

Public Health Wales

Evaluation of Whole Systems Approach to Healthy Weight: Executive summary

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Executive Summary

Overview

The Whole Systems Approach to Healthy Weight Programme (WSAHW) is an ambitious and forward-thinking programme. It is one of the first programmes in the world to tackle healthy weight through a systems lens via a nationally led approach, executed at national and local level. Its strength lies in moving from describing the theory of systems change, towards facilitating practical implementation in seven different local contexts as well as at the national and national-local levels.

This evaluation provides a timely opportunity to explore the implementation of WSAHW, gather the views of diverse stakeholders, and pool learning as delivery progresses into the 'action' stages. The departure of the programme from previous public health ways of working for healthy weight should not be underestimated, and therefore the lessons learned are useful for both the WSAHW and wider systems change efforts to promote complex issues such as healthy weight. This report is also available in Welsh.

About WSAHW

The WSAHW is a collaborative programme between Public Health Wales (PHW), the Directors of Public Health Leadership Group and Welsh Government. It is part of a larger movement in Wales tackling complex issues using systems change approaches, supported by the forward-thinking Future Generations Act, and addressing population body weight issues in line with the 10-year Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales strategy.

The programme combines national-level systems change efforts with local-level action in each of Wales's seven Health Board (HB) regions, enabling place-based and regionally specific efforts to design and deliver systems change. WSAHW builds on evidence and emerging promising practice elsewhere but remains at the forefront of a relatively new and highly innovative type of programme.

A designated regional Whole Systems Approach (WSA) lead drives delivery in each HB region, guided by a 9-step process which covers set-up and buy-in; system definition and mapping; co-developing a system narrative; system engagement; setting priorities and goals; network analysis; action planning; mobilising and managing; and review. National leads in PHW provide oversight, support, and national systems change delivery, and collaborations with Welsh Government.

Delivery so far

Systems change generally takes many years to achieve so at this stage, the evaluation has focussed mainly on the *process* of the WSAHW, rather than outcomes.

WSA regional leads have reported considerable progress in laying the groundwork for the programme: building relationships and 'buy-in' and turning this into more formal commitment in the form of governance structures and plans.

All regions have identified priority 'sub-systems' as their focus for delivery, with a view to cycling back to additional sub-systems once actions have been planned, delivered and reviewed. The priority sub-systems vary by region but early years and access to healthy food are common themes.

WSA regional leads are now transitioning into delivering a range of actions and testing approaches that have largely resulted from the WSAHW programme. The actions vary in scope, scale, and visibility but examples are contributing to planning decisions around hot food takeaway regulations, and influencing policies around building healthy food habits in early years settings or around catering in local hospitals.

WSA leads are now developing more formalised action plans with commitment from wider stakeholders. A key area of activity has been achieving buy-in at the level of Public Service Boards (PSB) so that their Wellbeing Plans can help boost the momentum of the WSAHW.

Learning about implementation

The extent, fidelity, and pace of delivery of WSAHW vary across regions, shaped by local contexts, histories, capacities, challenges and opportunities. Furthermore, the drivers of healthy weight vary geographically, particularly along the lines of urban/rural divides and levels of deprivation.

WSA leads have adopted a range of strategies to engage system partners and embed the WSAHW in local practice. They have used tools suggested by the 9-step process and associated guidance but in some instances, have brought in other techniques, working flexibly and practically.

Delivery of the 9-step process is not linear and involves iterative and responsive actions, reflecting the adaptive nature of systems change. Some regional WSA leads have used the 9-step process as a 'roadmap' with room for flexibility, some as a toolbox with optional activities, and others as a broadbrush approach. There is now an opportunity to reflect on findings about implementation to ensure greater model fidelity in delivery and to amend programme guidance where needed to support this.

The role and experiences of key stakeholders

WSA leads have played a critical role in introducing and embedding systems theory and practice as set out in the WSAHW. They have worked to foster understanding and buy-in amongst local wider stakeholders and report apparent increased understanding of systems approaches and greater use of systems language in some regions. Several strategies have helped WSA leads achieve this, including: aligning to wider partners' agendas; delivering 'quick wins' to build

trust and maintain momentum; drawing on data, evidence and community input; and working with key strategic stakeholders who 'champion' the work.

Many regions have reported positive progress in securing buy-in from key stakeholders. However, this remains challenging in some regions and with some relevant stakeholders. As WSA leads move into action planning and delivery, broader commitment has become increasingly important to avoid the risk of limited collective ownership and delivery of the programme. Challenges exist where there are limited available levers to gain senior and strategic buy-in; competing priorities and capacity amongst wider partners; and their different understanding and expectations of systems change work.

WSA leads and local stakeholders involved in the work were nevertheless enthusiastic about the WSAHW and keen to celebrate and strengthen this innovative work. There was significant support for the programme's aims, underlying principles, links with national governance, and the mandate to discuss and tackle difficulties in the 'system' and how they impact healthy weight.

Tackling population-level unhealthy weight is notoriously challenging and complex, even more so considering the competing priorities and day-to-day responsibilities of wider stakeholders. The shift from more traditional ways of working to applying the principles of systems change was welcomed and supported by those involved, who recognised that this is not a straightforward process.

Key lessons and next steps

A range of lessons and reflections were shared by all stakeholders who were consulted as part of the evaluation and consolidated through sense-testing workshops. There was a recognition of the inherent tensions in generating systems change in a programme such as WSAHW, between:

- Short-term action and sustainable, meaningful change
- Influencing national policy and conducting local targeted initiatives
- Following a national process and allowing local flexibility
- Different ways of measuring 'successful' delivery
- Remaining true to a specific systems change model compared to being flexible and adaptable in practice.

Further to these dynamics, the organising principles of the healthy weight systems in the HB regions, do not yet fully align with the principles of a WSA, i.e. the non-linear path to success, and long timeframes needed to achieve and demonstrate impact. In practice, this provides lessons which will be valuable not only for WSAHW but also similar efforts elsewhere on aspects such as delivery guidance, branding, national-regional join-up, monitoring, and the role of broader systems theory.

Challenges encountered by the WSAHW in Wales are arguably par for the course in an internationally ground-breaking healthy weight programme designed to bring about systems change, not least because the path is – as per a systems approach – not fully predetermined or apparent. To navigate this journey, WSAHW is supported by a shared determination amongst regional and national leads, and it will continue to be important to foster and embed continuous improvement through ongoing learning and development. The bigger challenge is for Wales to remain resolute in its commitment to this programme of work amidst the uncertain, long-term nature of systems change.



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