

# Health fair helps to tackle obesity

Catherine Heffernan found the public reacting with enthusiasm when the way to healthy life is entertaining and engaging.

Recently, a group of mothers with babies asked me the way to the Civic Centre. They were on their way to a Health Fair. I quickly gave directions and rushed ahead, thinking to myself that at least a handful of people would show up. Then I was met with a surprise. The fair was about to begin and already more than 250 local people were there. I gasped. The fair had started as a simple idea to promote tackling obesity in a fun way. Clearly the public had an appetite for it.

I chair the Healthy Weight Board in the London Borough of Hounslow. This is a partnership board made up of representatives from public health, GPs, hospital clinicians, dietetics, healthy weight teams, weight management providers, voluntary and independent sectors and from local authority, planning, transport, environment as well as adult services and children services.

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Back in April the Board came up with a delivery plan taking a life course approach to tackling obesity from maternity to adulthood including actions to be taken at removing barriers to healthy weight, such as lack of green spaces. Both preventive activities and weight management interventions are included. In a way, the delivery plan was ahead of its time. It predated the new national obesity strategy which recommends a similar approach.

Local councillors were quite keen that the public were informed that we were working

together to tackle obesity, particularly childhood obesity which is a huge problem in the borough. My team and I wanted to do it in a fun way and the idea of a health fair was born. Providers of various healthy weight services were invited to have stalls or taster sessions of the services they provided.

So members of the public were able to sample ‘dietary makeovers’, make smoothies using a bicycle, do Zumba and Bollywood dancing, Nordic walking, football and dance mats amongst other activities. Children were overhead exclaiming that they never knew that exercise made them ‘hot’ and ‘happy’. Parents commented that they had no idea that being healthy could be so much fun.

Leading up to the day, we ran a ‘Healthy Project’ competition during the summer holidays for school children. Primary and secondary school children were encouraged to be as creative as possible in thinking of how they would get their families to eat and live more healthily. The entries were all outstanding from short stories on protagonists learning the value of healthy eating to comic strips and movable cardboard models on exercise. Prizes were given

out on the day by a local celebrity, Red Madrell (star of ‘Kidulthood’) and we also launched the first ‘Healthy Hounslow’ Cookbook. This was a collection of recipes from members of the public and reflected the diversity of cooking in the borough from Irish to Caribbean recipes, Indian to New Zealand cooking. Dietitians checked all submitted recipes and the idea behind the book was to promote the message that healthy eating starts in the home. Just

like how oral traditions are passed from one generation to the next, cookery skills can also be passed on from parent to child, enabling them to look after themselves when they fly the nest. This free cookbook is now ‘sold out’ and following calls from residents, it is planned to be used in cookery classes in children’s centres.

What was innovative about this event was that this was the first time we used a fair to promote public health messages. It was time consuming to organise but the evaluation of the event so far has seen an increase in use of weight management programmes and other leisure



activities available to the public. There has also been a surge in requests for information. This has had a larger impact than traditional methods of mass media campaign and information from health professionals which we had previously utilised. So much that it is likely we may make this an annual event. I guess you could say that just like the film, ‘Field of Dreams’, “if you build it, it will come”. 