

The Real Picture of Childhood Obesity in Greater Manchester

What is it?

In response to the continuing rise in childhood obesity rates across Greater Manchester—and recognising the complex and interconnected factors behind it—we launched The Real Picture, a bold and wide-reaching public engagement consultation. The goal was clear: to build public support, explore the real drivers behind childhood obesity, and work with communities to develop actionable, people-powered solutions.

Through a multi-channel approach—including an online survey, a digital campaign, and grassroots promotion—we opened a space for honest dialogue with parents, carers, teachers, and those with lived experience.

What was the timeline?

The whole consultation took place over 3 months between November 2023 and January 2024.

The Real Picture Childhood Obesity Consultation has played a crucial role in continuing to raise awareness of the childhood obesity challenge, while helping to establish a locally driven public mandate for Greater Manchester's work on food and healthy weight.

The insights gathered are now shaping a GM-wide approach, identifying key focus areas and informing strategic recommendations for collaborative action over the next five years.

The findings are already being used to support local Health and Wellbeing Boards and to guide the further use of data in urban and environmental planning, as well as in the development of targeted local public health strategies.

This evidence base also supports a prevention-first model, feeding into a comprehensive review of weight management services and obesity pathways. It's helping build stronger partnerships to improve early identification and intervention for both children and adults. The evaluation has been shared widely—with professionals across early years services, weight management programmes, HAF leads, and public health teams—ensuring its impact is both immediate and far-reaching.

How did it happen?

The public consultation was a key element of the NHS Greater Manchester Population Health Business Plan. It was formally endorsed by the GM Public Health Leadership Group (comprising the 10 Directors of Public Health and senior representatives from OHID, UKHSA, and NHSE NW) and the GM Population Health Advisory Group, which includes voices from all NHS GM Locality Committees, GMPHLG, and the VCFSE sector.

Recognising the scale and complexity of the issue, we engaged key stakeholders early in the process to shape the consultation's approach, research methodology, and outreach strategy. These conversations surfaced the early insights that helped define our messaging.

To ensure wide reach, we launched an 8-week GM-wide digital campaign, supported by on-the-ground street teams in areas with high obesity rates. Public health leads and local councillors amplified the campaign through local media and community engagement, driving strong interest and participation across all 10 boroughs.

Who was involved?

A wide range of stakeholders were invited to shape the original consultation brief and survey questions. These included families with lived experience of overweight and obesity, Directors of Public Health and their teams, Directors of Children's Services, youth ambassadors, VCFSE organisations, the Greater Manchester Food Security Action Network, NHS teams, and local authority teams involved in commissioning weight management services. All contributing stakeholders were provided with a copy of the final and localised versions of the evaluation to ensure continued engagement.

How did you involve the community?

From the very beginning, the consultation was co-designed in partnership with parents, carers, and individuals with lived experience of overweight and obesity. Their insights were vital in shaping both the consultation approach and the wider campaign—ensuring the tone, content, and messaging reflected real concerns and felt relevant, respectful, and empowering.

Building on this foundation, we then partnered with 10GM—Greater Manchester's gateway organisation to the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector—to further extend our reach. 10GM played a critical role in mobilising

communities and ensuring that seldom-heard voices were included in the conversation. They led the delivery of 10 in-depth, in-community focus groups across the city-region, engaging families and individuals who might not normally participate in a digital survey.

Unsurprisingly, the responses we received were rich, diverse, and impassioned - reflecting the true complexity of the issue. Beyond the survey, the social media campaign sparked meaningful public debate, with residents actively discussing and challenging the drivers of childhood obesity in online comment threads. It was powerful to see the consultation create a space for these much-needed conversations.

What were the challenges and how were they overcome?

Childhood obesity is a deeply complex and often sensitive issue—both for families and communities, and by extension for senior leaders, public health teams, and local politicians. For many parents, it can feel personal, emotional, and even overwhelming, which is why we knew this consultation had to be handled with care, empathy, and integrity.

From the outset, we recognised the importance of co-design to ensure that both the consultation itself and the campaign materials were socially and culturally competent. By working closely with a diverse range of stakeholders—including those with lived experience, VCFSE partners, and professionals from across health and care—we were able to shape an approach that felt inclusive, respectful, and relevant to people and communities across Greater Manchester.

At every stage of the process, we kept stakeholders informed—sharing plans, updates, and opportunities for input. This transparent, collaborative approach helped to build trust and ensure the work was rooted in the real experiences and priorities of Greater Manchester's communities.

What have you learnt?

A striking 79% of respondents felt tackling childhood obesity should be a top or high priority for local authorities and health services. Yet, most were unaware of any local action being taken—highlighting a critical gap in communication and visibility.

When it came to causes, easy access to unhealthy food emerged as the top driver. Respondents pointed to fast food being cheap, convenient, and deeply embedded in everyday life—from time-poor parents turning to takeaways, to its role in young people's

social routines. School canteens were also seen as key environments for promoting healthy habits.

Other leading factors included:

- Low cost of unhealthy food: The cost-of-living crisis forces families to choose cheap, unhealthy options. Supermarket offers and a lack of skills around affordable healthy cooking added to the challenge.
- Excessive screen time: A sedentary lifestyle, increasingly shaped by screen-heavy routines, was widely cited as a core contributor.
- Poor nutritional quality: Confusion around food labelling, ultra-processed options, and lack of education on nutrition were major concerns.
- Junk food advertising: Highly visible and persuasive ads—especially around transport hubs—were seen as a powerful influence on young people’s eating habits.

This was echoed in a youth-led observational study by Bite Back Youth Food Activists, who found:

- 178 junk food adverts across Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, and Stockport
- 82 (46%) appeared at bus stops, making them the most saturated advertising spot
- 1 in 3 young people said seeing a junk food ad would make them more likely to buy it
- The consultation revealed not only the depth and complexity of the issue, but also the urgency for action, visibility, and system-wide collaboration.

Further information

NHS Greater Manchester - [The Real Picture – Overwhelming and inescapable video](#)