

Whole systems approach to obesity

A guide to support local approaches to achieving a healthier weight



Introduction

Obesity is considered to be one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century. It is having an impact on people’s lives now, across the generations, in terms of our quality of life, our risk of developing chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes and its association with common mental health disorders. Doing nothing is not an option.

Without action, the health of individuals will continue to suffer, health inequalities associated with obesity will remain and the economic and social costs will increase to unsustainable levels.

This paper aims to explain the role of all elected members in reducing obesity through the use of a whole systems approach, and to consequently seek the support of all elected members in championing a whole systems approach in their local area moving forward. As an elected member your decisions have the potential to have important impacts on health prevention and improvement.

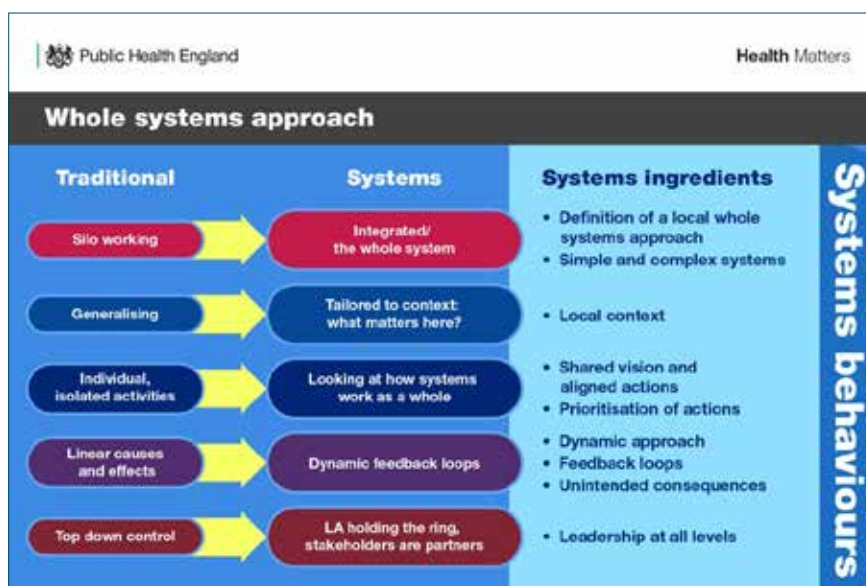
Helping people achieve and maintain a healthy weight is everyone’s business. This ‘must know’ for elected members across the council explains what a whole systems approach to tackling obesity is, its benefits and the importance of system-wide leadership and engagement.

What is a whole systems approach?

Systems working isn’t new to councils – many senior officers have been engaged in system leadership for many years. Even so, you may still have questions; what does it mean in practice for members throughout the organisation, how is it different to what you are already doing and how does it add value?

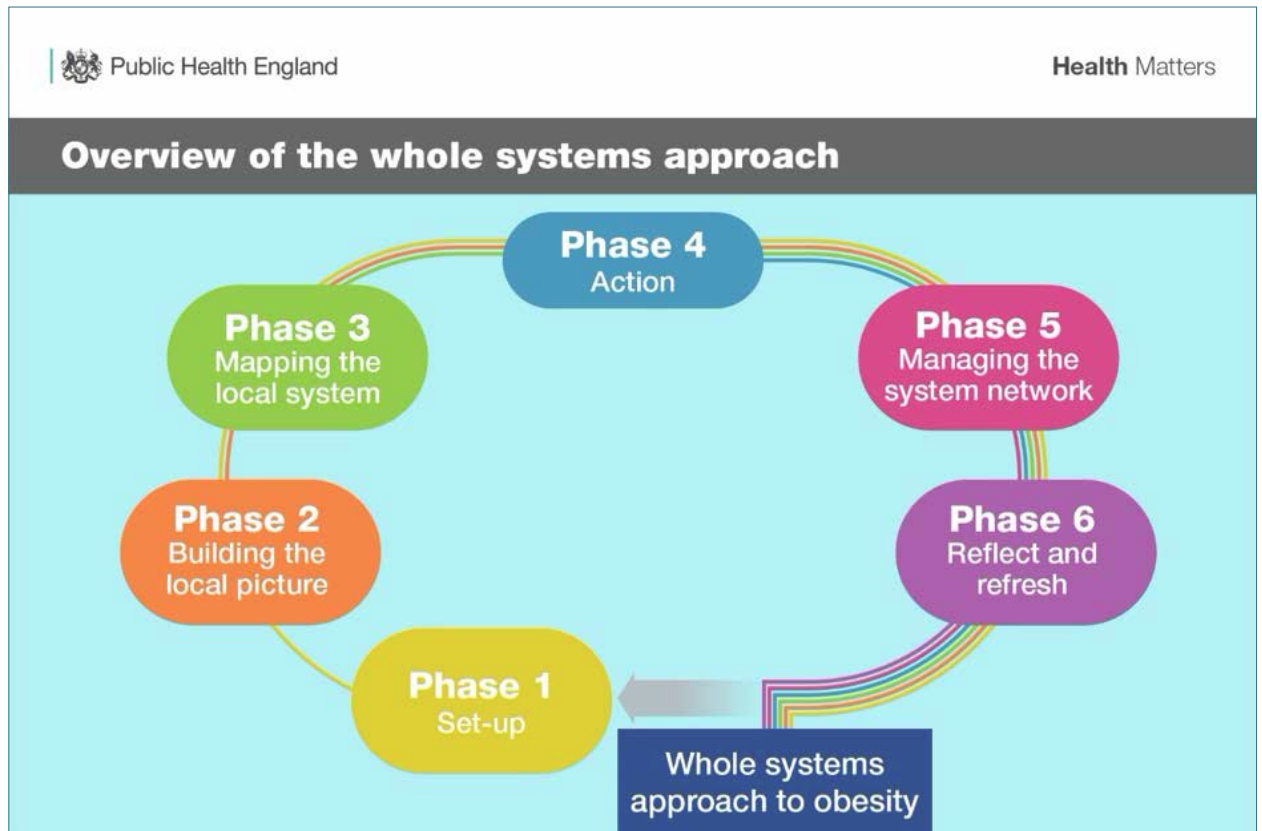
Local councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) collaborated with Public Health England (PHE) and the Association of Directors of Public Health to help answer these questions through the development of a practical guide and resources for local areas to put in place a whole systems approach to tackling obesity.¹

There are differing views of what a whole systems approach is and how it might be implemented. The diagram below illustrates the changes that local areas might expect to see when they implement systems working and highlights the key concepts of this approach. These are explained in detail in the whole systems approach to obesity guide.



1 www.gov.uk/government/publications/whole-systems-approach-to-obesity

The guide describes a 6-phase process, which can be used flexibly by local authorities, taking into account existing structures, relationships and actions that are already in place to tackle obesity.



The scale of the problem

Obesity is a complex problem with multiple causes and significant implications for health and beyond. With the majority of adults in England overweight or obese, and a substantial number of children on the same trajectory, particularly those in the most deprived areas, national and local action is needed now. We know that there is no one single solution. Tackling such an ingrained problem requires a long-term, system-wide approach.



Benefits

Excess weight is affected by many factors, not least our surrounding environment. Creating a healthier food environment will help people access a healthier diet. Advertising, promotions, the make-up of high streets and food offered in work cafeterias and in local takeaways, cafes and restaurants all influence our food options.

Putting actions in place to promote a healthier weight in our local communities does not just benefit our health. Delivering a more health-conscious environment can contribute to wider council priorities including improving the environment, and supporting local businesses and workforces. Maintaining a healthier local workforce may also have positive impacts on other longer-term local agendas; including employability and productivity of local communities, and the demand for social care. Actions, like these, can make a particular difference to communities and families living in more deprived areas. These communities are disproportionately affected by the drivers of obesity and it is vital that emphasis is put on addressing these inequalities.

Elected members as systems leaders

As local members, you have a vital role in championing the approach. This includes providing officers with ongoing, visible and active support to this new way of working; including opening and attending workshops and meetings. Active involvement sends a clear signal that tackling obesity is a priority for the local area and gives officers permission to work differently. The commitment and support of members will also help to ensure that sufficient time and resource will be available to maintain momentum.

Your reach into local communities enables you to raise awareness of the benefits of helping local communities achieve and maintain a healthier weight, as well as gaining their support for this agenda. The engagement of community organisations and the public in this approach is vital to ensure that it reflects their views.

Local members, as well as those with a lead on the Health and Wellbeing Board, can also help all cabinet members see how tackling obesity aligns with, or is impacted by, their own priorities. PHE's 'Promoting healthy weight in children, young people and families: a resource to support local authorities',² can help you identify the links between obesity and other agendas to support face to face conversations with different council departments and partners.

Making the case for a whole systems approach

Most local authorities will already have obesity integrated into their Health and Wellbeing plans, and programmes of work will be in place to tackle obesity. A whole systems approach can add value by providing the opportunity to engage stakeholders across the wider system to develop a shared vision and actions that tackle the causes of obesity, which are outside the realms of public health, and in some cases address some of the wider determinants of health. PHE's 'Promoting healthy weight in children, young people and families: a resource to support local authorities' can help local areas make the case for action by different stakeholders. Given the resource constraints of many local councils, embedding approaches to promote a healthy weight in wider agendas across the local area could provide a pragmatic approach, and maximise the use of local resources and community assets.

Taking a whole systems approach can provide additional benefits, over and above the benefits of tackling obesity:

- effect of collective actions is greater than the sum of the individual actions
- reflect the local leadership role of local authorities
- aligns health with all policies
- maximise all assets in the local area, including community assets
- supports a community centred approach to tackling health inequalities.

² www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-healthy-weight-in-children-young-people-and-families

The benefits of a whole systems approach to obesity



Key messages

Health and Wellbeing Boards should ensure addressing obesity through a whole systems approach is written into their strategic plans. Progress must be monitored and reviewed, and stakeholders should be made accountable. Addressing obesity should also be prioritised for monitoring by Adult Care and Children's Services Overview and Children's Services Scrutiny meetings.

Local members have a vital role in leading and driving whole systems change – ensuring that addressing obesity and promoting a healthy weight is a priority across the whole council. Officers should also be encouraged to work differently, connecting obesity with other local agendas.

A whole systems approach mirrors a 'health in all policies' approach and fits with a Place Based approach to health inequalities. This supports collaborative working across all council departments and with local communities, the NHS, businesses and the voluntary sector.

There needs to be a long-term commitment to tackling obesity – the drivers of obesity have been decades in the making and it will take significant effort at national and local level, with partners, to address it.

Understanding how action to address obesity connects with, and can support, other council agendas and responsibilities such as economic growth, workforce development and social care can help make the case for council-wide action.

Elected members are well placed to raise awareness of the importance of promoting a healthy weight and to engage with NHS colleagues and importantly communities. This will help to understand their views and ensure they have an active role in the whole systems approach.

Questions to consider

The following questions apply to lead members, but all members may wish to consider them:

- To what extent is addressing and preventing obesity across the life-course a genuine council priority? Is it supported by the council leader and chief executive? Are you satisfied that it is sufficiently prioritised by the Health and Wellbeing board and in Health and Wellbeing plans?
- Does the council have a shared vision, narrative and communications strategy in place to communicate publicly why tackling obesity is important and the approach the council is taking to address it?
- How is the council using a systems approach to align local efforts to address the drivers of obesity in our most deprived areas and communities?
- Are all council departments contributing to tackling obesity through their relevant functions? Do other departments clearly understand how tackling obesity benefits their own agendas?
- What measures are in place to engage communities and the NHS in the local whole systems approach to tackling obesity?
- Are staff, including those from outside public health, enabled and supported to allocate time to being part of the whole systems approach to tackling obesity?
- How does a whole systems approach to tackling obesity and promoting a healthier weight, feature in the council's overview and scrutiny process?
- How is the council monitoring and evaluating progress on tackling obesity and related drivers?

Resources for further information

Whole systems approach to obesity

Public Health England, 2019, Whole systems approach to obesity: a guide to support local approaches to promoting a healthy weight www.gov.uk/government/publications/whole-systems-approach-to-obesity

Public Health England, 2019, Whole systems approach to obesity case studies phases 1 to 6 www.gov.uk/government/collections/health-matters-public-health-issues#whole-systems-approach-to-obesity

Public Health England, 2019, Whole systems approach to obesity supplementary resources <https://khub.net/web/phe-national/public-library> (search whole systems approach to obesity)

Public Health England 2019, Whole systems approach to obesity animation www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLu9AOpfsjs

Public Health England, 2019, Health Matters: Whole systems approach to obesity – Interview with Prof Jim McManus www.youtube.com/watch?v=a768Mi0nn_Y

Public Health England, 2019, Health matters: whole systems approach to obesity www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-whole-systems-approach-to-obesity/health-matters-whole-systems-approach-to-obesity

Public Health England, 2019, Health Matters: Addressing the food environment as part of a local whole systems approach to obesity. <https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2019/08/08/health-matters-addressing-the-food-environment-as-part-of-a-local-whole-systems-approach-to-obesity/>

Bagnall, A.-M., et al. (2019). Whole systems approaches to obesity and other complex public health challenges: a systematic review. BMC Public Health 19 (1): 8 <https://rdcu.be/bflqO>

LGA briefings and Must Knows

Local Government Association, 2017, Making obesity everybody's business: A whole systems approach to obesity
<https://local.gov.uk/making-obesity-everybodys-business-whole-systems-approach-obesity>

Local Government Association, 2017, Prevention How do you know that your council is doing all it can to deliver on prevention?
<https://local.gov.uk/must-knows-elected-members-prevention>

LGA case studies

LGA, 2018, Healthy weight, healthy futures: local government action to tackle childhood obesity. Case studies.
<https://local.gov.uk/healthy-weight-healthy-futures-local-government-action-tackle-childhood-obesity-0>

LGA Health in all Policies

Local Government Association, 2016, Health in all policies: a manual for local government
<https://local.gov.uk/health-all-policies-manual-local-government>

Quality in Public Health

Public Health System Group for England, 2019, Quality in Public Health: a shared responsibility
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/809305/Quality_in_public_health_shared_responsibility_2019.pdf

Childhood obesity trailblazer programme

Local Government Association, 2019, Childhood Obesity Trailblazer Programme
www.local.gov.uk/childhood-obesity-trailblazer-programme

What Good Looks like

Public Health England, 2019, What good healthy weight for all ages looks like
www.khub.net/web/guest/public-library
(search what good healthy weight looks like)

Other useful publications

Public Health England, 2018, Promoting healthy weight in children, young people and families: A resource to support local authorities
www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-healthy-weight-in-children-young-people-and-families

Public Health England, 2019, Health inequalities: place-based approaches to reduce inequalities
www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-inequalities-place-based-approaches-to-reduce-inequalities/place-based-approaches-for-reducing-health-inequalities-main-report

NICE community obesity guidance

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2017, PH42 Obesity: working with local communities
www.nice.org.uk/Guidance/PH42



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