





Priorities for tackling the obesity crisis in England

Expert agreement on what needs to be done

October 2016















Obesity- and diet-related diseases are reaching catastrophic proportions

The UK has the second highest rate of obesity in Europe. One in four adults is now obese and half the adult population is predicted to be obese by 2050 (1). Diabetes now affects more than four million people in the UK and this figure is projected to rise to five million by 2025 (2). The majority of cases (90%) are type 2, which is strongly associated with obesity. This diet-driven crisis is crippling the National Health Service (NHS). The costs associated with being overweight or obese are £6.1bn every year for the NHS and £27bn for the wider economy (3).

Much more needs to be done to avert this looming crisis

A range of policies could be adopted to help people to eat a healthier diet and protect them from disease. A Food Environment Policy Index has been developed for England to assess the food- and diet-related policies that are in place and identify gaps. A total of 73 experts from 41 organisations (universities, civil society organisations and professional bodies) took part in the exercise to rate how well England was doing compared with the best practice in other countries, and to prioritise actions to improve diet-related health in England.

Experts from the following institutions contributed: Action on Sugar, Alexandra Rose Charity, British Medical Association, C3 Collaborating for Health, Cancer Research UK, Children's Food Trust, City University, Compassion in World Farming, Institute of Education, Eating Better Alliance, Food Ethics Council, Food Foundation, Food Research Council, Food System Academy, Forum for the Future, Health Equalities Group, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Medact, National Obesity Forum, Nourish Scotland, Queen Mary University, Royal College of Physicians & Surgeons of Glasgow, Soil Association, Sustain, Sustainable Food Trust, UK Health Forum, University of Aberdeen, University of Aberystwyth, University of Cambridge, University College of London, University of East Anglia, University of Liverpool, University of Oxford, University of South Wales, University of Stirling and Open University, University of Ulster, University of Westminster, Which? World Obesity Federation, World Cancer Research Fund, WRAP, WWF.

Food Environment Policy Index (Food EPI)

Food EPI is a tool for evaluating how well food policies are tackling diet-related disease in relation to international best practice. It was developed by an international network of experts called INFORMAS.* The method has been applied in several countries and described in *The Lancet* medical journal. It involves the following steps:

1. Documenting all the relevant policies to produce an Evidence Paper, which is checked for accuracy and comprehensiveness by government officials.
2. Bringing a range of experts together to rate the policies in terms of how well they are implemented compared with examples of best practice in other countries and identifying gaps.
3. Developing action statements, in conjunction with the experts, to fill those gaps.
4. Conducting an online exercise with the experts to prioritise the actions.

Food EPI covers all aspects of food, including:

- Composition
- Labelling
- Promotion
- Provision
- Retail
- Prices
- Trade and investment
- Leadership
- Governance
- Monitoring and intelligence
- Funding and resources
- Platforms for interaction
- Health in all policies

The Evidence paper and full research findings can be found on www.foodfoundation.org.uk

* International Network for Food and Obesity, NCDs Research, Monitoring and Action Support

England has some good diet-related policies and is considered a world leader in some areas

The experts rated the following policy areas highly in comparison with best practice examples from other countries:

Policy areas	Score out of 5
Systems to regularly monitor obesity rates	4.1
Systems to regularly monitor risk factors for non-communicable diseases	4.1
Inclusion of ingredient lists and nutrient declarations on packaged foods	3.9
Access by the public to key government food- and diet-related documents	3.6
Existence of dietary guidelines	3.5
Adoption of food standards in most schools	3.5

THE FOOD FOUNDATION

UK HEALTH PREVENTION FIRST FORUM

WORLD OBESITY

Food Research Collaboration

INFORMAS Benchmarking food environments

England has policy gaps that are preventing progress on combatting poor diets and ill health

The experts gave low ratings to the following policy areas in comparison with best practice examples from other countries:

Policy areas	Current status	Score out of 5
Formal platforms between government and civil society to discuss food policies and strategies	*There are limited mechanisms through which civil society can contribute to government planning on food-related strategies.*	1.3
Subsidies that favour healthy food over unhealthy food	*Subsidies for farmers are not determined by the healthiness of the food they produce.*	1.4
National investment strategies that protect nutrition and health	*Government focus is on driving food exports without considering public health.*	1.4
Planning regulations and zoning to encourage healthy food outlets	*There is no clear national guidance for planners.*	1.5
Government-led, systems-based approach to improving the food environment	*This work is devolved to local authorities whose powers are often limited and leadership may be weak.*	1.5
Advertising in child settings	*There are no bans on advertising unhealthy foods during family TV viewing times or through non-broadcast media.*	1.6

Priority actions that could significantly reduce obesity and diet-related diseases

The experts identified the actions that need to be taken to address the shortcomings in current policy and individually rated these in order of priority. Their judgments were based both on the importance of the action and the feasibility of it being implemented. The top 10 actions were as follows:

1. Control the advertising of unhealthy food to children

Reduce the exposure of children under the age of 16 years to the promotion of high-fat, -sugar and/or -salt food and drink by removing such promotion from: a) broadcast media before 9pm; b) all non-broadcast media (including digital) that have an above-average child audience; and c) the sponsorship of cultural and sporting events that appeal to children.

Canada sets advertising example

In 2015, the UK advertising spend on confectionery and snacks was £200m and a further £87m on soft drinks (4). This compares with £15 million spent on advertising fruit and vegetables. There is clear evidence that advertisements influence children's food preferences and habits. The Child Obesity Plan, published by the government in August 2016, failed to bring in tighter controls on advertising to children even though this was recommended by Public Health England, the body that advises the government.

Quebec imposed legislation in 1980 that banned commercial advertisements aimed at children under 13 in any media including radio, television, the web, mobile phones, printed materials, signage and promotional material (5). Advertisements for toys and children's food products were banned and adult advertising is highly regulated. A study that examined household expenditure statistics found that French speaking families in Quebec were 19% less likely to consume fast food compared with their Ontario counterparts and they spent 46% less on fast foods (6). Access to media from outside the province increased the probability of purchasing fast food. Quebec has the lowest rates of childhood obesity in Canada.

2. Implement the levy on sugary drinks

Implement the levy on sugary drinks by April 2018 and redesign the levy as a sales tax to ensure that the intervention provides a clear price differential at point of sale to promote a reduction in consumption of sugary drinks.

France reduces demand with 'soda tax'

A European Commission report in 2014 found that specific taxes on sugar, salt or fat do result in lower consumption. A levy on sugary drinks was announced by the government in 2016. Although it is included in the Child Obesity Plan, it is still unclear to what extent the levy will actually create a price differential at the point of sale.

France introduced a 'soda tax' in January 2012, which is applied to drinks with added sugar and artificial sweeteners. The tax is around €0.11 per 1.5 litres of soda and raises around €400m a year for the general budget. Demand for soft drinks reduced by 3.3% in 2012 and 3.4% in 2013 following the introduction of the tax (7). The French Treasury is now considering a tax on 'fatty foods'.

3. Reduce the sugar, fat and salt content in processed foods

Introduce composition standards for processed foods and dishes sold through food service in relation to the amount of free sugar, saturated fat and salt.

UK shakes up salt intake targets

Evidence shows that changing the balance of ingredients in everyday products can improve diets and go largely unnoticed. In the Child Obesity Plan, the government has pledged to remove sugar in a range of products that contribute to children's sugar intake by at least 20% by 2020. Currently, the focus is primarily on sugar, although there are plans to extend it.

The UK introduced a set of voluntary salt-reduction targets for a range of processed foods in 2006 as part of a broader campaign to reduce the population's intake of salt. Current targets have been set for 76 categories of food, which commits businesses to reformulate a wide range of foods to reduce salt levels. Many foods now have 10–20% less salt than 10 years ago, while salt intake has fallen 11% (8). Much less progress has been made on food eaten out of the home.

4. Monitor school and nursery food standards

Set out a new framework and independent body for inspection and monitoring of school and nursery food standards in England.

Sweden monitors nutritious school meals

New school food standards were introduced in 2015. Nurseries and some academy schools were excluded, however. The Child Obesity Plan commits to strengthen Ofsted review of food in schools and to develop voluntary guidance for nurseries, but experts recommended a full system of monitoring food in schools and nurseries.

Sweden introduced the Education Act in 2011 requiring school meals to be nutritious and free of charge. Good School Meals guidelines include age-specific reference values for energy and nutritional content in school lunches and portion sizes, while drinks are limited to water and milk.

The quality of school meals is monitored and assessed by an online tool called 'SkolmatSverige' (School Food Sweden). The tool allows schools and municipalities to evaluate their school food provision in six areas: choice, nutritional quality, safety and hygiene, educational resource, environmental sustainability, organisation and policy. It also includes questionnaires for the diners – pupils and staff. Currently 39% of all primary schools in the country have started to use the system. Schools that used the tool a second or subsequent time significantly improved their results in the categories of nutritional quality, educational resource and environmental sustainability (9).

5. Prioritise health and the environment in the 25-year Food and Farming Plan

Prioritise sustainable health and environment principles within the government's 25-year Food and Farming Plan.

Scotland puts Good Food Bill on the menu

The government is developing a 25-year Food and Farming Plan. It is an industry-led plan aiming to grow the British food market, increase competitiveness, develop resilience and maintain consumer confidence in British food. There is no indication yet of a focus on the healthiness of food.

Scotland will launch the consultation on a Good Food Nation Bill in 2017. It promises to address procurement, waste, health, education and social justice. Groups are lobbying for farming and fishing to be included too. The legislation is intended to enhance the National Food Policy.

6. Adopt a national food action plan

Adopt a national food and nutrition action plan to ensure that healthy and sustainable food supplies are affordable to all.

7. Monitor the food environment

Identify a suite of indicators to monitor the food environment to be included in the public health outcomes framework.

8. Apply buying standards to all public sector institutions

Make buying standards and application of the balanced scorecard for food and catering services mandatory for all public sector institutions by 2020.

9. Strengthen planning laws to discourage unhealthy fast food

Support local authorities to develop supplementary planning guidance and provide them with sufficient powers for a simplified mechanism of planning laws to enable them to both promote healthier food options and discourage less-healthy offers.

10. Evaluate food-related programmes and policies

Outline a plan to evaluate policies related to the food environment, and commission independent evaluations of major programmes and policies.

References: (1) Butland, B et al. 2007. Foresight. Tackling Obesities: Future Choices – Project Report. (2) Diabetes UK. November 2015. Facts and Stats. (3) Public Health England. February 2015. Making the case for tackling obesity. (4) Nielsen. 2016. Expenditure on Food Advertising 01 January 2015– 31 December 2015. (5) Office de la Protection du Consommateur. 2012. Advertising directed at children under 13 years of age. Quebec. (6) Baylis, K & Dhar, T. 2007. Effect of the Quebec Advertising Ban on Junk Food Expenditure. (7) Cornelsen, L & Carreido, A. 2015. Health-related taxes on foods and beverages (8) Public Health England. 2014. National Diet and Nutrition Survey (9) What is SkolmatSverige? http://www.skolmatsverige.se/in-english

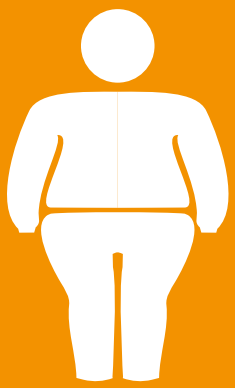
OBESITY- AND DIET-RELATED DISEASES ARE REACHING CATASTROPHIC PROPORTIONS

2016
25% of adults are obese



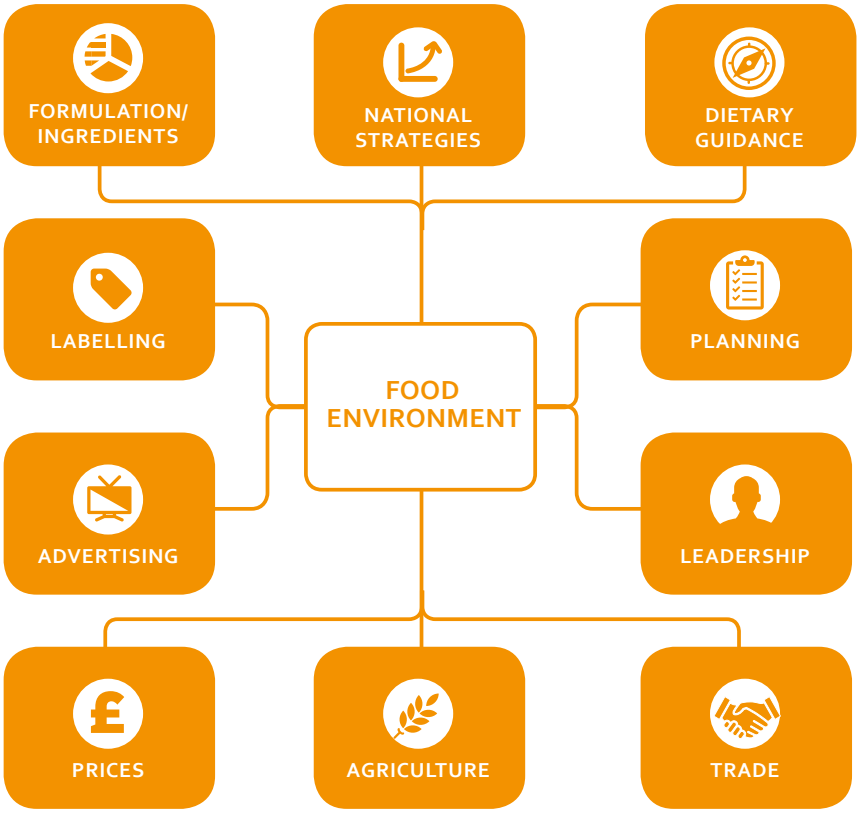
£6.1 BILLION COST TO NHS

2050
50% of adults will be obese



£9.7 BILLION COST TO NHS

OUR DIETS ARE INFLUENCED BY LOTS OF DIFFERENT FACTORS THAT MAKE UP THE FOOD ENVIRONMENT





73 experts from 41 organisations assessed the policies related to the food environment in England

THE EXPERTS JUDGED THAT ENGLAND IS DOING WELL ON

- Supporting systems for monitoring obesity- and diet-related diseases and risk factors
- Labelling packaged foods
- Allowing public access to key government documents on food strategy
- Developing national dietary guidelines
- Adopting school food standards

THE EXPERTS CONCLUDED THAT ENGLAND IS NOT DOING WELL ON

- Controlling the advertising of unhealthy food to children
- Systems-based approach to improving the food environment
- Strengthening planning laws to encourage healthy food outlets
- Considering health in food and farming strategies
- Subsidising farmers to produce healthier food
- Listening to civil society

10 PRIORITY ACTIONS THAT EXPERTS THINK COULD SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCE OBESITY- AND DIET-RELATED DISEASES

- Reduce the sugar, fat and salt content in processed foods
- Prioritise health and the environment in the 25-year Food and Farming Plan
- Control the advertising of unhealthy food to children
- Monitor the food environment
- Monitor school food standards
- Adopt a national food action plan
- Implement the levy on sugary drinks
- Apply buying standards to all public sector institutions
- Strengthen planning laws to discourage fast food
- Evaluate food-related programmes and policies

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE IN THE UK AND ABROAD

Advertising of unhealthy food to children

Quebec bans all food advertising aimed at children under 13 years. French speaking families in Quebec are 19% less likely to consume fast food than their counterparts in Ontario.

Health in food and farming plans

Scotland will launch the consultation on a Good Food Nation Bill in 2017. It promises to address procurement, waste, health, education and social justice. It is intended to enhance the National Food Policy.

Monitoring school food

Sweden monitors the quality of school meals with an online tool which allows schools and municipalities to evaluate their school food provision in six areas: choice, nutritional quality, safety and hygiene, educational resource, environmental sustainability, organisation and policy. Currently 39% of all primary schools have started to use the system.

Sugar, fat and salt content of processed foods

The UK introduced voluntary salt-reduction targets for a range of processed foods in 2006. Many foods now have 10–20% less salt than 10 years ago, while salt intake has fallen by 11%. Less progress was made with foods eaten out of home. It is important to build on this experience in the new sugar reformulation plan.

Levy on sugary drinks

France introduced a 'soda tax' in 2012. It is €0.11 per 1.5 litres of soda and raises around €400m a year for the general budget. Demand for soft drinks reduced by 3.3% in 2012 and 3.4% in 2013 following the introduction of the tax.