

National Assembly for Wales

Children and Young People Committee

CO 21

Inquiry into Childhood Obesity

Evidence from : City and County of Swansea

In general the extent of childhood obesity and its contributory factors are well known and illustrated through various pieces of educational and government research. Enough time and effort has been spent identifying this problem and its contributory factors; however the same can't be said for action.

For years people have questioned whether physical activity can improve health, and now that the case has firmly been proved, agendas can move forward. It is felt that the same needs to happen with childhood obesity.

Statistics show that Wales has one of the highest levels of childhood obesity however it is felt that there are huge gaps in resource, program delivery and local policy endorsement to tackling this agenda.

It would be easy to hand this agenda over to schools and use them to utilise their captive audience to address issues with children, however with the current educational pressures and the idea that not all children flourish in schools, it would be a very narrow minded view in our opinion. However school teachers do have a role to play in chatting to children and parents about issues around health and obesity and offer advice on how they can make small changes and who in the community can support them.

It is also our opinion that tackling the childhood obesity agenda needs to be re-addressed and a shift towards tackling family obesity would be a more appropriate way of tackling the issue. Parents have such an influential role to play on children's behaviours and life that they need to be included in the development of future programs and policy. A whole family approach would be one suggestion of how to improve Government programs and to tackle this agenda. It is noted that MEND and Change4Life attempts to adopt this approach, but the minimal resource and lack of clear brand awareness by families and professionals means that it is not the most cost effective way of tackling this agenda.

Whilst some Government strategies make reference to each other and try to impact each other. There are little if no practical links between Welsh Government programmes and campaigns e.g. Creating an Active and Healthy Wales / Swansea, Appetite for life, Change4life and MEND.

This stems from a range of professional paying lip service to problem that we face and no one employed or given clear direction to tackle and / or coordinate work to tackle this issue. As a practical example; in Swansea there is no capacity for dieticians to tackle childhood obesity and therefore don't see obese children.

This highlights that there is no clear lead for addressing childhood obesity at a local level. Welsh Government in partnership with Local Authorities, Public Health and Health Boards should provide more direction and guidance. Key partners need to ensure that whilst there is buy in at strategic level, there is the relevant operational officer to drive a collaborative approach to tackling the issue.

The regionalisation of Public Health has also had a detrimental affect on local work and has left public health teams with limited resources and a lack of relevant officers to take programs forward.

On a practical level Change4life has so much potential but administration from Welsh Government has been inconsistent and disappointing. Swansea has embraced the Change4life campaign and as a result has significantly higher sign up than other areas of Wales. Whether this will impact directly on childhood obesity levels, remains to be seen and we currently have no way of measuring this as individual contact details can't be shared with us by Welsh Government due to Data Protection issues. Is this another missed opportunity?

The MEND brand lacks influence and power. The current resource is not adequate enough to meet the demands of tackling this agenda. An officer at a national level within the MEND program are working at the wrong level and on the ground 'tagging' the agenda onto people's already busy remits hasn't worked.

De-investment in MEND is currently being considered as part of the Public Health Wales Health Review of Health Improvement Services.

If there is to be a national childhood obesity program, then there needs to be assurances that there will be formal consultation with all potential partners, that the program will be resourced appropriately and key direction of travel established. If this area is a key cause for concern then let's ensure that the resources match the size and priority of the issue and that the program is in place for long enough to be integrated into existing service provision and make a significant impact.

Another area for consideration is an indication or security about the future commitment to funding. A number of programs have suffered due to the uncertainty of short term funding and it should be accepted that if programs are to succeed, there needs to be a commitment to fund programs for 3 years plus as a minimum term.

Moving forward and creating new opportunities there is scope to utilise a more preventative approach to talking the agenda. There is anecdotal evidence from

families that even though they don't meet unhealthy weight criteria 'yet', they are certainly on a pathway to becoming overweight or obese. In the current set up these families would be turned away or signed posted to Change4life. As stated previously we have no indication if this is having an effect in Swansea.

Tackling Poverty is a key priority for Swansea Council.

The Authority has recently re-focussed resources and created a team to co-ordinate work around the food agenda in Swansea. The team has been tasked with writing a food strategy, of which addressing areas of food poverty and taking a preventative approach to tackling obesity and reducing health inequalities through the provision of cooking and growing projects will be key.

Key Points

- No person or organisation has a clear responsibility to coordinate tackling the issue.
- Teachers and other professionals find it difficult to talk about weight issues
- Lack of resources hinders professionals being able to tackle the issue
- Professionals don't identify that's its their role to talk about weight issues with families
- Lack of training for practitioners on how to discuss the topic with families
- MEND program is under resourced and to demanding for families to commit
- Too much of the focus is on treatment and not prevention
- Change4life nationally is un-coordinated and lacks communication with partners