**Obesity and our environment – briefing**

Boroughs may wish to use the information in this briefing for the Great Weight Debate events and activities.

**Background:**

Most experts agree that childhood obesity is caused by a combination of environmental and social factors:

* + Widespread availability of cheap, high calorie food, for example fast food outlets and fizzy drinks
  + Larger portion sizes than in the past
  + Marketing of unhealthy foods to children
  + Confusion about what the healthiest food options are for their children amongst parents
  + Lack of understanding of what a ‘normal’ weight is for a child
  + City environment that discourages walking and cycling.

Whilst people make choices about what they eat, and what they feed their children, these choices are affected by the environment in which they live.

Therefore, although some of the things we need to do to reverse our childhood obesity epidemic involve people changing their lifestyles, most of them involve changing our environment. This will include making changes at a community level, at local authority level, a London-wide level and at a national level.

**What do we mean by an ‘abnormal environment’?**

We now live in an environment where it is easier to gain weight than lose it.  The behavioural and environmental influences around us make it more difficult to make healthy choices. For example, fast food outlets are the norm and some children may avoid active travel due to safety concerns.  Children and their families are being constantly bombarded with access to unhealthy food – including ‘hidden’ hazards that also exist such as high sugar in yogurt and unhealthy portions – for example the £1 chocolate bar the size of a book at the corner shop counter. As a consequence, obesity is a normal reaction to our abnormal environment. In addition, parents are living the mindset of society as a whole. A society failing to identify with what an unhealthy weight looks like. Overweight is now something we see every day. It has become so normalised that we think it is normal or, worse, we think it is healthy.

**Where does the evidence that we are living in an ‘abnormal environment’ come from?**

Many reports and research from Public Health England and others including the Lancet and World Health Organisation shows evidence that we are living in an abnormal environment which promotes more sugar consumption.  Public Health England published ‘[Sugar Reduction: evidence for action’](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sugar-reduction-from-evidence-into-action) in October 2015 which highlights the changes in our relationship with food over the last 30 to 40 years and the impact of the environment to over consumption.

**What about the role of individuals?**

The issue of childhood obesity is now so widespread that we have moved well beyond blame. Parents and carers in London are up against an abnormal environment in which children are being constantly bombarded with:

* access to unhealthy food – many ‘hidden’ hazards also exist such as high sugar in yogurt,
* unhealthy portions – take for example the £1 chocolate bar the size of a book at the corner shop counter
* the cost of healthy eating for parents on a tight budget
* concerns about playing outdoors because of fears of safety or because there is simply not enough access to green space.

In addition, parents are living the mindset of society as a whole. A society failing to identify with what an unhealthy weight looks like. Overweight is now something we see every day. It has become so normalised that we think it is normal or, worse, we think it is healthy. Some people associate a bit of extra weight with health. What they don’t realise is that their child may not be unwell now and may not be considered overweight but the facts show that if children carry extra weight at a very young age they are more likely to have weight issues in later life and they are more likely to get ill in later life. We all want our kids to thrive and it’s about providing education to help parents and carers be aware of the risk and more alert to the ways they can reduce them in spite of the environment.