



Weight Management Services Report

Executive Summary

healthwatch
Wakefield

Executive summary

“I’m not ashamed of my weight, but I do find it emotional.”

For many people their weight is a deeply personal matter that affects both their mental and physical health. Obesity stigma has been, and continues to be, common, and recent high profile discussions around weight loss medications only add further complexity to the conversation.

Any support aimed at helping with weight needs to be sensitive to different cultures so that it can be delivered in a way that reaches people at the right time, with the right message, and in the right way, to be most helpful.

This report uses the experiences of people from the district to help illustrate the following:

- What are people’s relationships with weight?
- What are people’s experiences of seeking support, and what leads them to seek support?
- What are the obstacles for engaging with support offers available in the district? What makes it easier for people?

We then used the insights gathered to formulate our recommendations which we believe will help to increase awareness and uptake of the available Public Health funded services.

Relationships with weight

“I want to feel healthier, and I want to have more energy.”

People told us that they seek support services for weight management not only for weight loss but also for health, energy, mood, and habit improvements. People told us that services focused on health and wellbeing were more likely to engage, they also felt that they would be more likely to stick to new habits even after they met their target weight.

“Diets often feel like a punishment.”

People recognised that managing food intake is key to controlling weight, but they found it restrictive and negative. When the focus is only on food, it misses the opportunity to also increase physical activity, which was more effective and led to lasting changes. Support framed positively, focusing on building new habits rather than just stopping old ones, was also better received and sustained.

“I guess I feel like it’s my fault I’m overweight... it’s on me to sort it out myself.”

Participants felt alone in managing their weight, making it harder to change habits and build new relationships with food. A social aspect was key to effective services, with programmes like Slimming World and exercise activities where people could connect with others facing similar challenges being particularly popular.

Experiences of seeking support

“There’s not really time for myself, so I never think about my health. I feel like I am just living to get through each week.”

People told us they felt that addressing their weight would require too much time, focus, and energy, and they were also concerned about the cost of making changes. It’s important that support services emphasise that weight management doesn’t have to be a big, time consuming task.

“I didn’t bother to ask as I didn’t feel big enough.”

Many participants had never considered discussing their weight with healthcare professionals, and when they did, the clinician often didn’t bring it up unless it was directly related to another health issue. There was also confusion about what support was available and who could access it, with some being turned away after referrals. People are more likely to seek help if they understand the process and what to expect, so unclear information can delay help seeking.

Blockers and enablers

“If someone told me what I could do, I’d probably give it a try.”

Some people were unsure about what they should be doing and valued having a trusted person to guide them. For those with additional health issues they may also be unsure about what is safe for them to do. Many people also turned to social media and video sites for health and weight content, presenting an opportunity to explore new ways to present and develop local services.

“I don’t use it because I don’t enjoy it.”

Many people highlighted what made them disengage. Several talked about needing a sense of enjoyment. Others talked about needing services to be dynamic. Some cited the need for positive challenge, to feel like they are making progress, for example by having achievements and ways to mark success.

Several of the most highly rated support offers made use of these aspects. For example, coordinated events outside and Slimming World sessions which were holding to account and praising progress were key to driving initial and follow up attendances.

“90% of people there have the same desire to lose weight as you, everyone is supportive.”

Culture also plays a key role. When people feel supported and encouraged by the group, they are more likely to keep attending. However, a negative focus can lead to disengagement. Services should emphasise celebrating positive changes in weight, as people prefer praise over criticism.

Final thoughts

People in Wakefield District, like elsewhere, are concerned about their weight and seek effective support to manage it. Wakefield Council offers a range of Public Health services that have helped people achieve lasting success. However, challenges remain, such as people accessing services too late or being referred to the wrong one.

This report explores the reasons behind these issues and provides three practical, achievable recommendations within a limited budget and timeframe.

Summary and recommendations

Having listened intently to the voice of people from across Wakefield District we found that:

1. Weight management is an emotionally charged issue, but generally people do want to change their habits to address weight.
2. Restrictive initiatives do not seem to appeal or last as well as positive, additive and reinforcing ones.
 - A social aspect was highlighted as being important to break through the isolation of feeling overweight.
 - Support can feel like an additional pressure, when money and time resources are already stretched, but some initiatives can feel like they release time or make better use of existing resources.
 - There is uncertainty about who to ask, what they will say and what they can access even once they have been sent to a service. This ambiguity saps willingness and enthusiasm to engage.
 - There are trusted people who can make or break perceptions about the services available, and if the right people encourage the service this will drive engagement and increase uptake.
 - Some people have additional needs and concerns and having trustworthy guidance on what is and isn't appropriate or safe is vital.

- Enjoyment and positive challenge are important for driving uptake and ongoing engagement.
- Culture eats strategy – the best service in the world will only succeed if the culture is right, and this is true for weight management services.

Our simple recommendations, based on the above insights are:

1. Deliver a campaign to drive understanding of the available offers, in particular highlighting how they are quick, easy, social and support health and wellbeing. Make it clear what people can expect and who is eligible from the beginning. A good tool to consider using is the [EAST approach developed by the Behavioural Insights Team](#).
2. Focus on consistency of messaging and how referrers and sign posters to your service can simply inform and advise potential clients. This may be adding the services to the shared referral pathway for Primary Care, or a short script that can be given to referrers.
3. Build up positive peer networks across funded weight management services and consider opportunities to develop positive culture and practice that drives increased engagement and improved outcomes for clients.

Healthwatch Wakefield is committed to being a partner in addressing health and social care challenges in the district. We hope this report offers useful insights and supports the development of solutions. We also look forward to being involved in future service changes, whether as a partner, critical friend, or a route to gather feedback from clients and the public. If you'd like to discuss how Healthwatch Wakefield can support your next initiative, please reach out – we'd love to collaborate!

Lewis Smith-Connell

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The full report can be found on the Healthwatch Wakefield website.

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