

SEPTEMBER 2023



**Obesity Action
Scotland**
Healthy weight for all

Hearing from Scotland: A focus group study 2022-2023

Session 1

Food Deals and Special Offers (Promotions)

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Between November 2022 and March 2023, Obesity Action Scotland worked with Diffley Partnership to reveal the experiences and opinions of the Scottish public in relation to the food environment and potential policy interventions to improve access to healthy diets. Information and public discourse around diet and obesity is often dominated by numbers and statistics. We believe there is a knowledge gap for descriptive data on opinions and beliefs of the public related to the issues of diet and weight. This work delivered a series of focus group workshops with members of the Scottish public to hear about their personal experiences with these matters.

The sessions generated a wealth of information and opinions. At this stage, we have focused our analysis on findings that align with existing evidence and the policy positions of Obesity Action Scotland. We also highlight findings which are less supportive of public health recommendations and which may indicate a need for greater public awareness and understanding.

Overview of Food and Drink Promotions

Session 1 focused on the theme of Food Deals and Special Offers (promotions). The concept of food and drink promotions relates to tactics used by retailers, both in store and online, that are actively employed to increase sales of selected products. There are two broad categories in which food and drink retail promotions lie; price and non-price.

- Price promotions cover all offers where there is a reduction in the usual price of a product which may be time-limited or conditional on another requirement such as purchasing another item.¹ Examples include multi-buy offers, temporary price reductions, and special meal deal pricing.

¹ Scottish Government. *Reducing health harms of foods high in fat, sugar or salt: consultation*. 02/10/2018

- Non-price promotions involve the placement of products in prominent locations, including checkouts and end of aisles, in order to increase their visibility to customers. Non-price promotions also cover in-store marketing purchase rewards and coupons, such as customer loyalty points.¹

This session* aimed to understand how people view the various types of promotions in retail settings, whether they are seen as a barrier to healthy eating, and whether there is demand for interventions.

In-session Polling

Polling which took place at the start of the session showed all panel members agreed levels of overweight and obesity in Scotland is a significant issue, with most in strong agreement. In relation to the theme of food deals and special offers, the vast majority of participants said they use retail promotions on food and drink either 'sometimes' or 'often'. Panel members were generally supportive of interventions to address the negative impacts of promotions. Across sessions 1a and 1b, over 80% of participants supported introducing restrictions on where unhealthy food and drink products can be displayed in shops, with over **70%** also supporting restrictions on price promotions. A full breakdown of the in-session polling results can be found in the appendix of this briefing.

Panel Discussion – Findings and Insights

Types of food & drink on promotion

Panel members noted a variation in the types of food and drink seen on promotion, though sensed an imbalance where less healthy foods – such as biscuits, sugary breakfast cereals and crisps - are often given more prominence. Participants also discussed how they rarely find promotions on raw or fresh food, or 'staple' items like tinned foods, with many noting that they would like to see more offers on these and fewer on less healthy foods.

* Two separate sessions took place for this theme in order to accommodate availability of all members of the panel (sessions 1a and 1b). Both groups heard identical evidence presentations and were posed with the same discussion questions.

“I certainly have noticed a lot more of the sweeter products, the breakfast cereals, children’s breakfast cereals, chocolate, biscuits - that all seems to be a high proportion of the offers that are highlighted by supermarkets in a promotional lens at the moment” – [Session 1b Participant]

“You don’t get offers on your staples or your pasta and your fruit and veg and things like that” – [Session 1b Participant].

Impulse buying

Panel members said they generally try to avoid impulse buying promotional (and other) items, though can find them hard to resist. These are considered particularly attractive to in-person shoppers – who may be tired, hungry or in a hurry – and more easily persuaded to buy more than they intended:

“When you do see these offers, you might be [doing] ever so good and say ‘yes, I’ve done all my shopping, I can just get myself a little treat’” – [Session 1a Participant].

Several panel members considered how young people, such as those of high-school age, can be particularly influenced by the appeal of less healthy foods when purchasing their own meals or snacks, whilst younger children can encourage their families to impulse buy:

“It’s the children, I think, that I hear guiding the parents with ‘I want this, I want that’ because it’s right in front of them and that can be quite difficult for a parent to say no to” – [Session 1b Participant].

Location promotions

Participants were highly aware of the placement of promotions and the role of shop layouts, with many noticing that less healthy foods are typically placed ‘front and centre’ to capture attention.

There was strong agreement that the placement of such promotions – such as at shop entrances and the ends of aisles – was deliberate and motivated by market research strategies:

“They’re laid out in a way to maximise the profit of the supermarket owners, so they will have it [promotional products] as things where they’re making a lot of profit, which tends to be food of probably low nutritional value and have those where you see them and where research has shown that you’re most likely to zoom in on something and buy it. So, as long as that’s the situation, then it’s going to be hindering” – [Session 1a Participant].

Participants also felt that store layouts are ever-changing, with both promotional and non-promotional items being moved and re-positioned in new areas so that customers are encouraged to take different routes and browse new products, maximising purchase potential:

“The layout or the contents of the aisles tends to move around which slows you down to encourage you to buy more, which is quite frustrating when you know what you want to get but that’s also a way of getting you to spend more money” – [Session 1a Participant].

As the sessions for this theme took place in November and December, promotions were seen to have increased in the run-up to the Christmas period, with many panel members pointing out that such displays dominate stores and persuade shoppers to indulge:

“I was in Tesco last week and the first thing you see is the massive tubs of Quality Street and Celebrations for Christmas with the big Clubcard prices as they do, so making them the same price as they were last year for everyone. It’s just like this wall of giant tubs of sweeties” – [Session 1b Participant].

Other Learnings

The panel discussion also identified some contrary opinions which indicate that there are still areas where public health evidence and people's beliefs are different.

In terms of motivations, some panel members described only using promotions where these apply to items they purchase regularly or those which they already intended to buy, suggesting they do not feel strongly persuaded by them. Others declared that promotions were not only a way to reduce shopping costs but also an avenue for trying out new products.

Some members showed scepticism over proposed interventions to reduce the harm of promotional activities on people's diets. A few participants suggested they typically only buy what they need in retail settings and already know what they should be eating, therefore viewing regulation of current promotions as unnecessary. The need to increase broader availability of healthy food and drink was cited as being more important for improving public health by some members.

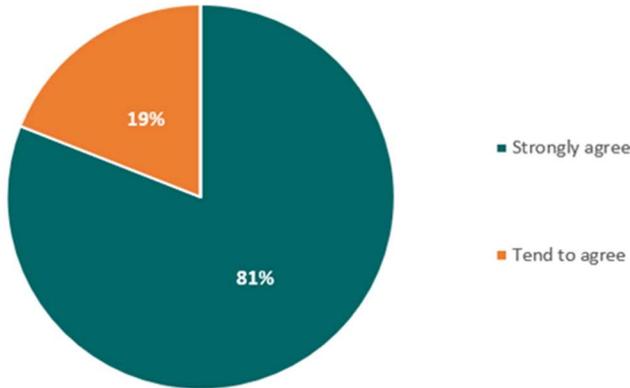
It is important to understand these beliefs and how promotions are viewed and used. We can use this knowledge to develop messaging that builds a wider understanding of the need for a changed food environment.

Summary and Conclusions

Discussions in this focus group session demonstrate that members of the Scottish public are acutely aware of the issues around food and drink retail promotions and their relationship with health outcomes. People recognise that promotions in Scotland are, more often than not, used to influence purchasing of products that can negatively impact our health. The session revealed that, while some people view promotional tactics as powerful due to their ability to prompt impulse buying, others believed they could make decisions that resisted influence; they were particularly concerned about the influence of these tactics on the preferences of children, while causing increased exposure to products which might otherwise go unseen.

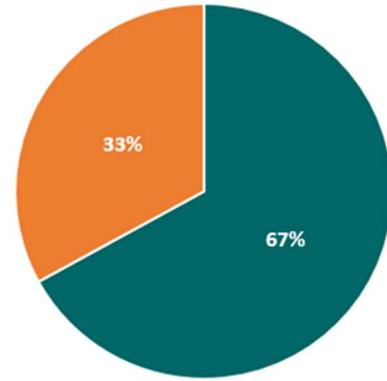
Appendix: In-session polling results

Question 1 – To what extent do you agree with the following statement? – ‘Overweight and obesity is a significant issue in Scotland’ (Single choice)



Session 1a (Saturday) – 16 voted (100%)

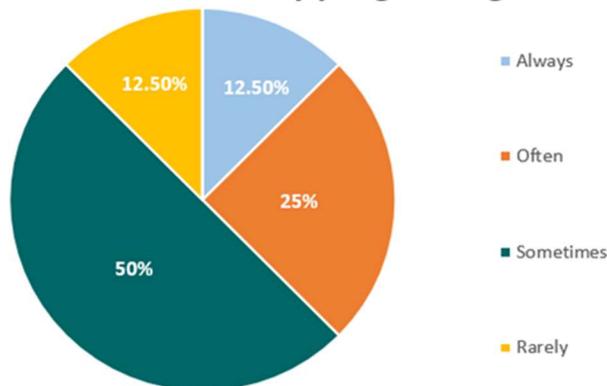
- Strongly agree – 13 (81%)
- Tend to agree – 3 (19%)
- Tend to disagree – 0 (0%)
- Strongly disagree – 0 (0%)



Session 1b (Thursday) – 6 voted (100%)

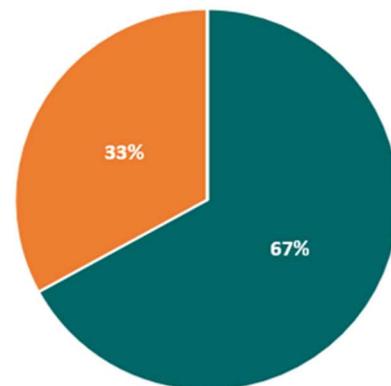
- Strongly agree – 4 (67%)
- Tend to agree – 2 (33%)
- Tend to disagree – 0 (0%)
- Strongly disagree – 0 (0%)

Question 2 – How often do you tend to make use of special promotions/deals on food and drink when shopping? (Single choice)



Session 1a (Saturday) – 16 voted (100%)

- Always – 2 (12.5%)
- Often – 4 (25%)
- Sometimes – 8 (50%)
- Rarely – 2 (12.5%)
- Never – 0 (0%)



Session 1b (Thursday) – 6 voted (100%)

- Always – 0 (0%)
- Often – 2 (33%)
- Sometimes – 4 (67%)
- Rarely – 0 (0%)
- Never – 0 (0%)

Question 3 – Which of the following measures would you support being introduced in Scotland? (Multiple choice)



Session 1a (Saturday) – 15 voted (100%, 1 had left due to technical difficulties)

- Restrictions on advertising unhealthy foods – 10 (71%)
- Restrictions on price promotions/special offers on unhealthy foods – 10 (71%)
- Listing calories on menus – 5 (36%)
- Restricting where unhealthy foods can be displayed in shops – 12 (86%)

Session 1b (Thursday) – 6 voted (100%)

- 4 (67%)
- 5 (83%)
- 1 (17%)
- 5 (83%)