

## **Medway Childhood Obesity Five Year Plan (2025-2030)**

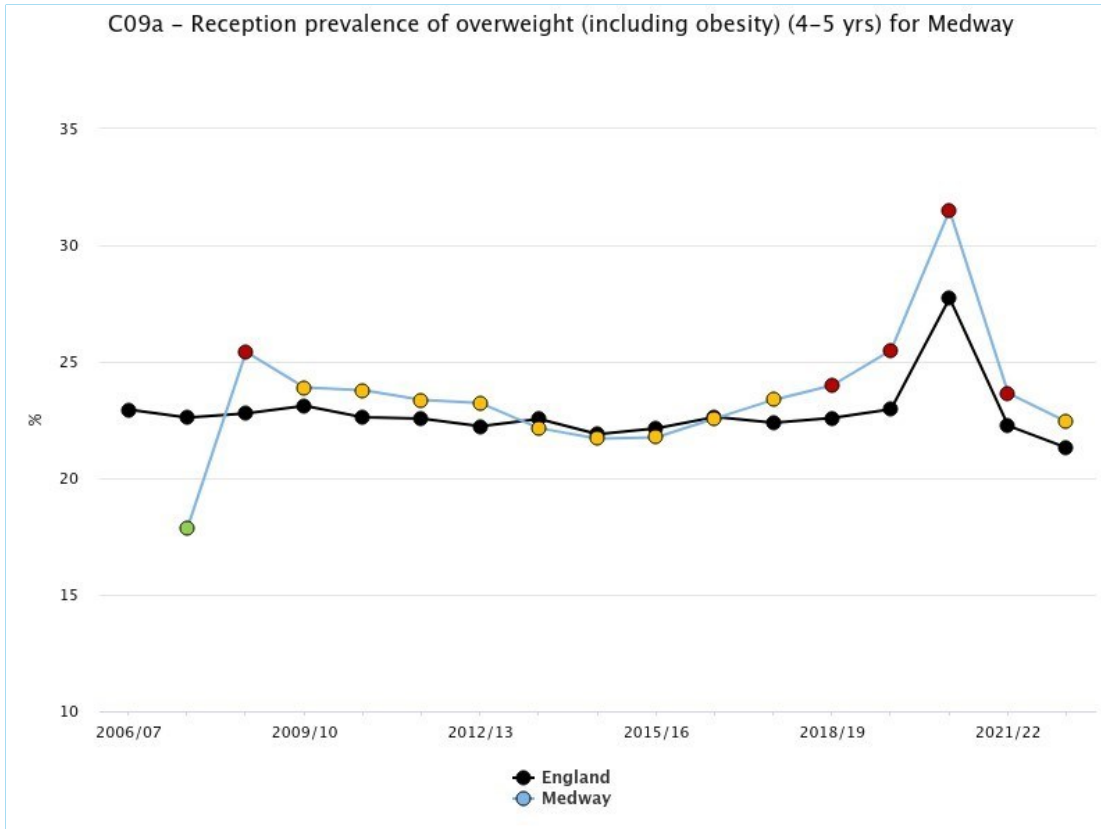
### **Introduction**

Childhood obesity and excess weight are significant health issues for children and their families. There can be serious implications for a child's physical, emotional wellbeing and mental health, which can continue into adulthood. The number of children with an unhealthy and potentially dangerous weight is a national public health concern. Obesity is associated with poor psychological and emotional health, and many children experience bullying linked to their weight. There is also a correlation between higher hospital admissions and healthcare needs, along with school attendance impacting academic attainment. Children living with obesity are more likely to become adults living with obesity and have a higher risk of morbidity, disability and premature mortality in adulthood.

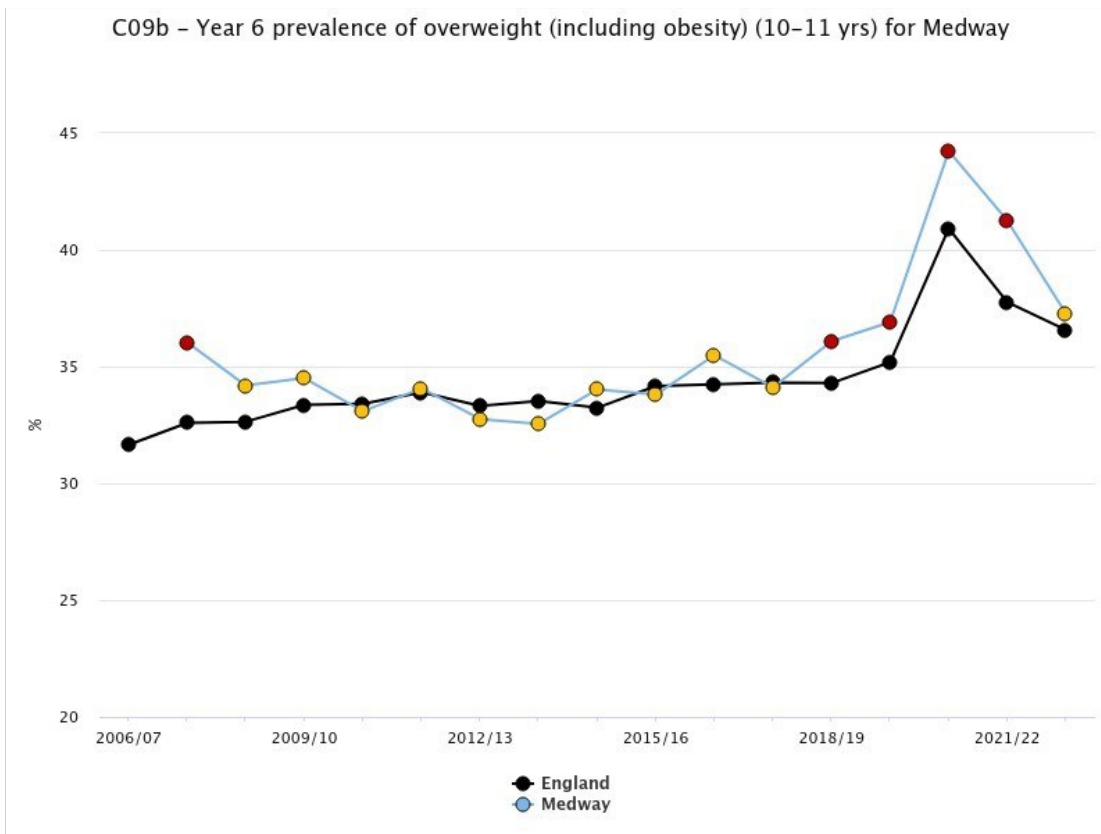
Children are currently consuming more than the recommended daily limit of sugar and this is a contributing factor to excess weight gain. The [National Diet and Nutrition Survey](#) found that sugary drinks account for 17% of 11 to 18 year olds' daily sugar intake or 6% of 4 year olds daily sugar intake. Physical activity can help children and young people to achieve and maintain a healthier weight. The [2019 to 2020 Sport England Active Lives survey](#) showed that only 45% of children and young people met the Chief Medical Officer's Physical Activity Guidelines and participated in an average of 60 minutes or more of physical activity a day. Meanwhile, 31.3% did less than an average of 30 minutes a day.

Child obesity data from the last 18 years is available from the National Child Measurement Programme. Data is published annually and can be broken down for local authorities and comparisons made between genders, deprivation quintiles and ethnicity. The most recent data shows that childhood obesity continues to be a major health concern.

*Figure 1:* Year R (4-5 year olds) overweight and obesity rates in Medway compared to England average. The current data shows a continued decrease in the obesity levels with a 1.3% reduction in the last year, however Medway remains slightly higher than the England average.



**Figure 2:** Year 6 (10-11 year olds) overweight and obesity rates in Medway compared to England average. Medway’s levels have decreased by 4% in the last year, however they still remain above the England average.



The [UK Parliament](#) identified that obesity is complex and driven by multiple behavioural, social, and environmental factors. The biggest risk factors include unhealthy diet, lack of physical activity, family health and behaviour, access to food outlets and spaces for exercise.

Following a local review of the evidence base of what works to tackle childhood obesity, the individual enablers are listed on the graphics jigsaw puzzle pieces.



The jigsaw puzzle analogy is appropriate when describing a wicked system problem such as childhood obesity. No single intervention (or jigsaw puzzle piece) will deliver the end product of reducing obesity and local interventions need to slot together to compliment each other. The jigsaw image above intentionally has no edges, as the physical environment is ever changing (often to be more obesogenic). Therefore, the action plan to tackle obesity needs to stay agile and new interventions and enablers need to be continuously considered.

## Policy Context

The [Government's obesity strategy](#), published in 2020, aims to tackle childhood obesity and encourage adults to “take stock of how they live their lives”. The [2018 strategy](#) included a Government ambition to halve childhood obesity and significantly reduce the gap in obesity between children from the most and least deprived areas by 2030.

The [Kent and Medway Integrated Care System Strategy](#) published in 2024 committed to addressing health inequalities including smoking in pregnancy, breastfeeding, immunisation and childhood obesity. Specifically, the system target was that by 2028, the percentage of children in Year 6 who are healthy weight will be maintained at the current level of 63 per cent and severe obesity will have reduced from five per cent.

The [One Medway Council Plan](#) identified the priority of empowering people to achieve good health and wellbeing through prevention, with access to local activities and services that will enable and support them to lead independent, active and healthy lifestyles.

The [Medway Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#) has a key strategic priority of healthier, longer lives for everyone. Childhood obesity specific targets within the strategy include ‘the proportion of children in Year 6 (age 10-11 years) with severe obesity will have reduced from 6.1% by 2026/27’ and ‘the percentage of physically active children and young people will be similar or higher compared to the England average by 2026/27’.

## Resident views and engagement

In 2021 the Medway Can healthy weight campaign was heavily informed by residents and partners through a series of surveys and workshops which included co-creation sessions involving primary aged children, along with a survey aimed at 13 to 18 year olds.

Questions were asked about physical activity frequencies, modalities and motivations, food choices, habits, and motivations. The aim was to explore whether capability, opportunity or motivation acted as moderators, mediators, or confounders of behaviours relating to maintaining healthy weight (e.g. physical activity and dietary choices).

Barriers to adopting healthy lifestyle behaviours were supportive of past research. Participants identified lack of time, lack of awareness of facilities, lack of knowledge, work, family, and other commitments, and low motivation. In addition to these barriers, others were identified such as digital exclusion, cultural barriers, low education status, negative or no prior exercise experience, and lack of social support.

Year 6 children identified barriers within their adult family groups such as lack of time, work commitments, inclement weather, social events that lead to sub-optimal eating behaviours, illness (specifically covid), and lack of family support. Children were also asked to describe the things that their parents did to support them in their own health behaviours. Children listed behaviours such as “making me go cycling” and “letting me make fruit salad” and “making me play outside.”

It was also noted in the community workshop that using children as messengers is powerful and has the potential to have impact. People are likely to feel motivated to take action if the call to action comes from their own children and young members of the community.

Many of the stakeholders and members of the public felt that there was a need for information about sedentary behaviours to be distributed because there is so much focus on adopting healthy behaviours that the risk of sedentary behaviours is lost. Many stakeholders agreed that they were not aware of the risks of, for example, sitting for long periods of time. Members of the public also agreed that they would prefer to be told that they should “stop doing nothing” rather than “start doing something.” This suggests that smaller, more manageable changes are likely to be more readily adopted. A particularly interesting conversation with community members suggested that they were not aware of the potential for small changes that can be made to achieve positive health benefits.

Equally, participants stated that they would like to see information about eating healthy on a budget; some suggested that local cafes and restaurants might offer taster dishes made using affordable ingredients, including ethnically diverse dishes. Community members felt that these businesses should be incentivised for promoting healthy menu options, particularly healthy take-away options.

Participants felt that by being informative there was less risk that a health promotion campaign was perceived as singling-out certain groups. However, stakeholders felt that the campaign should not shy away from messages about being overweight or obese carrying health risks. However, there was agreement that a focus on appearance might be damaging to motivation:

*‘Don’t focus on appearance- big is beautiful, but is it healthy?’*

*‘There’s a difference between shock tactics and giving people accurate information’*

Both stakeholder and public members felt that the focus should be on health rather than appearance, with messaging focusing on the physical and mental wellbeing associated with

exercise and good nutrition. “Happiness” and “energy” were frequently used words throughout both stakeholder and community member sessions.

In 2017 Medway Public Health ran a survey to hear from residents about how to help more local people to be a healthy weight. 740 people responded, sharing a range of views and ideas. The main points repeated very often were that to help residents of Medway achieve a healthy weight, we need to show how healthy eating can be achieved. Specifically, showing that it can be easy (giving people the skills, knowledge and ideas), quick and affordable (proving it can be cheaper than processed food or takeaways). Respondents were also clear that we must promote healthy eating and exercise together – emphasising that the combination is important. Cost and ease of use were important in relation to encouraging greater physical activity, with repeated requests for free or subsidised activities and facilities that are easily available to all.

Helping children to be a healthy weight insights included:

- Nearly all (94%) respondents felt physical activity and sport opportunities at school (in and outside of the curriculum) were most important to help children in Medway maintain a healthy weight
- Over ½ stated it was important for schools to offer walk and cycle to school initiatives, and for children’s centres to provide a range of lifestyle sessions for children and families
- Many suggested low-cost activity options for whole families

Other ideas put forward, included:

- Make it easier and cheaper to shop, cook and eat healthy
- Education about healthy diet and how to cook
- Improved access to healthy food
- Greater access to exercise and activity opportunities
- Campaigns focused on healthy weight & exercise, and against unhealthy foods, such as sugary drinks

## **Medway Whole System Obesity Approach**

In 2019 Public Health England (PHE), now the Office of Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID), released their whole systems approach to obesity publication which is a guide and set of resources to support local authorities and their partners with implementing a whole systems approach to address obesity and promote a healthy lifestyle.

A local whole systems approach responds to complexity through an ongoing, dynamic and flexible way of working. It enables local stakeholders, including communities, to come together, share an understanding of the reality of the challenge, consider how the local system is operating and where there are the greatest opportunities for change.

The Medway Healthy Weight Network was formed in 2014 bringing together organisations across Medway such as charities, voluntary sector, public sector, NHS, private businesses, educational organisations and residents to work together to tackle the rising obesity levels. The network is overseen by the Medway Health and Wellbeing Board where progress is reported yearly via a [formal report](#) and a request to sign off a set of annual priorities.

Using PHE’s guidance on developing a Whole Systems Approach to Obesity in Medway, the network provided the foundation to build upon and create subgroups to carry forward key priorities in the local area.

Since 2020 the network has developed three subgroups to focus on key areas of activity:

- The Medway Infant Feeding Strategy Group is made up of health professionals across acute, primary and community NHS organisations and public health professionals. The group work together to ensure parents are supported through antenatal care and post-natal support to ensure that all new parents have the tools they need to give their babies the best start in life. The group work towards 6 goals identified in the [2023-2028 Infant Feeding Strategy](#).
- [The Medway Food Partnership](#) works with local businesses, public services and the not-for-profit sector to make sure everyone has access to sustainable and healthy food, build the public's education and skills around healthy food and create healthier communities and better futures for all residents.
- [The Medway Physical Activity Alliance](#) brings together physical activity providers, clinical professionals, and partners to break down the barriers to exercise and educate on the importance of regular movement. The group seek to promote low cost or free activity by bring awareness to the [Everyday Active](#) website to all those living, working, and studying in Medway.

There are over 550 individual members of the Healthy Weight Network spanning over 200 separate organisations. These include a range of public, private, academic and voluntary sector partners.

### **Current interventions to tackle childhood obesity**

The [Whole Systems Obesity mapping tool](#) is a web-based platform that provides the opportunity to see what is going on at a detailed level. It helps identify gaps in provision and gives the opportunity to list ideas of new interventions to introduce in the future.

Medway's Public Health Team provide a wide range of interventions to support children to be active, eat healthily and lose weight. This includes:

- Little Chefs, Little Food Explorers, Tri cookery courses
- A Better Medway Champions
- A Better Medway training
- Beside You breastfeeding promotion and campaign
- Healthy Early Years Award scheme for nurseries and pre-schools
- Food for Life whole school food programme and Future Farmers project
- Fit Fix and Tri Club family weight management support
- Bump Club healthy weight advice for pregnant and post-natal women
- Child Health Team support to schools
- Medway Go – Holiday Activity Food programme
- Start for Life and Family Hubs App

Medway Council service interventions include:

- Range of activities at Medway Children and Family Hubs and Family Solutions
- Active travel initiatives, (Walk to School Week, Big Walk and Wheel)
- Medway Sport, leisure centres and sports activities for children
- Child Friendly Medway activities for children

NHS and Healthcare interventions include:

- Health Visiting and School nursing service
- More Life Tier 3 weight management for children and young people

Other interventions are delivered by a wide range of Medway Healthy Weight Network academic, public and private sector partners. These include:

- A range of sports and activity clubs



- School and college based activities
- Health promotion events

### Five year plan priorities

Over the next 5 years the ultimate priority for the partners of the Medway Healthy Weight Network is to see a reduction in childhood obesity. The specific healthy weight targets that have been set in the One Medway Council Plan and the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy are:

- By 2026/27, the proportion of children in Year R (age 4-5 years) that maintain a healthy weight will be the same or lower than the England average.
- By 2026/27, the proportion of children in Year 6 (age 10-11 years) that maintain a healthy weight will be the same as or above 60%.
- By 2026/27, the proportion of children in Year 6 (age 10-11 years) with severe obesity will have reduced from 6.1%.
- By 2026/27, the percentage of physically active children and young people will be similar or higher compared to the England average.
- By 2026/27, the proportion of infants that are totally or partially breastfed at age 6-8 weeks will be similar or higher compared to the England average.

Specific targets beyond 2027 for the five year plan will be set upon review of progress against the targets above.

Medway aim to achieve these targets with the following priority actions:

<b>Priority</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Means of verification</b>
Increase engagement and activity of the Medway Healthy Weight Network	750 members engaged with the Medway Healthy Weight network by 2030	Internal network list of partners
Tackling childhood obesity is identified as a priority across all council and key partner policies and strategies over the next 5 years	Include childhood obesity in 20 new policies and strategies across the council and key partners	Audit of council and key partner policies and strategies
Year on year investment into tackling child obesity	Annual 10% increase in investment by the council and key partners	Audit of council and key partner expenditure
Medway to create a healthy and sustainable food environment	Medway to be awarded the Sustainable Food Places Gold award by 2030	Sustainable food places award certificate
Develop a network mapping tool to identify new partners for the Healthy Weight Network	Publish network mapping tool on the Whole Systems Obesity Dashboard identifying new opportunities and network risks by the end of 2025	Whole Systems Obesity Dashboard mapping tool
Increase in referrals to family weight management services	5% increase in referrals from health and care professionals and self-referrals per year	Public Health record management system
Increase in free physical activity opportunities for children and families	25 additional free physical activity interventions offered for children and families by 2030	Whole Systems Obesity Dashboard

Increase in number of children and families learning to cook healthy food	10% increase in uptake of family cookery sessions per year	Public Health record management system
Schools adopting a whole school food programme	10% increase in schools achieving the food for life award per year	Food for Life award list
Medway is recognised as an area of best practice for the Whole Systems Obesity Programme	National documents referencing Medway's approach and tools	National documents, programmes for conferences and national awards
Increase in the number of children walking and cycling to school	5% increase in the number of children using an active travel method to commute to school year on year	
Increase in breastfeeding initiation and continuation rates	Implement the actions within the Medway Infant feeding Strategy	Medway Infant Feeding Strategy annual report
Increase the number of children accessing Medway Go	5% increase in the number of children accessing Medway Go year on year	Medway Go dashboard audit
Increase the number of pre-school settings that create and promote a healthy weight environment for children	5% increase in the number of pre-school settings achieving Gold status for the Healthy Early Years award year on year	Healthy Early Years Award database
Anchor institutions creating healthy weight environment	20 additional public and academic sector buildings implementing healthy weight environment initiatives	Whole System Obesity Dashboard
More community venues offering free water refill opportunities	5% increase in number of community settings listing themselves on the Water Refill app	Water Refill app database
Professionals and volunteers attending training on healthy weight subjects	500 professionals and volunteers attending ABM healthy weight and safeguarding training	ABM workforce development database
More people accessing green and blue space for recreation purposes	5% increase in the number of people accessing a park, play area, or river for recreation purposes year on year	