**NES AHP Contribution to Public Health**

Meeting with Niamh Smith, National Co-ordinator for Scotland’s WSA Early Adopter Programme, Obesity Action Scotland

21 February 2022

Niamh is employed part-time with Obesity Action Scotland, while also completing her PhD at Glasgow Caledonian University. These roles dovetail with each other as they both employ whole systems approaches to address complex problems. She is a Geography graduate and her PhD is looking at how the urban environment affects health, in particular focusing on urban blue spaces, e.g. looking at the canals in Glasgow and how they are under-utilised as a health asset. Her role with Obesity Action Scotland was first developed in 2019 and Niamh has been in post since June 2021. Her background as a geographer has allowed her to come at it with a different lens rather than just a purely health background.

In 2019, the Scottish Government decided to follow Public Health England guidance, developed in partnership with Leeds Beckett University, and devise local whole systems approaches to diet and healthy weight for across Scotland. They did this with eight early adopter areas: Dundee City, North Ayrshire, Dumfries and Galloway, and East Region Type 2 Diabetes Prevention Programme (West Lothian, Midlothian, East Lothian, Fife and Borders). These eight areas are working on different scales; some are at city level and some are much more local. The aim was for them to test a whole systems approach to diet and healthy weight in their areas. The projects are being led by a variety of disciplines including dietitians, Health Improvement Specialists and Environmental Health Officers.

They were trained using the [Leeds Beckett University Public Health England Whole Systems Approach](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/820783/Whole_systems_approach_to_obesity_guide.pdf) and subsequently have created working groups and hosted a series of online workshops to look at what affects the obesogenic environment. They have all had very different approaches as the toolkit was just a framework and they were able to tailor their approach to make it more specific to their context. Some areas have online workshops with lots of people; some have been a bit more selective and have done smaller sessions with targeted groups of people. However, all have then completed systems mapping where you get a group of people together to brainstorm what are all the factors that are affecting the diet and healthy weight environment and what we can all do as wide stakeholders to change some of those factors.

COVID-19 has been a barrier as some people have been redeployed and some of the work has been paused. However things are moving again and there's a national evaluation that Public Health Scotland have commissioned and there is also smaller, more local evaluations taking place. In terms of the governance of the of work, there's been a board of national partners who are Scottish Government, Obesity Action Scotland, Public Health Scotland and Food Standards Scotland. Niamh’s post is a link between the national partners and the early adopters. Her role as National Co-ordinator is to support the early adopters and the working groups to deliver the whole systems theory and guidance, offer facilitation support for workshops and also to report back to the national partners about progress and any challenges and training needs. They only have anecdotal comments so far about the success. The evaluations are process evaluations and aren't due for quite a while. They have been challenging too, trying to get people to interview because everyone is stretched.

The early adopter program is due to finish at the end of March, but Obesity Action Scotland plans to use the experiences of the eight early adopter areas and the evaluations to plan a national rollout of a whole systems approach to diet and healthy weight for 2023.

There is a [webinar](https://www.obesityactionscotland.org/whole-system-approach/) available on the website, where three of the areas spoke about their experiences.

In terms of AHPs, most of the areas have Public Health Practitioner Leads but the Dundee City work is led by a dietitian. East Lothian is led by Environmental Health and the feedback from them is that the people in the workshops have thought “health is nothing to do with me, I don't do health in my job and I don't see the relevance.” These questions have been really interesting because they bring in the whole idea of the wider determinants.

Niamh has also done some teaching to first year Physiotherapy students at GCU called Health Perspectives in Physiotherapy Practice and it is very much about the wider determinants of health. This is deliberately placed early in the curriculum so that it's embedded with the students that every time they are meeting someone, they are thinking about the other things that have impacted their health rather than just the issue they have been referred for.

Niamh’s role was funded and there was money provided for training but no funding went to the early adopters to implement this approach. The idea was that it was changing the way they worked and it shouldn't have been an additional burden; they shouldn't have needed more staff for example. However, in practice it is likely that the evaluations will say that funding will be needed if other areas are going to do this. For example, the timings that are presented on the Public Health England toolkit were found to be inappropriate, such as the amount of time it takes to organise a workshop. It has been a huge amount of work for the areas to change to this way of working. Dumfries and Galloway, North Ayrshire and Dundee didn't have funding but the East region decided themselves to use some of their budget to fund their areas. Therefore, it wasn't nationally funded, but was funded regionally at the East Region level. Hopefully the national evaluation will pull out whether the method of funding made a difference or not.

The early adopter programme was only meant to run until March 2021 but then they were given a one year extension because of COVID and now there has been some progress, but not as much as people had thought because COVID has taken priority. Eyemouth has established a junior parkrun so they have a core group working on that. They also have the school involved. The children are going to do some mapping projects of healthy spaces in Eyemouth and designers are going to work with them to make display boards to show places that can be used for health. They also have some food initiatives with community lunches.

One of the challenges that the areas have come up against most is the retail engagement. You can get health practitioners, AHPs, schools and community centres involved but if the businesses are still selling junk food then progress is going to be very difficult. Guidance on what’s the best way to engage with retail and how to do it practically is something that will be looked at if further funding is made available to push forward the rollout.

**Further input**

Niamh consented to being contacted again for further involvement in this work if appropriate [niamh.smith@obesityactionscotland.org](mailto:niamh.smith@obesityactionscotland.org)

However, as Niamh has a fixed term contract, she also gave her colleague’s details:

Lorraine Tulloch, Programme Lead [lorraine.tulloch@obesityactionscotland.org](mailto:lorraine.tulloch@obesityactionscotland.org)

**Sheila Wilson**

**2 March 2022**