

Our Right to Food: Affording to eat well in a Good Food Nation

Full report



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Executive Summary

If we want to live in a Good Food Nation, where people can take pride and pleasure in their food, we need to ensure that everyone can afford the food that keeps them healthy and well.

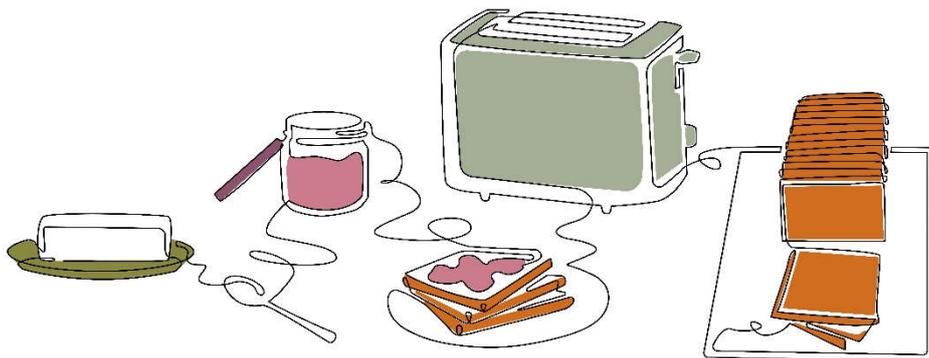
There has been little improvement in the Scottish diet over the past 20 years, and people in the most deprived areas experience the worst outcomes for diet related ill health. Our food environment makes it difficult to access the foods that will keep us healthy and well, and these pressures are felt most by those on the lowest incomes.

In 2020, we set out to understand what people living in Scotland today would choose as a healthy and enjoyable way to eat so that rights-holders and decision-makers would have better tools for understanding how to make this accessible for all. We worked with groups of community advisors to negotiate what would be included in a weekly 'basket of foods' that struck a balance of being nutritionally adequate, culturally appropriate and enjoyable. Together, we examined what taking 'pride and pleasure' in food means for families in Scotland today.

We worked alongside four groups of women who know what it is like to shop for, prepare and eat food in small and large families today in Scotland to agree what would be included in these shopping lists. The weekly meal plans and shopping lists these groups created are not meant to be representative of everyone in Scotland, but they are meant to be recognisable to most people. The groups received support and advice from the project team and public health nutritionists at different stages of their work together so that they could create lists that reflected the current reality of people's lives and the groups' shared aspirations for families living in Scotland's Good Food Nation.

We have been using these shopping lists as tools to measure progress towards realising the right to food in Scotland.

This report sets out what we learned about what an 'adequate diet' means in today's Scotland, how much this currently costs and how affordable this is for small and large families.



Introduction

If we want to live in a Good Food Nation, where people can take pride and pleasure in their food, we need to ensure that everyone can afford the food that keeps them healthy and well. For this to happen, we need a way of understanding whether local and national actions are helping us achieve this shared vision.

At the time of writing, families in Scotland are facing enormous financial pressures due to overlapping effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, departure from the EU, high rates of inflation and years of austerity measures. Wages and benefits have not kept up with increases to fuel and food prices, and this is forcing too many people to cut back on the quality and quantity of the food that they can afford. Even more people are worried about how they will afford the food that their families need with dignity and choice.

The Our Right to Food project set out to explore what families would choose to eat if income from wages and benefits were sufficient. We worked in collaboration with public health experts, civil society members, academics, representatives from the Scottish Government and – crucially – people with experience making decisions every day in families across Scotland, to find a balance of foods that reflects the current realities and aspirations of people who know what it is like to shop for, prepare and eat food in today's Scotland. This approach provides tools for measuring changes in how accessible this way of experiencing food is for people both at a national and local level.

For far too many people, being able to afford the food they need with dignity and choice is out of reach. One critical step forward will be to adopt mechanisms that help understand what the right to food means for us in today's Scotland and monitor how local and national actions are affecting our progress for different groups of people.

Scottish Context

The Scottish Government has a vision of becoming a “Good Food Nation, where people from every walk of life take pride and pleasure in, and benefit from, the food they produce, buy, cook, serve, and eat each day”.¹ The Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 was a significant step towards reaching this vision, and it recognises that promoting good food is interlinked with a wide range of outcomes, including social and economic wellbeing, environmental, health and physical and mental wellbeing, economic development, animal welfare, education and child poverty. The Act also acknowledges that action will be needed not by one department on its own, but that all parts of government, at national and local level, will need to work together to achieve this shared vision.

¹ The Scottish Government (2014) [Recipe for Success: Scotland's National Food & Drink Policy – Becoming a Good Food Nation](#).

Alongside this, the Scottish Government has committed to introducing “world-leading human rights legislation” to incorporate a wide range of human rights into domestic law.² Work is underway to develop this Human Rights Bill, and there is plenty to do in parallel to this to lay the groundwork for understanding the current state of rights realisation in Scotland and strengthening our monitoring framework. Implementation of Scotland’s human rights commitments will require collaboration and coordination across government.

Bringing human rights into Scots law as guiding principles for decision-making is an important step towards improving social, economic and health outcomes, and these steps should be celebrated as key markers of progress towards realising the right to food.

At the same time, there are significant challenges to overcome.

We know that too many people in Scotland cannot afford the food that they need to keep healthy and well, and that the financial pressures on some households are greater than others.³

There has been little improvement in the Scottish diet over the past 20 years, with levels of type II diabetes, heart disease and other diet related illnesses continuing to be an ongoing public health challenge. Although this is true across the population, people living in the most deprived areas are more likely to experience diet related ill health and less likely to be eating the types of foods deemed to protect against illnesses like cardiovascular disease and some cancers.⁴ In 2021, only 22% of adults consumed 5 or more portions of fruit and vegetables per day, only slightly improved from 21% in 2003.⁵

Our food environment makes it difficult to access the foods that will keep us healthy and well, with increased pressure felt by those on the lowest incomes. In 2017, 91% of people in Scotland thought that “cheap, fast food is too readily available” while 50% of those on the lowest household income agreed that “healthy food is too expensive” compared with 34% on the highest income.⁶ In 2021, 34% of single parents reported that they had worried about running out of food in the past year, compared with 19% of single adults and 9% of adults generally.⁷ In September 2022, one in four households with children across the UK (25.8%) reported that they had experienced food insecurity in the past month, compared

² The Scottish Government (2021) [New Human Rights Bill](#).

³ In 2021, 12% of large families and 34% of single parents reported that they had worried about running out of food in the previous 12 months, compared with 9% of the population overall: [The Scottish Health Survey 2021 – volume 1: main report](#).

⁴ Food Standards Scotland (2020) [Situation report: The Scottish Diet: It needs to change 2020 update](#).

⁵ Scottish Government (2021) [The Scottish Health Survey: 2021 edition | Volume 1 | Main Report](#).

⁶ NHS Health Scotland (2017) [Public attitudes to reducing levels of overweight and obesity in Scotland](#).

⁷ Scottish Government (2021) [The Scottish Health Survey: 2021 edition | Volume 1 | Main Report](#).

with 16% of households without children.⁸ This was higher than the first two weeks of lockdown in 2020 (20.8%) and more than double the rate in January 2022 (12.1%).

In order to address the gap between the challenges we face and our shared vision of a Good Food Nation, we needed to understand more about what the right to food looks like in today's Scotland, measure how financially and geographically accessible this is for people in different situations and begin to ask how government policies are helping to progressively realise the right to food.

Rights based approach

Realising the right to food means that food should be adequate, available and accessible to everyone in Scotland in all circumstances.⁹ The Our Right to Food project aimed to develop a way of measuring rights realisation that reflects the different elements of the right to food, in particular what people in Scotland mean by 'adequate' and how accessible this way of eating is for people today. UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Michael Fakhri, explains that for food to be 'adequate':

... people must decide for themselves what is appropriate food based on their own ecosystems, based on their own culture based on their own daily life. So, the idea of adequacy is to empower people to choose what type of food is good food for themselves.¹⁰

This project involved people living in Scotland today in a process of 'deciding for themselves' what appropriate food is for small and large families. We then found the price of this way of eating to see how affordable this is for typical Scottish households.

Project aims

- Co-create tools for measuring the progressive realisation of the right to food in Scotland
- Establish a baseline for national and local monitoring

Structure of the report

Chapter 1: Content of the Shopping Lists

This chapter explores the first of the project's key questions:

- What does Scotland's healthy diet look like?

⁸ YouGov survey of 4280 adults in the UK conducted 21-23rd September 2022: Food Foundation (2022) [Food Insecurity Tracking](#).

⁹ Professor Michael Fakhri, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (2022), Oral evidence: Food Security, HC 622, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, 22 November 2022.

¹⁰ UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Michael Fakhri: <https://youtu.be/iaBMwzGdzzc>.

Here we explain what groups of community advisors believed would be the patterns, priorities and aspirations of recognisable families living in Scotland today, and how these affect what was included in the shopping list for each case study family. The shopping lists represent an example of the healthiest balance of foods each group could agree would be enjoyable and a good fit for people's lives in Scotland today.

For more detail on how the shopping lists were developed, see [Our Right to Food: Affording to eat well in a Good Food Nation – Methods and Approach](#).

Chapter 2: Cost and Affordability

The second part of the report reviews two key questions:

- What does each shopping list cost?
- How affordable would this be for families?

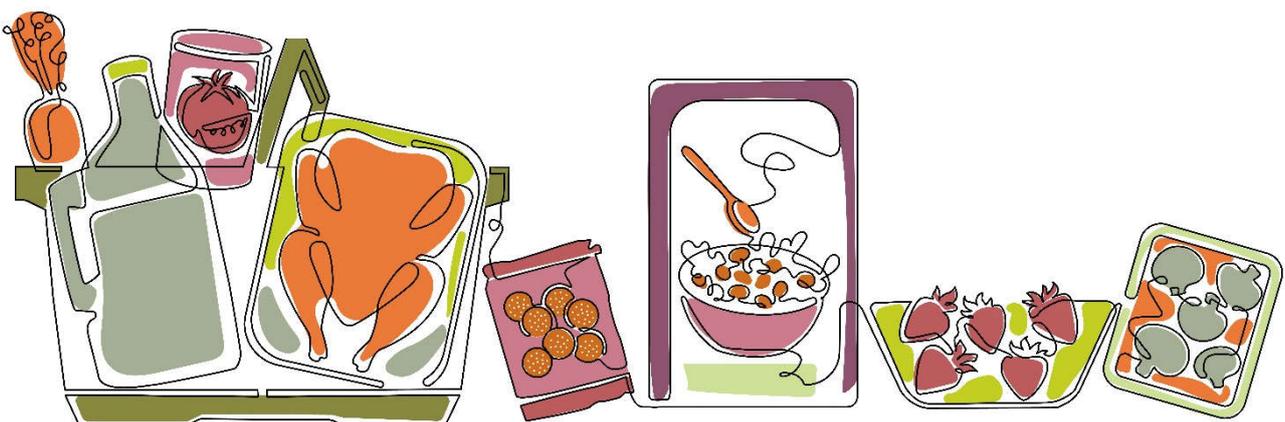
Here we set out the cost of the foods and drinks that community advisors included in each case study family's weekly shopping list, as well as the additional costs included for occasions like holidays, birthdays and being able to share food with guests. We then compare these costs to the incomes that the case study families would have – based on the example working patterns that groups agreed – and more generally to typical households of this size in Scotland.

Chapter 3: Measuring Progress and Recommendations

The final chapter of the report sets out how the Our Right to Food shopping lists can be used to explore the following key questions:

- How can we measure progress towards realising the right to food?
- What actions and policies are helping us achieve this shared vision?

We are at the beginning of the journey of using the learning from this project to measure progress towards realising the right to food. This explores how the shopping lists can be used as tools for local and national measurement, to help us understand whether progress is being made towards realising the right to food in Scotland.



Chapter 1: Content of the Shopping Lists

Introduction

The right to food is about more than having enough calories or the right nutrients each week – it is about being able to take part in our current food culture and to enjoy a balance of foods that nourish and sustain ourselves, our families and our communities. As UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Michael Fakhri explains, the right to food is “the right for everyone to celebrate life through their meals with each other in communion”.¹¹

This project involved community advisors in defining the content of the weekly shopping lists because we needed to know what people living in Scotland today believed was ‘adequate’ in our current culture and people’s daily lives.

Advisory groups involved people from different parts of Scotland with experience shopping for, preparing and eating food in households similar to the case study households. Group discussions were held over a period of 4-12 months, rather than as a single discussion, to enable the advisors to build the shopping lists from a position of strong understanding about what the family might want and need. Meetings were held online to accommodate busy schedules and the geographic spread of each group. The project team used a variety of online techniques to share information, support the discussions and help the group members arrive at agreement about what would need to be included in each list.¹²

Large Families	Small Families
Two adults with three children, aged 7, 10 and 15	Single mum with two children, aged 2 and 5
Brown Family: David, Karen, Max, Ben and Lily	Harris-McGregors – Nora, Sofia and Jack
Robinson Family: Johnny, Cathy, Nathan, Reuben and Harley	MacDougalls – Agnes, Morag and Hamish

A Good Fit for People’s Lives

Community advisors started their work together by imagining where, when and how each family member would eat throughout the week – this process helped build each group’s

¹¹ Overview from UN expert on the right to food, Special Rapporteur Michael Fakhri, available at:

<https://youtu.be/iaBMwzGdzc>

¹² For more detail on how the shopping lists were developed, see [Our Right to Food: Affording to eat well in a Good Food Nation – Methods and Approach](#).

understanding of how the patterns of a typical family in Scotland would affect the contents of the shopping lists.

Details like having more time to make a pot of soup or prepare a roast dinner at the weekend, compared with finding an easy meal to make quickly when you are busy and tired on a Wednesday, affect the balance of how large and small families prepare and share food throughout the week. This section explores how community advisors imagined and co-created a sense of these patterns for each of the case study families.¹³

Eating patterns

The groups spent multiple sessions discussing and agreeing the balance of effort across the week, and the meal plans represent their sense of what was reasonable in the context of the family's overall life.

Breakfasts and morning snacks

Breakfast was generally described as a busy time, particularly for mums, with everyone focused on getting ready for school and work.

I'd probably say mom's busy setting up the wee ones. Getting their breakfast sorted, making their packed lunch. While she's scraning a bite of toast. (Group 1)

I think that if she's getting up first, and it's a workday, she's making the kids' breakfast whilst chugging down some coffee and having a piece of toast or a couple of pieces of toast. Something quick that she can hold whilst multitasking so that she's not going to work starving, but she still had something. (Group 4)

Most of the groups assumed children and parents would eat bowls of mixed cereals or porridge sachets during the week, sometimes with toast and either fresh orange or diluting juice on the side. Breakfast was seen as an opportunity to add some fruit, for example to porridge or cereal, while things like apples, bananas and satsumas were often packed in bags to be eaten mid-morning.

For parents who did not work full-time, it was assumed that they might have a more substantial snack or breakfast after leaving the older children at school. This might be beans on toast or a fried egg with toast after the older children were away to school.

I think giving [the 2-year-old] a yoghurt for mid-morning snack is a good call, actually. Because when they're distracted with a snack, that's a good time for you as a parent to get your breakfast and a cup of tea or something like that. Because you kind of got your hands free to do that, then, there, eating. (Group 2)

¹³ For more detail on each case study family's cooking and eating patterns, see the Family Profiles on the [Our Right to Food project](#).

Another advisor suggested that if mum was staying home with a young child, she might have a larger breakfast or early lunch at 11am so that she would not get hungry again before tea-time, avoiding extra time spent eating throughout the day.

Most of the groups felt that breakfast would be more relaxed and informal at the weekends. However, community advisors agreed that the mum with children aged 2 and 5 was unlikely to have much variation in wake-up times:

Yeah, but when they were two and five... I mean, they've got no concept of the day of the week, really, do they, at that age? ... It's just a body clock thing, isn't it? They just wake up and want to get going, I reckon. (Group 2)

Most of the advisors thought it was likely for the families to have at least one cooked breakfast during the weekend, such as pancakes, bacon rolls or a fry-up. More involved breakfasts were about taking advantage of the extra time to enjoy food together in the morning, though some advisors thought it was unlikely that everyone in the larger family would get up at the same time on the weekends to share a meal.

Weekday lunches

Each group made decisions about how often the children would bring a packed lunch, take up a free school meal offer, purchase a meal at school or buy something to eat outside the school grounds. Determining when and whether to take up the offer of free school meals raised questions about taste, convenience and cost.

Some advisors thought that instead of sitting down together at lunchtime, the mum who was staying home with her young child might use this as an opportunity to do other chores while the child was occupied:

When my daughter was younger, I wouldn't have got her lunch at that age and then sat down and had lunch. I would have utilised that opportunity to do something else. Like, "Here you are, you're in the highchair, you're eating your finger sandwiches, and I'm going to do the dishes or I'm going to Hoover around you." Just because you're so busy all the time. (Group 2)

It was clear from many of the discussions that busy mums struggle to find the time and energy to have a 'proper meal' for themselves between all their other responsibilities. This can mean they are eating a piece of toast while running out the door or having less variety across the week.

Packed lunches

Most of the groups agreed that the families would be likely to make packed lunches for primary and secondary aged children about half of the time and have the children eat school meals for the other half (*see below for more detail*).

Additionally, the advisors emphasised that it would be likely for the parents to send both primary aged children in with a packed lunch on the same day rather than having to make a lunch every day of the week. They also suggested that lunching would likely be the same or similar for the whole family, to make them easier to prepare.

Table 1: Examples of packed lunches

Large Families	Children (aged 7 and 10)	Parents
Robinsons	Ham and cheese sandwich with 1-2 other items like cucumber and carrot sticks, an apple or banana, small yoghurt or a packet of crisps.	Johnny: Leftovers or a ham, cheese and cucumber sandwich with a piece of fruit, packet of crisps and/or a yoghurt. Cathy: Leftovers or an instant soup packet and breakfast bar, plus a yoghurt when she gets home mid-afternoon
Browns	Ham and cheese sandwiches, with 2-3 other items like a piece of fruit (banana, orange, apple), small yoghurt, packet of rice crackers, mini cheddars or biscuits.	Leftovers like Lentil Soup or Chickpea Curry. Other days, a ham, cheese and salad sandwich or tuna mayo wrap with 2-3 additions like yoghurt, rice crackers, biscuits or crisps.
Small Families	Child (aged 5)	Mum
Harris-McGregors	Small ham, cucumber and mayo sandwich with 1-2 other items like a cheese string, small box of raisins or piece of fruit like an apple or banana.	Ham, cheese, cucumber, tomato, salad, mayo sandwich with satsuma.
MacDougalls	Ham and cucumber sandwich with 1-2 other items like a satsuma, Babybel cheese or blueberries.	Handful of nuts or packet of biscuits with tea (rarely has time for lunch during shift work).

Both larger family meal plans include leftovers, like soup or curry, to be taken for lunch by the parents early in the week. Occasionally, the groups included times when the parents might purchase a lunch out of home rather than packing a lunch. For example, the Robinson Family’s shopping list includes a Subway meal deal for the mum, Cathy, and a Greggs meal deal for the dad, Johnny, on Fridays.

Nursery

There was a strong preference for the youngest child (aged 2) in the small case study families to be in a care-setting that provided food:

I do remember thinking, "Oh, that's great. I don't need to think about their food," because that was in with the price. (Group 2)

Whether he was eligible for a nursery place or was in a private childminder, you wouldn't actually have to provide any lunch. So that's a bonus, I think, to most mums. (Group 4)

Meal provision through nursery or a childminder was seen as more efficient and convenient for parents in terms of saving time, energy and money. Both groups working on the small case study family decided that the younger child would be placed in a care-setting that provided lunch while the mum worked, and they would eat at home with the mum on days when she was not working.

Primary school

There was disagreement within the groups about the potential for school meals to save the parents time, energy and money. Despite an overall perception that school meals would benefit the family financially, and possibly make mornings easier, this was weighed against the potential arguments with children who did not want what was on offer or the extra work and cost if children came home hungry because they did not eat the meal at school.

Many advisors explained that children often preferred packed lunches, but finding a compromise was necessary for the mums, especially the single parents:

I think there needs to be some room on this menu for packed lunches, now and again. I think there needs to be space because, yeah, children are so fussy and so strange. I think if we just forced them to go to school meals every day, we wouldn't be putting extra money into the shopping list, she probably does need. (Group 4)

Each group decided that it was important to assume that the children would take school meals some days but that the budget needed to accommodate space for packed lunches at least once or twice per week:

I try as much as possible to go for the free school meals. I've got one child who won't eat a few things like cheese and stuff which seems to be an option in all of them. So, I'll try and have something in the house just in case it's something that I just know he's not going to eat. So that he's got something. But mostly we go for the free school meals. I like to go for that. Makes life easier. (Group 4)

The advisors agreed that having options for the children in the canteen made it more likely that they would go for a school meal. Even though the advisors agreed some children were too 'fussy' to eat school meals every day, they thought the families would be able to plan ahead based on the schedules that are sent round:

Yeah, because we've got three options. Normally, there's a hot thing, a vegetarian and then usually a sandwich or a panini or a roll, which usually they like. But not always, not always. (Group 3)

I think they put out a, is it a three-week cycle thing that you know what the food's gonna be, so if there's certain things that your kids like, you can pre-book it in the sense, you know, say, "well I'll go for a packed lunch these days and have a hot meal or a school meal these days." (Group 1)

Advisors explained that as children got older, the eating environment in schools became more important to their lunch choices. Most agreed that where and how meals were served to the children would affect the case study families' decisions about what kind of lunch their children would have. One advisor shared that:

In the dinner hall there's separate seating for the school dinners and the packed lunches. Now, if you get into primary 4 and above and your child qualifies for free school meals, which my children do, I would much rather go without and make my kids a packed lunch so that they're seated with their friend than be the only ones on their own having a school dinner because that singles them out. (Group 2)

The stigma and eating experiences around school meals became a more important factor as the children came into primary school age than in nursery.

Some advisors thought that the quality and size of school meals were so poor that it might be more work for the mum to feed the children properly after school:

They were coming home [after eating a school meal], just eating everything we could find because they were so hungry all day. And [inaudible] and twice as much as we would've done if I just made them a healthy, packed lunch. (Group 2)

I think the school dinners that they provide are too small. My daughter comes home and says she's hungry... I think depending on the age of the child, it's not appropriate portion size because everybody gets the same whether you're a Primary 1 or a Primary 7. (Group 3)

Finally, for the large case study families, only one of the two primary aged children (the younger child, aged 7) was eligible for universal school meal provision at the time of the groups' discussions. As one advisor described, this would influence the parents' decision overall as there was a sense that it was good to take up the offer of a meal at school, but if you were making a packed lunch for another child, the parents might cluster the time, effort and ingredients involved and simply send both children in with a packed lunch that day.

Secondary school

For the oldest child in in the large case study families (aged 15), there was agreement within the groups that although buying a lunch either at school, at a supermarket or at a takeaway would be a significant expense over time, the family would likely try to find a way to support him to eat with his friends.

Advisors described the "tremendous pressure" young people in secondary school have "to have money in their pockets" and to socialise with friends over lunch.

I think if Nathan [aged 15]'s keeping in wi' his friends and keeping up appearances, he would have money in his pocket to go and buy out with the school, his lunch, just to get out, a walk and fresh air. (Group 1)

All sorts of things around here where they do sort of lunchtime deals and a lot of the children, maybe as a treat, get money on a Friday to go and get something like that. I think the vast majority are bringing lunches, but the rest of the time they get to go out and get whatever it is that they choose, maybe on a Friday or something like that. (Group 1)

The school lunches were seen as a cheaper alternative to eating at a takeaway or chippy, although still a significant expense. Advisors all agreed that the cost of eating out was high and thought the teenager in the larger families would only eat out once or twice a week as a treat.¹⁴

Afternoon snacks

Many of the community advisors explained that no matter what the children have for lunch, it seemed like they were always hungry when they arrived home from school. For families with older children, this might mean having plenty of milk and bread available for toast, and most of the groups suggested that children might have biscuits as a 'treat' on Friday.

¹⁴ Future development of the meal plans could seek to engage the views of children and young people about these decisions to help inform the overall weekly budget.

Some of the advisors thought that parents might try to encourage fruits and vegetables as a snack in the afternoon, but there was a sense that children might be too tired at this point in the day to eat anything 'healthier' without a lot of 'negotiation'.

So, it's the convenience, but it's maybe the negotiation as well. So, they're hungry, they've just come back from school, they want a wee treat because they're home from school. So, you might get some healthy stuff in them, like some carrot sticks, if you also let them have a chocolate bar. (Group 3)

As for the adults, one advisor described how "poor Cathy [the mum character in the large family] never gets a minute" during the day, mainly eating quick snacks or half of a sandwich on the go. The mum in both small families was also seen to be "rushed off her feet" between work and the children, which meant by the afternoon she was using coffee, tea or fizzy drinks to 'keep her going':

I just think sleep deprivation plays a really big part in this, actually. If you've just got to kind of get through work and you've really got to focus and you're feeling sleepy, you want something that's going to wake you up. And I guess it could be like a cola or it could be caffeine or something like that. But it's almost not even about your preference sometimes. It's just when you're feeling really tired and sleepy, you just need something to kind of fix that. (Group 2)

Sometimes I find some sort of, I don't know, sugary drink could also accomplish a similar thing. You know what I mean? Just something to kind of pep you up and keep you going, even if it's not something you might even particularly enjoy, or want... you kind of still do it. (Group 2)

Similar to the rushed time around breakfast, the arrival home from school was seen by most groups as a time for the family to grab something quickly while other priorities were competing for attention.

Dinners

It was clear from the groups' discussions that daily and weekly rhythms affect the amount of time and motivation parents have to prepare meals from scratch, and this was considered to have a greater effect on meal preparation than kitchen skills.¹⁵

Each of the groups imagined that the case study parents would have busy lives, between working full-time or part-time jobs, getting children to and from school or after school activities, trying to see friends and family and the daily rhythm of shopping for, preparing and eating meals. This busyness, alongside the practical and emotional challenges of

¹⁵ For more detail, see "Cooking patterns" section below.

negotiating healthy choices every day, was seen to be a key factor in their decisions about meal preparation.

Evening snacks and supper

Each group included an evening snack for the family members before bed, but these differed across the groups. For example, the young children in the Harris-McGregor household were allocated a small glass of milk, while the young MacDougall children had a larger snack of a small bowl of cereal or biscuits with their glass of milk. The children in the Robinson family were allocated cereal or toast most nights, with popcorn and crisps on Friday evenings. In the Brown family, where the parents have peanuts and crisps or cheese and crackers most evenings, the children also ate cheese and crackers some nights or had non-sugary cereal.

Throughout the discussions, it was clear that this was expected to be a small, simple snack that requires very little effort to prepare and is a comfort before bedtime.

Each of the groups decided that the parents were also likely to have a snack at the end of the day, sometimes after the children had gone to sleep. For one of the families, this was usually something like peanuts, crisps or crackers and cheese while watching tv at night. For the Robinsons, it was a simple piece of toast for Johnny but a KitKat bar for Cathy who looked forward to this moment of quiet throughout the day.

But honestly, my kind of me-time is basically after the kids are in bed. I genuinely cannot cope without treats at that stage even though it's like the middle of the night, I need something. And it could be, do you know, chocolate or some crisps or a glass of wine or something like that. Even midweek, if I'm honest. It does happen. Or a hot chocolate or just something kind of symbolic... Almost to kind of say, "Yes, got through today. And I can watch TV, even if it's like half-past ten, I'm doing it now." (Group 2)

Although the mum might not be able to eat exactly what she wanted for dinner, quality time alone in the evening when "mum hides in her room with her chocolate. A glass of wine" (Group 1) made up for the stresses and compromises throughout the day.

Cooking patterns

Community advisors believed it was reasonable to assume that the parents in each case study family would have the skills and confidence to make at least a few favourite recipes, and the main challenge was about finding the motivation and energy to make 'proper meals' every day. This was especially true for groups exploring the lives of the single mothers with young children, who would have all the challenges of encouraging and negotiating healthy choices with their children without another adult to share the practical and emotional weight.

Balancing time and effort across the week

A version of homemade lentil soup or stew was included in three of the four meal plans, and most advisors felt this was an easy, healthy, adaptable meal that could be made by most people, even with busy lives. Though many advisors were comfortable making stock from scratch,¹⁶ each of the groups decided that it would be more appropriate to include a stock cube for the case study family. As one person said “[Ham hock] would definitely make it taste better; I just never bother.” Homemade stock or not, soup was seen as “Easy. Easy-peasy” by these three groups.

Each of the groups identified Spaghetti Bolognese as a reasonable weekly meal that could be prepared by most people. As with soup, this was the kind of recipe that advisors felt was easily adapted to the ingredients the family had on hand (incorporating more or less of a particular vegetable if it was available) and was an opportunity to make something hearty and enjoyable for the whole family. Three of the groups decided the family would start with a jar of tomato sauce, while the fourth group selected a jar of passata or chopped tomatoes. In either case, there was an expectation that the person would be comfortable and confident enough to add to the sauce or chopped tomatoes as their family liked. Ingredient lists included similar amounts and ratios of beef mince, mixed vegetables (carrots, onions, peppers, mushrooms) and spices.

Swapping between days of preparing ‘safe foods’ that you know your children like and trying different things was considered important for expanding children’s tastes without tiring out the mum or children too much:

There’s almost this kind of tension between, you want to give the kids something you know that they will eat, but also try and get them to try more different things too. So, I tend to find it’s almost like one day on and one day off. One day, give them what they want. Give them fish fingers. Give them chicken nuggets. Give them macaroni cheese. And on the other day, give them a sort of maybe more mellow version of something you want and see how much of it they eat. (Group 2)

Each of the groups included nights when there was little or no cooking required, either as a marker of the end of a week or because the family was too tired and busy to prepare a ‘proper meal’ every night. For example, although some advisors shared (success) stories about making their own veggie or turkey burgers, when the groups included a ‘burger night’, it represented a simple, easy meal without a lot of preparation. The purpose was to find an easy crowd pleaser – parents could pull pre-made burger patties out of the fridge or freezer and serve with chips, coleslaw, salad, rolls and toppings that each family member likes so that they could make individual choices. Swaps for this meal might

¹⁶ Group members were animated when describing what they include in their home recipes (such making their own chicken stock from the bones from the Sunday Roast, adding a ham hock or bacon).

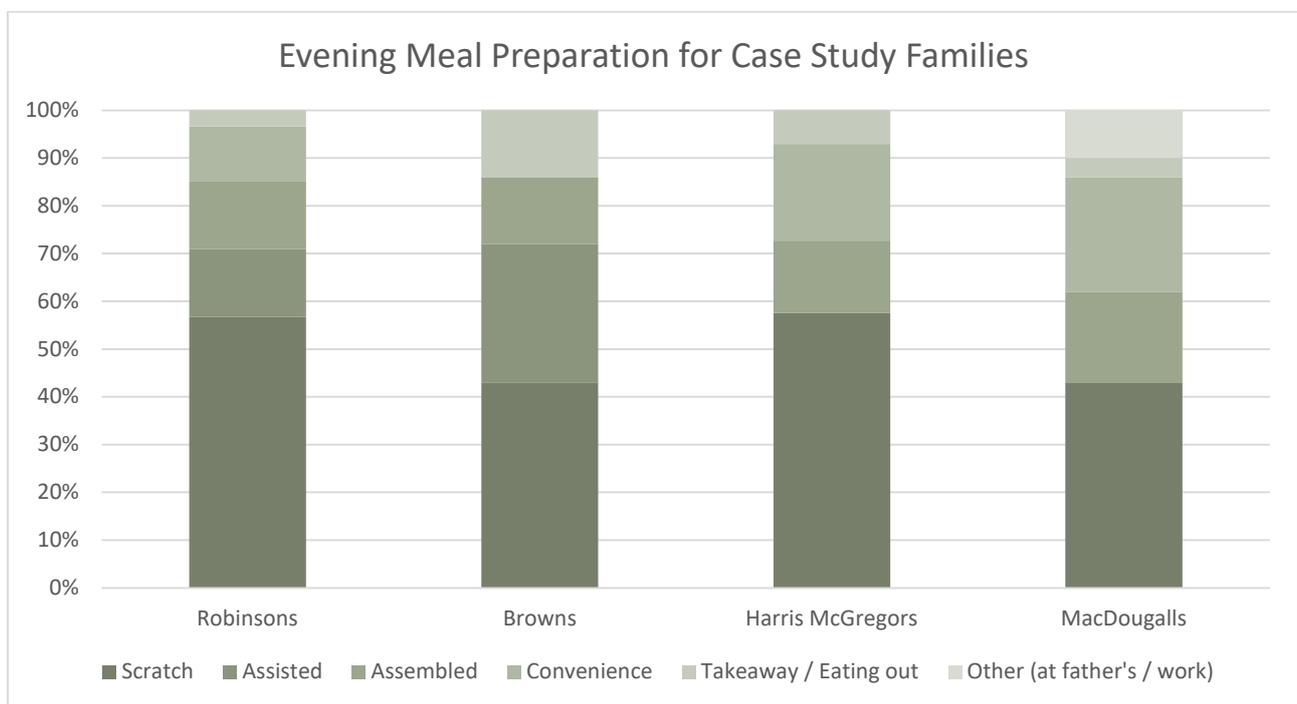
include something that takes a similar amount of time and preparation, such as chicken nuggets and chips or fish fingers and chips.

One advisor made the important point that having an 'easy night' was not always about eating unhealthy foods or takeaways, but that there are ways to use what is available at supermarkets as a strong starting point for a rounded meal:

You can buy, and it's a wee bit of a more expensive luxury, but you can buy a pot of soup that says, "One of your 5 a Day," and it looks homemade, from the supermarket. You don't have to buy a can of condensed soup anymore. And it is a wee bit more expensive. But actually, it's less wasteful as well. I would never have made up a pot of homemade soup for myself, my daughter. I don't really like soup, and I wouldn't bother to freeze portions, stuff like that. I'd buy one of these Country Garden things from Tesco's. (Group 2)

Although there was a clear commitment to including homemade meals, this has its limits. As one advisor explained: "I trained to be a chef 20 about years ago, and I could do it if I wanted to. But to be honest, I don't want to." (Group 2)

Figure 1: Balance of evening meal preparation - four case study families¹⁷



¹⁷ 'Assisted' includes meals that use some prepared ingredients, like a spice mix or jar of curry sauce, rather than preparing from scratch with individual ingredients. 'Assembled' includes meals like 'burger night' or 'chicken nuggets and chips' where parts of a meal are brought together.

Batch cooking, repurposing leftovers and using the freezer

One advisor explained that though it can be difficult to find the time and energy to cook with young children in the house, there is a sense of pride when everything comes together:

I probably come from the cook once, eat twice, eat three times school of cooking. I enjoy cooking. I liked it before I had kids. Now I do have kids, cooking with children around is like a living nightmare. So, I do not by any means do it every day. But I really like the win that you get from doing a bit of batch cooking. It's cheaper, and you can freeze it. And then you can have something that takes 10 minutes to get ready that you can sit down and eat with your children even if you're working, you're busy or whatever, or you don't have any energy, that you don't have the mum guilt of feeling, "I've just picked up something processed and chucked it in the oven." (Group 2)

This was partly about reducing food waste, but mostly about saving time – if you can make enough one night to stretch to the next, then that saves time the following day:

... you just eat it the next day, which we've not mentioned. Rather than going around freezing it and chopping your carrot in half, why are the kids and their mum not just eating it again? That is a time-saving initiative. (Group 2)

This was particularly true for the small families. Both of the groups developing the shopping lists for small families decided when the mum went to the trouble of making Spaghetti Bolognese or roasting a chicken, she would make enough to serve the family twice - either repurposing the leftovers as a new meal the next day or freezing half for the following week.

Table 2: Evening meals - Harris McGregor Family (small)

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
All: Chicken Casserole**	Nora: Cereal with Milk + Toast with Baked Beans	Nora: Salmon, Rice + Mixed Veg	All: Spaghetti Bolognese + Garlic Bread	All: Chilli Con Carne* + Rice	Nora: Supermarket Pizza	All: Chicken Salad** Sandwich
	Sophie and Jack: Fish Fingers + Baked Beans + Chips	Sophie and Jack: Macaroni Cheese + Apple Slices			Sophie and Jack: Supermarket Pizza + Ice Lolly	

*Repurposed from Spaghetti Bolognese on Thursday

**Leftover chicken from Sunday Roast at lunchtime

Repurposing leftovers was seen as a way to make time and money stretch, while providing a tasty base for including more vegetables in the family's meals.

Most groups did not expect the family to use the freezer for batch cooking or freezing ingredients for use later. They felt the family would be more likely to buy less of each item in the first place, fewer ingredients within the week or that some items would go to waste:

For something like the mushrooms, personally, if I wasn't using them for the rest of the week, I would buy the smallest pack of mushrooms. And I'd just put them all into the meal rather than think, "Well, I'm not going to use these again. I'll just let them sit in my fridge." (Group 2)

... my problem is my freezer is jam-packed. And do you know what? I do actually have things in there that I've put in containers and thought, "I will use that again," and I couldn't tell you what's in them. I've got one that's orange that could be anything. Not organised enough for labels, I'm afraid. (Group 2)

One exception that was generally accepted was dividing a larger packet of mince or chicken pieces and freezing these for the next week.¹⁸ For example, when considering which beef mince to purchase for a Spaghetti Bolognese recipe that called for 200g mince, advisors working on the small family plan explained:

I would perfectly portion it in half. I wouldn't weigh it out or anything like that. I'd use half. And then, I wrap the other half in cling film and put it in the freezer. I do know what that is in my freezer. I can see through the cling film. (Group 2)

It can be easy to lose track of leftovers or portions of meals in the freezer, but advisors thought this was less likely to be the case with meat than with portions of prepared meals (which could get 'lost').

"Eat, save or toss?" end of packet decision making

Converting the meal plans to a measurable shopping list required us to think about all the food and drink each family would likely purchase, even if they did not consume everything. This meant exploring with the community advisors what might be missing if we simply translated the meal plan into amounts – for example, what would happen to the remaining food or drink at the end of a packet after the amount needed by the family was used?

¹⁸ Some community advisors were used to freezing fresh foods at home, while others shared that they often threw food away because it had gone off. As with all discussions, the focus was to consider what the case study family was likely to do rather than what the advisors did at home.

Each group took part in an activity with some examples from the shopping list where the packet size or amount did not match what was in the meal plan. They were asked to consider whether the family would be likely to **eat** or drink the remainder, **save** this for later or **toss** the rest of the packet. The project team used the responses in this activity to establish and apply a rationale for decision-making from the group when similar issues appeared in the case study family's shopping list.

Table 3: Accounting for household food waste (examples)

Item	Amount needed per week	Projected lifespan	Adjusted lifespan	Notes
Tesco Sweet Peppers 500g (3 pack)	1 pepper	3 weeks	2 weeks	Group discussed and agreed that family would be likely to select 3 pack for convenience, but that it was likely one would spoil before used.
Tesco Baby Plum Tomatoes 325g	180g cherry tomatoes	1.8 weeks	1 week	Group discussed and agreed that the family would be likely to eat or throw out the end of a packet of cherry tomatoes within a week rather than expect this to last. This assumption was applied to similar items fresh fruits like strawberries and grapes.

Advisors shared different views on preparing enough or more than enough to eat in a meal and what would happen with the end of the packet in these situations. For example, groups working on a meal plan for the larger families all agreed that the family would be likely to use the full 500g bag or box of pasta rather than weighing out specific amounts. This might be eaten or thrown away, but the cost implications were the same – the full package would need to appear on the shopping list.

For something like garlic baguette to be served alongside the Spaghetti Bolognese night, each of the groups thought it was likely that this would be finished no matter what:

Project team: And we've also got just a quarter of a garlic baguette being eaten here...

Community advisor 1: That would never, ever, ever happen. Ever. I could eat a whole garlic baguette to myself. I don't, but I could.

Project team: Yeah. So--

Community advisor 2: It'd be like, "Oh, there's two pieces left. I'll just use it to mop up the juice from all the kids' plates in the kitchen." That's just what you would do.

A similar approach was taken to items like 1-2 remaining slices of bacon or ham. These are amounts that did not originally appear in the meal plan but needed to be accounted for in the shopping list because they are likely to be finished – because they are too tempting to leave – or incorporated in another meal (such as bacon into a pot of soup).

Thinking about the end of packets also revealed additional thoughts about the flexibility people might have in the kitchen. There was a sense that people would be more likely to use what was on hand or go without something than buy exactly the right amount of something for each week's meals:

You buy these things for your meal, right, and then you figure out what else you could put them in. It would never occur to me just to figure out, "Oh, one of this and one of that." And it's much more expensive as well. You buy a pack-- buying a bigger pack is cheaper, and then you do other stuff. (Group 2)

In practice, this meant that the groups included flexible recipes in the meal plans for each case study family, which could be adapted to include different amounts and types of vegetables, such as lentil soup and Spaghetti Bolognese, depending on what was available in the shops or fridge that week.

Shopping patterns

Community advisors were asked to consider how often the family might shop and decide whether particular items would be purchased monthly, weekly or as a 'top-up'. A range of factors were seen to influence these patterns, such as how often the parents were paid, how quickly fresh items like milk, bread, cheese, meat and fruit are eaten and how to work around children's schedules.

All of the groups assumed that the family would be likely to shop around for the best quality and price, within reasonable constraints of time, effort and distance to the shops.

Frequency of a 'big shop' versus 'top up'

Doing a 'big shop' approximately once a week was considered most common and preferred, though it is clear that this is not a fixed timeframe for most families:

So, it's not bang on [weekly]. I'm not like "Every Thursday I go..." Sometimes it's less, sometimes it might be like five days. It's just when I start running out of cheese and butter and when the fridge starts looking a bit empty, I might go again. (Group 3)

Across the groups, advisors agreed that families were likely to adjust their shopping pattern to their income schedule. One group suggested that the family would do a monthly shop when the character in full-time work was paid and top up throughout the month. A similar pattern might be expected for a family receiving Universal Credit, as one advisor explained: "Since I've had to come on to Universal Credit, I've had to learn to sort of shop monthly and then just top up, I suppose. I used to shop weekly" (Group 2).

Most community advisors agreed that bulk buying store cupboard items and non-perishables was common and buying larger packets of fresh items was preferred when it was practical. If resources allowed, bulk buying was seen to save money compared to buying ingredients for individual meals and ensured snacks and lunches were available for the whole week.

Most advisors thought it was common to top up across the week, when perishable items were running low. Even if people ordinarily shop at larger supermarkets to save money overall, a 'top-up' shop for things like bread, milk and cheese might be done at a local shop to save time. A common threshold for going back to the shop was described as the time "when there's nothing to start putting on sandwiches" or if you open the fridge to find "it's a bit Mother Hubbard" (Group 2). This might mean a 'top-up' at a local shop or returning to the supermarket, with cost implications for both.

Topping up was generally considered more expensive, though, and something to be avoided if possible. In smaller shops, prices are usually higher, while returning to a larger shop for only one or two items carries a risk of picking up more than you need. The decision was about balancing convenience with cost - sometimes topping up locally might be cheaper than going to a bigger shop in case "you come home with a whole load of other stuff that you really didn't need because it's on special" (Group 1).

Shopping around

In general, community advisors felt that people preferred to do most of their shopping at large supermarkets that provided choice and a variety of products, sizes and range of prices, but that the case study families would 'shop around' for the best prices and quality of items in their local area. This was about balancing quality, value and convenience. Despite the usefulness of low-cost shops like Lidl and Aldi, community advisors felt that "you can't get everything that you need at Aldi" or as one person explained: "I'll go to Aldi's and then I'll go to Farmfoods because I know that in the frozen section, I can get all these kinds of frozen things" (Group 2).

As one advisor explained, people are 'savvy' about finding the best quality and best value items. Getting to know where and how to buy the items your family needs is considered part of normal shopping patterns:

I don't think we give ourselves enough credit on how savvy we are, either. Because we're constantly looking at what's on promotion without even sort of realising we're doing it. And I don't know, I find it really—as a subconscious, I think you're just getting to be doing it without even thinking about what you're doing. (Group 2).

Other advisors expressed similar savviness in judging which items would perish before being eaten and how to optimise time between shops to accommodate for this. A few community advisors mentioned that sometimes the produce in the low-cost, larger stores was not as fresh as in other shops. Depending on the balance of other options, and the time needed to source from multiple locations, this could affect where fresh fruit and vegetables were purchased.

Community advisors who had moved to Scotland from another country explained that New-Scots would likely go to African, Asian, and Indian supermarkets to find products there that are not available in the main supermarkets. For example, this included specific vegetables, staple items (like particular rice) and halal meats. These shops were considered more expensive but necessary for accessing valued ingredients. It was felt that people would be unlikely to do their 'main shop' here, but rather as a weekly or monthly top up from larger supermarkets.

Enjoyable

Community advisors selected meals, snacks and ways of eating – together and apart – that they felt 'most people' would enjoy.

It is impossible to design a weekly list of foods that *everyone* would enjoy, and the groups were clear that there were limits to designing a shopping list for a 'typical Scottish family'. Effort was made to include meals that could appeal across a variety of preferences within the two household types that were the focus of this project, however, and future work can explore in more detail what would be appropriate for different household types.

Before finalising the shopping lists, each group discussed whether the balance across the week and year would be something that would bring the family both "pride and pleasure".

Sharing and enjoying food

Overall, community advisors decided that the family would make an effort to eat together whenever possible. Patterns of when and how people would eat together differed significantly between the two household types, however, and this related primarily to the age and stage of the children (rather than the number of people).

Eating together

Groups creating the meal plans for the Browns and Robinsons agreed that large families with children in primary and secondary school would aim to eat dinner together whenever possible, but they acknowledged that this would not always be the case. Activity nights, or evenings when one of the case study mums was working a late shift, would mean that not everyone was home at the same time. In general, however, advisors agreed that most nights would include time eating together “‘cause that’s probably the only family time they’ve got” (Group 1) and “it’s pretty important to have your dinner together” (Group 3).

Serving meals that allow each family member to adapt a plate to their personal preference means that there are fewer fights, and there is still only one main meal being made and offered (rather than cooking multiple meals at a time). As one advisor summarised: “You can leave the bits you don’t like but I only cook one dinner” (Group 3). Making dinner this way was easier for the larger families with older children:

Well, there’s normally a kind of one fajita certainly made with chicken. And then others that are just pure veg. And there’ll be the usual sour cream, some avocado, some lettuce and tomatoes for people to add in whatever they really like. And I normally do dips and salsa. As many veg as I can actually get into different people in that one night. That’s always a really-- that’s a big crowd-pleaser in here... if everybody’s going to be in the house at the one time, it would be fajitas, because it’s an easy one to get everyone around the table at the one time for. (Group 3)

I often do think shared dinners work a bit better if you have maybe a bigger family because they can pick and choose what they like. (Group 3)

Yeah. I’ve started putting the dishes [out]-- so making whatever I was making and put them into big bowls in the middle of the dining table, letting them pick what they wanted because my younger one would love veg but the oldest one doesn’t eat any veg. So the older one would have more meat. So that way worked out better, rather than having waste on the plates. (Group 3)

Groups working on the small families also thought there would be an aim and intention to eat together, and they thought that the evening was the best time to do this. Generally, this was considered more important than investing time in preparing the meal.

I think the compromise is that I will buy a soup that is premade, has one of their five a day, and I’m not wasting anything. I don’t have to then take extra time. That is where the compromise is for time and effort. And the same with the Bolognese situation as [advisor] said, the compromise is you’re getting them a wee, healthy vegetable in there, and you are spending time. And maybe the compromise is that

you're then going to sit down and have that Bolognese with your kids. That's the time and the effort into it. You'd rather do that and make the meal in 20 minutes than spend 2 hours doing it, freeze a couple of portions. If you have the spare time, you're not wanting to spend that time with your kids not cooking something in the kitchen, to be fair. (Group 2)

One person suggested that taking the time to sit down sometimes encouraged younger children to sit and eat as well and could feel like valuable time 'together': "I think them seeing me eat, encourages them to eat sometimes. It's the thing that we do together." (Group 4)

Even though groups agreed that the mum in a single parent family would be present when her young children were eating dinner, advisors felt that she would not eat the same as them every day. Ultimately, this came down to the feeling that there is only so much 'kiddie food' a parent is willing to eat in a week. As a compromise, the community advisors agreed that the mum would sometimes have a variation of what the children were having, but adjusted to an adult's tastes:

... if you're making pasta or something, she'd maybe make more of a blander sauce for the kids and have chili or something in hers, or added chicken or something like that, if the kids don't particularly like that in their pasta. (Group 4)

I think it's quite nice for the mum to have an option of a hot sauce to put in. I often do that just to make the meal more interesting. (Group 4)

Although the advisors expressed guilt at eating different food from their young children, the value of sharing a meal without conflict was more important than eating the same thing.

Time alone

Being able to share food together is an important part of realising the right to food, but it is clear that there are exceptions to this. For some people, at some stages of their or their children's lives, the opportunity to sit by yourself and enjoy a meal that *you* like can be highly valued:

I think that if they were having something relatively adult, like Spaghetti Bolognese, but obviously, chop it up for them so it's not chaos or whatever, then I would have had the same. But there were definitely times – I think that most mums have to own up and say, "Yeah, there was times that they came in and they had chicken nuggets, chips and beans, and I didn't want that. So when they went to bed, I had a nice salad and some pasta." (Group 2)

Each of the groups also included evening snacks for the parents to have after the children had gone to bed. This was part of having some ‘time alone’ after a busy day. One group discussed how this could be particularly important for single parents because of their position as the only adult in the household.

Relaxing over the weekend

All four groups included a shared dinner and family night on Friday or Saturday evening, where there was little to no cooking (either supermarket pizzas or a takeaway) and snacks for watching a film or show together. End-of-week meals were considered a special time for the family to come together over “something that’s a little bit special that you wouldn’t ordinarily have” (Group 2). Generally, these evenings would include snacks such as popcorn, chocolate or crisps as well – things that the family would not normally have during the week.

Along with a special family evening, weekends were seen as an opportunity to include some additional ‘treats’, such as a cooked breakfast (especially for families with older children, who might sleep in a bit later on the weekend) or something like croissants in the afternoon:

It could be pancakes or it could be eggs or something like that. I don't know... that takes a little bit of time that you might actually enjoy eating, you don't want to do when you're blurry-eyed and just got out of bed, I think. (Group 2)

... on a Saturday, they might have croissant or something that they might even keep in the freezer and just pull out for something different, or someone will come back from the shop or the supermarket with some cakes or some doughnuts or something, and they kind of get left out and will help themselves... maybe there's something like that, something that makes the weekend feel like more of a treat. (Group 3)

Three of the four families decided to have a ‘proper lunch’ at some point over the weekend, with more time spent preparing and sharing a meal. Some advisors suggested this would be a time where other family members, for example grandparents, might come and eat all together. One small family group chose not to have a roast, as the mum character worked weekends and the children were with their father over the weekend.¹⁹

¹⁹ BBC Good Food Nation [survey](#) of more than 3000 adults and kids conducted in August 2022 revealed that “Among those who cook, 26% claim[ed] they are less likely to make a Sunday roast” due to the rising costs of living.

Enough for guests

Community advisors were clear that the families would expect to purchase extra food for guests on occasion and to have some items in the house for unexpected situations.²⁰ Food for friends or family could include an extra bottle of wine, sharing bag of crisps or 'nice biscuits'. Parents would also be expected to have food for their children's friends, especially primary aged children who might come round with less notice than younger children. Since other children might be 'picky eaters' or have allergies, common items listed here were foods that were generally child-friendly, like nuggets and chips in the freezer, small packs of rice cakes, or pasta and sauce for a simple dinner.

Sense of pride and value

Taking pride and pleasure in our food relates to what, where and how we eat. It involves having the time, energy and resources to prepare and eat a balance of foods that promote physical and mental wellbeing, feeling recognised for effort put into shopping and preparing food and being able to enjoy food alone and in company with our friends and family.

It also includes being able to access a reasonable variety of foods nearby and to afford some choices about the quality and brands of food we eat and have available for guests. Taking pride and pleasure in our food means being able to afford strawberries when they are in season and having a choice about how often we buy a weekday lunch, order a takeaway or eat out with friends or as a family.

Feeling valued

Many of the positive examples that community advisors shared related to times when they had put effort into making a new recipe, learned something new or managed to prepare a special meal that everyone enjoyed. When these moments go well, this comes with a sense of achievement and pride, which reflects the value placed on homemade and from scratch dishes.

I started making bread a few years ago, and my best bread I ever made was fruit bread. And then, I chopped it up and put it in the freezer so when I felt like a wee bit, I could just go and eat it then... It was just delicious. (Group 1)

A critical part of this, however, was feeling that this effort was recognised or valued when people appreciated the food that you had prepared, or at the very least enjoyed it. The converse were examples of times when people had 'spent ages' making a meal, and no one offered any positive response. In these cases, it felt like far too much effort compared to reward, and some advisors had given up trying to please everyone:

²⁰ In a survey of 1,002 adults living in Scotland in March 2022, 78% of adults agreed that "Every family in Scotland should be able to afford extra food as backup, in case, for example, one of their children's friends comes round". Commissioned by Nourish Scotland and conducted by Survation, 24-28 March 2022 (unpublished).

I made a stew. And I spent ages making a stew. Three hours or something. And my stepdaughter at the time, she didn't like it. Oh, I was gutted. I was raging. So after that, I just-- well, they made their own stuff, because I was just annoyed. But I was gutted. I felt like crying... I was just hoping that they would enjoy it. And I made an effort, and I thought it was just going to be a really special time for three of us to sit down and eat together, and no. It just completely went all wrong. (Group 1)

A few of the advisors had examples from making Sunday roasts or Christmas dinners, when after preparing the meal, the last thing they wanted to do was eat it:

It normally happens on Christmas Day. [laughter] Sunday dinners, or the fact that you've stood and chopped, and peeled, and prepared everything, and then you get to a point, you're like, "Well, I've stood here all day doing all this, and now I don't even feel hungry, because I've stood smelling it and cooking it all day." (Group 1)

Some groups discussed how 'disheartening' it can be to put effort into a meal that your children refuse to eat, which can prevent people from trying new options or integrating foods that might lead to an argument.

Avoiding waste and considering the environment

There was a strong commitment across the groups to reducing household food waste and a sense of pride when you felt you had saved something from going in the bin. For vegetables, the greatest sense of pride seemed to come from catching them before they went off and including or 'sneaking' them in a meal:

... when you've got stuff to use up in the fridge, and I started making pots of pasta sauce. I just cook all the vegetables up and then blend them down. And I always feel really proud when there's vegetables that we'd used and people actually like it. One of my friends came over for dinner. Her wee girl ate the pasta sauce and she's like, "She never eats vegetables! She just doesn't." It's like, that's my magical leftover vegetable pasta sauce. So yeah, that's my proud moment. (Group 1)

With more expensive items, like meat, pride came from feeling that you had planned well and did not end up wasting something that could have been frozen earlier or simply not bought that week:

The last couple of weeks ...we're quite proud of ourselves because we're not throwing very much food out. Since being involved with the food share project, I've learned a lot about food and about what I do with the food in my place. And we used to have-- I'm totally ashamed of myself to say that we used to have quite a lot of waste. If I didn't want lamb chops on any given day, I just didn't eat them and

[inaudible] putting it in the bin. And now I don't think that way about the lamb chops because they're ready to be eaten. So, it sort of changed the way we eat in our house and much more conscious of waste. (Group 1)

Buying local, plastic free and in season were raised as ambitions by some community advisors, but most agreed that added concerns around cost, convenience and availability in the current context presented too many barriers to specify these as priorities. This was described as gap between values and actions:

There's have been a lot of chat in communities about shopping more local, or getting veg boxes from local farms, and all these other things, which is really nice in theory, and I think a lot of people in wealthier communities are doing that. But I think a lot of people who are a bit strapped for cash are looking at, "Well, how many carrots can I get for 42p?" rather than what is the better option for the environment. (Group 1)

Some measures, like Morrisons introducing soft-plastic recycling, were seen as progress and the type of change that could influence a shift in shopping patterns.

'Mum guilt' and pressure from others

Although the group members were familiar with the Eatwell Guide, very few felt that they were meeting the recommendations in their own households. This disparity between public health messages about balanced diets and what people feel is realistic and achievable in the context of family life came up often in the discussions.

Many community advisors shared a sense that it is not possible to 'get it right' all the time:

I think it does depend... Some weeks you might do a bit more cooking. For me, I suppose, I want to be able to serve my kids something that isn't going to take loads of time, at least not every day, but where I don't have the guilt that what I'm putting in them isn't good... What we don't want to feel as a mum is guilty about what they're eating because that is [unhealthy]. (Group 2)

It actually makes me feel quite guilty because we are nowhere near that one, unfortunately, but it's nice to see it as a guide to see that that's what we really should be working towards. But I think it's difficult to look at that and think we are not really doing that. So, there's the mum guilt. (Group 2)

The discussions did not aim to improve group members' cooking or budgeting skills, but it was clear that advisors valued the opportunity to swap and share tips with each other in a trusted and non-judgmental space. Community advisors often described how they felt

'less alone' and 'less guilty' as a result of being part of a group because they could openly discuss the realities of the day in and day out decision-making about meal preparation with other people who understood. This was especially appreciated by advisors working with the single mum character, perhaps because single parents are left without another adult to share the responsibility and 'guilt' with for not 'getting it right'.

One person described how that feeling of social pressure included people who might see what she had in her shopping trolley, such as the person at the till:

I'm walking around Tesco, whatever, and I've got my chocolate in the trolley. And I look at it and I go, 'Oh, I've got a lot of rubbish in here. Maybe the person at the checkout will judge me for that. Better put some apples in.' ... because you know how the world projects on you and what you eat. (Group 1)

The group itself became a supportive space where advisors would encourage each other for things they were proud of, and console each other when sharing difficult food stories.

... it is quite sort of helpful and reassuring, sort of to hear other people's strategies and perspectives and how they approach their weekly shop. And it makes you feel, I guess, less guilty or bad for not being the perfect mum or the perfect cook or the perfect this and that. (Group 2)

On a personal level, many advisors expressed that the solidarity they found with other parents in the groups was meaningful and comforting. Hearing what other mothers did eased the 'mum guilt' they often spoke of as the advisors became more comfortable sharing their highs and lows.

Special occasions

As part of developing a full account of the food and drink costs for the household, community advisors discussed how often the family would be likely to order a takeaway or eat out as a family, and they agreed on the amount of money they thought a small or large family would need to spend to celebrate each birthday and major holiday. Views about what was reasonable to spend on these occasions varied considerably, and the final amounts represent the compromises each group made when thinking about a balance of foods that are enjoyable, healthy 'enough' and a good fit for the family's life.

Takeaways and eating out

Views differed on whether a single parent with two young children would enjoy going out for a meal as a family. One group decided that the family would be likely to eat out 1-3 times a month, including a trip to a family-friendly sit-down restaurant like Pizza Hut or Brewers Fayre, or to McDonald's for a takeaway or because of the soft play area. Going

out for a meal was viewed by this group as a way to spend time together as a family with less hassle around dishes and cooking time for mum and a treat for the children.

She's a busy person, as everyone is, no matter what you do, if you work or you're a stay-at-home mum, or whatever, you're busy and there will be twice a month that you think, "Right. In the car. We're going to Tesco's. We're going to McDonald's. We're going to Brewers Fayre. Or we're going somewhere because this is going to make more dishes and I've had a busy day." (Group 2)

We quite enjoy just kind of-- not doing "fake-aways" but just getting kind of food that isn't that great for you and just whipping it up or something. I think because the takeaways are so busy on a Saturday night, we try and avoid them. (Group 2)

The other small family group was clear that when children are young, it can be stressful to manage their behaviour in a restaurant on your own. This group chose to include some money for the family to get a coffee and baked goods at a café where they could sit outside, for example after a weekend walk.

The advisors in the small family groups mostly felt that sharing the evening together was more important than getting a takeaway.

... by the time I've got something and they've each got something, I just think it's kind of expensive. And they never eat it all. And I'm just like, honestly, I could get two pizzas for [the price of a takeaway], which I know they'll eat, from the Co-op for like £5. Do you know? So, why would I go and spend like 20 on something that they're just going to kind of pick at? So, yeah, I think for me-- I think if you're on a budget or something, I really honestly think that you just-- I just kind of avoid the takeaway thing. It's just that wouldn't even be that much of a treat for my kids because I haven't really done it that much for them. They wouldn't get that excited about it anyway. Honestly, they prefer a pizza from the co-op. (Group 2)

The core of this was less about the actual food – with some significant disagreement about the value of takeaways, especially for younger children – and more about spending time together when mum or dad did not need to be focused on meal prep and clean up.

Birthdays and celebrations

Groups were asked to discuss what would happen when it was one of the family member's birthdays, school holiday or a celebration like Christmas or Easter.

There was significant variation between community advisors and across the groups about what should be expected for children's and adults' birthdays, and therefore

included in the budget. It was particularly difficult to come to agreement on this when the case study family had a young child, because of the wide range of expectations and options:

Low cost	Medium cost	High cost
Party at home with a few of your child's friends (and their parents if younger) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snacks and picnic foods • Homemade or supermarket cake 	Taking your child and their friends to a park with picnic snacks or a day trip <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snacks and picnic foods with small drink or snack purchased out • Homemade or supermarket cake 	Taking your child and their friends to an activity like soft play <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meal and drink bought at venue • Personalised cake ordered from a bakery

Many people described the pressure parents are under to put on something more fun and engaging than other parents:

... it is really, really expensive. And I feel it's a big competition. A one-year-old, for instance, birthday party and they've got a cake that's nearly like £100, I've seen them. And I'm like, "I don't even want to cut the cake, it's too nice." ... I think you really need to, instead of putting on a show, think what the kids are wanting. What happened to the old-fashioned days of the ice cream and jelly, and a wee sweetie? That made their wee faces light up, rather than, "Oh, I'm going to go and buy these vol-au-vents and all these fancy foods." And it's more for the parents to show off to each other than it is for the actual kids. (Group 4)

Although the groups did not include budget for these more expensive birthday parties, it was clear that never being able to splurge on something like this would feel constraining over time. One advisor suggested that it would better if parents had room in their budget to host a "bigger deal birthday" every couple of years:

... maybe having a bit of a budget for a bigger deal birthday party, if you know what I mean, rather than having something in the house. If you wanted to take all the kids and their friends to soft play and then for pizza or something, that always works out so much more expensive. You might not do it every year, but maybe you will have been able to do it for one child a year at least. It gives you that sense of, "I've treated my friends' kids, and I feel like I'm able to do something nice for my children, something really memorable." (Group 1)

Healthy 'enough'

Each group established a meal plan for the family's 'typical week' based on what they imagined the families would enjoy and choose within the reality of their day to day lives. They then spent time discussing the Eatwell Guide and feedback from public health nutritionists in order to make changes they believed the family would accept as reasonable ways to bring the meal plans into better alignment with government recommendations.

Before discussing specific changes to the 'typical' meal plan, group members were asked to think about what the case study families themselves would prioritise in making healthier choices or being able to access a healthier diet. This was central to the work as a rights-based project to ensure that rights-holders were setting the agenda for change.

The meal plans are not a reflection of the Eatwell Guide and if every family ate this way, we would not achieve the Scottish Dietary Goals.²¹ Instead, they are examples of the healthiest balance of foods that people with experience shopping for, preparing and eating in families agree is a good fit for people's lives and would be enjoyed by most people in today's Scotland.

Reflections on the Eatwell Guide

All the community advisors had seen the Eatwell Guide, either through their children or because they had used it in their own work in kitchens or community centres. Overall, there was a sense that the Eatwell Guide provides some useful context and perspective, and a few group members agreed it may be something 'to aspire to'. However, none of the community advisors thought the Eatwell Guide was relatable or achievable for their families or the people they knew.

I don't actually know anyone who looks at this and goes, "oh yeah, it's great. I reckon I'm pretty much on that". (Group 2)

I understand completely that it would be amazing if everyone was really, really healthy. But when you're doing things and you're busy and your kids won't eat certain things, it's not worth the fight. And somebody in this situation, I think-- I feel that Nora, or the person that we've created, this family we've created, would look at [the Eatwell Guide] and go, "oh, yeah, totally, when I get around it". It's not achievable in most people's lives. And maybe that's where the issue is. Maybe it's

²¹ In September 2022, Food Standards Scotland carried out a nutritional analysis of the adult characters in each of the case study families to compare the 7-day diets with both the Scottish Dietary Goals and the Scottish population averages. Full analysis available by request.

actually with the government saying we should all be doing this. Maybe they should step back and say, well, what are real people doing? (Group 2)

Although all groups made changes towards a healthier meal plan than they had suggested for a 'typical week', some members felt strongly that dietary recommendations were unhelpful and out of touch with people's lived experiences. Ultimately, each of the groups agreed with the starting point of the project – that many people want to eat more healthily but feel they cannot afford it – and choices about reasonable swaps were made with this in mind.

Priorities for 'eating healthy'

We asked each group to consider what the families themselves would value and prioritise when thinking about eating healthily. The group then used these priorities as a lens for making decisions about healthy swaps and add-ins to their original 'typical' meal plans.

What does the family mean by healthy? What would they like to be eating if budget constraints weren't a factor?

What do you think [the mum in the family] means when she thinks, "I want to be eating healthier. I would like our family to be eating healthier. These are the things I want to be able to do."

As with every part of this project, it is important to remember that community advisors were sharing views about what the case study characters might do based on their own perspectives of these issues and the information presented in the sessions.

Conversations often focused on what the mum character would do in the larger families, in part because the advisors could relate more readily with her decision-making. Their discussions also suggest that mothers still feel most of the responsibility for setting, shaping and informing both the aspirations around healthy eating – and whether the family is able to meet these aspirations. Views and priorities of other members of the case study families (younger children, teenagers, fathers) might differ if discussions were held with community advisors representing these perspectives.

Finding a balance

The overall aspiration identified by each group was to have a balanced diet including:

- More fruit and veg
- Less meat
- Less sugar
- Fewer 'snacks' and 'processed foods' (e.g. crisps, biscuits and chocolate)

Eating more fruit and veg was the most common response to what 'eating healthy' might mean for the family. Many group members mentioned the aim to eat '5 a day' specifically, and in some cases, this was directly associated with eating less meat. As one advisor summarised:

It's a good mixture between fruit and veg. Some meats. Maybe a meat free [day]. It's not always... doesn't always work, but that's ideally what you'd want. You'd want your plate to look quite healthy when you put it down to children. (Group 3)

Another advisor suggested that a 'plant-based' diet would help achieve an overall balance and help the family be 'at optimal health':

I think maybe including more plant-based food into their diet, fruit and veg and yams and things like that, less processed food, less red meat, that kind of thing... she just wants the family to be at optimal health and even if they can't afford the best food, you can still make healthy changes with the types of food that they eat... she wants them to be healthy and active and be in good health basically. (Group 4)

Despite some mentions that eating less meat could help the family be healthier, reducing meat consumption was not a high priority when the groups decided healthier 'swaps' and 'add-ins'.

It's interesting how we always associate health with fruit and veg, and we never really talk about the volume of meat we-- I'm a big meat eater. And I know that that's pretty poor in my diet. I don't eat very much fish at all, other than tuna mayo, once in a blue moon. But we eat a lot of meat in my house. I eat a lot of veg, and a lot of fruit, and a lot of salads, and I like the odd bit of salmon, but the odd bit of salmon. But we always equate health with fruit and veg, don't we?" (Group 1)

This demonstrates a strong awareness about the positive health implications of reducing (particularly red) meat consumption, but group members did not think this would be reasonable or a shared aspiration for the case study families.

Many groups talked about buying and eating less processed food for children. This was mainly about making healthier swaps for highly processed snacks but also related to making more meals from scratch:

I would say in terms of like negatives, cut out sugar, cut out processed snacks... (Group 2)

I think that is good if we make some meals ourselves, not to buy the ready-to-eat. The things like - I don't know - fast foods or some ready meals just to put in microwaves, I try to do something every day, try to cook some fresh things. (Group 2)

Many of the advisors thought families might be aiming to eat less sugar or 'cut out sugar' because sugar is 'bad'. Occasionally, advisors mentioned drinking more water, especially as a swap for sugary juices and fizzy drinks.

Healthy swaps and add-ins

Each group received feedback on their draft meal plans from public health nutritionists and reviewed the Eatwell Guide recommendations. Then, they used their own discussions about the healthy aspirations of the family as the lens for making decisions about healthy swaps and add-ins.²² These discussions were framed as opportunities for the group to review the weekly meal plans and see what changes might be reasonable to help the family eat more healthily.

Advisors were comfortable enough with each other by this point in the project that they were able to challenge different viewpoints and be honest about what they thought was reasonable - this was important. We did not want groups to make changes based on what they thought the project team 'wanted to hear'.

Fruit and vegetables

Each group found it easier to identify ways to include fruit than vegetables - this was generally a matter of exchanging one snack for another or adding fruit to what was already in place for breakfast (e.g. cereal or porridge).

Orange juice, especially for breakfast, was added by some groups without much hesitation, whereas other groups were more conflicted about whether the family would have space in their fridge for fresh orange juice.²³ For someone with a small fridge and young children, the potential risk of wasting money on something relatively costly, that a child might refuse and with a short shelf life (knowing the family had diluting juice in the cupboard) was not worth it. One group considered including a homemade smoothie in the morning to increase fruit and berry intake for the teenage son in this family, but they decided this would be too time consuming.

Vegetables were generally added to meals rather than swapped for snacks, and all groups found that the families could try to add more veg to their typical week. Many of the community advisors suggested that the families could add vegetables to pasta

²² See [Methods and Approach report](#) for more detail.

²³ Three out of four groups added orange juice to increase the children's fruit intake.

sauces and stews without attracting attention, supporting the children and everyone in the family to eat more vegetables without noticing:

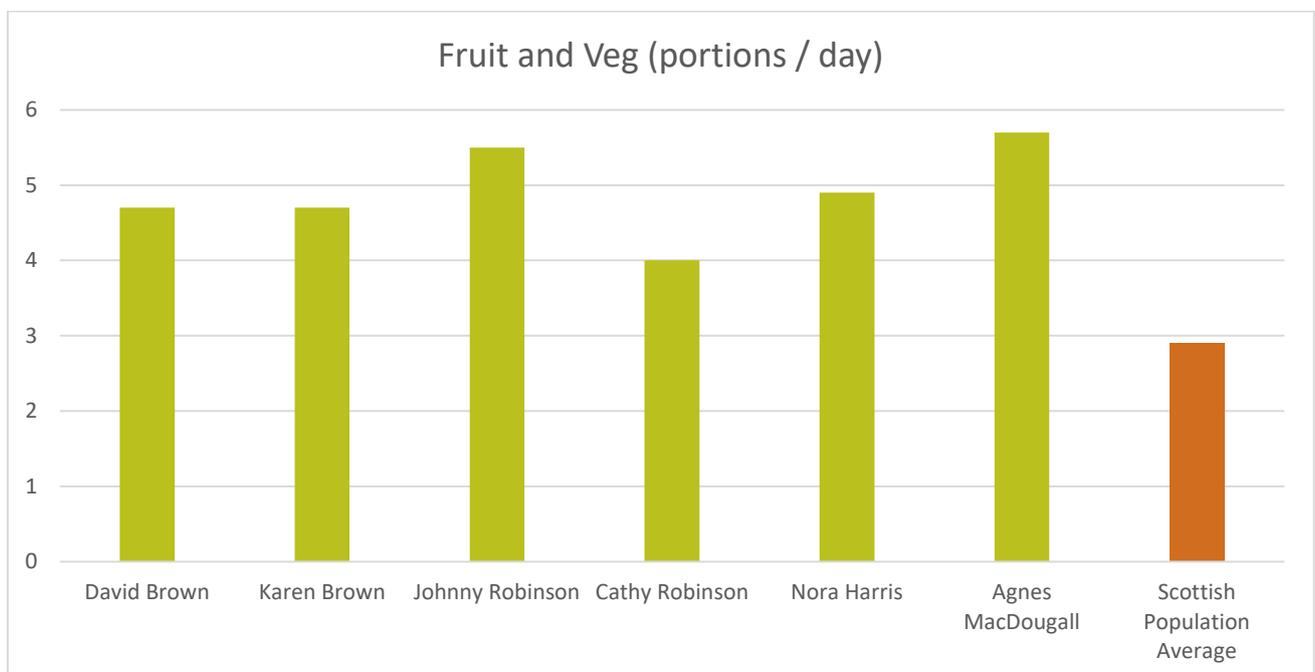
Bolognese is like – every person in the house loves spaghetti but also, I absolutely pack it with vegetables and then cut them up really, really small because they end up just disintegrating, and they can't really tell the difference between the meat and the veg so they end up eating loads of veg and they don't know. (Group 4)

Yeah. We do that. We grate courgette and carrot and chop up peppers small and onion and garlic. Yeah. I try to put in as much as possible. (Group 4)

For the adults, another relatively easy vegetable add-in was pre-cut and packaged salads to be eaten alongside an evening meal or added to a ham or cheese sandwich (these additions were not considered reasonable for children). Two groups discussed adding carrot and cucumber sticks to the children's snacks and lunchboxes, but only one group reached consensus that this seemed reasonable.

Finally, batch cooking homemade soup to bring into work was considered an efficient way to increase vegetable intake across the week in the colder months. Both the larger families batch cook soup on the weekend, whereas the advisors decided the mother in the single-parent household would not have the time for this change.

Figure 2: Scottish Dietary Goal - increase intake, target of 5 or more portions per day



Fibre

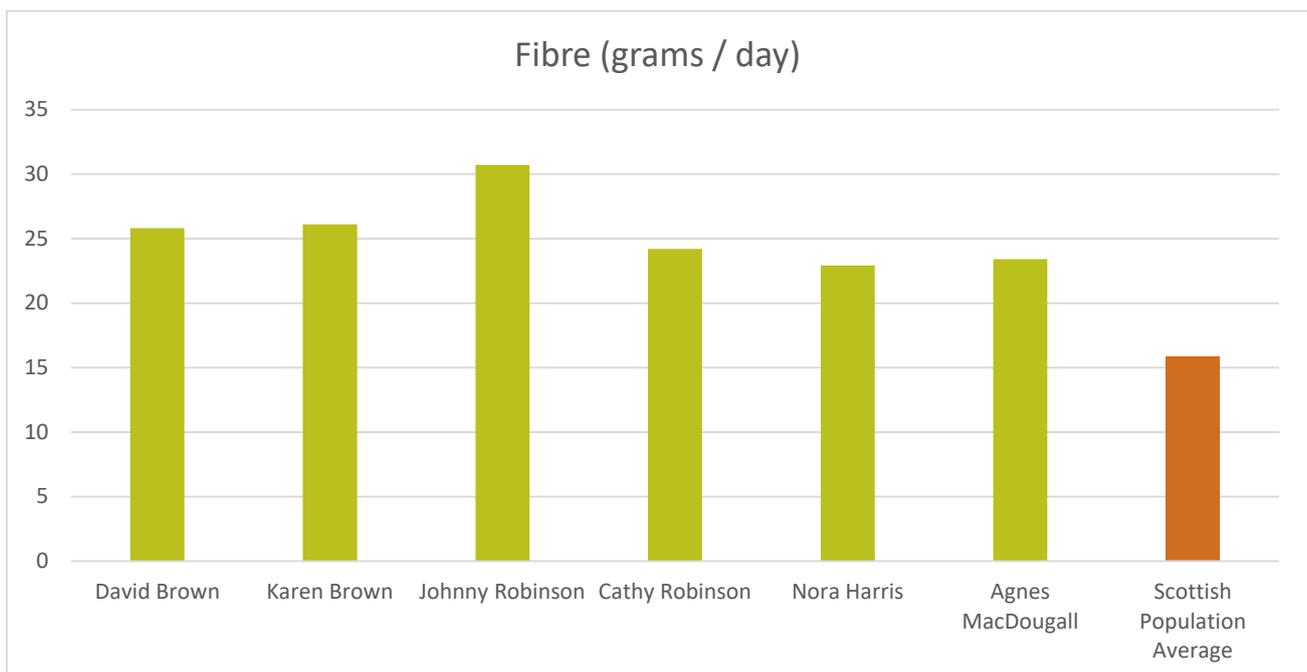
The community advisors were asked to think about ways the family might increase fibre intake, mainly in relation to nutritionists’ suggestions to switch cereal, pasta, rice, and bread to more fibre-rich and wholegrain alternatives.

Only one group included a single, wholegrain cereal (Weetabix) in the typical meal plan without including a sugary option. Most groups agreed that primary and secondary aged children would be likely to mix multiple cereals, and when discussing healthier swaps, each group agreed that at least one of these could be a wholegrain, high-fibre option if there was not a significant price difference. This came with a compromise, however, because some advisors thought children would then want to add sugar or sweetener to the cereal to make it palatable. Community advisors felt that the children were less likely to have healthier cereals without sweetener, fruit, berries, or chocolate spread added on top.

The groups were all in agreement that swapping to wholewheat pasta was unreasonable, because the taste was too significant of a change: “Maybe [changing to wholewheat pasta is] a swap you can do in the next months. Just ease them in gently”. Brown rice was considered a reasonable swap by some of the community advisors in the context of an easy meal for an adult, where they could heat a single-serving mixed grain pouch in the microwave. For full family meals, however, the community advisors agreed to keep white rice in the meal plans.

All groups agreed on 50/50 bread, which provided a compromise between the parents wanting a more nutritious option and the children’s preference for white bread.

Figure 3: Scottish Dietary Goal - increase intake, target of 30g per day



Dairy

Switching to lower-fat cheese was considered undesirable or too difficult by the groups. This was mostly due to the taste difference, but other factors included advisors not being aware that a low-fat option existed (e.g. for cheddar cheese) or simply not seeing the need for a change. Some of the groups were unable to reach consensus on which cheese the families should eat initially, but in the end none of the groups swapped to a low-fat cheese.

Although most people thought the adults would be happy to have low-fat yoghurts, one advisor mentioned that this might be difficult to manage for a parent with a young child.

... it means you end up having to buy two different sorts. Something for you which isn't full-fat and something for them that is. Because you sort of feel bad about maybe giving the kids zero-percent yoghurt or something, you might end up eating the full-fat ones just so as to avoid buying the two. (Group 2)

Other advisors thought it likely that the mum would stop eating yoghurt all together, to avoid buying two products. This only came up in small families, and it seemed easier for larger families to have more variety with more people to eat the food before it goes off.

Milk was less contentious, and all the groups agreed that everyone would drink and use semi-skimmed milk in tea, coffee and cereal, apart from the youngest child (aged 2), who would have whole milk. As with fresh orange juice and diluting juice, however, having to purchase two different milks was seen to put additional strain on the space available in a fridge for a small family.

Beans, pulses, fish, eggs and meat

The typical meal plans already included some examples of the family using beans alongside or instead of meat, such as in fajitas or chickpea curry. Many groups discussed how beans and extra vegetables could be used in homemade soups, stews or Spaghetti Bolognese to make meat go further.

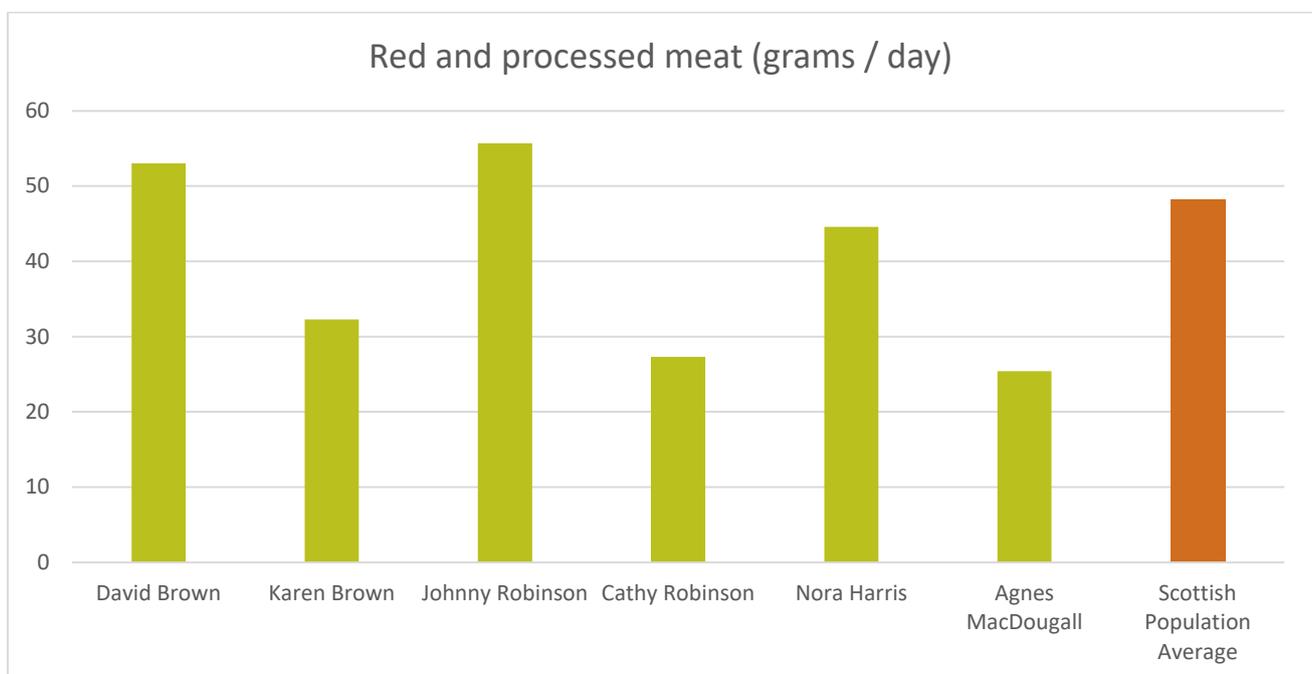
Most of the family members were already eating plenty of protein in the typical meal plans, apart from the mother in some cases. Baked beans and eggs were added to individual family members' weeks in these cases, usually with toast in the mornings. Eggs were swapped in for bacon in one family, as it filled the same purpose in the weekend cooked breakfast but was considered a healthier option (in terms of reducing salt and red meat).

Adding toast with eggs or beans also helped increase the calorie intake for the single parent mothers, who were initially low in intake overall. Advisors generally agreed that an

extra slice of toast in the mornings would be the best way to increase energy intake, even though there was disagreement about how much time she would have to eat a ‘proper’ breakfast. Consensus was particularly difficult to reach in conversations on increasing intake for the single parents, however, as time and convenience considerations were a barrier for the mother to eat enough across the day. The compromise was that she could be expected to add baked beans or an egg on days when she returned home after the school run.

Some community advisors suggested swapping processed meats, such as salami and ham, with chicken or tuna. However, the groups decided that swapping this entirely would not be reflective of a ‘normal’ diet in Scotland and decided that adding salads to ham sandwiches would be more reasonable than replacing the ham altogether.

Figure 4: Scottish Dietary Goal - no increase to intake, and no more than 70g per day



Foods high in fat, salt and sugar

There was a general resistance to equating low-fat with healthy, and as one advisor put it:

I don't like the idea of putting the message out there that everything should be low-fat, and that's how it should be. I think the better message would be how to get a balanced diet, enjoy good food and not feel guilty about it. (Group 4)

When asked specifically about swapping fizzy drinks for their low-fat and low-sugar counterparts, there was no clear consensus. Some groups agreed to the swap (“Yeah. That seems like a reasonable swap”), whereas others thought it unlikely. Some groups

agreed that the swap would be easier in a meal-deal scenario, however, where juices and smoothies were offered alongside fizzy drinks, and these swaps were made.

I mean, there's quite a lot of stuff out there that is an alternative anyway to colas these days that you get with a meal deal – used to be the case, I think, if you went into Boots or something, they would only have fizzy drinks, but now there's fresh juices and fruit... It's actually all part of the deal these days. So yeah, you could swap and just take something else from that, I suppose, if you were so inclined. (Group 2)

But I do think if they didn't have anything like that, and it was a fizzy, I would pick the diet and probably only because I would look at it and go, "I've eaten so much junk. I better be healthy in one thing. Go for the diet." (Group 2)

The typical meal plan included an energy drink each morning for the teenage son in the Robinson family. This was based on group members' experiences of seeing young people walking with their friends having fizzy drinks and energy drinks on their way to school or during breaks. Although there is evidence that up to a third of UK children under 18 have an energy drink weekly,²⁴ the group decided to swap these to a fizzy drink when considering recommendations from a public health nutritionist.

Each group unanimously decided that it was not reasonable to swap nuggets and baked beans for low-fat and low-sugar options. Advisors explained they had never seen low-salt nuggets in the supermarket, and that their children were too used to the taste and branding of regular beans. For single parent households, the smaller 'snap pots' of baked beans, which do not come in a low-sugar and salt version, were viewed as much more practical:

That comes down to cost and convenience again, because actually, [Heinz Snap Pots are] what I pick up because I won't use an entire tin of beans. I'll just use a wee snap pot. So that's what I tend to pick up. And I think they are just your regular bog-standard beans in those. And, yeah, chicken nuggets-- I think, potentially, I would go to the freezer section and go, "Oh right. These are the usual ones." Or I might go, "Oh, the Birdseye ones are on special this week. I'll buy those ones instead." So, I genuinely wouldn't in my shopping go, "Right. Where's the low-salt chicken nuggets?" I just pick up chicken nuggets. (Group 2)

²⁴ Khouja C, Kneale D, Brunton G, et al (2022) Consumption and effects of caffeinated energy drinks in young people: an overview of systematic reviews and secondary analysis of UK data to inform policy. *BMJ Open*. Available at: <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/12/2/e047746>

Figure 5: Scottish Dietary Goals - decrease intake, targets less than 35% of food energy (fat) and less than 11% of food energy (saturated fat)

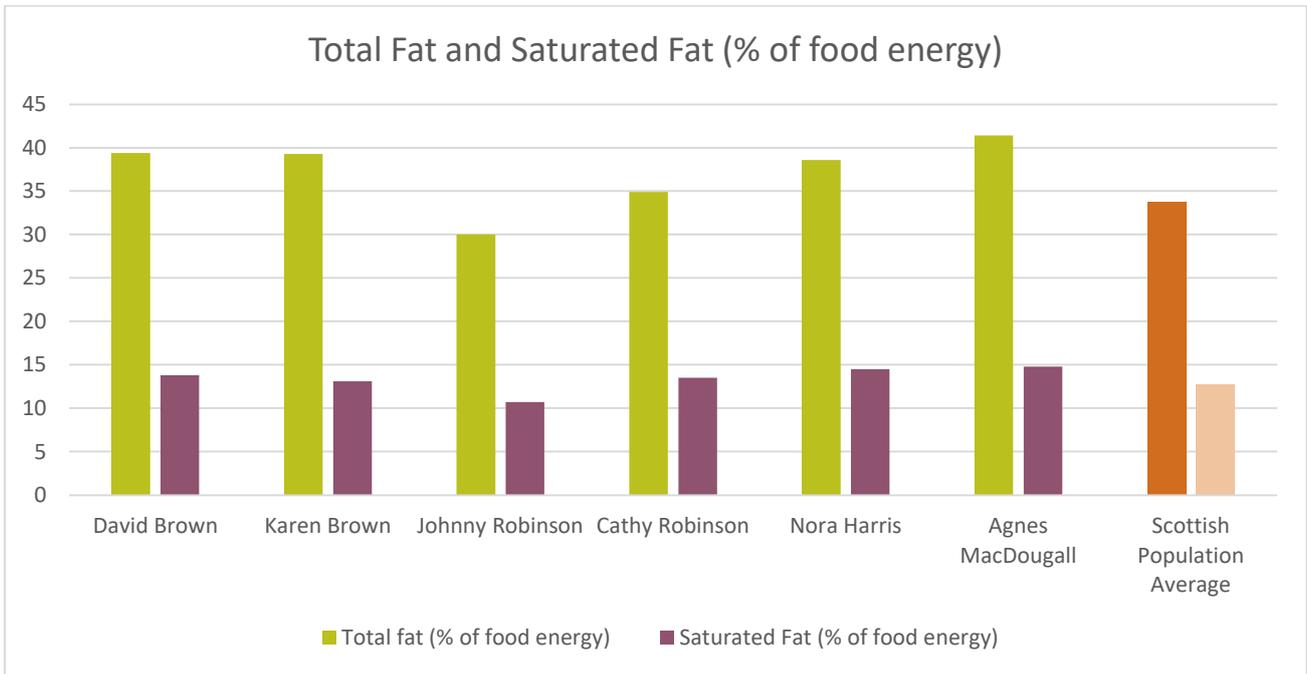


Figure 6: Scottish Dietary Goal - decrease intake, target less than 6g per day

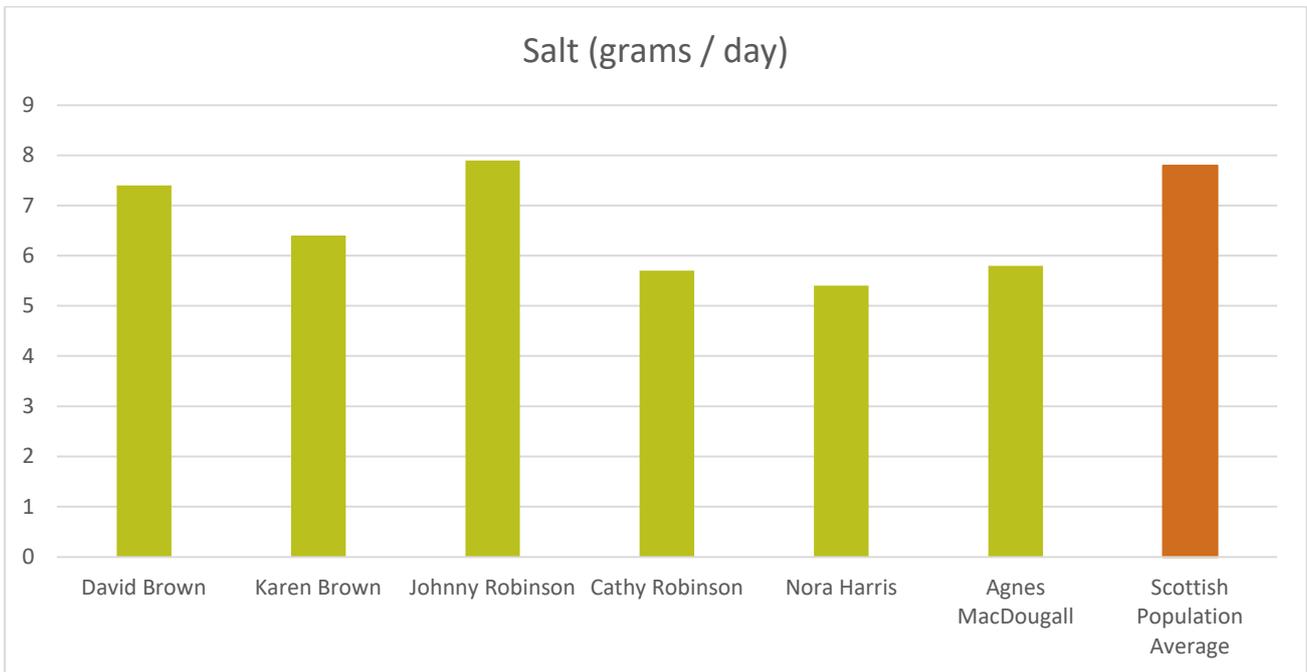
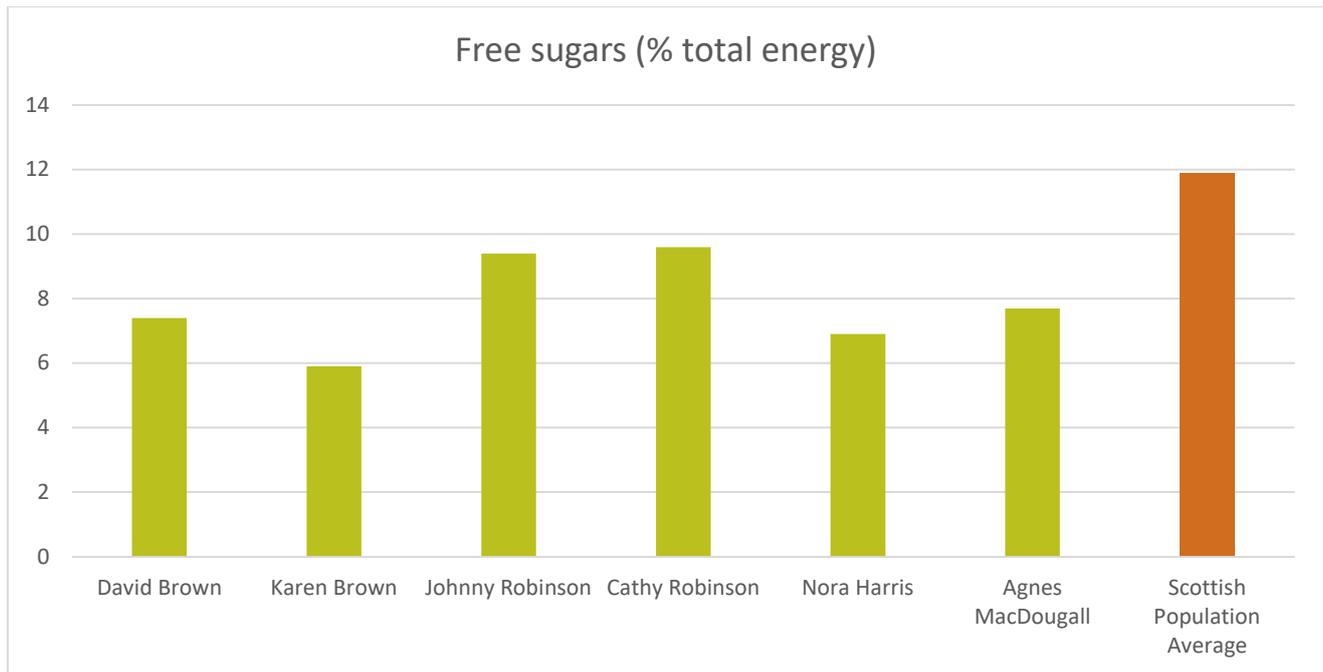


Figure 7: Scottish Dietary Goal - decrease intake, target less than 5% of total energy



Oils and spreads

Two out of the four groups selected a low-fat spread (one margarine, one butter spread), whereas the other two groups went with a full-fat, slightly salted butter spread.

One of the groups that chose a full fat butter decided that although it was not reasonable to swap for a lower-fat version, they would likely use less (and enjoy it more) because of the richer taste.

Drink plenty of fluids

Groups did not have full discussions of water intake, but this came up around variation between schools' requirements around bringing a water bottle and a sense that most adults would have a water bottle around for work.

Cutting down on alcohol was mentioned as a healthy change by one group, and while the group did agree to have the dad character only consume alcohol on the weekends, this did not represent a major change, as most groups already had a fairly low alcohol intake.²⁵

Some community advisors thought it reasonable that the children could swap diluting juice with water, whereas others found this impossible to imagine, as they felt children

²⁵ Adults' alcohol intake ranged from 5.7 - 14.4 units/week, with only Johnny Robinson going over the recommended limit of 14 units/week. Johnny Robinson: 14.4 units/week; Cathy Robinson: 9 units/week; Nora Harris: 9 units/week; David Brown: 9.3 units/week; Karen Brown: 5.7 units/week; Agnes MacDougall: 9 units/week.

would not drink plain water. A compromise was made in the final meal plans to include a mixture of water, milk, diluting juice and fresh orange depending on the group's overall thoughts.

Challenges for making 'healthy swaps'

Reviewing the changes that community advisors felt the families would be willing and able to make, some themes and patterns emerged about when, where and how it is easy or difficult to make healthier choices while remaining realistic and reflective of the modern, Scottish diet:

- Time of day, week and year
- Life stage
- Practical effort involved
- Emotional effort involved
- Social acceptability
- Cost

Time of day, week and year

All groups agreed that snacks, particularly morning snacks at school or at work, were the easiest foods to swap for healthier alternatives. This was true for both the adults and younger children (aged 2-10), but both groups thought it would be more difficult for the teenager to swap his eating at school because of social pressures to fit in with his friends.

Community advisors thought the family members would have more resolve in the morning. Being at school or work also limited options for making decisions based on impulse, meaning they would be more likely to eat what they had packed from home. Groups agreed that it would be reasonable to swap snacks out of the house like biscuits, crisps and chocolate with fruits, nuts, high-fibre crackers, and low-fat and sugary yoghurts. Only one group decided to include pre-cut and packaged fruit that could easily be put in a handbag on the way to work or school.

For afternoon and evening snacks, such as popcorn or crisps, the advisors agreed that some of these could be replaced with nuts, raisins, and baked rather than fried crisps, as well as biscuits being replaced with cheese and crackers. However, groups were often reluctant to remove chocolate, popcorn and crisps from evening snacks altogether because it was felt that these were an important part of 'getting through the week' and 'relaxing' in the evening.

When vegetables, as opposed to easy-to-grab fruits, were added to the families' diets, this was usually at times during the week where the family (especially mothers) had more time to cook. For most families this was during the weekend, and here the mother would take time to cut out carrot and cucumber sticks that the children could graze on or batch

cook soup for the week. Most advisors agreed that these more time-consuming swaps were not possible on an everyday basis.

Some groups also raised points about what people like to eat in different seasons. Advisors emphasised that the families were unlikely to eat homemade soup in the summer, for example, and although the teenager might eat a sachet of porridge after school in cooler months, some thought he would switch to something like pot noodle or crisps in other times of the year. Since so many of the vegetable portions were eaten through soups and stews, it is worth noting that there is work to be done on how to ensure people enjoy fruit and vegetables throughout the year.

Life stage

Community advisors were working to develop meal plans for families with distinct characteristics – a single parent with young children has very different experiences trying to make healthier choices than two adults with three children in primary and secondary school.

Groups creating a meal plan for a single mum with two young children often felt that this was simply a time of life when it was more difficult to prioritise healthy choices – especially for yourself. As one person said, “I think it’s a case of compromise for yourself when your kids are younger and you’re working” (Group 2). In both the Harris-McGregor and MacDougall families, the mum’s health and preferences often came second to providing meals that her children would enjoy:

Kiddie food is not adult-friendly. And if you’ve had a long day and you need a bit of a treat for yourselves, you’re not going to eat fish fingers with your kids five days a week, are you? But, of course, sometimes you do because you can’t be bothered or whatever. Quite often, I’ll just have cereal for dinner at the end of the day because I can’t be bothered anymore. And you do get a bit forgotten about. But it’s nice, I would say, at least a couple of days a week, to have an adult meal, whether they’re sharing that or not. (Group 2)

In addition to the added pressure on the single parent around mealtimes, one community advisor explained that the Nora character may be more likely to want a ‘treat’ in the evening after the children have gone to bed:

I think [having a ‘treat’ after the children go to bed] is probably a universal thing, but I think it’s a really specific thing to being a single parent because – that sounds really tragic – but it’s sort of like I just sit there and I think, “Well,”-- if you’re just sat by yourself, do you know what I mean? I think it’s just nice just to give yourself a wee treat somehow, so I think it’s almost more of a-- I don’t know. When I was in a relationship, I don’t remember having the same sort of need to feel it, to sit down

and - what? - have a bag of crisps or whatever - do you know what I mean? - at the end of the day. But I definitely feel it on my own... so I think maybe that's quite relevant as well to the family setup that's here, you know? (Group 2)

This group suggested that this was unlikely to change for a single mum while the children were young, but that her priorities and opportunities to include more healthy foods in her diet might change as the children got older:

I think the transition actually is as the kids get older and they start doing their own thing. I don't think it's a transition over months. I think it's actually a transition over years because as your kids start to get older and they go, "Oh, I'm going out with my friends for tea," or, "Can I go to Subway for dinner and get a sandwich?" and you go, "Okay. Excellent. Oh, I might have that bit of salmon with some potatoes and make myself a nice dinner." (Group 2)

This advisor explained that this stage of parenting is so demanding that it is unlikely that the Nora character would likely find it difficult to include the 'healthy swaps and add-ins' that were suggested.

In contrast to the small family with young children, there was a sense that the larger family might be in a good position to be integrating healthier foods in their diets throughout the week. Since the parents in the larger family with older children had more experience cooking for a family, the group agreed that the mum might have gained more confidence to make more meals from scratch or with fewer prepared items:

... when I was younger, I would always use jars when I was making chilis and stuff, and I bought the packets. And as I got older and started reading ingredients, and I've learned to cook a bit better-- I just realised how much easier they are to make. So I make a lot of stuff from scratch now... I think Karen [Brown, aged 40] might be at that point in her life where maybe she's a little bit better at cooking. I think you do get a bit better as you get older. (Group 3)

On the other hand, group members working on the large family's list described with some frustration how difficult it can be to support older children to eat healthily if they are not committed to it themselves. The community advisors agreed that as teenagers become more independent in what they purchase at school or outside of school, it can be harder to 'control' what they are eating:

It's hard to control what [a teenager is] doing when he's out of the house buying his own snacks. So, it's almost like maybe the mom and dad would be keeping a closer eye on him at home and maybe just filling him up-- making sure he's getting fruit

and healthier things at home, because when he's out and about, realistically, there's nothing they can do. (Group 3)

While children's preferences for particular foods created challenges, community advisors were also clear that sometimes adults just don't want to go to the effort of eating a healthy, balanced meal either:

I mean, I try to incorporate [vegetables] where I can, but sometimes you get really lazy as well, and it just becomes part of your life, do you know what I mean? And you really should have your five a day, but I dinnae always have my five a day, do you know what I mean? (Group 1)

Group members felt that the reality was that it can be difficult to keep this balance on a low income and with a busy schedule.

Practical effort

Convenience and ease were considered key to making healthier swaps – especially if these foods or drinks were going to be eaten out of the house. Most of the items that the groups were willing to swap were already packaged in portion sizes that were easy to grab and go, such as multi-packs of crisps and individual chocolate bars. The healthier items needed to be equally convenient. This meant that fruits such as apples, bananas, and (smaller) satsumas were preferred over (larger) oranges, which were considered difficult to eat on the go, or nuts that would need re-packing from a larger bag. Yoghurts were a favourite for this reason, as they are already packaged individually.

Community advisor 1: For me, I think fruit would be really easy for her to get more of. She could bring a banana for breakfast, an apple for a snack, like apple, cheese and crackers instead of a biscuit. You know, none of that takes any more time.

Community advisor 2: And barely much more resolve, let's be honest, compared to eating vegetables. (Group 2)

Making fruit and vegetables the easy option was also seen as important for children, even if a parent had to put in some additional preparation for this. For example, chopping up fruit and vegetables ahead of time for them to eat as snacks could make all the difference:

You find when teenagers hit that age [15], they don't eat a lot of veg, but my son would eat a lot of fruit if it was here. If I was to chop stuff up, chop it up and put it in the fridge, it would last two minutes. But if he had to do that, he would not do it. (Group 1)

Once the family's weekly patterns had been established and understood by the groups, they worked hard to ensure they were not making significant changes to the effort involved in any particular part of the day or week. For a swap to be considered acceptable, the foods had to serve the same function and way of eating. For example, nuts could be swapped with popcorn, as they are both foods you graze on throughout an evening. Similarly, baked crisps were considered easy to swap for traditional crisps, but only if they were available at the same shop and a similar price.

At this stage of the project, community advisors did not replace an 'easy dinner' with a homemade meal, because the groups were taking into consideration the amount of time and effort the family had to prepare that meal during a busy week or at the weekend when they were planning to relax together. Having the 'right foods' in the house might not make a difference if you don't have the time or energy to make them:

Because you know sometimes you buy all this stuff with the intention to eat well, and then you're like, 'Oh, actually I could just—'... [and] they just eat their beans and put it on some toast rather than actually sitting down and thinking about something balanced. (Group 1)

A lot of the time it's convenience when you've got kids and you will make something quick, and it doesn't take long to put a piece of salmon in the oven and have a salad and some potatoes. But I also think - same amount of time to put some pasta in a pan, go and do half the ironing, come back, take the pasta out of the pan, you know? (Group 2)

All the community advisors agreed that finding time for the mum to eat was challenging, as she compromised her own meals to feed the children, pack lunches and do other household chores. This was reflected in our nutritional analyses where most of the mum characters initially came back under-nourished.

Emotional effort

Community advisors often reflected on their experiences of trying to get children to eat different foods - negotiating with children through food, compromising on one healthy aspiration in order to reach another, or even just to keep the house calm.

"Well, you can have that. But instead of having a biscuit with it, you can have a banana." And it sounds so silly. But that's what you do when you're -- you're sort picking your little fights all the time and trying to get little wins. (Group 2)

These were often difficult and emotional situations, and advisors agreed that most parents would give a child an unhealthier snack or meal to avoid a large argument or to

save time. This was particularly true in the evenings or after school, when the children were more hungry and tired.

Sometimes it's not worth the fight. And you want them to eat healthy and you do that thing where you replace certain snacks with healthier ones. But I don't think you can live your life to a guide like this. I really don't. (Group 2)

As this community advisor explained, this is more to do with snacks than meals, which are relatively easier to plan and control.

I think something I always need to feel resolved to do with my children is to not give in to their snack demands. So, I suppose for me it would be cutting out the sugary and salty processed snacks and trying to substitute them rather than necessarily changing what I'm cooking them because I always try and cook them healthy stuff. But it's that where I always fall down because they'll ask and ask and ask for lollies and crisps. And if you don't have the resolve, you give in. But if I had resolve of steel, I would deal with that problem first. (Group 2)

Although the battles over particular food items varied for each community advisor and their children, the process of constant negotiation was recognisable for almost every participant. Keeping your resolve when children were asking for snacks and sweets, or at times during the week when you have less energy yourself to resist temptation, can be a challenge.

Social acceptability

Community advisors were mainly speaking from their perspectives as mothers and women in their households, but there was a recognition that the teenage character would be under different pressures at school and with his friends around making different choices:

I think it's really hard for teenagers. I think there's that peer pressure to just be with the crowd and not be even eating an apple. It's just different. A banana's just different [from a chocolate bar], isn't it? (Group 1)

Social pressures were also a consideration for other family members. For example, swapping ham for tuna was not thought to be possible on a workday, as the smell of tuna at a workplace was too overpowering.

While taste and habit largely formed the basis for what the children preferred, some community advisors also reflected on the influence of products branded for children, for example having tv-characters on products high in sugar. The children were more likely to ask for the items that they recognised, creating potential conflict for the mothers.

Cost

The groups were asked to set cost aside as a main consideration in developing the meal plans, but they often cautioned against making changes that would be seen as unreasonably expensive when a cheaper option was available. For example, there is a perception that wholewheat pasta and bread is much more expensive than white:

Even simple things, like your bread, to get the wheat bread is over a pound and stuff now. So they're much more expensive just for simple things. You'll end up buying or people get into a trap of buying, just for the much cheaper white bread just because it's more accessible. You need to feed them, so you need to buy bread. (Group 2)

Although most groups felt that baked crisps or crackers would be acceptable swaps, they generally felt the cost of the other pre-packaged items with lower fat, salt and sugar content would be a deterrent. Snacks such as hummus, pre-sliced carrot and cucumber sticks and sliced fruit were generally seen as too decadent for the families to swap to, even though these met the criteria for being a 'like-for-like' swap in terms of effort and convenience. This, combined with the time-consuming alternative of cutting and packaging vegetables from home, kept the groups from swapping some morning and afternoon snacks.

Finding a balance

We asked the groups to consider the overall balance of foods across the week and items included in the shopping list to ensure that the iterative decision-making had not inadvertently created something that was no longer recognisable. Groups unanimously agreed that they had achieved a good balance across both.

I mean, Sunday dinner is Sunday dinner. Most people take a wee bit extra time on a Sunday to cook their Sunday dinner. And mince and potatoes doesn't take very long to cook, tuna pasta's pretty fast. Even with the pressures of modern life, and Mum working and a busy household. Yeah. And a lot of things able to reheat, as well, if they're not together. So, yeah, I'm quite comfortable with it. (Group 1)

It is worth noting that not all advisors agreed with the idea of making changes to the meal plan they had initially drafted for the family. One advisor felt it was unrealistic to make any changes that would move the family into closer alignment with the Eatwell Guide:

I don't think we should change anything for Nora [single parent, two young children] because I think what we've actually created is reality based on all of us saying, "Well, at night I would sit down and go, "Do you know what? I'm taking that tub of ice cream out of the freezer." And I think it's just reality. I don't think we should be saying, "Well, how could we get Nora to incorporate more veggies?" when in reality we're probably just going to sit down and eat a bar of chocolate and have more coffee or a glass of wine... (Group 2)

On the other hand, another advisor thought that the process had helped the group create something that was based in reality but also informed by their shared aspirations around healthier eating:

The lists that we were creating here, it would have been easy to just say, 'Oh, I'm gonna have all the fruit and veg under the sun and nothing else.' That's the way that we think it should be, but in reality, it doesn't work like that. And to have different types of families – like the single parent family, which I can relate to – it can be difficult to make meals as healthy as possible. You don't always have the time to cook from scratch. All of these things were incorporated in the discussions that we had, which was really good. (Group 2)

Most advisors felt that the variety and balance of foods across the week represented what they felt would be enjoyable for people even if budgets were not a barrier.

I'm not sure how much money it would take for me not to eat mince and potatoes once a week... I wouldn't be embarrassed or ashamed to tell anybody that I had tuna pasta for my dinner last night, or I'm having mince and potatoes tonight. I think there's a balance here with what people eat in normal everyday life. I think we nailed it, girls. (Group 1)

In terms of the overall balance of the shopping list – and specific items that were included – one group described it as a good mix that is reasonably accessible:

... it's stuff that you can get quite easily in the supermarkets. It's a shopping list that's not out-of-reach stuff... so I think it's something that they wouldn't struggle with, and they know that they could make use and make different dishes from the same foods that they're buying. (Group 1)

I'm quite proud of us. I feel like we've been able to come up with a good, realistic family and we've kind of talked through the issues that might have arisen. (Group 4)

I think it feels really comfortable, it doesn't feel like there's any scrimping or scraping or concern about anybody not getting what they need out of that. And for me, that's always where the sort of shame and embarrassment comes in, if somebody has to say "oh, I had to do without such and such a thing..." I know we all need to cut our costs, but when it comes to food, you want to be able to buy the things that you like. So yeah, it looks like a good balance to me. (Group 1)

Making sure that the foods we included in each family's list would be ones that people could feel proud about eating and sharing with others was an important part of the process.

Conclusion

Using co-production methods meant that rights-holders were central to shaping the contents of the shopping list, but they were not alone. The project involved experts *and* experts by experience to turn differing views about what an 'adequate diet' is into detailed tools for measuring how affordable these are for people living in Scotland today. This was a process of ongoing negotiation within the groups and in light of the recommendations, feedback and suggestions the group received from external sources. Community advisors had a clear role to advise on the realities of a case study family's patterns, preferences, challenges and opportunities for accessing the foods that 'would keep them healthy and well'. The project team aimed to keep their discussions informed by relevant advice and guidance.

In the end, the healthiest weekly meal plans that could be agreed by community advisors did not meet all the expectations of the Eatwell Guide or the majority of the Scottish Dietary Goals. Compared to the Scottish population, however, this way of eating reflected what community advisors believed most families would prioritise around healthy choices – including more fruits and vegetables and reducing sugar and processed foods. The case study families would be eating slightly more total fat and saturated fat than the population average, but significantly more fruit, vegetables and fibre, less red and processed meat and fewer free sugars.²⁶

What this shows is that the groups arrived a way of eating that is taking us in the right direction, even if it does not align with public health goals – yet. The balance of foods that are included represent a realistic attempt to show what a family might choose to eat when taking everything into account – skills and interest in cooking from scratch, the value we place on time spent with friends and family, feeling a need to have an 'easy night' or 'treat' sometimes and days when parents work hard to overcome emotional and practical challenges to pack more fruit and veg into everyone's meals. This reflects what

²⁶ A copy of the nutritional analysis Food Standards Scotland conducted for the adult case study characters is available by request.

each group thought the families' healthy aspirations would be and helps us understand more about the many factors that are simultaneously engaged when we ask how much it costs to afford the food that keeps us healthy and well.

[Meal plans and shopping lists](#) for the four case study families are available to download.

Chapter 2: Cost and Affordability

Introduction

Families in Scotland are facing very difficult choices amid the uncertainty of increasing food prices and converging energy and cost of living crises. Competing pressures are being placed on any money that remains from wages and benefits once fixed costs like housing and childcare are paid, and this is affecting people's ability to choose the food that they need and enjoy.

We began monitoring the cost of the shopping lists in December 2021, and the research coincided with the highest period of inflation for forty years. In September 2022, The Food Foundation surveyed people across the UK to understand the effect that the Cost of Living Crisis was having on rates of food insecurity, and more than 42% of large families like the 'Browns' and the 'Robinsons' in this project (with three or more children), had experienced food insecurity in the past month. Importantly 58% of households that reported being food insecure had cut back on fruit and nearly 48% had bought fewer vegetables.²⁷

If we are to meet our shared ambitions around everyone being able to afford the food that keeps them healthy and well, these shopping lists provide a useful method of monitoring where the most significant pressures are being felt for families and the role of government support in alleviating these pressures.

What do these shopping lists cost?

The large case study families would have spent an average of £235.73 per week on food and drink if they took part in the eating practices and patterns described and agreed by community advisors.

²⁷ The Food Foundation (2022) [Food Insecurity Tracking](#), YouGov survey of 4280 adults in the UK conducted 21-23rd September 2022.

Table 4: Total Food and Drink by Category - Brown Family (large)

	Dec 2021	March 2022	June 2022	Sept 2022	Dec 2022
Fruit and vegetables	£26.54	£24.34	£26.92	£27.95	£30.16
Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates	£22.40	£22.98	£28.55	£25.90	£25.09
Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins	£28.47	£27.45	£19.92	£31.91	£34.82
Dairy	£16.65	£16.77	£15.88	£21.90	£20.95
Oil and spreads	£5.78	£5.47	£6.40	£6.32	£6.28
Packaged foods (e.g. pizza, soup)	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Cooking ingredients and condiments	£8.16	£8.42	£11.26	£10.01	£10.17
Drinks (coffee, tea, no sugar options)	£3.07	£2.19	£2.43	£2.63	£4.51
Sweets, chocolate, crisps, pastries, biscuits and sugary drinks	£27.35	£27.05	£30.33	£25.63	£28.11
Alcohol	£10.80	£10.80	£12.00	£11.25	£11.75
Guests and visitors	£5.29	£4.15	£4.29	£4.57	£6.52
Weekday lunches	£26.36	£26.36	£26.36	£26.40	£26.40
Takeaways and eating out	£32.08	£32.66	£32.66	£33.47	£32.66
Holidays and birthdays	£9.55	£10.13	£10.13	£10.08	£10.13
TOTAL Food and Drink	£222.49	£218.77	£227.14	£238.02	£247.55

Table 5: Total Food and Drink by Category - Robinson Family (large)

	Dec 2021	March 2022	June 2022	Sept 2022	Dec 2022
Fruit and vegetables	£22.03	£22.07	£21.46	£24.22	£26.90
Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates	£20.03	£22.64	£23.07	£24.07	£25.12
Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins	£23.74	£25.42	£26.28	£25.08	£29.06
Dairy	£13.75	£13.82	£15.42	£17.68	£16.62
Oil and spreads	£2.65	£2.71	£2.98	£2.98	£3.36
Packaged foods (e.g. pizza, soup)	£13.95	£14.00	£14.00	£14.80	£14.80
Cooking ingredients and condiments	£4.06	£4.31	£4.64	£5.27	£5.52
Drinks (coffee, tea, no sugar options)	£7.43	£6.93	£6.96	£6.98	£7.38

Sweets, chocolate, crisps, pastries, biscuits and sugary drinks	£17.44	£16.90	£16.72	£17.44	£19.92
Alcohol	£11.50	£11.50	£12.50	£12.50	£13.05
Guests and visitors	£2.74	£2.35	£2.72	£3.43	£3.01
Weekday lunches	£34.17	£34.17	£34.17	£34.23	£38.01
Takeaways and eating out	£9.80	£7.86	£7.60	£8.00	£10.51
Holidays and birthdays	£10.19	£10.75	£10.73	£10.68	£10.66
TOTAL Food and Drink	£193.47	£195.43	£199.26	£207.34	£223.91

The small case study families would have spent an average of £108.98 per week in December 2022. This had increased more than £15 per week since the previous year, from an average of £93.62 in December 2021.

Table 6: Total Food and Drink by Category - Harris McGregor Family (small)

	Dec 2021	March 2022	June 2022	Sept 2022	Dec 2022
Fruit and vegetables	£17.56	£17.81	£17.16	£16.83	£20.60
Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates	£7.05	£7.40	£9.37	£8.08	£8.88
Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins	£16.40	£16.55	£11.50	£17.98	£20.70
Dairy	£5.39	£5.55	£7.18	£6.95	£7.47
Oil and spreads	£1.53	£1.44	£2.02	£1.93	£1.94
Packaged foods (e.g. pizza, soup)	£8.07	£6.85	£7.48	£7.13	£7.48
Cooking ingredients and condiments	£1.17	£1.37	£1.27	£1.46	£1.56
Drinks (coffee, tea, no sugar options)	£2.03	£2.47	£2.81	£1.81	£3.09
Sweets, chocolate, crisps, pastries, biscuits and sugary drinks	£11.43	£9.36	£11.00	£8.96	£11.45
Alcohol	£6.50	£6.50	£6.75	£6.50	£6.75
Guests and visitors	£2.74	£2.19	£2.07	£2.57	£3.09
Weekday lunches	£3.00	£3.00	£3.00	£3.00	£3.40
Takeaways and eating out	£9.49	£9.80	£9.68	£9.34	£10.26
Holidays and birthdays	£7.40	£7.40	£7.40	£7.40	£7.42
TOTAL Food and Drink	£99.78	£97.70	£98.70	£99.96	£114.11

Table 7: Total Food and Drink by Category - MacDougall Family (small)

	Dec 2021	March 2022	June 2022	Sept 2022	Dec 2022
Fruit and vegetables	£16.86	£17.52	£17.44	£19.46	£21.55
Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates	£7.79	£8.20	£8.43	£8.56	£8.95
Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins	£11.86	£11.12	£12.59	£13.56	£14.22
Dairy	£6.98	£7.22	£7.81	£8.64	£8.99
Oil and spreads	£1.91	£1.83	£2.07	£2.52	£2.52
Packaged foods (e.g. pizza, soup)	£7.94	£7.94	£6.74	£8.70	£9.99
Cooking ingredients and condiments	£2.29	£2.48	£2.34	£2.71	£2.52
Drinks (coffee, tea, no sugar options)	£1.24	£1.73	£1.73	£0.99	£1.90
Sweets, chocolate, crisps, pastries, biscuits and sugary drinks	£6.80	£6.19	£6.41	£8.33	£8.13
Alcohol	£6.50	£6.50	£6.50	£6.50	£6.75
Guests and visitors	£4.06	£3.84	£3.93	£4.21	£4.62
Weekday lunches	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Takeaways and eating out	£7.82	£7.80	£7.80	£8.29	£8.28
Holidays and birthdays	£5.42	£5.41	£5.41	£5.42	£5.43
TOTAL Food and Drink	£87.45	£87.78	£89.19	£97.89	£103.85

Monitoring cost 2021-2022

We monitored the shopping lists quarterly from December 2021 to December 2022, and the price of food and drink increased significantly during that time. For items priced at Tesco online,²⁸ there was an average 18% increase from the previous year.

Table 8: Shopping list categories in December 2022 compared to December 2021 (% change)

	Browns	Robinsons	Harris-McGregors	MacDougalls
Fruit and vegetables	14%	22%	17%	28%
Pasta, bread, cereal, rice, potatoes	12%	25%	26%	15%
Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins	22%	22%	26%	20%

²⁸ Excluding out of home, takeaway, holidays and birthdays.

Dairy	26%	21%	39%	29%
Oil and fats	9%	27%	27%	32%
Packaged foods (e.g. pizza, soup)	0%	6%	-7%	26%
Cooking ingredients and condiments	25%	36%	33%	10%
Drinks (coffee, tea, no sugar options)	47%	-1%	53%	54%
Sweets, chocolate, crisps, pastries, biscuits and sugary drinks	3%	14%	0%	20%
Alcohol	9%	13%	4%	4%
Guests and visitors	23%	10%	13%	14%
	Large Families		Small Families	
TOTAL % increase for items priced at Tesco online	15%	18%	16%	21%

Our monitoring revealed that the small case study families would need to spend an additional £3.87 per week on fruits and vegetables and £3.33 per week on proteins like meat, eggs and beans compared to last year. The large case study families would have needed an extra £106.71 per month to afford the same items at Tesco online as they had the previous year.

Table 9: Shopping list categories in December 2022 compared to December 2021 (£ change)

	Browns	Robinsons	Harris-McGregors	MacDougalls
Fruit and vegetables	£3.61	£4.87	£3.04	£4.69
Pasta, bread, cereal, rice, potatoes	£2.69	£5.08	£1.83	£1.16
Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins	£6.36	£5.32	£4.29	£2.36
Dairy	£4.30	£2.87	£2.08	£2.01
Oil and fats	£0.50	£0.71	£0.41	£0.61

Packaged foods (e.g. pizza, soup)	£0.00	£0.85	(£0.60)	£2.05
Cooking ingredients and condiments	£2.02	£1.46	£0.39	£0.24
Drinks (coffee, tea, no sugar options)	£1.44	(£0.05)	£1.07	£0.66
Sweets, chocolate, crisps, pastries, biscuits and sugary drinks	£0.77	£2.49	£0.02	£1.33
Alcohol	£0.95	£1.55	£0.25	£0.25
Guests and visitors	£1.23	£0.27	£0.35	£0.56
Weekday lunches	£0.04	£3.84	£0.40	0
Takeaways and eating out	£0.58	£0.71	£0.77	£0.46
Holidays and birthdays	£0.58	£0.47	£0.02	£0.01
TOTAL Food and Drink	£25.07	£30.45	£14.33	£16.40

How affordable is this?

Unlike in the case of fuel,²⁹ there is no agreed benchmark for how much income is ‘too much’ to have to spend on food to eat well enough.

In 2017–20, a typical single parent household with 2 children living in Scotland had a household income of £350 per week, and typical couple household with 3 children had £703 per week.³⁰ These figures represent the average disposable household income for families with similar household characteristics to the case study families, inflation-adjusted to 2020/21 prices.³¹

Based on the types of employment and number of hours the community advisors imagined the parents in the case study families would work, the tables below show how each family’s income after housing costs (‘disposable income’) compares to the total cost of their shopping list. The shopping lists would currently cost between 25% and 37% of the case study families’ household income after housing costs.

²⁹ Scotland’s 2040 fuel poverty targets are set out in legislation: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2019/10>.

³⁰ Based on figures from the Family Resources Survey 2017–2020. Income includes income from all sources (earnings and benefits), after taxes have been deducted, and after housing costs have been paid.

³¹ We are grateful to Maïke Waldmann at the Scottish Government for these calculations, available at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/additional-poverty-analysis-2022/>.

Table 10: Cost of the shopping list in December 2022 compared to disposable income of the case study family³² and typical households in Scotland³³

	Browns	Robinsons	Couple with three children
Overall cost of the shopping list	£247.55	£223.91	£235.73 ³⁴
% of disposable income	37%	33%	32%

	Harris-McGregors	MacDougalls	Single parent with two children
Overall cost of the shopping list	£114.11	£103.85	£108.98 ³⁵
% of disposable income	32%	25%	30%

This does not take into account the cost of transport to the shops or fuel to prepare the meals once purchased. Volunteers who worked with us to explore the availability and price of the fruits and vegetables on the Robinson Family’s shopping list often noted that the cost of transport, in particular, could add considerably to the overall price of the shopping list.³⁶ These costs relate to the local food environment and transport options nearby.

Affording dignity and choice

There was a significant difference between the cost of selecting only the cheapest food and drink available and the items the groups thought the case study families would find acceptable.

A measure of choice is built into the cost of the shopping lists because having no option but to buy the cheapest item on the shelf is not considered culturally appropriate or acceptable in a society where everyone’s right to food is realised. Community advisors spent time discussing and negotiating what a family living in Scotland today would think about branded versus unbranded cereals and baked beans, for example. The shopping lists include an overall balance of items that reflect specific group preferences and what they believed would be acceptable to families living in Scotland today.

There is a clear ‘dignity gap’ of being able to afford a choice of brand and quality when shopping for food and drink. Buying only the cheapest option for each item would have

³² Calculated by total household income from earnings and benefits minus housing costs.

³³ See “Weekly household income of single and couple parents”, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/additional-poverty-analysis-2022/>. Based on Scottish figures from the Family Resources Survey 2017–2020, income adjusted to 2021/22.

³⁴ Average of Browns and Robinsons’ total food and drink costs.

³⁵ Average of Harris-McGregors’ and MacDougalls’ total food and drink costs.

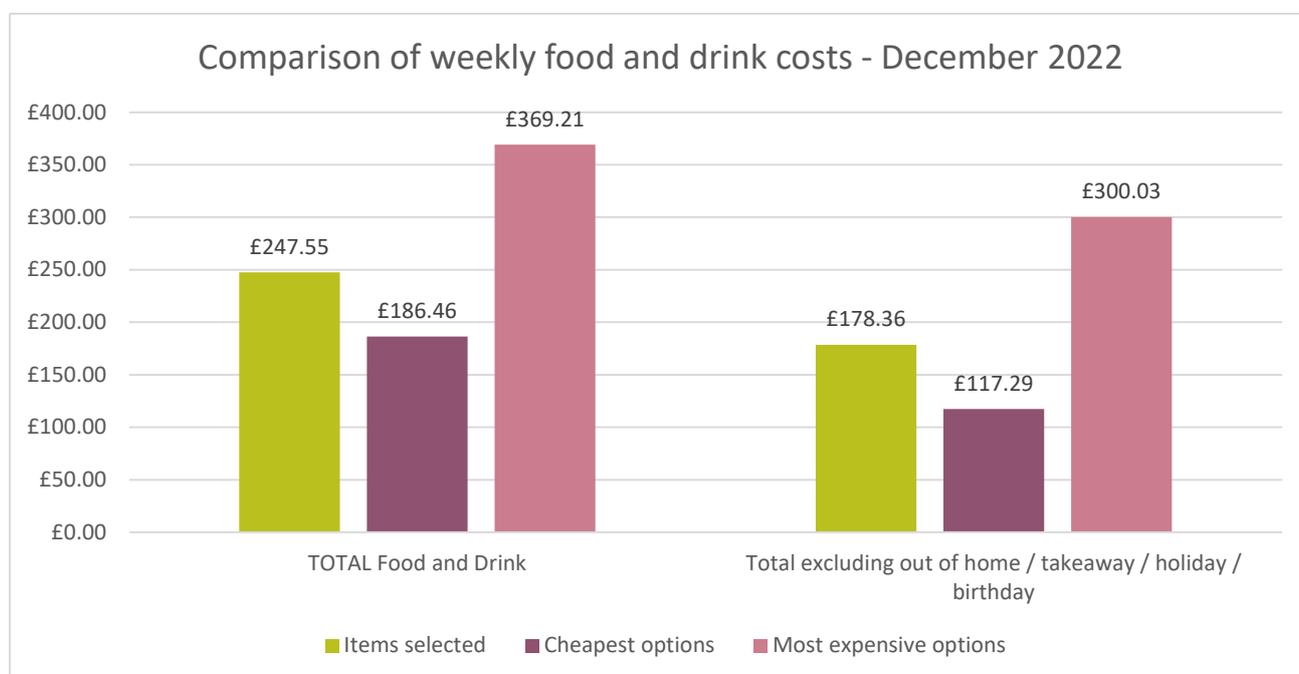
³⁶ Nourish Scotland (2022) [Exploring local availability and price of fruit and vegetables: Scotland, Summer 2022](#).

reduced the cost of the Brown Family’s weekly shop³⁷ by 34%, while choosing the most expensive items would have increased it by 68%. The lists include a balance of mid-range options to account for the cost of affording food with dignity and choice.

Table 11: ‘Dignity Gap’ for Brown Family by category – comparing most and least expensive December 2022

	Price of cheapest options compared to selected items	Price of most expensive options compared to selected items
Fruit and vegetables	-£7.68	£17.34
Pasta, bread, cereal, rice, potatoes	-£10.52	£21.61
Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins	-£9.51	£15.54
Dairy	-£5.98	£8.48
Oils and fats	-£4.73	£0.19
Cooking ingredients and condiments	-£0.89	£7.66
Drinks (coffee, tea, no sugar options)	-£3.56	£5.87
Sweets, chocolate, crisps, pastries, biscuits and sugary drinks	-£10.30	£14.78
Alcohol	-£5.50	£24.75
Guests and visitors	-£2.40	£5.45

Figure 8: ‘Dignity Gap’ for Brown Family – comparing full list December 2022



³⁷ Includes all items that would be purchased at the shop, priced at Tesco online in December 2022. This excludes the food and drink costs for out of home, takeaway, holidays and birthdays.

Scottish Government Support for Families

We know that many families are making compromises to the quality and quantity of the food that they purchase due to these financial pressures. This makes support from local and national governments even more important and time sensitive.

Scottish Government policies to provide direct financial support to low-income parents are important levers for fulfilling the right to food for eligible families, and the extension of universal free school meals and promotion of the living wage will provide protection to even more families.

Scottish Child Payment

The Scottish Child Payment was introduced in February 2021 and helps with the costs of supporting a family. Payments are made every four weeks, and the money can be used however the person chooses. In November 2022, the Scottish Child Payment was extended to include children up to age 16 and increased to £25 per week per eligible child.³⁸

If the case study families were eligible for the Scottish Child Payment,³⁹ the recent increase in value and extension to more children would have the following positive effect on their food and drink budget:

Table 12: Scottish Child Payment value compared to total food and drink costs - December 2021

December 2021	Browns	Robinsons	Harris-McGregors	MacDougalls
Number of eligible children	0	0	2	2
Amount per week	£0	£0	£20	£20
Proportion of total weekly food and drink costs	-	-	20%	22.9%

Table 13: Scottish Child Payment value compared to total food and drink costs - December 2022

December 2022	Browns	Robinsons	Harris-McGregors	MacDougalls
Number of eligible children	3	3	2	2
Amount per week	£75	£75	£50	£50
Proportion of total weekly food and drink costs	30.3%	33.5%	43.8%	48.2%

³⁸ <https://www.gov.scot/news/scottish-child-payment-increased/>

³⁹ To be eligible you must live in Scotland and you or your partner must be getting certain benefits or payments and be the main person looking after a child who's under 16 years old: <https://www.mygov.scot/scottish-child-payment/who-should-apply>.

Best Start Foods

Best Start Foods supports pregnant people and families with young children in receipt of certain benefits or tax credits to buy ‘healthy foods like milk or fruit’ with a pre-paid card. Payments range from £18 every four weeks during pregnancy, £36 every four weeks from birth until the child is aged one and £18 every four weeks from age 1-3.

An evaluation of Best Start Foods in 2022 showed that the scheme had “enabled mothers and children to eat more healthy foods” such as “healthier snacks for their children” and providing “more freedom to let their children try a greater range of healthy foods without worrying about wasting money or food”. The evaluation demonstrated that clients generally considered the support a helpful contribution towards costs and a reassurance when costs were tight.⁴⁰

The Harris-McGregor and MacDougall case study families have a child aged 2. If they met the criteria for Best Start Foods, they would be eligible for £18 every four weeks.⁴¹ In December 2022, this would have covered an average of 21% of their weekly fruit and vegetable costs or 55% of their spending on dairy each week.

Table 14: Best Start Foods value as a proportion of weekly spend for small case study families

	Harris McGregor	MacDougall
Fruit and vegetables	21.8%	20.9%
Pasta, bread, cereal, rice, potatoes	50.7%	50.3%
Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins	21.7%	31.6%
Dairy	60.2%	50.1%

Universal Free School Meals

In 2021, when the community advisors were co-developing the shopping lists, universal free school meals were provided to all P1-3 pupils and expanded to P4s and P5s during the 2021/22 school year. The older child (aged 5) in the Harris-McGregor and MacDougall families would have benefited from this support, as would the youngest child (aged 7) in the Brown and Robinson families. The following shows the value to each family based on an average cost of £2.24 per day per child⁴² and the number of school meals community advisors believed each child would choose, rather than bringing a packed lunch.

⁴⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/research-and-analysis/2022/07/evaluation-best-start-foods/documents/evaluation-best-start-foods/evaluation-best-start-foods/govscot%3Adocument/evaluation-best-start-foods.pdf>

⁴¹ <https://www.mygov.scot/best-start-grant-best-start-foods>

⁴² Cost calculated by averaging primary school meal price to parents from 28 local authority areas.

December 2022	Browns	Robinsons	Harris-McGregors	MacDougalls
Number of eligible children	1	1	1	1
Value per week	£6.71	£6.71	£6.71	£8.95

The delay in the planned extension of universal free school meal provision to P6s and P7s in summer 2022 would have affected the two large case study families, who have children aged 7, 10 and 15. Extending universal provision to reach all primary pupils in the 2022/23 school year would have provided an additional savings of nearly £30 per month for the Brown Family and nearly £20 per month for the Robinsons.

Importantly, community advisors suggested that having children with different eligibility within the household can make it difficult for families to receive the full benefit from the offer. For example, if an older child is not eligible for free lunch, and a parent is making a packed lunch for them as a result, some community advisors thought that the parent might just make a packed lunch for both children that day. In reverse, if the school meal was something both children liked, it might be difficult for a parent to say the older child could not take a school lunch, even if they had to pay for that child’s meal. Extending universal provision – and ensuring this aligns with Scotland’s wider ambitions to become a Good Food Nation⁴³ – is therefore an important part of realising the right to food for children and their families.

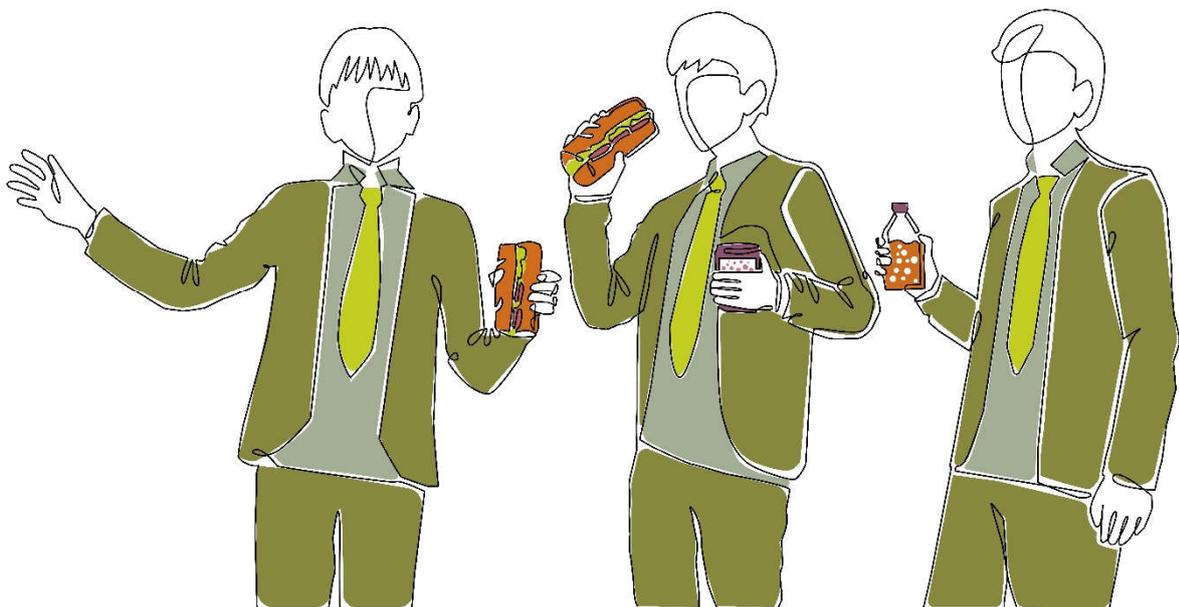
Conclusion

It would be difficult for the Browns or Robinsons to afford the cost of the large family shopping lists, and the same is true for the Harris-McGregors and MacDougalls of the small family lists. The proportion of the disposable income that would be needed to cover this way of eating would make it hard for them to afford the other things that compete for household budgets, like transport, childcare, clothing and social engagements.

We used income scenarios to explore how affordable this way of eating would be for the case study families, but even the average earnings in Scotland show that this is out of reach for many families. Transport and fuel costs to source and prepare the food would add even more to the overall costs. Steps that local and national governments are taking to reduce the cost of living and increase wages and benefits go hand in hand to addressing this gap.

⁴³ The ‘Good Food’ Case for the provision of Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) in Scotland: <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/news/articles/2021/the-e28098good-foode28099-case-for-the-provision-of-universal-free-school-meals-ufsm-in-scotland/>

Our aspiration around what *should be affordable* for people living in Scotland today is not yet matched by sufficient incomes from benefits and wages. But the shopping lists show us where the pressure points for family budgets are, and they reveal where policies like increasing the value and eligibility for the Scottish Child Payment or extending universal free school meals to all pupils can make a real difference.



Chapter 3: Using the tools to measure progress

Working with groups of rights-holders to identify the contents of a weekly shopping list created a set of tools that allow us to measure how close we are to realising the right to food and what policies and practices are making a difference.

The shopping lists are detailed examples of recognisable, culturally valued ways of eating that balance people's priorities and aspirations around enjoyment, health and the realities of our lives in Scotland today. The shopping lists represent what a family today could take pride and pleasure in eating in Scotland.

Our Right to Food shopping lists can be used to measure progress towards realising the right to food by monitoring changes to the:

1. Cost of the shopping lists
2. Affordability of the shopping lists
3. Content of the shopping lists
4. Geographic accessibility of the items included

Cost of the shopping lists

Monitoring the cost of the overall shopping lists, divergence between food and drink categories included on the lists and changes in availability of different price points provides a way to explore in detail the pressures that families might be under when making choices about the food they are purchasing for their families.

Key questions:

- What does the shopping list cost?
 - How is the cost of the shopping list changing over time?
- How do the main categories of the shopping list compare to each other, and how is this changing over time (e.g. fruits and vegetables versus discretionary items)?
 - How might these changes affect choices about purchasing the food that keeps people healthy and well?
- How does the price of the cheapest items compare to the median or most expensive item costs?
 - What effect does this have on people's ability to afford food with dignity and choice?

Affordability of the shopping lists

Monitoring the proportion of household incomes needed to afford the shopping lists provides an opportunity to explore whether wages, benefits and discretionary supports are sufficient and enabling people to afford the foods they need with dignity and choice.

Key questions:

- Can families afford the food that people would choose as a good balance?
 - How does this differ for different income scenarios?
- How are statutory and discretionary support measures affecting the affordability of this diet?
 - How does the value of benefits like Best Start Foods and the Scottish Child Payment or discretionary support schemes like the Scottish Welfare Fund compare to the overall cost?

Content of the lists

Co-production of the shopping lists provides an opportunity to explore rights-holders' priorities and aspirations around food, the way people eat and what they believe everyone should be able to afford in a Good Food Nation if wages and benefits were sufficient. As time moves on, people's priorities and aspirations are likely to change as new policies come into place and the reality of life in Scotland changes too.

For example, as universal free school meal provision is extended to more children in Scotland, this will affect the eligibility of the characters in the case study families to a free meal, which may in turn affect community advisors' views on the acceptability of including more school meals in the family's weekly budget. In 2021, one group explicitly included a 'meat-free' evening meal during the week, but in five years, more groups might prioritise this or some groups may feel that even more meat-free meals would be acceptable and recognisable to families in Scotland.

Key question:

- How are public perceptions of what people should be able to afford in a Good Food Nation changing over time?

Access to healthy foods

The shopping lists can be used as tools for local action as well as national action. If the foods that people would choose to eat are either not physically available in the shops or the price of them is so high that they are out of reach for most people, then families will struggle to access food with dignity and choice.

Local decision-makers and stakeholders can use information about the availability and comparative price of healthy foods in their areas to reflect on specific challenges and consider the steps needed in each area to address geographic and financial barriers.

Key questions:

- Are these foods available in shops in our local area?
- What is the price of these items in shops in our local area compared with the national average?
- What does this tell us about the actions that are needed in our local area to ensure people can access a variety of high quality foods with dignity and choice?

Recommendations

Policymakers can use this way of thinking about and co-defining the right to food as we develop both our national and local food plans and the implementation strategy for our human rights commitments.

We recommend a working group of relevant partners in civil society, Food Standards Scotland and the Scottish Government is established to build on the learning of the Our Right to Food project and:

- Continue to monitor the cost and affordability of the shopping lists for the large and small family household types.
- Establish and monitor the cost and affordability of 'Right to Food shopping lists' for additional household types.⁴⁴
- Regularly review the priorities and aspirations people have for what is considered 'adequate' within the context of healthy and sustainable foods, and update the shopping lists accordingly.
- Evaluate the effect that changes in direct support from new and existing mechanisms, such as the Scottish Child Payment, Best Start Foods, universal free school meals and school clothing grants, have on the affordability of the shopping lists for different household types.

⁴⁴ Suggestions from the Our Right to Food roundtable November 2022 include: Older person living alone, Migrant Muslim family in the asylum process (with no recourse to public funds), Pregnant woman and / or parent with infant under one. These case study households would provide scope to explore wider barriers people face to accessing an adequate diet.