

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

WRITTEN STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY ESTABLISHMENT OF A REGIONAL OBESITY MANAGEMENT SERVICE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Published at 10am on Wednesday 21 May 2025

Mr Nesbitt (The Minister of Health): Today I am pleased to announce plans for the introduction of a new Regional Obesity Management Service for Northern Ireland. This new service will be the first of its kind in Northern Ireland. It is a significant development here, and one which has the potential to significantly improve the lives of many individuals who are struggling with being overweight or obesity. This new service will provide a clinically approved pathway for weight management in Northern Ireland. Not only will this service help those who are struggling with weight management, but it also has the potential to deliver significant indirect benefits through the prevention and treatment of associated illnesses such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease, and thus potentially helping to alleviate demand on other health and social care services, which are coming under increasing and sustained pressure.

Members will be aware that my Department previously launched a public consultation seeking views on the introduction of this type of service. The outcome of the consultation, which yielded just under 19,000 responses, was overwhelming in favour of introducing this service to Northern Ireland. Through that process, my Department heard from a number of individuals who have lived with and had experience of obesity, and who set out the challenges and difficulties, including stigma, that they have encountered throughout their lives. These accounts give us an insight into the very real difficulties associated with obesity, an insight that simply cannot be gained from statistics alone, and I am grateful to all those who have shared their personal stories.

The new service will be introduced on a phased basis, with phase 1 scheduled to commence in early 2026. This first phase will focus on development of a community-based service where patients will have access to lifestyle support as well as obesity medication, where clinically appropriate and used in line with recommendations from the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE). Currently, health service patients in Northern Ireland do not have access to specialist weight management provision – including the new generation of innovative weight loss injections/medications. As with any new service, it will be important to take forward implementation in a carefully managed way to ensure that it operates effectively, therefore patient numbers will be limited in this first phase, before increasing capacity as the service becomes fully embedded.

Further phases of the Regional Obesity Management Service will, subject to funding, be developed over time and will include other interventions such as bariatric (weight loss) surgery.

Supporting and enabling people to improve their health and wellbeing is a key priority for me, and this announcement today is a very significant step forward. The health and social care system has many competing demands on a seriously overstretched budget, but I am determined to prioritise this area. Obesity is a significant public health issue in Northern Ireland, with 65% of adults and 26% of children living with obesity or being overweight. Those living with being overweight or obese are at a higher risk of a range of major health conditions including heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers, and regularly face weight bias and challenges from a variety of sources, including education, workplace, and healthcare settings. Research has shown however, that it is possible, through appropriate weight management programmes and interventions, to significantly reduce the risk of health conditions associated with obesity and improve quality of life for individuals.

As I have repeatedly emphasised, my ambition is to shift our health service focus from treating ill people to helping people stay healthy. I have also made the removal of health inequalities one of my main areas of focus as Minister. Obesity is a contributing factor to health inequalities. It is a notable fact that it is more prevalent in the most disadvantaged communities (68%) compared to the least disadvantaged (62%). Furthermore, the annual cost of obesity to society as a whole in Northern Ireland is substantial, with previous estimates stating that both the healthcare and productivity costs in Northern Ireland were £414 million a year.

It is important to note that the Regional Obesity Management Service sits within Department's wider obesity strategic framework 'Healthy Futures.' A 'Healthy Futures' consultation analysis report, outlining the findings of the public consultation on the vision, principles, themes, and population-level outcomes for the new obesity strategic framework is also being published today.

The consultation findings indicate overwhelming support and emphasise the need to redouble efforts to prevent overweight and obesity, while also calling for a holistic, patient-centred approach to obesity management. Respondents have highlighted the importance of addressing health inequalities, promoting community engagement, and ensuring equitable access to resources and support for marginalised populations. The focus is shifting from individual responsibility to systemic changes that foster healthier environments. Work is now well advanced on the finalisation of the 'Healthy Futures' obesity strategic framework and, given its cross-cutting nature, I will bring this to the Executive in the near future for their support and agreement. I will update the Assembly further on this in due course.

Finally, establishing a Regional Obesity Management Service will bring us into line with other parts of the UK. It will be a phased introduction and will take time and sustained investment to become fully established and effective. In that context today is a very important moment for public health in Northern Ireland and a significant step forward.

I wish to put on record my thanks to all those who have contributed to this work over the last number of years.