

Planning and Obesity: Sharing research, policy and practice work in partnership

Virtual symposium with Public Health England and collaborators



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On the 10 May 2021, Public Health England (PHE) held a virtual symposium in collaboration with Fuse, academic institutions, local authorities and stakeholder organisations to bring together key research and initiatives relating to Town Planning and Obesity in which PHE is actively involved.

The symposium showcased the following research and initiatives:

Census of local planning approaches to managing hot food takeaways

Researchers from the Centre for Diet and Activity Research, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and Fuse: The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, collaborated to complete a national census of local authority actions to prevent further proliferation of hot-food takeaway outlets through urban-planning. Across 325 local authorities in England, around half had adopted a planning policy or planning guidance that aimed to prevent new hot-food takeaway outlets from opening. Of these, around one-third were health-based, and the use of exclusion zones around schools was common.

Researchers: Matt Keeble, Dr Tom Burgoine

For more information visit the [NIHR School for Public Health Research website](#).

Online food delivery service research

Online food ordering and delivery services have the potential to reshape traditional food retail and the purchase of food prepared away-from-home. Using data from an online survey completed in Australia, Canada, Mexico, the UK and the USA, researchers from the Centre for Diet and Activity Research identified that around one in six adults had used an online food delivery service in the past week. Adults in the UK that used these services were typically younger, female, or living with children, and these services were used by adults with various levels of education.

Researcher: Matt Keeble

Understanding what helps and hinders the implementation of regulation to restrict hot food takeaway outlets

Exploring and examining the Planning Inspectorate's decision-making in relation to hot food takeaways. This was achieved by selecting 8 geographically dispersed cases from across England, with interviews with planning and public health professionals, assigned inspectors and business owners. This evidence is hoped to provide those involved in the planning process with a better understanding of the Planning Inspectorate's decision-making process and how this can be used to support and appeal cases.

Researchers: Prof Amelia Lake, Prof Tim Townshend, Dr Helen Moore, Dr Claire O'Malley, Dr Peter Van Der Graaf, Dr Nick Gray, Dr Suzanne Spence, Dr Vera Araujo Soares, Dr Jean Adams, Dr Thomas Burgoine, Dr Angeliki Papadaki, Prof Karen Lock

For more information visit the [NIHR School for Public Health Research website](#).

Planning, hot food takeaways & COVID-19: perceptions of the impact of regulations on access to healthy food environments

Exploring the policy, practice and health implications of government temporary planning regulations to allow food retail, such as pubs and restaurants, to be open for takeaway services due to the pandemic. Conducted with key professional groups within the context of Public Health England's recently updated childhood obesity plans, where the environment and its impact on health has been recognised as complex and multi-faceted.

Researchers: Prof Amelia Lake, Dr Helen Moore, Dr Claire O'Malley, Prof Tim Townshend, Dr Nick Gray, Mr Callum Bradford

Eating out in the North of England: consumer behaviours and experiences coming out of lockdown

Behaviours and experiences of adults living in the North of England around accessing and consuming hot foods prepared outside the home before and during the pandemic, including as restrictions are lifted. The data gleaned from this work help us to understand how changing access to foods prepared out of the home due to COVID-19 restrictions and changes to planning regulations influence consumer behaviour and experiences.

Researchers: Dr Mackenzie Fong, Dr Steph Scott, Dr Shelina Visram

Evaluation of the 'School Superzone' initiative

This project is looking at the effects of 'Superzones' created for healthier places for children and young people to live, learn and play, which have been introduced by 13 London Councils in selected areas around schools. Superzones are examples of local place-based public health initiatives, and place a 400 metre zone around a school to reduce harmful exposures, such as air pollution, and increase health-promoting ones, such as access to parks and safe spaces.

Researchers: Prof Karen Lock, Dr Dalya Marks, Jin Lim, Katie Hunter, Prof Steve Cummins, Prof Matt Egan, Dr Ruth Ponsford, Sophie Rowland, Claire Thompson

For more information visit the [NIHR School for Public Health Research website](#).

Pennine Lancashire Childhood Obesity Trailblazer

Healthier Place, Healthier Future (HPHF) in Pennine Lancashire (East Lancashire and Blackburn with Darwen) is one of five Childhood Obesity Trailblazer programmes funded by the Department of Health and Social Care and delivered by the Local Government Association. The project is designed to give local authorities the power and support to test existing levers within their control and to identify opportunities to support healthy weight and reduce levels of children living with obesity, including planning.

Researchers: Food Active and Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council

For more information visit the [Healthier Pennine Lancashire website](#).

Planning for Healthier Food Environments: Continuing Professional Development

In June 2020 a team from Newcastle and Teesside Universities were appointed by Public Health England (PHE) to develop a continuing professional training package to facilitate the implementation of PHE's guidance. Training materials were developed which will be hosted on an online learning platform and will include specific training for professionals from planning and public health.

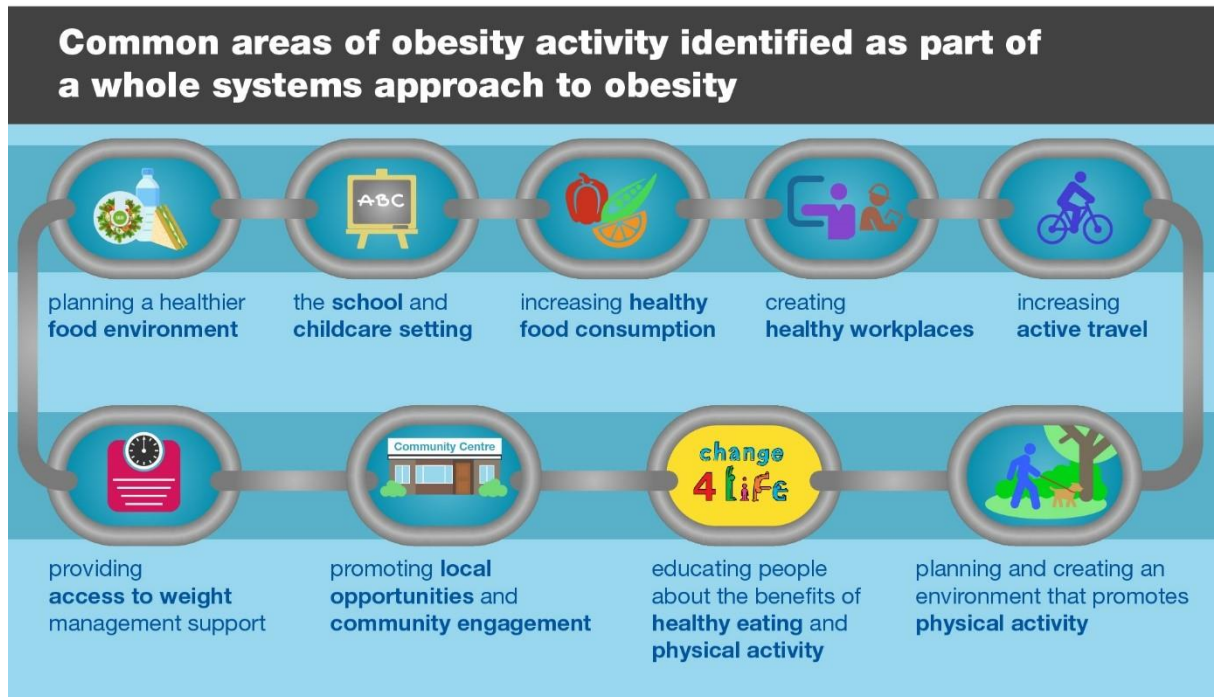
Researchers: Prof Tim Townshend, Prof Amelia Lake, Dr Helen Moore, Dr Claire O'Malley, Hannah Poulter, Michael O'Malley

Key findings:

- There is an increasingly joined up approach to research across institutions on how the planning system is being used to manage a healthier food retail environment from policy to decision-making stages.
- Managing the food environment is complex and there is need to consider a combination of influencing factors such as changing consumer behaviour, market trends, changing high street and retail businesses towards online delivery and unprecedented events such as COVID-19 lockdown restrictions and closing of hospitality. Research needs to reflect this complexity.
- Local authorities are taking a place-based approach using pilot initiatives such as the Pennine Trailblazers and London ‘Superzone’ examples, using the planning system as one of the levers to address the obesity issue. There are interesting and important lessons to share to other areas not involved in those initiatives.
- The development of planning training for practitioners will help to improve capability and greater understanding of the limitations and opportunities of the planning system. The availability of such training online as self-learning can improve accessibility.

Policy relevance and implications:

- Taking a whole systems approach to tackling obesity is an important framework to ensure the sum of the parts is greater than the whole, in terms of research impact and aligning with the interconnected nature of place and the environment.
- There is a need to assess the effectiveness of interventions throughout the life course of the planning process, from policy development to implementation through decision-making. Supporting researchers to collaborate or align research objectives across the planning process can ensure policy makers gain a better understanding of whether policy works.
- There remain challenges to evaluating the outcome of place-based initiatives given such outcomes are observed over a longer period of time, while process evaluations may still be useful in the short term.
- There is greater appreciation that while the planning system is only one driver among many, it plays a critical role in helping to manage the food environment and reduce obesity prevalence.



Further information:

Presentations from the Symposium can be accessed on the [PHE Healthy Places Knowledge Hub](#).

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