Thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to contribute to your project on study into the implementation of effective measures to tackle obesity. Association for Nutrition (AfN) is the voluntary regulator for qualified nutritionists. We protect and benefit the public by promoting nutrition and public health and championing high standards of practice in the nutrition profession. We maintain a competency-based register of individuals who are qualified and competent in nutritional science and practice and agree to uphold professional and ethical standards through a code of conduct. Only individuals who meet the highest standards in evidence based science and professional practice can join and remain on the Register.

Registered Nutritionists occupy important positions, often with strategic input, in policy and service functions throughout the NHS, in private healthcare, in animal welfare, academia and the food sectors (retailing, service, manufacturing and aspects of agriculture).

The Association accredits 50 Bachelors and Masters courses in nutrition and promotes high standards of competence, skill and ethical conduct. Each year approximately 450 students qualified in the science of nutrition with a strong all round skill set and a firm understanding of and commitment to professional responsibility and accountability graduate from AfN accredited courses.

In addition, the AfN is in the final stages of a major project funded by the Department of Health under the Third Sector Investment Programme entitled *Improving Capacity, Confidence and Competence in Nutrition across the Workforce*, producing a blueprint for supporting the health workforce below professional level and health professionals, (G.P.’s pharmacists, school nurses, health visitors, etc.), who provide nutrition advice to individuals and populations where nutrition may not be a central part of their role, but an important element of it. A major focus of this project is exploring how to reduce nutrition-related inequalities by improving the capacity, confidence and competence of the frontline nutrition workforce.

In the past two decades, as nutrition-related ill-health has become a major factor in preventable disease, most clearly marked by the increasing prevalence of obesity and its complications at an ever younger age, there has emerged a need to protect the public from poor nutrition practice. In 2013,
with the establishment of Public Health England, and with Local Authorities exercising their new role as commissioners of local programmes to address and prevent obesity and overweight, it is critical, in our opinion, the Government has a coherent strategy for the regulation of nutrition professionals in order to ensure best use of public funds.

Research, (AfN 2012) demonstrated significant gaps in the education, training and continuing professional development of current regulated health professions (GP’s, dentists, nurses, pharmacists, health visitors, etc) in terms of their competence to deliver basic nutrition advice. We are in the final stage of developing a web portal for co-professionals, (funded by DH), which launches this autumn, whereby health professionals will be able to test their knowledge of nutrition, receive certification, and signposting to additional resource where weaknesses in knowledge are identified. In addition, we are launching ‘Centers of Excellence,’ certification for organizations/practices providing sound, evidence-based nutrition advice to the public.

Our strategic aim is to ensure consistent, accurate and evidence based nutrition practice across the healthcare team, from professional to frontline worker, to improve nutrition-related health outcomes for public, patients and service users. We welcome the opportunity to provide input into to your project on obesity and recognize the importance of coordinated and synthesized strategy to Government. Our argument is that no initiative or funding stream will be wholly effective in reducing obesity unless the workforce delivering frontline nutrition advice is competent and capable. A single point of influence, whereby weaknesses identified in the skill and competence of fellow health professionals can be addressed quickly and cost effectively would be in the public and service users interest.

Whilst the UK voluntary register of nutritionists does provide assurance that suitably qualified and competent nutrition professionals are capable of delivering nutritional messages in an evidenced-based, safe and effective manner, the lack of statutory regulation, and any form of protection of title, has potential to harm. The recent ‘Which?’ report into Nutritional Therapists evidenced alarming non-evidence based practices with a focus on detoxification, optimal nutrition and use of supplements, that in many cases cannot be justified by existing scientific evidence. In the subsequent debate in the press and social media, the title ‘Nutritionist’ (highly qualified evidence-based scientists registered with the AfN) was used interchangeably with unregulated complementary ‘Nutritional Therapists,’ with much evidence of public confusion.

Further, in our opinion, health care regulators should have a far stronger role in education to encourage greater multi-professional leadership in nutrition across the health-care professions. Registered Nutritionists, qualified and competent in nutrition science and practice, work as part of a team of healthcare professionals and have an equal commitment to improving health outcomes, often at a strategic or population level, for public, patients and service users. It is in the interest of Registered Nutritionists that there is a far greater recognition of the skills of all
healthcare professionals in achieving better health outcomes; not just the skills of those professionals with a professional qualification in nutrition.

Ends.

For more information about the work of the AfN, or this response, please contact AfN Chief Executive, Leonie Milliner on 020 7291 8385, email l.milliner@associationfornutrition.org