

Healthy Futures

A Strategic Framework to Prevent the Harm caused by
Obesity, and Improve Diets and Levels of Physical
Activity in Northern Ireland

Consultation Questions

November 2023

Overview

Consultation to seek views on Healthy Futures Strategic Framework to Prevent the Harm caused by Obesity, and Improve Diets and Levels of Physical Activity in Northern Ireland

Consultation opened on Friday 24 November 2023.

Consultation closes on Friday 16 February 2024 at 17:00.

Summary

The Department of Health has worked with key stakeholders to co-produce a new strategic framework to reduce the harm related to living with overweight and obesity in Northern Ireland.

Consultation Description

The new strategic framework for obesity – “**Healthy Futures**” – was issued for public consultation on 24 November 2023 and is available online at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/consultation-obesity-strategy-healthy-futures>

How to Respond:

You can respond online by accessing the consultation documents on the ‘Citizen Space’ web service and completing the online survey there. The online version can be accessed at <https://consultations2.nidirect.gov.uk/doh-1/healthy-futures-consultation-2023-2032/>.

To respond in writing, please email the Department at: HDPB@health-ni.gov.uk or write to:

Health Development Policy Branch
Department of Health
Room C4.22, Castle Buildings
BELFAST BT4 3SQ

Next Steps

Following this consultation, we will collate and analyse all views and inputs, and begin the process of developing the final strategy. This will need to be agreed by the Minister of Health and the NI Executive before being published. It is important to note that AFFFA – and all the structures that support action and collaboration – will remain in place until any new strategy is put in place.

The Closing Date for responses is Friday 16 February 2024 at 17:00

Your details

Name: Niamh O’Kane

Email: Niamh.okane@qub.ac.uk

Are you responding as an individual or organisation?

Individual ☐

Organisation ☒

Name of organisation if appropriate: GroundsWell Consortium (contributors: Niamh O’Kane, Ruth Hunter, Mike Clarke)

Screening

The strategic framework has been equality and rural screened to consider impacts on this important group. These documents are available at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/obesity-strategy-2023-2033-rnia-and-eqia-0>.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 1 – SCREENING:

Have you any comments on either the Equality/Good Relations or Rural screening documents?

No

CONSULTATION QUESTION 2 – SCREENING:

Are there any areas or issues you feel we should be considering in future Equality/Good Relations or Rural screenings?

No

Vision, Principles, Outcomes, Thematic approach

CONSULTATION QUESTION 3 – VISION: the overall vision for this new strategic framework is to *“create the conditions in Northern Ireland which enable and support people to improve their diet and participate in more physical activity, and reduce the risk of related harm for those living with overweight and obesity”*.

Do you agree with this vision?

Strongly agree: X

Agree: ☐

Disagree: ☐

Strongly disagree: ☐

Comments:

We believe that the vision for the strategic framework highlights the potential of the environment to empower individuals to make healthier decisions, adopt healthier behaviours and improve their health and well-being. In this way, there will be a shift away from placing blame on those in the population unable to adopt healthier behaviours (for example, because poor infrastructure limits their access to active travel options).

CONSULTATION QUESTION 4 – PRINCIPLES: The project board proposed a range of principles for the development and implementation of the new strategic framework, these are: taking **whole system approach** with the framework being **health led but not solely health owned**, taking **a life course approach** and targeting or prioritising certain groups, focusing on reducing **inequalities**, acknowledging the **alignment with other policy areas** and not duplicating effort, being **outcome-based**, and that the framework will provide an **umbrella for actions to prevent and address overweight and obesity**.

Do you agree with these principles?

Strongly agree: X

Agree: ☐

Disagree: ☐

Strongly disagree: ☐

Comments:

Obesity and other NCDs are complex conditions existing within a large system and sphere of influence. Adopting a whole systems approach to helping individuals live healthier lives ensures co-ordinated actions developed with a multitude of factors in mind, would involve a variety of stakeholders within the system (holding them accountable, as appropriate), and can improve the likelihood of successful outcomes and positive impact on citizens.

“Health-led but not solely health owned” and “alignment with other policy areas” are two important principles which highlight the need for collaborative working across multiple departments and policy areas. The framework makes a number of references to the “obesogenic environment” which reaches far beyond that of just health. Various domains of physical activity and diet, for example, active travel, leisure time activities, and fast-food consumption, will be determined in no small part by the nature of the environments in which we live, work, and play. This means that how our spaces are designed and planned can directly influence the adoption of individual behaviours. Collaboration across the likes of health, infrastructure, environment, planning, can also help to identify ‘multi-solvers’ (i.e., solutions which help address numerous issues across different policy areas). For example, provision of good quality green space can encourage physical activity leading to improved health outcomes, but it can also encourage active travel leading to a reduction in environmental pollutants, among other co-benefits to the economy and society (1,2). It is also important that policies and actions are based on reliable and robust evidence, ideally that which comes from systematic reviews and evidence synthesis of high-quality research (as was recognised through the development of the living policy options matrix for this in the consultation document, sections 3.18 and 3.19); and that evaluation plans are put in place to show the impact of new policies and actions which might include randomised trials where options could be compared in this way.

1. Hunter R et al. Advancing urban green and blue space contributions to public health. *Lancet Public Health*. 2023 Sep;8(9):e735-e742.

2. Diener A, Mudu P. How can vegetation protect us from air pollution? A critical review on green spaces' mitigation abilities for air-borne particles from a public health perspective - with implications for urban planning. Sci Total Environ. 2021 Nov 20;796:148605.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 5 – OUTCOMES: This strategic framework focuses on four main long-term population level outcomes across the life course: Reducing the percentage of people in Northern Ireland who are living with overweight and/or obesity; Improving the population’s diet and nutrition; Increasing the percentage of the population who participate in regular physical activity; and Reducing the prevalence of overweight and obesity-related Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs).

Do you agree with these 4 population level outcomes?

Strongly agree: ☐

Agree: X

Disagree: ☐

Strongly disagree: ☐

Comments:

When considering all four of these outcomes, we would encourage the department to consider the role of Urban Green and Blue Space (UGBS). Increasing amount of, access to, and use of UGBS can impact upon physical activity and have preventative health impacts on overweight, obesity and obesity related NCDs including cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease and risk for type 2 diabetes, and healthy environments (1,2,3).

1. Gascon M et al. Residential green spaces and mortality: A systematic review. *Environ Int.* 2016;86:60–7.
2. Villeneuve PJ, et al. A cohort study relating urban green space with mortality in Ontario, Canada. *Environ Res.* 2012;115:51–8.
3. De la Fuente F et al. Green Space Exposure Association with Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus, Physical Activity, and Obesity: A Systematic Review. *Int J Environ Res Public Health.* 2020;18(1):97.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 6 – THEMATIC APPROACH: The strategic framework takes a thematic approach to the issues focusing on four key themes: Health Policies, Health Places, Healthy People, and Collaboration and A Whole System Approach.

Are all the key areas covered within this thematic approach?

Yes: ☐

No: ☐

Comments:

Healthy Policies

CONSULTATION QUESTION 7 – HEALTHY POLICIES: Our ability to eat a healthy diet, participate in physical activity, and to maintain a weight that is good for our health, is very much influenced by the wider environment in which we live our lives. This theme focuses on the strategies, policies, regulations and stakeholders that control the wider food and physical environment, therefore playing a key role in addressing the obesogenic environment.

Do you agree with this theme and what it is seeking to achieve?

Strongly agree: ☐

Agree: X

Disagree: ☐

Strongly disagree: ☐

Comments:

We agree and welcome mention of green space.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 8 – HEALTHY POLICIES:

Do you agree with these priorities?

Strongly agree: X

Agree:

Disagree: ☐

Strongly disagree: ☐

Comments: Food environment priorities

N/A

Comments: Food labelling and information priorities

N/A

Comments: Heathier food options priorities

N/A

Comments: Physical activity and active travel priorities

We welcome this section in the document and would like to comment on several points. We are pleased to see an emphasis on areas of deprivation – as urban green and blue spaces have the potential to act as a setting for the reduction of inequalities, and due to the health benefits of these spaces, the resulting health inequalities faced by individuals living in urban areas with little or no access to high quality, safe, and useable spaces.

Regarding active travel, research by members of the GroundsWell team has highlighted evidence to support active school travel, teen mobility, organisational travel plans and walking for transport interventions to shift travel modes to more active modes (1). It is imperative that interventions at the micro- (structural dependence) and macro-levels operate concurrently and in a complementary manner to ensure that environmental designs (at the macro level) facilitate individual-level travel mode choices. Recommended components would be segregated bicycle lanes, lanes specifically for public transport, greenways, accessible pavements, and street connectivity. Citizen juries conducted by the group into car dependency in Belfast highlighted a number of recommendations for reducing car dependency (2) which included building a network of cycle access and dedicated cycle lanes connecting to, across, and through the Greater Belfast area and integrated with other transport policies/solutions. Other recommendations include incentivising active travel and educating the public.

Further research by members of the GroundsWell team, as part of the SPACE project, conducted workshops with a multitude of stakeholders from across the policy landscape of health and the environment in Northern Ireland. In workshops designed to address the task of accelerating policy and action on health and the environment, one of six key priorities identified was reducing car dependency (3). Over 30 organisations were represented at the workshops, and stakeholders agreed that our spaces have been designed to accommodate cars. They outlined that we must change our culture of car dependency and design spaces around the

people who live in them – this has cross-sectoral implications, including health, climate and infrastructure.

We note the mention of “safe routes” for walking, cycling and recreation and would like to highlight the particular inequalities faced by women and girls in public spaces, particularly young women and girls. GroundsWell are planning to investigate this further, but we know from existing research that young women and girls in particular do not feel welcome or safe in their parks (4). Reducing barriers for a large group in the population will have short and long-term benefits, as physical activity habits adopted early in life may continue into adulthood, further reducing NCD incidence and health service burden. We would encourage collaboration with The Executive Office and other departments working on the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls strategy in NI (5), as well as linking in with academics and researchers continuing to identify gender-based barriers to physical activity and seeking to find effective ways to overcome these.

1. Cleland CL et al. Complex interventions to reduce car use and change travel behaviour: An umbrella review. *Journal of Transport & Health*. 2023;31.
2. Involve and QUB (2023) How can car dependency and levels of car use in Belfast be reduced? Available at:
<https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/cardep/Filestore/Filetoupload,1749640,en.pdf>.
3. O'Kane N et al. (2024) Leadership for Healthy People and Planet: An invitation to accelerate integrated policy and action on health and environment. Available at: <https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/space/Resources/>
4. Make Space for Girls: the research background 2023. Available at:
https://assets-global.website-files.com/6398afa2ae5518732f04f791/63f60a5a2a28c570b35ce1b5_Make%20Space%20for%20Girls%20-%20Research%20Draft.pdf.
5. Ending Violence Against Women and Girls. Available at:
<https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/topics/ending-violence-against-women-and-girls>.

CONSULTATION QUESTION 9 – HEALTHY POLICIES:

Is there anything missing that is likely to have a positive impact on this theme and what it is trying to achieve?

Comments:

As mentioned above, we welcome the mention of green space in 5.11 in the framework document. Urban green space has an important role to play in the creation of a culture of health and wellbeing. Research from our team has shown that urban green space and urban green space interventions can have health, social and environmental benefits (1). Furthermore, the World Health Organisation recognises green space interventions as having the potential to deliver positive health, social and environmental outcomes for all population groups, particularly among lower socioeconomic status groups (2). A good local example can be seen in the Connswater Community Greenway, who we work closely with. It is an exemplar project of rejuvenation and development of a greenway and research conducted by team members has shown the importance of it for physical inactivity mitigation and impacts on mental wellbeing and quality of life (3). Furthermore, greenways such as the Connswater Community Greenway, have been shown to be cost-effective interventions for improving physical activity levels (4). Research by members of the team has also demonstrated that the Connswater Community Greenway has provided a positive social return on investment and shown that for every £1 invested in the Connswater Community Greenway, the local economy gains between £1.34 and £1.59 (5,6).

In addition, we believe that green space provides further co-benefits to health beyond that of just increasing physical activity levels or encouraging active travel. We are learning that, particularly in urban areas, exposure to pollutants can have detrimental impacts on our health and wellbeing. Not only can environmental pollutants lead to development of respiratory diseases, but we are beginning to understand that pollutants can even cause epigenetic changes, altering our underlying biology, and further leaving us vulnerable to the development of NCDs. Urban green and blue spaces, if properly planned and designed, can contribute to the reduction of some urban environmental pollutants. GroundsWell completed a collaborative piece of work alongside The Paul Hogarth Company and EastSide Greenways, to view the Connswater Community Greenway through the lens of climate resilience, adaptation, nature conservation and self-sustainability. Findings

indicated that greenways can act as a space for capturing carbon, eliminating emissions, and building biodiversity (7). Whilst all of these can provide environmental benefits within the context of the climate crisis, they can also lead to health benefits among the individuals who use the green space. A better understanding of how green space, particularly in urban areas, can act as a 'multi-solver' with a multitude of co-benefits for health, can ensure that we prioritise these spaces as an important setting for the improvement of public health, and the reduction of health inequalities.

Further work has been done by the World Health Organisation European Office for the Prevention and Control of NCDs and the Centre for Environment and Health, outlining the co-benefits of linking NCD (such as obesity) prevention and climate change, which was guided by experts (8). The report outlines that NCDs can be prevented through policies addressing risk factors, including physical inactivity and air pollution, and that policies which are designed to prevent NCDs can have co-benefits for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

1. Hunter RF et al. Environmental, health, wellbeing, social and equity effects of urban green space interventions: A meta-narrative evidence synthesis. *Environ Int.* 2019 Sep;130:104923.
2. World Health Organisation (2017) Urban Green Space Interventions and Health A review of impacts and effectiveness. Available at: <https://www.who.int/andorra/publications/m/item/urban-green-space-interventions-and-health--a-review-of-impacts-and-effectiveness.-full-report>.
3. Hunter RF et al. Investigating the physical activity, health, wellbeing, social and environmental effects of a new urban greenway: a natural experiment (the PARC study). *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act.* 2021 Oct 30;18(1):142.
4. Dallat MA et al. Urban greenways have the potential to increase physical activity levels cost-effectively. *Eur J Public Health.* 2014 Apr;24(2):190-5.
5. Hunter RF et al. (2022) Social return on investment analysis of an urban greenway, *Cities & Health*, 6:4, 693-710.

6. Tate et al. (2023) The social return on investment of an urban regeneration project using real-world data: the Connswater Community Greenway, Belfast, UK, *Cities & Health*, 7:5, 699-718.
7. GroundsWell (2023) Climate and Nature Action: A vision for the Connswater Community Greenway. Available at:
https://groundswelluk.org/Filestore/ClimateNatureAction_VisionforCCG_231023.pdf
8. Noncommunicable diseases and climate change. Report of an expert meeting, Bonn, Germany, 1–2 December 2022. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

Healthy Places

CONSULTATION QUESTION 10 – HEALTHY PLACES: At all ages, we can spend a significant portion of our lives in places and settings that influence our ability or inability to eat healthily, be physically active and to manage our weight. This can be through a lack of access to opportunities, barriers to participation and lack of availability. However, settings can also play a positive role in supporting the health and wellbeing of the people who access them. This theme focuses on creating supportive places and settings.

Do you agree with this theme and what it is seeking to achieve?

Strongly agree: ☐

Agree: ☒

Disagree: ☐

Strongly disagree: ☐

Comments:

Whilst we agree that the places identified are important settings, we believe that there would be a benefit in identifying “public spaces” (e.g., urban green and blue spaces, parks, etc.) as an additional “healthy place” within the framework. Whilst all of the aforementioned places may come to play at one time in an individual’s life, outdoor/public spaces will play a role throughout the lifetime, which comes back to the framework’s focus on taking a life course approach. Furthermore, these spaces act as settings publicly available to all, with the potential to transcend inequalities faced by minorities who may not have access to these other spaces (e.g., houseless individuals, asylum seekers).

CONSULTATION QUESTION 11 – HEALTHY PLACES:

Do you agree with these priorities?

Strongly agree: ☐

Agree: ☒

Disagree: ☐

Strongly disagree: ☐

Comments: Early years settings priorities

Comments: School settings priorities
Comments: College, university, and workplace settings priorities
Comments: Healthcare settings priorities
Comments: Local government and community settings priorities

CONSULTATION QUESTION – 12: HEALTHY PLACES:

Is there anything missing that is likely to have a positive impact on this theme and what it is trying to achieve?

Comments:

See previous comment re absence of “public/outdoor spaces/urban green and blue spaces”.

Healthy People

CONSULTATION QUESTION 13 – HEALTHY PEOPLE: As well as amending the wider policy and legislative environment and ensuring that a range of settings support people to be healthy, this theme therefore focuses on the need to help, support, and enable people to prevent poor health and wellbeing, to provide early interventions for those who may need additional help, and to provide appropriate treatment and interventions which seek to reduce the harm to those who may be living with overweight and obesity.

Do you agree with this theme and what it is seeking to achieve?

Strongly agree: X

Agree: ☐

Disagree: ☐

Strongly disagree: ☐

Comments:

CONSULTATION QUESTION 14 – HEALTHY PEOPLE:

Do you agree with these priorities?

Strongly agree: X

Agree: ☐

Disagree: ☐

Strongly disagree: ☐

Comments: Pregnancy and early years priorities

Comments: Prevention and awareness programmes priorities

Comments: Weight management services priorities

CONSULTATION QUESTION 15 – HEALTHY PEOPLE:

Is there anything missing that is likely to have a positive impact on this theme and what it is trying to achieve?

Comments:

Collaboration and Whole System Approach

CONSULTATION QUESTION 16 – Collaboration and a Whole System

Approach: Overweight and obesity is complex and interrelated with other issues and outcomes. It is vital therefore that this strategic framework is a living document which is regularly updated in line with the latest international research and evidence, that we work collectively across the UK and Ireland, and that we enable people to come together to find solutions and take a systematic approach to achieving our goals.

Do you agree with this theme and what it is seeking to achieve?

Strongly agree: X

Agree: ☐

Disagree: ☐

Strongly disagree: ☐

Comments:

See response to consultation question 4

CONSULTATION QUESTION 17 – Collaboration and a Whole System

Approach: **Do you agree with these priorities?**

Strongly agree: ☐

Agree: ☐

Disagree: ☐

Strongly disagree: ☐

Comments: Whole System Approach and collaboration priorities

As a consortium, we have had very positive experiences and impactful collaboration working across sectors with a multitude of stakeholders – for example, EastSide Partnership, Belfast Healthy Cities, Belfast City Council and others. We have experienced how vital collaboration is in addressing complex issues.

One example of collaboration can be seen in work we conducted as part of the SPACE project, with involve NI, “Leadership for Healthy People and Planet” which engaged over 30 organisations in three workshops, and aimed to accelerate integrated policy and action on health and the environment (1). The report outlines priorities identified by stakeholders, one of which is meaningful collaboration, identified as key for achieving impact within the policy landscape. Therefore, we recommend that collaboration and cross-sectoral working is prioritised within the strategy.

(1) O’Kane N et al. (2024) Leadership for Healthy People and Planet: An invitation to accelerate integrated policy and action on health and environment. Available at:

https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/space/Filestore/Leadership%20for%20healthy%20people%20and%20planet_RGBCOMPRESSED.pdf

CONSULTATION QUESTION 18 – Collaboration and a Whole System

Approach: **Is there anything missing that is likely to have a positive impact on this theme and what it is trying to achieve?**

Comments:

Knowledge exchange and partnership with the research community and academia, to ensure that the research they design and conduct is as useful as possible and the findings are used. This was one of the priorities identified by stakeholders in our policy workshops (citation above).

Thank you

Thank you for completing the consultation. We are keen to hear a wide range of views and ideas to make our new strategy, and proposed interventions, even better targeted at the factors that will make the most positive difference.

You may also be interested in the Department's consultation on a Proposed Regional Obesity Management Service (ROMS) for Northern Ireland which is running at the same time as this consultation. Details are available online at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/proposed-regional-obesity-management-service-roms-northern-ireland>.