



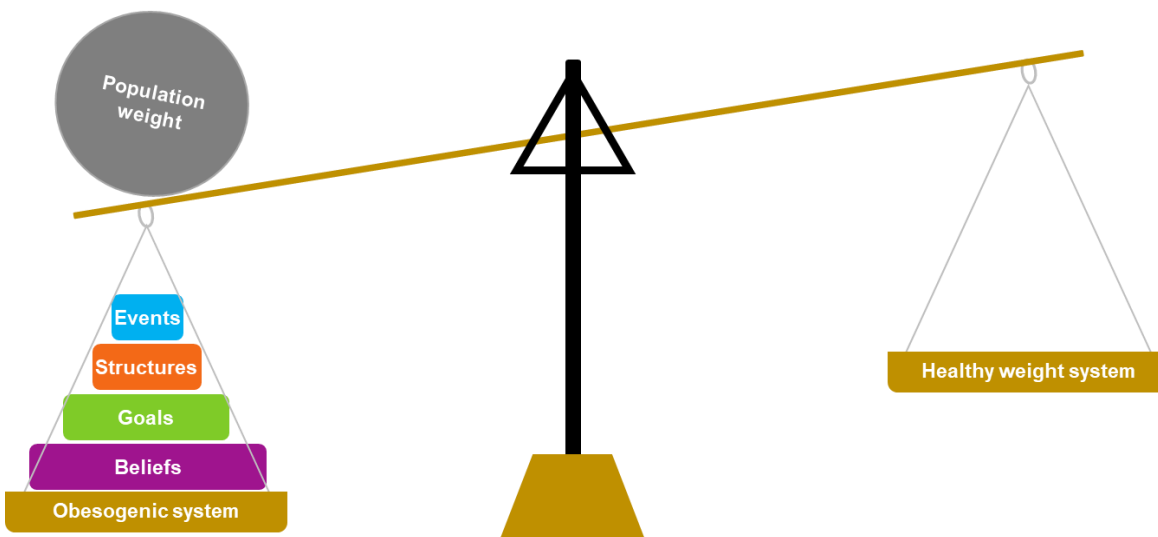
Resource P: Action scales model¹

The action scales model

The action scales model is a tool to stimulate thinking about actions within a complex system. The model is visually depicted as a set of scales and weights.

On the left-hand side of the scales is the current system; one that makes it difficult for people to maintain a healthy weight. On the right-hand side of the scales is a healthy weight system; a system which increases the likelihood of the population having a healthy weight. The weights represent four different levels to intervene in a system, with each level holding a different weighting for systems change. The larger the weight, the greater the likelihood for systems change but the harder these changes are to bring about. The aim is for systems network to shift the balance of the system towards healthy weight.

Figure 1: Action scales model



¹ This resource is part of Public Health England's wider whole systems approach to obesity programme. Please search to find the main guide and additional resources.

Events – These are happening now and can be seen in our day-to-day lives. They are the behaviours and outcomes that arise from how the system functions. Two examples include few families walking to school and people consuming high sugar drinks. Actions at this level generally provide short term fixes, but do not address the underlying structures that caused the behaviours/outcomes to occur in the first place. For example, the introduction of a walking bus initiative, or information campaigns on the risks of consuming too many sugar-sweetened beverages.

System structures – These are the underlying structures that cause the events to occur. These could include the physical infrastructure, relationships between parts of the system and the flow of information across the system. Actions at this level, which seek to reshape or redesign these structures, are more likely to reduce the frequency of events occurring in the future. For example, providing physical infrastructure (for example, pavements, street lighting, safe cycle storage), encourages active travel or reducing the marketing and advertising of high fat, salt, sugar foods and drinks, encourages reduced exposure/consumption.

System goals – These are the goals that the system, or a part of the system, is working to achieve. For example, increasing neighbourhood walkability, reducing the consumption of high sugar/calorie foods and drinks. The system goals drive the system structures. Competing goals across different parts of the system may also make it harder for change to occur. Actions taken at this level alter the goals, targets or ambitions that the system - and people within the system - are aiming to achieve. For example, establishing targets for increased neighbourhood walkability; or healthy school accreditation schemes including healthy food award schemes and strategies for improving the local food offer.

System beliefs – These are the deeply held beliefs, norms, attitudes and values of the individuals and organisations within the system. They are the foundations that allow the system to keep functioning as it does and are reflected in the systems goals. Actions taken at this level aim to change the deeply held beliefs of the stakeholders and/or organisations who steer the direction of the system and sub-systems. For example, development of evidence to demonstrate that pedestrian infrastructure is a key factor in a sustainable and prosperous local economy, or the adoption of guidelines for healthier food procurement across all key stakeholder organisations (for example local authority, NHS and contracted service providers).

Action is needed across all four levels to bring about sustainable systems change. There are many different events that need to be responded to, many system structures that need to be re-designed, goals that need to be re-focused, and system beliefs that need to be transformed. The action scales model helps stakeholders determine a coherent set of actions, all pushing in the same direction, across the levels.