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- Focused on working with policy makers and practice partners
- A founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR)
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Fit 4 The Future: how community-led approaches can address childhood obesity

There are stark and increasing differences in obesity prevalence with children living in the most deprived areas twice as likely to be obese than those in the least deprived. Engaging communities experiencing high levels of disadvantage is essential if we are to make a difference.

Local Authorities, voluntary and community sector organisations and researchers recognise that they need to work together to tackle inequalities in health, such as childhood obesity.

Gateshead Council Public Health commissioned Pattinson House, a Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisation in a deprived ward in Gateshead to develop a childhood obesity prevention project. This was part of ongoing work with local residents to 'build happier, healthier, friendlier communities'. The project deliberately did not specify a pre-set intervention, but encouraged community members to develop their own plans. These included a project to engage primary schools, initiatives to increase levels and types of physical activity, and offering family cooking sessions.

A Fuse embedded researcher in Gateshead Council evaluated the project and spent time with community members, children and young people, volunteers, staff, parents and teachers who lived and worked in the area.

Building on the positive relationships already in place with staff, the research followed community members in planning and developing local activities to address childhood obesity and talked to people about their experiences.

Key Findings

- The research uncovered major structural, environmental, social and financial barriers to health and wellbeing. It raised concerns about traffic, community safety and the lack of safe spaces for children to play. The adverse effects of welfare reform and austerity increased poor health outcomes and limited people's choices.
- Community engagement and children's activities, alongside opportunities for people to volunteer, eat, socialise, have fun, get out, learn and play together improved health and wellbeing, social support, community cohesion, sense of belonging and partnership working.
- Social relationships developed through Pattinson House helped to reduce social isolation, promote mental health, improve community connectedness and increase physical activity.
- Skilled, non-judgemental and committed staff worked alongside dedicated community members and volunteers as enablers, advocates, facilitators and supporters. The approach they took together helped to engage people.
- Co-ordinated, trusting, respectful partnerships between local communities, VCS organisations and schools offer promising ways to promote community wellbeing, using an inclusive approach, to drive changes in the local environment. This included a successful campaign to reduce traffic outside primary schools.
- This responsive, collaborative approach led to: improved access to local leisure facilities; promotion of the Daily Mile in schools; young people's participation in the Harriers running club and a community carnival. Volunteers and apprentices worked together to cook a weekly, nutritious, affordable community lunch and a healthy pizza social enterprise was established with potential employment opportunities.

Policy relevance and implications

- Responding and being flexible to community priorities instead of implementing pre-determinant childhood obesity interventions is essential for engaging people in community-centred approaches.
- Sustainable, long-term funding for collaborative, targeted, place-based approaches such as Fit 4 The Future are needed to address inequalities in public health, such as obesity.
- These approaches take time to establish as they rely on building trusting relationships between local authorities, voluntary and community sector organisations and researchers.
- Engaging community members, including children and young adults, with personal experience of health inequality is important if we are to fully understand and address the stigma created by poverty and discrimination.
- Embedded research offers a nuanced understanding of the reality of people's lives. Through relationships of trust and connections between community members and those in positions of power, it can help to change attitudes and remove financial and attitudinal barriers to services.

“It’s not about telling people to eat better, stop smoking or get on the treadmill”

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

This study was undertaken from September 2016 to October 2017. The aims were to explore what community-led interventions were effective in addressing childhood obesity; how families could be engaged; what roles schools could play and to examine the wider lessons learned. We gratefully acknowledge funding from Gateshead Council for this research.

Cheetham M and Rushmer R (2017) Research findings from Fit 4 The Future: a place-based, community-led, transformative approach to improve wellbeing and address childhood obesity. Teesside University and Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health.

A case study about this approach is included in a report by Hamblin et al (2017:10) Working together to reduce childhood obesity; ideas and approaches involving the VCSE sector, education and local government, The National Children’s Bureau available from www.ncb.org.uk

FURTHER INFORMATION

Dr Mandy Cheetham
Fuse Research Associate, Teesside University
Email: m.cheetham@tees.ac.uk

Fuse is one of five UKCRC Public Health Research Centres of Excellence. It brings together public health researchers from across the five universities in North East England.

Website: fuse.ac.uk/research/briefs
Email: info@fuse.ac.uk
Telephone: 0191 222 729
Twitter: [@fuse_online](https://twitter.com/fuse_online)

