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# POSITION STATEMENT:

# LOCAL POWERS ON HEALTHY WEIGHT

## KEY MESSAGES

- Reducing the prevalence of obesity across the lifespan is a priority for local and national governments.
- Local authorities are at the forefront of necessary changes to promote a healthy diet and physical activity, to help promote healthy weight in the local community. They are uniquely placed to influence and control the offerings and availability of food and drinks, plus have many touchpoints to communicate with and influence the consumption habits of their local populations.
- Local authorities have a wide range of levers at their disposal to influence healthy weight that go beyond public health; including planning, regulatory services, environmental health and transport.

## Overview

The World Health Organisation has described addressing childhood obesity as a key public health priority. The Covid-19 pandemic has further catalysed obesity prevalence in UK children; in Reception, obesity prevalence has increased 9.9% in 2019/20 to 14.4% in 2020/21. In Year 6, obesity prevalence has increased 21.0% in 2019/20 to 25.5% in 2020/21 [1]. National government has a key role to play in promoting healthy weight and the UK Government have published a range of strategies in recent years to address obesity. However, Local Authorities (LAs) are particularly well placed as the functions they are responsible for serve all generations in society and can directly influence people's health. The transfer of responsibility for public health in 2013 to councils has sparked a surge in innovative programmes and councils exploring various powers and levers to help address obesity. From working with children who have obesity and overweight to encouraging children to cut their consumption of sugary drinks, to making best use of Supplementary Planning Documents; LAs are showing how obesity can be addressed at a local level.

## What local powers are available?

Sustainable Food Places found 29 different levers that LAs are currently using to support access to healthy food [2]. Below summarises a handful of these levers, but to explore in more detail and find case studies of local action please visit this link.

- Many LAs, often combining environmental health and public health, are launching voluntary healthy catering award schemes and are working with food venues, as part of a complex system, to promote healthier out-of-home environments and transition from the mass provision and consumption of unhealthy food and drink to a healthy diet to reduce non-communicable disease [3, 4].
- Supplementary Planning Documents are used by a number of local authorities to restrict the development of hot food takeaways. Planning departments can make the case against granting planning permission on a range of grounds – environmental health i.e. littering but also impact on public health.
- Councils have explored implementing healthier vending policies or requirements as part of procurement protocols. A trail with Leeds City Council resulted in a significant decrease in overall energy and unhealthy food/drink vended without impacting on revenue [5].
- Some local authorities have implemented a wide-ranging policy including a number of restrictions, granting planning approval only "within identified centres, or beyond a 400m exclusion zone around school/colleges either within or outside local education authority control [6].
- The planning system also has the potential to help change travel behaviour to support active modes of travel (such as by foot and cycling) which can improve public health outcomes [7].
- The local authority can encourage community food growing by adopting policies that increase allotment provision, promote edible landscapes and make available green and brownfield sites.
- Licensing and street trading policies can be used set out its standards for those engaged in street trading, including restricting those offering less healthy food and drink.
- Business relief rates can be explored to support healthier food and drink outlets [8].
- The Major of London launched a healthier food advertising policy across Transport for London in 2019, which has led to a reduction in weekly spend

on unhealthy food and drink per household equal to 1000 kcal of energy (6.7%) as a result of the advertising ban [9]. A further five councils have successfully implemented the policy: Bristol, Greenwich, Haringey, Merton and Southwark [10].

## Policy context

### Whole systems approach to obesity

In 2019 Public Health England, the Local Government Association, Association for Directors of Public Health and Leeds Beckett University published their whole guide and set of resources to support the implementation of a whole systems approach to obesity [11]. LAs can adopt a 'whole systems approach' to obesity to deliver on a range of key local priorities, in addition to reducing obesity levels, such as improving workforce health, contributing to a stronger local economy and helping reduce social care costs [12]. This supports cross-departmental conversations with different parts of the system, which perhaps were not previously engaged in the obesity agenda e.g. planning and infrastructure.

### The Childhood Obesity Trailblazer Programme

The Childhood Obesity Trailblazer Programme was announced as part of the Childhood Obesity Plan, Chapter 2 in 2018 [13]. The 3-year programme was designed to support councils to test and refine their ideas for addressing childhood obesity and health inequalities and managed by the Department of Health and Social Care, the Local Government Association and Public Health England. 5 councils were successful in the tendering process: Bradford, Blackburn with Darwen, Nottinghamshire, Lewisham and Birmingham. These programmes focus on exploring various levers in tackling obesity; for example the Pennine Lancashire trailblazer 'Healthier Place, Healthier Future' seeks to take a test and learn approach for the following levers; System leadership (working with elected members to raise the importance of health and wellbeing), Planning (harnessing the planning system to promote healthy weight), Social Movement (utilising the voice of the community to campaign for change) and finally Businesses (working with food outlets to support them to provide healthier options). The other trailblazers explore using children's centres, apprenticeships, local advertising policies and faith settings to address obesity.

## Our position and what we will do

Obesity is a complex issue that cannot be solved by public health alone. Tackling obesity requires system-wide efforts and ensuring all council departments are exercising their responsibility.

Policy change: We will continue to support local authorities to adopt a whole systems approach to obesity by adopting the Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight and supporting cross-departmental working. The Declaration has now been signed by 27 councils across England.

Food Active is the delivery partner for the Healthier Place, Healthier Future Trailblazer Programme. We will continue to support the programme to explore local authority levers to support healthy weight until the project end in June 2022, and ensure there is a legacy from the programme so other local areas can learn from the programme.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The public health grant should ensure all LAs have sustainable and adequate funding to support councils to take action on obesity.
- LAs should explore levers beyond public health that can influence healthy weight, working with a range of departments and partners to support a community-centred whole systems approach.
- LAs should consider adopting the Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight which can be a useful way to engage and sensitise elected members and other council departments to tackling obesity.

## References


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