-level) evaluation, oversight and meet the broader communications roles for the HENS GG and help to identify areas where additional support may be required (e.g. partnership input, networking).
- We recommend that a “reaffirmation” activity should occur, to support re-engagement in the strategy and networking among those formally and informally linked. This activity may facilitate the development of new partnerships, enhance existing ones and provide opportunities to leverage resources. It will also serve as a point of celebration for the tremendous amount of work and commitment for this strategy over the past five years. We also recommend that the HENS GG take on this important role.

Communications

- We recommend that more frequent and broad communications occur in relation to HENS and the activities that formally (or informally) support the agenda. At a minimum, this “sharing what’s working well” activity might be supported by

