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This guide is one in a series. It aims to provide an overview of the whole systems approach to weight management in Wales, and the steps to be taken.

Work Plan reference: Obesity Prevention and Nutrition Work programme



Contents

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT	1
Overweight and Obesity in Wales	1
A WHOLE SYSTEMS APPROACH	5
A Whole Systems Approach to a Healthy Weight in Wales.....	5
Roles and Responsibilities	6
KEY STEPS	9
Step 1: Set up and Buy-in	10
Step 2: System Definition and Mapping	10
Step 3: Creating a System Change Narrative	11
Step 4: System Engagement	11
Step 5: Priorities and Goals.....	11
Step 6: Network Analysis	12
Step 7: Action Planning	12
Step 8: Mobilise and Manage	13
Step 9: Review	13
LONG TERM APPROACH	14



Background and context

The Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales Whole Systems Approach (HWHW WSA) programme is funded by Welsh Government to 'enable delivery of a national programme for Healthy Weight System Based Approaches'. This includes the establishment of a national team within Public Health Wales to provide oversight and develop evidenced based approaches, and work with local health boards to develop local teams.

Grant funding of £1.2m was initially awarded by Welsh Government for a period of one year from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. Grant funding was extended in September 2021 for a further £1.2 per annum in 2022-23 and 2023-24 in support of the Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales strategy and delivery plan for 2022-24.

The HWHW WSA Programme is a collaborative programme between Public Health Wales, the Directors of Public Health Leadership Group and Welsh Government.

This guide is one in a series. It has been developed along with supporting resources and tools, to help Local Public Health Teams and the Directors of Public Health and system partners in taking forward a Whole System Approach (WSA) to Healthy Weight. It aims to provide an overview of the whole systems approach (WSA) to a healthy weight in Wales and the steps to be taken.

Overweight and Obesity in Wales

Currently in Wales more than half of the adult population experience overweight or obesity, being overweight is now normal. There are already signs that unless we can change this, the situation will get much worse as 26.9% of children already experience overweight or obesity by the time they start school. In the 1970s this would have been more like 1 – 2%. We know that even in childhood obesity is hard to reverse and that our likelihood of experiencing overweight or obesity increases as we get older.

Overweight and Obesity is rapidly becoming the leading cause of years lived in poor health, with disability or early death. Developing overweight and obesity increases our

risk of a number of diseases including diabetes, heart disease, cancer and stroke and it can worsen the impact of other conditions such as arthritis. The COVID-19 pandemic also brought into focus the potential risk from infectious disease with those who were obese being at greater risk of poorer outcomes.

While overweight is common across all social groups in society, being obese is much more likely for those who live with multiple disadvantage and those in certain ethnic groups who are more likely to experience poor health as a result of their weight.

The rise in levels of overweight and obesity is complex and is the result of a number of rapid changes in our lives and lifestyles over the 20th century. We are less likely to work in manual jobs; we travel by car and have a number of labour-saving devices that mean we use less energy than before. At the same time, we have seen a massive expansion in food technology which has prioritised lower cost mass produced food which is energy dense containing lots of sugar and salt. We grow and prepare far less of our meals at home and busy lives have meant that we often choose quick meals that are ready prepared or cooked by others.

The complexity of the problem means that there are no simple solutions and no one agency or organisation can solve it alone. In addition, there has been growing recognition that there are complex inter-relationships between different aspects in a system that is constantly adapting and changing. Action taken by one part of the system can have an unintended consequence on other parts. The role and influence of the commercial determinants of health has never been greater and often has a global dimension.

Map 0
Full Generic Map

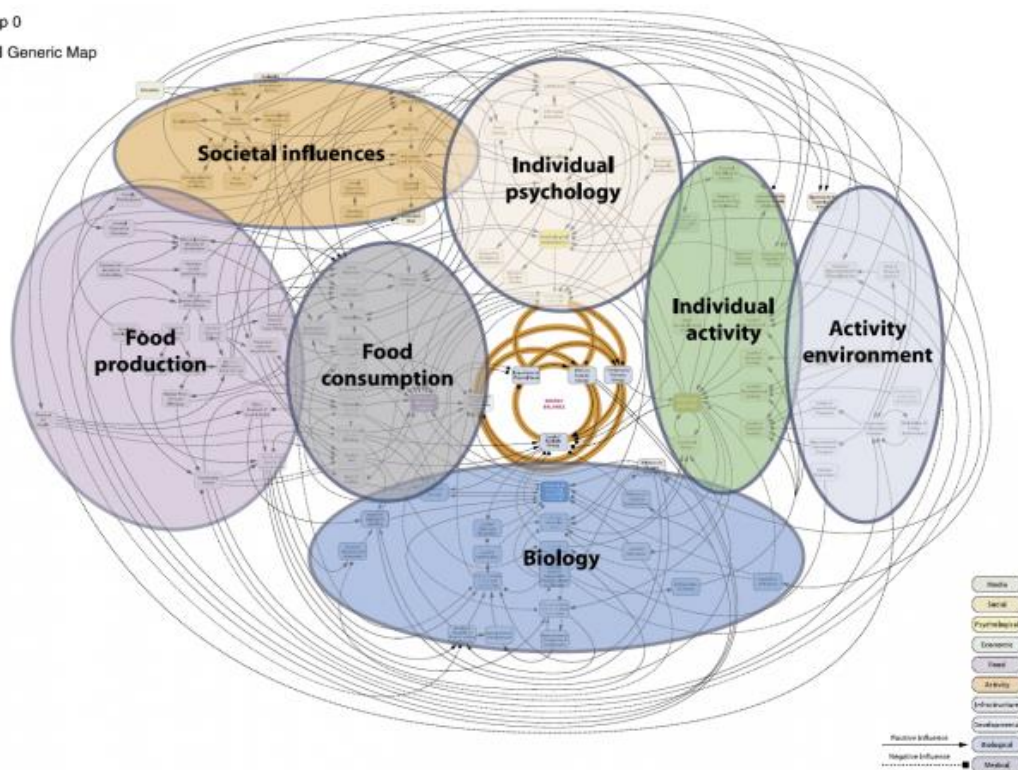


Figure 1: Foresight Obesity Systems Map¹

The Foresight Report Tackling Obesity's Future Choices (Figure 1) drew attention globally to the need to take a whole systems approach to the problem of unhealthy weight. The obesity systems map produced by that work shows how the obesity system is made up of a series of interconnected 'sub-systems' including: societal and cultural influences; food production; food consumption; biological factors; individual psychology; individual activity and environmental factors. Influencing change requires an understanding of this complex system.

In 2019, the Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales Strategy was launched to prevent and reduce obesity in Wales. This long-term strategy has a core focus of leadership and

¹ Tackling obesity: future choices—project report. 2007, The Stationery Office, London

http://www.foresight.gov.uk/Obesity/obesity_final/Index.html

enabling change through a systems-based approach that focuses on local leadership, collaboration and involvement and enabling local action.

As obesity is complex with no single solution it is important that we address this collectively, embedded across the system. A WSA presents an opportunity to work with communities and partners at a local level to tackle and prevent the causes of obesity, complimenting work being undertaken nationally.

A Whole Systems Approach

A WSA has been defined as 'those that consider the multi-factorial drivers of overweight and obesity, involve transformative co-ordinated action across a broad range of disciplines and stakeholders, operating across all levels of governance and throughout the life course.'²

A Whole Systems Approach to a Healthy Weight in Wales

The Whole System Approach to a Healthy Weight in Wales takes a long-term view. It recognises complexity and works with a range of stakeholders, including local communities, to both better understand the system and the opportunities for change. The process explicitly aims to reveal the structures and goals within a given system.

Working together, local areas are working to agree their priorities for change and developing the work so that each partner in the process understands how they can contribute to that change through a shared vision and approach. The collection and collation of information and data is being developed to enable stakeholders to understand whether the actions being taken are having the intended effect and ensure that the system receives regular and timely feedback. The work is supported through a programme of national communication, using the latest behavioural science methods to reach all parts of the system including the public who have their part to play.

Figure 2 illustrates the core components of the system in Wales if we work in this way.

² Bagnall A, Radley D, Jones R, Gately P, Nobles J, Van Dijk M, Blackshaw J, Montel S and Sahota P (2019), Whole systems approaches to obesity and other complex public health challenges: a systematic review. *BMC Public Health*, 19:8

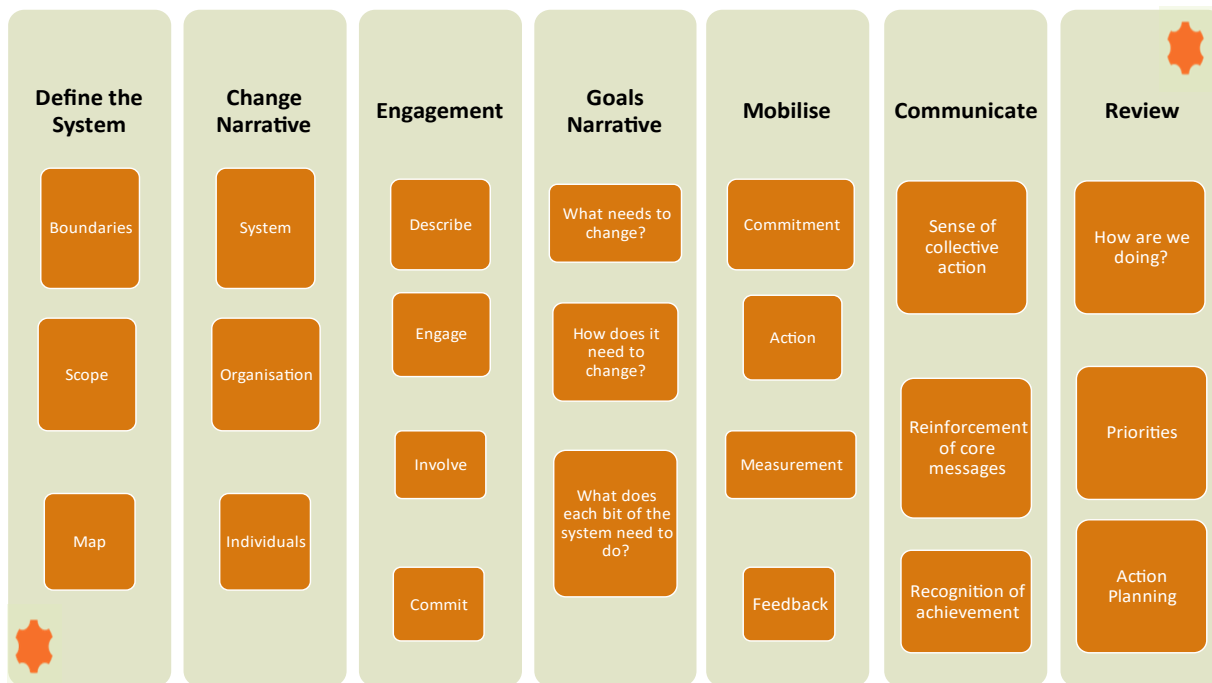


Figure 2: Core components to a whole system approach.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Healthy Weight Healthy Wales Strategy from Welsh Government (2019) outlined the planned delivery of this approach, and this is supported by Directors of Public Health across Wales. Consequently, work is happening at a national level, at health board regional level and at local community level so that actions are being targeted where they can make the greatest difference using the different levers for change that exist at each level.

Public Health Wales Health Improvement Division is providing expert public health leadership to support all levels of the system by making available the best international evidence of what works; facilitating the sharing of learning across the system and working to embed a culture of research, innovation, and evaluation. Public Health Wales is also leading on national communication and behaviour change programmes.

Directors of Public Health and the health board public health systems leads are providing expert public health leadership within their region, maximising their local relationships and partnerships and their links with their local communities to

implement and drive change. The approach recognises the importance of building on local assets and opportunities and strengthening cross-sector alliances.

Although systems working has similarities with effective partnership working, it is set apart by the application of complex systems thinking, methods and practice to both understanding the problem and to support identification and testing of actions to address it.

When moving from a traditional working model to systems working there are a number of ways of working that will become more prominent. These include:

- Strong leadership across the system through actively engaged partners, rather than a single main driving force.
- Consistent language used across the key organisation involved to promote a unified approach.
- A shared understanding of the local context and what will work in this context.
- Meaningful engagement with local communities who experience the system to understand their viewpoint.
- Recognition that outcomes are influenced by a complex and adaptive system of interacting components.
- Robust governance structures and shared values.
- Continued learning, reflection, and refinement for ongoing improvement.
- Initiatives embedded within the broader policy.

These ways of working are strong foundations for an effective whole systems approach. There is ongoing work to embed these ways of working, recognising that creating this system will take time. This approach is important to build relationships, trust, and community and organisational capacity.

Our whole system approach to a healthy weight has Wales as the primary system; within that we have regional and local systems, and we have sector-based systems such as the food system which can be defined on a Wales wide or regional or local basis.

Work is progressing in all 7 Health Boards in Wales. As this work develops the understanding of local system components is and will become clearer. Each step of the

Whole Systems Approach will need to be revisited and this process will not be a linear one. Mapping the system is not something that is done once, nor will be the need to achieve 'buy-in' from stakeholders. Rather, these two steps need to be repeated as new potential stakeholders are identified and further information is forthcoming.

Key Steps

Drawing on learning from the international literature and from approaches elsewhere in the UK we have identified an initial nine step approach (Figure 3) within a cycle of ongoing review and adaptation.

As part of this process a series of guides have been developed. In addition, how to guides have been produced to support the use of system tools for the different stages of this process.



Figure 3. Nine Step Approach to Whole System Working in Wales

Step 1: Set up and Buy-in

The initial step is to set up and establish the programme and its governance and ensure that key stakeholders are engaged to support the programme.

At a local level decision need to be made about the basic governance of the local project. For example, identifying whether a local strategic partnership such as the Public Service Board or the Regional Partnership Board will take responsibility and ownership of the work. Gaining that initial commitment and raising awareness with key local strategic partners is important. This stage is then revisited periodically to maintain engagement and ensure that this awareness and commitment continues.

Understanding how the team works and will work and the wider network of programmes and activity already in place within the local area is also important.

Engagement with potential stakeholders and the development of relationships is a very important part of the process of developing robust systems working. A whole system approach is not going to work if the key local statutory agencies are not on board and supportive.

Step 2: System Definition and Mapping

This step focuses on defining and understanding the local system. For this step, it is important to start by identifying which partnerships and organisations to engage with, who within these partnerships and organisations to engage with, and to identify the system agents and assets which will help you to achieve healthy weight goals. This step includes gathering information about the key organisations, partnerships, plans and activities that are currently happening, or planned to start shortly, around the healthy weight agenda in your area. This information helps to inform decisions around the boundaries of the system that you wish to focus on. It also forms a baseline from which to measure change in the system. This step should be revisited as the work develops. This will include further defining the subsystem areas of focus when these are identified. A Guide to System Definition and Mapping has already been produced.

Step 3: Creating a System Change Narrative

A coherent understanding of the scale of the problem in the local system is an important resource when working to draw stakeholders in. An initial narrative helps to build consistent messaging and a common language for change across the local system. Local narrative should follow through from the national narrative flowing from the Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales Strategy.

The Creation of a set of common tools and resources that can be used across the system helps to embed and communicate a consistent set of messages and the whole systems approach. This step will be revisited to develop the narrative over time and also shape the narrative for the priority subsystem.

Step 4: System Engagement

This step brings key stakeholders together identified through the initial strategic system mapping. The purpose of this engagement is to formally signal a start to the work; develop a shared understanding of the task and work collectively to agree initial priorities for action. This step may involve a number of events, a range of activities and the use of systems tools to engage stakeholders. This step will also be revisited to engage more stakeholders as the systems work and subsystem priority area work develops to bring together partners for the selected priority areas.

Step 5: Priorities and Goals

The local system needs to agree initial priority sub-systems for focus. Whole system working for healthy weight is potentially vast. Learning from elsewhere is that resources are rarely available to mobilise and maintain action across the whole system at once to achieve change. Each area should therefore agree one or more areas for action based on where collectively the partners feel there is the most potential for change and the greatest alignment with other strategic priorities. Tools that may support partners with this process include causal mapping to help identify and focus on key areas.

Once the priority area for work has been agreed, work can begin to 'zoom in' on that priority to gather and undertake more detailed systems and asset mapping. This helps to identify the key partnerships, organisations and plans at a more detailed level that are part of the sub-system and specifically what they are currently doing or planning to do.

Step 6: Network Analysis

Once the different factors and the connections have been mapped, stakeholders can begin to better understand the system. How do the key 'agents' or 'assets' inter-relate or connect to one another? Are there key providers which are isolated from the rest of the system suggesting perhaps that the full potential of that asset is not realised? Are there clear silos where people are working within rather than across sectors or organisations? Are there clear hubs or nodes through which much of the communication and inter-relationships flow?

Network analysis can be conducted to determine the extent to which organisations, partners and agencies share information, knowledge and resource, and the extent to which they engage in joint planning and delivery, including funding. Levers for change can be identified around these nodes of influence and partnership arrangements that currently exist or could be developed. Revisiting this step can then demonstrate how and where the system has changed and opportunities to develop relationships and ways of working.

Step 7: Action Planning

The purpose of this stage is to develop a plan of action with stakeholders. At this point in the process there should be a clear understanding of what is currently taking place, how the system works together and where there are gaps. Action planning should be supported by (a) an understanding of the evidence base for different interventions so that your system is having the greatest impact, and (b) clear engagement with the community of stakeholders within whatever system you have prioritised.

This should help to identify a plan of action focused on:

- Growing the system.
- Increasing connectivity.
- Increasing capacity and reach.

It is important to document the situation prior to acting, so that the intended and unintended consequences can be identified and noted, and the impact on the wider system acknowledged once the actions have been taken forward.

Step 8: Mobilise and Manage

This stage is all about the stakeholders taking forward the action plan. Securing commitment from the system to act; agreeing what each element of the system will contribute; establishing how you will measure change in the system and providing feedback regularly to maintain motivation.

An effective communication plan within the system will be essential for this stage.

Step 9: Review

Effective system working and large-scale change needs a robust system of measurement. The system needs to know whether what it is trying to achieve is being successful, each system will need a set of system change indicators which will help to track progress and these need to be fed back to the system.

Periodically the system needs to come together to review progress. Identify where change is needed and plan for the next phase of action.

Long Term Approach

After the initial sub-system working has been embedded, the overarching system will need to come together to agree the next priority and agree a maintenance approach for the original priority so that momentum is not lost. The process will then repeat, focusing on the next agreed priority system.



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