How Change4Life is helping Westminster tackle sugar

What is the scale of the challenge?

Childhood obesity is a significant issue in the City of Westminster. While the level of childhood obesity in Reception year is around the national average at 24%, it is significantly higher in Year 6, rising to nearly 40%.

Children in the borough also experience issues with oral health. Thirty eight percent of 5 year olds attending the borough’s maintained schools have decayed, missing or filled teeth, the sixth highest proportion in London. Poor nutrition and high consumption of sugar contribute to two of the root causes of obesity.

Westminster’s population is particularly diverse, with the highest level of international migration of any place in England. Just over half of its residents were born outside the UK, compared to 9% for the rest of England. Nearly a third of of residents are from black, Asian, Arabic or other minority ethnic groups.

As with other London councils, inequality and poverty are significant factors for the borough’s residents. Over a third of children (36%) live in income-deprived households. In four wards, the proportion of children in poverty rises to more than half.

What is Westminster City Council’s approach?

Westminster City Council always runs local activity to support Public Health England’s Change4Life campaigns. However the Change4Life Be Food Smart campaign, with its focus on sugar, saturated fat and salt, was seen as a particularly relevant opportunity to help tackle the various health issues arising from high sugar consumption in children.

Westminster’s objective was to help families across the borough make changes to their diet. Their campaign strategy involved six weeks of tightly co-ordinated local activity.

Be Food Smart campaign messages were amplified with an intensive burst of localised communications and interventions run in parallel with national activity. The communications team had a budget of just under £5,000 for the work. A member of the communications team was also freed up to work exclusively on the campaign over the period, co-ordinating and consolidating all campaign-related activity across a mix of free and paid-for channels and delivery partners.

“Working in partnership with the council’s communications team to promote the Be Food Smart campaign has brought multiple benefits – it has provided a platform to raise the profile of our Tackling Childhood Obesity Together (TCOT) programme within the council, enhanced collaborative working between directorates and helped ensure these important health messages reach children and families right across our communities.”

Eva Hrobonova,
Deputy Director of Public Health,
Westminster City Council
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Ellie Lewis,
Senior Public Health Officer,
Westminster City Council

Digital advertising
The majority of the local campaign budget was spent on a geomarketing campaign, where Public Health England Change4Life digital ads were delivered to people (via mobile phones and other devices on social media applications such as Facebook and Instagram) based on where they were or what locations they had previously visited in Westminster. Westminster commissioned a local marketing agency to implement this activity at a cost of just under £3,000.

Tailoring Be Food Smart for Westminster

The Westminster communications team drew on a range of free materials from Public Health England’s Campaign Resource Centre. Posters, digital banner ads and an email signature were customised by their designer to include a direct call out to Westminster residents, ‘Hey Westminster, what’s in your food?’ and were endorsed by the Westminster City Council logo. Ready-to-use Facebook and Twitter posts covered the range of sugar, saturated fat and salt messages highlighted by the national Be Food Smart campaign.

This kind of geomarketing programme targets everyone in an area rather than particular demographic types. However, by reaching those within a particular geographical radius, it included Westminster’s families in their homes and other public locations.

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Two weeks were spent planning the Be Food Smart campaign and creating localised content, with activity launched in mid-January, two weeks into the national campaign.

Advertising was placed in a range of physical places through public and voluntary services and on digital spaces such as Facebook, Instagram and other websites. The campaign also made use of council communications (newsletters and magazines) and the local press to reach families multiple times during the campaign period. This was supported by several interactive healthy eating and advice events designed to engage families and children.

While the local campaign used the key messages from the national Be Food Smart campaign, Westminster placed a particular emphasis on the importance of being sugar smart to ensure alignment with local oral health priorities.

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Westminster City Council customised free Public Health England materials with a local call to action.
Westminster’s own communications channels

The communications team placed multiple ads and other content across the full range of the council’s own free channels, including:

- a page in Children First, the council’s magazine for families, which has a circulation of around 20,000 people
- a page in the Westminster Reporter, the residential magazine which has a circulation of around 120,000 people
- ads in the council’s families newsletter, sent to around 13,000 households
- ads in a resident’s newsletter, sent to around 60,000 people
- a wide range of tweets and posts were made from the corporate Twitter account (20,000 followers) and corporate Facebook account (2,500 followers) during the campaign period, including both generic posts and others specifically targeted to community groups, family groups and Westminster-based health organisations over the 6 weeks.

Community hotspots

300 posters were printed by the Westminster communications team and sent out to locations in the community where families were likely to visit. This included 30 children’s centres, 13 libraries and 14 community organisations. The 49 GP practices in Westminster were also given printed posters to display and digital files to use on surgery websites or on waiting room screens where these were available.

Stakeholders

A wide range of voluntary and community organisations working with families in the borough were also approached and asked to promote the Westminster Be Food Smart campaign. These partners cascaded messages and materials through to both residents and other organisations they were working with.

Local event

The campaign team also worked with Paddington Development Trust to ‘piggy back’ on an event already planned to happen during the campaign period at a local school. This ‘marketplace’ event was targeted at both parents and pupils from a range of schools in the area, and helped the local campaign reach both families and a wider group of professionals within the borough.

Taster sessions

MyTimeActive, the borough’s provider of healthy lifestyle services, ran taster sessions at 3 libraries within the borough using resource packs ordered from Public Health England. The activities were targeted at young children aged 2 to 4 and 6 to 8, and focused on healthy eating sessions, exercise and advice for the children and their parents. The packs were used to supplement the message of the sessions and allowed the Westminster communications team to further spread the messaging on cutting down on sugar.
Press engagement

The local event and taster sessions were used to generate publicity and help engage the local press, such as West End Extra, which has a circulation of 23,000.

The communications team combined template press releases provided by Public Health England with local statistics about obesity which made the local press more likely to pick up the release. Photos from the events demonstrating families engaging with Change4Life tools provided both local illustration and inspiration for other families.

Service contracts

Westminster also built in measurable targets for promoting Change4Life into the service specification of their local healthy lifestyle provider contracts.

Reaching into many layers of the community and across a variety of workforce professionals, these services included:

- obesity prevention and treatment programmes for children, young people and adults
- support in schools through curriculum development or support to achieve Healthy Schools Award status
- workforce training to staff across a range of frontline services for children, including children’s centre staff, voluntary sector staff, social workers and school teachers.

This has extended the reach of Change4Life campaigns to target communities and across the health and social service workforce both during and beyond individual campaign periods.

Targets

By ensuring the unique URL provided by Public Health England was included on all campaign materials, Westminster was able to directly and easily measure local engagement with the campaign.

An initial target of 1,000 click-throughs to the Change4Life website was set. However as this was exceeded early in the campaign, the target was revised and raised several times. By the end of the campaign period, Westminster had generated over 6,500 click-throughs (the second highest for an upper tier local authority).

Results

- Commissioned geomarketing helped generate over 800,000 impressions and 5,500 click-throughs to the Change4Life Be Food Smart website (a positive click through rate of 0.7%).
- Building responsibility for promoting campaign messages and goals into an individual’s job description or service provider’s contract really helped deliver consolidated activity to many different parts of the authority.
- Working closely with partners uncovered opportunities to ‘piggy back’ on complementary existing events aimed at the target audience, saving the time and budget that would be required to create an event from scratch.
- Using free ready to use Change4Life materials from Public Health England, allowed the borough to achieve more within its budget.
- Running communications across multiple channels increased the likelihood that messages would be seen and helped generate a sense of campaign scale, trust and authority.