

BRIEFING FOR ELECTED MEMBERS

Tackling Weight Stigma

Key messages

- Weight stigma is referred to as discriminatory acts and ideologies aimed at individuals due to their weight and size [1]. It is also known as weight-based discrimination or weight bias.
- Weight stigma can have a significant impact on local communities, including long lasting psychological, social and behavioural implications, such as: depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, binge eating, potential denial of jobs and biased attitudes from healthcare professionals [2].
- Weight discrimination isn't a motivational vessel for individuals to lose weight, moreover, it decreases levels of motivation that can create a barrier to accessing health services [3].
- Elected members and local councils can play an important role in challenging weight stigma leading by example when communicating with their constituents, local authority and media.

About weight stigma

It is reported that over 80% of UK adults believe that individuals living with obesity are perceived in a negative manner due to their weight. Additionally, 62% estimate that there is a high probability that people are likely to discriminate against someone who is overweight. This statistic is higher than any other forms of discrimination which includes ethnic background, sexual orientation or gender [4]. Furthermore, another study reported that 88% of individuals living with obesity had experienced weight stigma as a consequence of their body size [5].

Evidence suggests that weight stigma predominantly affects those living with overweight or obesity, children within educational settings (reported by teachers and peers) and women, who are more likely to experience weight stigma compared to men. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest weight stigma can be experienced by those who are underweight [6]. However, this briefing focuses on the implications of weight stigma for those who are living with overweight or obesity as it appears to be greater for those with a higher BMI, but this is not exclusive.

Why it is not as simple as 'eat less and move more'

There is a common perception that weight loss is as simple as eating less and moving more. Evidence shows the situation is much more complex. Weight stigma can be classed as a by-product of societal attitudes directed at diet culture, body diversity and medicalisation of weight. Drivers of stigmatisation are predominately associated with a misunderstanding of the complexity of overweight and obesity, along with society attributing weight gain/loss to individual responsibility, not recognising the complex drivers that are beyond the individual's control such as biological, commercial, social, economic and political factors [1].

Taking the above into consideration, it would be unjust to solely blame an individual or community for issues relating to their weight. It is therefore essential that we consider tackling weight stigma if we want to support our community to be a healthier weight.

Why is weight stigma an issue for communities?

Weight stigma can have a detrimental effect on people across the weight spectrum and may impact on individual constituents and communities in a variety of ways:

Poor mental health & well-being: This can include depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, negative body image, instances of self-harm and thoughts/acts of suicide. It is reported that psychological outcomes are not associated with obesity per se, but more so the consequences of weight stigmatisation [6].

