HEG | 20 Championing prevention for 20 years

Partnering for Prevention:

Health Equalities Group

www.heg.org.uk

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Health Equalities Group (HEG) is a public health charity with two decades of experience supporting systems to tackle the root causes of non-communicable diseases and address health inequalities. We work across sectors and settings, including local authorities, NHS Trusts, Integrated Care Systems, schools, academic institutions, and VCFSE organisations to co-develop interventions that are practical, scalable, and grounded in evidence.

As public services confront rising demand and entrenched inequalities, HEG brings the capability, partnerships, and insight to enable joined-up prevention and long-term change. We support public health systems to move upstream, embedding equity and impact at the heart of everything we do.

Health Equalities Group is a trusted partner for system-wide prevention, policy innovation, and long-term change. Our model combines evidence-driven insight, relational expertise, and practical tools to help systems unlock their potential. We invite commissioners, policy-makers, and system leaders to work with us in shaping healthier, fairer, and more resilient futures. For more information about what we do and how we do it, please visit our website and take a look at the case studies we've put together.

www.heg.org.uk

What we do and how we do it

At HEG, our work is rooted in practical action and collaborative system change. We focus on prevention frameworks, targeted interventions, applied research, workforce development, and advocacy to support partners in addressing the structural drivers of health. By aligning evidence with local context, we help move prevention from aspiration to embedded practice.

1. Prevention frameworks to support a left shift in population health

We design prevention frameworks that empower local authorities, NHS Trusts, schools, and other settings to address pressing public health challenges. These frameworks are co-produced with partners to ensure relevance and practicality, with each commitment designed to help organisations identify and act on the levers within their influence, whether through local policy, environmental change, or workforce development.

These frameworks are not off-the-shelf solutions, they are locally owned, shaped by context, and sustainable in nature. By focusing on structural drivers of health and aligning partners around common goals, we help move prevention from rhetoric to reality.

2. Designing interventions to address health inequalities

Our approach to addressing health inequalities is grounded in data and collaboration. We use public health intelligence and national datasets to identify underserved populations and develop interventions to support those most in need.

Where we can, we try to move beyond individual behaviour change by examining the wider contexts and circumstances in which people live. This enables local systems to respond to local needs that are both realistic and resonant with lived experience.

3. Supporting applied research to inform policy and practice

HEG has a strong track record of working in partnership with academic institutions, researchers, and statutory agencies to deliver applied public health research. We place particular emphasis on patient and public involvement (PPI), ensuring that those most affected by public health challenges have a meaningful voice in shaping research.

Our role does not end with publication. We actively support the translation of research findings into real-world practice, helping to embed insights into local systems and services. By doing so, we create a legacy that extends beyond the project lifecycle, informing commissioning, shaping policy, and driving change in populations most at risk.

4. Workforce development and capacity building

HEG delivers workforce development grounded in real-world system insight, from commissioners to frontline staff and the communities they support. Training is shaped by local context and need, not top-down assumptions.

We use the 'building blocks of health' to reframe how practitioners think about prevention, showing that health is shaped by structures as much as choices. This shift helps embed upstream thinking into everyday practice.

Our role is to challenge constructively, and to refine what's working and rethink what's not. Prevention shouldn't sit on the margins; we help move it to the centre.

5. Partnerships and advocacy for system change

We understand that system change takes time, and it requires direction, coordination, and shared momentum. Our work involves aligning partners around a common purpose, helping to steer efforts towards meaningful, long-term improvements in public health.

Our strength lies in connecting the dots. Whether bridging planning and transport, health and education, or the voluntary and statutory sectors, we help position prevention as a shared responsibility, not the remit of any one organisation. By fostering these links, we ensure public health is embedded across the system; not siloed within it.

Our advocacy is rooted in partnership. Rather than speak on behalf of others, we help build platforms where diverse voices can come together to influence policy and practice. The result is more coordinated, credible, and actionable change.

Case studies

The case studies in this collection demonstrate how Health Equalities Group translates its values and expertise into practice, working with partners to design, implement, and embed solutions that address the structural drivers of health. Each case study highlights a different aspect of our approach - whether through prevention frameworks, targeted interventions, applied research, workforce development, or advocacy - and illustrates how collaborative, evidence-informed action can achieve measurable impact. Together, they showcase the breadth of our work and the value of partnership in creating healthier, fairer, and more resilient systems.

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FOOD ACT!VE

North West Food Active Network

Amplifying North West public health leadership on food and health

Food Active was established in 2013 by the North West Directors of Public Health in partnership with Health Equalities Group (HEG), following frustration at the lack of national ambition to address the growing prevalence of overweight and obesity. Commissioned collaboratively by 23 local authorities in 2013, the programme created a unified voice for the region to advocate for stronger population-level action and policies that address the wider determinants of health.

From the outset, Food Active has championed bold policy change. The programme's Top Ten for Number Ten manifesto published in July 2014 called for measures such as a sugary drinks levy and restrictions on junk food advertising to children. These advocacy efforts helped build the case for the UK Soft Drinks Industry Levy, which has since removed more than 45,000 tonnes of sugar from supermarket shelves and contributed to reduced obesity and dental extractions in children.

Food Active has mobilised the collective influence of Directors of Public Health and elected members to call for action on issues including energy drinks, food marketing restrictions, and school food standards. By producing locally relevant modelling, consultation responses, open letters, and media campaigns, the programme has amplified the concerns of local authorities in national debates.

The programme's credibility lies in its strong partnerships across academia, local government, the NHS, and national campaign groups such as the Obesity Health Alliance and Sustain. Its Healthy Weight Declaration, GULP campaign, and policy briefings demonstrate how advocacy can be combined with practical tools that support local delivery.

Ten years on, Food Active continues to act as a catalyst for change and providing a voice for the North West at national level. By convening local authority voices and aligning them with national partners, the programme has positioned itself as a trusted platform for advocacy, influencing, and ensuring the priorities of local communities are heard at the highest levels of government.

www.foodactive.org.uk

PREVENTION PLEDGE
for Cheshire & Merseyside

NHS Prevention Pledge

Embedding prevention into NHS culture and practice through system-wide commitments to reduce inequalities.

The NHS Prevention Pledge is a region-wide initiative led by HEG, commissioned through Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board's Population Health Programme. It supports NHS Trusts to embed prevention, tackle health inequalities, and deliver on the ambitions of the NHS Long Term Plan.

The framework is underpinned by 14 core commitments, developed through extensive consultation with NHS England, local authority public health teams, NICE, OHID, and voluntary sector partners. The commitments span organisational culture, workforce development, healthier environments, social value, and action on inequalities. Adoption of the Pledge is also a pre-requisite for NHS trusts signing the Cheshire & Merseyside Anchor Institution Charter.

Since 2019, HEG has worked with all 16 NHS provider trusts across the sub-region, supporting each to adopt the Pledge and implement commitments through tailored action plans. Trusts track progress via six-monthly submissions, supported by HEG's resources, case studies, and one-to-one guidance. A Community of Practice, convened quarterly by HEG, brings together all trusts to share learning, while localised meetings link trusts with public health, ICB Place, and voluntary sector partners.

In 2024–25, a new Primary Care Pledge was co-developed with clinical directors, underpinned by six tailored commitments. This pilot, now running across selected Primary Care Networks, demonstrates scalability and the potential for further rollout.

By embedding prevention into governance cycles, aligning with NHS Long Term Plan and 10 Year Health Plan priorities, and supporting delivery through robust evaluation and shared learning, the NHS Prevention Pledge is strengthening the role of the NHS Trusts as anchor institutions, while reducing health inequalities across Cheshire and Merseyside.

www.preventionpledge.org.uk

School's Pledge programme

Supporting schools in deprived communities to tackle inequalities through healthier food, physical activity, and classroom environments where every child can thrive.

The School's Pledge for a Healthy and Active Future is supporting primary schools to make improvements to school food, increase physical activity levels and promote wider wellbeing through a whole-school approach. Following successful pilots in Knowsley and Leeds, the programme is now being rolled out across nine Cheshire and Merseyside local authorities, funded by the Integrated Care Board (ICB).

Over 18 months (October 2024–March 2026), the programme is supporting schools in three stages: initial consultation, adoption of the Pledge by an initial 27 schools, and expansion to a further 45 schools, including SEND settings. This phased approach demonstrates scalability and ensures the model can be embedded sustainably across different school contexts.

Each participating school receives structured support, tailored advice from registered nutritionists, digital resources, and bi-monthly network meetings to sustain momentum. Schools also appoint "Pledge Champions" who take ownership of delivery, building capacity within staff teams and reinforcing the programme's long-term sustainability.

Early outcomes show cultural change within schools: healthier food and drink policies are being adopted, active travel promoted, and pupils engaged in initiatives that reach into families and communities. This co-production approach strengthens impact, with staff, pupils, and parents working together to embed prevention into daily school life.

The programme is also creating system-wide change. It aligns directly with national and local priorities, including the School Food Standards, Childhood Obesity Plan, Local Authority Healthy Weight Declarations, and ICB prevention strategies. By embedding prevention into education — particularly in schools located in the most deprived 20% of areas — the Pledge tackles inequalities while supporting healthier childhood development.

Through strong partnerships with schools, local authorities, and researchers, HEG is building a scalable and sustainable network of health-promoting schools across Cheshire and Merseyside. The School's Pledge demonstrates how HEG works with the education sector to deliver upstream prevention and reduce health inequalities for future generations.

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“Why weight to talk?”

Empowering practitioners to hold compassionate, stigma-free conversations about healthier weight.

“Why weight to talk?” is a universal training programme that equips frontline professionals — including health visitors, school nurses, teachers, social prescribers, and voluntary sector staff — to hold sensitive, respectful conversations about healthier weight with children, young people, and their families.

Between 2023-25, NHS Cheshire and Merseyside funded HEG to deliver the programme across the sub-region. A total of 616 practitioners were trained through 51 online and in-person sessions. We worked with each local authority to understand referral pathways and support services and developed tailored resources, including a post-training support pack, to ensure learning could be embedded into practice. Colleagues from Halton Council were trained to deliver the programme, demonstrating the feasibility of a train-the-trainer model, laying the foundation for sustainable delivery at scale.

Evaluation demonstrated significant impact. Practitioners’ confidence to engage families rose sharply, and confidence in making referrals increased. Knowledge of the complex causes of overweight and obesity — including stigma, trauma, and wider determinants — improved markedly and was sustained at three-month follow-up. Importantly, the training shifted attitudes away from blame, helping practitioners build rapport with children and their families by reducing weight stigma.

Beyond individual learning, the programme acted as a catalyst for system change. Mapping local provision highlighted gaps and encouraged stronger integration between statutory and community services. Local authority colleagues endorsed “Why weight to talk?” as timely, strategic, and aligned with wider priorities such as Family Hubs, early years reform, and trauma-informed care.

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gulp.

Give Up Loving Pop (GULP)

Inspiring over 11,000 children to choose water over sugar-sweetened beverages to protect their oral health.

Give Up Loving Pop (GULP) is HEG's flagship oral health improvement programme designed to reduce children's consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs). Delivered in primary schools by professional sports club foundations, and funded by both local authorities and NHS bodies, the programme combines education with practical tools and challenges that help children and their families make healthier choices.

Since its inception, GULP has reached over 11,000 primary school children, with approximately 70% attending schools in the most deprived areas of England (IMD deciles 1–3). This targeted approach ensures the programme is making the greatest impact where health inequalities are most pronounced, particularly given the relationship between deprivation, poor oral health, and overweight and obesity.

The GULP model consists of a school assembly, three PSHE sessions, and the 21-day GULP Challenge. Pupils receive reusable water bottles and toothbrush/toothpaste packs, reinforcing key messages around hydration and oral hygiene. Delivery is supported by community sports coaches, upskilled by HEG, who act as trusted role models in the classroom.

Evaluation has shown that GULP consistently shifts children's preference for water across multiple settings — at school, at home, during sport and physical activity, and when eating or drinking out-of-home. These changes are reinforced by improved knowledge of the sugar content of drinks and stronger oral hygiene practices, including brushing teeth twice daily for two minutes or more. The model has also demonstrated scalability, having been successfully delivered across diverse settings including Blackpool, Lancashire, Warrington, Blackburn with Darwen, Wycombe, Haringey and Enfield.

By embedding prevention into schools and sports settings, and by focusing delivery in areas of highest deprivation, GULP is helping to reduce health inequalities, support healthier childhood development, and support wider work on oral health including supervised toothbrushing.

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STRATEGIC OBESITY PROJECT

Strategic Obesity Project for Cheshire & Merseyside

Bringing housing, planning, health, and community sectors together to tackle obesity as a cancer prevention priority.

HEG is delivering a long-term project for the Cheshire and Merseyside Cancer Alliance (CMCA) to tackle overweight and obesity as part of the sub-region's cancer prevention priorities. With above-average rates of both obesity and cancer prevalence, the project brings together health and non-health stakeholders – including housing, transport, employers, and VCFSE organisations – to strengthen prevention and create healthier environments.

The project is structured around four core workstreams:

- Building VCFSE capacity: HEG created the Why Weight Hub, a repository of resources and service directories, and trained over 160 voluntary and community practitioners through an adapted version of "Why weight to talk?".
- Planning levers: We launched the Food Policy & Planning Toolkit in March 2025, providing planners and public health teams with practical guidance to integrate healthier food environments into local plans; a resource with clear potential for national replication.
- Weight stigma training: Informed by academic evidence and lived experience, HEG piloted a new training package with primary care, secondary care, and cancer screening staff. Feedback highlighted strong relevance and value, with a refined model launched in July 2025.
- Housing, food insecurity and diet-related ill health: We engaged housing associations through surveys, workshops, and training, exploring the links between housing sustainment, food insecurity, and health outcomes - drawing attention to wider determinants often overlooked in obesity prevention.

The programme has shifted the local conversation from treatment to prevention. By linking cancer prevention with healthier weight agendas and embedding action across planning, housing, healthcare, and the VCFSE sector, HEG has demonstrated how convening diverse stakeholders can create a coordinated, system-wide approach.

The Strategic Obesity Project aligns with NHS Long Term Plan ambitions, and local prevention priorities, while also generating transferable learning for other regions. By building system capacity, tackling stigma, and addressing wider determinants such as food insecurity and housing, the programme reinforces HEG's role as a trusted delivery partner for sustainable, upstream prevention.

www.cm-strategicobesity.org

Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight

Supporting councils to lead the way on healthier weight with a bold, system-wide commitment to change.

The Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight (HWD) was developed in 2015 on behalf of the North West Food Active network, part of HEG, and formally adopted by Blackpool Council in 2016. Since then, it has grown into a national programme, with more than 35 councils across England committing to action on healthier weight.

The Declaration enables local authorities to provide visible leadership on healthier weight and to take a systems approach that embeds prevention across all council functions. Its 16 core commitments cover planning, procurement, schools, food environments, and advertising, while also allowing each authority to add locally tailored priorities through stakeholder consultation. This co-produced approach ensures relevance to local contexts while maintaining fidelity to the core framework.

Directors of Public Health, local authority public health colleagues, academics, and third sector partners were brought together to shape the framework. Today, we continue to provide practical support for adoption and implementation, including guidance, stakeholder engagement, and monitoring and evaluation tools.

Adoption of the Declaration has led to tangible outcomes: councils have restricted hot food takeaway growth through planning policy, developed healthier catering and vending frameworks, introduced advertising and sponsorship policies to limit promotion of high fat, salt, and sugar products, and worked with schools and businesses to improve the food environment for children and families.

The HWD demonstrates sustainability by embedding healthier weight into council governance, ensuring commitments extend beyond political cycles. Its national spread shows scalability and adaptability to different local contexts. The framework aligns with whole system approaches, and local and national prevention plans, reinforcing councils' role as system leaders in tackling inequalities.

“Are you onside?”

Harnessing the power of sport to challenge misogyny and violence against women through bystander training.

“Are you onside?” is a pioneering primary prevention programme developed by Health Equalities Group (HEG) through its Healthy Stadia programme, commissioned by the Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership. Delivered between 2023 and 2025, the project equipped community sport organisations across Merseyside with the tools to challenge sexism, misogyny, and violence against women and girls (VAWG) through evidence-based bystander intervention training.

The programme was built on the Football Onside methodology developed by the University of Exeter Law School and tailored specifically for the community sport sector. Delivered in partnership with Kindling Interventions and the NWG Network, training reached 245 participants across 19 programmes in 13 organisations, including Everton in the Community, Tranmere Rovers in the Community, Liverpool County FA, and the LFC Foundation.

Evaluation demonstrated significant impact across all domains measured. Participants reported greater belief in the importance of addressing VAWG, stronger confidence to intervene, and increased motivation to act. The largest shifts were seen in confidence and perceived peer approval, both vital enablers of active bystander behaviour. Qualitative feedback reinforced these outcomes, with participants describing the training as “eye-opening,” “transformative,” and “confidence-boosting.” Staff at Everton in the Community even adopted the phrase “offside” as an informal and culturally resonant call-out mechanism to challenge inappropriate behaviour.

“Are you onside?” has demonstrated how sport can be harnessed as a setting for cultural change. By empowering staff and volunteers to act as active bystanders, and by positioning prevention alongside safeguarding frameworks, HEG has strengthened the role of community and grassroots sport as a force for inclusion, safety, and respect.

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European Fans in Training (EuroFIT)

Bringing together academia, professional football, and public health to engage men in a programme to reduce health inequalities across Europe.

European Fans in Training (EuroFIT) was a ground-breaking randomised controlled trial (RCT) funded through the European Union's Seventh Framework Research Programme. Delivered between 2014 and 2019 across 15 professional football clubs in England, the Netherlands, Norway, and Portugal, the project sought to engage overweight and inactive men in lifestyle change by harnessing the power of professional sport.

HEG, through its Healthy Stadia programme, played a pivotal role as a convening partner. We brought together a wide range of stakeholders — including academic institutions, football clubs, coaches, technology providers, public health practitioners, and community organisations — many of whom had not traditionally worked together in health promotion. By coordinating across these diverse sectors, HEG helped create the conditions for rigorous academic research to be successfully implemented in real-world settings.

EuroFIT offered 12 weekly group sessions delivered in club stadia, combining behaviour change techniques with graded physical activity. Innovative self-monitoring tools and applications were developed to support participants' motivation and peer interaction. The programme attracted more than 1,100 men aged 30–65 with BMI $\geqslant$27 kg/m^2, making it one of the largest gender-sensitised lifestyle trials of its kind in Europe.

Results showed EuroFIT successfully increased physical activity, improved diet, reduced weight, and enhanced wellbeing and cardiometabolic health. The football club setting proved critical in reaching men often underserved by traditional public health interventions, showing how trusted cultural institutions can be mobilised to deliver on public health outcomes at scale.

EuroFIT demonstrated how HEG can support local, national and international research consortia to deliver large-scale, complex interventions while aligning academic rigour with system and community priorities to tackle health inequalities and achieve meaningful public health outcomes.

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Lancashire
Healthier Places

Lancashire Healthier Places

Uniting councils, businesses, and communities to embed prevention and healthier environment across Lancashire.

The Lancashire Healthier Places programme was commissioned by Lancashire County Council Public Health as part of the Healthy Hearts Strategy to reduce cardiovascular disease and promote healthy weight. Initially delivered from 2023–25, the programme has been extended for a further year, with a focus on strengthening system leadership and embedding place-based approaches.

HEG led delivery across three connected strands: system leadership, business engagement, and social movement. Working with district councils, we facilitated Healthy Weight workshops, provided resources and training, and supported adoption of Healthy Weight Declarations. Pendle became the first district to adopt a declaration following extensive consultation, setting a precedent for wider rollout across Lancashire.

Through our partnership with Recipe 4 Health, HEG supported local food businesses to offer healthier catering and menu options. Online training, branded resources, and a cost-savings pilot demonstrated how businesses can balance profitability with public health responsibility, reinforcing the programme's efficiency and value for money.

Alongside this, young people were engaged through a series of social movement campaigns. Youth groups and schools co-created projects on food poverty, school meals, and sustainability, sharing their outputs with local decision-makers and strengthening the role of lived experience in shaping local policy.

The programme has proven adaptable in navigating Lancashire's complex governance landscape and political diversity. By aligning efforts across councils, businesses, and communities, Lancashire Healthier Places is shifting the system focus from treatment to prevention. It is building stronger leadership capacity, embedding healthier environments into local agendas, and laying the foundations for sustainable improvements in population health.

www.lancashirehealthierplaces.org

We're Health Equalities Group, a public health charity working to improve the wellbeing of communities across the UK.

We're an independent voice for preventative public health in the North-West and beyond.

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