

WELCOME



MAKING LIFE BETTER

NEWS

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Get In Touch

If you have any questions about the content of MLB News, have work you want to share with the Network or wish to join please email:
mlbnetwork@hscni.net

(Picture left) Prof Sir Michael McBride, Chief Medical Officer (CMO), Department of Health



CMO Foreword

Welcome to this edition of the MLB Newsletter.

I am delighted to advise that the Making Life Better (MLB) new Thematic Action Plan was published on 21 July 2026.

Whilst MLB remains the overarching strategic framework for public health in Northern Ireland, the new Thematic Action Plan provides a renewed focus for collaborative action to improve health and wellbeing and reduce health inequalities. The Plan supports joined up working across government and sectors, with a focus on prevention, early intervention and addressing the wider factors that influence health.

The Department is now planning a cross-Departmental implementation workshop which will allow for structured engagement between key stakeholders to agree ownership of actions and support delivery of the key priorities over the next three to five years. I look forward to attending this workshop in early October.

In this edition of the MLB Newsletter, you will find articles which showcase some of the excellent work that is being taken forward within the Department of Health and beyond.

All-Departments Officials Group (ADOG)

The All-Departments Officials Group (ADOG) is a key part of the structures for co-ordinating implementation of Making Life Better (MLB) and is chaired by the Chief Medical Officer. ADOG last met on 28 May 2026.

During this meeting members discussed the next steps for publication of the MLB new Thematic Action Plan and agreed to attend a cross-departmental and agency workshop in the Autumn to focus on implementation.

Presentations on the new 'Eastern Transport Plan' and 'A Vision for Health and Wellbeing – The UK Healthy Cities and Towns Network' were delivered by Tony Rafferty (DfI) and Anne McCusker (Belfast Healthy Cities), respectively.

The meeting proved very productive, giving members the chance to exchange insights, build stronger connections across departments, and deepen their understanding of key issues and strategic priorities.

Following the MLB workshop in early October, ADOG will meet again on 26 November 2026.

Regional Health Literacy Forum

The Regional Health Literacy Forum (RHLF) last met on 3 June 2026, and Members received updates on This Is Your Health from Martin McCrory (Public Health Agency) and the Making Life Better (MLB) new Thematic Action Plan from Philip Cairns (Department of Health).

The RHLF welcomes the inclusion of health literacy as a key enabler within the MLB new Thematic Action Plan, recognising its important role in supporting people to take control of their own health and is delighted an Easy Read version has been produced to ensure greater accessibility. To support delivery of the MLB outcomes, the RHLF is in the process of developing an Action Plan to promote and embed health literacy across health development approaches, policies or initiatives and within communities.

The Forum is also preparing for Health Literacy Awareness Month in October. Building on the success of 2025, the campaign will highlight how health literacy is being incorporated into work across Northern Ireland, to support and empower individuals to make informed decisions and confidently navigate their personal health journey.

Our Co-Chair, Helen McNamee, also delivered a lecture on Health Literacy at Féile an Phobail on 4 August 2026. During the session, Helen explored what health literacy is, how it influences people's health and wellbeing, and why improving health literacy for all can help reduce health inequalities. She also highlighted the important role of the Regional Health Literacy Forum in supporting the development and implementation of strategies and policies to improve health literacy.



(Picture above)
Co-chair Helen McNamee
at Féile an Phobail.

Launch of Northern Ireland's Breastfeeding Action Plan



(Picture left) Former Health Minister at Breastival alongside members of the Breastival Board

Former Health Minister Mike Nesbitt launched Northern Ireland's Breastfeeding Action Plan at the annual Breastival #MorethanMilk event at Stormont on 21 July 2026. Breastival, Northern Ireland's annual breastfeeding festival, brings together families, health professionals and community organisations to celebrate breastfeeding, promote informed feeding choices and help create a culture where breastfeeding is understood, accepted and supported.

The new Breastfeeding Action Plan has been jointly developed by the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency, with contributions from stakeholders across the health, community and voluntary sectors. It sets out a shared vision of a Northern Ireland where breastfeeding is normalised, and women are empowered and supported to breastfeed.

Breastfeeding is recognised as an important public health issue, with evidence showing significant health benefits for both babies and mothers. However, breastfeeding rates in Northern Ireland remain lower than desired, with inequalities continuing to impact outcomes.

The Action Plan aims to increase awareness of the benefits of breastfeeding, improve public attitudes and ensure women and families can access the support they need throughout their breastfeeding journey. Key actions include improving breastfeeding support services, creating more breastfeeding-friendly environments, enhancing staff training, expanding community support and delivering public awareness initiatives. The Breastfeeding Action Plan will be implemented in partnership with health and community organisations across Northern Ireland and seeks to increase breastfeeding rates, reduce inequalities and support more babies to receive the best possible start in life. The Breastfeeding Action Plan is available here : <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/breastfeeding-action-plan-2026-2029>

Strengthening Communities for Health

Join the Community Development Practitioners' Forum Echo Network

Are you interested in how community development can help tackle health inequalities? The Community Development Practitioners' Forum is an online network that brings together people from across Northern Ireland who are passionate about supporting healthier, more connected communities.

The Forum is a space to connect with others, share experiences, learn from practice, and explore new ideas. Through online peer learning sessions, members discuss real-life challenges and opportunities, exchange useful resources, and hear examples of what's working in communities across the region.

Whether you're new to community development or have years of experience, the Forum offers a chance to build your knowledge, strengthen your confidence, and develop valuable relationships with colleagues from a range of sectors. Through the Forum, practical ways to apply community development principles, engage with communities most affected by health inequalities, and how to create positive change locally, are explored.

A unique feature of the Forum is that members help shape the programme by identifying the topics that matter most to them, ensuring sessions are relevant, practical and focused on current issues. This collaborative approach supports strong connections, shared learning, and a growing community of practice.

Sessions to date have included:

- Setting the agenda for the network
- Understanding the purpose, values and processes of community development
- Exploring health inequalities and their impact on communities

The conversation is continuing with four monthly sessions from September to December, followed by a reflective practice and evaluation session in January 2027.

The next session takes place on 30 September at 10am, and will focus on how listening to lived experience can support community action to address health inequalities. Practitioners from all sectors and levels of experience are welcome to join the Forum, and contribute to this growing community of learning, collaboration, and practice.

The Forum is coordinated by the Community Development and Health Network, with oversight from the Public Health Agency, and the Strengthening Communities for Health Steering Group.

To register for the Community Development Practitioners' Forum ECHO Network, access recordings of previous sessions, and receive information about upcoming sessions, visit the ECHO Moodle NI site: <https://moodle.echonorthernireland.co.uk>
Alternatively, contact Elaine Kane at Elaine.Kane@RQIA.org.uk

News from the Network

Nutritional Standards in Health and Social Care (HSC) Creating a Healthier Food Environment

Nutritional Standards for HSC were introduced in 2017 to support the health and overall wellbeing of staff and visitors across Northern Ireland by creating a healthier food environment across HSC catering facilities, retail outlets and vending machines. The Nutritional Standards are food-based standards modelled on the Eatwell Guide. They were developed in partnership by the Public Health Agency, Food Standards Agency, Safefood and the Department of Health, and form part of the wider regional obesity prevention strategy, Healthy Futures.

By creating a healthier food environment, the standards contribute to a healthier workforce. They were revised in September 2025 to reflect changes in guidance, evidence-based practice and feedback from stakeholders.

Excellent progress has been made regionally, with overall compliance with the standards currently at 77%, including 100% compliance in vending. Compliance is measured through assessments coordinated locally, with coordinators supporting settings to review food and drink provision against the standards. All Trusts have introduced two days per week with no processed meat and no fried foods on the menu. Some practical changes include smaller traybakes, the removal of sugary drinks and no salt and sugar on tables. There is also a stronger focus on fruit, high fibre options, and healthier meal deals, supported by clear signposting, leaflets and advertising.

Awareness of the standards continues to grow, with 75% of staff and visitors reporting being familiar with them. Feedback from a recent survey has been positive, with many respondents highlighting how the changes are supporting a healthier food environment. Comments include:

- “It makes me more mindful of what I’m eating.”
- “If healthier options are available, I’m more likely to choose them.”
- “Having better choices in the canteen helps me stick to healthier habits.”
- “I’m more aware of calories and make better decisions now.”



(Picture above) From left to right - Justin Kelly, Leah O'Neill, Rachael Taylor and Dorota Cuthbert, HSC Nutritional Standards Coordinators

News from the Network

Nutritional Standards in Health and Social Care (HSC) Creating a Healthier Food Environment (cont.)

Ongoing collaboration between catering teams, dietitians, registered nutritionists, funding partners and coordinators is helping to fully embed Nutritional Standards across HSC. Coordinators will continue to champion the Nutritional Standards and set an example across the wider public and private sectors.

Overall, Nutritional Standards are making a positive difference and contributing to the shared aim of supporting health and well-being of staff, visitors and the wider community.

For more information, please see the following video: [Nutritional Standards Revised 2025 video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFIdHRzd_8s) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFIdHRzd_8s)

Regional Project Evaluation Key Findings & Achievements 25/26

NS training delivered to 113 staff across all Trusts



Delivery of 20 awareness sessions

New promotional materials developed and distributed



High engagement with the NS survey (991 respondents)

574 views on the Nutritional Standards YouTube video



(Picture above) Regional Project Evaluation Key Findings and Achievements 25/26

News from the Network

Preventing and reducing the risk of Dementia

1 in 3 people born in the UK today will develop Dementia in their lifetime but 45% of all diagnoses are potentially preventable

A common misconception is that Dementia is an inevitable part of ageing rather than a neurological disease which affects the brain. Currently there are over 25,000 people living with a form of Dementia in Northern Ireland (NI), projected to rise to 43,000 people by 2040. Dementia is the leading cause for deaths in NI, and during the next 20 years we are projected to have the highest prevalence rate across the UK.

Dementia is generally considered an older person's disease, but earlier recognition of symptoms, often identified in your 40's and 50's, means people are needing services sooner, with approximately 1800 people in NI living with early/young onset Dementia [[Young onset Dementia facts and figures - Young Dementia Network](#)]. People with a learning disability are also more likely to get Dementia at a younger age, about 1 in 5 over the age of 65, and 50% or more with Down syndrome developing Dementia as they age [[Learning disabilities and Dementia | Alzheimer's Society](#)]; and women are twice as likely to develop Dementia than men [[Why women are bearing more of the impact of dementia - Alzheimer's Research UK](#)].

Research shows that 45% of cases of Dementia are potentially preventable by addressing 14 modifiable risk factors [[Risk factors for dementia](#)] at different stages during our lives. Some risk factors require changes through leading a healthier lifestyle and others involve wider social and environmental factors.

Making Life Better (MLB) recognises that health outcomes are influenced not only by healthcare services but also by wider social, economic and environmental factors. MLB is focused on improving the health and wellbeing of people in NI, closing the gap between the most and least disadvantaged. It encourages changing lifestyles whether it is stopping smoking, drinking less or getting more exercise to help reduce developing long term health conditions. The majority of modifiable risk factors for Dementia are reflected within MLB, and others reflected in the public health strategies which support it.

News from the Network

Preventing and reducing the risk of Dementia (cont.)

Our Public Health Agency also leads on public health initiatives designed to help people live healthier lives and prevent ill health; public awareness and healthy active ageing is also a key element of the Regional Dementia Care Pathway. All which will contribute towards potentially preventing and reducing the risk of developing Dementia.

FACTORS LINKED TO DEMENTIA RISK

EARLY LIFE



Quality of education
5%



Hearing loss
7%



High cholesterol
7%

MID-LIFE



Depression
3%



Traumatic brain injury
3%



Physical inactivity
2%

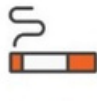
LATER LIFE



Uncorrected visual impairment
2%



Type 2 diabetes
2%



Smoking
2%



High blood pressure
2%



Obesity
1%



Excessive alcohol
1%



Social isolation
5%



Air pollution
3%

The percentage figure refers to the reduction in worldwide cases if this risk factor were eliminated. In the UK, a 1% reduction = 10,000 people.

Adapted from The Lancet standing commission on dementia prevention, intervention and care, 2024.

ALZHEIMER'S RESEARCH UK **FOR A CURE**

Registered charity numbers - 1077089 & SC042474

(Picture above) 14 modifiable risk factors of dementia
[Addressing 14 health and lifestyle factors could prevent nearly half of global dementia cases - Alzheimer's Research UK]