

Taking a Whole System Approach to Food and Health

'Systems thinking is becoming a widely accepted approach within public health. Public Health England will soon publish a toolkit for a Whole Systems Approach to Obesity for local authorities across England. This participatory workshop explored SFC member experiences of engaging with health led whole systems approaches and asked: What opportunities and challenges are there for SFC partnerships, for whom public health is a key partner? How do we weigh up the need for specific programmes targeting obesity with those targeting the food system overall? How can SFC's existing approach best integrate with the emerging public health 'systems thinking'?

1. Introduction

The concept of Sustainable Food Cities (SFC) is based on working across the whole food system.

- Places often begin with a **'food summit'** type event involving stakeholders from across the food system e.g. waste, markets, producers, procurement, community initiatives, health, environment etc.
- A **multi-sector food partnership** is a requirement of membership of SFC.
- SFC encourages **broad stakeholder engagement** in developing a food strategy and action plan.
- **SFC Awards** recognise action across the whole food system in a place.

In parallel with this we have seen the emergence of the 'whole systems approach' within public health.

- **Foresight Report (2007)** highlighted the complexity of the causes of obesity. An obesity systems map was presented as a framework for tackling the issue.
- Recognition of the need for public health to move towards **'upstream'** approaches that tackle the root causes and for **joined up thinking** to tackle complex issues of obesity.
- **'System thinking'** is now a widely accepted approach within public health.
- 2019 Public Health England to publish **Whole System Approach to Obesity** – toolkit for local authorities.

2. Whole Systems Approaches and You

Workshop participants discussed the question

- **'What does a whole system approach mean to you?**

Participants were asked.

- What do you understand by 'whole system approach'?
- How important is whole system working to you?
- What was your starting point? A single issue? Or whole food system?
- How did that impact on your journey to date?
- What were the pros/ cons of taking this approach?

Feedback from participants included:

- Systems within systems – feeling that there were many layers to systems working.
- The need to understand relationships within the system
- The difficulty of engaging with the whole system, particularly when faced with limited resources.
- Each part of the food system needs a specific issue that feeds into the whole i.e. a way of making it relevant to others / a commonality.
- The need for accountability to the bigger picture and across time.
- The fit with 'place-based' approaches.
- The need to get into the hearts and minds of stakeholders so that they 'get it' = whole system success.
- Should we be focused on 'food and nutrition' rather than 'obesity'.

3. Whole System Obesity

- **Margie van Dijk** from the Diet, Obesity and Physical Activity Division, Public Health England gave a presentation on the Whole System Obesity Pilot and the forthcoming toolkit for local authorities across England.

4. Inspiration and Sharing Experiences

- **Gwenda Scott** – Public Health Strategist, Lewisham Council gave a presentation outlining their experiences of delivering the Whole System Approach to obesity and the links between the Lewisham Obesity Alliance and the Good Food Lewisham.
- **Liz Harris** – Population Health Programme Manager / Chair Tameside Food Partnership presented her thoughts on the whole systems work needed to tackle food and health.

5. Headlines and Key Learning

Participants had a few minutes at the end of the workshop to share thoughts on the key headlines that had come out of the session.

These included:

- The need for whole systems approaches to focus on 'food and health' rather than obesity.
- The importance of the connection with economy – (it is currently harder to make money selling vegetables than it is selling fizzy drinks, sweets and Crips).
- The need to align actions across the system.
- Need to celebrate outcomes.
- The importance of the framing of the conversation – framing institute about to publish work on obesity.
- The need to be able to simply explain whole systems approaches
- 'We can't commission our way out of obesity'.
- The usefulness of the Healthy Weight Declaration as a tool for engagement