

# Tackling childhood obesity in West Yorkshire

## The role of nature and the outdoors

Workshop Report - Bradford, 25<sup>th</sup> November 2015

### Purpose of the meeting

Initiatives that improve access to the natural outdoors have always been part of the health service in the UK. They play a vital role in promote healthy lifestyles as well as helping people to manage ill health when it arises. There is a growing aspiration that local environmental initiatives can play a bigger and more tangible part in preventing ill health and promoting good health in the UK.

One way of turning this aspiration into action is to focus efforts on local partnerships to tackle specific health priorities. The Ecosystems Knowledge Network organised this workshop in partnership with the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare, with a view to stimulating one such local initiative. The South Pennines Local Nature Partnership initiated the event with the aim of setting up a programme of work with the Yorkshire West Local Nature Partnership.

The event involved 30 participants from environmental, education and food initiatives in West Yorkshire and several public health specialists. Participants represented local authorities, environmental charities, research institutions, public agencies and a water company.

### Information and ideas presented at the meeting

**Professor Harry Rutter** from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine opened the event by presenting a perspective on what interventions work for obesity. He is senior strategic adviser on obesity for Public Health England. Professor Rutter made the following points:

- There is certainly a role for individual behavioural change to improve health, however the choices people make are framed by the environment in which they make those choices. For this reason, there is a need for major changes to the food and physical activity environments.
- Caution is needed against over-emphasis of the cost-effectiveness argument for improving access to the natural outdoors for health. While this argument can be very powerful in securing funding for improved access to the outdoors to tackle health issues, there is a need for caution in its use. It is essential to consider the multiple benefits of local natural outdoor spaces, of which health is just one. Not all of these benefits can (or should) be monetised.

**Dr Zoe Knowles and Dr Lynne Boddy** from Liverpool John Moores University explained how physical activity, and the settings in which this takes place, can benefit child health. They made the following key points:

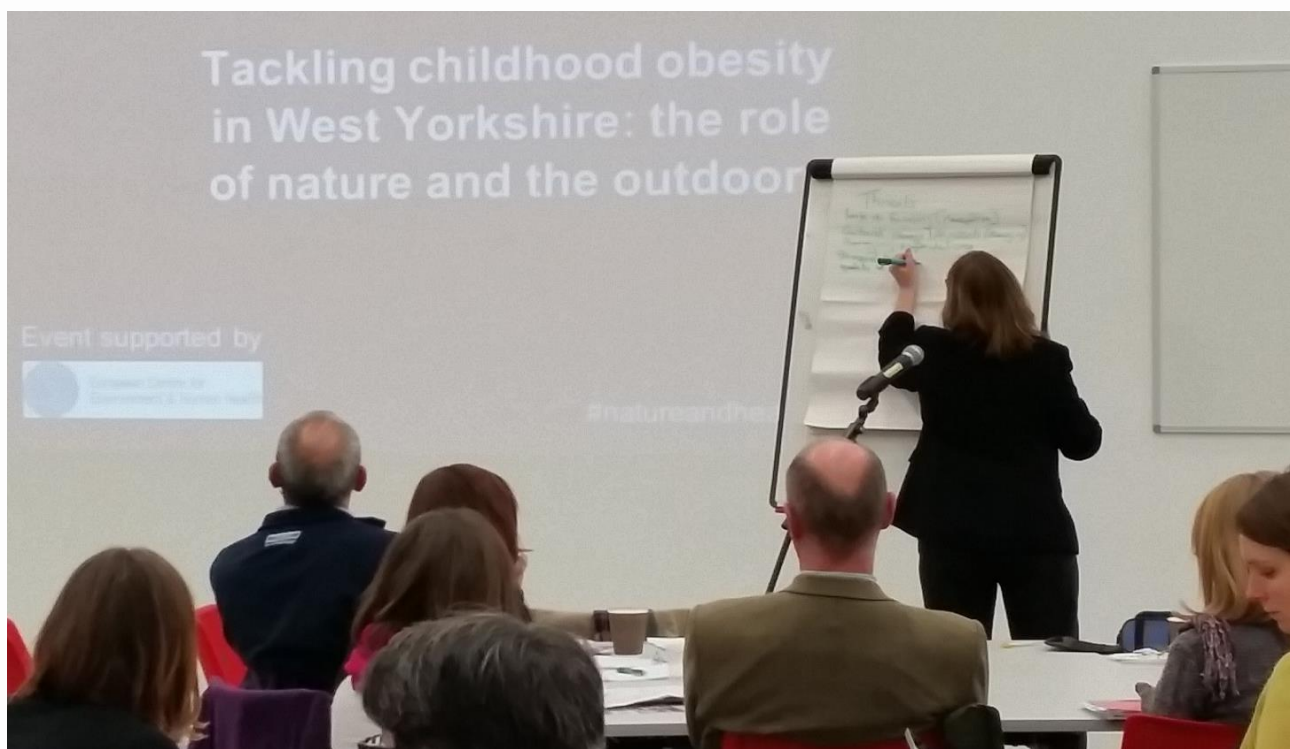
- Children's physical activity patterns are different to adults, being more sporadic and taking place in a wide range of settings (from the journey to school to around the

home). Children are much more active on week days than at weekends and boys and girls differ in the way they exercise and why they exercise. This should be taken into account in the design of new programmes to tackle childhood obesity.

- School is an important setting for improving children's physical activity because it involves all children in structured and well-managed activities. Forest School days, where learning takes place outside the classroom, are highly beneficial. They provide considerable benefits over and above traditional forms of school day exercise such as PE lessons.
- Children should be involved in the design of any programme to improve their physical activity.

**Dr Sally Barber and Dr Sara Ahern** introduced Born in Bradford, a birth cohort study to provide insight into health trends in Bradford and beyond. Over 12,000 mothers were recruited into the study between 2007 and 2011. They had nearly 14,000 children in this period. The study provides an opportunity to evaluate the impact of various interventions to improve the health of children. This includes a programme to promote physical activity by running sessions for pre-school children and their mothers in school playgrounds. Dr Ahern pointed out the links between promoting physical activity through active travel and the statutory requirements to tackle poor air quality.

**Jane Robinson** from the **Bradford Community Environment Project** shared some lessons from the Gardening for Health Project in Bradford. This has been running for over 20 years and has involved more than 2,000 people in some of the City's most deprived communities. Jane highlighted the opportunity of gardening and local food projects to engage socio-economic groups that may otherwise be hard to involve. Gardening for Health has demonstrated how children's interest in growing food can serve as a valuable starting point to encourage physical activity. The need for trained staff and suitable equipment to enable children to be safe and active outdoors should not be overlooked.



*Photo: participants discuss a potential pilot programme for West Yorkshire.*

**Hawarun Hussain**, a Councillor for Bradford City involved in a variety of health initiatives, reminded participants of the long-term obesity challenge for her city. She pointed out how this was most acute in areas with less greenspace.

**Helen Noble** from Pennine Prospects (home of the South Pennines Local Nature Partnership) talked about the capability of Local Nature Partnerships in bringing together partners for collaborative activity to address health challenges. She highlighted the importance of opportunities to tackle childhood obesity through improved access to the natural outdoors in the wider landscape as well as within urban centres. The Healthy Parks, Healthy People programme in Australia was given as a useful example of an initiatives in the wider landscape that had delivered health benefits.

## Outcomes and Follow-up

Some participants started to formulate a pilot project that would address childhood obesity through improved access to the natural outdoors. This would be focused on West Yorkshire.

The groups identified that a pilot project would need to focus on the co-ordination of activity. It would need to include of people working at the core of the health system and who have responsibility for tackling childhood obesity.

The work would involve giving recognition to:

- The experience and social capital of existing projects (such as the Bradford Community Environment Project).
- The relative proximity of urban centres (such as Bradford and Halifax) to the open countryside of West Yorkshire.

Participants are expected to meet again early in 2016 to progress the pilot project. The Local Nature Partnerships in the area have expressed a desire to provide the co-ordination and strategic oversight necessary for the project.

More information on speakers and available presentations can be found at:

<http://ecosystemsknowledge.net/about/events/bradford>

*The organisers are grateful to the European Centre for Environment and Human Health for supporting this event, along with Ecosystems Knowledge Network's current funders: Defra, NERC (via the BESS Programme) and Scottish Government.*

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