

Slimming World's *5-point manifesto* to support people and families living with obesity

Why is the manifesto needed?

By 2050, it is predicted that the number of adults in the UK who are living with obesity will rise by 73% to 26 million people. As well as the emotional difficulties experienced by people living with obesity, this public health crisis is linked to many serious health conditions such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, strokes and several types of cancers.

The pressure that obesity puts on the economy and NHS needs everyone – health professionals, politicians, policymakers, industry and the NHS – to pledge to work together on a practical, effective strategy that recognises one size doesn't fit all and, crucially, stick to it.

By implementing the measures outlined in this manifesto, the Government will commit to helping more people living with obesity, by supporting them to lose weight with a personalised, compassionate approach, improve health outcomes, and relieve the financial burden on the NHS.

The Government and politicians across all parties have a responsibility to support people to lead healthier lives by losing weight and maintaining that weight loss. The new generation of GLP-1 weight loss medications may help to alleviate the upward trajectory of obesity in the short-term but medicalising a problem that experts *and* government know requires a change of diet alongside physical activity, and behavioural support to ensure long-term success, is not the answer. We therefore firmly believe that equal consideration must be given to people who cannot, or do not wish to, take the drugs.

The UK needs an obesity strategy that is inclusive and effective for all.

The facts about obesity

- In June 2022, the Local Government Association (LGA) warned that the Government is set to miss its deadline to combat childhood obesity by 2030. The LGA projected that around 40% of 10- to 11-year-olds will be living with obesity or overweight by 2030 if trends in childhood obesity continued at their current rate.
- The Health Survey for England 2021 estimates that 26% of adults in England are living with obesity and a further 38% are overweight.
- Obesity rates are highest in adults living in the most deprived areas (34%).
- The cost of obesity to the NHS is now estimated to be £19.2 billion, according to modelling undertaken by Frontier Economics.
- Obesity is associated with reduced life expectancy. It is a risk factor for a range of chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, at least 13 types of cancer, liver and respiratory disease, and can impact mental health.

The UK's obesity landscape

Since the General Election in 2019, obesity policy in the UK has been subject to indecision and U-turns, linked in part to the changes in leadership in government. Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson made a major commitment to invest £70 million in weight management services, enabling up to 700,000 adults a year to access support to help them to lose weight. Despite significant investment in time, budget, and resources from Local Authorities, the funding was suddenly withdrawn just 12 months later. As a result, Local Authorities have been unable to plan, tens of thousands of people and their families have been left without effective support, and the UK has no coherent or clear strategy to tackle a growing public health problem that is now estimated to cost the UK £98 billion a year.

Despite many promises, a review of the overarching obesity strategy – which has been subject to considerable downgrading and policy reversal – failed to materialise.

In 2023, the Government announced a £40 million pilot to roll out GLP-1 medication to a wider population. This announcement marked a major shift in government policy insofar as drugs have effectively replaced all previous elements of the Government's obesity strategy. It is very easy to believe that this new generation of drugs are the holy grail and that they'll turn the tide of the obesity crisis. However, while they are an important innovation, and undoubtedly are changing the obesity landscape, they are not without significant associated concerns.



touching hearts, changing lives

The introduction of GLP-1 – the silver bullet?

In March 2023, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommended the use of semaglutide (brand name Wegovy) for weight loss for adults with a BMI over 35 and one weight-related health condition, such as type 2 diabetes or high blood pressure. Under these plans, the drug would be available on private prescription or from specialist weight management services.

The quality of 'wraparound' support patients receive must be a priority. NICE and the Government acknowledge the huge importance that lifestyle changes, such as healthy eating and increased physical activity, will be to the success of the drug, yet there is a lack of clarity as to how prescribers will be monitored to make sure this happens.

Furthermore, supply issues of the drug, combined with intense media and social media coverage, has led to a black-market boom, with considerable risks from fake medication.

The use of semaglutide on the NHS is limited to two years, and trials have shown that they don't work for everyone and once people stop taking the drug, they regain most of the weight they've lost. The stark reality remains that the only way to lose weight and keep it off in the long-term is by making sustainable healthy changes to what we eat and drink and by becoming more active.

It is an unrealistic expectation that the NHS can prescribe drugs to the millions of eligible patients when we already know that the total cost of prescription medicines to the NHS in England reached a new high of £17.2 billion in 2021 – 2022, before Wegovy was even introduced. **Lifestyle changes must sit alongside, and exist well beyond, any medical intervention such as surgery or drugs.**

about Slimming World

Established in 1969, Slimming World is the UK and Ireland's most advanced and effective weight management organisation. More people in the UK choose to attend a Slimming World group each week than any other weight loss programme. We support over 700,000 members each week through our community weight-loss groups, run by 3,500 highly trained self-employed Consultants, and our online service.

Slimming World's guiding principles are based on a deep understanding of the shame, guilt and societal stigma people living with overweight and obesity face. Members are supported to feel free of these emotional burdens and self-worth is raised through a powerful programme of behaviour change support.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Slimming World was able to quickly adapt its digital service and support the Government's Better Health programme, with over 27,000 individuals joining within the first six months.

Since then, NHS Digital has launched its own programme for healthcare professionals to refer eligible patients for weight-loss support, for which Slimming World was chosen as a provider. The programme has now been running for three years with over 25,000 referrals activated. Recently published research in The Obesity Journal has shown this is an effective and successful way to reach people with a weight management service.

Slimming World has the largest published evaluation of a national lifestyle weight management service in the world. Data from 1.3 million Slimming World group members showed that, on average, members lose:

- 4.4% of their body weight in three months
- 7.5% of their body weight when they attend at least nine out of 12 weekly Slimming World group sessions
- 13.2% of their body weight over 12 months when they attend 75% of their weekly group sessions

Research presented at the UK Congress on Obesity in Belfast (UKCO 2023) found:

- 100,000 Slimming World members who joined in 2016, attended at least two years later
- The average weight loss was 11.2%
- Almost three quarters (71%) of members lost 10% or more weight in their first year after joining Slimming World
- 2-7 years later 68% had maintained this weight loss or gone on to lose more

The healthy influence of Slimming World stretches right across families too, with 74% of current members reporting that they have influenced their family to make healthier food choices, and many involving their family in activity.

Slimming World's philosophy is based on a deep understanding of how people who are living with overweight feel, coupled with a passionate desire to help them achieve their goals. For 55 years, our programme has been developed and refined in line with the latest evidence on nutrition, exercise and the psychology of behaviour change, and our innovative digital programme has been designed to support members using the latest technology. We successfully support hundreds of thousands of people each week to eat more healthily and adopt a more active lifestyle for the long-term.

Slimming World's *calls to the* Government

Call 1:

Actively support the option of evidence-based and effective lifestyle-based weight loss programmes so that healthcare professionals have a full range of treatment choices for people without medicalising obesity as the first and only option.

For over a decade, the Government's public health campaigns, *One You* and *Better Health*, have worked on the understanding that the way to successfully lose weight is through diet, physical activity, and behaviour change support – evidence-based principles backed by NICE – and it is imperative that these options remain for people who cannot, or do not wish to, resort to drug treatment.

A recently published study in *Clinical Nutrition Open Science* shows that Slimming World members sustain healthy habits three years after joining, even if they've stopped attending their group. Slimming World members (both current and past) eat more fruit and vegetables, cook more from scratch, reduce alcohol intake, and lead a more active lifestyle.

Alongside this, improvements in health (including better mobility, reduced levels of anxiety and depression, blood pressure and type 2 diabetes) were reported. The research also showed that members influence their family to eat more healthily and be more active too.

The Government and NICE know that losing weight, and keeping it off in the long-term, is achieved by making sustainable healthy changes to what we eat and drink, and by becoming more active.

Lifestyle changes must sit alongside – and exist well beyond – any medical intervention, whether that be surgery or drugs.

Call 2:

Ensure effective and evidence-based wraparound support – comprising diet, physical activity and behaviour change strategies – for people using weight-loss drugs, with a robust monitoring and evaluation strategy to ensure prescribers are compliant with these guiding principles of effective weight loss.

For many people, the introduction of the NHS £40 million two-year pilot may sound like a panacea – a treatment to lose weight that doesn't require any lifestyle changes. However, it's a short-term medical intervention with many unpleasant potential side-effects and people prescribed it will also be advised to follow a calorie-reduced diet and increase their activity levels.

The Government must provide adequate and ongoing wraparound support for those using weight-loss drugs to adopt new healthier habits. Support should be offered as part of the pilot, and beyond, to ensure patients are not only supported to lose weight, but to maintain that weight loss long-term, long after they stop taking the medication.

Treatment for patients taking part in the pilot only lasts for two years, and as trials have shown, those who do not engage with lifestyle changes, such as healthy eating and exercise, put most of the weight back on.

If the pilot fails to offer suitable wraparound support for those patients taking obesity drugs, then weight will be regained, and conditions associated with obesity will only continue to put pressure on the NHS, both financially and in terms of treatment pathways. Alternatively, those people will be condemned to a life of injecting drugs funded by the NHS to manage their weight.

Slimming World is calling on the Government to commit to a robust monitoring and evaluation strategy that can be used to compare the effectiveness of a range of treatment options. The assessment must fully evaluate the level to which people are being encouraged and supported to engage with the behaviour change techniques that are recognised by NICE as being essential to achieving long-term weight loss beyond the use of drugs.

Call 3:

Clear guidance on healthy weight management in pregnancy – Slimming World is calling on the Government to introduce clear guidelines on safe and healthy weight gain in pregnancy for all women regardless of their starting BMI.

There is strong evidence of the health risks of obesity and excess weight gain in pregnancy for both the mother and child during and after pregnancy, and yet there are no UK guidelines on what constitutes a safe weight gain, and many midwives have to refer to American guidance.

As health professionals, it's important for midwives to receive training on how to have supportive and effective conversations with women about weight, but research from Slimming World and the Royal College of Midwives (RCM) found that only 51% of midwives feel confident about advising women on weight management during pregnancy.

Clear guidance on healthy weight management in pregnancy is needed for women and midwives to have the information, support and resources they need.

Call 4:

Establish a coherent, long-term strategy to recognise the link between overweight or obesity and type 2 diabetes and commit to removing societal stigma that prevents people accessing diagnosis, treatment and support.

Slimming World welcomes members living with diabetes to attend a group to obtain support in making positive, lifestyle changes to manage their weight. Taking guidance from Diabetes UK, British Dietetic Association Diabetes Management and Education Group, and nutritional guidelines for diabetes care, Slimming World has developed specific guidelines to support members with diabetes. An evaluation, published in the journal *Archives of Diabetes & Obesity* in 2021, showed that, of the Slimming World members surveyed:

- 33.9% of those with type 2 diabetes reported their diabetes had gone into remission; this increased to 51% for those who'd lost at least 10% of their body weight
- 61% were able to reduce or stop taking their diabetes medication
- 81% saw improvements in their blood glucose (also known as blood sugar levels) management
- 80% reported an improved quality of life
- 76% said they found it easy to follow our Food Optimising eating plan alongside the dietary advice from their healthcare team

The latest evaluation also includes members living with type 1 diabetes, with 88% reporting improvements in their blood sugar levels.

Slimming World is calling for a coherent strategy with clear actions that support people living with overweight or obesity and type 2 diabetes to have access to non-judgemental diagnosis and treatment.

Call 5:

Training for healthcare professionals to enable sensitive and skilled conversations about weight. Slimming World calls on the Government to develop and implement mandatory training for all healthcare professionals who interact with patients living with overweight and obesity, to equip them with the skills to raise the issue of obesity and weight management sensitively and effectively.

The training must address the psychological as well as physiological impact of weight on health and must be underpinned by the understanding that, anyone who struggles with their weight must be treated with kindness, compassion and respect to support behaviour change.

We call for the introduction of training applied to undergraduate and professional studies for all healthcare professionals in both hospital and community settings, which addresses 'raising the issue' of weight with compassion and sensitivity, and never with judgement, criticism or humiliation.

The training will provide healthcare professionals with the skills to:

- recognise when it would be beneficial to raise the issue of weight with people in a sensitive and skilled way
- understand the difficulties that people who are living with overweight or obesity face and recognise the need for compassion and care in helping them to address them
- know where to signpost patients for expert advice and support in making healthy lifestyle changes, losing weight and maintaining weight loss

Slimming World believes that professionals working in the health sector should have a duty of care to their patients who are at risk of public health conditions associated with obesity, both physical and psychological.

Guidance published by NICE in May 2014 advises raising the issue of weight loss in a respectful and non-judgemental way and suggests how lifestyle weight management programmes focusing on diet, activity and the way people live their lives (behaviour change) can help people who are living with overweight or obesity to lose weight and to keep it off.

The pressure that obesity puts on the economy and the NHS needs everyone – health professionals, politicians, policymakers, industry and the NHS – to pledge to work together on a practical, effective strategy that recognises one size doesn't fit all and, crucially, stick to it.

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