

Tackling Childhood Obesity in Southampton Scrutiny Inquiry – Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

- In Southampton there are estimated to be between 13,000 and 13,700 children aged between 2 to 17 years old who are overweight or obese. Over half of these children are estimated to be obese.
- The rate of childhood obesity increases from Year R to Year 6 and rates in Southampton are higher in Year 6 than other comparable areas in the UK.
- Trends within the city from Year R to Year 6 are not consistent, suggesting there are environmental changes occurring differentially in the city that need to be further explored.
- Rates of overweight increase with levels of deprivation, and over time the rates have increased more in deprived areas than in better off areas.
- Children who are overweight or obese are more likely to experience a range of health problems in childhood. Children with obesity are also significantly more likely to be obese as adults. This is associated with a wide range of health conditions that can limit life expectancy and quality of life as well as increasing demands on the NHS.
- Whilst body weight is a direct consequence of energy balance - calories in versus calories used, this over simplifies the complex interplay between genes, human psychology and behaviour, circumstances and the environments in which people live, all of which can affect body weight.
- Evidence presented to the Panel identified the role played by diet, physical activity, sleep/stress and the wider socio-ecological environment toxicants. In particular, the role of the environment, and how it shapes eating and physical activity behaviours, has been identified as fundamental to the increase in levels of obesity we see today.
- Nationally and locally there exists the ambition to reduce levels of childhood obesity. Progress, however, has been limited and uneven, such that the worst off in the city have fallen further behind. We need to focus our efforts on reducing these inequalities for children now and adults in the future.
- In Southampton progress has been made to encourage people to be more active, in particular through sustainable travel initiatives. The City Vision local plan, due for adoption in 2022, presents a genuine opportunity to ensure that the facilitation of a healthy city is a priority in Southampton's development.
- Initiatives across the settings where Southampton's children go to live, learn and grow are helping to create a health promoting culture, championing healthy food choices and active lifestyles. However, these initiatives, many of which are unique to Southampton, have not been able to reach a critical mass to impact on the scale of the childhood obesity problem that exists in Southampton.

- Limited attention has been paid to improving the food environment in Southampton. Local authorities have the power to help shape the food environment and the Panel have been made aware of approaches pioneered by other UK cities that make it easier for residents to make healthy food choices. Southampton can learn from these approaches.
- Improving the above issues will make a difference in reducing levels of childhood obesity in Southampton. However, because obesity is complex with many different, but often interlinked causes, tackling childhood obesity cannot be achieved through single sector measures or themes, or short-term plans. It requires a long-term commitment and a willingness to work flexibly across council functions, and with partners, including the Government.
- Southampton needs to make tackling childhood obesity everybody's business and to commit key partners in the city to develop and implement policies which promote healthy weight across the life course, as well as mitigate the effect of existing policies which do not support healthy weight. If this is achieved it is realistic to expect levels of childhood obesity in Southampton to reduce, and with it a number of the poor health outcomes and inequalities associated with it.

Recommendations

Reflecting the key findings and conclusions the following actions are recommended to help tackle childhood obesity in Southampton:

Place / Environment – *Develop a healthy weight environment where healthy choices are the easy choices for children, young people and families.*

Planning for a healthier future

1. **City Vision Local Plan** – Incorporate guidance published by Public Health England - '[Using the planning system to promote healthy weight environments](#)' in the developing City Vision to ensure that the facilitation of a healthy city is a priority in the city's development.

Improve the food environment

2. **Improve our knowledge and understanding of the food environment in the city** – To develop policies that meet the requirements of local communities we first need to understand the food environment within the communities. Tools such as the Food Environment Assessment Tool (FEAT) can be utilised to map, measure and monitor access to food outlets at a neighbourhood level to help develop, alongside obesity mapping and community engagement, our understanding of the variations in childhood obesity levels across the city.
3. **Restrict the growth in hot food takeaways** – Include within the developing City Vision a policy that helps to manage the increase in exposure to takeaways in Southampton. Following consultation with the Chair of the Planning and Rights of Way Panel, the city should learn from other local authorities and adopt planning regulations that restrict the exposure of

children to unhealthy snacks, beverages and hot food takeaways in and around schools and on routes to and from schools.

4. **Southampton Eating Better Awards** – Develop a free award scheme that supports and rewards businesses in Southampton that act to offer healthier food options and promote sustainability.
5. **Seek to become a Sustainable Food Place** - Sustainable Food Places is a partnership programme led by the Soil Association, Food Matters and Sustain. The initiative has been influential in cities such as Leeds and Bristol and would help to embed improving the food environment within wider strategic priorities such as the Green City Charter and addressing food poverty. This offer should be flexible, based on the needs of at-risk communities. This could include support with budgeting, cooking classes, helping people to access to cheap healthy food e.g. through the community food pantry, or fruit and veg voucher schemes.

Improve the active environment

6. **Community Hubs** – Leisure facilities and green spaces are key assets in the drive to increase levels of physical activity in the city. As demonstrated by Testlands, opportunities exist to increase participation in physical activity by encouraging leisure facilities in the city to become community hubs, developing stronger links with local schools and communities and effective utilisation of the PE and Sport Premium funding. Developing this further the council could consider future procurement of SCC leisure services to include wider aims related to physical activity levels and childhood obesity levels in the city.

Settings - Support early years providers, schools and colleges to champion healthy food choices and active ways of living

7. **Scale up initiatives so that they reach a critical mass** – Initiatives such as the Southampton Healthy Early Years Award; Southampton Healthy High 5 Award; Young Health Champions and the Lifelab programme are excellent schemes making a genuine difference to the lives of children and families in Southampton. If all children in the city benefitted from these initiatives it could help to transform the culture and attitudes towards food and activity in the city (See recommendations 9 and 15 with regards to targeting initiatives and evaluating effectiveness).
8. **Support Southampton schools to make healthy choices easier** - The prevalence of obesity doubles in the seven years between starting and leaving primary school. The council, and partners, can do more to support schools to adopt practices that promote healthy choices. These include:
 - **Engage in conversation with schools about extending the length of lunch time** to enable children to sit down and have lunch whilst also allowing time for physical activity.
 - **Develop a packed lunch toolkit for schools** which helps them to develop their own nutritional guidance to support parents and carers make healthy choices for their children.

- **Adopt a Good Food and Catering Procurement Policy**, akin to Bristol City Council, where good food standards are applied to all contracts and concessions where the council has influence over the food offer.
9. **Target deprived communities when promoting health initiatives within settings** - Direct resources to increasing participation from settings within deprived communities, proportionate to level of need, to avoid inadvertently increasing health inequalities.
 10. **Analyse the uptake of free school meals** – Feedback provided identified that the take up of free school meals in Southampton is declining. This is concerning as for many children school offers the best opportunity for a nutritious meal. Analysis should be undertaken on the take-up of free school meals and this should inform targeted approaches to encourage increased uptake for eligible children.
 11. **Measure BMI at Year 3 for Southampton school children** – Currently the National Child Measurement Programme, delivered in Southampton by Solent NHS Trusts 0-19 service, measures BMI at Year R and Year 6. As the prevalence of obesity doubles in the seven years between starting and leaving primary school, practitioners have recommended measuring BMI at Year 3 as well to support targeted intervention.
 12. **Learn lessons from the HENRY programme** – Ensure that learning from Leeds City Council's utilisation of the HENRY programme is built into the parenting programme delivered in Southampton by Solent NHS Trust.

Strategic ambition and vision – Long-term thinking and a system wide approach

13. **Commit to the Whole Systems Approach to obesity** - Implementing the previous recommendations will result in fewer overweight and obese children in Southampton. To deliver systemic change requires embedding a whole systems approach to healthy weight across the city. Tailoring the approach published in the PHE guide, '*Whole systems approach to obesity - A guide to support local approaches to promoting a healthy weight*', to the needs of Southampton, encouraging stakeholders to engage, and recognising this is a problem that goes beyond public health, will help to make tackling childhood obesity everybody's business.
14. **Sign and commit to the Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight** – The Healthy Weight Declaration provides the strategic vision and aspiration that can underpin the whole systems approach to obesity. It would represent a positive long-term commitment that the city is going to change the food and active environment and could provide a focus for different departments across the council to unite behind.
15. **Develop/clarify governance arrangements to oversee development in tackling childhood obesity in Southampton** – A coherent approach to co-ordinating action and measuring outcomes needs to be in place to ensure that progress is being made, and all relevant city council functions are contributing to the objectives. The approach should explore opportunities for leadership from, and co-production with, children and young people.

- 16. Develop the evidence base** – Engage with academia to encourage research to be undertaken into the effectiveness of initiatives to tackle childhood obesity in Southampton. Findings can then be used to focus resources on effective practice.