

Nourish Scotland evidence on

Obesity



For the Health and Sports Committee

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“The diets of typical British families now pose the greatest threat to their health” and life expectancy¹. Our overconsumption of sugar is highly problematic, but it is not the only issue: British diets include insufficient fruit and vegetables, fibre and oily fish, and too much added sugar, salt and saturated fat. Almost half of the energy consumed by British children in a typical family² comes from foods high in fat, salt, and/or sugar.

Poor diets are a social justice issue

While poor nutrition is a problem for the Scottish population as a whole, lower levels of income and education are associated with less healthy diets³. And while progress has been made in improving diets over recent decades, those on lower incomes have been left behind⁴⁵.

Poorer households tend to have poorer nutrition because they have less freedom of choice, due to both economic and geographical factors, and they tend to be more targeted by, and possibly more vulnerable to, marketing of unhealthy foods.

- When budgets are tight, people are forced to prioritise calories over nutrients to afford their weekly food shop⁵.
- The proliferation of supermarkets has meant most people have more access to nutritious food, but many low-income areas suffer from a lack of access to nutritious, affordable food⁴.
- The top seven food brands spend a combined ten times more on marketing than the entire budget of the government’s leading healthy eating campaign, while often targeting unhealthy products on those with the lowest incomes⁴.

Worryingly, the incidence of obesity is rising steadily for children in the lowest income households across the UK. This is dramatic because poor nutrition in childhood has long-lasting health and developmental impacts. On one hand, it is a contributing factor to the attainment gap as children who are malnourished suffer from poorer health, lower cognitive functions, erratic behaviour and emotional distress. On the other hand, childhood malnutrition has been proven to increase the risk of adult diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease⁶.

The knowledge that obesity and poor nutrition are a social justice issue must inform policies, so that deprived communities are no longer left behind. Tackling low wages, insecure working conditions, and the poverty premium, and strengthening welfare social security nets for the most

¹ Food Foundation, 2015. *Force-fed: Does the food system constrict healthy choices for typical British families?*

² Defined by the Food Foundation as a family of four (two adults and two children) with a gross household income between £37,000 to £52,0001 (the average British household income)

³ POST NOTE Nb 522, April 2016

⁴ Fabian Commission, 2015, *Recipe for Inequality*.

⁵ Fabian Commission, 2015, *Hungry for Change*.

⁶ American Academy of Pediatrics, 2015. *Promoting Food Security for All Children*

vulnerable, while not health measures, are likely to have significant benefits for improving the nutrition of all people in Scotland.

Tackling the obesity crisis requires substantial changes to our food environment

We have had 20 years of ‘eat 5-a-day’ messaging, but it has made no significant difference. Educating individuals on how to make healthy choices cannot work when the whole food system pushes behaviour in the opposite direction. The obesogenic food environment is created and perpetuated by the food and drink industry, because it is profitable. Most of the intellectual capital in the food industry is dedicated to adding value to cheap food commodities for the profit of the industry rather than to nourishing us. “Industry profit margins are far greater from highly processed, commodity derived products such as snack foods and beverages which are primarily composed of refined starch, concentrated sugars and low quality fats.”⁷ It is therefore critical that policy-makers commit to bold action and confront the food industry for its responsibility in the current obesity crisis.

1. Bold and urgent action is needed on the following five levels – the 5 P’s⁸

Promotions in retail and catering outlets are biased towards unhealthy foods. Across the whole sector, 3% of all food advertising is spent on fruit, veg and pasta, while 58% is on confectionary and convenience food. The Scottish Parliament and Government must, within their powers, put in place strict regulation of all forms of marketing of unhealthy foods, especially when targeted at children.

Prices: healthier foods are 3 times more expensive than foods high in fats, salt and/or sugar as source of dietary energy, and the price difference is growing. A sugar tax is a positive step in the direction of taxing unhealthy foods, but measures are needed to mitigate the disproportional burden it may place on lower income households. Nourish Scotland advocates for the introduction of a Multiple Retailers’ and Caterers’ Levy – see below.

Placement: there has been a 53% increase in places to eat out in the last 10 years, and the single biggest category is quick service restaurants, which typically sell less-healthy meals. The Planning Bill provides a key opportunity to set the objectives of our planning system. One such objective should be to ‘create a safe and healthy environment in which physical activity and nutritious food are easy options.’ This means for example a ban on junk food outlets near schools, spaces for urban food growing, subsidies and indoor spaces for farmers’ markets, and support for local and independent food retailers through tax rebates. Special attention must be given to deprived areas.

Products: only 5% of ready meals, breakfast cereals, bread and yoghurts bought by ‘typical families’ have low levels of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt. This is clear evidence that voluntary action by the industry is not going far enough. Regulation and fiscal measures are needed to force the industry to cut on fats, free sugars, and salt. Such regulation must also prevent the industry from merely substituting regulated components with equally unhealthy alternatives (replacing sugar with high-fructose-content corn syrup or with aspartame for example).

Pleasure: ‘taste or smell’ is the fourth most important factor influencing consumers’ product choice, before ‘healthy option’ – rated first by 14% of respondents, against 9% only for ‘healthy option’. More needs to be done to increase the appeal of fruit and veg; for example through a public campaign, upskilling in public catering, and education in schools. Nourish Scotland is currently involved in a project that seeks to do just that – see below. Furthermore, cutting down, gradually but drastically, on levels of salt, sugar and sweeteners across all processed foods and drinks will change our taste preferences and help us enjoy healthier foods better.

⁷ Scottish Collaboration for Public Health Research and Policy, 2011. *Policy Interventions to Tackle the Obesogenic Environment: Focusing on adults of working age in Scotland.*

⁸ Facts and statistics taken from Force-Fed

2. Useful frameworks to guide policy

The Individual, Social, Material – ISM – framework has been adopted by the Scottish Government for its efforts to promote low carbon behaviour change. This framework recognises that individual behaviours are integrated within, and influenced by, a social context, which is itself part of a wider material context. “By understanding these different contexts and the multiple factors within them that influence the way people act every day, more effective policies and interventions can be developed”⁹. The ISM framework should be used to develop the Diets and Obesity Strategy to promote a more holistic approach and comprehensive solutions.

The Food Environment Policy Index (Food EPI) is a tool for evaluating the effectiveness of food policies in relation to international best practice. The London-based Food Foundation recently published its final Food EPI report as well as a Policy Briefing¹⁰ which compiles 10 priority actions to reduce obesity and diet-related diseases in England – listed below. Nourish is currently in discussions with the Scottish Government’s Food, Drink and Rural Communities Division about conducting similar research in Scotland.

1. Control the advertising of unhealthy food to children
2. Implement the levy on sugary drinks
3. Reformulation: reduce the sugar, fat, and salt in processed foods
4. Monitor school and nursery food standards
5. Prioritise health and the environment in Farming Policy
6. Adopt a national food action plan to make healthy and sustainable food affordable to all
7. Monitor the food environment
8. Healthy buying standards in public procurement
9. Strengthen planning laws to discourage unhealthy fast food
10. Evaluate food-related programmes and policies

These frameworks should inform the upcoming Good Food Nation Bill. This Bill provides a key opportunity to establish framework legislation that joins up food, farming, and health.

A complex issue such as obesity cannot be solved by siloed thinking and timid guidelines. The Good Food Nation Bill offers a crucial opportunity to:

- rethink the legal framework surrounding our food environment,
- establish the fundamental objectives of our food, farming, and diet-related health policies, and
- make the missing link between environment and physical wellbeing – *i.e.* Scotland’s land and other natural resources should contribute to supporting healthy lifestyles, so our land should support a food system that nourishes all people in Scotland.

3. The Multiple Retailers’ Levy

Multiple Retailers and Caterers create our collective food environment. This power should come with responsibility; the responsibility to help us meet the nutritional standards set by Food Standards Scotland.

This Levy would tax the “health difference” between what we are sold and what we should be buying. Large retailers and caterers would be required to report periodically on the nutritional composition of their sales. They would then pay a levy on the difference between their sales and the national dietary goals – this would apply to each nutritional component: saturated fats, fibre, free sugar, etc. as a proportion of total dietary energy sold.

The two primary goals of a Retailers’ and Caterers’ Levy are 1) to influence proportional food prices in favour of healthier foods and 2) to incentivise large retailers and caterers to promote healthier foods through reformulation and marketing.

⁹ Scottish Government, 2013. *Influencing Behaviours - Moving Beyond the Individual - A User Guide to the ISM Tool*.

¹⁰ Available here: <http://foodfoundation.org.uk/publications/>

4. Making veg the easy choice, Peas Please

Increasing the proportion of dietary energy that we get from fruit and veg is a key avenue of tackling obesity. Since education and public messaging are not improving diets, we need to address barriers in the food chains that are impeding increases in consumption of healthy foods. To achieve this objective, strong collaboration between civil society, the food industry, and the public sector will be needed. Nourish is involved in a project, called Peas Please, that seeks to do just that. Peas Please aims to increase veg consumption in the UK by tackling barriers in the Social and Material contexts of the food system.

Over the next six months, experts and stakeholders from the food and drink industry, civil society including academia, and the public sector will explore the opportunities to increase veg consumption along food supply chains. They will do so in eight working groups (provisional names):

1. Veg in everything (reformulation and product design)
2. Veg on show (normalising veg through advertising and marketing)
3. Veg on the move (improving veg offers in fast food, street food, sandwiches & snacks, and workplace food)
4. Veg direct (dignified ways to get veg to low income households)
5. Urban veg (creating cities which support veg consumption)
6. Outlook for veg (ensuring we have a thriving and sustainable future for British horticulture)
7. Clever with veg (upskilling in catering industry to provide more pleasurable veg)
8. Veg everywhere (increasing the placement and promotion of veg on the streets and in retail environments)

The outcome of this process will be a list of commitments to which industry actors, politicians and public institutions are asked to sign up¹¹.

A well-nourished population comes with wider societal benefits

To conclude, it is important to remember that improving diets, while it may seem expensive in the short term, will lead to a whole host of other, monetary and non-monetary, benefits:

- a reduced burden on the NHS,
- a more productive and happier population,
- opportunities for the Scottish horticultural sector,
- thriving local and community food sectors,
- lower greenhouse gas emissions from the food we consume¹²
- a fairer country, as diet-related health inequalities are halted,

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¹¹ More information can be found at www.nourishscotland.org/projects/peas-please

¹² Miriam E. Nelson et al., 2016. *Alignment of Healthy Dietary Patterns and Environmental Sustainability: A Systematic Review*.