



## **Panel Discussion | Policy solutions to tackle the obesity and fatty liver disease crisis in Wales**

**November 2023**

**Event:** AGM for Cross-Party Group on Liver Disease and Liver Cancer followed by panel discussion on policy solutions to tackle the obesity and fatty liver disease crisis in Wales

**Date/Time:** 12:00-13:00, Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> November 2023

**Location:** Conference room A (Hybrid set up)

**Attendees:** Joel James MS (Chair), Heledd Morgan MS, Russell George MS, Jenny Rathbone MS, Sarah Murphy MS, Julie Morgan MS aide, Dr Lee Gonzalez, Mathew Norman (Diabetes UK Cymru), Richard Daniels (British Liver Trust), Paul McGlinchey (British Liver Trust), Julie Adams (British Liver Trust), William Williams (patient advocate), Andrew Yeoman (clinical lead, LDIG), Claire Williams (Diabetes UK), Julie Harrington (Guts UK).

### **Minutes**

- **Joel James MS (Chair)** thanked panellists and attendees for taking time to support this important event on tackling rising obesity and fatty liver disease in Wales; provided introductory remarks for the AGM highlighting recent progress with the Cross-Party Group on Liver Disease and Liver Cancer in raising the profile of the liver disease public health crisis in Wales including through tabling over 50 Parliamentary Questions, and securing the first ever debate on liver disease and liver cancer at the Senedd in January 2023.
- It was noted that despite recent policy developments including the publication of the Quality Statement on Liver Disease in November 2022, and the nationwide rollout of the All-Wales Abnormal Liver Blood Test Pathway, significant challenges persist with liver disease deaths having increased by 23% in the last 2 years alone.
- It was further noted that the CPG would produce a 'state of the nation report' in 2024 to identify policy solutions to accelerate earlier diagnosis, improve outcomes, tackle chronic workforce shortages and reduce unwarranted variation in care.

**AGM outcome:** Joel James MS was re-elected to the position of Chair. Existing officers (Sarah Murphy MS, Jane Dodds MS) were re-elected by cross-party consensus, with Mabon ap Gwynfor MS (Plaid Cymru) taking over from Rhun ap Iorwerth MS.

- **Health and Social Care Committee Chair, Russell George MS**, opened the panel discussion by highlighting the significant burden of obesity related ill health in Wales with two thirds of the population overweight or obese; noting with concern the high incidence rate for liver disease in Powys Health Board; emphasised that prevention policy is often treated as secondary to tackling immediate pressures on the NHS particularly in the context of cost-of-living crisis; highlighted recent conversations with the Deputy Health Minister on the forthcoming junk food marketing legislation and differing perspectives on government intervention to regulate the unhealthy food and drink environment; noting the importance of looking for good practice in obesity prevention internationally and within continental Europe in particular to promote healthy diet and lifestyle.
- **Obesity Alliance Cymru representative, Mathew Norman (Deputy Director, Diabetes UK Cymru)**, highlighted the Welsh Government's recent projections for the [NHS in 10+ years](#) which recognises the growing prevalence of non-communicable diseases (e.g. cardiovascular disease, liver disease, diabetes) which are linked to modifiable risk factors (alcohol, smoking, HFSS foods), noting the impact of long term conditions and multimorbidity on huge avoidable pressures on the NHS. MN clarified that regulatory changes to the unhealthy food and drink environment isn't about banning something but improving public awareness and education and empowering households to ensure that healthier choices are more accessible. MN highlighted the importance of effective implementation of the Healthy Weight Healthy Wales strategy and



adequate resourcing to improve earlier detection of NCDs in primary care such as liver disease and type 2 diabetes (e.g. lack of funding for Liver Disease Implementation Network); and noted the role of prevention measures in tackling health inequalities and narrowing the gap in healthy life expectancy.

- **Equality and Social Justice Committee Chair, Jenny Rathbone MS**, highlighted the severe impact of ultra-processed food (UPF) on widening the gap in healthy life expectancy including within her own constituency; noting that UPF is poorly regulated and has particular penetration in the UK and US which is driving population obesity and preventable conditions such as heart disease and diabetes. JR further noted the importance of removing UPF from schools, nursing homes and hospitals.
  - Joel James MS acknowledged the vital importance of improving education on cookery and healthy eating in schools.
  - Dr Lee Gonzalez highlighted importance of affordable and nutritious shelf-stable foods for busy households.
  - Julie Harrington (Guts UK) highlighted the importance of more research into the health benefits of a diverse microbiome, while recognising the impact of poverty and inequality as a driver of obesity related ill health.
  - Dr Andrew Yeoman (LDIN clinical lead) highlighted that the unhealthy food and drink environment is a driver of cancer, liver disease and diabetes; noting that UPF can adversely impact your gut health whereas balanced and nutritious diets can create an optimal microbiome for faecal transplants for liver disease patients.
  - Dr Yeoman also highlighted the importance of upstream factors to tackle obesity related ill health such as nudge theory, improved choice, public awareness raising and education in schools, and improving earlier detection of fatty liver disease in primary care.
- **Cross-Party Group on Eating Disorders Chair, Sarah Murphy MS (CPG member)**, noted that it was great to see one of her constituents from Bridgend was attending remotely (William) as he is a passionate advocate for improving outcomes for liver disease patients in Wales; noted the complexity around implementing Healthy Weight Healthy Wales in schools and ensuring sensitivity to vulnerable categories children, particularly those with learning needs who are more likely to develop eating disorders; emphasised the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on poorest households with food banks noting that fuel poverty is hampering families from being able to cook even pasta or rice; further highlighting local innovation and good practice within her own constituency with Slade Farm Veg Bag Scheme supporting food insecure households through a Welsh Government grant; emphasised the importance of tackling food waste and noted the growth in healthy meal prep kits.

**Call for action:** The event was closed by the Chair of the CPG, Joel James MS, with a call to action. Members of the Senedd were urged to table bespoke PQs and sign a cross party letter to Baroness Morgan (Health Minister) on strengthening oversight for prevention and earlier diagnosis of liver disease in Wales. It was also agreed that the CPG would publish a 'state of the nation' report on liver disease and liver cancer in Wales in 2024.