

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

PUBLICATION OF 'HEALTHY FUTURES' OBESITY STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

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Mr Nesbitt (The Minister of Health): Members of the Assembly, today, I am pleased to announce that my Department has published the new 'Healthy Futures' Obesity Strategic Framework on my Department's website: [Healthy Futures obesity strategic framework for Northern Ireland](#) | Department of Health.

As colleagues will know, I have made addressing health inequalities one of my key areas of focus. Living with obesity, having poor diets and/or not being physically active, is recognised by the World Health Organisation as one of the most serious global health challenges we face. The worldwide prevalence of obesity nearly tripled between 1975 and 2016, and it is estimated that by 2030 over 1 billion people globally will be living with obesity.

In Northern Ireland, 64% of adults are classified as living with overweight or obesity, and rates are also higher in the most disadvantaged communities (68%) compared to the least disadvantaged (62%). Just over one in four children and young people are living with overweight (20%) or obesity (6%). However, even at this age there is a real inequality within the outcomes, with 7.7% of P1s in the most deprived communities being measured as obese, versus 4.7% of P1s from the least deprived communities.

Those living with overweight or obesity are at a higher risk of a range of major health conditions including heart disease and stroke; type II diabetes and some cancers, including postmenopausal breast cancer. Obesity can also contribute to mental health issues such as depression, orthopaedic problems, and complications in pregnancy.

The financial costs related to the harms caused by overweight and obesity are substantial. A study published in 2023 focused on the costs to society of overweight and obesity in Northern Ireland; it estimated the annual cost to society of obesity at £500 million and estimates the annual Health expenditure due to obesity at £100 million.

I am therefore pleased today to launch the new 'Healthy Futures' Framework, following Executive approval. The causes of this issue are wide and complex, and the new strategic framework therefore sets out actions to prevent and address overweight and obesity, from education and prevention through to weight management and treatment services. This fully supports my announcement earlier this year on the development of a Regional Obesity Management Service for Northern Ireland.

The vision statement for the new strategic framework, is 'to work collectively to create the wider social and environmental conditions in Northern Ireland that enable and support people to improve their diet and participate in more physical activity, and that reduces the risk of related harm for those living with overweight and obesity'.

The new strategic framework will take a whole system approach to addressing obesity and supporting people to achieve a healthy weight, it will be health led but not solely health owned.

Recognising that overweight and obesity can cause harm at any stage, and that there is an intergenerational dimension, the new framework takes a life course approach and is outcome-based, focused on how we improve life for people not just the activities and initiatives we undertake.

It is also important that we acknowledge the alignment with other policy areas both within health and across departments, the new framework will seek to add value to existing strategic frameworks on issues such as cancer, diabetes, food, and sport and physical activity.

The Delivery of the strategic framework will be taken forward through a thematic approach, across four key themes:

- i. Healthy Policies: the strategies, policies, regulations, and stakeholders that influence our ability to eat a healthy diet, participate in physical activity, and to maintain a weight that is good for our health.
- ii. Healthy Places and Settings: places and settings that influence our ability to eat healthily, be physically active and to manage our weight.
- iii. Healthy People: supporting people to be healthy across a range of settings; provide early interventions and appropriate treatment which seek to reduce the harm to those who may be living with overweight and obesity.
- iv. Collaboration and a Whole System Approach: regularly updating this strategic framework in line with the latest research and evidence; to work collectively across the UK and Ireland to find solutions and take a systematic approach to achieving goals.

The strategic framework focuses on four main long-term population level outcomes across the life course:

- i. Reducing the prevalence of overweight and obesity related Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs).
- ii. Halting the growth in the prevalence of obesity, and moving in the longer term to reducing the percentage of people in Northern Ireland who are living with overweight and/or obesity;
- iii. Improving the population's diet and nutrition; and

- iv. Increasing the percentage of the population who participate in regular physical activity.

The strategic framework aims to address obesity in Northern Ireland through actions delivered collaboratively across sectors, ongoing evaluation, and adaptation to ensure effective implementation of evidence-based actions. While acknowledging the financial challenges that come with delivery of this ambition, the framework sets out the potential for better alignment of existing programmes to achieve improved outcomes and potentially, cost savings in health and social care services. It also acknowledges the stigma that surrounds this issue, which in itself can lead to poor outcomes. We need to be clear, this is about more than individual responsibility, it is about us all working together to address the wider food and physical activity environment to ensure that it supports and enables people to live healthier lives.

There is a clear invest to save rationale for this strategy, with the potential to support the wider prevention and health inequalities agenda, reduce the substantial costs the harm from living with overweight and obesity, and related conditions such as type II diabetes, has on Northern Ireland.

As I have repeatedly emphasised, my ambition is to shift our health service focus from treating ill people to helping people stay healthy, and this approach is at the heart of Healthy Futures.

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