

Report to West Suffolk Overview and Scrutiny Meeting 15 June 2023 following the Suffolk Health Scrutiny Meeting 19 April 2023

Childhood Obesity in Suffolk

As today's Overview and Scrutiny Committee will involve new members, I have appended my Report of 6 April 2022 and attachments, giving context to this follow-up Report.

Following the 2020 Place-based Needs Assessment, identifying a worrying level of childhood obesity in Suffolk, and the publication of Suffolk County Council's Report entitled "Tackling Childhood Obesity in Suffolk", Health Scrutiny set up a Task Group (T&F Group) to consider the issues causing this unprecedented rise in obesity levels and consider ways to reverse this trend.

I have appended the Final Report of the Joint Scrutiny Task and Finish Group (T&F) on Tackling Childhood Obesity, presented at the HOSC by Cllr. Joanna Spicer, who stepped in to take the Chair of this T&F Group following the sad and untimely death of Cllr. Graham Newman. The Committee noted its appreciation to Cllr. Newman for his commitment and enthusiasm in setting up and initially Chairing this T&F Group.

Members of this T&F Group were: Cllr. Joanne Spicer, Cllr. Edward Back, Cllr Inga Lockington, Cllr. Sandy Martin and Cllr. Christine Shaw.

It was evident, not only from the comprehensive T&F Report, but also from the robust discussion, that the challenges and importance of this situation should not be underestimated. The impact on the health of children and the consequential knock-on effect to an already overstretched NHS is critically worrying.

Childhood Obesity is linked, not only with health-related issues such as diabetes, but also with lower levels of academic attainment.

There is little to add to the detail contained in the T&F Report – we know that dietary preferences are determined the moment food is given to a baby and the importance of education to pregnant woman was identified. We know too that weight gain is 80 percent what you eat and 20 percent movement. Poor quality food both in nutritional terms and high sugar/fat levels is cheap and available and is often the first choice for hungry children and tired parents.

Covid and the economic climate contributed to this growing problem, as do on-line games. We know the causes; we know the challenges and we know the consequential and damaging outcomes. We know how these outcomes may be improved but are limited in the actions we can take. Schools and education will have limited impact, the majority of change need to come from home, from families, from food production and availability, and these are undoubtedly the greatest barriers.

So the highlights:

- Failure to accept/recognise that their child is overweight
- Lack of knowledge/acceptance of the potential damage to health and academic attainment
- Lack of funds given as excuse for poor diet
- Lack of knowledge of how to cook
- Lack of understanding of nutritional value of foods
- Hungry children and tired parents – quick fixes of cheap food
- Economic climate
- Stress related eating habits
- Eating environment – children often eat alone in front of TV/Computer
- Lack of exercise
- Lack of desire to change

The Health Scrutiny Committee endorsed the T&F Report and its recommendations and noted that the report would be finalised for presentation to the Suffolk Health and Wellbeing Board in late Spring/Summer 2023, along with the refreshed Childhood Weight Management Strategy and Action Plan. The development of which is being led by the County Council's Public Health team in consultation with a wide range of partners and stakeholders. It is intended that this topic will be revisited by Health Scrutiny at a future meeting.

Meanwhile, during recent meeting with Warren Smyth CEO of Abbeycroft, he shared information on the programmes they run, aimed at supporting families on low incomes. This included the families cooking simple, nutritious meals. Feedback indicated that those families who had attended the programme had continued with elements of it – eating better and eating together as a family. He commented that the issue of obesity cannot be overcome by a sledgehammer approach, but by using stealth– encouraging participation.

Whilst the T&F Report identifies the support offered by different agencies, it remains thus, as ever it was, "you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink.

Councillor Margaret Marks
West Suffolk Council Member on the Health Scrutiny Committee

Appendices attached:

- a) Margaret Marks report of 15 June 2022 and the appendices (Report number: OAS.WS.22.009)
- b) HOSC 19 April 2023 Agenda item 6 pages 25-57