

Systems approaches to obesity: The lived experience of young people

Wendy Wills

Professor of Food and Public Health and Director of the Centre for Research in
Public Health and Community Care (CRIPACC), University of Hertfordshire

Theme Lead - NIHR Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) East of England – ‘prevention
and early detection in health and social care’

Email: w.j.wills@Herts.ac.uk

(My) Underpinning principles

- #1 Involve people with ***lived experience*** of socio-economic deprivation, obesity, malnutrition, hunger [etc] in research of relevance to public health processes/practice, intervention or policy



(My) Underpinning principles

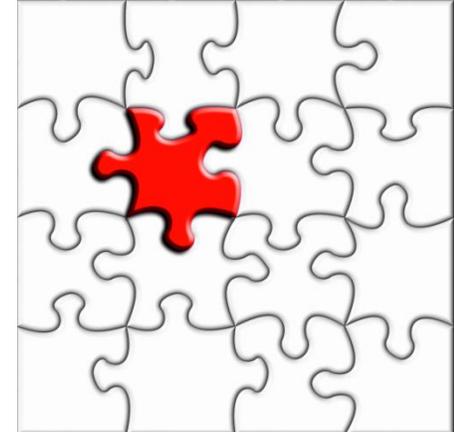
- **#2 *Social distinctions matter***: They represent *habitus*.
 - Cultural, social, economic capital inform obesity-related practices



(My) Underpinning principles

- #3 Consider ***practices*** rather than ***behaviour*** in relation to shifting rates of obesity downwards
 - Competency [*how do we do it?*]
 - Materiality [*what do we need to do it with?*]
 - Meanings [*this is important to us because...*]

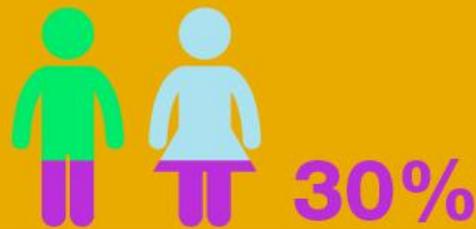
[Draws from Shove 2012; also see Warde 2005]



The move towards / need for systems approaches to address obesity

Obesity in children

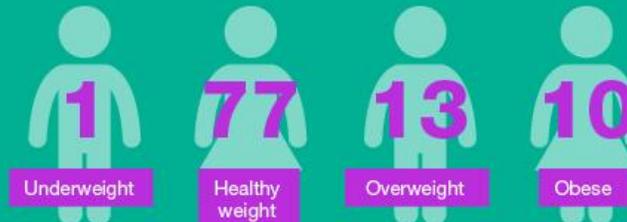
Younger generations are becoming obese at **earlier ages** and **staying obese into adulthood**



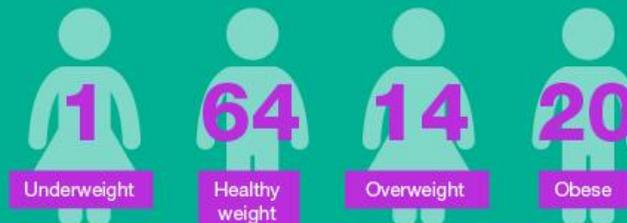
of children aged 2 to 15 years old are **overweight** or **obese**

*Academic year 2017

Of every 100 4 and 5 years olds in England* there are:



Of every 100 10 and 11 years olds in England* there are:

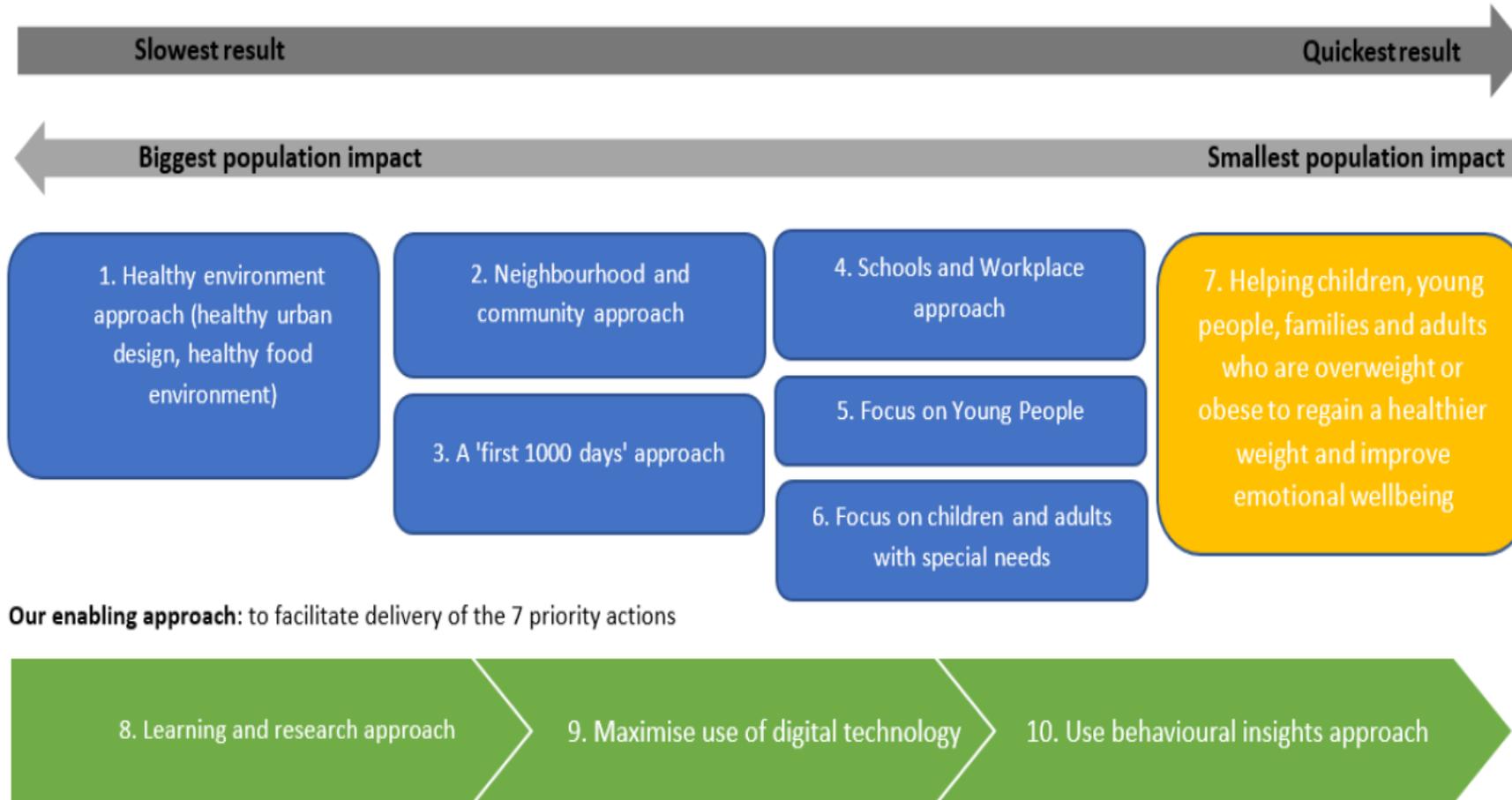


*Academic year 2017 - 2018

Hertfordshire Whole Systems Obesity Programme

- Project team recruited for the WSO programme
- Mapping of local factors conducted
- Developing understanding of gaps and opportunities to address obesity
- Draw on the Ten Pillars of Action approach

Hertfordshire: Ten Pillars Approach



Community engagement and the co-production of solutions



Consultation methods and participants

- 56 young people (26 male, 30 female) participated in August 2019
- Recruited via the NCS / Stevenage Football Club



Consultation methods and participants

- Visit 1
 - Mapping activity
 - Discussion
 - Suggestion box
- Visit 2 – small group discussion
 - (1) What does overweight mean to you?
 - (2) What words should we use when talking about overweight or obesity?
 - (3) Why are some people overweight and not others?
 - (4) What are the impacts of overweight/obesity?

Growing up in Stevenage

Four main themes identified as important:

- Affordability
- Crime and anti-social behaviour
- Transport
- Places to go and places to eat



Factors driving excess weight/obesity

- What does overweight mean to you?
- What words should we use when talking about overweight or obesity?



Factors driving excess weight/obesity

- Why are some people overweight and not others?
- What are the impacts of overweight/obesity?



Local Issues Related to Overweight /Obesity

- Affordability:
 - The cost of healthy vs less healthy food
 - The cost of gym membership and other physical activities
 - The cost of using public transport
- Crime and anti-social behaviour
 - Bullying
 - Fear of gangs and knife crime
 - Both impact autonomy, freedom to be outside, lower levels of physical activity

Local Issues Related to Overweight /Obesity

- Transport
 - Cycle path network viewed positively
 - Public transport viewed as unreliable [encourage car use]
- Places to go and places to eat
 - Few places to go/socialise for older teenagers
 - This influences use of fast food restaurants



What solutions do young people suggest?

- **1. Healthy Environment Approach**

- More pathways and cycle lanes.
- Ban cars in the town centre.
- Remove advertisements for fast food restaurants on bus tickets and replace with adverts for healthy food, for example free fruit.
- Increased and improved police patrols to prevent bikes from being stolen.
- Increased street lighting, especially in the winter months.
- Reduce the cost of healthy food such as fruit and vegetables/ Increase the cost of unhealthy food.
- Decrease the number of fast food and takeaway outlets. Increase the number of healthy food outlets to give people viable alternatives, like fruit and vegetable markets.
- Regulations so that shops have to relocate healthier foods to the front of shops or by the tills.
- Regulations to change the way food is cooked in fast food restaurants; baked instead of fried.
- Regulations to stop the advertisement of unhealthy and/or fast food.
- Provide free fruit. Fast food outlets could offer free fruit bags.
- Make public images about obesity more graphic, similar to cigarette packaging.

What solutions do young people suggest?

- **2. Neighbourhood and Community Approach**

- Areas for young people to socialise where gangs or knife crime will not be an issue.
- Encourage people to walk or cycle, rather than driving, e.g. via a financial incentive.
- Build an athletics track for young people to use that is free or cheap.
- Provide affordable gym equipment people can use at home.
- Increase the advertisement of local sports activities, clubs and events.
- Make gyms more accessible by building them in residential areas.
- Increase the number of local sports activities available for young people, for example a rock climbing club.
- Build more skate parks for young people.
- Organise fun runs for charity.
- Make sports activities and clubs more affordable for young people and their families.

What solutions do young people suggest?

- **4. Schools and Workplace Approach**

- Teach young people about respecting others, in particular those who are overweight or obese.
- Raise awareness about healthy foods and diets by educating people about food.
- Raise awareness about obesity in schools.
- Promote sports in schools. All schools should encourage students to participate in sports. Secondary schools could make PE compulsory for all students.

- **5. Focus on Young People**

- Events about obesity that are specifically targeted at young people.
- Decrease the cost of public transport for young people to discourage the use of cars.
- Encourage young people to be physically active and engage in sports outside for school by reducing the cost of gym memberships and sports facilities or activities for young people.
- Introduce more programs like NCS for young people
- Increase the number of healthy food outlets that are affordable for young people

- Project funded by the NIHR ARC East of England
- With thanks to Stevenage Football club and all the young people who generously gave their time
- Report available on the ARC EoE website:
[https://arc-
eoe.nihr.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Childhood%20obesity%20in%20Stevenage%20report.pdf](https://arc-
eoe.nihr.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Childhood%20obesity%20in%20Stevenage%20report.pdf)



Thank you for listening.