

Whole System Approach to Healthy Weight

Public Health and Health Integration Scrutiny Commission

Date of meeting: 4/11/2025

Lead director/officer: Rob Howard

Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: All
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- Report version number: 1

1. Summary

Maintaining a healthy weight is important for overall health and wellbeing. People who have excess weight, compared to those with a healthy weight, are at increased risk for many serious diseases and health conditions including cardiovascular and respiratory disease, as well as mental health conditions. In addition, excess weight is known to contribute to factors such as poorer sleep, self-esteem and body image. Maintaining a healthy weight can reduce the risk of these adverse impacts. A balanced weight also supports better energy levels, mental health, and helps people to stay active and enjoy a higher quality of life.

Leicester City Council's Whole System Approach (WSA) to Healthy Weight supports collaborative action across a variety of areas to support the promotion of healthy weight, moving away from individual blame of weight status to an approach that focuses on the power and cumulative effect of systems changes. If every single player made a positive change of 2 or 3%, rolled out across the entire system, we would see improvements in healthy weight in Leicester. This incremental gain made collectively adds up to sustained and system wide change.

The below report outlines the complexities of weight and the comprehensive approach being taken within Leicester to promote healthy weight across the system.

2. Recommendation(s) to scrutiny:

Public Health and Health Integration Scrutiny Commission are invited to:

- Read and comment on the current position regarding the approach to healthy weight in Leicester.
- Offer suggestions on the planned and future work of the approach, suggesting opportunities for engagement with system partners.

3. Detailed report

Language used when communicating about weight

Obesity is a complex issue that can be attributed to a combination of environmental and medical factors. The sensitive nature of the topic, and stigma that those living with obesity can face, has supported widespread work to neutralise the language used when referring to individuals whose weight is above or below what is clinically healthy. Terminology relating to clinical definitions of weight outside of healthier parameters is used within this report, but communication relating to weight will be compassionate and person-first.

4.1. Healthy weight in Leicester

Maintaining a healthy weight is important for overall health and wellbeing. People who have excess weight, compared to those with a healthy weight, are at increased risk for many serious diseases and health conditions including cardiovascular and respiratory disease, as well as mental health conditions. In addition, excess weight is known to contribute to factors such as poorer sleep, self-esteem and body image. Maintaining a healthy weight can reduce the risk of these adverse impacts. A balanced weight also supports better energy levels, mental health, and helps people to stay active and enjoy a higher quality of life.

People living with excess weight are more likely to develop a range of conditions including diabetes, cancer, hypertension, and stroke. Leicester has a significantly higher prevalence of diabetes than England. Leicester's communities are diverse, and members of these communities, specifically those from South Asian backgrounds, are at an increased risk of experiencing life-limiting long-term conditions such as diabetes at a lower Body Mass Index (BMI).

62.8% of adults, 19.3% of Reception aged children and 39.1% of Year 6 age children in Leicester have excess weight. Higher prevalence exists in those aged 44-64 years, people living with disability, people with poor mental health, people with low level of education and people from Black communities.

However, the world we live in is not conducive to maintaining healthy weight and individuals cannot be blamed. Wider influences on health play a huge role in individual and community capability, opportunity, and motivation to maintain a healthy weight. The complexity of the many influences on healthy weight means the approach to try and improve healthy weight must be comprehensive and draw on the whole system.

A sample of influences on weight are summarised:

- Biological influences – genetics, hormone changes, slowing of metabolic rate across life course.
- Psychological influences – depression, sleep, eating disorders, anxiety, substance misuse, mental health treatments, body image and experience of abuse.
- Environmental influences – fast food outlet density, transport used, travel methods, marketing exposure, employment, air quality, access to services, access to green spaces and access to good food.
- Economic influences – high deprivation, low income, and cost of living crisis.

The complexity of the many influences on healthy weight means the approach to try and improve healthy weight must be comprehensive and consider the whole system, whilst acknowledging what is within and outside of our control as a Local Authority.

4.2 Whole system approaches overview

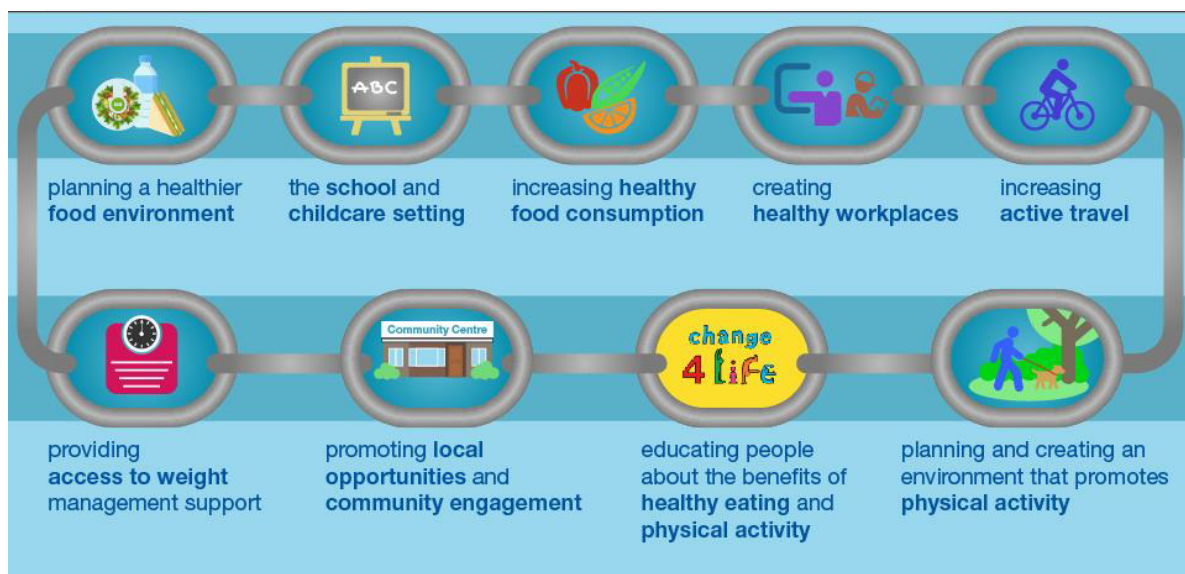
Approaches towards reducing excess weight remained unchanged and focused upon individual intervention and responsibility for years, whilst rates of excess weight have increased globally¹. Evidence of successful approaches to addressing complex public health challenges such as excess weight suggest that full engagement with relevant partners and the community, time to build relationships, trust and capacity, good governance, embedding within a broader policy context, evaluation and finance are important contributing factors².

A WSA works by allowing us to respond to a complex problem with a comprehensive approach that considers the many influences on weight. As a Local Authority, we play a guiding role, and the approach draws on the strengths in our relationships with organisations and learns from and builds on these. It provides the opportunity to foster new relationships through a shared agenda.

Wider influences on excess weight including living and working conditions, education, and policy must be considered when trying to promote healthy weight. If every single player and area made a positive change of 2 or 3%, rolled out across the entire system, we would see improvements in healthy weight in Leicester. Incremental gain made collectively adds up to sustained and system wide change.

The below figure outlines common areas of excess weight activity that can be identified and prioritised when implementing a WSA to healthy weight. Leicester's system actions broadly align with these main areas of activity and focus, as well as reflecting existing strategy operating within the City, without duplication.

Figure 1: Common areas of activity identified as part of a WSA to healthy weight.³



4.3. Adopting the Food Active Healthy Weight Declaration for Local Authorities

To support the implementation of the WSA, Leicester City Council adopted the Food Active Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight in December 2022, committing to action on healthy weight. Representatives from Local Authority attended the launch, with many Heads of Service and Officers pledging their support and making tailored commitments to their department. These pledges were followed up after 6 months, and were reviewed and renewed at an event in late 2024. The 16 commitments within the Declaration that are embedded within the WSA action plan are outlined in Appendix 1.

4.4. Leicester's mission, guiding principles and key themes

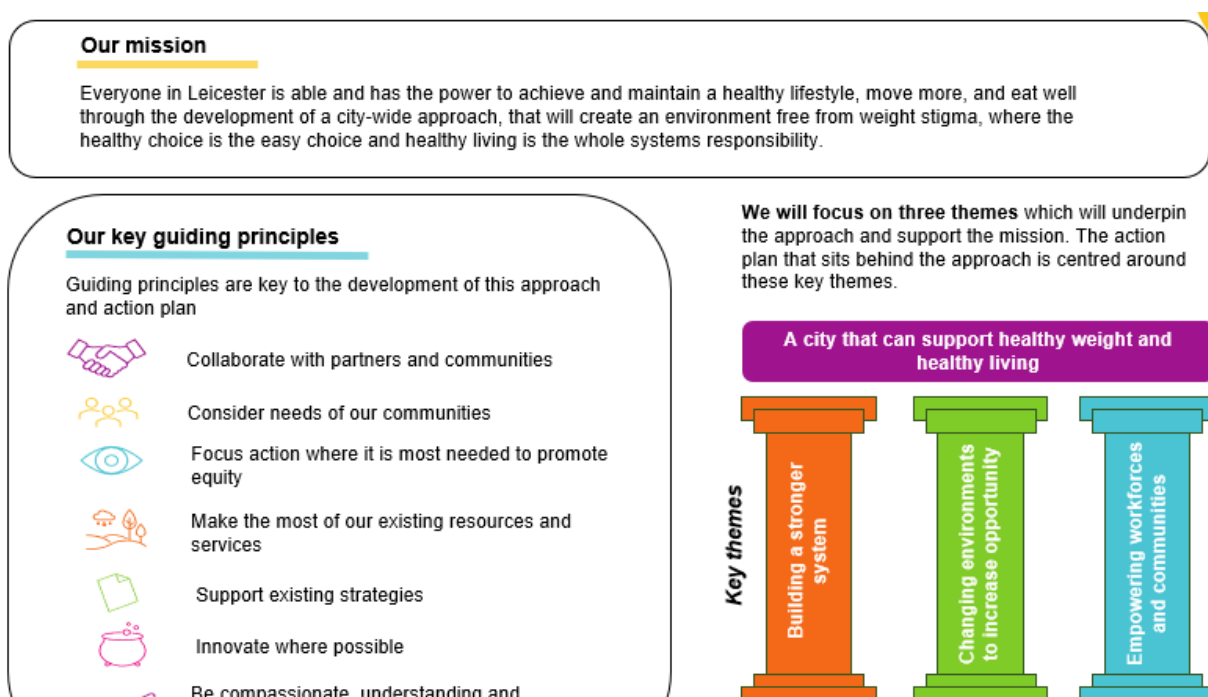
As a long-term approach aiming to influence generational change, qualitative and quantitative outcomes and outputs are not the focus but are monitored through an action plan and yearly reports.

To support long term action, short term aims, and smaller projects sit as part of the approach. Long term systems change and a long-term vision of reducing excess weight across Leicester is the focus. We must continue to do what we can upstream, and we must acknowledge that doing nothing to reduce excess weight is not an option. The approach aims to contribute towards the development of a city where healthy weight can be maintained, and good health is the systems responsibility.

The work of numerous Public Health activities is supported and interwoven within the approach including; Leicester's Food Plan, Healthy Conversation Skills (Making Every Contact Count approach), health in all policies, mental health, social isolation, and physical activity. Wider departments such as SEND and Education, Children's Social Work and Early Help, Adult Social Care and Commissioning, Housing, Transport, Planning, Public Safety and Organisational Development all play a role within the approach and have benefits to obtain.

The approaches existing mission, guiding principles and key themes are outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Leicester City Council WSA to Healthy Weight mission, guiding principles and key themes.



4.5. Life course approach to healthy weight

Addressing excess weight takes a life course approach that spans a variety of organisations and embeds healthy living as the responsibility of all. Leicester's approach reflects the life course perspective, whilst prioritising work around maternal weight, children and families, and promoting equity within areas of deprivation and those with disability. Work in recent years and plans for work across the life course are provided.

4.5.1. Preconception, pregnancy and post-partum

Data from 2018 showed that 23.8% of pregnant women/ people* in Leicester at booking appointment were defined by BMI as living with obesity. Pregnancy alone can be a significant factor in developing obesity. A high BMI during pregnancy can also have negative health impacts on the mother, foetus and child as they grow⁴. Children born to women of a higher weight are likely to experience overweight as a child and into adulthood.

**transgender and non-binary people also give birth*

Existing local programmes and initiatives

A vast array of work is occurring to support the first 1001 critical days of life. The Healthy Pregnancy Birth and Babies Group works to reduce incidence of infant mortality and has maternal obesity as an identified priority. A new working group is being established to support strategic development of focused actions surrounding maternal obesity across a Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland footprint. The work of Family Hubs within Children Young People and Family Centres across the 0-19 age range around elements such as infant feeding, bonding, communication and family wellbeing contribute to healthier living.

Elements of WSA to highlight

- Bumps to Babies (Leicester City Council antenatal class provision) content on healthy living during pregnancy amended to include clearer messaging on healthy eating and physical activity during pregnancy, and myth dispelling.
- Focus groups carried out in 2023 with women from Leicester Mammias to support direction of maternal excess weight work which supported development of Live Well Walk More offering walks for families.
- Health Needs Assessment on maternal weight worked on throughout 2025 to support direction of work.
- Live Well Leicester integrated lifestyle physical activity instructors trained in Level 3 Pre and Post Natal Physical Activity Training to enable pregnant women/ people to access service.
- Live Well Leicester open to pregnant women/ people with long term conditions (as of September 2025).
- Active Leicester staff at Aylestone Leisure Centre trained in Level 3 Pre and Post Natal Physical Activity Training.
- Buggy Boot camp and Aqua-natal classes added to offer at Aylestone Leisure Centre for pre-and post-partum women for pilot period.

- Specific infant feeding space at Aylestone Leisure Centre set up (timescale to be confirmed) as a pilot alongside staff training on infant feeding to support a welcoming environment for infant feeding.
- A training needs analysis has been conducted with a small sample of Midwives (community and hospital based) to support the development of a new training package. This insight from Leicester based professionals has supported assumptions made from national research that practitioners are concerned about the response of individuals when raising the issue of weight, fear of damaging the relationship with the individual, and have a lack of time.

Planned work

- Focus groups for pregnant women/ people or who have had a baby in the past 2 years to support understanding of weight related experiences, eating well, staying active, how culture and religion affects choices during pregnancy and how health workers have spoken about these topics. These will inform the creation of new resources for healthy weight during and after pregnancy and inform staff training. Additional engagement sessions with a local organisation that supports migrant families around pregnancy, birth and parenting are also being explored.
- Training for Midwives, Health Visitors and other health care professionals engaging with women antenatally to support raising the issue of weight, nutrition and physical activity during and post pregnancy in a compassionate and informed manner.
- Work towards recommendations outlined in the Maternal Weight Health Needs Assessment once finalised, facilitating the development of a shared action plan through the Maternal Weight Working Group reporting into the Healthy Pregnancy Birth and Babies Strategy Group.

4.5.2. Early years (0-5 years)

Being overweight in childhood is associated with being overweight in adulthood and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and other non-communicable diseases. Childhood healthy weight has been approached in a variety of ways across Local Authorities that have seen downward trends in childhood obesity. The most common areas include a strong focus on early years nutrition and exercise⁵.

Existing local programmes and initiatives

A variety of organisations work towards promoting healthy weight by promoting healthy relationships with food and physical activity in the early years. Leicestershire Nutrition and Dietetic Service (LNDS) offer a variety of support to nurseries and childminders to improve their nutritional offer under the “Eat Better Start Better” Award for City Nurseries including; nutritional training sessions, nursery visits, network events and packed lunch engagement with parents/carers. The Big Cook Little Cook programme takes place in nurseries, community venues and offers weekly cooking and education sessions for parents/carers and their children. This train the trainer programme is well received by parents and highlights positive outcomes.

The Healthy Teeth, Happy Smiles! Oral Health service aims to improve the oral health of children and adults in Leicester and reduce tooth decay and associated health issues. The service provides support and resources for Supervised Toothbrushing in schools and

Signed: **Barbara Green**, **Equality Officer**, **Leicester City Council**, **27/02/2025**
 Dated: 16 October 2025
 environment and food security (consider an agreed process for local plan

4.5 Other Implications
 Signed: Mannan Begum, Principal Lawyer, Commercial and Contracts Legal
 Dated: 13 October 2023
 development between public health and planning authorities)
 Signed: 11
 air quality etc

4.3 Equalities Implications
Organisational Change/Cultural Shift
 Review contracts and provision at public events, in all public buildings,
 When: **5. Background information and other purposes**
 duty (PSED) (Equality Act 2010) by paying due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful
 discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people
 who are different.
6. Summary of appendices
 possible)

Appendix 1: Commitments with the Local Authority Declaration of Healthy Weight adopted in 2022 by Leicester City Council
 doing the report and, in particular, the proposed option; their protected characteristics; and (where negative impact
 that negative impact
 cycle to work/school schemes)
 Protected characteristics
 assignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, religion or
 belief, sex, and gender identity
 The report outlines the importance of a multi-agency approach to encourage healthy weight
 healthy weight while acknowledging that excess weight is disproportionately affects certain
 groups within the city. Actions are targeted to address the needs of these vulnerable
 groups. It is important that any engagement is accessible. The initiatives should lead to
 positive impacts for people from across many protected characteristics
 Signed: Equalities Officer, Surinder Singh, Ext 37 4148
 Dated: 16 October 2025

4.4 Climate Emergency Implications
4. Financial, legal, equalities, climate emergency and other implications
 Increasing the proportion of journeys made by active travel - which produces no, or
 in Financial implications
 towards a 'climate ready' net zero city. Work which encourages and enables sustainable
 behaviours such as increased investment in cycling, active travel and healthy
 eating may have further co-benefits for tackling the climate emergency.

Signed: Rohit Rughani
 Dated: 16/10/2025
4.2 Legal Implications
Health Promoting Infrastructures/Environments
 Where relevant, information about the climate benefits of such actions could also be
 included in communications and reports of the authority to help people to take such steps as it deems appropriate to improve the health of people in its area.
Reference list

¹ A secondary analysis of the childhood obesity prevention Cochrane Review through a wider determinants of health lens: implications for research funders, researchers
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-021-01082-2>

² Whole systems approaches to obesity and other complex public health challenges: a systematic review <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-6274-z>

³ Health Matters: whole systems approach to obesity Health matters: whole systems