



# The Real Picture of Childhood Obesity in Greater Manchester.

## Executive summary

*The Real Picture* was launched in response to the continuing rise in childhood obesity rates across Greater Manchester. This was a bold and wide-reaching public engagement consultation with a clear goal — **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, an open space was created to allow for an honest dialogue with parents, carers, teachers and those with lived experience.

To ensure wide reach, an **8-week** GM-wide digital campaign ran, 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**.

**Timing:** November 2023 and January 2024

## What did we do?

In response to rising childhood obesity rates across Greater Manchester, the Real Picture Consultation had one clear mission: **to create a safe space for honest conversations with parents, carers, teachers, and those living with obesity.**

Our goal was to uncover the real **drivers** behind the issue, **raise awareness** of its scale, and **collaborate** with communities to develop practical, **people-powered solutions.**

We ran an 8-week social media campaign across Greater Manchester, supported by on-the-ground street teams and a giant milkshake event that captured headlines and public attention.

Local public health leaders and elected councillors amplified the campaign in their communities, while the voluntary and community sector helped engage those less likely to respond online. Together, this approach sparked strong community interest and participation—enabling us to hear from over **10,000 voices** across the region and providing a powerful public mandate to act.





# How did we do it?

## Insight and Co-design

Childhood obesity is complex and sensitive. We teamed up with families living with childhood obesity, public health experts, children's services, VCFSE groups, the Greater Manchester Food Security Action Network, and weight management colleagues. Together, they shaped every part of the NHS Greater Manchester consultation and campaign, keeping it relevant, respectful, and real.

This group acted as our campaign test bed, pinpointing the key drivers of childhood obesity. Their insights became the heart of our promotional adverts, inviting Greater Manchester residents to confirm or challenge these views by completing the survey. This collaborative approach was key to getting the tone right, connecting partners, and driving real engagement on the ground.

## Campaign and Engagement Delivery

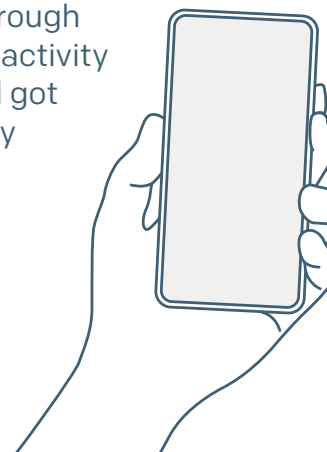
To reach as many people as possible across Greater Manchester, we teamed up with **10GM** – as a key partner in connecting with the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise sector. They led 10 in-person focus groups, reaching communities who might have otherwise been missed online and providing offline survey options to increase engagement. This ran alongside the 8-week digital campaign and targeted street outreach, as well as direct mail surveys in neighbourhoods hit hardest by childhood obesity.

Local public health leads and councillors took the campaign further, amplifying it through media and community networks. The activity turned heads, grabbed headlines, and got people talking about childhood obesity across the city-region.

[Find out more](#)

## Findings and Impact

We dug deep into survey and focus group responses, uncovering the shared drivers, barriers, and perceptions that paint the true picture of childhood obesity in Greater Manchester. Key insights have been turned into a powerful evaluation report and video, shared widely with local authorities, the Combined Authority, public health teams, and VCSE partners. They're already contributing to discussions on junk food advertising policies, steering the Greater Manchester Food Programme Board, and helping influence obesity pathways across NHS Greater Manchester.



# What did we find?

Easy access to unhealthy food is the problem, as fast food is cheap, convenient, and deeply embedded in everyday life

## 79%

of respondents felt tackling childhood obesity should be a top or high priority for local authorities and health services.

Most of the participants were unaware of any local action being taken

...highlighting a critical gap in communication and visibility

## Drivers

### Low cost of unhealthy food.

The cost-of-living crisis forced 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.

### Lack of education on nutrition.

Confusion around food labelling, ultra-processed options, and lack of education on nutrition.

### Junk food advertising.

Highly visible and persuasive ads were seen as a powerful influence on young people's eating habits.



# Key challenges & lessons learned

## 1. Childhood obesity is a complex, multi-layered issue

Childhood obesity is a complex, multi-layered issue that carries sensitivity and stigma. Tackling it requires coordinated action across sectors, with cultural competence and an **understanding of diverse communities** at its core.

## 2. Campaign timing matters

Running a campaign in November and December came with challenges—it's a season of indulgence, and many people are winding down or taking time off work. But it also opened a window to **engage at the right moment**, when food and lifestyle were front of mind and people had more time to take part—ultimately helping to boost survey engagement.

## 3. Navigating different partner priorities

When running a Greater Manchester-wide campaign, timing and **partner coordination** are key. It's crucial to work closely with local authorities and partners to understand when the campaign will land and what other priorities they may have—especially during busy or sensitive periods. For example, some partners focused on warm homes initiatives during the same timeframe, which affected their capacity to fully engage. To secure buy-in and alignment, **early planning and clear communication** are essential.

## 4. Public engagement is powerful—but unpredictable

Public engagement is powerful—but unpredictable. When you ask people what they think, the responses can be unexpected and sometimes challenging. To manage this, we developed **clear social media responses and a risk management plan** to address concerns swiftly and thoughtfully. Being prepared to adapt and respond not only helped to build trust but also kept people engaged in the conversation and drove survey responses.

## 5. Closing the loop is critical

Closing the loop is critical. Without follow-up and feedback, people feel unheard. That's why we plan to go back out and share how their contributions are shaping our programmes and interventions helping to **build credibility** and setting the stage for **deeper engagement** in the future.

If you want to know more about the **Greater Manchester Real Picture Consultation** contact [gmhscp.admin@populationhealth@nhs.net](mailto:gmhscp.admin@populationhealth@nhs.net)