HEG | 20 Championing prevention for 20 years

Health Equalities Group:

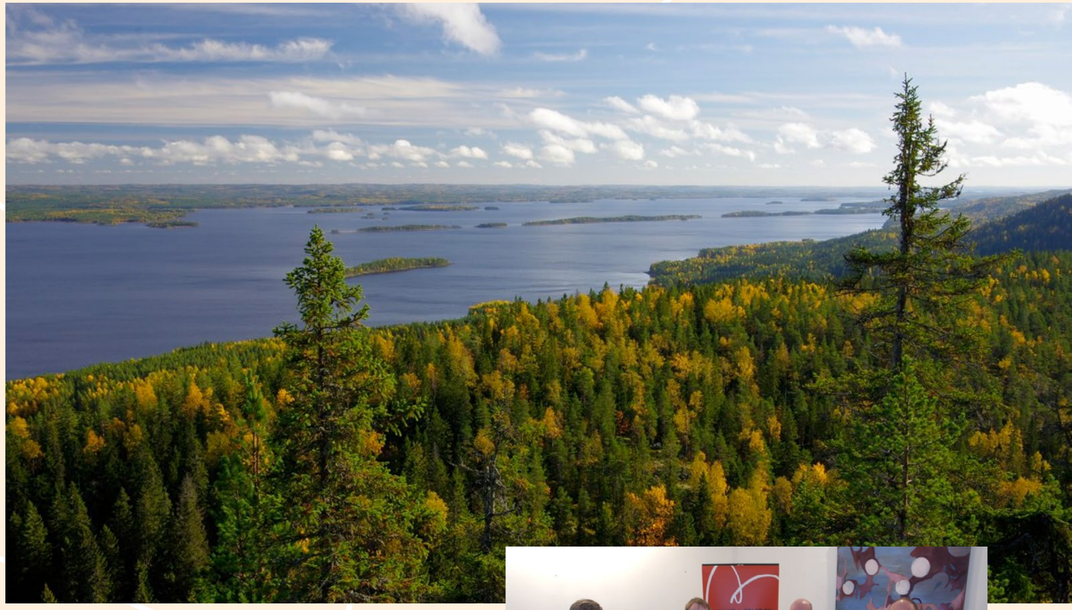
Reflecting on 20 years of preventative action at local, regional and European level

Foreword

Health Equalities Group's story begins with a journey. In the early 2000s, a delegation of elected members, academics and public health leaders from Merseyside travelled to North Karelia, Finland. There, they witnessed first-hand how a population-wide programme of prevention had transformed health outcomes, reducing heart disease by addressing tobacco use, diet and the broader determinants of health.

The North Karelia Project was a pioneering response to Finland's crisis of cardiovascular disease in the 1970s. At that time, North Karelia had the highest recorded rates of coronary heart disease in the world. Through coordinated action, replacing saturated fats with healthier oils, reducing salt intake, tackling tobacco use, mobilising communities, and working across policy levels, the project achieved an extraordinary reduction of more than 80% in cardiovascular mortality among working-age men and increased life expectancy by seven years. Its success became a global model for prevention: a demonstration that structural, community-based action can shift health outcomes at scale.

Inspired by these lessons and determined to apply them to the challenges facing Merseyside, Heart of Mersey was launched in 2003. Under the leadership of Dr Robin Ireland, the programme set out to confront the root causes of cardiovascular disease, not by focusing solely on individual behaviour change, but by shaping the environments, policies and systems that influence people's health. In doing so, it pioneered a regional approach to upstream prevention with a focus on population level policies.



Photograph above: View from Koli Summit to Lake Pielinen in Koli National Park, North Karelia, Finland by **Pentti Rautio**, 2 October 2011, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

Foreword

Our mission has broadened beyond cardiovascular disease, and indeed Merseyside, but our principles remain constant: prevention first – focusing on stopping illness before it starts by creating the conditions that keep people healthy in the first place.

The early focus on tobacco control and healthier food laid the groundwork for wider advocacy, research and collaboration at local, national and European levels. Heart of Mersey quickly became known not just for its campaigns, but for its role as a trusted partner – convening diverse organisations, translating evidence into action, and giving public health a strong, independent voice. By 2005, it had evolved into a registered charity, with the ambition of embedding prevention as a long-term, system-wide commitment.

Photograph: HEG - 20th anniversary

Our mission has broadened beyond cardiovascular disease, and indeed Merseyside, but our principles remain constant: prevention first – focusing on stopping illness before it starts by creating the conditions that keep people healthy in the first place. This means prioritising action on the structural drivers of health and building partnerships that create lasting impact, tackling the unfair and avoidable inequalities that still shape lives across the UK.

This prospectus sets out how we have delivered this work over a 20-year period – through frameworks, interventions, research, workforce development and advocacy. It reflects two decades of learning and partnership, rooted in our origins but responsive to today's challenges. Just as the North Karelia project inspired a generation of public health practitioners, we believe HEG can help shape the next chapter in prevention – heading upstream and working with partners to create healthier, fairer, and more resilient communities.

Together, we can make prevention central to the systems that shape our lives. Together, we can create a society where everyone can live a long, healthy and happy life.

Timeline

2005

Heart of Mersey becomes registered charity

Funding from the Merseyside primary care trusts and local authorities enabled Heart of Mersey to be established as a formal charity.

2005

Smokefree Legislation

Following the development of a local bill by SmokeFree Liverpool that would make all enclosed workplaces and public places in Liverpool smokefree, Heart of Mersey were tasked with galvanising support from across Merseyside, presenting a proposal to the Leaders and Chief Executives from Greater Merseyside to ensure this landmark bill was adopted uniformly across the sub-region. Enclosed workplaces were initially exempt from proposed national legislation, but the government eventually yielded to pressure due to local action. Smoking was banned in workplaces as part of the Health Act in July 2006.

2006

European Commission funds European Healthy Stadia Programme

A two-and-a-half-year programme begins with sports venues, researchers and other health agencies across Europe to promote public health outcomes through a settings-based approach to local populations.

2007

Review of hospital food in Cheshire and Merseyside

Working with 10 hospitals across Cheshire and Merseyside, Heart of Mersey reviewed hospital food provision helping to reformulate menus and encourage the sale and promotion of healthier options.

2010

Partnership with World Heart Federation

Healthy Stadia begins partnership with World Heart Federation (WHF) to strengthen work with UEFA on development of healthier stadium environments.

2013

Launch of Food Active

The North West Directors of Public Health commissioned the launch of Food Active, focussing on advocacy, targeted interventions, research and strategic partnerships to drive forward action to address healthier weight across the region.

2014

Healthy Stadia becomes partners for EU funded EuroFIT programme

Healthy Stadia supported academics from across Europe to develop a 12-week physical activity and weight loss programme that was delivered by football clubs in four EU member states.

2013

Heart of Mersey becomes Health Equalities Group as responsibility for public health transferred to local authorities

Our population-based approach to prevention, which purposely set out to build local capacity and enhance our partners' ability to support under-served communities, proved hugely successful and precipitated our rebranding as Health Equalities Group. This change coincided with responsibility for public health services transferring from NHS to local authorities. Our role in an emergent system was to galvanise new coalitions to address health inequalities with restricted resources.

2015

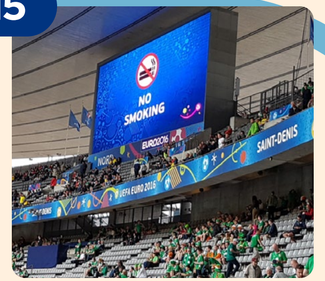
Give Up Loving Pop launched

Campaign to raise awareness of the health harms of over-consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages launched across the North West of England. Three years later, we were working with sports clubs to deliver a KS2 programme in primary schools.

2015

Healthy Stadia named as health partner within UEFA's social responsibility portfolio

Our relationship with UEFA grew into a formal partnership. Subsequently, we supported Europe's governing body of football to embed tobacco-free stadia policies at UEFA EURO 2016 and 2020, delivered an Active Travel project for UEFA Women's EURO 2017, and supported their member associations to develop communications activities to support WHF's World Heart Day campaign.



2018

NHS Healthy Weight Declaration

Working in partnership with trusts based in South West England and the regional OHID team, Food Active developed the NHS Healthy Weight Declaration and began supporting NHS organisations to work as part of a wider system to promote healthier weight.

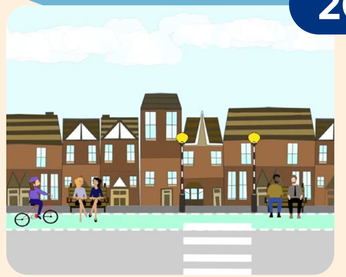
2016

First Local Authority adopts the Healthy Weight Declaration

Blackpool Council becomes first local authority to sign up to Food Active's Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight. The declaration, which is a strategic, system-wide commitment made across all council departments, has now been signed by over 40 local authorities in England.

Childhood Obesity Trailblazer programme in Pennine Lancashire

2019



The Pennine Lancashire Healthier Place, Healthier Future Programme, was one of five Childhood Obesity Trailblazers commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Care. The aim was to explore innovative actions to tackle childhood obesity and associated health inequalities. The Lancashire Healthier Place project continued this work.

Prevention Pledge

2019

The NHS Prevention Pledge is a prevention framework underpinned by 14 commitments that was originally developed by HEG for NHS Provider Trusts in Cheshire & Merseyside to embed prevention of ill health within core service delivery, wider Trust environments, and with partners organisations at Place. All 16 trusts in the sub-region have now adoption the Pledge, with a primary care model rolling out for PCNs from 2024 onwards.

Pioneering work in sport to address gambling sponsorship in sport

2022

In Greater Manchester, we worked with clubs across the football pyramid to call for an end to gambling sponsorship in sport securing support from a range of sports organisations across the region including Bolton Wanderers FC, GM Moving, Manchester FA, and a range of grassroots clubs. The Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham also lent his voice to the campaign.

"Why weight to talk?"

2021

Cheshire West and Chester public health team commissioned Food Active to consult on, design and deliver a universal training programme, primarily for frontline health and social care workers to deliver effective brief advice to members of the public on healthier weight. The training – called "Why weight to talk?" was scaled up across Cheshire and Merseyside with funding from NHS Cheshire & Merseyside reaching over 1,000 practitioners by 2025.

Cheshire and Merseyside Cancer Alliance funds Strategic Obesity Project

2022

The Cheshire and Merseyside Cancer Alliance became the first alliance to commission a specific programme of work to address healthier weight on a population level. Bringing together system leaders, including non-health stakeholders such as housing, planning, transport and third sector organisations, the aim of the project is to elevate prevention of overweight and obesity as a key agenda item for all stakeholders across the system in Cheshire & Merseyside.

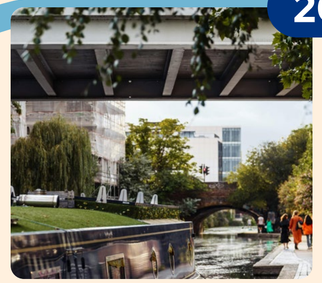
Bystander intervention training to prevent violence against women and girls in sport

2023

The "Are you Onside?" programme empowered community sports organisations across Merseyside to challenge sexism and violence against women and girls through bystander intervention training, laying the foundations for cultural change and advancing gender equity in grassroots sport.

New toolkit to designed for planners to support healthier food environments

2025



A new digital toolkit was recently launched to support local policy makers and planners consider how the local plan making process and additional planning policy tools can create healthier food environments for communities across Cheshire & Merseyside.

Launch of the School's Pledge in Cheshire and Merseyside

2024

Funded by Cheshire and Merseyside ICB, the School's Pledge programme introduced a framework of nine core commitments aimed at promoting nutritious eating habits and fostering healthier environment in primary school settings. The programme is aiming to engage 72 schools across the system over an initial 18-month period.

As we look to the future, Health Equalities Group remains steadfast in our commitment to upstream, primary prevention. Our work over the past 20 years has demonstrated that meaningful change is possible when we focus on the root causes of poor health and act collectively to reshape the systems, environments, and policies that shape our lives.

The coming decades demand ambition and courage: ambition to tackle the persistent and unjust health inequalities that hold communities back, and courage to confront the structural drivers of non-communicable disease. We believe that prevention must be the foundation of a healthier society – not an afterthought.

Our vision is clear: **a society where everyone, regardless of where they are born, live or work, has the opportunity to thrive in good health.** Together, we can create a future where inequalities are narrowed, prevention is prioritised, and the next generation grows up in a fairer, healthier, and more resilient world.

HEG | 20 Championing prevention for 20 years

heg.org.uk

We would like to thank our current team, past members of staff and all of our trustees past and present – their time and dedication has allowed the charity to flourish over 20 years and make a difference to our local populations.