

Health first

Communicating about health and obesity in Scotland

Publication date: 2 March 2023

A guide created by





Translations



Easy read



BSL



Audio




Large print



Braille

Translations and other formats are available on request at:

 phs.otherformats@phs.scot

 0131 314 5300

Public Health Scotland is Scotland's national agency for improving and protecting the health and wellbeing of Scotland's people.

© Public Health Scotland 2023. Illustrations © Impact on Urban Health.

OGL

This publication is licensed for re-use under the [Open Government Licence v3.0](#).

For more information, visit www.publichealthscotland.scot/ogl



www.publichealthscotland.scot

About FrameWorks UK

This guide was written by FrameWorks UK for Public Health Scotland.

FrameWorks UK is a not-for-profit communications research organisation. It works with charities, foundations and other mission-driven organisations to communicate about social issues.

FrameWorks UK is the sister organisation of the FrameWorks Institute in the US. Its research shows how people understand social issues. It uses this knowledge to develop and test strategic communications to help organisations create change.

'Change the story. Change the world.' Learn more at frameworksuk.org

Contents

About FrameWorks UK	1
Introduction	3
About this guide	4
What is framing and how can it help?	5
Terminology	5
Recommendations for talking about health and obesity	6
Lead with health	6
Show how what surrounds us shapes us	7
Use the power of explanation	10
Further tips and guidance	13
Use numbers to strengthen your story, not to tell it	13
Beware of myth-busting	13
Focus on addressing challenges in places, not among groups of people	14
Supporting your story with images	15
Further reading	16

Introduction

How we communicate about health and obesity matters. Some of the main ways that people think about health and obesity lead to a narrow focus on individual-level solutions.

- People see obesity as the fault of individuals due to a lack of willpower. This perception can lead to blame, and a belief that people simply need to ‘eat less and move more’.
- The focus on individual responsibility also leads to stigma and othering – othering is a sense that this is other people’s problem to solve, not something we all have a stake in.
- People also tend to see obesity as an unfortunate and inevitable part of modern life, and therefore insolvable.

Communications about health and obesity often inadvertently trigger and reinforce these unhelpful mindsets. We need to tell a new story which focuses on the wider context beyond individuals, and shows how what surrounds us shapes us. In doing so, we can build understanding and support for the wider changes that will enable everyone to thrive and be healthy in Scotland.

Figure 1: Illustration of how the wider context impacts food options



Reproduced with permission from Impact on Urban Health, created as part of their **reframing children's health work**.

About this guide

This guide is for anyone communicating about health and obesity in Scotland. It provides practical tips and advice to help build understanding, reduce stigma and drive action on improving health.

This guide brings together recommendations from FrameWorks' research into health and obesity, the wider determinants of health and related issues such as poverty.

More information on why we need a new approach to communicating about health and obesity, detailed research findings and methods can be found in the strategic briefing: **Changing the childhood obesity conversation to improve children's health**.

What is framing and how can it help?

Framing is the choices we make about what ideas we share and how we share them. This includes what we choose to emphasise, how we explain things and what we leave unsaid. Framing can help us side-step the challenging beliefs people hold and unlock new ways of thinking about social issues.

FrameWorks' research reveals how people understand social issues – the mindsets or 'mental shortcuts' which guide their thinking. It tells us not only what they think, but why they think it. We use this evidence to develop and test strategic communications, so we can recommend how to frame different social issues and help create change.

Terminology

There is considerable debate about the most appropriate language to describe weight. There are different opinions on this and no 'one term fits all'. FrameWorks UK research has not yet tested specific terminology, but what is most important is that we lead with the idea of health first.

To find out more about what language and terminology to use when talking about weight, visit [Public Health Scotland's challenging weight stigma learning hub](#).

Recommendations for talking about health and obesity

Lead with health

Talking about health early in our communications inspires support for solutions and avoids triggering stigma and fatalism. Fatalism is the idea that a problem is too big and cannot be solved.

Making the conversation about more than weight and obesity leads people to focus on the needs that we all have in common, instead of homing in on the perceived otherness of people with higher weight. 'Health' also leads people away from focusing purely on body shape.

However, we should not avoid mentioning obesity or weight altogether. Research showed this can have the opposite effect and make people suspicious about the communication. It makes people feel like they are being manipulated, or the 'real' issue is being avoided.

What you can do

- **Set the scene with health**, before mentioning obesity or weight.
- **Make the issue about improving health** – lead with what needs to be improved and created rather than dealt with.
- **Do not avoid mentioning obesity or weight completely** – just do not start the conversation with them.

Table 1: How you can do it

Instead of	Try	Why
‘Childhood obesity: achieving the ambition. Can we halve childhood obesity by 2030?’	‘Childhood health: achieving the ambition. Can we halve childhood obesity by 2030?’	What we say first benefits from the primacy effect: we are more likely to recall it later, and it shapes how we interpret what follows. So, even in a short headline and subheading, like this example, leading with health first can have an impact
‘Tackling obesity has never been more important to keep the population healthy’	‘Improving our population’s health by ensuring everyone can get affordable, healthy food has never been more important’	Leading with health and how we can improve it focuses the conversation on solutions and what we all have in common

Show how what surrounds us shapes us

When we highlight circumstances and environments, and explain how these shape our health, we show that wider changes, beyond solutions at an individual level, are necessary. Identifying how context has an impact activates a powerful sense of collective responsibility. It also helps people to understand the role that inequalities play in our health, without stigmatising groups of people.

Metaphors can be an effective way to explain this context, as they can be used to compare complex concepts to something more immediate and easily understood.

Two metaphors, the rivers metaphor and the stage metaphor, were tested successfully with members of the public. They were effective for showing how what surrounds us shapes us, leading to a more expansive understanding of the problem and the possible solutions.

The rivers metaphor

Explain the roles played by the built environment, the food system and commercial practices by comparing them to an imbalanced system of rivers.

We can use this metaphor in lots of different ways using language like 'flood', 'awash', 'over-flowing', 'saturated', 'tide', 'flow', 'upstream', 'downstream'. But avoid triggering fatalism by taking the metaphor too far. Avoid ideas like 'a tsunami' or 'drowning'.

Example:

'To improve health in Scotland, we need to increase the flow of affordable, healthy food options. Right now, on our high streets, the floodgates of unhealthy food options are open wide, while there's often only a trickle of healthy options.'

Figure 2: Illustration of the rivers metaphor



Reproduced with permission from Impact on Urban Health, created as part of their **reframing children's health work**.

The stage metaphor

When talking about children's health specifically, we can use the metaphor of unhealthy food being put 'centre stage' via advertising. This image helps to explain how marketing practices influence children's taste for high-sugar, high-fat, calorie-dense foods.

Use words like 'spotlight', 'star' and 'leading role' to talk about unhealthy food and how healthy food is pushed into the background.

Example:

'Food companies are putting unhealthy food in the spotlight – giving it a starring role in the adverts children see. Meanwhile, healthy food is pushed offstage.'

Figure 3: Illustration of the stage metaphor



Reproduced with permission from Impact on Urban Health, created as part of their **reframing children's health work**.

- **Connect opportunities to be healthy with environments** where people spend their time, for example our high streets, workplaces and schools.
- **Talk about 'options' and 'opportunities'** instead of 'choices', which activates a narrow focus on individuals.
- **Use the metaphor of 'rivers' or 'the stage'** to make complex concepts more immediate.

Table 2: How you can do it

Instead of	Try	Why?
'Our delivery plan sets out how we will work with partners in the public and private sector to help people make healthier choices about food'	'Our delivery plan sets out how we will work with partners in the public and private sector to put healthy food options in reach'	The idea of putting options in reach signals that the environment around us plays a role in our health, and shifts the focus away from individual choice and a narrower range of solutions
'We must take action to reduce sugar and high-calorie food'	'We must take action to stem the tide of unhealthy food'	The rivers metaphor paints a richer, more immediate picture of what we need to change

Use the power of explanation

How we explain a problem sets up our solutions to it. By explaining rather than just asserting something to be true, we can ensure we build the understanding we want to. It is like showing our workings, rather than just expecting people to get to the same answer.

We know people tend to think about obesity as the fault of individuals and, as a result, are limited to only thinking about solutions such as education. But by leading

people step-by-step through problems and solutions, we can open understanding of the need for wider changes to our systems and environment.

What you can do

- **Use a step-by-step explanation.** This means simply and explicitly making the connection between causes and outcomes. Use language like 'because', 'so', and 'as a result' to make the connections.
- **Go further than talking about prevalence.** Explain the factors that shape our health, and what can be done. People already understand that obesity is an issue, and prevalence figures alone will only make fatalism worse rather than build understanding. We need to tell a complete story.
- **Explicitly talk about solutions** to emphasise that change is possible, not just necessary.
- **Avoid complex, expert terms** like 'the food environment', 'obesogenic environment' and 'food insecurity'. Instead, bring these concepts to life by explaining them well.

Table 3: How you can do it

Instead of	Try	Why?
<p>‘The physical, social and commercial environments that we live in have profound effects on our health’</p>	<p>‘When where we live is surrounded by fast-food outlets, and healthy options are out of reach, it makes it harder to eat well; this can lead to poorer health’</p>	<p>The first example just asserts the issue, whereas the second explains it. Cause and consequence are linked by the phrase ‘this can lead to’</p>
<p>‘Obesity is an issue of health inequality. The most deprived people in Scotland are suffering the greatest burden of obesity. Focusing on actions individuals can take only worsens the inequalities gap’</p>	<p>‘Too often, the most affordable food options are high in sugar and fat, and healthier affordable options are out of reach because of barriers such as limited public transport.</p> <p>Barriers like this lead to poorer health for people living in areas most affected by poverty. We need to address this inequality by making sure healthy, affordable options are always available where we live, work and learn’</p>	<p>The first example assumes that people will be able to make the connection between inequality and obesity. Without explaining how this happens, it risks leading to default ideas of individual choice and stigma.</p> <p>By unpicking an example that demonstrates inequality, we can build better understanding and talk about specific solutions to address inequalities</p>

Further tips and guidance

Use numbers to strengthen your story, not to tell it

Numbers alone do not build understanding. Without context and explanation, they can reinforce unhelpful mindsets and, in the case of prevalence stats, simply fuel the idea that the problem is ‘too big to solve’.

Ask yourself: what story is your number supporting?

- Is it helping to build understanding?
- Could it be fuelling fatalism?
- Is there another number which could better support your story? For example, a number which shows the impact of a solution?

Always check – if you took the numbers out, would your point still make sense?

Table 4: How you can do it

Instead of	Try
‘People in Scotland eat three times more sugar than is recommended’	‘With our supermarkets awash with sugary foods, and even household basics like pasta sauces and yoghurts containing sugar, we can see why people in Scotland are eating three times more sugar than is recommended’

Beware of myth-busting

Multiple studies have shown that myth-busting – repeating unproductive beliefs to counter them – tends to have the opposite effect. Even though our intention is to deny or counter the myths, the myth-busting tactic inadvertently reminds people of them, which activates and strengthens the false ideas.

Bypass myths entirely by focusing on the facts and explanations that you do want people to take away. And use the framing tips in this guide to state a positive case.

Table 5: How you can do it

Instead of	Try
‘People often think that being healthy is our own responsibility – that we just need to be less lazy and try harder to resist unhealthy food. But our health is actually impacted greatly by the options and opportunities available to us’	‘The options and opportunities available to us shape our health. From whether we can access healthy food in the shops where we live, to whether we have safe spaces to walk and exercise’

Focus on addressing challenges in places, not among groups of people

Talking about groups of people can lead to stigma; a focus on places helps avoid this. Talking about places draws attention to context and helps to show how what surrounds us shapes us. Places can be geographic or spaces where we spend our time, like work and school.

Table 6: How you can do it

Instead of	Try
‘We see a higher proportion of deprived people living with obesity compared to well-off people’	‘We see a higher proportion of people living with obesity in areas most affected by poverty compared to the least affected’

Supporting your story with images

Avoid

- Images that reinforce stigma and othering, such as photos cropped to remove people's faces.
- Only showing people who look overweight.
- Images of people eating unhealthy food – this reinforces the unhelpful mindset of individual choice.

Try to

- Show problems that surround us, such as high streets and supermarket shelves awash with unhealthy food options.
- Show solutions, such as spaces to exercise safely, areas for children to run and play, healthy, affordable food in our local shops, schools and more.
- Show a range of body shapes.

To find out more about how you can support your story with images, visit [Public Health Scotland's challenging weight stigma learning hub](#).

Further reading

FrameWorks UK. **Changing the childhood obesity conversation to improve children's health**; 2021.

FrameWorks UK. **Communicating about childhood obesity at the time of COVID**; 2022.

Public Health Scotland. **Challenging weight stigma learning hub**; 2022.

FrameWorks UK. **A matter of life and death: explaining the wider determinants of health in the UK**; 2022.

FrameWorks UK. **How to talk about poverty in the United Kingdom**; 2018.

FrameWorks UK. **The storytelling power of numbers**; 2015.