

Chapter Title: WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

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WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

One in 111 (542,000) people in the UK have facial disfigurements and one in 44 (1,345,000) have a significant disfigurement to their face and body.³ Around 15,000 children are born in the UK every year with a disfigurement.⁴ Disfigurement can be defined as having one's appearance affected by a congenital or acquired medical condition. Causes of appearance change can stem from: burns; birthmarks; scars; craniofacial conditions; skin diseases and the impacts of head and neck cancers.

People affected by a visible difference can suffer twice, firstly from the cause or condition, and secondly from appearance-related prejudice and discrimination, often on a daily basis. These findings are widely documented in the research literature and demonstrated by the report on *Disfigurement in the UK*, published in 2017 by the national charity Changing Faces. 'Disfigurement can affect anyone from any social or demographic group and at any time in life.'⁵ Severe facial disfigurement is considered a disability under the Equality Act 2010.

People with visible or invisible physical impairments face social stigma, discrimination, prejudice and exclusion in public life.⁶ The prejudice which people harbour towards disfigurement is far higher than prejudice towards ethnicity or gender.⁷

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‘A public attitude survey found 67% of the general public find it difficult to attach positive qualities to people with disfigurements.’⁸ Having a disfigurement therefore means having to face very challenging life experiences.

The report *Disfigurement in the UK*⁹ produced by the charity Changing Faces in 2017 showed that:

- > ‘having a disfigurement can often lead to a lack of aspiration in education, in work, and in personal relationships, often confirmed by teachers, employers and others who have lower expectations of them’;
- > ‘this lack of aspiration and opportunity can lead to a resignation that this is how things will always be, and consequently unfairness and discrimination go unchallenged’;
- > ‘authorities who should stand up to prejudice are failing to do so effectively even when they are alerted to it’.¹⁰

This policy brief challenges appearance-related prejudice, stereotypes and misrepresentations of disability. It also contributes to the discussion on what still needs to be done to enact appearance-related equality, and the acceptance of bodily diversity in more general terms.

There is a range of examples where policy is linked with issues around appearance: following the vote by nearly one million people in 2016 in the UK Youth Parliament's ballot, who pointed to 'body image' as one of the top ten issues, the Parliamentary Youth Select Committee held dedicated sessions in July 2017 to debate related concerns.¹¹ Internationally, several countries, including Italy, Spain and Israel, have legislated on underweight models.¹² France – another country that has implemented similar laws aimed at banning the hire of extremely thin models – introduced mandatory health check requirements for workers in the fashion industry. The new French law also obliges the labelling of digitally altered images in tackling the propagation of unrealistic 'beauty' standards.^{13,14} These policy initiatives reflect the necessity of specific targeted measures to address looks-related prejudice and to make the principles of equality and diversity work in practice.

Many of these problems originate in the prevalent culture of obsession with appearance, which has a number of harmful consequences. Body image-related concerns in their variety of forms often cause serious mental and physical health issues.^{15,16,17} In the UK, disability hate crime offences increased by 101%, from 1,531 in 2014-15, to 3,079 in 2016-17.¹⁸

According to the Editors' Code published by the Independent Press Standards Organization (IPSO): 'The press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual's race, colour, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation or to any physical or mental illness or disability'.

**‘People with a visible difference are
systematically misrepresented in the media’**

Additionally, the code states: ‘Details of an individual’s race, colour, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical or mental illness or disability must be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story.’¹⁹ Yet, people with a visible difference are systematically misrepresented in the media.