

Report on Healthwatch Wandsworth's Great Weight Debate Consultation

Background

Healthwatch Wandsworth invited local residents to share their views on how children and families can be supported to lead healthier lives as part of the *The Great Weight Debate*, a London-wide campaign to raise the issues of childhood obesity.

London has more overweight and obese children than any other global city, including New York, Sydney and Paris. More than a third of children in London are overweight or obese by the time they leave primary school.

London is facing a childhood obesity epidemic, putting children at increased risk of a range of health problems, including cancer; infertility; diabetes; high-blood pressure; and breathing difficulties. According to figures released by Public Health England (PHE):

- Hospital admission rates for obesity and related conditions amongst children and young people in England have **quadrupled** over the past decade¹
- There are more than **8,600 fast food outlets** in London
- The average chicken shop meal of chicken, chips and a drink contains **70% of an adult's daily calories**
- The average child in England spends **six hours a day in front of a screen**
- **Only 28% of children** in England achieve the recommended activity levels

In Wandsworth, almost 20% of 4-5 year olds are overweight or obese. More than 30% of 10-11 year olds are overweight or obese².

Our questionnaire tested the level of awareness of factors that local residents considered contribute to childhood obesity, and sought their ideas on what changes could be made at a community level to support children and families to lead healthier lives.

Our Consultation Survey

The questionnaire comprised of seven questions based on those posed by the national Healthy London Partnership survey to unearth what changes Wandsworth residents think will make it easier for people to make healthy choices.

We aimed to raise awareness of the challenges to leading healthier lives while also inviting residents to feed back their own ideas for change and improvement in the borough to support Wandsworth Council to tackle childhood obesity.

The survey was open from 23rd November 2016 to 14th December 2016 to offer residents chance to take part in the campaign, but with limited time for wide consultation.

¹ Jones Nielsen JD, Lavery AA, Millett C, Mainous Iii AG, Majeed A, Saxena S. (2013) Rising Obesity-Related Hospital Admissions among Children and Young People in England: National Time Trends Study. PLoS ONE. 8:6, e65764

² Public Health England (2016). Public Health Outcomes Framework: Health Improvement. Available at: <http://www.phoutcomes.info/public-health-outcomes-framework#page/1/gid/1000042/pat/6/par/E12000007/ati/102/are/E09000032/iid/90640/age/164/sex/4>

Findings

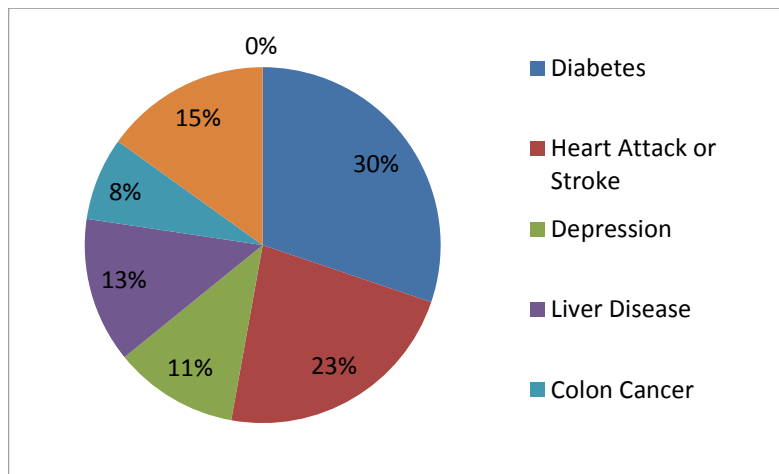
A total of 16 people submitted their views to us via the consultation and additional responses were drawn from an online poll question. A sample of the consultation can be found in Appendix A. All individual responses can be found in Appendix B.

The survey was advertised via our website and social media channels and circulated to our local contacts.

The questions, based largely on those posed by the national Great Weight Debate survey, were deliberately open to draw out people's experiences, thoughts and suggestions. As a result, we could draw conclusions about the availability of information around healthy choices in Wandsworth, awareness of local initiatives and the impact of wider, environmental factors. This could help us understand where provision could be strengthened and what further action could be taken to best support the community.

Question one: Which of the following health risks did you know were linked to obesity?

Of the health risks listed, all respondents (100%) recognised the link between obesity and diabetes. However, only 25% identified the link between obesity and colon cancer, though research shows that obese men have about 50% higher risks of colon cancer than those with a healthy weight³. The majority of people consulted knew that obesity could lead to a heart attack or stroke but far fewer knew of the connection between liver disease and obesity (48%).



The implication is that people aren't aware of the full extent of the risks associated with unhealthy lifestyle choices. This disparity in levels of awareness between obesity and different health complications presents a serious local and national challenge. It emphasises the importance of public awareness campaigns to educate and inform, and also enable the prevention of obesity comorbidities.

³ Pischon, T. et al. Body size and risk of colon and rectal cancer in the European Prospective Investigation Into Cancer and Nutrition (EPIC). Journal of the National Cancer Institute 98, 920–31 (2006)

Question two: Do you think that tackling childhood obesity should be a national priority?

According to the Department of Health's Obesity Policy Team, reducing childhood obesity is a top priority, echoing the responses obtained to our consultation with local residents. All respondents agreed that tackling childhood obesity should be a **national priority** because this would help increase awareness.

Key reasons respondents provided to support their viewpoint included the **cost-savings** from investing in health and wellbeing, **preventing future weight issues and diseases** linked to obesity and **helping future generations** by managing the issues early on:

“the health risks associated with obesity contribute to most of the health issues that the NHS have to deal with”

“costs the NHS too much money”

[Tackling obesity would] *“help support the economy”*

“the children of today are the leaders of tomorrow so we need to make their health and wellbeing a priority”

Question three: Do you think that tackling childhood obesity should be a local priority?

All respondents agreed that local leaders should prioritise reducing childhood obesity, alongside national decision-makers.

“Practical decisions can only be effectively implemented at a local level”

“It is always easier and logical to tackle issues on a local level as local authorities have the information and statistics that are unique to their area”

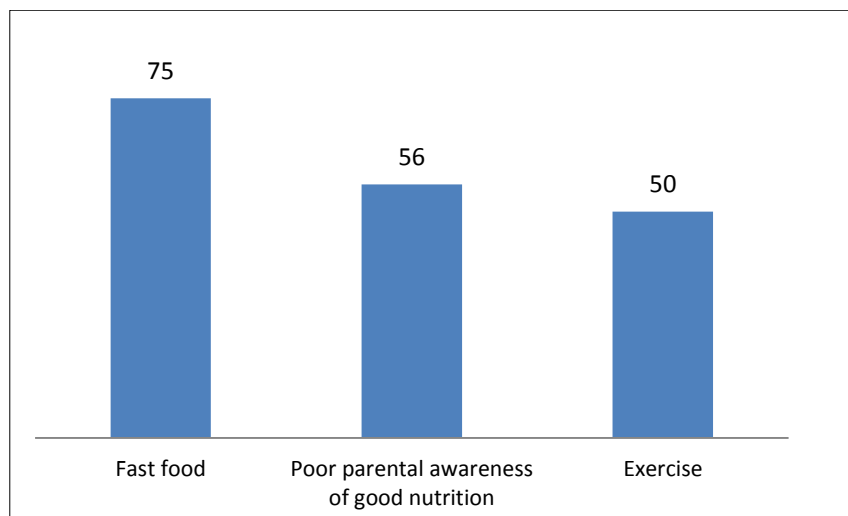
Other respondents reiterated the reasons given for national prioritisation, including cost-saving and protecting the future of the UK economy.

However, some respondents went further and claimed that it was the responsibility of the borough to reduce childhood obesity in Wandsworth. They emphasised the **obligation** of the local council to introduce strategies to tackle childhood obesity, particularly given that obesity rates are especially high in the borough.

Question four: What do you think are the top three factors contributing to childhood obesity in Wandsworth?

This question allowed respondents to offer their own personal views on the top factors contributing to childhood obesity in Wandsworth. The **overwhelming majority of respondents (75%) cited fast-food** as the key cause of obesity in the borough.

Respondents also ranked **poor parental awareness of nutritional risk factors (56%)** and **lack of exercise (50%)** as the two other leading contributors to childhood obesity in Wandsworth.



It is interesting that the main causes identified relate to **availability of lifestyle choices**, and our respondents clearly felt there were barriers to making the right choices, for example:

‘Lots of local fitness activities are very expensive’
[a lack of] ‘knowledge of parents regarding nutrition’
‘There’s no point educating people about healthy food and then lining the high street with junk food restaurants’

To make better choices residents need healthy food options, better information and options for exercise available.

Question five: What do you think should be the top three strategies to tackle childhood obesity in Wandsworth?

The strategies respondents considered most important to tackle childhood obesity relate to the main contributors to childhood obesity identified in the previous question: proliferation of fast food outlets; parental knowledge of good nutrition; and exercise.

The top three strategies suggested to tackle childhood obesity in Wandsworth were:

1. Increased awareness of health risks in school settings (24.5%)
2. Promotion of healthier food choices (15.1%)
3. Increased awareness of exercise facilities (15.1%)

Some respondents offered more specific practical approaches:

“Ban junk food and sweets on school premises”

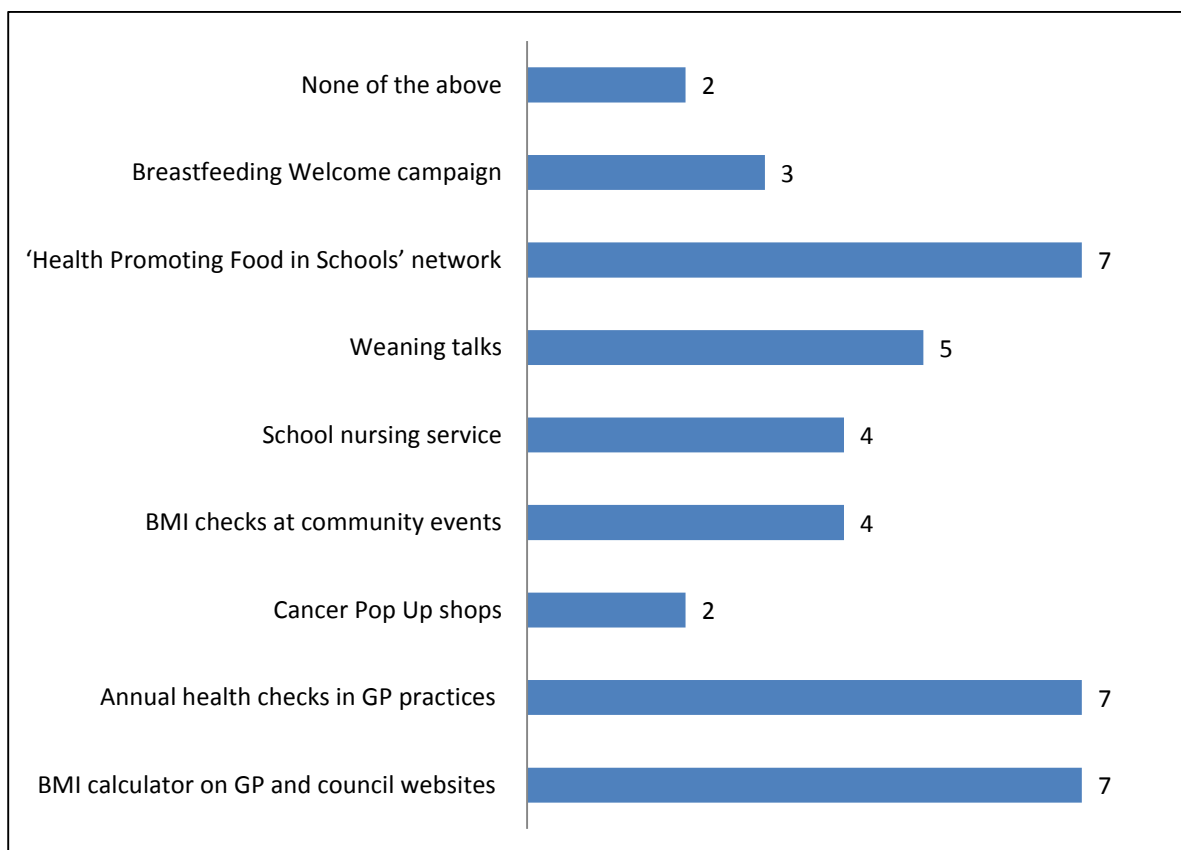
“Subsidised gym, classes and activities”

Question six: How many of the following initiatives are you aware of in Wandsworth?

Of the available initiatives which promote healthy living in Wandsworth, the three which are most widely recognised are:

1. BMI calculator on GP and council websites (43.8%)
2. Annual health checks in GP practices (43.8%)
3. ‘Health Promoting Food in Schools’ network (43.8%)

Two respondents (12.5%) were unaware of any of the noted services while the least familiar initiative is the Cancer Pop Up shop.



Question seven: What more can Wandsworth Council do to better support children to lead healthier lives?

A number of initiatives were recommended to support children to lead healthier lives. Most focused on **schools**, **information provision** and **exercise activities** for children and echoed the key factors of childhood obesity identified above. Suggested opportunities for Wandsworth Council included:

- Promoting healthy:
 - *“Give[ing] fruit and vegetables in school*
 - *“To put healthy food in schools”*
 - *“Promote healthy foods”*
 - *“Make sure they know sugar is bad and is present in so many unexpected places like tomato sauce and baked beans”*
- Promoting exercise:
 - *“More activities for kids”*
 - *“More dodgeball sessions; urban sports”*
 - *“Activity days”*
- Raising awareness through education:
 - *“More informative education targeting parents/guardians and carers”*

Conclusions

Wandsworth has a higher proportion of obese children than the England average yet the low levels of awareness about obesity and the many related health risks presents a serious local and national challenge.

Childhood obesity has a big impact on children and local communities. It increases risks of psychological disorders, certain cancers and diabetes. It also puts increased strain on services, costing the NHS £4.2 billion per year⁴. The results of our survey also support findings by experts that the key causes of childhood obesity are a combination of environmental and social factors including:

- **The availability of fast food**
- **Unhealthy portions**
- **Confusion about healthiest food options**
- **The city environment**, for example discouraging walking and cycling

While people make choices about what they eat, and what they feed their children, our survey responses indicate that choices we make are affected by the environment we live in and in our borough there are **limited opportunities to make healthy life choices**.

Respondents to our survey thought tackling childhood obesity should be a national and local priority, while stressing that local leaders are best placed to understand local populations, risks and opportunities, and that they must take the lead in implementing strategies to tackle childhood obesity.

⁴ Healthy London Partnership, Great Weight Debate – Summary Slides, 21 September 2016

Recommendations

According to our survey the following strategies should be considered by local leaders to tackle childhood obesity and related problems, and to change an environment which makes it easier to gain weight than lose it:

1. **Increase awareness of obesity related problems and comorbidities:** especially in schools and amongst parents
2. **Promotion of healthier food choices**
3. **Promotion of exercise facilities**

Due to limited time we were not able to achieve a broad a response or explore the issues further as we would have preferred. However, the responses and suggestions do echo findings of our earlier consultations. Healthy food has been a positive lifestyle choice often identified in our '[What Keeps Me Well](#)' survey. Young people responded to our [Healthy Alternatives to Junk Food](#) consultation suggested that there was an awareness of healthy food options. However, convenience, appealing taste and low cost of healthy food would be encourage them to make the right choices. **We would recommend further investigation of practical solutions to address the obesity problem by engaging local communities to develop them.**

Although this consultation focused on childhood obesity adult obesity, adult attitudes have an impact on children and their perceptions of healthy weight and lifestyle choices. As many of our respondents highlighted, parents particularly have direct influence over the choices children are able to make. Importantly this implies that **residents throughout the borough should be enabled and encouraged to make healthy lifestyle choices.** To be effective these choices need to be **easy and suit the daily lifestyle, and needs and preferences of residents.** For example, availability of exercise that is convenient and enjoyable, such as a walk or cycle to work or being able to quickly purchase a healthy meal. To be inclusive the right choices must be cost effective for personal budgets.

The obesity problem is a community wide problem so solving the problem will involve changing social and environmental influences throughout the community. The importance and urgency of the challenge suggests that public awareness campaigns to educate and inform is a priority. Local residents should also be involved in promoting public awareness and information and developing solutions. **It is also crucial to advocate for changes to the local environment by engaging and involving a broad range of local stakeholders,** such as the council and the private sector, **who provide the lifestyle resources people draw on** such as exercise facilities, local transport and food outlets.

Appendix A - The Questionnaire

London has **more overweight and obese children** than other cities like New York, Sydney, Paris or Madrid. More than a third are overweight or obese by the time they leave primary school.

Wandsworth has a higher proportion of children that are obese or overweight than the England average, for example approximately 22% of children between the ages of 3 and 5 are overweight or obese.

London councils, including Wandsworth Council, have plans to tackle childhood obesity but results need to come quickly so more work may need to be done. **The Great Weight Debate** has been launched to find out what people think will help children and families lead healthier lives and make healthy choices.

This questionnaire can be completed anonymously, and the answers you give will be shared with Wandsworth council and others to help inform plans to tackle the obesity problem.

1. Which of the following health risks did you know were linked to obesity?

Diabetes Heart Attack or Stroke Depression Liver Disease
Colon Cancer Infertility in women

None of the above

2. Do you think that tackling childhood obesity should be a national priority?

Yes No

Please explain:

3. Do you think that tackling childhood obesity should be a local priority?

Yes No

Please explain:

4. What do you think are the top three factors contributing to childhood obesity in Wandsworth?

5. What do you think should be the top three strategies to tackle childhood obesity in Wandsworth?

Increased awareness of health risks in school settings

Increased awareness of health risks in GP settings

Safer cycle lanes

Increased availability of exercise facilities

Affordable healthy breakfast clubs

Personalised support for overweight and obese individuals

Promotion of healthier food choices

Reduced portion sizes

Any other suggestions, if none of the above:

6. How many of the following initiatives are you aware of in Wandsworth?

BMI calculator on GP and council websites

Annual health checks in GP practices

Cancer Pop Up shops

BMI checks at community events

School nursing service

Weaning talks

'Health Promoting Food in Schools' network

Breastfeeding Welcome campaign

None of the above

7. What more can Wandsworth Council do to better support children to lead healthier lives?

Appendix B - All Individual Responses

1. Which of the following health risks did you know were linked to obesity?

Diabetes	Heart Attack or Stroke	Depression	Liver Disease	Colon Cancer	Infertility in women	None of the above
16	12	6	7	4	8	
100.0%	75.0%	37.5%	43.8%	25.0%	50.0%	0.0%

2. Do you think that tackling childhood obesity should be a national priority?

Yes	No
16	
100.0%	0.0%

Comments:

Help support the economy, not drain resources
 Every one should be working towards the overall health of our children
 Catch them young
 To prevent adult obesity
 Better future for them when they grow up
 From parenting and curtailing fast food near schools
 Because they are eating fast food and also don't want to eat healthy food.
 The health risks associated with obesity contribute to most of the health issues that the NHS have to deal with
 It is always better to stop being obese early on and get fixed. It is more difficult to get rid of excess weight.
 Many people only respond to national initiatives, as they do not feel they need to. National initiatives/priorities are taken more seriously.
 Due to the various illnesses causing lots of financial and social problems, medical issues need to be seen and attended to as well
 The children of today are the leaders of tomorrow so we need to make their health and wellbeing a priority
 Costs the NHS too much money
 Get the nation thinking healthy food and exercise! It's the opposite at the moment

3. Do you think that tackling childhood obesity should be a local priority?

Yes	No
15	
93.8%	0.0%

Comments:

Care for your neighbours
 As above
 As above
 Healthy children for next generation
 It saves money in the NHS
 "Processed foods, processed minds". Expressly so as they are the future.
 Every borough needs to teach schools to have healthy meals - no pizza or chips
 The borough has one of the highest rates of obesity
 Wandsworth seems to have more obese children
 This would support whatever national initiatives are put in place. Also practical decisions can only be effectively implemented at a local level.
 In finding out about the problem, visit your GP as soon as possible
 It is always easier and logical to tackle issues on a local level as local authorities have the information and statistics that are unique to their area, thus making it easier to target the right people.
 We need to take responsibility
 Could tackle at schools, education re healthy food and how food is linked to health

4. What do you think are the top three factors contributing to childhood obesity in Wandsworth?

Comments:	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3		
1	Information	Free trial classes	Passionate people		
2	Eating too much sweets	Less exercise			
3	Fast food	Lack of exercise	Parental knowledge		
4	Lots of local fitness activities are very expensive	Exercise equipment in parks tend to be on dark, poorly lit estates			
5	Fast food	Lack of exercise	Sweets		
6	Not eating healthy	Takeaways	Sugar		
7	Lacking exposure to nature	Keeping fit	TV/Social Media		
8	Not eating healthy food		Parents should teach their children to eat healthy		
9	Education of children in delaying immediate gratification	Sedentary lifestyle	Knowledge of parents regarding nutrition		
10	Eating habits	Lack of exercise	Lack of awareness		
11	Too many sugary drinks	Having tinned and processed foods that have sugar to make them more attractive			
12	The proliferation of fast food outlets	The availability of sweets and snacks at the supermarket checkouts	Parents who don't say no	Inadequate provision for school dinners	School students who are allowed to have lunch outside school
13	Must be taught from a young age about a balanced diet and exercise				
14	Easy access to fatty and sugary food	Lack of information or denial of the dangers of obesity	Lack of strict parenting in area of food choices		
15	Junk food is cheap	Obese parents	Parenting. Not educating parents.		
16	Too many junk/fast food shops. Should be replaced by healthy food shops. There's no point educating people about healthy food and then lining the high street with junk food restaurants				

5. What do you think should be the top three strategies to tackle childhood obesity in Wandsworth?

Increased awareness of health risks in school settings	Increased awareness of health risks in GP settings	Safer cycle lanes	Increased availability of exercise facilities	Affordable healthy breakfast clubs	Personalised support for overweight and obese individuals	Promotion of healthier food choices	Reduced portion sizes
13	6	4	8	7	5	8	2
24.5%	11.3%	7.5%	15.1%	13.2%	9.4%	15.1%	3.8%

Any other suggestions:

- Subsidised gym, classes and activities
- Increasing Healthwatch funding!!!
- Annual weigh-ins for all children of school age - followed by counselling to congratulate or advise students, according to what is best suited
- Individuals taking responsibility for their own care; followed by rewards, including certificates
- Ban junk food and sweets on school premises. Kids can eat them outside if they wish but shouldn't be encouraged at schools.

6. How many of the following initiatives are you aware of in Wandsworth?

BMI calculator on GP and council websites	Annual health checks in GP practices	Cancer Pop Up shops	BMI checks at community events	School nursing service	Weaning talks	'Health Promoting Food in Schools' network	Breastfeeding Welcome campaign
7	7	2	4	4	5	7	3
43.8%	43.8%	12.5%	25.0%	25.0%	31.3%	43.8%	18.8%
None of the above							
2							
12.5%							

7. What more can Wandsworth Council do to better support children to lead healthier lives?

Comments:

- More dodgeball sessions; urban sports
- More activities for kids
- Have more free parent and child exercise classes
- Less conservative input
- Activity days
- Give fruits and vegetables in school
- Increase the budget of Healthwatch!!
- To put healthy food in schools
- More awareness. Promote healthy foods.
- Make sure they know sugar is bad and is present in so many unexpected places like tomato sauce and baked beans
- Reward them for success. Give them points for each milestone passed, then award them with a prize at the end, based on points collected
- More informative education targeting parents/guardians and carers
- Support
- Stop leasing commercial spaces to junk food businesses