

# Calorie Labelling on Menus

## Our key policy ask:

- The introduction of calorie labelling on menus is paused, at least until research is published on the impact of such measures on those living with eating disorders.

Beat recognises that nutritional information on menus may be beneficial for those with certain health conditions. We fully support increased public education on nutrition. 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, and risks causing harm to those living with eating disorders.

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

Research has found that mandatory calorie labelling is likely to exacerbate eating disorder symptoms, presenting a roadblock in recovery, and heightening the risk of relapse. A 2017 study found that, when calorie labelling was included on menus, participants with anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa ordered significantly fewer calories, and participants with binge eating disorder ordered significantly more calories for hypothetical meal choices. More broadly, the use of nutrition labelling has been associated with more unhealthy weight-control behaviours among both women and men.

In July 2022, Beat conducted a survey on calorie labelling on menus in Wales. Of the 120 respondents living in Wales who had either experienced an eating disorder themselves or supported someone who had:

- 98% of survey respondents feel that calorie labelling on menus would be negative or very negative for people living with eating disorders.
- Almost 7 out of 10 survey participants told us that, if calorie labelling was introduced in restaurants, they would be less likely to eat out.
- 96% of survey respondents do not support the introduction of mandatory calorie

labelling on menus in cafes, restaurants, and takeaways in Wales.

The survey respondents raised concerns about the effect of mandatory calorie labelling on children. Of those we surveyed:

- 96% told us they would not support the introduction of calories on menus in schools, colleges, early years, or childcare settings.
- 84% of survey respondents do not support the introduction of mandatory calorie labelling on menus specifically targeted at children.

## These measures are based on limited evidence

There is limited evidence to suggest that this legislation would have its intended outcome.

- A number of meta-analyses have found that adding calories on menus is unlikely to lead to significant changes in behaviour of the general population.
- **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 be effective for public health, there is convincing evidence that this legislation will be detrimental for people with eating disorders.

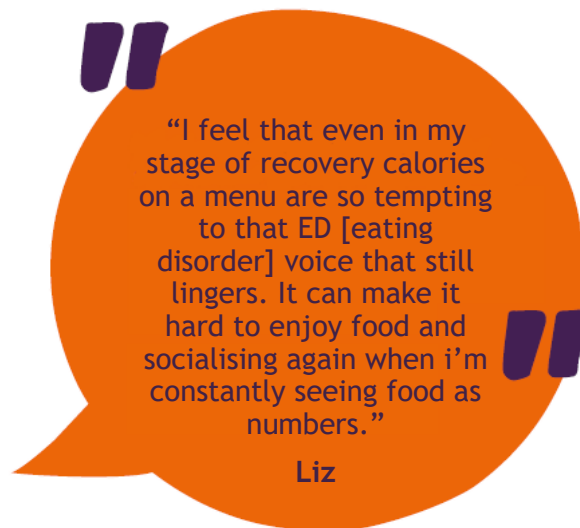
## The need for a different approach

Experts have highlighted the need to take an integrated public health approach, that considers the lived experience of people with eating disorders. Research has found that the occurrence of binge eating disorder can range between 16-52% amongst people enrolled in weight loss programs. If such an approach is not taken, the Welsh Government risks not only being ineffective, but also harming vulnerable people, including the people whom this legislation has been designed to support.

Following the introduction of mandatory calorie labelling in England, the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) announced a new grant to fund research into the impacts of 'Calories on menus' legislation on people with lived experience of eating disorders. This research will be critical to understanding the impact of this proposed policy.

The evidence already available to us suggests that calorie labelling on menus **harms** those with eating disorders and is likely **ineffective** in improving public health. As the forthcoming

NIHR-funded research may reveal harmful impacts on people affected by eating disorders, the Welsh Government should pause the development of this policy, so that it can take account of its findings. These are expected to be published in 2025.



As an MS, we ask that you call on the Welsh Government to take an evidence-led approach to this legislation and pause the introduction of calorie labelling on menus, at least until the findings of the NIHR-funded research are published.