

Improving the healthiness of Scotland's Out of Home food and drink sector – Policy Position

Policy Position

Obesity Action Scotland supports the introduction of various statutory measures to improve the healthiness of food and drink products offered in Scotland's Out of Home sector (OOH). Such restrictions should be focused on improving the diet and health of the population.

The OOH sector covers all the food and drink eaten outside of the home, and from takeaways consumed inside and outside of the home. Examples of OOH outlets include restaurants, quick service restaurants such as fast food chains or takeaways, pubs, coffee shops, petrol stations, bars, hotels and cinemas.

Evidence shows that OOH options tend to contain higher quantities of salt, sugar, and fat than similar food and drink available in retail outlets such as supermarkets. This is a concern given that, in Scotland, it is estimated **25% of our total calories** are consumed OOH.¹

The Scottish public supports policies to help improve the sector, with **over half of people (53%)** in support of limiting the number of fast food outlets permitted in a given area.²

What measures should be introduced?

In order to be effective, we need a broad range of policies to ensure outlets in our communities offer more healthy options:

- Regulate to restrict OOH promotions on products high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS); and encourage businesses to promote healthy food and drink options instead
- Regulate or limit access to unhealthy food through improved planning and licensing arrangements for the sector
- Regulate to control portion sizes, introduce calorie caps, and ensure provision of half size portions
- A mandatory reformulation programme that reduces calories, sugar and salt while increasing content of fruit, vegetables and wholegrains in recipes and on menus
- Introduce mandatory nutrition information on menus and online

For a wider consideration of the evidence related to Scotland's OOH sector, please see our Briefing on [The out of home sector and its impact](#), which is available on our website.

Why action is needed to improve Scotland's Out of Home sector

- In 2021, **96% of people in Scotland** reported visiting an OOH outlet, with an average of just under three trips a week per person.³
- Quick service restaurants (QSRs), which are fast food outlets and takeaways, generate the most business in the OOH sector in Scotland, making up 34% of total sector spend.⁴
- In 2021, the most popular food products purchased in Scotland were sandwiches, confectionary, and cakes, biscuits and pastries.¹

- The most frequently bought OOH main meals for children in 2019 were chicken, burger, pizza, sausage, and fish-based meals.⁵
- A Food Standards Scotland survey of 81 branded outlets found that nearly a third of main meals (32%) offered in Scotland's OOH sector contain more than one thousand calories.⁶
- A survey of sweet snacks sold in Scotland's OOH sector revealed an average of 465 calories per serving in these products - nearly a quarter of a woman's daily recommended intake.⁷
- A 2022 systematic review of international studies found that higher frequency of visiting the OOH sector is associated with higher BMI and overweight in individuals.⁸

Policy areas for intervention

Planning

Planning policy must support the creation of healthy places and facilitate and support easy access to healthy food.

The current reality is very different. For many people in Scotland, their local food environment is comprised of more unhealthy outlets, such as hot food takeaways, than outlets offering healthy and affordable options. A review of the impact of planning policy by the Scottish Government concluded that there is an **association between exposure to unhealthy food outlets and weight gain**.⁹

- A recent Scottish study showed that outlets in Glasgow selling potentially health-damaging products and services, such as fast food, were usually clustered in more deprived areas, leading to greater exposure in these areas and further exacerbating inequalities¹⁰.

Scotland's National Planning Framework 4¹¹ acknowledges the relationship between planning and health. Although we were disappointed that health is not fully incorporated as a material planning consideration, the need to consider health and wellbeing of communities could enable improved local food environments.

Currently in Scotland there are no examples of planning policies being used to help improve local food environments. Evidence from planning authorities in England have demonstrated this can be done, with planning policy used to refuse planning applications from unhealthy food outlets in order to protect public health.^{12,13}

Portion Sizes

Regulations should be introduced to restrict portion sizes in the OOH sector.

Portions in the OOH sector tend to be much larger compared to portions served in standard retail settings and they have increased over time.¹⁴ These larger portions result in OOH options often being more energy dense than food prepared at home.¹⁵

- Recent evidence from *Which?* found that a large serving of a fizzy sugary drink in a fast food outlet can be over 1,100ml, while small servings come in at around 470ml. Both of these portion sizes are far bigger than the standard retail serving of 250ml.¹⁶ Larger servings of these fizzy drinks have a higher calorie content.

There needs to be a greater differentiation in price between smaller and larger portion sizes.

- Larger portion sizes are regarded as being better value for money relative to smaller portions offered.¹⁷ Prices for large portions are often only slightly higher than those for regular which encourages people to buy the larger option – a tactic known as *upsizing*.¹⁶
- Evidence indicates that larger portion sizes are associated with increased food and drink and calorie intake.¹⁸

Marketing and price promotions

Marketing and price promotions are commonly used in the OOH sector and evidence shows they are predominantly found on unhealthy products.

- Evidence from a recently published Scottish Government study reveals price promotions (e.g., multi-buy, price reduction) were far more frequently applied to less healthy products, both in-premise and online¹⁹;
 - o Only 8% of in-premise offerings on price promotion were categorised as healthier, compared to 73% categorised as less healthy.
 - o Even starker figures were found online where 0% of price promotions were attributed to healthier products compared to 70% for less healthy.
- Upsizing (outlets offering an increased portion size at point of sale) was also found to be a commonly adopted strategy and it was used nearly twice as often to promote less healthy options compared to healthier ones.

Other policy measures

There are a number of other policy measures that could be introduced which would help to improve the OOH food environment. These include:

- **Nutritional information**, including calorie information and calorie caps on certain products
- **Reformulation** of products sold to make them healthier
- **Improving children's menus**, including providing healthier options and offering smaller portions of meals from the regular menu

There are strong levels of public support for legislative action

We recently commissioned polling^a to gain an understanding of levels of public support for various public health policy interventions.² The results largely showed support for a number of policy measures which would allow people in Scotland to eat a healthier diet.

- The majority of respondents supported interventions to add calorie information to menus both in-premise (60%) and online (61%).
- Over half of people (53%) support limiting the number of fast food outlets in a specific area – compared to 25% opposed.
- More people are in favour of capping portion sizes of unhealthy food and drinks when eating out (42%) than those who are opposed (37%).

References

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⁴ Food Standards Scotland, Kantar (2022) Overview of the Total Food and Drink Landscape in Scotland 2021 <https://www.foodstandards.gov.scot/publications-and-research/publications/overview-of-the-total-food-and-drink-landscape-in-scotland-2021>

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^a We commissioned Diffley Partnership to carry out public polling on various policy interventions. Over 1,000 people in Scotland responded which was conducted between the 24th and 26th of August 2022.

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