

# Royal Society for Public Health Response to National Food Strategy

The Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) is an independent health education charity dedicated to protecting and promoting the public's health and wellbeing. We campaign and raise awareness of health issues, including obesity. We are a member of the Obesity Health Alliance (OHA), and share a common interest in preventing obesity-related ill-health by supporting evidence based population level policies to help address the wider environmental factors that lead to excess bodyweight.

We welcome the development of a new National Food Strategy as an opportunity to address the health problems caused by our food system, which is one of the major drivers of health inequalities, obesity, and obesity-related ill-health.

The suggestions we have made here are based on the research and policy recommendations we have made in our recent reports on obesity.

## **Change the retail environment to encourage healthier choices**

Food manufacturers and retailers are major players in the process of getting food to consumers, and therefore should take responsibility for the wellbeing of their customers by making the healthier choice easier. Our joint campaign with Slimming World, Health on the Shelf, explored this idea.<sup>i</sup>

We aimed to demonstrate that traditional marketing tactics employed by supermarkets to drive sales could be turned on their head to nudge consumers to make healthier choices. A panel of experts, including public health professionals, nutritionists, behaviour change specialists and retail psychologists were consulted, and gave a series of recommendations for what they thought a healthy store could look like.

To support the recommendations, we surveyed the public and Slimming World members. Over one third (36%) of the public reported they impulse purchase unhealthy products because they are on special offer, indicating the need to stop practices such as this in food retail. Slimming World members, who have been trained to have disciplined shopping habits, overwhelmingly (90% support) wanted to see offers on healthier products such as fruit and vegetables.

To accompany the research and report, we opened a pop-up store, showcasing the recommendations for how supermarkets can encourage healthier choices. *Nudge* was designed to subtly make the healthier options easier, and included:

- Nudge points, educational signage and basic nutritional training for staff to inform customers of how they could make their shopping basket healthier;
- Recipe cards and an on-site kitchen with cooking demonstrations;
- The proportion of food stocked in the supermarket to be in line with the government recommended Eatwell guide;
- Healthier products positioned at eye level, with less healthy products lower down.

The campaign was received positively, and shows what food retailers can do to help customers make informed decisions about their purchases, and how to increase access to healthier food.

Along with wider implementation of the changes we made in our pop-up supermarket, we want to see clear and consistent nutritional information on packaging, and reward schemes

that incentivise customers to choose healthier products. We believe altering the retail environment would help deliver safe, healthy, affordable food.

### **Transform the street environment to address the junk food offer and advertising**

Children with obesity are more likely to grow into adults with obesity, and experience obesity related health issues. The street environment constantly pushes unhealthy options, making it very difficult for children and families to have a sufficient balanced diet. We looked into this issue in our report, Routing Out Childhood Obesity.<sup>ii</sup>

We ran a series of focus groups with secondary school children. They told us that the main reason they go to fast food outlets after school is because they're cheap and they're there. Schools in London have an average of six fast food shops within a five minute walk of the gates.

We recommended the following:

- Local authorities to introduce A5 planning restrictions within 400m of all primary and secondary schools – two thirds of the public (65%) back a ban on unhealthy fast food outlets within a 5-minute walk of school gates.
- Exploration of novel licensing tools as a means to reduce afterschool consumption of food at unhealthy fast food restaurants – almost half of the public (48%) support banning the sale of unhealthy food during the post-school hours.
- An end to the school children discounts offered by unhealthy fast food outlets near schools – four in five (80%) of the public would put an end to the school children discounts offered by unhealthy fast food outlets near schools.
- A ban on app-based food delivery services delivering junk food to school gates – four in five (80%) of the public would support a ban of app-based food delivery to schools.
- Local authorities to follow the lead of Southwark and other councils in banning all junk food adverts across council owned advertising sites – nearly four in five (77%) of the public agree that any areas where children tend to congregate more should be considered unsuitable for junk food advertisements.
- Councils to be further supported to restrict advertising of HFSS products on public telephone boxes and remove obsolete phone boxes which can still be used to advertise unhealthy foods.
- The ASA to review the 100m restriction on HFSS advertisements near schools.
- ASA to have, and use, powers to levy fines on any company that breaks advertising rules more than once in 3 years.
- Limits to be placed on shopfront advertisements for unhealthy foods, particularly when aimed at school children.

We need to transform the environment to increase access to and affordability of high-quality food. Currently, children are overwhelmed by the flow of affordable, convenient and unhealthy food options at the end of a school day, all while healthier options are being pushed out of the spotlight as a result of aggressive marketing campaigns. Local authorities must be given more licensing powers to reverse this situation and provide healthy affordable food, regardless of where people live or how much they earn. Simultaneously, more campaigns should be funded to encourage children and teenagers to eat more vegetables, to build on the success of Veg Power, make healthier options the norm, and to promote a positive diet.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/obesity/health-on-the-shelf.html>

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ii <https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/obesity/routing-out-childhood-obesity.html>