HEALTHY WEIGHT, HEALTHY LIVES: A RESEARCH AND SURVEILLANCE PLAN FOR ENGLAND
Update on progress
# Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives: A research and surveillance plan for England: Update on progress

**DH**

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In 2008, the Department of Health (DH) and the Medical Research Council (MRC) held two meetings of government Chief Scientific Advisers, with other research councils also represented. The discussion focused on how to improve collaboration across funders to strengthen the evidence base on obesity to help inform policy development, evaluation and monitoring in this complex area.

Key themes arising from the discussion were set out in Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives: A cross-government research and surveillance plan for England (December 2008). The document recognised that developing the evidence base is an ongoing process and a long-term venture. However, even within this first year, considerable progress has been made in terms of building upon existing infrastructure and investments.

This document does not attempt to offer a comprehensive list of investments and projects; instead it is an overview of key strategic developments and partnerships. It is, by and large, restricted to activity within government departments and research councils. It is recognised, however, that government agencies and many voluntary organisations invest in the science relating to obesity. Further details can be obtained by following the links.

Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives: A cross-government research and surveillance plan for England listed the following as first steps in developing the evidence base:

- surveillance and an audit of data sources;
- building on current infrastructure and identifying priorities;
- obesity health impact assessment (HIA);
- evaluating natural experiments;
- feedback.

2 See Annex for a policy-maker perspective on research and evaluation issues.
Surveillance and audit of data sources

A number of routine data sources contribute to population surveillance of obesity and its determinants. A series of key indicators which are used to monitor progress for the Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives strategy as a whole are set out in the Annex of *Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives: One Year On* (October 2009),<sup>3</sup> including data from:

- the NHS Information Centre’s Health Survey for England;
- the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’ (DEFRA’s) Family Food Report;
- the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)/School Food Trust survey of school lunches;
- the Department for Transport’s (DfT’s) National Travel Survey; and
- the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)/DCSF School Sport Survey.

A further critical component is the National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP). Detailed analysis of the 2007/08 NCMP dataset will be undertaken by the National Obesity Observatory (NOO). These detailed secondary analyses aim to further our understanding of the epidemiology of child height, weight and body mass index (BMI) across England. NOO intends to produce a report, focusing on a range of themes including the relationships between deprivation, ethnicity and weight status, on an annual basis.

As part of work in the area of surveillance, NOO has begun conducting an audit of data sources available and has produced a series of data mapping papers describing the main sources of national-level surveillance data in England for children and adults. The papers highlight gaps and make recommendations for enhancing existing activity.

Papers to date include:

- obesity and overweight surveillance (including background on relevant measures and standards);
- physical activity surveillance (including key sources of available data on determinants of physical activity such as characteristics of the built environment);

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<sup>3</sup> www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/DH_097523
• nutrition surveillance (the paper focuses on data collected on food consumption, but also includes data collections relating to expenditure on food and drink, and related areas such as breastfeeding).

NOO is also developing a variety of data visualisation tools including an e-atlas to enable users to analyse surveillance data on obesity and its determinants. The e-atlas enables users to compare a range of indicators such as prevalence of childhood obesity with, for example, local area deprivation scores and rates of physical activity. NOO is continuing to build on this interactive tool, adding more indicators and functionality. Further details can be found on the NOO website.4
Building on current infrastructure and identifying priorities

The plan is committed to building upon and developing the current complex research infrastructure. Significant advances have been made over the last 12 months. The following gives an overview of key strategic developments with an emphasis on funder collaboration.

- A third phase of projects has been announced as part of the multi-funder collaboration, the National Prevention Research Initiative (NPRI).5

- A consortium of UK Clinical Research Collaboration (UKCRC) partners6 has provided a joint investment of £20 million to establish five public health centres across the UK. The aim is to strengthen research into complex public health matters, including obesity. For example, the UKCRC Centre for Excellence in Diet and Activity Research (CEDAR)7 has a specific focus on relevant issues. The UKCRC Centre for Translational Research in Public Health8 also covers issues relating to diet and exercise. The contracts are managed by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

- The ESRC is leading a cross-government collaboration in the area of Subjective Wellbeing and Public Policy.9 This is a joint venture between ESRC, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), DH, DCSF, the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) and the MRC. Subjective wellbeing is a field of study that attempts to understand people's own evaluations of their happiness or life satisfaction.

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5 www.mrc.ac.uk/Ourresearch/ResourceFocus/NPRI/index.htm
6 The partners are the British Heart Foundation, Cancer Research UK, the ESRC, Health and Social Care Research and Development Office for Northern Ireland, the MRC, National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), Wales Office of Research and Development – Welsh Assembly Government and the Wellcome Trust.
7 www.mrc-epid.cam.ac.uk/cedar/
The centre receives funding from the NIHR, the MRC, the ESRC, the British Heart Foundation and the Wellcome Trust.
8 www.ncl.ac.uk/ihs/ctrph/
The centre receives funding from the NIHR, the MRC, the ESRC, the British Heart Foundation and Cancer Research UK.
9 www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities/current_funding_opportunities/SW09.aspx
ESRC has co-funded a number of activities with the Food Standards Agency (FSA) including a public policy seminar on the impact of rising food prices and a research call on understanding dietary decisions. The research call provided funding for work on the study ‘Food Practices and Employed Families with Younger Children’.

With the MRC, the Wellcome Trust has provided funding for the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), which has produced evidence on, for example, exercise and obesity.

The National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) Health Technology Assessment (HTA), and Public Health Research (PHR) programmes advertised a joint themed call on obesity in late 2009. This included the evaluation of interventions to prevent or treat obesity or overweight, whether those interventions were delivered by the NHS (HTA programme) or outside the NHS (PHR programme). Both programmes have a focus on pragmatic evaluation and a special interest in cost-effectiveness. The call was open to proposals for evidence synthesis, pilot and feasibility studies as well as full primary evaluation studies.

In the year following the publication of Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives, the MRC invested approximately £13 million in obesity research. A significant proportion of this investment is centred on MRC units (particularly the Human Nutrition Unit, Epidemiology Unit, Epidemiology Resource Centre and Social and Public Health Unit) as well as the MRC Centre for Obesity and Related Metabolic Diseases, which together cover the broad range of obesity research from molecular and mechanistic studies to social and public health science. To underpin the surveillance activities described earlier, the MRC is carrying out a substantial part of the National Diet and Nutrition Survey, and is also undertaking research into advanced methods of physical activity measurement.

The MRC’s overarching strategy is described in the document Research Changes Lives (2009). This strategy, in conjunction with the MRC Strategic Review of Nutrition and Energy Balance (2008), provides a basis for a medical research strategy in obesity. The MRC has since held an internal meeting with leading scientists to translate these high-level documents into a detailed plan of action for obesity research.
- **The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC)**\(^{13}\) estimated spend for 2008/09 on human diet and health is approximately £11.6 million, including about £1.1 million on obesity-related research. The £1.1 million figure includes research on exercise related to whole energy balance and weight. Within the overall diet and health spend, BBSRC supports research on food choice, and this also has relevance to understanding factors leading to obesity. BBSRC has a current priority on ‘Ageing research: Lifelong health and well-being’. This includes interactions between diet, physical activity and health over the lifecourse. It also supports research relevant to obesity at its **Institute for Food Research (IFR)** where one of the current themes, food structure and health, includes work on appetite reduction.

- A £12 million five-year partnership, called the Diet and Health Research Industry Club (DRINC),\(^{14}\) between BBSRC and a consortium of companies is aimed at supporting pre-competitive research to help the food industry deliver health benefits to consumers. The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), the MRC and the ESRC are providing support to high-quality proposals falling within their remits. Themes include improved understanding of healthier diets.

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\(^{13}\) [www.bbsrc.ac.uk/funding/priorities.html](http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/funding/priorities.html)

\(^{14}\) [www.bbsrc.ac.uk/business/collaborative-research/industry-clubs/drinc/drinc-index.asp](http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/business/collaborative-research/industry-clubs/drinc/drinc-index.asp)
Obesity health impact assessment and scanning for natural experiments

The plan is committed to an evaluation of natural experiments arising from policy and practice developments. This included both the evaluation of health policy and the HIA of non-health policy.

- The **NIHR PHR** programme\(^{15}\) evaluates public health interventions, providing new knowledge on the benefits, costs, acceptability and wider impacts of non-NHS interventions intended to improve the health of the public and reduce inequalities in health. The programme is multidisciplinary and broad, covering a range of interventions that improve public health. An early commission is a study exploring the health impacts of the Cambridgeshire Guided Busway.

- DH’s **Policy Research Programme (PRP)**\(^{16}\) continues to respond to the research needs of policy makers through commissioning stand-alone projects, reviews of evidence and programmes of research in units and centres. An evaluation of the Healthy Community Challenge Fund has been commissioned and, more generally, the PRP is currently commissioning a new programme of work on behaviour and health. Ongoing contracts with the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre)\(^{17}\) and the Public Health Research Consortium\(^{18}\) have produced a number of reviews and studies.

- **Cycling Cities and Towns (Dft)**\(^{19}\) are pilot projects in various areas to test whether investment in cycling at a town-wide level results in increased cycling levels. The interventions are being extensively monitored through a number of approaches to determine the impact on levels of cycling and physical activity. Specific evaluation projects are investigating the interventions in more detail including process and impact evaluations and case studies.

- The **Free Swimming Programme** is a £140 million programme designed to increase participation in swimming in England. This is a cross-government initiative with funding from five government departments (DCMS, DH, DCSF, DWP and CLG), as well as investment and resources from the Amateur Swimming Association and Sport England. Sport England is leading

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\(^{15}\) [www.phr.ac.uk/](http://www.phr.ac.uk/)

\(^{16}\) [www.dh.gov.uk/en/Researchanddevelopment/Policyresearchprogramme/DH_533](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Researchanddevelopment/Policyresearchprogramme/DH_533)

\(^{17}\) [http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/](http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/)

\(^{18}\) [www.york.ac.uk/phrc/](http://www.york.ac.uk/phrc/)

\(^{19}\) [www.dft.gov.uk/cyclingengland/cycling-cities-towns/](http://www.dft.gov.uk/cyclingengland/cycling-cities-towns/)
a national evaluation of the programme involving routine data collection from participating local authorities and an independent evaluation team collecting supplementary survey data and developing a number of case studies. Initial monitoring data has been published by DCMS and Sport England.

- DEFRA is currently undertaking a retrospective analysis of the Food Expenditure Survey to assess the impact of cost on healthy diets for different socio-economic groups in different regions with a particular focus on disadvantaged groups.

- The NOO has published a standard evaluation framework for weight management interventions. It aims to increase the proportion of such interventions that are evaluated at a local level; to increase the quality of evaluations; to contribute to the development of a core dataset to increase the consistency and comparability of evaluations; and to provide wider evaluation support. NOO is currently monitoring uptake of the framework and broadening the work to address other types of population-level health improvement interventions which impact on obesity.
Report back

This report gives an overview of key highlights over the first year since the release of Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives. A cross-government research and surveillance plan for England.
Annex: A policy-maker perspective on research and evaluation

Rising obesity trends remain a problem for the UK with known associations with a number of chronic diseases and increasing awareness of the impact of excess weight in terms of social, economic and direct health costs. Evidence suggests that a broad policy response is required to tackle the ‘obesogenic environment’ and generate the degree of change necessary to both prevent and treat obesity.

The Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives strategy (HWHL) and more recently Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives: One Year On describe the focus of policy work in England and set out an overall strategic framework of:

- supporting healthier choices;
- creating an environment that promotes healthy weight including:
  - promoting healthy growth of children;
  - promoting healthier food choices;
  - building physical activity into our lives;
  - creating incentives for better health;
- effective services for those at risk and needing treatment;
- effective delivery systems.

The evidence to date is sufficient to guide the general approach and strategy development; however, many unanswered questions remain. It will be important to deepen the evidence base for which interventions are effective and how the wider context shapes this: we would not only like to know what works but under what conditions, for whom and whether it can be applied in different settings. Three areas in particular are important to inform the challenges faced by policy and delivery systems:

1. Additional work on effective interventions to prevent and treat obesity with a particular focus on community and population-level interventions, for example through evaluation of national and local policy and of ‘natural experiments’.
2. Assessment of cost effectiveness.

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20 Obesity policy is a devolved issue so this covers policies in England, except for the areas of work led by the FSA, which has a UK-wide remit.
3. Consideration of wider intervention issues and context including health inequalities. In particular, consideration of issues such as:

- **feasibility**: what resources are required to implement the approach, and is it feasible for the approach to be sustained over time by the relevant delivery system?

- **replicability**: how well could the approach be replicated in different ‘real world’ settings and contexts?

- **scaleability**: how well does the approach lend itself to large-scale application?

- **specificity**: is the approach more or less effective and appropriate for particular population groups, e.g. different age groups (particularly the under fives), genders and ethnic populations?

- **personalisation**: to what extent is the approach tailored to meet the requirements of individual participants?

- **acceptability**: is the approach viewed as acceptable by participants, experts and other stakeholders?

- **wider impacts and unexpected consequences**: does the approach have an impact beyond the direct participants?

- **comparability**: how do different approaches compare with each other?

- **sustainability**: are immediate outcomes sustained over the long term? Is the intervention process itself self-sustaining?
List of abbreviations

ALSPAC  Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children
BBSRC  Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council
BMI  body mass index
CEDAR  Centre for Excellence in Diet and Activity Research
CLG  Department for Communities and Local Government
DCMS  Department for Culture, Media and Sport
DCSF  Department for Children, Schools and Families
DEFRA  Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
DfT  Department for Transport
DH  Department of Health
DWP  Department for Work and Pensions
EPSRC  Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council
ESRC  Economic and Social Research Council
FSA  Food Standards Agency
HIA  health impact assessment
HTA  Health Technology Assessment programme
IFR  Institute for Food Research
MRC  Medical Research Council
NCMP  National Child Measurement Programme
NIHR  National Institute of Health Research
NOO  National Obesity Observatory
NPRI  National Prevention Research Initiative
PHR  Public Health Research programme
PRP  Policy Research Programme
UKCRC  United Kingdom Clinical Research Collaboration