

Confronting the Crisis:

Obesity in Wales

Obesity Alliance Cymru (OAC) is a group of leading national charities, professional bodies, campaign groups and membership organisations working together to support public health in Wales. The primary objective of the OAC is to provide a collaborative forum to influence policy on preventing and reducing obesity in Wales.

This manifesto document has been co-produced ahead of the 2026 Senedd election by members of the OAC and contains support for evidence-based policies to urgently address the wider environmental factors that lead to excess weight.

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Introduction

All children should be able to grow up healthy and happy,
no matter who they are or where they live.

But this is not the case for all the children of Wales.

2025 evidence shows that:



- The proportion of children living with obesity in Wales is now **higher** than that reported for England and for Scotland



- By the time they start school, **a quarter** of children in Wales are already living with overweight or obesity



- Those living in the **most deprived areas** of Wales are more likely to be living with overweight or obesity compared with the least deprived.¹

Obesity in childhood is a strong indicator for living with excess weight into adulthood and this matters because obesity is a leading cause of preventable death.

More than 6 in 10 adults in Wales live with excess weight, increasing the risks of developing diet-related ill health, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and 13 types of cancer.²

In addition to this personal toll, a population living with excess weight increases government spending through higher health spending and simultaneously reduces economic output.

Public Health Wales has previously estimated the cost of obesity to the NHS in Wales as £73 million. By 2050, this is projected to rise to £465 million.³

Furthermore, the wider societal costs are staggering. When adding in lost economic productivity, social and informal care and reduced quality of life and mortality, analysis conducted by Nesta estimates the overall cost to Wales is £5.2 billion per year.⁴

These health and wider societal costs demonstrate that a Welsh Government which prioritises the reduction and prevention of overweight and obesity will directly decrease the strain on the NHS and wider economy.

In this manifesto, the OAC is calling on the next Welsh Government to improve health and wellbeing for all, by embedding prevention more consistently across policy decisions in Wales. As highlighted in the Chief Medical Officer for Wales' annual report 2024–25, prevention offers outstanding value for money and is essential to tackling health inequalities and improving healthy life expectancy across Wales.⁵

Prevention has the power to radically improve public health and boost the economy. Present and future generations need us to act now.

Obesity Alliance Cymru manifesto priorities

Tackling overweight and obesity is one of the most significant long-term health challenges we currently face in Wales. To help meet this challenge, the OAC has produced six priorities within the following target areas:

- 1 Commitment**
Establish a Minister for Public Health, with an allocated budget for prevention
- 2 Co-operation**
Work with retailers to make Wales a leader in healthy food standards and positive food environments
- 3 Community**
Empower local leadership to provide healthier neighbourhoods
- 4 Children**
Expand food literacy education with an all-Wales and whole-school approach, to embed healthier diets and physical activity in all young lives
- 5 Care**
Ensure everyone living with overweight and obesity in all parts of Wales has timely and equitable access to effective preventative pathways and programmes
- 6 Communication**
Improve promotion of healthy food benefits to increase uptake within deprived communities in Wales

1. Commitment

Establish a Minister for Public Health, with an allocated budget for prevention

The OAC believes the need for a Public Health Minister is more urgent than ever. Alongside this, a sustained budget line for primary prevention, which increases year on year is essential for protecting future generations. This role would provide the opportunity for a renewed national focus on prevention, and specifically primary prevention – stopping ill-health in the first instance. It would also provide a vital point of contact for organisations, stakeholders and delivery-bodies, to ensure effective joined-up delivery and robust accountability.

Public health and prevention are currently subsumed into the role of the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care. With ever-increasing demand on NHS services and growing waiting lists, the Cabinet Secretary's role in recent years has understandably focused on responding to immediate pressures and demand on the health system. This highlights the scale of the current system pressures caused by ill-health in Wales, and the importance of *reducing* this pressure in the years to come. Projections by Cancer Research UK suggest that, if current trends continue, there will be almost as many people living with obesity as those of a healthy weight in Wales by the 2040s.⁶ In light of this, a dedicated ministerial focus on prevention is therefore vital to secure the focus necessary to counter this trend.

The new Minister for Public Health should have a budget line allocated for primary prevention to ensure resources are genuinely redirected to this vital area. This budget should continue to increase, and it should be transparent and reported on. It must also be additional, and not taken from primary care, which is already central

to supporting people to lead healthy lives. Without such a change in resourcing, the OAC's concern is that we risk primary prevention being deprioritised while demand on the NHS inevitably continues to increase.

We understand that a shift in resources is a bold political choice, but one that will deliver long-term savings and healthier lives.

The people of Wales, and future generations, should be able to expect bold leadership from a Minister for Public Health – to safeguard the health of Wales for years to come. Such a Minister must ensure healthier retail and community environments, affordable and resilient food systems, and increase visibility and equitable access to effective support programmes. These areas are outlined in further detail within this document.

Additionally, this role provides a newfound opportunity to drive forward progress in eliminating health inequalities and for Wales to become the first ever Marmot Nation – a country committed to reducing health inequalities through evidence-based action.⁷

2. Co-operation

Work with retailers to make Wales a leader on healthy food standards and positive food environments

The Welsh Government has introduced a series of preventative public health measures to support people's health and wellbeing, which the OAC supports, including:

- New laws which will restrict volume price promotions of less healthy foods and keep them from key selling locations, which will come into force in 2026.⁸
- Healthy eating in schools' regulations, which will maximise the impact of universal free school meals and improve access to healthier food during school hours.
- Health impact assessments, which require certain public bodies to show how they are delivering their well-being duty, particularly in relation to the goals of a healthier and a more equal Wales.⁹
- Wales will become a Marmot nation, to help tackle health inequalities.¹⁰

While the OAC welcomes this progress, we are keen to see more.

Temporary price promotion restrictions

On average, we get 80% of our calories from the largest food retailers, meaning their actions are critical in helping to shape a healthier food environment in Wales. In light of this, the OAC believes food retailers must play a greater role in creating the conditions needed for more people to live and *stay well*.¹¹

Last year, new legislation was passed to address how products high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) are disproportionately promoted to consumers in Wales. These promotions are known to drive sales of unhealthier items and prompt families to consume and spend more. Research has shown that across all income groups in Great Britain, shoppers who buy more on promotions are 13% more likely to be overweight and 28% more likely to be living with obesity than low promotional shoppers.¹² Considering this, the new Food (Promotions and Presentation) Regulations marked a positive step in helping to rebalance the food environment, helping to support healthier shopping choices for more families across Wales. However, these regulations do not include temporary price reductions. Evidence suggests that, if they did, the impact of the regulations on overweight and obesity would be greater.¹³

Currently, there is a risk that temporary price reductions could be used by retailers as a simple replacement for multi-buy promotions, offering a similar discount for a smaller outlay. Temporary price promotions clearly provide retailers with a route to circumvent the new regulations – a loophole which we believe could risk undermining the public health purpose of the policy, and one which should be closed urgently.

In Great Britain, shoppers who buy more on promotions are

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Mandatory health reporting and targets

Voluntary UK Government reformulation targets for retailers have failed to effectively reduce sugar and calorie consumption. Similarly, 10 of the 11 largest UK retailers have set their own varied health goals. This inconsistency highlights the limitations of voluntary approaches and the need for stronger, more coordinated action.

Welsh Government should explore the introduction of mandatory health reporting for all large food businesses and healthy sales targets for large retailers in Wales. Modelling by Nesta estimates that setting targets for the largest 11 retailers at levels similar to that already achieved by today's 'best' players could cut obesity prevalence by around 20% within 3 years.¹⁴

Crucially, independent economic analysis found that this would be possible without pushing up prices for consumers.¹⁵

The policy sets a clear outcome while granting supermarkets the flexibility to determine the means of achieving it, such as through reformulation, pricing strategies, promotional activities, or product availability adjustments.

This could have a very high impact on obesity and evidence shows implementation costs to governments could be very low, with the potential to provide significant cost benefits.¹⁶



3. Community

Empower local leadership to provide healthier neighbourhoods

Levers within local leadership

Across Wales, there is widespread recognition that our high streets are saturated with unhealthy food and drink promotions and takeaways, often targeting young people.¹⁷ Furthermore, research has shown that a higher prevalence of hot food takeaways is associated with unhealthy dietary habits in children and a connection has been established between the proximity of these outlets to schools and childhood obesity.¹⁸ As a result, there is a growing interest in the restriction of out-of-home advertising and hot food takeaways, especially around schools.

This has been supported in recent years by Welsh Government, regional and local spatial planning authorities, and health policies and systems which have built on core themes contained within the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, the Planning (Wales) Act 2015, and the Public Health (Wales) Act 2017.

The *Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales* delivery plan proposes consultation on measures that could include exclusion zones for hot food takeaways (HFTs) near places frequented by children and families, including schools, in an effort to improve local food environments. Despite variation in approaches across Wales, it is positive to see some councils responding proactively to local public health challenges through local planning. One such example is Wrexham County Borough Council, which has implemented more specific health planning guidance – which includes a 400-metre restriction on new HFTs around schools.

In order for more local authorities in Wales to consider the use of supplementary planning guidance, a technical advice note from Welsh Government's Planning Policy Wales (PPW) would provide greater clarity on how different types of food outlets can be defined and distinguished, supporting the effective application of restrictions.

We welcome the introduction of health impact assessments in Wales in 2025. Delivery of these should be monitored to ensure all decisions within local authorities create and maintain positive food environments.

Food resilience

The OAC supports calls from the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales to see the Welsh Government establish a food resilience strategy which can set a clear vision and a direction of travel for local authorities in shaping their local food systems.¹⁹ This would ensure that wellbeing objectives are an integral part of local food systems.

There are positive examples from other countries which are creating fairer, healthier, and more sustainable food systems by establishing legislative frameworks for food-related policies and practices. Scotland has a Good Food Nation Act (2022),²⁰ Northern Ireland has a National Food Framework (2024),²¹ and England has launched a new UK Food Strategy for England (2025).²²

Here, the Welsh Government has committed over £2 million for 2025–26, with further funding secured through to March 2028 to support local food initiatives.²³ Since 2022, local food partnerships have also expanded to cover every Welsh local authority. However, we would like to see this work scaled up to maximise the benefits for all communities in Wales.

We have welcomed the work of the Food Policy Alliance Cymru in setting out a clear case for a national food resilience plan to coordinate local food systems, tackle food poverty, improve public health, and support green growth and education.²⁴ We would like to see this plan developed and taken forward by the next Welsh Government.



1 in 4
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Training within local authorities

The OAC believes local authority leaders are ideally positioned to drive further change in addressing many aspects of an unbalanced food environment, but they can sometimes lack the training and resources to do so.

To address this, we are calling for Welsh Government to roll out training for relevant local authority staff and councillors, to ensure they have a sufficient understanding of the food environment and its impacts on population health.

This will facilitate a more informed use of planning policies and health impact assessments to address local overweight and obesity rates across Wales.



4. Children

Expand food literacy education with an all-Wales and whole-school approach, to embed healthier diets and physical activity in all young lives

The proportion of children living with obesity in Wales (11.8%) is higher than that reported for England and Scotland.²⁵

Evidence shows an all-Wales, whole-school approach to nutrition education and physical activity is an important part of shaping lifelong habits²⁶ and reducing inequalities.²⁷

Wales already has a proven, NHS dietitian-backed method of delivery for nutrition education and physical activity in the Food and Fun holiday programme.²⁸ The OAC is calling for this successful scheme to be scaled up across Wales, with dedicated multi-year funding, and to include term-time activities in all primary settings.

Wales led the way with the launch of “Food and Fun” in Cardiff a decade ago, a programme providing food and nutrition education, physical activity, enrichment sessions and healthy meals to children during the school summer holidays. A recent evaluation of the scheme reported more than 200 schools in Wales delivered the programme and provided over 13,000 places for children each day that it ran.²⁹ The benefits head teachers identified include improved dietary behaviour for some pupils as well as better take-up of school meals and eating habits. Crucially, head teachers also reported improved attendance in September for children who attended Food and Fun in the summer holidays.

NHS dietitians provide Nutrition Skills for Life accredited training for all Food and Fun delivery staff, increasing staff confidence and self-efficacy to deliver nutrition education beyond the scheme itself.³⁰

Recently, the OAC has been encouraged to see the Children’s Commissioner for Wales call for the extension of the Food and Fun scheme to help meet the needs of those in deep poverty.³¹

In addition, the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales explicitly recommends the expansion of food literacy programmes like Nutrition Skills for Life, which underpins Food and Fun:

“To equip future generations with the skills for lifelong healthy eating, Wales should expand food literacy programmes like Nutrition Skills for Life, which teaches children the knowledge, skills, and behaviours needed to plan and prepare nutritious meals.”³²

When it comes to physical activity, the latest School Sport Survey figures highlight that only 39% of school-aged children are active three or more times a week.³³ However, demand for more sport amongst children and young people is at a staggering 93%. Young people want to increase their activity levels, and the expansion of the Food and Fun programme could play a part in supporting them to do so.

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5. Care

Ensure everyone living with overweight and obesity in all parts of Wales has timely and equitable access to effective preventative pathways and programmes

Across Wales, 62% of the adult population (16+) are living with excess weight. A quarter of this group are adults who live with obesity.

There is a strong systemic relationship between overweight, obesity and deprivation, which impacts people most in areas including Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen and Neath Port Talbot.³⁴ We must intervene earlier and target areas of most need, to address the underlying causes.

The OAC is calling for the All-Wales Weight Management Pathway to be embedded in all health boards and across all communities so that people living with overweight and obesity can have equitable access to effective weight management, particularly amongst socio-economic groups that are most under-represented in these services.

We believe such services should include targeted outreach campaigns to encourage uptake from under-served groups with improved access to community-based, healthy lifestyle programmes that people can self-refer to.

We are also calling for training for health care professionals to conduct health conversations, to support their knowledge and confidence in sensitively raising the topic of weight in everyday contacts. This may also include discussion around onward referral to identify obesity-related ill-health early, for instance cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

In addition, the All-Wales Diabetes Prevention Programme has shown early signs of success and must continue to be expanded across the whole of Wales to identify and treat pre-diabetes where possible. Multi-year funding to health boards and other partners should be maintained so that weight management services and prevention programmes can be delivered sustainably.

62%

of the adult population in Wales are **living with excess weight**



Weight loss drugs within weight management services



New medications have shown to be effective in helping to support weight loss, which in turn, could play an important role in tackling obesity. However, these pharmacological treatments also present new challenges as health systems across the UK navigate how best to integrate and potentially scale them within current services. These challenges include pricing, availability, increased service demand, and the risk of weight regain following discontinuation. While promising, these factors indicate that weight loss medications are not sufficient to address obesity on their own.

NICE recommends that approved weight loss medications prescribed by the NHS are provided alongside wraparound care, including advice on lifestyle changes needed to support long-term weight loss.³⁵

While weight loss medications are available within the NHS in Wales, access is currently limited.³⁶ As this area of pharmacology develops, it is important that accompanying services are appropriately equipped to support their effective usage. Furthermore, barriers experienced by certain groups while accessing weight management support must be addressed to ensure that health inequalities are not inadvertently widened.

Beyond services, it is vital that population-wide public health interventions continue to be prioritised alongside the rollout of weight loss medications. While weight loss medications can help some individuals lose weight, they may not be suitable for all, and they do not prevent obesity from developing in the first instance. **Therefore, a holistic approach is needed to reduce growing rates of overweight and obesity at a population level** – particularly given the risk of weight regain following discontinuation, and the fact that these medications may not be the right treatment option for everyone.



6. Communication

Improve promotion of healthy food benefits to increase uptake within deprived communities in Wales

The Healthy Start scheme provides eligible families with nutritional support during pregnancy and early childhood. The scheme supports families in receipt of certain benefits, specifically helping pregnant and breastfeeding mums, and children under the age of four.³⁷

The OAC would like to see Welsh Government back an increase in eligibility up to age 5, to bridge the gap between Healthy Start ending and free school meals starting. However, the first challenge for the next Welsh Government is to raise awareness and uptake of the scheme as it exists now, as nearly 4 in 10 families that could be eligible have not yet applied.³⁸ There is also some regional variability between local authorities, ranging from 77% uptake by eligible households in Blaenau Gwent to 61% in Ynys Môn.

The Healthy Weight Healthy: Wales delivery plan includes a commitment to review current arrangements.³⁹ The OAC is calling for a dedicated, sustained and visible promotion of the scheme through a mass communications campaign, via the Welsh Benefits Charter and the 'Claim What's Yours' income maximisation initiative.

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families that could be eligible **have not yet applied** for the Healthy Start Scheme



Note from Chairs

The challenge ahead is great – but so is the opportunity.

Through a range of strategies and new pieces of legislation, Wales has demonstrated a clear commitment to improving public health, advancing fairness, and protecting the wellbeing of future generations. This commitment is welcomed, but it is vital that it is strengthened and streamlined in the years to come.

Despite progress to date, rates of overweight and obesity continue to rise – driving increased levels of diet-related ill health across our nation. Without increased decisive action, the years ahead risk a continuation of present trends, which are evident and etched deep within our healthscape. This includes rising cases of non-communicable diseases, widening health inequalities, and the significant, avoidable pressure this puts on the Welsh health system.

With the election of a new Senedd and the formation of a new Welsh Government comes a critical opportunity to renew focus on prevention, moving beyond incremental progress towards change at the scale and pace required. The evidence is clear, the cost of slow progress is mounting, and the need for more decisive action is urgent.

By delivering the actions set out in this manifesto, we can help secure a future where every person in Wales, in every community, has a fair opportunity to live and *stay* well.

Signed:

- British Heart Foundation Cymru
- British Medical Association Cymru
- British Dietetic Association, Wales Board of the BDA and NHS dietitians from local health boards
- Cancer Research UK Cymru
- Diabetes UK Cymru
- Nesta
- Royal College of General Practitioners
- Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health Wales
- Royal College of Podiatry
- Royal College of Physicians
- Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh
- Tenovus Cancer Care

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