



Sunderland Healthy Weight Strategy 2026-2031

**Sunderland
City Council**

The places we live shape our health. Let's shape them together!

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Foreword

Strengthening the Building Blocks of Health: A shared vision for healthy weight in Sunderland

The Sunderland Healthy Weight Strategy (2026-2031) sets out a framework for action to strengthen the building blocks of health that provide the foundations for healthy weight. Our strategy recognises that achieving and sustaining a healthy weight requires healthy places. From the design of our neighbourhoods to the policies that govern food and advertising, every part of the system matters.

We know some communities have less access to affordable, healthy food. In places where nutritious options are limited and high fat, high salt takeaways dominate, families already facing insecure work or low income have fewer opportunities to eat well or stay active, widening existing health gaps.

This strategy commits us to addressing these challenges head-on. We will use every lever available, planning, licensing, food standards, and more to create environments which improve access to healthy food and physical activity.

Our journey will require collaboration, commitment, and care. No single organisation can solve this alone. We will strengthen the building blocks of health so everyone can achieve a healthy weight, and no one is left behind.



Gerry Taylor
Executive Director of Public
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Sunderland City Council



Cllr Kelly Chequer
Chair of Sunderland Health and
Wellbeing Board and Deputy
Leader, Sunderland City Council

Executive summary

Sunderland faces a crisis in healthy weight. Despite our efforts, rates of children and adults living with overweight or obesity continue to rise. This reflects deep inequalities in the environments that make healthy options harder to access.

The scale of the challenge:

- **Reception (age 4-5):** Nearly **1 in 3 children** (28%) are living with overweight or obesity¹



- **Year 6 (age 10-11):** Nearly 1 in 2 children (42%) are living with overweight or obesity²



Deep inequalities drive this crisis, making healthy choices unaffordable and inaccessible for too many people:

- Almost **1 in 3 children** (29%) in Sunderland live in poverty, making the cost of the government-recommended healthy diet impossible for many families³



- The city faces the **highest rate of fast-food outlets in the North East**, alongside widespread unhealthy advertising, this actively undermines healthy choices⁴



Our priorities for action

This strategy aims to close the health gap by taking a whole systems approach. It includes a delivery plan to address any negative ways that businesses and markets affect health. By using policy and local powers, we will make changes across the city that support healthier choices and fairer opportunities for everyone.

Our four priorities for action are:

Our priorities	Commitment to structural change
<p>Priority 1: Ensuring a best start in life</p>	<p>Developing policies that strengthen early years support, promote breastfeeding, and ensure children are automatically enrolled in healthy programmes, such as free school meals.</p>
<p>Priority 2: Shaping a healthier city environment</p>	<p>Using planning, licensing, and advertising policies to help reduce commercial exposure to health harming activity (e.g. unhealthy hot food takeaways, junk food marketing) and developing healthy standards in our practices.</p>
<p>Priority 3: Enabling healthy lives in communities</p>	<p>Providing early, easy-to-access support through programmes like Sunderland Links for Life. Helping people get the financial and social support they need and reduce the barriers that make it harder to get help or be active.</p>
<p>Priority 4: System-wide leadership and accountability</p>	<p>Making sure everyone plays their part, including addressing business influences on health. Driving a system-wide shift toward accountability, using data-driven insights and governance to deliver structural change.</p>

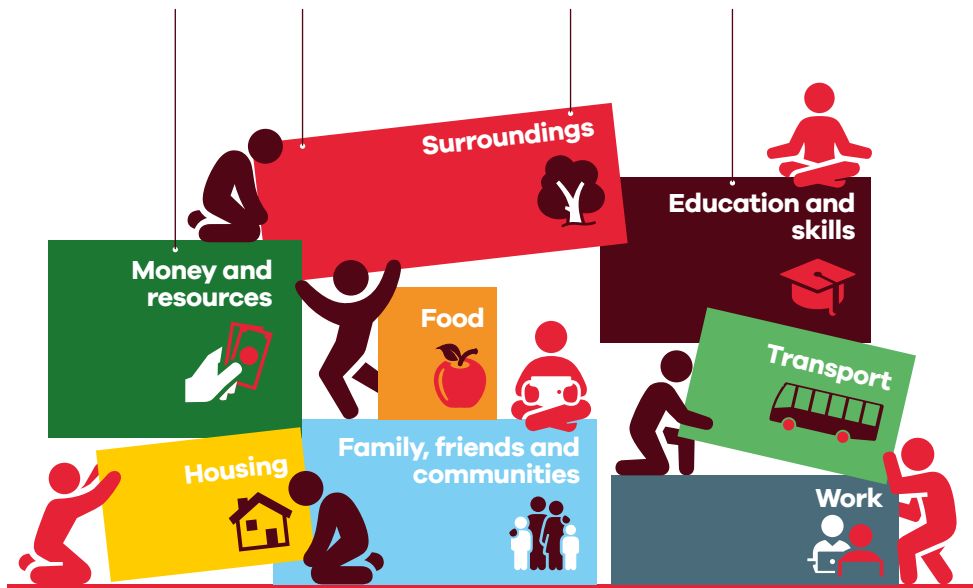
We will make sure everyone works to the same priorities. This builds on the Healthy Weight Declaration we already have. By working together, we can make big changes to create a healthier and fairer future for everyone in Sunderland.

Why healthy weight matters

Healthy weight reflects whether people have what they need to live well. The places we live, the communities we belong to, and the systems that support us shape it. When these are working well, people are more likely to enjoy good health, take part in everyday life, and avoid preventable illness.

In Sunderland, we commit to strengthening the building blocks of health that influence healthy weight. This includes access to nutritious food, open spaces, decent housing, reliable transport, secure work, education, and strong social connections. These building blocks are the foundations that help people to be healthy and thrive.

The building blocks of health



We know that:

- **Healthy places** make it easier to eat well and move more. Streets that are safe for walking and cycling, green spaces that invite play and activity, and neighbourhoods with affordable, nutritious food all help build healthy weight.
- **Healthy communities** offer support, connection and opportunity. When people feel part of something, they are more likely to stay active, share knowledge, and access services that support their wellbeing.
- **Healthy people** are supported by systems that work together. From early years to older age, people need joined-up services, fair work, and environments that make healthy living possible.

Healthy weight matters because it tells us whether our city is providing the foundations people need to live well. It's a measure of fairness, and a sign of whether our systems are working for everyone.

By focusing on healthy places, healthy communities and healthy people, we can build a Sunderland where everyone has the opportunity to live a long, healthy life – no matter their postcode, background or circumstance.

Strategy alignment

This strategy sets out our shared commitment to improve healthy weight across Sunderland. It outlines how partners across the city will work together to strengthen the conditions that help people live well. This joined-up approach brings together four interconnected priorities:

- **Ensuring a best start in life:** Supporting families from pregnancy through adolescence.
- **Shaping a healthier city environment:** Shaping environments that make nutritious food and physical activity accessible.
- **Enabling healthy lives in communities:** Ensuring everyone can access the support they need to live well.
- **System-wide leadership and accountability:** Providing the leadership to role model change, demonstrating how people have a role to play in supporting healthy weight. Collaborating across partner organisations to strengthen the building blocks of health and reduce factors that harm health like poor quality environments and junk food.

This strategy supports the delivery of the [Sunderland Healthy City Plan \(2020-2035\)](#), which sets the overarching mandate and strategic direction for improving health and reducing inequalities across the city. The Healthy City Plan and its supporting annual Delivery Plan provide the framework through which we will deliver this strategy, ensuring that our actions support healthy places, healthy communities and healthy people. We will remove the barriers to having a healthy weight for everyone, regardless of where we live, our background or circumstances.



Sunderland Healthy City Plan 2020–2035

Our ways of working are:



Prevention focused



Intelligence led and technology enabled



Focused on inequalities and people who need extra support



Strengths based and community focused



Equitable

Addressing the eight Marmot policy objectives

1. Give every child the best start in life
2. Children, young people and families maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives
3. Fair employment and good work for all
4. A healthy standard of living for all
5. Healthy and sustainable places and communities
6. Strengthen the role and impact of ill-health prevention
7. Tackle racism, discrimination and their outcomes
8. Pursue environmental sustainability and health equity together



National policy levers

National policy is crucial for setting the standards and creating an environment that supports a healthy weight. Our strategy aligns with the following key policies:

NHS Long Term Plan (2025–2035)

This plan aims to make a big difference in reducing numbers of people living with obesity by focusing on prevention and providing better access to treatment. This includes commitments to:

- Double access to the Digital Weight Management Programme.
- Expand free school meals and strengthen School Food Standards.
- Restrict junk food advertising to children and limit new hot food takeaway outlets.

Statutory and regulatory frameworks

These national policies provide the mandatory and regulatory foundation for many of our local actions:

- **Healthy Child Programme (HCP):** England’s universal public health programme for children and families. It includes the **National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP)**, which tracks obesity trends, and promotes early years nutrition through the **Early Years Foundation Stage framework**.
- **UK Government Food Strategy (2022):** Sets out a vision for a healthier, more sustainable, and resilient food system, encouraging better food education and supporting local food partnerships.
- **Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL):** This successful tax has encouraged drink companies to use less sugar, leading to a 46% drop in sugar content in many products.
- **High Fat, Sugar & Salt (HFSS) Product Restrictions:** New laws restrict where stores may place these products and ban volume promotions (started October 2025).
- **Calorie Labelling Regulations:** Regulations require large food businesses to display calorie information on their menus to support informed choices.
- **PE and Sport Premium:** Provides over £600 million nationally to support physical activity in schools.

Major conditions strategy

This broad government strategy provides the overarching framework for addressing the root causes of major illnesses, including obesity, to promote a more integrated and preventative approach across different sectors.

Regional policy levers

We work closely with our regional partners in the North East to address these issues together and strengthen collective impact:

- **North East North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (NENC ICB):** Committed to developing the **NENC ICB Healthy Weight and Treating Obesity Strategy**, ensuring our local efforts align with regional health system priorities.
- **North East Combined Authority:** Committed to implementing a **healthier food advertising policy** across the regional transport network
- **Regional Healthy Weight Declaration:** We are actively working with our partners to adopt this declaration, showing a shared, cross-sector commitment to building a healthier North East.
- **Good Food Local North East:** This collaboration with Sustain and all North East Local Authorities agrees on a common food framework and benchmarking to drive collective commitments toward a good food system across the region.
- **“Hungry for Change” Report:** A key 2025 report highlighting the strong link between **food insecurity and child obesity** in our region, providing vital evidence for policies to address these inequalities.



The scale of the challenge: What we know

The following data provides the evidence base for our Strategy. It shows that achieving and maintaining a healthy weight in Sunderland is shaped by inter-connected and complex factors. These challenges are driven by the conditions in which people live - such as access to affordable food, safe surroundings, transport, and income - these are the building blocks of health.



The critical impact

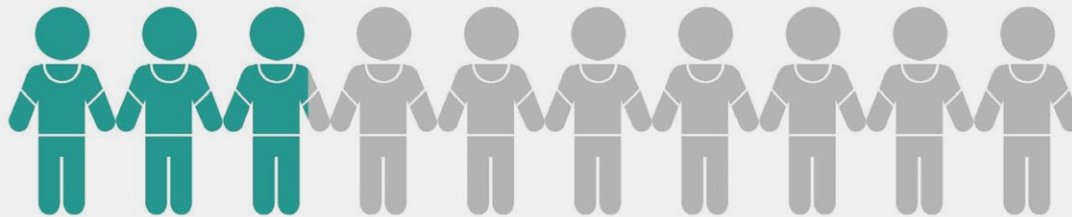
Reception to Year 6:

Nearly 3 in 10 (28%) reception year children are living with overweight, including obesity. This increased to 4 in 10 (42%) year 6 children.⁵

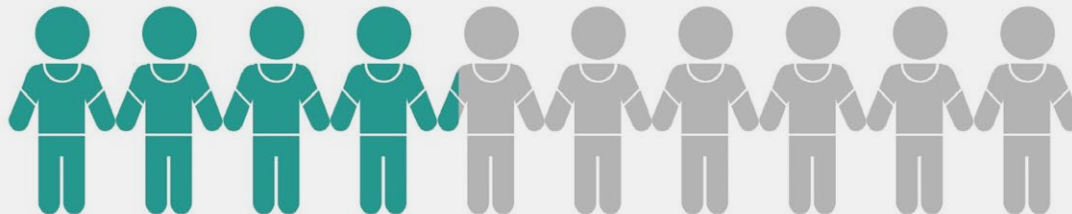
Prevalence of overweight (including obesity) in Sunderland by age

National Child Measurement Programme 2024 to 2025

In 2024 to 2025, 28.0% of children in reception (aged 4 to 5 years) were overweight or living with obesity



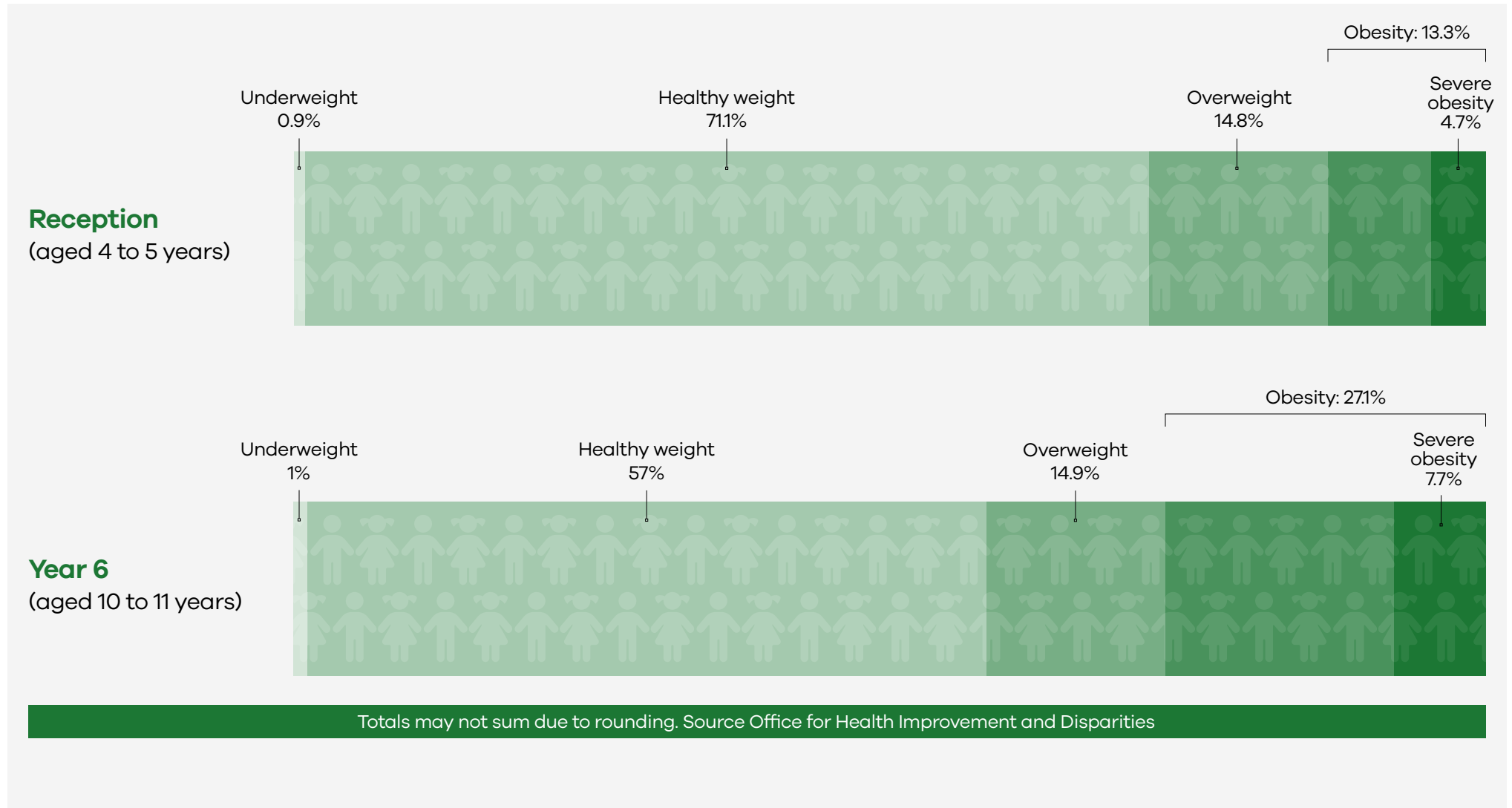
In 2024 to 2025, 42.0% of children in year 6 (aged 10 to 11 years) were overweight or living with obesity



This places Sunderland with the **highest prevalence in the North East** region and the **16th highest in England** for Year 6 children living with overweight, including obesity.⁶

BMI status of children by age in Sunderland

National Child Measurement Programme 2024 to 2025



This chart visually demonstrates the sharp shift in population health as children age.

Early years:

Challenges to a healthy weight begin in the earliest years:

- The challenge starts even before birth: more than **3 in 10 women** are living with overweight, including obesity in early pregnancy (**34.7%**), significantly above the national average (**26.2%**)⁸



- This trend continues, with **28%** of children in Reception (aged 4-5) already living with overweight or obesity⁹
- Many factors challenge early life nutrition: only **1 in 3 mothers are breastfeeding**, despite good progress being made to improve this rate more recently (improving from 33.6% (23/24) to 37.3% (24/25))¹⁰



Place matters

Data shows that a child's environment including neighbourhood, income, food access, and safety, is a primary driver of health inequity:

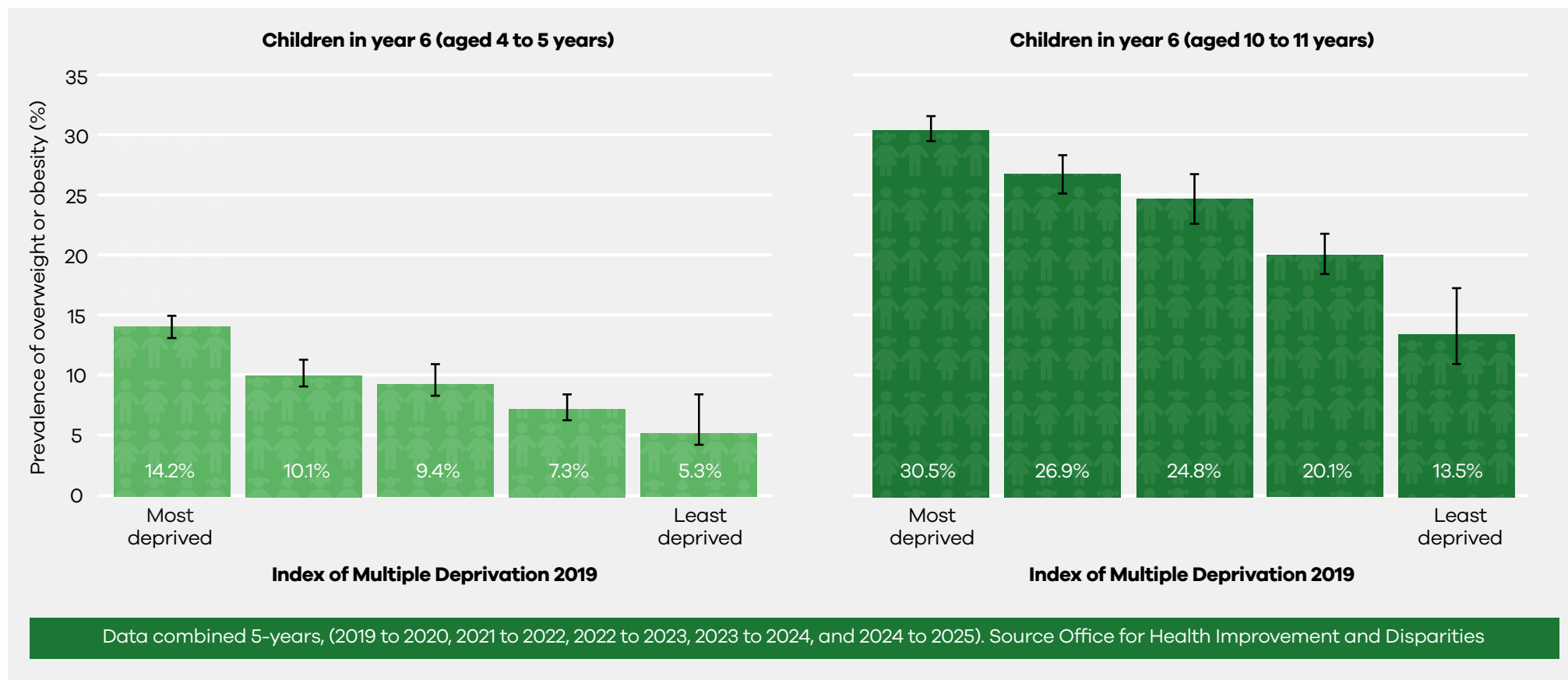
Children in the most deprived areas face more than twice the risk of unhealthy weight, compared to children in the least deprived areas.

- The prevalence of children **living with overweight, including obesity more than doubles** between Reception (age 4-5) and Year 6 (age 10-11) across **all deprivation levels** in Sunderland. This demonstrates the cumulative, negative impact of the city's shared environment over time.¹¹



Children living with overweight or obesity by deprivation and age (NCMP)

National Child Measurement Programme

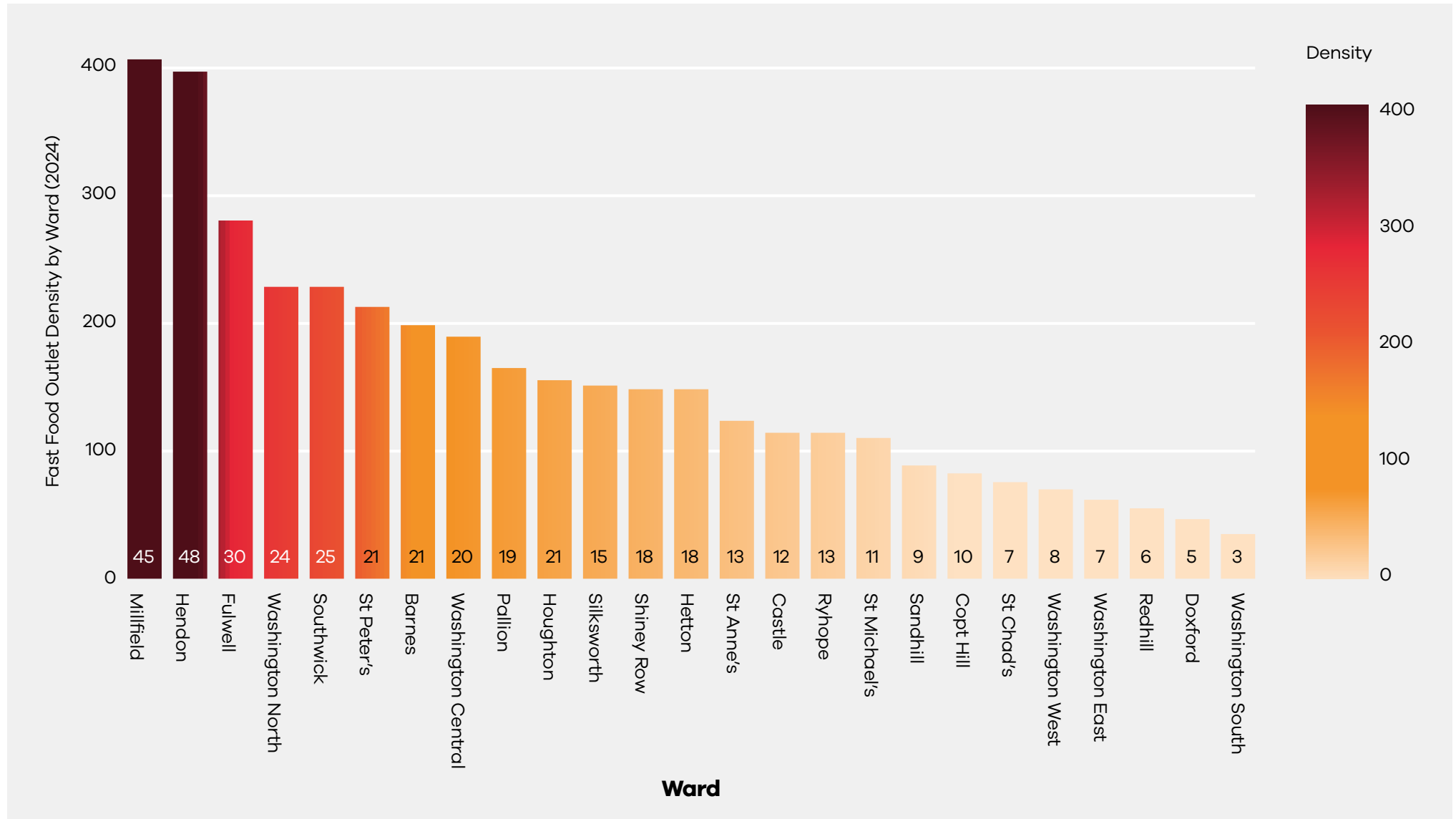


- **Almost half of people who live in the city live in areas of food insecurity.** This means that these households face uncertain or limited access to enough affordable, nutritious food due to a lack of resources. This is a critical barrier, forcing many families into a trade-off where they must prioritise cheap, calorie-dense options over the nutritious food required for a healthy weight.

- The built environment and food offer frequently work against efforts to maintain a healthy weight. Sunderland has the **highest density of fast-food outlets in the North East**, with 163 per 100,000 people. This density is so unevenly distributed, that in some wards, the concentration of fast-food outlets is **over 4 times higher** than in others.¹²

Sunderland has the highest density of fast-food outlets in the North East.

Fast food outlet by ward (2024)

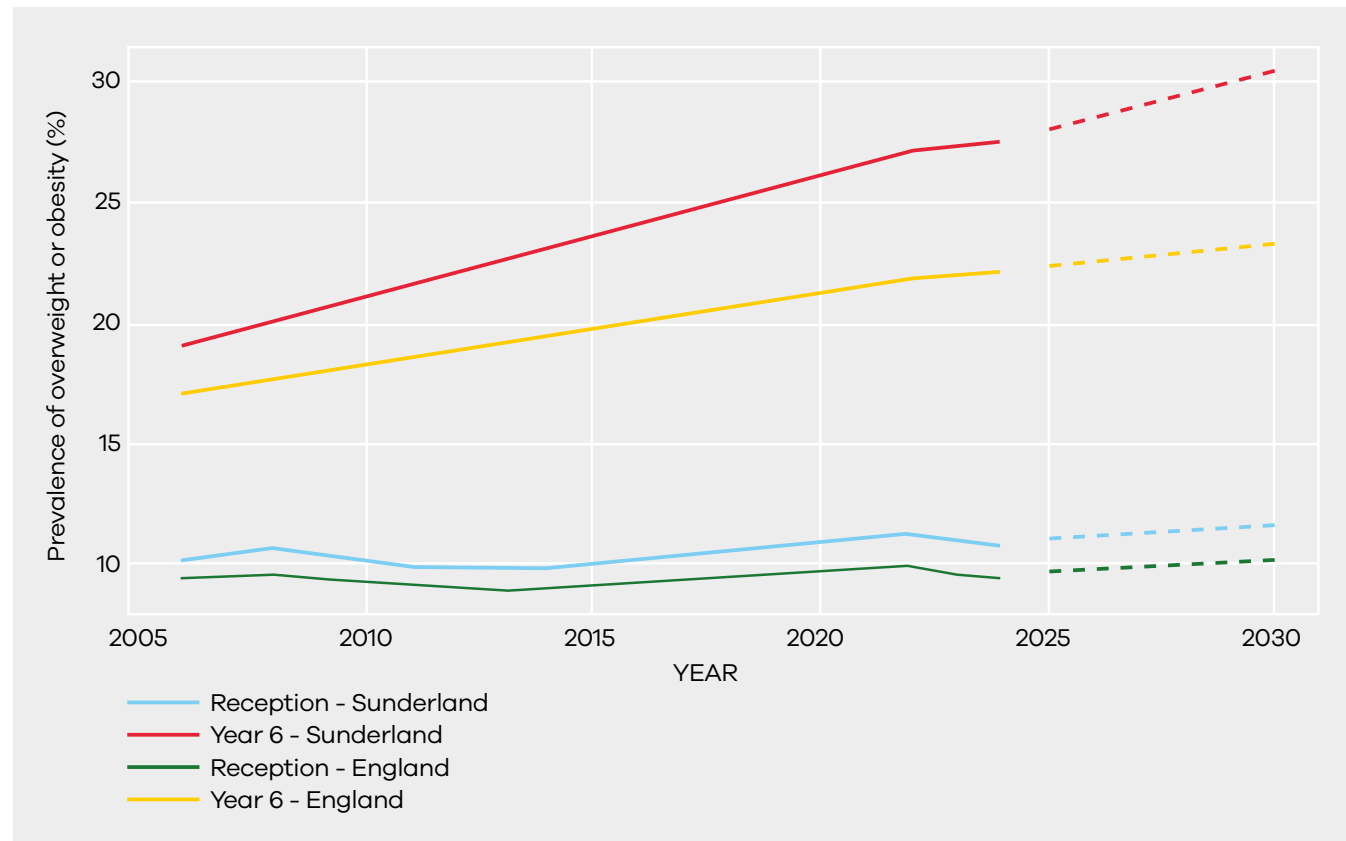


The cost of inaction is too high

The graph below provides a critical long-term perspective. The solid line tracks the historical prevalence of children (Year 6, aged 10-11) living with overweight or obesity, based on NCMP data from 2006 to 2024.

The dotted line represents the evidence-based forecast to 2030. It visually demonstrates the projected crisis if the current systemic challenges are left unaddressed, showing the expected rise in children living with overweight or obesity over the next five years.

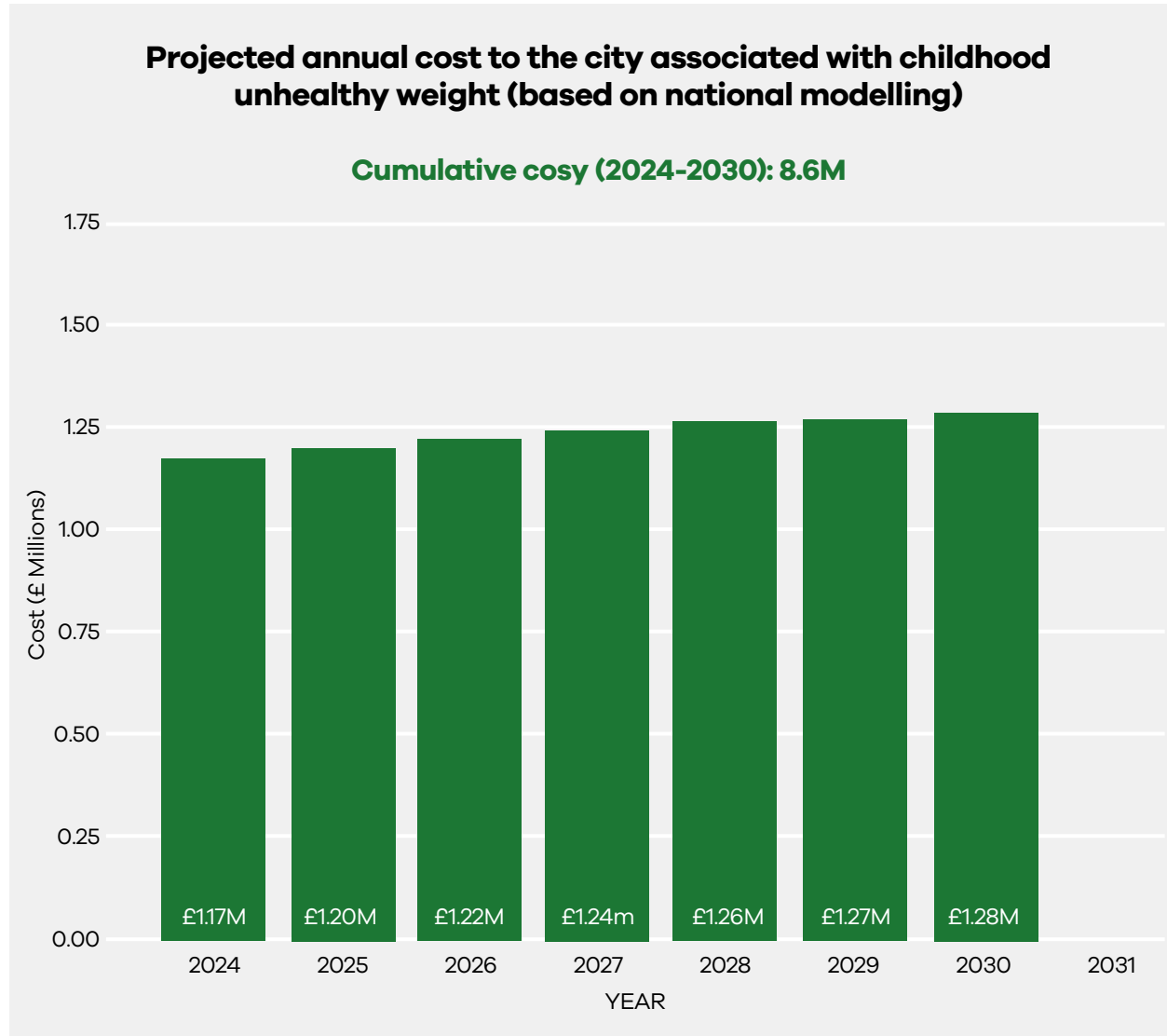
Children living with overweight or obesity (including severe obesity): historical trends and forecasts (NCMP)



The forecast shows that if we continue as is, by 2030:

- The total number of Year 6 children **living with overweight or obesity** is expected to rise from **42% to 44%**
- **Nearly 1 in 3 Year 6 children** will be **living with obesity (31%)**
- The rate of **severe obesity will climb sharply**

The cost of inaction will escalate, placing an unsustainable pressure on local services, costing the city an estimated £8.6 million by 2030.



This chart shows the projected financial impact on Sunderland's public services and economy by 2030 if current trends in childhood overweight and obesity continue. The estimated £8.6 million cost reflects pressures across three key areas:

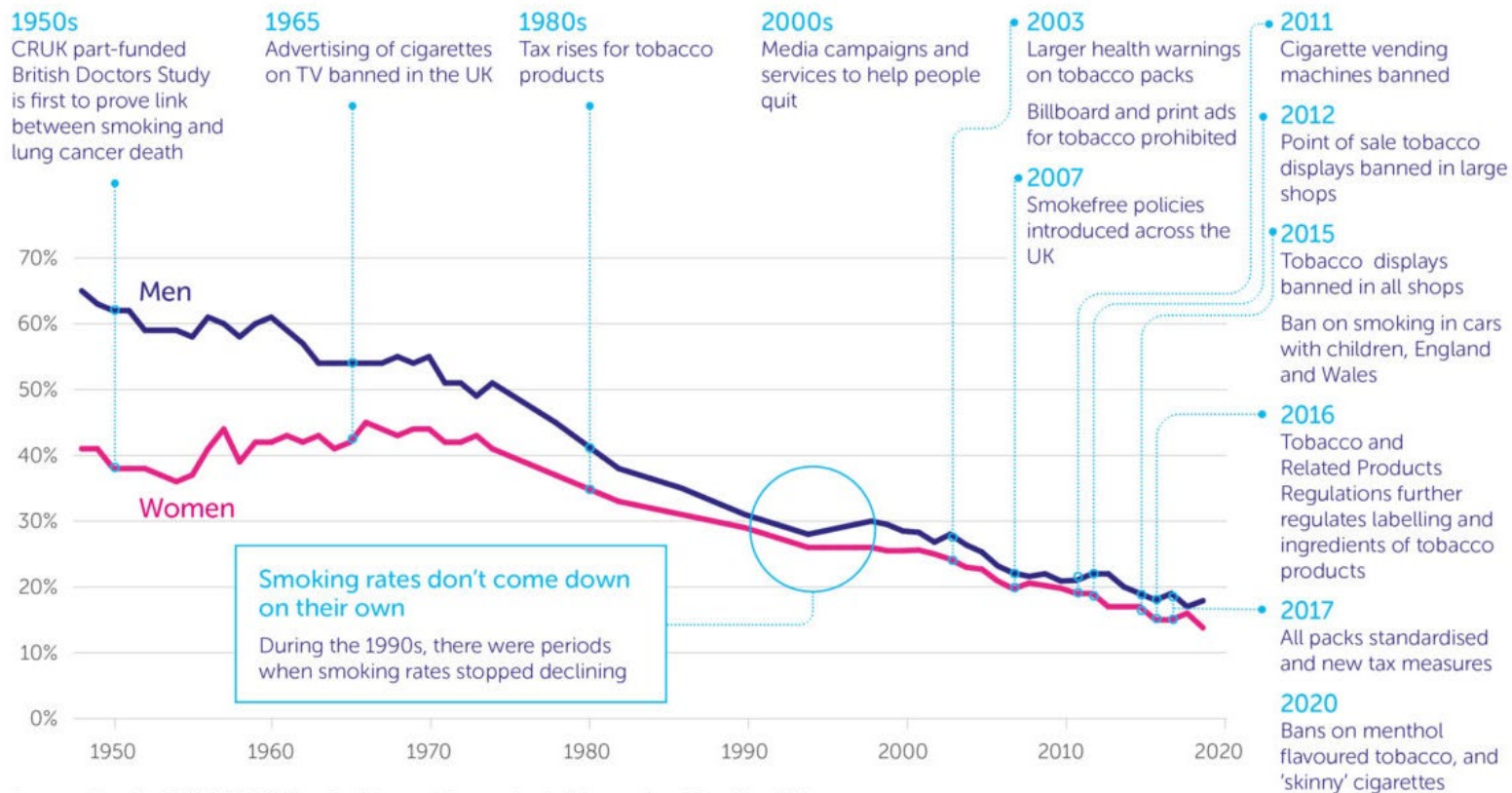
- **Direct health costs:** The essential NHS spend required for treating the long-term health consequences of unhealthy weight (e.g., Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease).
- **Wider economic costs:** The loss incurred by the local economy due to reduced productivity and absenteeism linked to illness.
- **Social care burden:** The projected increase in adult social care costs associated with the long-term, disabling health impacts of unhealthy weight.

[**Forecasting and cost data source:** Projections for the future prevalence and the local Cost of Inaction figure were calculated using methodology derived from national economic modelling tools (PHE Weight Management Economic Assessment Tool) applied to Sunderland's National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) data.]

The case for structural change

Lessons from tobacco

Smoking rates decline with action

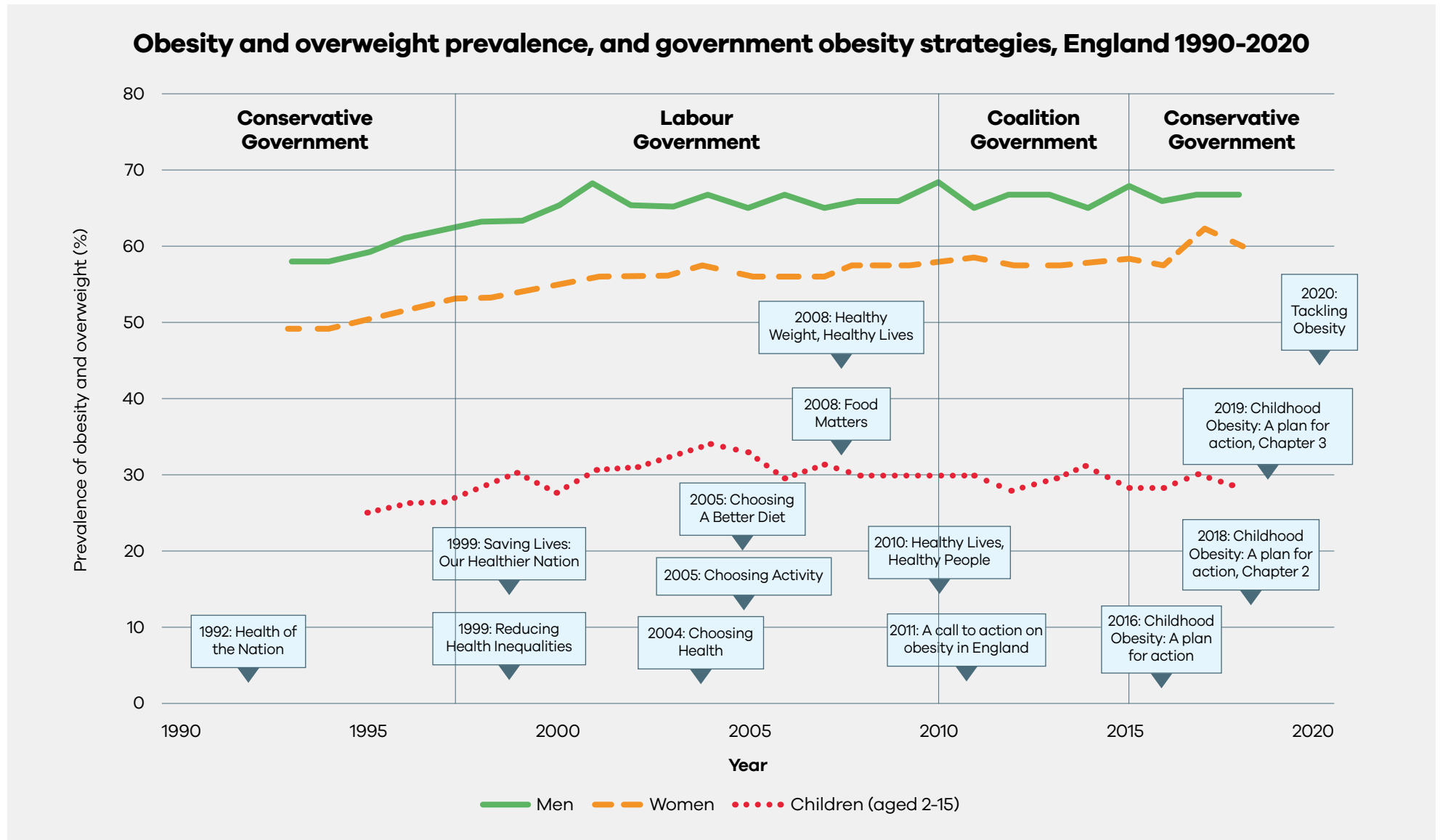


Sources: Data for 1948-1973: PN Lee Statistics and Computing Ltd. International Smoking Web Edition. Available from <http://www.pnlee.co.uk/ISS.htm>. Accessed July 2020. Data for 1974 onwards: Office for National Statistics. Adult smoking habits in Great Britain. Accessed July 2020.

cruk.org
Together we will beat cancer

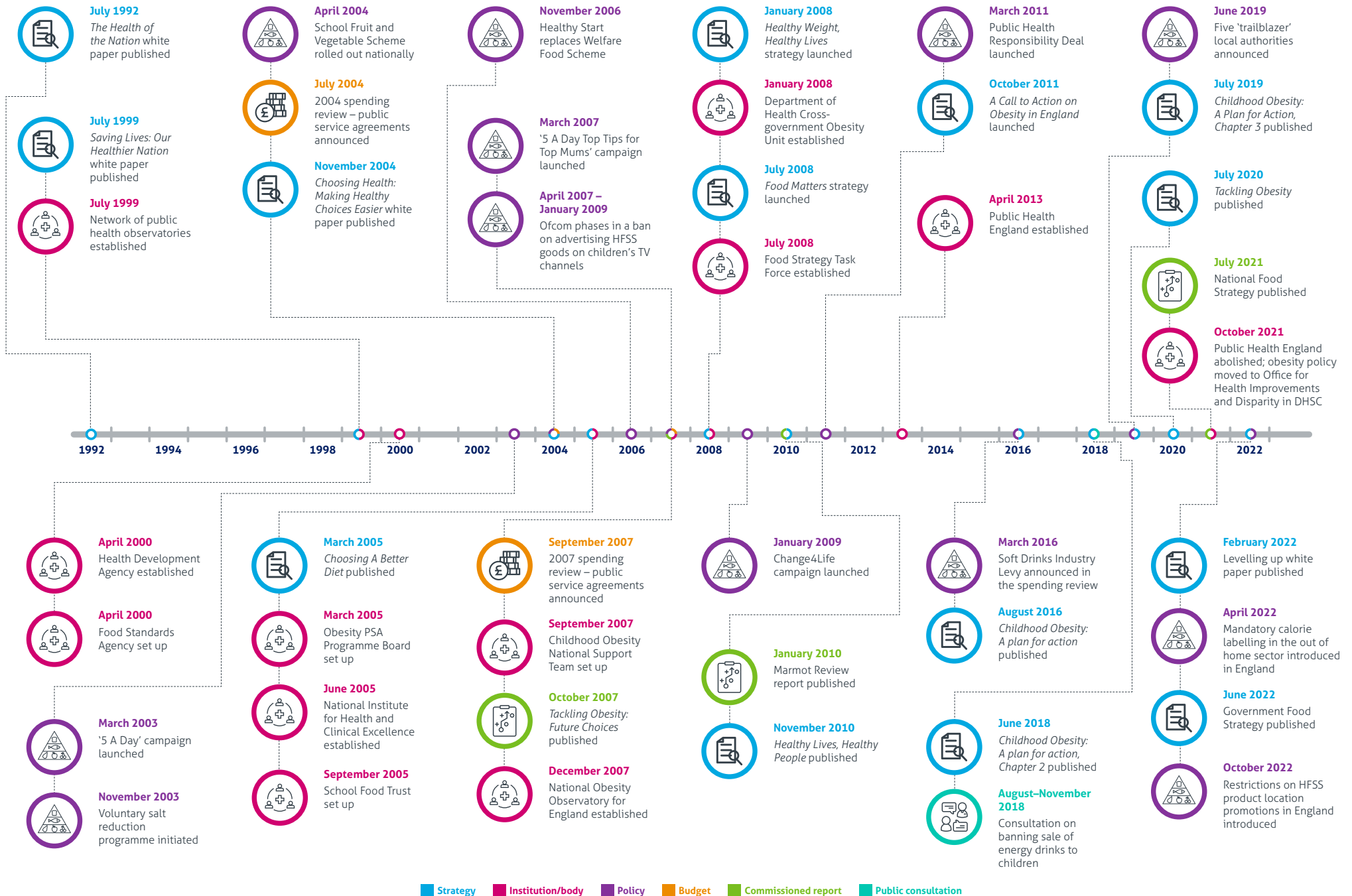


Government action on tackling unhealthy weight



Source: Theis DRZ, White M. Is obesity policy in England fit for purpose? Analysis of government strategies and policies, 1992–2020. *Milbank Q.* 2021;99(2). doi:10.1111/1468-0009.12498.

Timeline of government action on obesity in England, 1992-2023



Source: Institute for Government analysis of various government strategies, press releases, and policy documents.

The crisis in Sunderland, where nearly 1 in 2 children in Year 6 are living with overweight or obesity, requires a fundamental change in approach. The evidence is clear: the high volume of past national obesity interventions has not resulted in a corresponding decrease in population rates of people living with overweight and obesity.

The current approach, largely reliant on individual education and voluntary industry pledges, is failing because it neglects the power of commercial and environmental influences on health.

The success of Tobacco Control demonstrates that sustained reduction is possible through comprehensive, structural, and regulatory action. The historic, relentless focus on changing the environment - through high taxation, advertising bans, and mandated plain packaging - drove a dramatic, 70+ percentage point structural shift in male smoking prevalence (from a peak of over 80% in the 1950s to the current UK adult rate of 11.9%). This proves that the environment can be fundamentally changed, and then behaviour follows.

Public Health challenge	Policy approach	Impact
Tobacco (Success)	<p>Comprehensive, structural and regulatory. Implemented high taxation, banned advertising, and mandated plain packaging.</p> <p>A relentless focus on changing the environment.</p>	<p>Dramatic, sustained reduction: Male smoking prevalence peaked at over 80% in the 1950s and the current UK adult rate is now 11.9% (2023).</p> <p>The environment changed, and then behaviour followed.</p>
Healthy Weight (Inaction)	<p>Fragmented, voluntary, and individual. A complex timeline of strategies, white papers, and campaigns, lacking consistent, mandatory regulatory power.</p>	<p>Persistent high rates: The prevalence of unhealthy weight has been fundamentally unchanged for three decades, showing that policy volume does not equal structural impact.</p>

A whole systems approach:

Reframing the conversation

The data shows the scale and complexity of the challenge. To make progress, we need a whole systems approach that focuses on structural change – similar to the lessons learned from tobacco control. This means working together across Sunderland, aligning efforts across all sectors, and creating conditions that make healthy weight part of everyday life. It requires mobilising partners and making healthy weight “everyone’s business”.



This strategy recognises that our surroundings, income, housing, education, and access to food all shape our health. These are some of the key Building Blocks of Health. We aim to strengthen the Building Blocks of Health for everyone, recognising that the built and social environment shapes our health and making the healthy option the easiest and most accessible one.

Big businesses in the UK have a major role in shaping the conditions that influence healthy weight. When we look at the systems and environments around us, it is clear that large companies can either support or weaken the building blocks of health.

Food:

Retailers and manufacturers shape what food is available, affordable, and promoted. Ultra-processed foods, high in sugar, salt and fat, are often cheaper and more heavily marketed than healthier options.

Advertising and placement strategies (e.g. promotions at checkouts or online targeting) influence eating habits, especially among children.

We need businesses to support access to nutritious, affordable food – a key building block of health.

Work:

Employers influence health through working conditions, wages, and access to healthy food at work. We need fair work and stable income to help people build healthy lives.

Surroundings:

Fast food outlets and convenience stores often cluster in areas with fewer resources, limiting access to healthier options. Local Authority Planning, Policy and Environmental Services teams along with businesses can help create healthier high streets and public spaces by reducing unhealthy food density and supporting active travel infrastructure.

Marketing and advertising:

Marketing and advertising has changed how people access food, especially through delivery apps and digital adverts. This often increases exposure to unhealthy options. Businesses can support healthier choices by improving how they advertise online and offering healthier defaults.



Governance

The Healthy Weight Steering Group and Healthy Weight Alliance will lead the delivery of the Healthy Weight Strategy, with progress reported to the Health and Wellbeing Board via the Building Blocks of Health Delivery Board. The existing Healthy Weight Declaration will be a key lever to refocus action across the city.

Key partners contributing to this collaborative effort include: Sunderland City Council, NHS Trusts, Integrated Care Board (ICB), education settings, University of Sunderland, workplaces, Sunderland's Business Improvement District and the voluntary and community sector.

This strategy complements existing plans, including the North East North Cumbria (NENC) ICB Healthy Weight and Treating Obesity Strategy, North East Children and Young People Healthy Weight Health Needs Assessment 2025, Sunderland Healthy City Plan 2020 - 2035, Active Sunderland Strategy, and Sunderland Child Poverty Strategy.

Our priorities and commitments

Our strategy is built on four interconnected priorities that will drive system-wide change across Sunderland.

1. Ensuring a best start in life

Supporting families from pregnancy through to adolescence to improve health outcomes and reduce inequalities.

2. Shaping a healthier city environment

Shaping environments that make nutritious food and physical activity accessible, affordable, and sustainable.

3. Enabling healthy lives in communities

Ensuring everyone can access the support they need to live a healthy life, regardless of background or circumstance.

4. System-wide leadership and accountability

Embedding healthy weight as a shared responsibility across all sectors, with strong leadership and collaboration.

Priority 1: Ensuring a best start in life

The foundations for a healthy life begin in early childhood. This priority focuses on supporting families from pregnancy through to adolescence, recognising that early experiences shape future health and wellbeing.

What we know:

The data confirms that the barriers to healthy weight begin pre-conception and inequalities increase over time:

- 3 in 10 women **living with obesity in early pregnancy** (34.7%) which is significantly above the England average¹⁴



- At 6–8 weeks, only 1 in 3 mothers (37.3%) are **breastfeeding**, significantly lagging behind the national rate (55.6%)¹⁵



- Inequality increases as the number of **children living with overweight or obesity more than doubles between Reception** (age 4–5) **and Year 6** (age 10–11). Children living in the most deprived areas are more than twice as likely to be affected, with inequalities also seen across ethnic groups¹⁶

We use this data and local insights to help share our actions. This include insights from the 2025 Health-Related Behaviour (HRB) survey, Youth Summit, and Sunderland Healthy Schools Award.

What we have been doing:

Our existing work has built system capacity and delivered focused interventions:

Strategic and policy

- Celebrated the 2025 **Sunderland Healthy Schools Award** with 53 schools, embedding healthy environments into education settings.
- Seen over 5,000 pupils participate in the 2025 **Health Related Behaviour survey** and held a **Youth Health Summit** for Year 9 pupils, providing key insights.

Partnership and system development

- Established **Family Hubs** offering a strategic platform for wrap around support for parents, carers and children.
- Provided **training through the Holiday Activity & Food Programme (HAF)** to ensure healthy food is offered consistently across partner settings.
- Promoted the **Healthy Start programme** to improve financial access to nutritious food.

Community and service delivery

- Increased breastfeeding rates at 6–8 weeks, supported by the **Breastfeeding Friendly Sunderland Pledge** (50+ venues signed up).
- Delivered Year 7 assemblies through the **Healthy Child Programme**, focusing on nutrition and physical activity.
- Delivered a varied offer through **Active Sunderland**, including ParkPlay, the Teach Active pilot, and new PlayZones.

What we will do:

Policy, planning & regulation

- We will **implement auto-enrolment for free school meals**, reducing administrative barriers and stigma to ensure every eligible child receives nutritious meals.
- We will align our early years-based interventions with the **Early Years Foundation Stage nutrition standards**, to ensure a consistent and evidence-based approach.
- We will promote the **Healthy Settings agenda** and expand the Sunderland Healthy Schools Award across all education settings, embedding healthy weight into everyday environments.

System and partnership action

- We will **maximise the Family Hub offer** to ensure families receive consistent, joined-up support from pregnancy through adolescence.
- We will **champion the Healthy Start Toolkit** and work with partners to increase uptake among eligible families, reducing barriers to accessing nutritious food.
- We will finalise and launch the **Infant Feeding Pathway**, to formalise and promote the support offer to women pre/post pregnancy and their families.
- We will use **behavioural insights** to better understand the lived experiences of children and families, ensuring our interventions are responsive, accessible, and effective.

Community and setting implementation

- We will strengthen support for pregnant women by improving access to nutrition and physical activity resources, ensuring every family has the foundation for a best start.
- We will promote Breastfeeding Friendly Sunderland by supporting venues to sign up to the pledge to normalise breastfeeding across the city.

Spotlight 1 Building food confidence in holiday activity settings

What was the challenge?

The school holiday programme providers play a vital role in supporting children during school holidays, especially those eligible for free school meals. However, some providers lacked confidence and consistency in delivering nutrition messages and providing healthy food options.

What did we do?

Together for Children and Sunderland City Council's Public Health team collaborated to ensure all providers received training through Food Active's Training and Resources to Support the Holiday Activities and Food Programme.

This included:

- Practical guidance on delivering healthy meals
- Resources to support food education and engagement
- Confidence-building around nutrition messaging

What changed?

- All providers across Sunderland were trained before the summer programme
- Providers reported increased confidence in delivering healthy food and nutrition activities
- Children and families were exposed to consistent, positive messages around healthy eating
- The initiative strengthened the city's commitment to giving children the best nutritional start

What's next?

The training model will be embedded into future programme planning cycles to ensure sustained quality and consistency.

*The school holiday programme in Sunderland includes Holidays Activities and Food (HAF) funding from the Department for Education plus additional grant funding.



Priority 2: How our environment shapes our health

Our surroundings including the place we live, work and learn have a powerful influence on our health. This priority focuses on creating a food and physical environment that supports the building blocks of health for everyone.

2.1 Creating healthier food environments

We will address the structural factors that make the healthy choice difficult, expensive or invisible.

What we know (food environment):

The local food environment actively works against efforts to maintain a healthy weight:

- **Fast food density:** The city has 163 fast-food outlets per 100,000 people, the highest rate in the North East and well above the national average. This density increased by 18.3% between 2017 and 2024¹⁷
- **Ward inequality:** This pressure is not evenly distributed. Some parts of the city (e.g., Millfield and Hendon) have four times the density of fast-food outlets (over 400 outlets per 100,000 people) compared to others (e.g., Washington South, just 30 outlets)¹⁸
- **Financial barrier and inequality:** Financial hardship is a primary driver of poor diet. With almost 1 in 3 children in Sunderland living in poverty (29%)¹⁹ the cost of healthy food becomes a real barrier. The national Broken Plate Report²⁰ provides the core evidence for this:

- To afford the government-recommended healthy diet (the Eatwell Guide), the most deprived fifth of the UK population would need to spend **45%** of their disposable income on food, rising to **70%** for households with children. For many of Sunderland's families, a healthy diet is financially impossible.
- Healthier foods are **more than twice as expensive per calorie** as less healthy foods, locking low-income families into buying cheaper, calorie-dense, and less nutritious options.
- This challenge becomes more difficult because over a third (37%) of supermarket promotions are for less healthy foods, skewing choices towards poor health.²¹
- The high proportion of children across the city eligible for free school meals underscores the critical importance of supporting this demographic, emphasising the urgent need for a high-quality, nutritious school food environment.
- **Systemic challenge:** The problem extends beyond the physical high street. The rise of online food delivery platforms with high marketed deals and promotions means that easy, affordable access to high-fat, high-sugar food is widespread, often bypassing local planning restrictions. Insights from the local Weight Friendly Workplaces report also reveal that employees across the city face challenges in accessing healthy, affordable food even in their workplaces, reinforcing the need for a whole-system approach.

What we have been doing (food environment):

Our existing work has built system capacity and delivered focused interventions:

Strategic and policy

- Adopted the Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight in 2022
- Implemented Local Plan policies (SP7) and (VC4) to manage the location and concentration of hot food takeaways.

Partnership and system development

- The Sunderland Good Food Partnership (SGFP) was established to foster collaboration and coordinate policy influence, including work with the Business Improvement District (BID) to improve hospitality offerings.
- Participated in the Good Food Local North East pilot.

Community and service delivery

- Embedded the Bread & Butter Thing and joined with Feeding Britain to create seven new/enhanced Affordable Food Clubs (AFCs) across the city, alongside providing support to 32 food aid organisations.



Spotlight 2 Expanding affordable food access across Sunderland

What was the challenge?

Many families in Sunderland face barriers to accessing affordable, nutritious food, particularly during the cost-of-living crisis. Traditional food support models often carry stigma or lack sustainability, leaving gaps in provision across neighbourhoods.

What did we do?

Sunderland City Council partnered with **The Bread and Butter Thing (TBBT)** to open five affordable food hubs across the city, including in Easington Lane, Southwick, Hendon, Washington and Silksworth. Gentoo Group (Housing Association) established Pennywell's hub. These hubs offer weekly groceries at a fraction of retail prices, using surplus food from supermarkets, manufacturers, and farms.

- Members pay just £8.50 for £35 worth of food, including fresh produce, chilled items, and cupboard staples.

- The hubs are free to join, open to all, and hosted by trusted community organisations.

What changed?

- Local people reported reduced food insecurity and improved diet diversity
- The initiative reached people who had never used food banks before
- Volunteers and community groups strengthened local engagement and support networks
- The hubs helped reduce stigma by offering a dignified, choice-based model

What's next?

Sunderland plans to expand the model further, integrating food access with wider health and wellbeing services.



Tackling unhealthy advertising: Leading by example

Junk food advertising bans on public transport:	Transport for London (TfL)	North East Combined Authority – Tyne and Wear Metro
Action:	Policy implemented in 2019 banning advertising for foods high in fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS) across the network.	Policy started 1 December 2025 banning HFSS adverts on the Tyne and Wear Metro and Nexus-owned sites.
Key outcome:	Average weekly household purchase of HFSS products was 7% lower than predicted (1,001 fewer calories per week). Estimated to have prevented almost 100,000 cases of obesity and projected NHS savings of £218m over the population’s lifetime. ^{22, 23}	Makes the Tyne & Wear Metro one of the first regional networks outside London to take this bold step, setting a national precedent.
Why it matters:	Demonstrated that environmental policy change has a stronger impact on lower-income households, directly supporting the reduction of health inequalities.	This policy directly affects the people of Sunderland who use the Metro network. It provides a local policy success story and a strong lever for the City Council to extend similar controls to council-specific properties, ensuring consistency across the city environment.



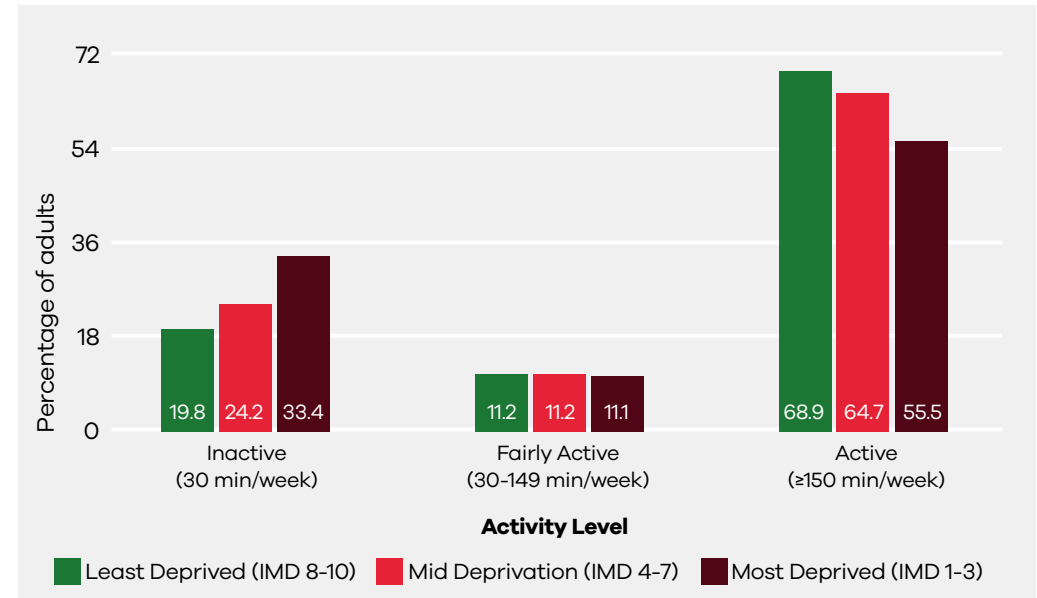
2.2 The physical environment: promoting active living

Creating accessible, equitable, and safe physical environments is critical to increasing physical activity and reducing the time people are sedentary.

What we know (physical environment):

Physical inactivity is a major contributor to poor health outcomes, including the high prevalence of unhealthy weight in Sunderland:

- **Adult inactivity:** 3 in 10 adults in Sunderland were classified as physically inactive in 2023/24, a rate above both the North East and the England average²⁴
- **Active travel gap:** Only 1 in 10 adults walk for travel at least three days a week²⁵
- **Children:** Over half of our children in Sunderland were inactive during the 2023/24 academic year²⁶
- **Deprivation:** Data confirms that deprivation significantly impacts physical activity levels, limiting access to safe, inclusive spaces for being active.



Data source: Sport England

The **Active Sunderland Strategy** aims to support a city where everyone is as active as they can be. This involves targeting communities that are benefiting least from being active to reduce health inequalities.

What we have been doing (physical environment):

Our actions have focused on infrastructure, design, and regulation to enable being active:

Strategic and policy

- Adopted the Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight
- Initiated a review of our advertising policy to reduce visibility of unhealthy products in council owned spaces.

Partnership and system development

- Developed a Greenspace Audit to identify spatial deficiencies in greenspace quantity/quality within the city.
- Developed a Public Health Considerations checklist to guide planners in designing accessible, inclusive, and health-promoting parks and greenspaces, maximising the use of the city's blue and green spaces.

Community and service delivery

- Published a Local Cycle Walking Implementation Plan (LCWIP) for Sunderland, Washington with Coalfields underway; identifying priority routes and infrastructure improvements.
- Delivered Active Sunderland events, festivals, and targeted community programmes. These include the PlayZone programme and family sessions, to inspire people to become more active throughout their lives.

What we will do (consolidated actions):

Policy, planning and regulation

We will explore all opportunities available within existing and future legislation, guidance and regulatory powers to:

- **expand healthy advertising policies**, by building on the regional success of the Tyne and Wear Metro ban
- prioritise nutritious food in **street trading and licensing policies**
- **implement healthy food standards in council-run venues**, and
- **advocate for national policy change** using Sunderland's voice to influence healthier food environments and reduce inequalities.

System and partnership action

- We will **strengthen the Sunderland Good Food Partnership (SGFP)** by fostering collaboration across sectors to deliver a shared vision for a healthier, fairer, and more sustainable food system.
- We will **strengthen workplace health initiatives** by improving access to healthy food in public sector and partner workplaces, supporting staff wellbeing and modelling good practice.

Community and setting implementation

- We will promote equitable access to nutritious, affordable, and sustainable food by working with partners to ensure healthy food is available across all Sunderland neighbourhoods, aligning our actions with the UK Government Food Strategy.
- We will ensure the Local Cycle Walking Implementation Plan (LCWIP) is actioned to create Active Environments - including safe active travel routes and accessible public spaces that encourage physical activity for everyone.
- We will gather and apply insights to inform future actions, ensuring our approach is evidence-based, accessible, inclusive, and responsive to community needs with a continued focus on engaging underrepresented groups.



Spotlight 3 Using Planning Policy to shape healthier food environments

What was the challenge?

Sunderland faces the highest concentration of hot food takeaways in the North East, particularly in areas with elevated levels of childhood obesity and deprivation. These outlets undermine efforts to promote healthy eating and contribute to poor dietary habits.

What did we do?

Sunderland City Council implemented two key Local Plan policies to address this:

VC4: A health-focused policy to control the location and concentration of hot food takeaways (Use Class A5) to support healthier communities.

SP7: A strategic framework for improving health and wellbeing through planning, which includes supporting measures that limit unhealthy food environments (linked to VC4)

Between August 2019 and June 2025, eight planning applications for hot food takeaways were refused based on the VC4 policy - demonstrating a proactive approach to shaping a healthier food environment.

What changed?

- Clearer integration of public health priorities into planning decisions
- Number of new hot food takeaways granted planning consent reduced
- Stronger cross-sector collaboration between planning and public health teams
- Increased awareness of how the built environment influences dietary behaviours

The council will continue to monitor the impact of these policies and explore opportunities to strengthen planning guidance, including aligning advertising and licensing policies with healthy weight goals.



Priority 3: Enabling healthy lives in communities

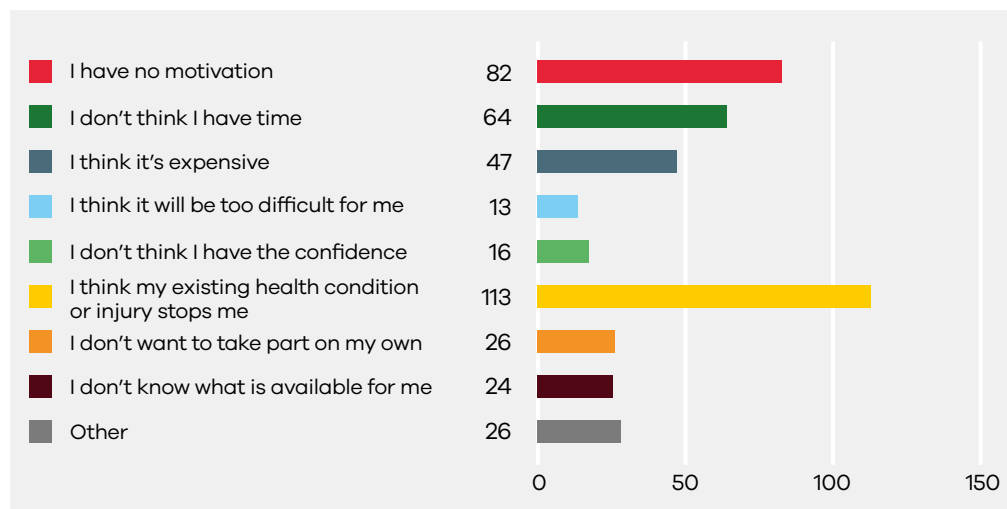
Health is shaped by the support we receive and the services we can access. This priority focuses on making sure everyone, regardless of background or circumstance can connect with the opportunities they need to live well.

What we know:

The local food environment actively works against efforts to maintain a healthy weight:

- **Financial barrier:** The average weekly income for people in Sunderland is £644. This is 12.8% lower than the North East average (£661) and significantly lower than the England average (£732)
- **Child poverty:** Almost 1 in 3 children (14,307 children under 16) are living in poverty in Sunderland (29.1%)
- **Challenges to participation and accessing support:** The financial and social pressures of low income create direct barriers to healthy living and service engagement. These include financial insecurity, limited access to safe outdoor spaces, health inequalities (including chronic pain and disability), time constraints and awareness and motivation.

The Active Sunderland Survey results (2025) show the main barriers stopping people from being active in Sunderland:



What we have been doing:

Our existing work has built system capacity and delivered focused interventions:

Strategic and policy

- Published the **Active Sunderland Strategy 2024-2027**, a comprehensive plan owned by partners across the City, providing a mandated framework for activity initiatives.

Partnership and system development

- Established **Links for Life Sunderland** - our joined-up approach to prevention which helps people to build the foundation blocks to enable them to live healthier, happier lives by connecting people with local opportunities. From walking groups and community food projects to social networks and support services. These place-based approaches help build the conditions for healthy weight by strengthening relationships, improving access, and making health part of everyday life.
- Built a **Health Champion network** (around 530 individuals, many MECC trained) to embed health promotion across communities and services.
- Ensured a comprehensive **Clinical Services** offer via the NHS, including the Digital Weight Management Programme and the NHS Diabetes Prevention Programme.

Community and service delivery

- Delivered targeted programmes, including the **Sunderland Weight Management Programme**, and partnerships with **Bags of Taste** (food literacy) and **Foundation of Light** (community sport).
- Provided a comprehensive city-wide physical activity offer, including the **Active Sunderland Healthy Lifestyles Programme**, the **Active Sunderland Walking Programme**, and specific support for people living with disabilities through **Gateway Wheelers and other providers**.

What we will do:

System and partnership action

- We will **gather and apply insights from communities**, including co-producing initiatives, to ensure future actions are community-informed, inclusive, and responsive to local needs.
- We will **maximise the Family Hub offer** by improving access and visibility of services that support healthy weight, nutrition, and physical activity for local families, ensuring this platform acts as a trusted source of support.

Community and setting implementation

- We will **create and share a clear offer of available services** to improve awareness, accessibility, and uptake of healthy weight and wellbeing support across Sunderland.
- We will **improve walking and wheeling routes** across the city to encourage everyday physical activity and make active travel safer and more accessible for everyone.
- We will **support businesses and community groups** to build knowledge and confidence in delivering key nutrition messages, helping to create healthier environments across Sunderland.



Spotlight 4 Expanding access through digital weight management

What was the challenge?

Many adults in Sunderland living with obesity face barriers to accessing traditional weight management services -including time constraints, transport issues, and stigma. There was a need for a more accessible, non-judgemental approach that could fit into people's lives.

What did we do?

Promoted the **Digital Weight Management Programme (DWMP)** across GP practices and community settings. The programme offers a free, 12-week online service for adults living with obesity who also have diabetes, hypertension, or both. It includes:

- Behaviour change coaching
- Nutrition and physical activity guidance
- Goal setting and progress tracking via app or web platform

What changed?

- Some GP practices across Sunderland actively referred eligible patients
- Participants accessed support from home, increasing flexibility and privacy
- Participants reported improved confidence, healthier eating habits, and increased physical activity
- The programme helped reduce inequalities by reaching people who may not access face-to-face services

What's next?

Sunderland is working to embed DWMP referrals into routine care pathways to ensure seamless access.



Priority 4: **System-Wide leadership and accountability**

This priority provides the strategic oversight and leadership required to ensure all partners are working together to achieve our shared vision, committing the entire system to a whole systems approach.

What we know:

The local food environment actively works against efforts to maintain a healthy weight:

- While Sunderland has delivered a significant range of targeted initiatives (as detailed in Priorities 1-3), the scale and complexity of the challenge-particularly the environmental and financial drivers of poor health-have meant these efforts have not yet delivered the sustained, system-wide step change required to halt the rising trend of unhealthy weight.
- The complex nature of healthy weight requires a coordinated, multi-agency response.
- Sustained leadership and alignment across all partners is essential for long-term success and to drive fundamental change across the city environment and services.

What we have been doing:

Our existing work has built system capacity and delivered focused interventions:

Strategic and policy

- Became the **first council in the North East to adopt the Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight** in February 2022, signalling a clear organisational commitment.
- Established the **Sunderland Good Food Partnership**, which has just recently achieved **Sustainable Food Places Bronze status** (a framework for city-wide commitment to a sustainable food system).

Partnership and system development

- Established a **Healthy Weight Steering Group** and a **Healthy Weight Alliance** to lead our collective efforts to address the factors in the commercial business environment that influence the Building Blocks of Health (i.e. addressing the Commercial Determinants of Health).
- Actively promoting the regional **Boost Academy** to increase professionals' knowledge and confidence regarding healthy weight across the workforce.
- Pursuing the adoption of a **regional Healthy Weight Declaration** to embed a cross-sector commitment beyond the city boundary.

Community and setting implementation

- Exploring work with **Sunderland Association Football Club** to support healthy lifestyles, using the high-profile setting of sport to promote positive health messages.

What we will do:

Policy, planning and regulation

- We will **relaunch the city-wide Healthy Weight Declaration**, moving beyond adoption to embedding shared metrics and accountability across all signatories.
- We will **support the adoption of a Regional ICS System-Wide Healthy Weight Declaration**, aligning Sunderland's efforts with broader regional commissioning and strategic priorities to strengthen our collective impact.
- We will **build on the recently awarded Sustainable Food Places Bronze status** recognising and strengthening our commitment to creating a healthier, fairer, and more sustainable food system. We will use the framework and recommendations to drive action across key food levers.

System and partnership development

- We will complete **Sunderland's detailed "Insights" exercise** to move beyond general data to specific, localised, and actionable intelligence, ensuring all future initiatives are evidence-based and community-informed.
- We will embed the **Commercial Determinants of Health (CDoH) Action Plan** across relevant partner organisations, focusing on strengthening policy and regulatory levers (e.g., planning, licensing) where possible.
- We will **promote the Boost Academy** to build **knowledge and confidence** among professionals in delivering effective, compassionate healthy weight support, ensuring a qualified and consistent workforce.
- We will **build on our work to reduce weight stigma** by promoting inclusive language and practices across system partners, ensuring all communications are respectful and empowering and do not act as a barrier to service access.

Community and setting implementation

- We will **develop and launch a high-impact, city-wide healthy weight campaign**, supported by senior system partners, focused on shifting public narrative and promoting healthier lifestyles across Sunderland.
- We will establish a clear **monitoring and evaluation framework** for all priority actions, regularly reporting progress to the Healthy Weight Steering Group to ensure transparency and drive effective delivery.

Spotlight 5 Building system-wide confidence through the Boost Academy

What was the challenge?

Professionals across Sunderland - from health, education, and community sectors - often lacked consistent training and confidence when discussing healthy weight. This created variation in messaging and missed opportunities to effectively support people.

What did we do?

Actively promoted the **Boost Academy**, a training programme designed to equip professionals with the knowledge, tools, and confidence to engage in healthy weight conversations. The academy offers:

- Evidence-based training on nutrition, physical activity, and behaviour change
- Guidance on non-stigmatising language to reduce stigma
- Practical resources for use in everyday settings

What changed?

- Professionals across sectors reported increased confidence in supporting healthy weight conversations
- Consistent, non-stigmatising messaging was embedded across services
- The Boost Academy became a recognised part of Sunderland's whole-systems approach to healthy weight

What's next?

We will continue to promote the Boost Academy to ensure the entire professional workforce is equipped with the knowledge and confidence to deliver effective, compassionate support.

Measuring impact

Outcomes

Monitoring the prevalence of healthy weight in children and adults is a core requirement of the **Public Health Outcomes Framework (PHOF)**. Sunderland will use these national indicators, alongside local intelligence, to assess progress over the lifetime of the strategy.

The key PHOF indicators relevant to healthy weight are:

- **Breastfeeding prevalence at 6–8 weeks**
- **Maternal obesity in early pregnancy** (OHID Maternity Dataset)
- **Child excess weight in 4–5 year olds** (NCMP)
- **Child excess weight in 10–11 year olds** (NCMP)
- **Percentage of adults (18+) who are overweight or living with obesity**
- **Percentage of adults (18+) who are physically active (150+ minutes/week)**
- **Percentage of adults (18+) who are physically inactive (<30 minutes/week)**
- **Proportion of adults meeting the recommended '5 a day'** (fruit and vegetable consumption) (OHID's Obesity Profile)
- **Percentage of adults walking for travel at least 3 days per week**
- **Percentage of adults cycling for travel at least 3 days per week**

(Active Lives Survey indicators included in OHID Obesity Profile)

Other useful datasets that help build the overall picture of healthy weight in Sunderland

These datasets provide additional context on the wider social and environmental factors that shape healthy weight:

- **Food environment data**, including the **density of fast food outlets**, published nationally as part of the wider determinants of health.
- **Active Lives Survey (Sport England)**: national surveys for **adults** and **children and young people**, providing annual data on physical activity patterns.
- **Local planning, licensing and environmental health data** supporting assessment of the **Commercial Determinants of Health**, including advertising, outlet density and regulatory activity.
- **Local service data** including uptake of **Healthy Start, weight management** offers, and **community activity** participation.

A detailed delivery plan will sit alongside this strategy and set out; specific actions for each priority, milestones and timelines so we know when things should happen and clear measures to track progress and hold everyone accountable.



Conclusion

This Healthy Weight Strategy marks a renewed, system-wide commitment to delivering structural change in Sunderland. By working collectively across policy, partnership, and delivery, and by committing to bold actions that address the deep financial and environmental barriers to health, we will ensure that everyone, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to live a longer, healthier life. Our focus now shifts to action and accountability to realise this shared vision.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the individuals and organisations who contributed to the development of the Sunderland Healthy Weight Strategy (2026-2031). This strategy reflects the collective insight, expertise and commitment of partners across Sunderland who are working together to create a healthier, fairer city.

Special thanks to members of the Healthy Weight Steering Group and Healthy Weight Alliance, including representatives from:

- Active Sunderland
- Education settings across the city
- Local food partnership and community food providers
- NHS Trusts and the Integrated Care Board
- Sunderland Business Improvement District
- Sunderland City Council
- Together for Children
- University of Sunderland
- Voluntary and community sector organisations

We are grateful to the children, young people, families and communities who shared experiences through surveys, forums and engagement activities. Their voices have helped shape this strategy. We will keep working with them through a detailed insights exercise. This will help us move from general data to clear, local information, so future work is based on strong evidence and guided by our communities.

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Sunderland Healthy Weight Strategy 2026-2031

The places we live shape our health. Let's shape them together!

**Sunderland
City Council**