

Chapter 6 Improving health and wellbeing through healthy lifestyles: Making healthier choices easier

The economic burden of unhealthy lifestyles in Walsall is substantial. The health service is experiencing the spiralling costs of treating ill health, Social Care is struggling to meet the increasing costs of providing services for residents who have lost their ability to live independently and employers are bearing the costs of high sickness absence rates and low productivity. Most importantly the people of Walsall are experiencing poorer health and quality of life than those who live in most other areas of the country, and many have their lives cut short by entirely preventable illnesses.

Lifestyle factors such as diet, physical activity, alcohol, smoking and drug use are key determinants of health and wellbeing and are linked individually or in combination to a wide range of health and social consequences. These factors follow a social gradient; those who live in the most deprived areas of the borough are most likely to adopt the most risky lifestyle behaviours. To bring about real improvements in health and wellbeing and reduce health inequalities will require changes in both individual behaviours and in the physical and social environment of Walsall.

The Walsall Lifestyle Survey 2012 helps estimate the proportion of adults whose health could be improved through lifestyle changes. For example, the vast majority of residents do some form of physical activity but only a minority do it frequently enough to achieve health benefits. Half of residents eat fresh fruit and vegetables on a daily basis, but just one in eight has the recommended 5 portions a day.

Smoking reduces life expectancy by an average of 10 years and obesity by an average of 9 years; in Walsall there are tens of thousands of residents whose health and quality of life could be transformed by stopping smoking or losing weight.

Walsall also has high rates of harm, both to health and as a result of crime, related to alcohol consumption and drug misuse. The levels of misuse mirror the areas of the borough with the highest levels of social and economic deprivation.

This chapter discusses lifestyles and prevention in Walsall, focussing on strengthening individuals and developing environments that promote wellbeing and support positive, sustained behaviour change.