

+  
PRACTICAL  
GUIDES  
+

+  
**Obesity and weight-  
based stigma in the  
workplace**  
+



# A complex and multi-factorial issue



Overweight and obesity affect a large proportion of the English population.



In 2019 in England, 68% of men and 60% of women were living with obesity or overweight. (1)



**1 in 4 adults** is living with obesity. (2)

that's an estimated 12.6 million adults living with obesity. (1)

## Weight gain depends on multiple factors.

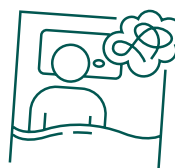
It is not due to a lack of willpower or self-discipline.

An individual's genetics play a significant role in weight gain; some people gain weight more easily than others, despite having similar lifestyles to those who do not.



Children of parents living with obesity are more likely to live with obesity themselves compared to children whose parents are a healthy weight. (3)

The impact of food consumption on obesity is **complex** and involves much more than the simple intake of excess calories: **diet, the relationship people have with food, and the microorganisms that exist in the digestive system i.e., the gut microbiome**, all influence weight gain. It is wrong to assume that healthy eating behaviours alone will lead to weight loss.



The work environment plays a significant role: shift work, working patterns, sleep disorders, stress and sedentary behaviour are all risk factors for overweight/obesity.

### LET'S THINK ABOUT THIS

Do our bodies all work the same way in terms of immunity, endurance, sleeping etc.?

**No, our bodies all work differently from one another according to our genetics, lifestyle and environment.**

# Weight-based stigma in the workplace: what's really happening?



## Weight-based stigma – what's the evidence?

**62%** of adults have experienced discrimination at work on account of their weight. (4)

Research suggests that weight discrimination is ranked as third most prevalent in the UK after age and sex discrimination. (5)

**Women living with obesity experience an obesity wage penalty of up to an estimated 10% gap in average earnings. (6).**



**Stigmatising individuals based on their appearance via conscious or unconscious bias is still happening.**



A 2015 UK-attitude survey revealed that 75% of respondents believed that an overweight job applicant would not be offered an office manager role over an equally as qualified applicant who is not overweight or living with obesity. (7)

**This is unacceptable, and we must take action!**

## WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY?



### UK LAW

**Obesity is a risk factor for several health conditions that already sit under the provisions of the 2010 Equalities Act.**

This means that recruitment, progression and pay equity, and access to workplace adjustments should be open to all employees and that any discrimination based on disability, health conditions or impairment related to obesity may violate these provisions. (6) It is therefore recommended that all organisations integrate obesity and overweight explicitly into equality, diversity and inclusion policies.



# The principle of practical guides



The following six guides aim to support employers and organisations to prevent weight-based stigma in the workplace:

→ By offering insights from individuals with lived experience of weight-based stigma in the workplace.

→ By positioning organisations as key actors in developing a more inclusive society as well as benefitting from increased diversity in the workplace.

## PRACTICAL GUIDES

6 themes relating to employment discrimination:

**01**

Obesity and health: being aware of generalisations



**02**

Overweight, obesity and physical ability



**03**

Personality traits: judgements and assumptions



**04**

Encouraging diversity within teams: an asset for organisations



**05**

Progression and promotion opportunities: including employees living with obesity and overweight



**06**

Experiencing or observing weight-based stigmatisation or discrimination: how to take action







# Obesity and health: being aware of generalisations





## SURPRISING EVIDENCE



Whilst obesity does not always co-exist with poor health, overweight and obesity are major risk factors for developing several chronic diseases, including cardiovascular diseases such as heart disease and stroke, which are the leading causes of death worldwide. (8)

Despite this, it is important not to generalise or assume that obesity always co-exists with poor health.



I just don't like the idea that people look at me and then make judgements about my health.”

Dr Stuart Flint, Associate Professor of Psychology,  
University of Leeds



## UNDERSTANDING OBESITY AND HEALTH

Living with obesity / overweight exposes individuals to certain health risks – this is undisputed.

**In England, adults living with obesity are five times more likely to be diagnosed with diabetes (9) and twice as likely to develop high blood pressure compared to adults of a healthy weight. (10)** ≡

But, although living with obesity increases the risk of developing type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure, **it doesn't mean that all people living with obesity also live with these conditions.**

The risk of developing a disease or condition is calculated according to how frequently it occurs in a given population, during a given time period. Therefore, it is a **probability rather than an outcome of certainty.**

An individual's health status is personal and unique to them – and we cannot make generalisations from it.



Many people live with chronic diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure, which can be successfully managed with appropriate medical interventions.



### DID YOU KNOW ?

High blood pressure affects more than 1 in 4 adults in England; affecting men more than women (11) and increases sharply with age. Overweight and obesity are not the only causes of high blood pressure, other causes include alcohol, smoking, physical inactivity, and salt consumption but there isn't always an explanation! (12)

### WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

**Living with obesity does not mean being unable to work. Just because obesity may be 'visible' – it should not be associated automatically with poor health.**

The health status of people living with obesity is personal and unique – just as it is for everyone regardless of their weight.





## CASE STUDY



“I live with movement disorders and endocrine issues that contribute to my disability. As a result, I walk in an unusual way. **Because of this I was once asked if I was ‘drunk at work’ at 9am** – even though my disability was known in the workplace because of my limited movement.

During my career I have received several comments about my size and shape by colleagues such as: “Well if you just move more!” or “Have you tried dieting before?” One colleague remarked “Well, considering you’re a health professional, you’re not much of a role model, are you?”

I believe that when you carry additional weight and have a visible disability, people think it’s their duty to inform you about your wellbeing for your own good – **they forget that the expert in the room is me.**

I often feel decision-making in the workplace is based on disability and/or biases.”

Adele, Midwife



## TAKING ACTION



### Avoiding stereotyping

Always consider that a person’s appearance does not necessarily reflect their current state of health.



### Don’t forget about free NHS health checks

The NHS Health Check is a free service offered to all adults aged between 40 and 74. It is designed to spot the early signs of stroke, kidney disease, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, or dementia. As we age, we develop a higher risk of developing any of these conditions. An NHS Health Check finds ways to lower your risk. You can call your GP surgery to book a health check.

Many organisations offer similar employee health checks/ health MOTs.



→ GUIDE 02



# Overweight, obesity and physical ability





## SURPRISING EVIDENCE

- Recent evidence shows that 13% of the UK Armed Forces is classified as living with obesity. (13) Although this figure is low compared to the general UK population, it is a surprising figure considering the high levels of endurance and strength required by military personnel.

This figure challenges the common misconception that overweight adults or those living with obesity have compromised physical capacity.



“However ordinary each of us may seem, we are all in some way special, and can do things that are extraordinary, perhaps until then...even thought impossible.”

*Sir Roger Bannister,  
Former athlete and record breaker*



## UNDERSTANDING PHYSICAL ABILITY



### Endurance is a physical $\leq$ ability that differs from one individual to another.

Endurance is not based on a person's build.

It differs according to genetic factors and can be maintained and improved through training and physical activity. A so-called 'athletic' physique is not necessarily an indicator of a high level of endurance.

An individual accustomed to tasks requiring endurance can sustain positions that demand specific levels of endurance such as standing up all day, for example (security guards, chefs, nurses, etc.)



### Self-awareness and physical ability

A person applies for a job because they know who they are and what their skills are – and they believe they are capable of doing the job. The purpose of the job interview is to assess a person's suitability for the job.

#### DID YOU KNOW?



##### Joint pain – a condition that can affect anyone

Certain jobs demand high levels of endurance, particularly those requiring long periods of standing or repetitive movements, which can expose employees to a greater risk of experiencing joint problems. While it is well documented that living with overweight/obesity increases an individual's risk of developing joint conditions, such as osteoarthritis and low back pain, around a third of the UK population live with these joint conditions (14) – so employers must not be deterred from recruiting people living with overweight or obesity into specific job roles.



#### KEY LEARNINGS

A **sustainable and inclusive approach** to recruitment focuses on capacity not incapacity and integrates prevention strategies for joint pain and repetitive strain injuries into workplace health and safety policies.

Additionally, **providing appropriate equipment** (chairs, desks, and screens etc.) for employees enables everyone to feel more comfortable in the workplace.

## CASE STUDY

### Marie, photographer

“At the end of my studies, I applied for a job as an assistant photographer. I had several interviews

and finally I had a good feeling with a freelance photographer who, after setting-up his own business, needed a new face in his team.

He was very honest with me during the interview; he asked me if I felt able to stand for long hours and carry boxes when setting up equipment. I don't know if this question was due to my weight or if he asked this routinely to all applicants. In any case, for someone like myself who is strong, it was not a problem, and I was aware of the physical aspect of the job before applying.

After reassuring him that I felt able to meet the physical demands of the job, he recruited me. And it's been almost two years now that I have been assisting him!”



## TAKING ACTION



### Giving applicants a chance!

#### **Before joining an organisation:**

talking with an applicant during the interview allows employers to get an idea of their suitability for the position. As with all applicants, if the position requires specific physical capabilities, this should be addressed and explored during the interview.

#### **When joining an organisation:**

have confidence in those applicants who have demonstrated during the recruitment stage(s) that they have the required skills for the job. Remember that probation periods at the start of a contract allow employers to determine if an employee is fully suitable for the position.

#### **Once inside an organisation:**

it is important to ensure that each employee can work in an environment suited to their needs. Small adjustments, such as adjustable seats and desks, and double screens can make a big difference to employees. And when it comes to higher risk jobs, prevention and a robust system of monitoring and evaluating risk is vital.



→ GUIDE 03



# Personality traits: judgements and assumptions





## SURPRISING EVIDENCE

- ⇒ **In a 2015 UK-wide attitude survey, over half of respondents thought that most overweight people could lose weight if they tried. (7) This indicates a widespread perception in society that lack of will power is a key issue for people living with overweight or obesity.**

This is not true. We know that obesity is complex and involves multiple inter-related factors such as: an individual's biology (genetics, hormones, gut microbiome), their environment (access to physical activity and food), social and economic inequalities, employment and stress and/or mental health. (6)



**“Take nothing on its looks; take everything on evidence. There’s no better rule.”**

*Charles Dickens,  
Writer*



## UNDERSTANDING JUDGEMENTS AND ASSUMPTIONS

### Major and deep-rooted prejudices and stigma can influence and interfere with staff recruitment.

Beliefs and opinions around obesity are overwhelmingly negative. Existing public consensus suggests that someone living with obesity lacks self-control, and so is personally accountable. **This attitude reinforces stereotypes that people living with obesity are lazy and have no will power.**

→ These negative characteristics contradict what employers are looking for in new applicants hoping to join their team.

### Individuals have unique personalities: personality traits such as determination and resilience are associated with a person's unique lived experiences and personal journeys.

Personality is influenced by family, school, relationships, and lived experience. **A person's personality cannot be predicted or determined by their physical appearance.** Such personality-based assumptions are unhelpful and not relevant.



*Halfway through a job interview, a recruitment consultant spelled it out: 'You're not compatible with the image we want to portray of the company.'*

**Gabrielle Deydier, Author**  
*'On ne naît pas grosse' (One Isn't Born Fat)*  
Extract from an interview published in the *Guardian* (2017)



### Shared values and teamwork are the driving forces of organisations.

It seems obvious, but whatever their weight, the **employees of a company are driven by common values; they share the same objectives and take pride in being part of a big organisation. An organisation that promotes inclusive values aligned with employee and societal values can generate meaningful change.**





## CASE STUDY

Lesley, HR worker



“In my career I’ve experienced colleagues policing my food intake – especially the ‘wrong’ things. I was working in a different office for a while and my colleagues appeared bothered that I wasn’t munching on a celery stick but instead, enjoying a bar of chocolate. **And yet it was acceptable for them to go out of the office twice a day for a quick cigarette...**”



## THE KEYS TO TAKE ACTION



**Recognise that biases related to physical appearances exist in the recruitment process and try to overcome them.**

- Because recruiters have restricted insight into the knowledge and skills of applicants, they are likely to be influenced by biases relating to physical appearance, which may affect how they assess an applicant’s capability during the interview stage. It is good practice to implement interview processes that promote objectivity such as a scoring system to compare an applicant’s score with other interview panel members after an interview.
- Employers should think carefully about their own attitudes and beliefs and try to distance themselves from any prejudices or judgements based upon physical appearance. After an interview, employers should take the time to think objectively about the applicant’s skills and reflect carefully on their interview responses.
- Employers should consider what they are looking for via the interview process. A suitable, qualified person, able to fit into a team? An individual living with overweight or obesity is just as likely as anyone to meet these criteria!

**Promote a trustworthy work environment and culture that enables individuals to thrive.**

- If people, especially those affected by weight-based stigma, appear to be more withdrawn or reserved in interviews, this shouldn’t be viewed as a reflection of their personality, which will be expressed when they feel confident.
- Finally, it’s important to remember that in any organisation – just as in any society – diversity contributes to a team’s skills, experience, and expertise.



→ GUIDE 04



# Encouraging diversity within teams: an asset for organisations





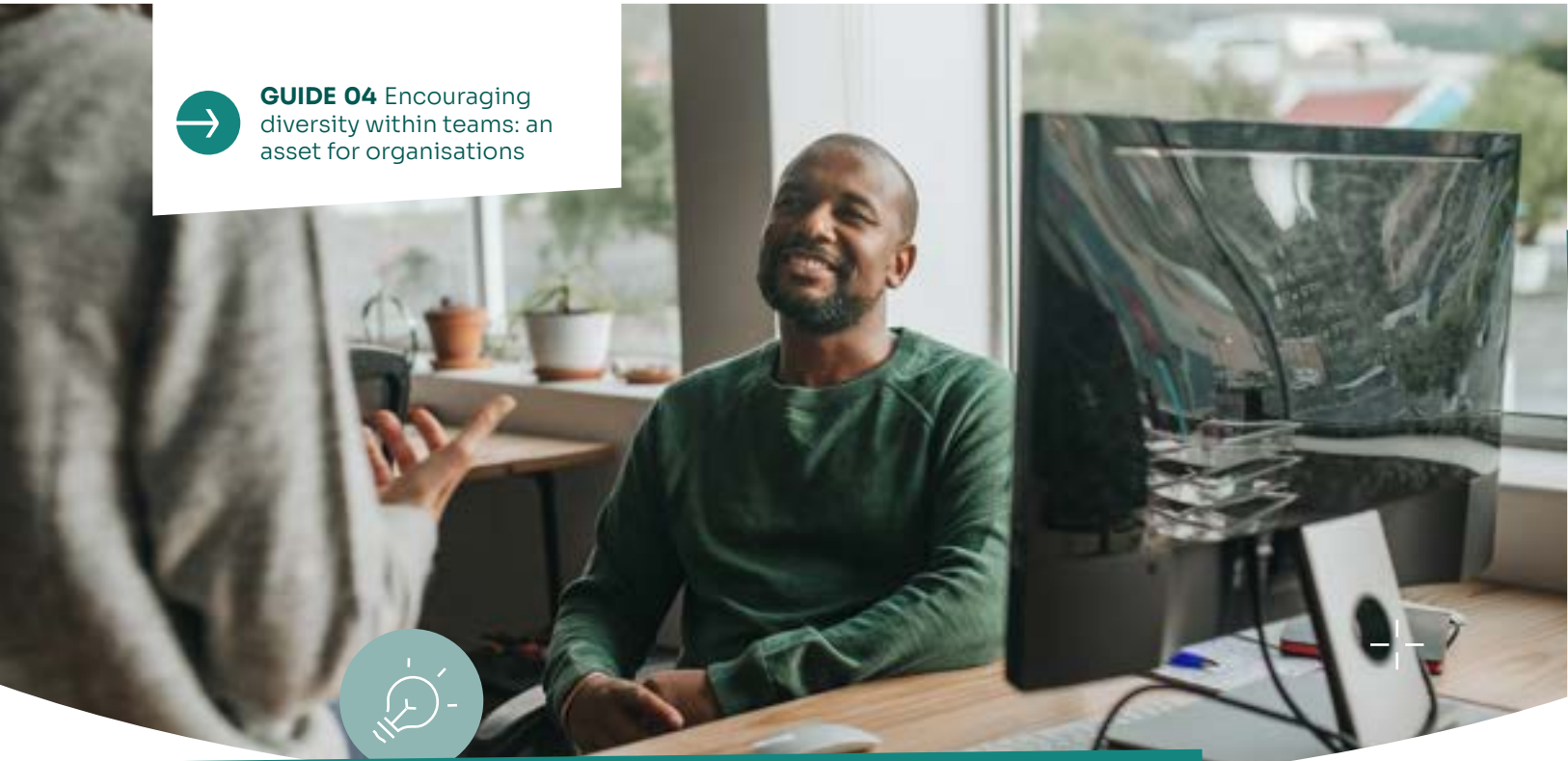
## SURPRISING EVIDENCE

- ⇒ Organisations with **inclusive teams make better business decisions 87% of the time, twice as fast, with half the meetings** – and decisions executed by these teams deliver 60% better results. (15)



**“I can tell you, without diversity, creativity remains stagnant”**

*Edward Enniful,  
Editor-in-chief of British Vogue*



## UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY

**Society and societal norms are constantly evolving. Any form of discrimination in society is wholly unacceptable.**

Today, a large proportion of the working population is affected by overweight and obesity. At the same time, **the emergence of the 'body positive' movement reflects an evolving society in which there is a desire for much greater diversity and representation, and an accompanying narrative that individuals must be comfortable with who they are.**

Subsequently

- There must be more commentary and testimonies from individuals with lived experience of weight-based stigma.
- There should be more plus-sized representation in mainstream media.



**Diversity: a performance booster.**

**An inclusive organisation is more innovative, and creative. Diversity allows organisations to break away from norms by offering a greater breadth of perspectives and experience.**



***“Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of our civilisation”***

**Mahatma Gandhi, Indian political activist**

**A commitment to inclusivity makes organisations attractive places to work and promotes stability within teams.**



Organisations that employ people from a variety of backgrounds have a reputation for being good employers. Diverse organisations harness a **spirit of kindness towards others and a culture of openness, which enable a constructive work environment and positive social atmosphere.** A commitment to inclusion and diversity promotes an organisation's brand and reputation; applicants are attracted to organisations that recognise societal issues and the reality faced by employees – this can make recruiting new staff much easier. Inclusion and diversity enable organisations to benefit from improved employee fulfilment and a deeper commitment by employees to organisations.



## CASE STUDY

Adil, Diversity & Inclusion Advisor

“People living with obesity that we support have often been on complex journeys and suffered stigmatisation along the way. Subsequently, once on-board, these employees demonstrate increased motivation having finally found stability – and a job where they feel good – which contributes to lower staff turnover.”

## THE KEYS TO TAKE ACTION

**Address the issue, train, and educate managers to challenge any appearance-based conscious or sub-conscious biases.**

Recognising that these biases exist in the first place is essential to fight against them in addition to adhering to robust and best practice employee recruitment and managerial practices. For external help and independent support, organisations such as Acas offer both UK-based employees and employers free, impartial advice on workplace rights, rules, and best practice as well as training and support.

**Promote an inclusive working environment.**

Make sure that each employee feels at ease in the company, and feels confident, protected, and included.



### A LITTLE TIP

**Set up a “buddy” system to make it easier for all employees to integrate.**

Designate a senior employee to support a newcomer to an organisation to make it easier for them to settle into their new team.

→ GUIDE 05



# Progression and promotion opportunities: including employees living with obesity and overweight





## SURPRISING EVIDENCE

- ⇒ People living with overweight/obesity are less represented in more senior workplace positions.

**The evidence shows that a pay disparity exists – employees living with overweight/obesity receive reduced wages even after all other factors are taken into account. (16)**

Discriminatory practices have been documented in relation to progression and promotion opportunities for people living with obesity.

Common stereotypical beliefs about employees living with obesity being ‘lazy’ and ‘lacking self-control’ are still prevalent. (16)

In a 2015 UK-wide attitudes survey, 75% of respondents believed that a person who is not very overweight would be more likely to be offered an office manager’s job than someone living with overweight/obesity. (7)

his figure challenges the common misconception that overweight adults or those living with obesity have compromised physical capacity.



**You should never view your challenges as a disadvantage. Instead, it’s important for you to understand that your experience facing and overcoming adversity is actually one of your biggest advantages”**

*Michelle Obama,  
Former First Lady of the United States*



**GUIDE 05** Progression and promotion opportunities: including employees living with obesity and overweight



## UNDERSTANDING PROGRESSION AND PROMOTION



### Bias and first impressions

The career of any individual (especially managers and executives) depends a lot on their earlier jobs, where **physical appearance and the ability to impress visually** may have played a big role.

Persistent negative personality traits that are associated with people living with obesity/overweight may prevent individuals from moving into positions of responsibility because they conflict with the image people have of a 'leader'. Furthermore, occupations deemed more acceptable for overweight people are usually lower paid.



**Recent evidence suggests that if a woman was a stone heavier (6.3kg) for no other reason than her genetics, this would result in an income reduction of £1,500 per year than a comparable woman of the same height who was a stone lighter. (17)**

**The issue is reinforced by inadequate appraisal systems, which are generally insufficient for tackling appearance-based bias.**

### A lack of representation and inclusion in business and society.

A lack of representation is a barrier to career progression and subsequently people living with obesity/overweight tend to earn lower salaries, and receive pay rises less frequently.



**“Getting hired is just the first step. The next step is getting promoted within an organisation. Someone living with obesity is less likely to hold a position of responsibility if they are considered unable to control their weight. Being in control of your body and your appearance is synonymous with power.”**

Laura, workplace eyewitness

It is the consequences of repeated challenges, failures, and injustices due to weight-based stigma that can make individuals lose confidence on their career path.



## CASE STUDY

### Bruno, Operations Manager

“After obtaining a business degree and specialising in finance from a prestigious school, I had difficulty finding a job. My CV and covering letter enabled me to reach several interview stages, following which I never heard anything back.

I felt upset that my ability was questioned because of my weight.

I ended up applying for a position as a financial assistant in the company where I work today. I quickly demonstrated my skills and abilities, which allowed me to progress within the company, and to be given greater responsibility.

I am now very proud to be one of the youngest operations managers in my company!”



## ORGANISATIONS MUST BE AGENTS OF CHANGE

### Diversity: a driver of economic performance

**Organisations with inclusive teams make better business decisions 87% of the time, twice as fast, and deliver 60% better results. (15)**

### Organisations must promote a strong message to change society

Physical appearances should not influence or affect an individual’s career development. **Organisations must promote diversity and be major players in promoting inclusivity within teams – at all levels.**

## TAKING ACTION



### Let the skills speak for themselves!

- Enhance the objectivity of job descriptions and appraisal systems so that they evaluate skills during interviews and reviews.
- Promote transparency by defining the necessary steps to access higher positions within an organisation, and/or how to take on more responsibility – and share this information with all employees.
- Implement a robust performance review process, such as a scoring system.
- Encourage managers to undertake equality and diversity training.



→ GUIDE 06 <sup>+</sup>



# Experiencing or observing weight-based stigmatisation or discrimination: how to take action





## UNDERSTANDING STIGMATISATION

**Stigmatisation may result in discrimination and involves:**

- An individual being treated less favourably
- Because of a protected characteristic
- In an area protected from discrimination by law (at work, in education, when using public services etc.)

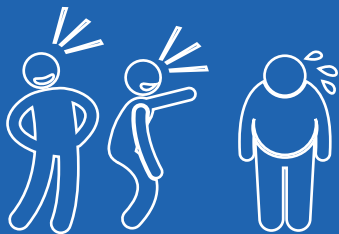
Negative comments about an individual's physical appearance are extremely harmful, and have a negative impact on victims, organisations, and trust within teams.

## TAKING ACTION



**If an individual notices mockery, negative and/or inappropriate comments, stigmatisation, or discrimination, it is important to rectify the problem immediately.**

- Make it clear that criticising someone's physical appearance and/or physical attributes is utterly unacceptable, and in conflict with the organisation's values.
- Reaffirm the values of the organisation.
- Emphasise that individuals are recruited for their skills, knowledge, and experience.
- Encourage team discussions to resolve the issue collaboratively and quickly.



**Listed below are several organisations that can assist and support individuals who experience or observe weight-based stigmatisation or discrimination.**

### **Acas, the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service.**

Acas is an independent public body that receives funding from the government and works with millions of employers and employees every year to improve workplace relationships. Acas offers specific advice on discrimination, bullying, and harassment.

<https://www.acas.org.uk/discrimination-and-the-law>



### **Citizens Advice**

Citizens Advice is an independent organisation specialising in confidential information and impartial advice to assist people with legal, debt, consumer, housing, and other problems in the UK including specific advice on dealing with discrimination at work.

<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/work/discrimination-at-work/discrimination-at-work/>

**citizens  
advice**



Listed below are several organisations that can assist and support individuals who experience or observe weight-based stigmatisation or discrimination.



### **Institute for Employment Studies**

IES is a leading independent centre for research and evidence-based consultancy, which provide insights on employment and human resource management topics to help improve policy and practice. Their website offers online access to resources on the issues of obesity and employment.

[https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/publications?search=OBESITY&search\\_resources=1#results](https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/publications?search=OBESITY&search_resources=1#results)

#### **Obesity and Work**

Challenging stigma and discrimination

#### **Obesity stigma at work**

Improving inclusion and productivity

#### **Living and working with obesity**

Are employers playing their part?

#### **Webinar:**

Obesity Stigma at Work: Improving Inclusion & Productivity



Listed below are several organisations that can assist and support individuals who experience or observe weight-based stigmatisation or discrimination.

### Health and Safety Executive

The Health and Safety Executive is a UK government agency responsible for the encouragement, regulation and enforcement of workplace health, safety, and welfare, and for research into occupational risks in Great Britain.



<https://www.hse.gov.uk/index.htm>

### CIPD

The professional body for experts in people at work. For more than 100 years, CIPD has been championing better work and working lives by setting professional standards for HR and people development, as well as driving positive change in the world of work.



<https://www.cipd.co.uk/#gref>

### TUC

The Trades Union Congress is a national trade union centre, a federation of trade unions in England and Wales, representing the majority of trade unions. The TUC exists to make the working world a better place for everyone and offers information on employee rights and on what you can do if you think you're being discriminated against.



<https://www.tuc.org.uk/workplace-guidance/equality-and-discrimination>

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