

OPTIMISING A WHOLE SYSTEMS APPROACH

Co-produced Key Tips for Policy Makers and Practitioners

Obesity affects people of all ages and backgrounds but also exacerbates health disparities. Taking a Whole Systems Approach (WSA) to address influences on diet and healthy weight has been identified as having potential in tackling the complex issue of obesity.

What is a Whole Systems Approach?

A WSA can be described as a range of comprehensive initiatives targeted at change across the system by influencing government, policy decision makers, individuals, groups and community-level factors [1].

What is the aim of this briefing?

The key tips for optimising a Whole Systems Approach in this briefing have been taken from a recent systematic review of reviews [2] of the evidence and a longitudinal research evaluation conducted in East Scotland [3]. The aim of this research briefing is to provide practitioners and policy makers with some top tips ahead of setting up a whole systems approach. We also highlight additional resources that would support the implementation of whole systems approaches for diet and healthy weight.

Tip 1: Select a Whole System Implementation Approach or Model

There are already a number of approaches and models to implement whole systems change. Select a WSA implementation model and follow the model as closely as you can (e.g. Leeds Beckett methodology). As each system is different the model may also need to be flexible.

Tip 2: Consult the evidence

Consult evidence of previous practice and what works– click here to see our Review of Reviews paper [2] and here for a [summary briefing for policy makers and practitioners](#).

Tip 3: Establish the system and steering group to oversee implementation

Establish the boundaries for the system to include the geographical area, what part of the system will be impacted, invite key stakeholders to be involved and keep them informed of decisions and implementation plans.



Tip 4: Make a plan

Develop a Logic model outlining how you intend to meet your objectives, and a realistic timeline for implementation acknowledging the length of the process.

Tip 5: Be flexible

Each system is different, allow for flexibility in the set-up of the system, mapping the system, development of an action plan. It's important that flexibility is included to allow for integrating the plan with existing policy and practice.

Tip 6: Building capacity: make time for staff training and reflective practice

Train staff and allow for internal discussions and reflections to develop a supportive community of practice and a shared understanding of the Whole System Approach. Plan ahead for different occurrences, such as new staff requiring training and staff moving to other roles. A skill deficit can potentially slow progress - introduce structured training or mentoring.

Tip 7: Review the stakeholder list

It is important that all key stakeholders are involved. Conduct stakeholder mapping early on, and be prepared to revisit this list and update it.

Tip 8: Seek and maintain buy-in from stakeholders

Seek and maintain buy-in and commitment from stakeholders, including senior leadership. This is important to motivate staff and provide strategic direction.

Tip 9: Financial investment

Appropriate financial investment is important- consider long term financial planning.

Tip 10: Build on existing work

Build on good practice and be prepared to evolve the current system.



Tip 11: Keep leadership in mind

Having someone to coordinate and lead the steering groups is important, ensure it is part of someone's role.

Tip 12: Systems change is possible

Drive an ethos of 'real change' - it is possible.

Tip 13: Evaluate

Integrate an evaluation and impact plan. Have a flexible approach to both process and outcome evaluations. Consider the availability and integration of population data that could assess long term change.

**VIEW OUR PREVIOUS WORK**

[Article - Evaluation of a Whole System Approach to Diet and Healthy Weight in the East of Scotland: Study Protocol](#)

[Article - Whole Systems Approach to Diet and Healthy Weight - A longitudinal Process Evaluation in East Scotland](#)

[Article - Whole Systems Approaches to Diet and Healthy Weight: A Scoping Review of Reviews](#)

[Briefing - Enablers and Barriers to a Whole Systems Approach to Diet and Healthy Weight - Findings Briefing for Practitioners and Policy Makers](#)

[Briefing - Findings from an International Review of Whole Systems Approaches to Diet and Healthy Weight - Briefing for Practitioners and Policy Makers](#)

[To keep up-to-date with our evaluation, please visit www.phirst.nihr.ac.uk/evaluations/whole-systems-approach-to-diet-and-healthy-weight-community-pilots-project-scotland/](http://www.phirst.nihr.ac.uk/evaluations/whole-systems-approach-to-diet-and-healthy-weight-community-pilots-project-scotland/)



References:

- [1] Public Health England. Whole systems approach to obesity: A guide to support local approaches to promoting a healthy weight. 2019. [Available here](#)
- [2] Breslin, G., Fakoya, O., Wills, W., Lloyd, N., Bontoft, C., Wellings, A., Harding, S., Jackson, J., Barrett, K., Wagner, A., Miners, L., Greco, H-A. & Brown, K., (2023). Whole Systems Approaches to Diet and Healthy Weight: A Scoping Review of Reviews. Accepted In: PLoS ONE
- [3] Breslin, G., Wills, W., Bontoft, C., Fakoya, O., Greco, H., Lloyd, N., Wagner, A., Wellings, A., Harding, S. & Brown, K. E. (2023). Whole Systems Approach to Diet and Healthy Weight - A longitudinal Process Evaluation in East Scotland. Perspectives in Public Health. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17579139231203858>

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