



## BRIEFING

### **Weight Change within families during the pandemic: Results from the Parent Omnibus Survey – Summary Briefing**

#### **Key Messages**

A survey commissioned by Obesity Action Scotland has revealed parents' views on weight change within families and the practice of how their child is weighed in school. Parents reported that their own weight was much more likely to be higher (44%) than lower (24%) since the COVID-19 lockdowns began, and 14% believed that their children's weight had also risen. Whilst the majority of parents (56%) were in favour of weighing children in Primary 1, there was still a significant number who were against it (29%).

#### **Parents Omnibus Survey Findings**

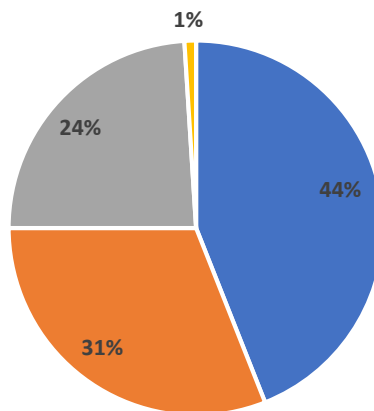
In late 2021, Obesity Action Scotland commissioned a survey by IPSOS MORI which reported the views of a sample of parents on weight change and the current practice of weighing children in school.

The first part of the survey asked parents about weight change in themselves and their children since the onset of the COVID-19 lockdowns in March 2020. The results of the survey showed disparities in perceived weight change across households from different levels of area deprivation, and also between various child age groups. As the survey did not include exact weight measurements we could not comment on the extent of any perceived weight change.

More parents believed they themselves had gained weight (44%) compared to those who believed their weight had decreased (24%). Just under a third of parents (31%) said their weight was unchanged. A significantly higher proportion of parents from the most deprived SIMD quintile believed they had lost weight (43%) since March 2020 compared to the least deprived quintile (15%).

### Parent opinion of their own weight change since March 2020

■ Higher ■ The Same ■ Lower ■ Don't Know

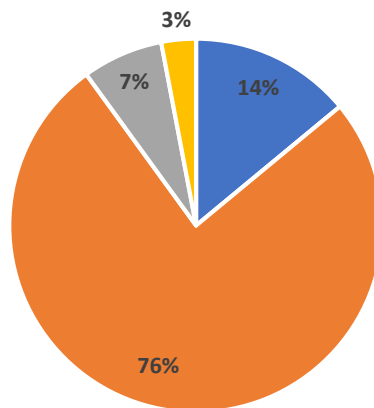


OAS1 'How does your body weight now compare to your weight before the first lockdown in March 2020? Would you say your body weight is now...' Base = 1,004

Whilst the vast majority of parents (76%) believed their child's weight had remained unchanged since the start of the pandemic, 14% of parents believed their child's weight had increased since March 2020. Twice as many parents said their child had gained weight compared to those who believed their child's weight was now lower (7%).

### Parent opinion of weight change in their child since March 2020

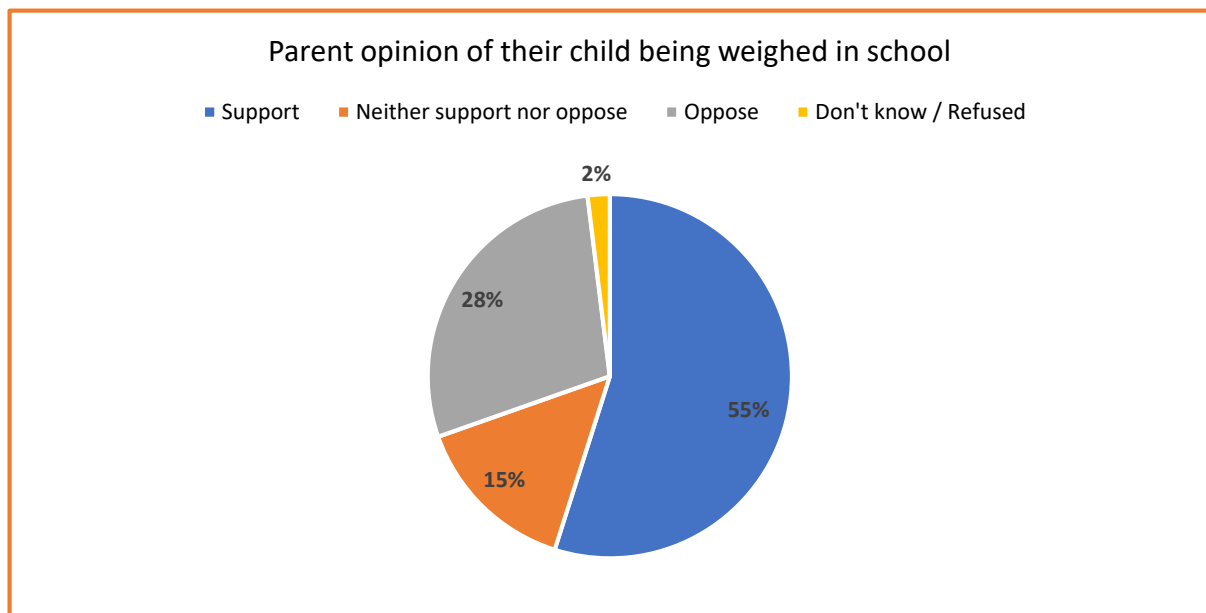
■ Higher ■ The Same ■ Lower ■ Don't Know



OAS2. 'Other than the usual weight increase that you would expect to see as your child grows up, how does your year-old child's weight compare to before the first lockdown in March 2020? Would you say their weight is now...' Base = 1,004

Primary 1 measurement data<sup>1</sup> collected elsewhere has shown a significant uptick in rates of children at risk of overweight and obesity. In the 2020/21 school year, 29.5% of children in Primary 1 were confirmed to be at risk of becoming overweight or obese, an increase of 6.8% from the previous year. Importantly, the biggest increase across weight categories was seen in children at risk of obesity which rose to 15.5% (up from 10% in 2019/20).

As part of Public Health Scotland's National Statistics reporting and the national Child Health Programme, health boards across Scotland aim to measure the height and weight of every Primary 1 child each year. We asked parents their opinion on the current practice of weighing children in school - just over half (56%) supported it while around a third (29%) said they opposed it (the remainder neither supported nor opposed).



OAS3. 'To what extent would you support or oppose your child being weighed at school by health professionals to determine any potential issues with weight?' Base = 1,004

Support was shown to vary between different groups. Men were most supportive of the practice, however the overall majority of both men (66%) and women (51%) were in favour of it. Parents in households with 3+ children showed significantly more support compared to households with only one child (67% vs 52%).

The results also showed differences in parental support for weighing in school across child age groups. More parents of 5-8-year olds supported the practice (62%) compared to parents of 15-17-year olds (50%), and there was generally more 'strong support' of the practice from parents with children in the younger age groups (children aged 11 and under).

Finally, parents were asked about their reasons for not supporting their child being weighed in school. The most common reason for opposing weighing was concern over the mental health and wellbeing of their child (e.g. poor body image, eating disorders) (33%). A large proportion of parents also believed that it is not the school or government's place to weigh children (23%). Other reasons

<sup>1</sup> Primary 1 Body Mass Index (BMI) statistics Scotland School year 2020 to 2021. Available at <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/primary-1-body-mass-index-bmi-statistics-scotland/primary-1-body-mass-index-bmi-statistics-scotland-school-year-2020-to-2021/>

given by parents for opposing weighing were that it was deemed to be unnecessary or that their child didn't need it (10%), concern that it would lead to issues between children such as bullying (10%), and concern over their child's privacy (10%). A small proportion of parents believed BMI measurements to be outdated and not fit for purpose in the assessment of children (5%). Qualitative responses showed some parents believed weighing to be necessary due to the scale of the obesity problem in Scotland and that they would be supportive of it as long as it was not carried out in a stigmatising way.

## **Conclusions**

This survey provides a small snapshot of the potential impact of the pandemic restrictions. It indicates that parents in Scotland recognise that their own weight has changed over that time with many indicating their weight is now higher.

If we consider this alongside the national measurement programme reporting a concerning rise in Primary one children at risk of overweight and obesity, it is clear that families have been impacted and that action is needed to achieve healthy weight across the population.

Currently, Primary 1 BMI data is the only official, regular measurement of child weight in Scotland, and Obesity Action Scotland have previously called for extending this practice to include an additional older year group (e.g. Primary 7 children). This would paint a more complete picture and allow for trends over time to be better understood. The survey results in this report indicate that the majority of parents support their children being measured at school but there are genuine concerns around stigma and mental health that need to be properly considered.

## Appendix: High level results from each survey question

*Q1. How does your body weight now compare to your weight before the first lockdown in March 2020? Would you say your body weight is now...?*

	<b>Total n (%)</b>
All	1004
<b>Lower</b>	245 (24)
<b>The Same</b>	313 (31)
<b>Higher</b>	438 (44)
<b>Don't Know</b>	5 (1)

*Q2. Other than the usual weight increase that you would expect to see as your child grows up, how does your year-old child's weight compare to before the first lockdown in March 2020? Would you say their weight is now...?*

	<b>Total n (%)</b>
All	1004
<b>Lower</b>	75 (7)
<b>The Same</b>	761 (76)
<b>Higher</b>	139 (14)
<b>Don't Know</b>	27 (3)

*Q3. To what extent would you support or oppose your child being weighed at school by health professionals to determine any potential issues with weight?*

	<b>Total n (%)</b>
All	1004
<b>Support</b>	558 (56)
<b>Neither support nor oppose</b>	147 (15)
<b>Oppose</b>	287 (29)
<b>Don't know / Refused</b>	12 (2)

Q4. What are your reasons for not supporting your child being weighed at school?

(\*Most frequent responses)

	Total n (%)
<b>Concern it could lead to mental health / wellbeing impacts (poor body image, eating disorders, weight worries)</b>	143 (33)
<b>Not the school / government`s place or prefer to monitor themselves</b>	100 (23)
<b>It is not necessary / my child doesn`t need to be weighed</b>	44 (10)
<b>Concern it could lead to issues between children (bullying, shaming, comparisons)</b>	44 (10)
<b>They shouldn`t be weighed in front of other children / respect their privacy</b>	42 (10)
<b>BMI is flawed / outdated / not suitable for everyone</b>	23 (5)
<b>There is already too much focus on weight / weight shouldn`t be the main focus</b>	20 (5)

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*Technical note*

- Ipsos interviewed a representative sample of 1,004 parents and carers across Scotland.
- Interviews were conducted by telephone from 1<sup>st</sup> November – 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2021.
- Data are weighted on age of parent, working status, Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), and age of child.
- Where results do not sum to 100%, this may be due to computer rounding, multiple responses, or the exclusion of “don’t know” categories.