System Leadership[1] within a Whole Systems Approach[2] to Healthy Weight

Background: As the prevalence of obesity in UK communities continues to rise, there is a growing interest in taking a whole systems approach to build healthier weight environments. This paper has been produced to support local authorities who are seeking to take population-based measures to address inequitable levels of overweight and obesity, with a particular focus on the role of system leadership.

Taking a whole systems approach (WSA) to healthy weight: 69.1% of men and 58.4% of women in England are living with overweight and obesity[3]. The UK has one of the highest obesity rates in Europe and the prevalence of adults living with obesity has continued to rise[4] (see figure below).

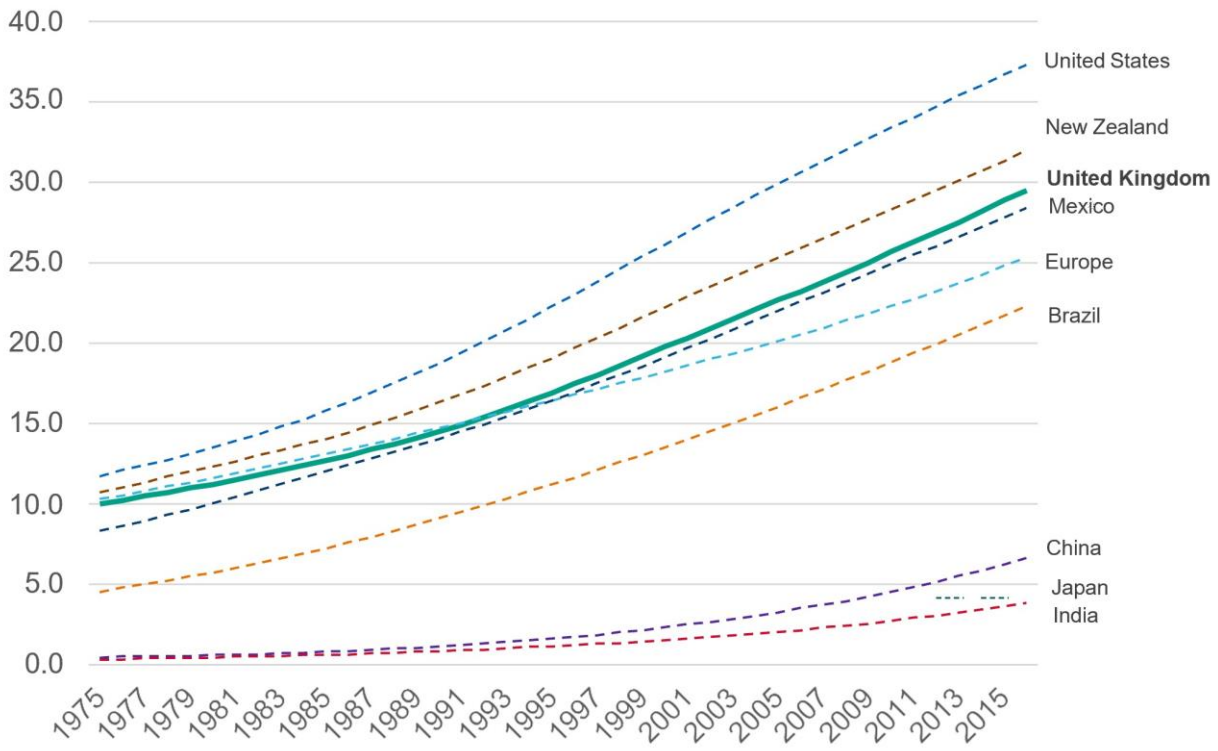

Figure 1: *Prevalence of obesity rates in adulthood across Europe, between 1975-2015[4].*

1. See Glossary for a definition of System Leadership
2. See Glossary for a definition of a Whole Systems Approach
3. Data from Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) Obesity Profile: short statistical commentary. May 2023.
4. Dr Jeanelle de Gruchy. Obesity and Nutrition: Trends, Successes and Challenges. September 2023.

The reasons for these high levels of overweight and obesity are complex and there is no easy solution to address a condition which contributes to the increasing mental and physical health burden of disease which affects all our communities. Local authorities are beginning to take a systems approach involving collaborative coordinated actions by a range of departments, organisations, and the communities themselves to identify the causes of excess weight and to seek solutions. Critically, the approach incorporates a shift from a stigmatising individual behaviour change model to a population-based approach which focuses on building healthier weight environments. In the UK, many local authorities and Health Boards have drawn on Public Health England's guide to support local approaches to promoting a healthy weight[5]. This guide suggests a six-stage process including building a local picture and determining what is already in place, and what may be drawn on to develop an action plan to create a healthier weight enviror

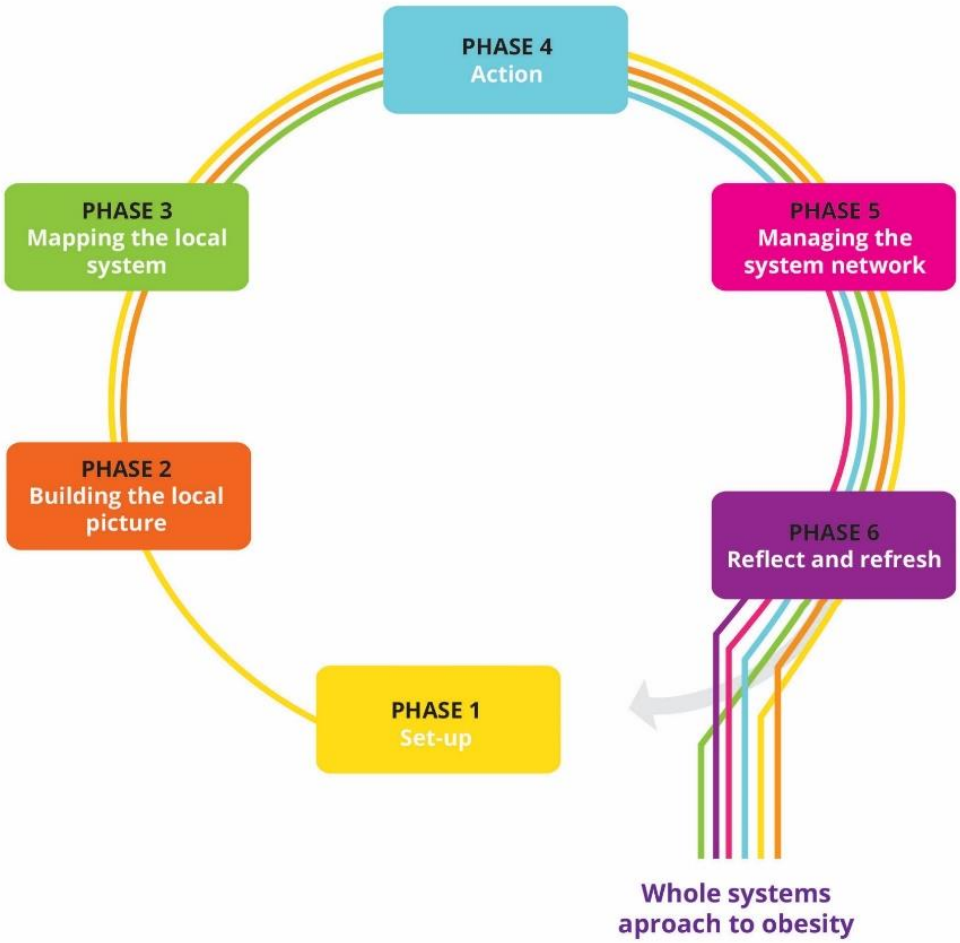

Figure 2: *Phases to a whole systems approach to obesity[5].*

It is important that WSAs to healthy weight should address and link with local plans and priorities and local communities should be consulted to determine local priorities to address health and wellbeing.

5. Public Health England. Whole systems approach to obesity. A guide to support local approaches to promoting a healthy weight. 2019.

Addressing the determinants of health: The model originally developed by Dahlgren and Whitehead and shown below, has been much used to consider the various factors that determine population health. We can't control our age and hereditary factors but our individual lifestyle 'choices' are heavily influenced by our income and where we grow up. The food choices available in Kensington, Liverpool for example may be very different from what can be bought in local shops in Kensington in London, and similarly, even if healthier choices may be available, the ability to afford them will be determined by household income. If we are to have much impact on addressing the causes of overweight and obesity, we need to use more resources on addressing the outer layers of the rainbow i.e. the general socio-economic, cultural and environmental factors.

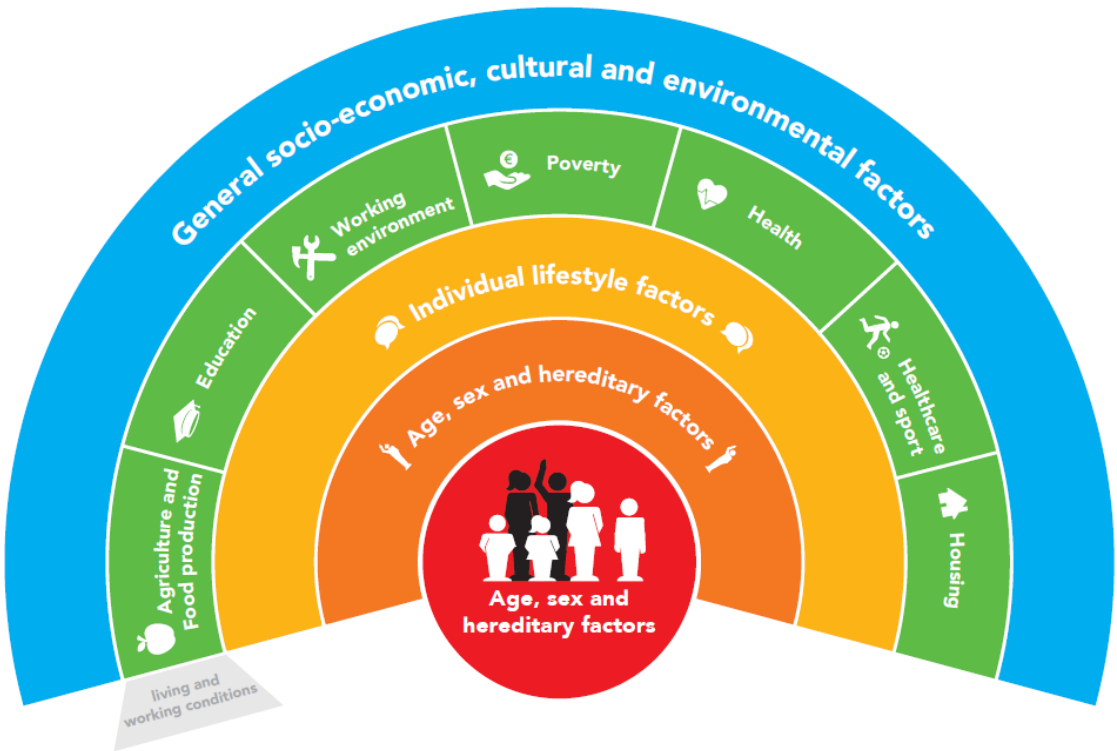

Figure 3: *Dahlgren and Whitehead's rainbow model of the determinants of health[6].*

Upstream and downstream interventions: The analogy of a river is often provided in describing health interventions. John McKinlay's influential article[7] was first published in 1975 and made the case for refocusing health resources upstream, arguing that downstream endeavours did not provide long-term solutions. The winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Bishop Desmond Tutu, is frequently quoted: "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they are falling in". Thus, although we need to treat overweight and obesity, we also need to find the causes and prevent them happening. Hard-pressed public health budgets often focus on downstream lifestyle interventions such as cooking classes and cycle training whilst ignoring more difficult and challenging upstream issues such as improving access to healthier food and developing better cycling infrastructure.

6. Whitehead, M., & Dahlgren, G. (1991). Policies and strategies to promote social equity in health. Stockholm: Institute for Future Studies.
7. McKinlay, J. B. (1979). A case for refocusing upstream: the political economy of illness. Patients, physicians and illness: A sourcebook in behavioral science and health, 9-25.

A WSA to healthy weight should encompass actions which address both the wider determinants of health and individual lifestyle factors.

System leadership: Early evaluations of WSAs to healthy weight[8,9] mention complexity, the need for positive relationships between key personnel, and the importance of system leadership. Whilst community engagement is also critical, communities may not identify or easily influence the causes of obesity and the wider determinants of health. It is essential that systems approaches incorporate both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' frameworks in order to address complex issues. "System leadership is about building a culture in which systems approaches can flourish. System leaders set the tone for an organisation to work more systematically and encourages staff to embed system approaches in their work" [10].

A Whole Systems Approach to Healthy Weight which uses the Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight: The Healthy Weight Declaration was developed and is delivered by North-West based charity Food Active[11]. The Declaration presents the opportunity to lead local action and demonstrate good practice in adopting a systems approach to promote healthy weight and overall good health and well-being in communities. It enables local authorities to demonstrate system leadership in addressing healthy weight. The Declaration is usually signed by the Council's Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing, and the Director of Public Health. The Declaration is made up of 16 core commitments that the council has within its remit such as the use of local policy levers around planning and recreation for example. Health and Wellbeing Partnerships provide an opportunity to progress the declaration, whilst supporting the locally determined public health priorities, working in partnership to promote healthy weight.

Summary: Arguably, system leadership is the most important component of a WSA to a healthier weight environment. If senior leaders are not engaged at the beginning of this process, action plans run the risk of not being implemented later as they lack resources or political commitment. Food Active's Healthy Weight Declaration is designed to help local authorities meet their public health objectives in addressing overweight and obesity.

For more information: Food Active has examples of good practices both in terms of engaging elected members and using the Healthy Weight Declaration as part of a WSA to Healthy Weight and Food Active's resource hub contains these and many other useful resources. Key publications from Public Health England (now the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities) and Public Health Scotland are shown in the footnotes to this paper.

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8. Breslin, Gavin, et al. "Whole systems approach to diet and healthy weight: a longitudinal process evaluation in East Scotland." Perspectives in Public Health (2023): 17579139231203858.
9. Public Health Scotland. 'Whole Systems Approach (WSA) Early Adopters Programme Process Evaluation'. 2022 and NIHR. 'An Evaluation of Healthy Weight Tayside, a whole systems approach to healthy weight in Dundee City'. 2023.
10. UK Government Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy and Department for Energy Security & Net Zero. 'Systems Leadership Guide: how to be a systems leader. 2023.
11. Further information may be accessed here: https://foodactive.org.uk/what-we-do/influence-policy/local-authority-declaration-on-healthy-weight/

Glossary

System Leadership. System working requires buy-in from senior leaders throughout the process as a change in mind-set may be required at officer and elected member level to undertake long-term systemic approaches. Early evaluations of local authorities using a whole systems approach emphasise the importance of getting a wide set of senior staff engaged at the outset[12].

Whole Systems Approaches. Systems-based approaches are becoming common in addressing complex public health issues[13] such as healthy weight and obesity. These may be defined as those that "consider the multifactorial drivers of overweight and obesity, involve transformative co-ordinated action across a broad range of disciplines and stakeholders, operate across all levels of governance and throughout the life course". Public Health England (now OHID) use the example of a bicycle to explain systems. A bicycle is composed of many parts with no single part operating the system alone. You can only ride the bike when all the parts work together. A functioning system is able to deliver more than simply the addition of its parts. Many local authorities and Health Boards in the UK have taken a whole systems approach to promoting healthy weight as part of a 'Health in All Policies' approach[14]. This provides a platform for partnerships in and across organisations to work with local communities to make effective use of a council's resources and policies in building healthier environments. The figure on the following page illustrates the change from traditional to systems approaches.

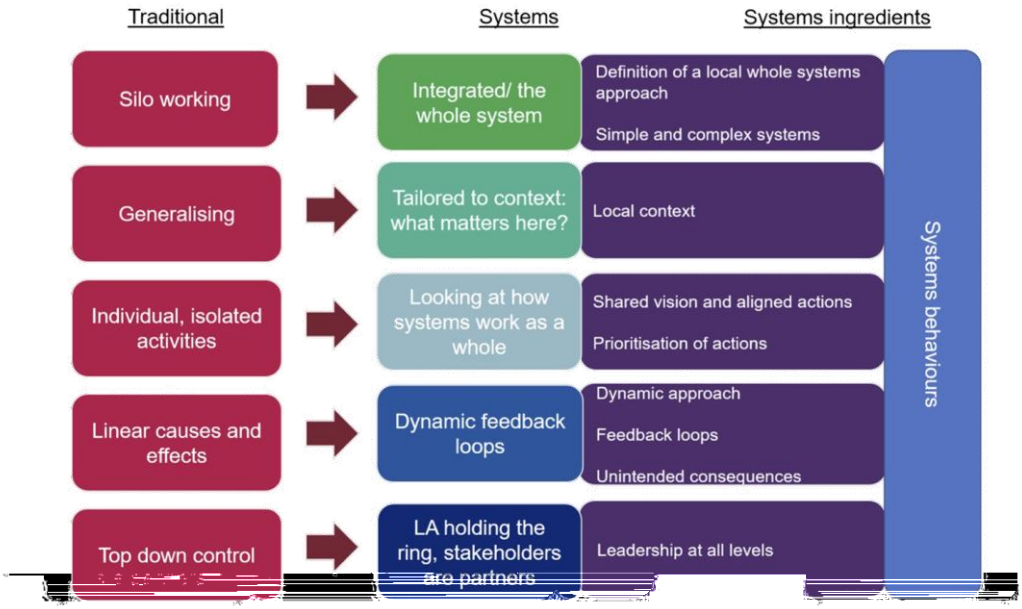

Figure 4: *Changes expected to happen in a local place when shifting from traditional working to systems working[14].*

12. Public Health Scotland. 'Whole Systems Approach (WSA) Early Adopters Programme Process Evaluation'. 2022 and NIHR. 'An Evaluation of Healthy Weight Tayside, a whole systems approach to healthy weight in Dundee City'. 2023.
13. Bagnall, A. M., Radley, D., Jones, R., Gately, P., Nobles, J., Van Dijk, M., ... & Sahota, P. (2019). Whole systems approaches to obesity and other complex public health challenges: a systematic review. BMC public health, 19, 1-14.
14. Public Health England. Whole systems approach to obesity. A guide to support local approaches to promoting a healthy weight. 2019.