Briefing for Elected Members

# Tackling Weight Stigma

## KEY MESSAGES

- Weight stigma refers to the discriminatory acts and ideologies targeted towards individuals because of 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, rather 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 because 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 also 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. However, evidence shows the situation is much more complex [7]. Weight stigma can be classed as a byproduct 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 living with obesity per se, but more so the consequences of weight stigmatisation [6].

**Physical ill-health**: Weight stigma can impact an individual's behaviour such as less healthy weight control practices, health screenings and binge eating. It is believed that weight stigma can be a contributing factor behind weight gain/loss. Research suggests that weight bias can impact psychological and behavioural changes which are associated with poor metabolic health and weight gain [8]. Additionally, it correlates with the avoidance of exercise [9].

**Lower quality of life:** Those who are subjected to weight stigmatisation may experience rejection by peers, potential negative impact on academic outcomes, difficulties with interpersonal relationships, reduction of earning potential, being overlooked for a job or promotion, stereotypes from within the media and biased attitudes from health care professionals [2]. It has also been acknowledged that individuals living with obesity can often received lower levels of care from healthcare professionals [9]. It is reported that 42% of people living with obesity don't feel comfortable discussing weight with their GP. This supports the evidence of individuals avoiding healthcare due to being stigmatised about their weight [10].

## What is my role as an Elected Member?

The role and responsibilities of an Elected Member involves leadership and ensuring visibility. They are vital in championing and promoting the importance of healthy weight at a local level through engaging officers, departments and the public. There are many opportunities as an Elected Member to help challenge weight stigma by supporting stigma-free communications and advocating for weight-inclusive environments and policies locally. This could be through social media, providing stigma-free quotes during press releases and when working with local media, communicating to constituents and raising awareness through relevant meetings, with other councillors and working with local authority officers in policy making. Some key actions to be considered include:

**Avoid stereotypes:** Common stereotypes of obesity include laziness, a lack of willpower and less healthy behaviours, ensure these stereotypes are not re-enforced [11].

**Use appropriate language and terminology:** Consider how the language and terminology used to describe body weight may be perceived or interpreted. Use person-centred language, which is designed to put the person first, rather than the condition of the individual i.e. people living with obesity, rather than obese person [10].

**Create balanced and accurate conversations around obesity:** Making sure the wider drivers of obesity are considered; and increasing people's awareness of this.

**Use appropriate images of individuals with obesity:** When communicating about obesity, the imagery used is just as important as the language. There are some free non- stigmatising image banks provided in our resource hub.

Access the Food Active Weight Stigma Resource Hub here

### References


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