



Obesity Alliance Cymru

Response: Healthy Eating and drinking in maintained schools in Wales

28.07.2025

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 Obesity Alliance Cymru is a forum for organisations to collaborate and influence policy on preventing and reducing obesity in Wales.

OAC welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on healthy eating and drinking in maintained schools in Wales. This response letter represents a consensus of our membership.

Our current members are:

- Cancer Research UK (Co-Chair)
- British Heart Foundation Cymru (Co-Chair)
- Bowel Cancer UK
- British Dietetic Association and dietitians from local health boards
- British Medical Association Cymru Wales
- Chartered Society of Physiotherapy
- Diabetes UK Cymru
- Nesta
- Royal College of General Practitioners Cymru Wales
- Royal College of Occupational Therapists
- Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
- Royal College of Physicians
- Royal College of Podiatry
- Royal College of Surgeons England
- Royal College of Surgeons Scotland
- Tenovus Cancer Care
- Welsh NHS Confederation

Background:

In the general population, rates of overweight and obesity are climbing, with 62% of the population (16+) in Wales living with overweight or obesity, which increases the risks of diet-related ill health.¹

It is estimated that obesity costs the Welsh NHS £73 million a year, increasing to £86 million when including overweight² and is exacerbating tremendous and avoidable pressures facing our NHS. If the numbers of people living with overweight continue, the estimated cost to the NHS will be close to half a billion pounds by 2050.

Excess weight can increase the risk of many non-communicable diseases and is associated with significant mortality and morbidity. This includes long-term health conditions like type-2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases (CVDs), liver disease, 13³ types of cancer, musculoskeletal conditions, and poor mental health.

Our Future Generations:

OAC has been hugely supportive of Healthy Weight, Healthy Wales (HWHW), Welsh Government's 10-year Obesity Strategy. First published in 2020, delivery plans are published every two years and OAC has been supportive of many evidence-based measures outlined in the plans to support public health.

Many of the factors that shape our eating behaviours and habits are due to influences that are outside the individual's control and are characteristics of their environment. Most of these behaviours are influenced in our earliest formative years. For example, poor nutrition consumed during pregnancy and immediately after a child is born can exert a powerful influence on later eating behaviours, and in turn, increase the chances of living with overweight and obesity in childhood and young adulthood.⁴ In light of this, opportunities that can help counter this should be seized.

The cause for change is clear. With one in three children in Wales now living with obesity, and a continued rise in the number of children being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes (a primarily preventable condition usually linked to adults over 55), the implications of which are currently unknown but alarming. For adults diagnosed with type 2 diabetes earlier in life, in their 30s, their life expectancy is reduced by 14 years, compared to a 6-year reduction at age 50.⁵ Applying similar calculations (though not exact), someone diagnosed at 20 could lose up to 20 years of life, while those diagnosed at 10 could lose 27 years. While type 2 diabetes is a stark example, the impacts of diet-related poor health extend far wider – affecting multiple systems and increasing risk of a range of chronic diseases.

¹ Stats Wales, 2024, <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/National-Survey-for-Wales/Population-Health/Adult-Lifestyles/adultlifestyles-by-healthboard-from-202021>

² Public Health Wales <https://phw.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/primary-care-division/primary-care-obesity-prevention/>

³ B. Lauby-Secretan, C. Scoccianti, D. Loomis, Y. Grosse, F. Bianchini, and K. Straif, "Body Fatness and Cancer — Viewpoint of the IARC Working Group," *New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 375, no. 8, pp. 794–798, Aug. 2016, doi: 10.1056/NEJMSr1606602.

⁴ BPS, <https://explore.bps.org.uk/content/report-guideline/bpsrep.2019.rep130/chapter/bpsrep.2019.rep130.4>

⁵ <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/type-2-diabetes-diagnosis-at-age-30-can-reduce-life-expectancy-by-up-to-14-years>

The ambition for Wales to become a Marmot nation is one we support. The Marmot principles include giving every child the best start, maximising their capabilities and ensuring a healthy standard of living and can only be achieved if action is focused now on children living in higher areas of deprivation.

We encourage the Welsh Government to take additional action to support the children of Wales in living healthy lives. OAC welcomes measures to improve healthy eating and drinking in maintained schools in Wales; however, concerns remain that the current school food standards are not being applied equally.

In addition to the above, we encourage the Welsh Government build upon progress to date and scale-up the Nutrition Skills for Life programme across all schools in Wales, ensuring every child leaves school food literate, with the skills and knowledge to maintain a healthy and sustainable diet. This programme also holds an evidence-based model of training that could be delivered to school staff, which could help embed the proposals by building confidence and understanding at the school level.

Schools to lead the way:

Healthy diets, which should comprise 40% fruit and vegetables by weight, remain less affordable than unhealthy diets. We know that 28% of children in Wales live in relative poverty⁶ and families are likely to be struggling to afford to eat enough fruit and veg. The relative lack of availability further compounds the problem, with areas across Wales (whether it be urban or rural) unable to access more than a local corner convenience store to purchase food.

For our schools and colleges, we need to promote the best and healthiest environments so that they become ingrained as normal and part of their everyday lives. Schools should provide food education throughout all years, emphasising health and diet sustainability alongside accessibility to healthy, balanced and nutritionally informed foods.

OAC welcomes a 'Whole School Approach' to healthy food and physical activity, which includes providing education through the years with an emphasis on health, diet, and sustainability. We also welcome both structured and unstructured approaches to physical activity throughout the day, with food served in schools that meet high nutritional standards.

We believe schools and the public sector more widely have an essential role to play in reducing the burden of living with obesity and overweight in Wales, by supporting our future generations to use locally sourced, sustainable food. Examples such as the 'Future Generations Menu Pilot' in Carmarthenshire County Council highlight long-term positive impacts of redesigning primary school lunch menus, with emphasis on local produce to promote health, wellbeing, sustainability, social value, and education.⁷

One of the key aims of the recently published Wales Community Food Strategy⁸ is to help address food-related issues facing communities in Wales, around tackling food poverty, diet-related ill-health and reducing food waste.

⁶ Welsh Government Relative income poverty: April 2021 to March 2022

⁷ Future Generations Pilot Scheme, Carmarthenshire County Council, <https://www.carmarthenshire.gov.wales/home/council-services/education-schools/school-meals/future-generations-menu/>

⁸ [Wales Community Food Strategy](#)

New research is beginning to show that paediatric hypertension is increasing within children who are obese⁹. One study showed that individuals with persistent hypertension through childhood and adolescence were 7.6 times more likely to have adult hypertension than those with optimal blood pressure¹⁰.

Although there is limited evidence on how childhood hypertension changes through adolescence, the growing rate of obesity among children in Wales is a cause for concern. Studies have shown that children and adolescents living with obesity are around 5 times more likely to live with obesity into adulthood, with 80% of adolescents living with obesity still measuring as having obesity in adulthood¹¹. Furthermore, the percentage of children considered to have overweight or obesity in Wales continues to be higher in areas with the greatest deprivation¹².

With growing numbers of childhood obesity cases and stagnant poverty levels in Wales, the projected increase in disease burden in Wales needs to be addressed now.

It should be easy for everyone, especially children, to eat healthily. But it isn't, because the food environment is stacked in favour of unhealthy food from the start of life. Wider social determinants of health include access to healthy food and drink; this is why we need to broaden the focus beyond the Welsh NHS to address factors such as exercise provision and food education, portion control, and quality in educational settings. Addressing the factors that cause ill-health in the first place should be a central focus for the Welsh Government.

The OAC is calling on the Welsh Government to raise standards and uphold them, by ensuring:

- All national guidance and standards on food and drink in schools are met, and compliance is regularly monitored and data is regularly published, because transparent data enables better accountability
- Parents can easily access information on what meals are being given to their children in schools, to support children with long-term health conditions (like diabetes) and encourage, among other benefits, conversations about healthy eating at home
- The provision of meals which are sourced locally and sustainably produced and contain a balanced diet supported by a dietitian

International and domestic examples of food environments in schools:

While there is considerable variation in the breadth and depth of uptake of recommended strategies between countries and within Wales, there is broad consensus that strong government, corporate,

⁹ Jeong, S. and Kim, S., 2024. [Obesity and hypertension in children and adolescents | Clinical Hypertension | Full Text](#)

¹⁰ Urbina, E., et al., 2019. [Relation of Blood Pressure in Childhood to Self-Reported Hypertension in Adulthood - PubMed](#)

¹¹ Simmonds, M., et al., 2015. [Predicting adult obesity from childhood obesity: A systematic review and meta-analysis](#)

¹² Public Health Wales, 2025. [Proportion of children with a healthy weight remains higher than pre-pandemic level - Public Health Wales](#)

and consumer actions, including regulatory measures, are needed to advance obesity prevention policies. Below are international and Welsh examples: ¹³

Education in Norway

The Norwegian Directorate of Health has developed guidelines for all food and drink available during the school day, including school vending machines. Nutrition education is integrated within the Norwegian national school core curriculum developed by the Directorate of Education. A specific subject called “food and health” is compulsory for all grades. Education on nutrition is also embedded in other subjects such as science and general studies.

Culture shifting in Japan

In Japan, it is common for nursery schools to not let children get dropped off by car, so families must walk or cycle. Most high school children eat lunches at school that are prepared on site using fresh local ingredients and planned by qualified experts in nutrition. This is one reason why there is a weaker relationship between low socioeconomic status and obesity in Japan than there is in Western countries. There is also a strong cultural pressure to enjoy junk food and processed food in moderation.

Energy drinks in France

In France manufacturers reduced the caffeine content of beverages to avoid a tax levy based on caffeine content.

Food education in Wales (Monmouthshire)

The Chwedlau Bwyd / Food Stories is a school project run by Monmouthshire County Council aimed at making food fun, through a creative and playful approach to food education. Family involvement has been crucial to the success, with families invited to sample the meals prepared by the children, which sparked conversations about making healthy food choices at home. Additionally, families received meal kits to recreate the recipes together, turning cooking into a fun, bonding experience. As a result, more pupils chose nutritious meals from their school menu, significantly boosting their enjoyment and confidence about lunchtime choices.

Food education in Wales (Cardiff)

[Food and Fun](#) is a school-based education programme that started in Cardiff as a pilot in 2015. It was the first UK example of a multi-agency project providing food and nutrition education, physical activity, enrichment sessions and healthy meals to children during the school summer holidays. The Food and Fun ethos is “*Working together to promote healthy living, positive well-being and improve engagement with education and the school during the summer holidays.*” NHS dietitians provide accredited nutrition training for delivery staff and nutrition learning and teaching resources, ensuring that consistent, evidence-based messages about nutrition are disseminated through the programme.

In 2024, 205 schools delivered the programme and provided over 13,040 places for children each day that it ran. 2025 marks the 10th operating year of Food and Fun where the focus continues to be on extending the reach and impact of the programme.

¹³ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31673982/>

Planning and the broader food environment in Wales

We welcome pilot work in Cardiff and Vale and Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Boards on how health and planning can work together to reduce hot food takeaways in local communities. We would like to see learnings taken from this work, built upon, and used to inform how local authorities review planning applications for takeaways in close proximity to schools.

In light of the above, we welcome the proposals' references to the broader food environment surrounding schools. This includes guidance around the governing body/ schools developing and reviewing healthy eating and drink policies, which 'may include' food brought into schools (i.e. takeaways). While this inclusion is welcomed, there is scope to go further - to help ensure that the surrounding food environment does not undermine new measures.

The OAC has long called for the strengthening of national planning guidance to empower local authorities to prevent new hot food takeaways from being established in areas with high existing density or close proximity to schools. Whilst no silver bullet, this will be an important step in tackling the broader obesogenic environment in which schools operate in.

The Welsh Government should be ambitious in its plans to support all children in Wales to live healthily, to reduce the increasing levels of obesity and overweight in Wales, which has increased exponentially over the last 20 years.

For more information about anything contained within this response please contact:

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