

# Why the Government must drop its plan to make calorie labels mandatory

## Introduction

This document outlines Beat's key concerns in response to the Government's proposed legislation that will require restaurants, take-aways and cafes with 250 or more employees to calorie label the food they sell.

Beat supports the Government's aim to address obesity; however we believe that it is crucial to do this through an evidence-based approach that recognises the complexity of obesity and does not harm people with eating disorders or those at risk of developing an eating disorder.

We strongly urge the Government not to mandate calorie labelling on menus.

## Recommendations

- **The Government should not mandate calorie labelling on menus.**
- **The Government should take an integrated public health approach to obesity and eating disorders.**
- **The Government should consult with experts from the field of eating disorders, including people with lived experience, in all campaigns and legislation to address obesity.**

**Counting calories has been almost deadly for me and ruined my life.**

**Respondent to Beat Survey**

## Mandatory calorie labelling on menus would harm people with eating disorders

Introducing mandatory calorie labelling on menus would have a negative impact on people with an eating disorder.

**Research** has found that when making hypothetical food choices from a menu that includes a calorie count, individuals with anorexia and bulimia are more likely to order food with significantly fewer calories, whereas people with binge eating disorder are more likely to order food with significantly more calories. These findings highlight the potential for this legislation to exacerbate the disordered thoughts and behaviours of people with eating disorders, and the potential for harm.

The research findings also imply that those with eating disorder symptoms are potentially likely to avoid those restaurants with calorie labelling on menus, limiting choices for those who may already struggle to find foods they feel able to eat.

Additional research has found that using menu labels to limit calories was related to binge eating among women and was associated with more weight-related concerns, dieting, and unhealthy weight-control behaviors among both women and men.



In November 2020 Beat conducted a survey on calorie labelling on menus. Of the 1,118 people who took part, 95% had either experienced an eating disorder themselves or supported someone who had. The survey found that:

- **93% of respondents thought that the introduction of calorie labelling on menus would be 'negative', or 'very negative' for people with eating disorders.**
- **84% of respondents did not think that calorie labelling on menus could be introduced without posing risks to people with eating disorders.**

Survey respondents raised concerns that calorie labels have the potential to:

- Encourage an obsession with calories and counting calories, which is a common trait for people with eating disorders.
- Increase anxiety and distress for people with eating disorders when in restaurants, and even make it difficult for some people with eating disorders to eat out in public.
- Hinder an individual's recovery, as the very practice of selecting food and eating in public can be part of the treatment and recovery pathway for those with eating disorders.

The survey responses also highlighted that it is difficult to make calorie counts on menus accurate and that calorie labels provide limited information about the nutritional value of a meal.



The Government recently announced their plans to develop and test a "**Mental Health Impact Assessment**" for all new policies and in the **Mental Health and Wellbeing Recovery Action Plan** they committed to working with stakeholders "to explore the development of a policy tool which allows policymakers to examine the impact of their proposals on mental health." As far as Beat is aware there has been no such assessment for this proposed legislation.

## These measures are based on limited evidence

There is limited evidence to suggest that this legislation would have its intended outcome. A **Cochrane review** found that there is only a small body of low-quality evidence supporting the idea that calorie counts on menus lead to a reduction in calories purchased. Although a **more recent study** found that calorie labelling in US fast food restaurants was associated with a 4% reduction in calories per order, this reduction diminished over one year of follow-up, suggesting any small differences that may occur are not maintained.

While there is limited evidence that calorie labelling on menus will support the public to lose weight, there is convincing evidence that it will have negative consequences on people with eating disorders.



**If there is a menu with calorie labelling I will feel compelled to look at it. I would feel embarrassed asking for a different menu.**

**Respondent to Beat Survey**

## Why permitting businesses to provide a menu without calorie information is not enough

In its draft Statutory Instrument, the Government permits restaurants to provide menus without calorie labels at the express request of a customer. It is clear, however, that this does not go far enough in preventing harm to people with eating disorders. Firstly, offering a menu without

calorie labelling will not be mandatory, meaning that people with eating disorders will not necessarily be able to avoid calorie labels. Secondly, as survey respondents highlighted, the secretive and complex nature of eating disorders may prevent individuals from requesting the menu without calorie labelling.

## The need for a different approach

**Experts from the field of eating disorders** have highlighted the need to take an integrated public health approach to obesity and eating disorders, which acknowledge the complexities of both eating disorders and obesity and the relationship between the two. Many people with eating disorders or other mental health conditions are also living with obesity. Various studies have shown that **up to 30%** of people seeking weight management services would meet the diagnostic criteria for binge eating disorder. If such an approach is not taken, the Government risks not only being ineffective, but also harming vulnerable people, including the people whom this legislation has been designed to support.

Beat recognises that calorie information on menus may be beneficial for those with certain health conditions. To this, we fully support increased public education on nutrition and health. However, we do not believe that adding mandatory calorie labelling to menus fits in with this aim; rather, it takes a reductionist approach to nutrition.

The Government should take a different approach to addressing obesity and should consult experts from the fields of weight management and eating disorders, including experts with lived experience, to develop this.

## About eating disorders

Eating disorders are **serious mental illnesses**. Around **1.25 million people** in the UK have an eating disorder. The **NHS Health Survey for England 2019** found that 16% of adults screened positive for a possible eating disorder, up from 6% in 2007. Eating disorders affect people of any age, gender, ethnicity or background. They have major impacts on individuals, families, the NHS, social care and wider society.

Types of eating disorders include binge eating disorder, bulimia, anorexia, other specified feeding or eating disorder and avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder. Eating disorders have **high mortality rates**, with anorexia having the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, and the mortality rates of bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder and other eating disorders also being high. One in six of those ever affected by binge eating disorder attempts suicide. People with eating disorders typically develop severe physical health problems and overall **quality of life** has been estimated to be as low as in symptomatic coronary heart disease or severe depression. Without early intervention, many become unable to participate in education or employment. Recovery from an eating disorder is possible. Access to the right treatment and support is life changing and **early intervention** provides the best chance for recovery.

It's going to affect so many people and instead of helping, will only make the mental health crisis worse.

Respondent to Beat Survey

COVID-19 and the resulting necessary lockdown restrictions are having **profound, negative impacts** on people affected by eating disorders. The referrals for children and young people to community eating disorder services in England were **rising significantly** before the pandemic. Now they are **rising even faster**, with **a third more young people starting treatment in 2020/21** than in 2019/20. However, the number waiting for treatment has continued to grow, with seven times more children and young people assessed as in urgent need still waiting to start treatment at the end of March 2021, compared to the number at the end of March 2020. Referrals for adults have also **increased**, although the full extent of this is unclear due to limited data being published.

## About Beat

Beat is the UK's eating disorder charity. We exist to end the pain and suffering caused by eating disorders, and we are here to help anyone affected by these serious mental illnesses.

We provide information and support through services such as Helplines, online support groups, and HelpFinder, an online directory of support services.

We provide expert training and resources to health and social care professionals places of work and education, and carers, and we support and encourage research into eating disorders.

## Beat's Helpline and other support services

Beat provides [Helplines](#) and [online services](#) for adults and young people offering support and information about eating disorders. Our services are confidential and free to use.

Individuals contacting our Helpline speak to trained advisors who are experienced in listening and talking to people affected by eating disorders. Anyone affected by an eating disorder can call, email or contact Beat's Helpline Advisors via one-to-one webchat.

Adult Helpline: 0808 801 0677

[help@beateatingdisorders.org.uk](mailto:help@beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

Studentline: 0808 801 0811

[studentline@beateatingdisorders.org.uk](mailto:studentline@beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

Youthline: 0808 801 0711

[fyp@beateatingdisorders.org.uk](mailto:fyp@beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

Our Helplines are open 365 days a year from 9am – 8pm during the week, and 4pm – 8pm on weekends and bank holidays.

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