

SEPTEMBER 2023



**Obesity Action  
Scotland**  
Healthy weight for all

# Hearing from Scotland: A focus group study 2022-2023

Session 3

**Food Industry Power**

## Session 3 - Food Industry Power

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 from the public's perspective. 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 Industry Power

Session 3 focused on the overall power and influence of today's food industry, and how much responsibility it holds for population health outcomes. The content of the session was guided by a Scottish study which explored stakeholder perceptions of regulating adverts for products high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS).<sup>1</sup> The paper outlines how the food industry is able to influence all other stakeholders in the food system, from governments to individuals, and how it uses its disproportionate power to maintain its position of control.

This session aimed to understand the panel's perception of large food and drink brands, and reveal their thoughts on industry regulation to improve public health.

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<sup>1</sup> Carters-White, L., Hilton, S., Skivington, K. and Chambers, S., 2022. Children's, parents' and professional stakeholders' views on power concerning the regulation of online advertising of unhealthy food to young people in the UK: A qualitative study. Plos one, 17(6), p.e0268701.

## Pre-session Polling

Polling carried out in the days leading up to the session revealed **71%** of participants disagreed with the notion that the food industry empowers them to make healthy choices. Despite this, polling also showed **70%** of panel members believed that individuals have the most responsibility to fix high rates of obesity in Scotland, with the government and food industry being selected less often (12% and 18%, respectively). In a question exploring what might be the most effective avenue to improve the food environment, the majority of participants (**82%**) supported the idea of a combination between industry and government action, where industry voluntarily responds to government guidance/regulation. This was favoured above either action (voluntary or regulated) being implemented in isolation. A full breakdown of the pre-session polling results can be found in the appendix of this briefing.

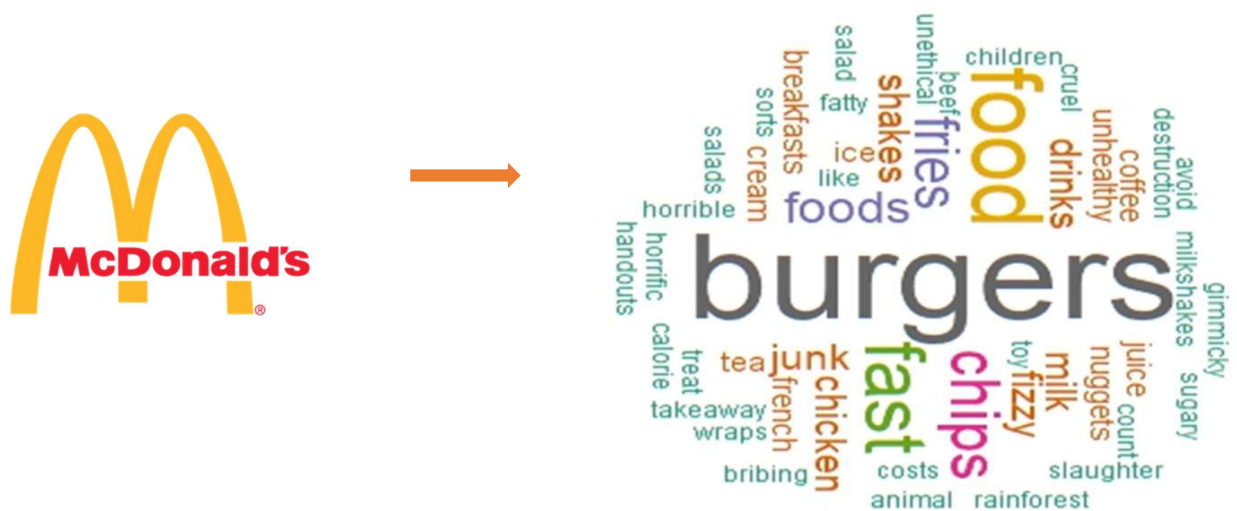
## Pre-session Activity – Brand associations

In the lead up to the session, participants were given an activity to complete. A list of seven popular food and drink brands were posed; participants were asked to make a list of the types of food or drink products they associate with each. The collection of this succinct qualitative information offered scope for the creative presentation of data, via word clouds. These were created using 'R' statistical software, in which the most frequently mentioned words and phrases are shown in a larger font to demonstrate significance.



### iii. McDonalds

The presentation of the McDonalds logo provoked strong associations with burgers, chicken nuggets, fries, ice cream and milkshakes. Others went further in writing that burgers have 'horrific calorie counts', while phrases like 'junk food', 'fast food' and 'unhealthy food' were used by 12 participants. One participant alluded to the influence of McDonald's marketing strategies on children, where they saw them as 'bribing children with their gimmicky toy handouts'. A few (n=2) participants associated McDonald's with 'healthier' food options, such as salads and wraps.





vi. AG Barr

Participants broadly associated AG Barr with soft/fizzy drinks, particularly IRN BRU. While most labelled these drinks as 'sugary', a few panel members also wrote about AG Barr's 'sugar free drinks'.



vii. Müller

All participants associated Müller with 'yoghurt' or 'dairy products'. Specific products like rice pots, Greek style yoghurt and 'Fruit Corner' were highlighted by some. While one participant associated Müller products with being 'full of sugar', another wrote about the 'high protein' content of such foodstuffs.



## Panel Discussion – Findings and Insights

### Industry response to advertising regulation

Participants largely expected industry pushback where restrictions on HFSS product advertising had potential to negatively affect profits. Some called this resistance to change a 'knee-jerk reaction':

*“Anything that’s going to affect their profits, they’re not going to be happy with. It comes down to the same thing and they’ll just throw in anything to downplay the potential benefits of the policy” – [Session 3 Participant].*

In keeping with the sentiment of the word association activity, participants talked about brand recognition and industry’s desire to keep their products at the forefront of consumers’ minds.

Participants identified advertising as a particularly powerful way of achieving this:

*“If they [industry] can keep the image of the product or the association with the company in the forefront of your mind, you’re going to go and buy that in the supermarket because you recognise it. And they don’t want to lose that foothold. The bigger the company, it seems, the bigger the adverts and that’s what they want – because ultimately the food industry wants us to keep buying their product to keep their profits high” – [Session 3 Participant].*

Some participants felt that restrictions on advertising would discourage impulse buys, while others saw potential for such restrictions to positively impact children, who can be easily influenced by the advertising content they are exposed to:

*“I think it would make a bit of a difference, particularly for kids. They’re influenced a lot by what they see, so if they’re not exposed to it, it won’t have as much of an effect. But it probably wouldn’t be as effective on adults” – [Session 3 Participant].*



Similarly, others highlighted the prevalence of food and drink advertising across society, and its various points of influence. Advertisements could influence consumers in public spaces – for instance, via physical posters, billboards and leaflets – as well as those viewing online content. As one participant noted, people may consume – and perhaps internalise – content and messaging around food and drink without making an active effort to do so:

*“I think advertising is more important with unhealthy foods. Because every single day you’re walking down the street and there are all sorts of adverts, on the TV, on your phone, on your computer – it’s everywhere, so it makes sense that it will have an impact. Even just the things that you’re hearing when you’re not really listening, it’s subconscious” – [Session 3 Participant].*

Upon reviewing the evidence, several panel members pointed out how certain restrictions (e.g. the ban on HFSS product advertising on the Transport for London network<sup>2</sup>) were not as detrimental to the food industry as they had implied. They saw this as proof that industry can, and should, adapt to the market and successfully switch the focus of advertising towards healthier products:

*“I think that just proves that we’re not going to be detrimental to the food industry by bringing in restrictions, and that they can advertise healthier products, or what’s perceived as healthier products. It’s still going to keep their name out there but hopefully you’ll associate it with better products, not the worst ones for you” – [Session 3 Participant].*

Panel members were largely supportive of stopping the food and drink industry from advertising unhealthy products to children, though some wondered whether an outright ban on this was unrealistic. Others felt that that it would be possible to impose such a regulation if there was public, government and/or industry willingness, and drew examples from regulations on other industries:

*“I think I’d transfer examples from other industries like alcohol and tobacco - it can be done if there’s a willingness there, if the narrative leans towards being able to do that, like if there’s political will or not. So whether or not I think it’s a good idea, I think it’s possible to do” – [Session 3 Participant].*

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<sup>2</sup> London.gov.uk. *Londoners buy less junk food due to ad restrictions on TfL network*. 17/02/2022.

In line with this, panel members felt that businesses in the food and drink industry would – and should – be able to continue to compete without advertising unhealthy food and drink to children. One went further by suggesting that advertisements of this kind “normalise unhealthy products for kids”.

### **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.

An instance of this could be found in the pre-session polling which showed the vast majority of the panel believed individuals hold the most responsibility for the high prevalence of obesity seen across Scotland. This result is at odds with the wider evidence relating to obesity which underlines the various social, economic and political factors that significantly contribute to health and weight outcomes. It is also at odds with a separate polling result, which revealed that the majority of participants did not feel the food industry empowers them to make healthy choices, alluding to a failure of the current system.

Elsewhere, when prompted with real-world examples of food industry regulation and company responses, participants were broadly unsurprised by attempts to push back from industry, pointing to their obligation to protect profits. Additionally, some participants were unsure of the extent to which it is government’s responsibility to improve the health of the population, but agreed that government should have to encourage manufacturers to produce less unhealthy options and improve people’s diets.

It is important to understand these beliefs and how food industry power is perceived by the public. We can use this knowledge to develop messaging that builds a wider understanding of the need for a changed food environment.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

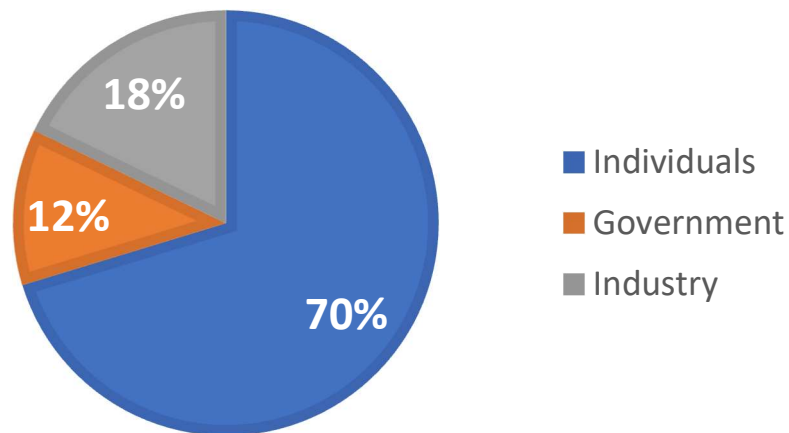
Both the results from the pre-session activity and panel discussion confirmed the Scottish public are aware of the wide-ranging influence of the food and drink industry on population diets. Despite large brands often positioning themselves as positive actors in the food system, the panel mainly associated such brands with less healthy products. Conversely, healthy options were very rarely associated with any of the brands put to the panel.

Broader discussion in the focus group session revealed the panel to be supportive of restrictions on HFSS product advertising. Restricting adverts targeted at children was especially favoured as they were recognised as the most vulnerable to harmful outcomes. Other participants highlighted that HFSS product advertising restrictions would not prevent companies from continuing to operate, and that political will has been the key facilitator of similar public health action in the past.

## Appendix: Pre-session polling results

*Who do you think has the most responsibility to fix high rates of obesity?*

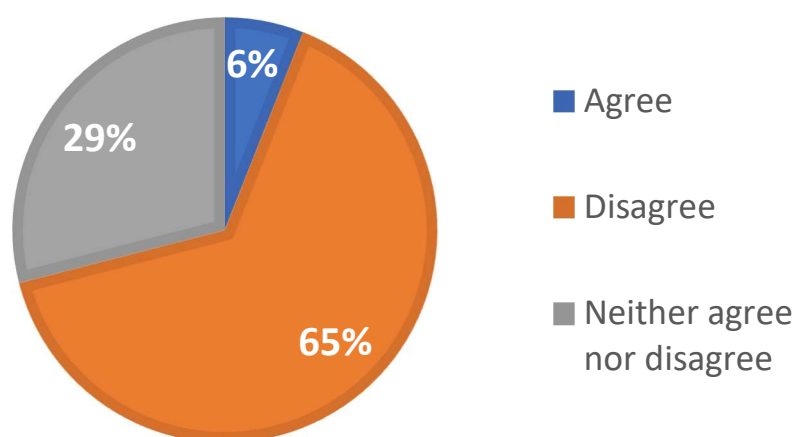
(n = 17)



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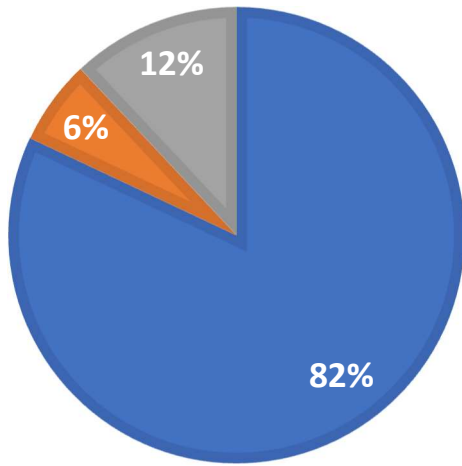
*Do you feel the food industry empowers you to make choices which are good for your health?*

(n = 17)



**How could the food industry improve the food environment?**

**(n = 17)**



- Both (Taking voluntary action and Responding to government regulation/guidance)
- Taking voluntary action (industry)
- Responding to government regulation/guidance