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## Myth Busting Prevention and Obesity Policies

Wales is facing a public health crisis. Rates of overweight and obesity are climbing, resulting in diet related ill health across the population. Obesity costs the Welsh economy an estimated £3 billion per year<sup>1</sup> and is exacerbating huge avoidable pressures facing our NHS. Excess weight leads to a large number of diseases that cause significant mortality and morbidity, including type-2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease (CVD), liver disease, many types of cancer, musculoskeletal conditions and poor mental health.

This paper aims to set out the health and economic benefits of continuing to fund public health interventions even in difficult economic climates, and challenges some of the negative media messaging around population health measures.

### Prevention is cheaper than treatment

Diabetes related hospital spells cost the Welsh NHS an average of £4,518 per spell in 2021/22, not including spells requiring amputations. £105 million was spent on drugs to manage diabetes in Wales in 2022/23.

However around 90% of diabetes cases are type 2 diabetes, over half of which could be prevented or delayed with behaviour changes. Some of the ways people can combat the main risk factors are by having a healthier weight, eating a healthy diet, and being physically active.

There are around 2,700 premature deaths from heart and circulatory diseases each year in Wales. The total annual economic cost of heart and circulatory diseases in Wales is around £1.5 billion. Around 50% of heart attacks and strokes are associated with high blood pressure in Wales, yet 26% of adults have obesity and 45% of adults in Wales do not meet physical activity recommendations.<sup>2</sup>

We must ensure that, where possible, we prevent people from developing heart and circulatory diseases. We would like to improve detection and support people to manage conditions such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol which often precede heart and circulatory diseases. This could be done through making every contact count and using community pharmacies and local authority settings to promote healthy lifestyles.

Around 4 in 10 UK cancer cases are preventable. Preventing cancer saves lives, saves money, and reduces pressure on the health service. As our population grows and ages, reducing the cases of preventable cancers will be essential to avoid the need for ever-growing health budgets. By acting against key risk factors – tobacco, alcohol and overweight and obesity – to prevent ill health, governments across the UK could prevent nearly 37,000 cases of cancer in total in the UK by 2040.

### Meal deals will not be banned in Wales

Meal Deals will not be banned in Wales when the Healthy Food Environment Legislation come into force next year, but meal deals with a high fat, sugar or salt content will be restricted. The same products will continue to be available in stores for people to buy. 75% of meal deals examined exceed recommended calories for lunch.

### Restricting price promotions on the unhealthiest foods will save people money

Volume based promotions drive greater sales,<sup>3</sup> promote quick consumption rather than sensible stockpiling,<sup>4</sup> and are much more prevalent for unhealthy products rather than core staples.<sup>5</sup> Price promotions are not free gifts and should not be considered so by the Welsh public; they are mechanisms used to drive sales.



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Polling by Cancer Research UK in November 2018 highlighted that 86% of Welsh adults felt that multi-buy type promotions caused people to buy more unhealthy food, and that Welsh adults more frequently saw unhealthy food on promotion than healthy food or core staples. As obesity rates have increased since 2018, this polling is still reflective of Wales's unhealthy shopping baskets.

Research by Cancer Research UK which included a sample size of 800 Welsh adults, published in March 2019, found that people who bought more on promotion were more likely to have a weight classed as overweight, and that they were more likely to buy unhealthy food and less likely to buy fruit and vegetables.<sup>6</sup> As promotion use increases, adults buy more carbohydrates, sugar and saturated fat, and less protein and fibre – products that we often never intended to buy when walking into the shop!

### **We can make great strides in supporting people to live a healthy life**

There is a strong systemic relationship between obesity and deprivation. National Policy which focuses on population health measures is needed so that the NHS can work with local partners and engage with communities to deliver interventions to prevent and treat obesity.

Moving from working in silos to a whole systems approach will also improve population health outcomes over the long term. We welcome that there is now a Public Health Wales System Lead working in each Local Health Board to bring all local stakeholders together and look at things like the health aspects of planning applications for new hot food take aways.



#### **Recommendations:**

**We would like to see the All-Wales Weight Management Pathway embedded in all Health Boards and across communities so that those people living with obesity can have equitable access to effective weight management particularly amongst socio-economic groups that are most under-represented in these services. These should include targeted outreach campaigns to encourage uptake from under-represented demographic groups and encouraging healthcare professionals to take-up training and develop opportunities to build their capability to discuss weight and health with patients.**

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<sup>1</sup> Public Health Wales

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bhf.org.uk/statistics>

<sup>3</sup> Public Health England

<sup>4</sup> NHS Health Scotland (2017) Rapid evidence review – restriction of price promotions (pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Food Standards Scotland (2018) Monitoring retail purchase and price promotions in Scotland (2010 – 2016) (pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-us/we-develop-policy/we-work-with-government/cancer-research-uk-in-wales#Policy\\_Wales1](https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-us/we-develop-policy/we-work-with-government/cancer-research-uk-in-wales#Policy_Wales1)