

Real-life story - Claire Alp

After working in the voluntary sector on a lottery-funded project improving food in schools, Claire was appointed to this role, initially coordinating the Healthy Schools London programme on a part-time basis, then moving to full-time with a broader public health remit.

Claire Alp Health improvement specialist (schools)

Employer or university London borough of Havering local authority

Salary range Unknown

How I got into the role

I studied sport sciences at university and started my career in sports development roles, working for both local government and Sport England. I had always had an interest in nutrition and food, and returned to university to study for a degree in Human Nutrition and then a Master's in Food and Nutrition Policy.

What I do

For two days a week, I co-ordinate the Healthy Schools London (HSL) programme. This programme promotes a "whole-school" approach to health, which means involving many people across the school in education about drugs, alcohol, tobacco, healthy relationships, healthy eating, physical activity, and emotional health and wellbeing.

The programme includes a bronze, silver and gold award scheme. My role involves running workshops for school staff, supporting them to achieve these awards. I arrange for external providers to run specialist topic workshops for school staff to broaden their knowledge, understanding and skills. When schools apply for their awards, I provide feedback, and am able to approve the Bronze award myself and make a recommendation to the Greater London Authority regarding the award of Silver or Gold status.

I am a member of the HSL Borough Leads Network, which brings together people from across London who are in similar roles to share ideas and good practice. I'm also on the Strategic Advisory Group, which meets quarterly to agree strategy and policy, review success of the programme and agree changes to the scheme.

The other three days of my week are more strategic, working in the Children and Young People's team alongside a consultant and a senior health improvement strategist. I have been involved in writing the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and researching the evidence base for our obesity, nutrition and physical activity strategy. I organise and attend meetings, which bringing together a variety of departments across the council to tackle issues that affect children and young people's health, wellbeing and protecting them from injury or abuse.

I also work with external providers of health improvement services that the council buys (commissions),

such as weight management and school nursing, and contribute to decisions on granting and renewing those contracts.

Like many in local authority public health, my role has become increasingly strategic and less operational as my career has progressed.

The best bits and challenges

I enjoy face-to-face contact with teachers and other school staff, building their understanding of their role in improving health.

I also enjoy preparing reports on the health needs of different groups in our local population.

It is a pleasure to bring together a wide range of people from different council departments to agree how we can work together to meet the population's health needs and benefit from shared goals. For instance, the Transport Planning team's primary concerns may be reducing emissions and making travel safer for pedestrians and cyclists, but we work with them on how their work influences the health of the population.

The challenges are limited budgets and limited capacity (staff numbers and availability), which means difficult decisions need to be made when prioritising our work. Over the last five years the pressure on school staff has also increased, which can make it difficult for them to prioritise the HSL programme.

Life outside work

I run or swim most mornings. Exercising in the mornings sets me up for the day and clears my brain. I have quite a long drive to work so it's a good tactic for traffic avoidance because I leave early and swim or run once I get to Romford then walk from the gym to work. I also work on a local community farm project called Food Smiles; about 25 of us rent a plot of land from a local organic farmer, grow our own veg and take an equal share of the harvest each week.

Career plans and top tips for others

Cuts to public health budgets mean we are no longer able to offer free support to schools for the HSL programme, so my role recently has focused on the transition to become a traded service, meaning that in future schools will have to pay for our work. As a result, responsibility for Healthy Schools will move to the traded services team with my role becoming focused on the strategic aspects.

I am keen to progress to a more senior role in public health and gain a substantive post in the new structure. I enjoy working with schools and others to improve health outcomes for children and young people. Hopefully I will be able to continue to do that, albeit from a more strategic perspective.

Local authorities value a breadth of experience in any aspect of public health including wider government settings, voluntary sector organisations and in roles that provide or commission health services. I would recommend gaining experience in any of these settings, and in a variety of roles within them - public health roles are very varied and are rapidly changing. Some universities have links with local authorities; we host a 3-week public health placement for dietetics students.

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