

Phase 1 of a whole systems approach to obesity

Background

In Suffolk, childhood obesity is a growing concern with National Childhood Measurement Programme data indicating that rates are continuing to rise.

Suffolk County Council decided that addressing this was a priority but recognised there was only so much progress they could make with just public health interventions. Therefore, they implemented the whole systems approach to obesity programme, with the aim of involving a range of teams and organisations in their local area that have a role to play in tackling childhood obesity and its knock-on effects.

Phase 1 of the 6-phase whole systems approach to obesity entails:

- engaging with senior leaders to obtain their support
- setting up a core working team to undertake the day-to-day operations and coordinate the approach
- establishing resources to support the process
- securing the accountability, advice and support of a group of senior stakeholders offering a broad range of expertise to ensure the approach has sufficient challenge, governance and resource

What was involved

The first step taken by Suffolk County Council's Public Health Team was approaching politicians and senior leaders from across the system to help release the resources required for this work to be prioritised. This was important in enabling staff to support the approach as part of their day-to-day work and embedding it into their objectives.

After support was secured, a series of events were held with stakeholders committed to reducing childhood obesity, including:

- Health and Wellbeing Board
- NHS and clinical commissioning groups (CCG)
- voluntary and community sector organisations
- district and borough councils
- local businesses
- education and schools
- children and young people's services

As the whole systems approach involves people outside of the public health field, this phase was also crucial in establishing the same level of understanding about childhood obesity.

To help achieve this, the council created a campaign addressing any stigma

and stereotypes about obesity, as well as presentations to the Health and Wellbeing Board, the Suffolk County Council chief executive and directors, CCG leaders, hospitals and the voluntary sector.

This ensured that everyone had a basic knowledge about how the different areas of work linked together and the role they played in this.

The core working group started as a small group with representation from schools, healthy child services and sustainable transport. Over time, the group has grown and become more of a network, so the council are now reviewing membership and will set up a more developed network.

Working well

Initial engagement helped senior leaders understand the purpose and benefits of a whole systems approach, as well as the impact it could have locally and how their organisations played a role. Furthermore, holding face-to-face meetings with members from the Health and Wellbeing Board, building on the evidence and priorities, and providing briefings and regular updates was important for gaining their support.

Stakeholder events, presentations about the approach for senior leaders, and the campaign to address obesity-related stigma were all also beneficial in securing support and the required resources.

Feedback from partners indicated that some of the stakeholder events and workshops were too academic. Therefore, it is important that these events make it clear that there is a link between the whole systems approach to obesity and partners' day-to-day jobs and the communities they are working with. Making this connection clear in the first workshop is critical for securing support over the subsequent phases.

The good working relationships developed during this phase have also helped other projects. For example, the councils 'Eat Out Eat Well' award now includes a breastfeeding-friendly criterion because of new breastfeeding contacts made through the whole systems approach.

Next steps

Suffolk County Council will continue engaging partners and increasing momentum for the work, as well as adding national directives such as the NHS Long Term Plan and Childhood Obesity Plan into their planning.

The council are also aiming to secure resource that would allow someone to take this on as a full-time role, as this work is currently based on individual capacity. Having a dedicated person working on progressing this programme means that the work will not get deprioritised and that there is 1 specific person with constant commitment, capacity and enthusiasm who partners can liaise with.

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