

Sectors join forces to halt childhood obesity

As the public's perception of 'normal' weight changes, the UK finds itself sliding towards a 50% obesity rate. Rachel Potter looks at what can be done to reverse the trend and move towards prevention

As autumn, the government quietly abandoned its target to halt childhood obesity by 2010, setting instead the more achievable goal of reducing it by 2020.

The decision came in response to the Foresight report, which revealed the true scale of the UK's obesity problem. Published by the Government Office for Science, it concluded that if things continue at their current pace, about 50% of men, 50% of women and 25% of children would be obese by 2050.

As with so many of the challenges faced by healthy communities, there is no single reason for the nation's growing waistlines and no single solution. Experts agree that the trend will only be reversed if the public, private and voluntary sectors join forces.

Local government is well placed to take a lead on childhood obesity, a fact that they have taken on board. Obesity was identified by 49% of local authorities as their top priority for tackling health inequalities in the recent Ipsos-MORI poll (see page 1).

At the bottom line, the solution seems simple. "We should stop eating as much and we should exercise more," says Liam Hughes, national adviser for healthy communities at the DfES. "But it's not like smoking and tobacco control. When you ask why young people are gaining weight, the answers take you from the family to school and the neighbourhood and out into the world of food production and retailing."

Foresight identified four key areas of local government influence in the fight against obesity: planning, children's services, adult social care and leisure and culture. "Every part of a local authority is involved one way or another in tackling this, along with their partner agencies," says Hughes. "But unless you mobilise all of them systematically and with determination it's unlikely that much will change."

There is an appetite for change – not least because treating obesity-related health problems cost the NHS £4.2bn in 2007, according to figures from the Department of Health.

A commitment to finding solutions is evident in the new local area agreements (LAAs), in which local strategic partnerships have selected their priorities from a menu of performance targets. Reducing obesity among schoolchildren in year six is the fourth most popular performance indicator, chosen by 97 of the 150 LAAs in England.

DEA adviser Rachel Litherland helps local strategic partnerships to deliver successful LAAs. She believes this process encourages a more holistic approach,



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with partner agencies working together to deliver appropriate solutions.

Councils across the country are demonstrating leadership in tackling obesity, says Litherland, including Newark and Sherwood district council, which works with the local primary care trust (PCT) to deliver a weight-loss programme to local youngsters, and Swale in Kent, where the district council runs a sports bus club taking its of Sheppey children on accompanied trips to sports centres after school.

LAAs provide a huge opportunity for partnership action, says Maryn Allison, DEA's national adviser for culture and sport. "A big issue for us is getting health to recognise that councils are part of the prevention programme."

"It is starting to happen, but we need to convince PCTs that sharing some of the investment in this area is important." Some PCTs are already on board. Milton Keynes PCT is one of them. Its chief executive and director of public health for the local council, Dr Nicholas Hilda, says: "As obesity becomes more common and

our perceptions of what's normal weight change, so we more readily accept obesity as normal and fail to recognise the consequences to our health – and that of our children. Deep-rooted issues such as this can only be tackled by sustained multi-sectoral action. The NHS acting alone will not be enough."

Dance as sport

Encouraging young people to take part in sport is part of the solution, says Allison. In particular, managing the transition of sport from school into the community, perhaps through partnerships with clubs and leisure centres. But there is a drop-off in sports participation by teenage girls, and young people with weight problems can feel self-conscious taking part.

Councils are taking an innovative approach to this. For example, Sheffield PCT and council support Dance Action Zone Leeds (DAZ), which works with children and young people aged from three to 25. "DAZ has been an excellent way of connecting with teenage girls," says councillor

Stewart Colton, executive member for children's services. "It raises their confidence and self-esteem and improves their fitness while increasing their access to a wide range of health information."

Town planners are also increasingly aware that their decisions have a direct impact on health. Sheffield city council, for example, has explicitly designed its planning strategy to ensure that schools and health centres are easily accessible from areas of new housing, making people less reliant on cars.

Sarah Richards, DEA national adviser for places and prosperity, explains why this matters. "Planning has a fundamental part to play in shaping the environment in which people live," she says. "An ideal environment is one in which it is easy for people to move around, and where links are created between the places they go, for children, the important links are between school and home, home and the playground, and home and leisure centres."

"So the work of spatial planning underpins the creation of healthy communities

Fighting the flab

Fire fighters are fit, brave and heroic – so what better role model for children at risk of health problems, from their weight? That's the thinking behind Start Right, a programme run by Wirral PCT and Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) to help children aged between five and eight – and their families – to adopt healthier lifestyles.

The partnership began in 2005 when Gareth Hill, now Start Right's lead adviser, was looking for somewhere to run the PCT's weight-management programme. Merseyside FRS already encouraged community use of its facilities and was happy to oblige.

The programme is tailor-made for each child and covers diet, exercise and self-esteem. The project helped Merseyside FRS win a national Beacon award for its work on reducing health inequalities. "Fire stations are an exciting and inspirational venue for children – they are motivated by their visits," says Hill. RP

Fight the flab and have fun: Leeds-based Diamonds junior chess/dancing squad seen here in training is run by Dance Action Zone Leeds. It works with young people aged from three to 25, and is supported by Sheffield primary care trust.

In a very physical sense," adds Richards. Planners have a wide range of powers at their fingertips – from refusing licences for new takeaways near schools to designing safe cycling routes.

"It sometimes feels a bit like social engineering, and obviously there's a line there that shouldn't be crossed, but the decisions made by planners are socially and immediately relevant," says Richards. Allison believes that the focus needs to shift to prevention. "It's a big challenge for the public sector – having the courage to risk putting resources into prevention rather than continually solving problems that have already gone wrong."

Society also needs to welcome young people into opportunities to be active. Allison asks a telling question: "We want young people to become part of society and be more active so they don't cost us money and are employable, fit and healthy, but how comfortable are we having them around our facilities? Are the rest of us, as adults, really making them feel welcome?"