

CONCEPT  
EXPLAINER

WHAT IS

# whole-system approach

swipe



## A Whole-System Approach (WSA)

applies systems thinking to complex public health challenges. Instead of targeting single causes or isolated interventions, it focusses on how organisations and communities can work collectively over the long-term to improve health.

Scotland's Population Health Framework explicitly promotes a whole-systems approach by calling for coordinated, cross-sector action to understand how social, economic, environmental, cultural and political factors interact.



## Why does it matter?

Issues such as health inequalities, obesity and mental wellbeing are difficult to tackle; they are complex, persistent, and influenced by deep-rooted social structures and power imbalances.

A whole-system approach helps move beyond short-term or linear fixes by understanding how these problems are maintained and where leverage for change exists.



# Key features of WSAAs

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- **Interconnectedness:** Multiple systems shape health, such as housing, education, transport, welfare etc.
- **Feedback loops:** Actions in one area can reinforce or undermine progress elsewhere.
- **Multiple perspectives:** Professional, organisational, and lived-experience insights all matter.
- **Adaptability and learning:** Systems shift over time, so responses must be iterative, flexible and informed by continuous learning.
- **Shared purpose:** Partners work towards a common vision with joint ownership and aligned action across levels (individual, community, organisational and policy).



## Implications for practice

WSAs require sustained collaboration across sectors and with communities to address root causes, redistribute power, and create conditions for healthier lives.

The aim is to work **with** systems rather than against them, to enable long-term, equitable change.



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# Thanks for reading

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