

Co-developing a Systems Map to Promote Healthier Weight in Belfast

Key Findings from the Mapping the Systems Workshops November 2025

Obesity affects people of all ages and backgrounds but also exacerbates health disparities. Taking a Whole Systems Approach (WSA) along with psychological support to influence healthy weight has been identified as having potential in addressing the complex issue of obesity (1,2,3).

What is the aim of this brief report?

- To provide stakeholders in Belfast with an update on key findings from two systems mapping workshops on healthier weight.
- Highlight additional resources that would support the implementation of WSA for healthier weight in Belfast

(A full report can be found at [Active Belfast Resources - Making Life Better Together](#))

Definition of Whole Systems Approach?

A range of comprehensive initiatives targeted at change across the system by reaching government, policy decision makers, individuals, groups and community-level factors and drivers of human action (1,2). In understanding a WSA, an early step is to map the system.

What is a systems map?

It's a visual representation of a complex system. The map helps to understand the complexity of the system and is useful for informing policy, and intervention design. The map is co-created by stakeholders connected to the system through their participation at the workshops.

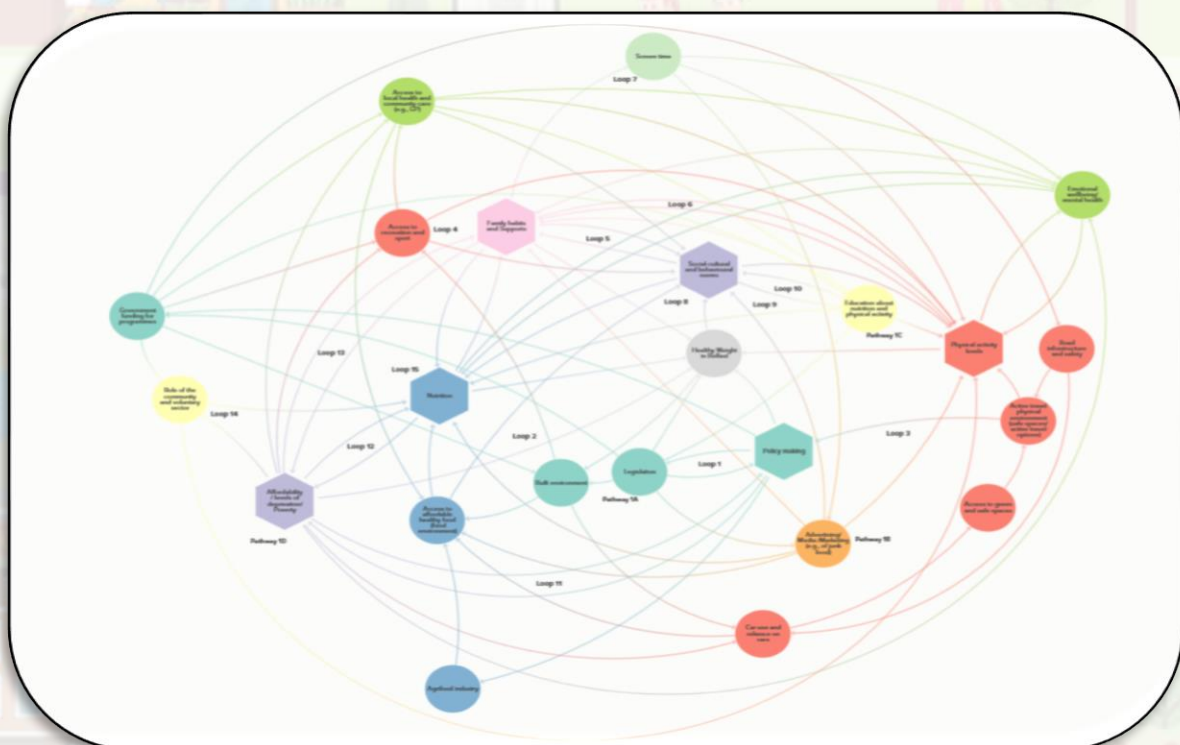
What did we do?

Stakeholders took part in a two-day structured system mapping workshop, and represented a range of multi-sectoral stakeholders, including managers, practitioners and policy makers from across the statutory, community and voluntary sector. The process was inclusive of those with lived experience of obesity.

Findings from the Integrated Systems Map

The online interactive version of the integrated systems map is available at:

<https://embed.kumu.io/882ebbe0a02e5cea9a40167a1531e92e>



Belfast Integrated Systems map

Key insights from the maps:

1. **High system complexity** with multiple feedback loops that can either accelerate problems or solutions.
2. **Policy and legislation** are critical upstream levers affecting infrastructure (including the built environment), funding and regulation.
3. **Socio-economic factors** including affordability/levels of deprivation and poverty act as fundamental constraints across multiple domains.
4. **Cultural and behavioural factors** such as social-cultural and behavioural norms and family habits and supports create intergenerational change.
5. **Multiple pathways to healthier weight** suggest that no single intervention will be sufficient and therefore systems level change is needed.

Critical Factors that Influence Obesity - these are high-leverage intervention points

Several critical determinants emerged from the analysis:

- *Policy Making;*
- *Nutrition;*
- *Affordability/levels of deprivation/poverty;*
- *Social-cultural and behavioural norms;*
- *Physical activity levels.*

To view these determinants, you can hover over the factors in the interactive systems map.

Stakeholders suggestions for systems change

- Creating enabling Infrastructure (Action Point 1A (PATHWAY 1A:))
- Regulating Commercial Determinants (Action Point 1B (PATHWAY 1B))
- Education as Driver of Change (Action Point 1C (PATHWAY 1C:))
- Addressing Socio-Economic Barriers (Action Point 1D (PATHWAY 1D))

Summary Conclusion

Through systems mapping in Belfast we have:

- Created a list of draft action points that transforms the challenge of healthier weight taking into account the individual, psychosocial processes as well as systems-level solutions.
- Identified potential implementation pathways that could be targeted

Next Steps as part of a Whole Systems Approach for Healthier Weight in Belfast

- The systems map will help to inform the development of a Healthier Weight Action Plan for Belfast. This action plan will be taken forward by multiple stakeholders to target healthier weight.
- The action plan will be aligned to actions of the Healthy Futures Obesity Strategy for Northern Ireland (2) and other strategies which are part of the system.

References

1. Breslin G, Wills W, McGowan L, Mack JB, Reynolds CME, McAvoy H. A whole systems approach to obesity prevention: a rapid synthesis of evidence to inform the Northern Ireland Obesity Prevention Strategy Project Board. Dublin: Institute of Public Health; 2023 Jan. 48 p. Available from: <https://publichealth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/WSA-approach-to-obesity-prevention-final.pdf>
2. Healthy Futures Obesity Strategic Framework For Northern Ireland (2025) Department of Health Northern Ireland.
3. Breslin, G., Fakoya, O., Wills, W., Lloyd, N., Bontoft, C., Wellings, A., ... & Brown, K. E. (2024). Whole systems approaches to diet and healthy weight: A scoping review of reviews. Plos one, 19(3), e0292945.

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