

Editorial

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Editorial

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Welcome to the November edition of Perspectives in Public Health, and as new deputy Editors for the journal, it is our pleasure to share with you a special issue on Obesity that brings together a collection of papers focused on our practice and research interest. Obesity is recognised to be a major public health concern. The World Health organization states the prevalence of Obesity across the world nearly tripled between 1975 and 2016 and has a marked gradient in line with inequality and deprivation. The environment and communities people live, work and raise children in are fundamental in shaping the factors driving the increasing levels of obesity. This is explained further in the article by our RSPH colleagues 'We can tackle obesity . . . but it has to be collectively', which summarises the current picture of obesity, impacts, costs and highlights the need for collective responsibility and collective action. The first step to achieve this collective responsibility is widespread acknowledgement that many of the problems we face in public health, including obesity, are complex and require us to approach these challenges in a new way.

In recent years, systems approaches have been recognised as a realistic and promising approach to addressing such complex public health challenges. Systems approaches can allow us to obtain a better understanding of the complexity of obesity and identify if and how actions we take contribute to reshaping the system in favourable ways. They require a paradigm shift in thinking, away from notions of simple cause and effect, to understanding that the way in which the many interconnected parts of the system interact determines the outcome(s) produced. In doing so, the focus of attention moves away from notions of siloed attribution to consideration of the contribution of multiple activities.

Promising as systems approaches may be, it is important to recognise that our understanding of how best to implement and evaluate them is still in their infancy. This special edition of Perspectives in Public Health moves us forward in this journey, bringing together papers highlighting how policy interfaces with systems thinking, with some ideas and suggestions of what does and could influence collective action to reduce levels of obesity. As a forerunner, collective action should start with having a 'shared understanding of the challenge' and Griffiths and colleagues propose a framework to bring together academic, policy, practice and community representatives to develop and to integrate action to bring about sustainable, long-term systems change.

Local government have a key role within the system, and as a result of the wide remit of local authorities including planning, environment, public health functions and transport, reducing the prevalence of obesity often falls at their door as the champion of systems change. An article by Taheem et al. explores if and how systems thinking is reflected in local authority plans to address levels of obesity. While finding an overreliance of downstream actions, the work also revealed some examples of upstream actions with the potential for high impact.

Regulatory methods are one example of systems work that can be championed by local authorities. Examples of this are well presented in papers by Bernhardt and O'Malley. Fran Bernhardt and colleagues highlight the potential cost savings of up to £218 million to the National Health Service (NHS) through targeted work with advertising policies which feature high fat, salt and/or sugar (HFSS) foods and drinks. Their paper identifies an increasing interest from local authorities across the UK in considering this preventive approach. While O'Malley focuses on the local and national regulatory mechanisms to restrict hot food takeaways. Both papers push for the need to focus on upstream or higher leverage point activity and highlight the value of having a coalition with a shared vision led by willing stakeholders.

Stakeholders within a systems approach to address obesity must also include the voices of people in communities. Yet the extent to which community representatives are included in discussions is rarely reflected. Nield's piece on empowering seldom heard communities as key stakeholders within the system firmly sets out the challenge and encourages co-production approaches by policy makers and service deliverers to avoid inadvertently ignoring the needs of those at high risk of obesity and perpetuating further health inequalities.

Finally, Bontoft and Gadsby offer us insight from the evaluation of systems approaches. Bontoft and colleagues consider the enablers and barriers in the early stages of setting up and implementing a whole systems approach to address diet and healthy weight in two council areas of Scotland. Correspondingly, the team led by Gadsby provide a unique, retrospective analysis of the complexities of evaluating multistrategy, community-based approaches to obesity prevention on behalf of a public sector commissioner, offering key learning points for others engaging in this type of complex, real-world programme evaluation.

We hope you enjoy reading the excellent papers presented in this special edition, which has allowed us to bring together our previous roles and experiences working within obesity policy in local government and commissioning and delivering weight management services, and celebrates the advances in real-world systems thinking.