Policy proposals should:

• Recognise the complex and contested nature of obesity as measured by BMI.
• Engage with the evidence base which illustrates the damaging effects of generalising links between weight status and health.
• Focus on structural inequalities and social determinants of health, including food security, poverty and the environment.
• Demonstrate how they will tackle inequality and ensure that what is proposed will not widen inequality through effective engagement with social determinants of health.

Barriers to healthy eating and physical activity, particularly those most impacted by health inequalities, regardless of weight, must be removed for healthier outcomes for all.
Key findings

• Our review found that the overall problem framing of 'obesity' in The Policy risks reducing the important public health aims to encourage healthy diets and increase opportunities for physical activity for children (and the physical and mental health benefits of both) to weight management, to damaging effect.

• Our review critiques the individualising of responsibility to respond to systemic factors and structural inequalities, warning of the potential to perpetuate stigmatising narratives. The damaging effects of stigma can not be overlooked, recognising the barriers caused by stigma in reducing the opportunities for health promoting behaviours, to positive health outcomes, and to timely and appropriate treatment of health problems.

• We propose an alternative conceptualisation that the obesity rates shown by the social gradient in BMI trends at a population level are illustrative of inequality. Therefore, rather than 'obesity' being the ‘problem’, we propose that the ‘problem’ to be addressed is inequality.

• As the public health priority of childhood obesity continues to develop and implementation of The Policy continues to unfold, policy makers must seriously consider the damaging effects of the wider social determinants of health central to their proposals, to offer the greatest potential to promote better child health and reduce inequalities found in obesity measures.

Further information

Further information on this project can be found here.
This research has been published as a paper which can be found at: Griffin, N., Phillips, S.M., Hillier-Brown, F. et al. A critique of the English national policy from a social determinants of health perspective using a realist and problem representation approach: the ‘Childhood Obesity: a plan for action' (2016, 2018, 2019).

Contact the researchers

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About the School

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial; and University College London; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM); LiLaC – a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; and Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

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