



Food, Diet and Obesity Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Food, diet and obesity

Thursday 2 May 2024

11.20 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Walmsley (The Chair); Baroness Boycott; Lord Brooke of Alverthorpe; Baroness Browning; The Earl of Caithness; Lord Colgrain; Baroness Goudie; Baroness Jenkin of Kennington; Lord Krebs; Lord McColl of Dulwich; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick; Baroness Suttie.

Evidence Session No. 17

Heard in Public

Questions 245 – 260

Witnesses

[I](#): Emmanuel Matuka, Youth Board member, Bite Back; Anisah Rahman, Youth Board member, Bite Back; Harrison Wright, Youth Board member, Bite Back.

Examination of witnesses

Emmanuel Matuka, Anisah Rahman and Harrison Wright.

Q245 **The Chair:** Hello and welcome back to this public meeting of the House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee. This is the 17th evidence session of the committee's inquiry exploring the role of foods such as ultra-processed foods and foods high in fat, salt and sugar in a healthy diet and in tackling obesity, and we continue to hear from members of the public sharing their lived experience in relation to food, diet and obesity.

Today we will be hearing from three representatives of Bite Back's youth board. We are joined by Harrison Wright, Emmanuel Matuka and Anisha Rahman. You are very welcome, and we very much look forward to your evidence. I will ask you in a few moments to introduce yourself briefly when you answer the first question. Please let us know if you are asked a question that you do not wish to answer. We will respect that absolutely, so please speak up if that is the case. Today's meeting is being broadcast, and a written transcript will be sent to you to check for accuracy before subsequent publication.

I refer to the list of members' interests, including my own, as published on the committee's website and set out in the committee's first evidence session on 8 February. Our members will indicate any particular interests that they have in relation to this evidence session before they speak. I also would like to repeat what I said at the beginning of the earlier evidence session: that although it would be inconsistent with Lords committee procedure to compel our witnesses to do so, we will, for the sake of transparency, be giving all our witnesses the opportunity voluntarily to declare any interest they deem relevant to the work of the inquiry the first time they speak. That is a formality that we have to do at every meeting.

The first question is this. Can you introduce yourself and tell us why you decided to start campaigning for a better food system?

Harrison Wright: Hi. I am 18 and from Birmingham. I joined Bite Back when it started five years ago. It is our fifth-year anniversary this year. I started campaigning because it affects all young people across the UK and the world. I started campaigning when I was about 11 years old. In year 6 you get weighed and measured, and then I got a letter in the post saying that I was overweight. Then, as you do, you follow through on the letter and go on the website. My mum and I followed it through, but there was no help for us. It was just a guy in a leisure centre who was working three jobs and there was literally no support for me. Then I went on my own journey. My first campaign was on the sugar tax when I was 11 years old and I have been doing it ever since. I am 19 next week.

The Chair: You are a veteran.

Harrison Wright: Yes, pretty much. It has been eight years with very little change and that is why I joined Bite Back.

Anisah Rahman: Hi, everyone. I am 20 years old and from London. I have been an activist with Bite Back for roughly three years now. My reason for joining Bite Back was a very personal one. It had a lot to do with my little baby sister, who is type-1 diabetic. Unfortunately, we saw that her health was at times endangered by misleading health claims plastered on food and drink products. For me, it was all the more frustrating, because in my family we work incredibly hard together to do everything we can to ensure that she has what she needs, yet time and time again we kept encountering countless products that were deceptively marketed as healthy but were in fact laden with high amounts of sugars and fats.

Being her older sister, I realised that I did not want to witness my sister getting sick any more from some of these claims and that these companies should not be getting away with these practices in the first place. I believe that everyone has the right to know what they are consuming. I think that is fair to say. Also, I believe that my seven-year-old sister, alongside millions of other people in this country, really deserves that honesty and integrity from these big food companies. I was very willing to fight for that change.

The Chair: Emmanuel, what brought you into this?

Emmanuel Matuka: I am 19 years old and from Wakefield. At Bite Back we talk about a lightbulb moment. For us as young campaigners, this lightbulb moment is the first pivotal point at which we began to realise just how broken the food system in the UK really is. When you are in the middle of a system as a young person, it is not always easy to realise that you are subjected to so much unfairness and inequality. It was not until I began to observe the world around me more and started to see how good these junk food advertising companies are at marketing and targeting not just young people but children specifically that I began to realise that there is a real issue here and I needed to do more to be a part of bringing about the positive change that I wanted to see.

I am going through it with my younger brother as well at the moment. A bit like Anisah, it is a bit more personal for me. I have three younger brothers and I got my driver's licence in the summer, so I have been helping my parents with the school run this year. My younger brother, Nathan, is in year 2. I will pick him up and drop him off at school. Every day when I pick up Nathan from school I always ask him the same question: "What did you learn today?" Like most seven year-olds, his answer is always the same: "I don't know".

It is interesting, because Nathan is so observant. He is a very quiet kid but he is so good at looking at the world around him and seeing what is going on. Every time we drive home from school we pass McDonald's on the way. He knows there is a McDonald's on the way, and when I pick him up at the gates he says, "I don't know what I did in school today", but as soon as he gets in my car the first thing he says is, "Can we get McDonald's?" That is because big food corporations like McDonald's do such a good job at actively targeting and marketing at these young

children with the use of toys inside their Happy Meals and bright colours and cartoon characters on their packaging. You cannot tell me that they are not trying to appeal to a specific age demographic, and it is wrong. I joined Bite Back because I do not feel that any young person or child should be taken advantage of in that way.

The Chair: I thought you were going to tell us that he told you what he had had for lunch.

Q246 **Baroness Jenkin of Kennington:** Do you approach Bite Back? How do you find it? Does it come to you? What is the process of getting involved in the campaign, which I am very well aware of, by the way?

Harrison Wright: With Bite Back, we all have different journeys. We have all joined differently. I joined at the start, so I was approached to join, whereas some of our members have joined through Instagram ads and different social media apps. I am sure Emmanuel and Anisah agree with me. We like to include young people from all across the country so that we can get all experiences. Starting at age 14 we go all the way up to mid-20s on our board, so we get a great experience of all young people across the UK.

Emmanuel Matuka: To add to Harrison's point, I joined through social media. Bite Back is so good at using social media to reach people. Before I joined the Bite Back youth board, I was a fan of the work that it was doing. I was following the work that it was doing. Now I get to call him one of my close friends, but I used to be his number one fan.

Baroness Jenkin of Kennington: All of you are on the youth board.

Anisah Rahman: Yes.

Emmanuel Matuka: Yes.

Q247 **Baroness Suttie:** Emmanuel, I loved your lightbulb moment. For me, it was during Covid when I realised the incredible importance of a healthy diet and the sometimes malign influence of our supermarkets. Can you tell us a bit about your own personal experience of food in the environment where you live and at home? What do you think are the main barriers to being able to have a healthy diet?

Anisah Rahman: For context, I live smack on the border between two neighbourhoods, Kilburn and West Hampstead. Turning left at the end of my road takes you into a much more deprived area, Kilburn, that is not massively healthy. Quite literally, every storefront is a fried chicken shop, a convenience store, a fast-food outlet or a burger joint. The streets are simply flooded with these unhealthy options lined up right next to one another. In fact, within a few minutes' walk I can already count about five fried chicken shops and four fast-food outlets, including the likes of McDonald's, Popeyes and KFC.

However, if I was to turn right at the end of my street, it takes you to the much more affluent West Hampstead, where there is an abundance of

healthy food options, shops and restaurants—you name it. The only difference, and the irony here, is that nothing in that area is affordable for the residents living in Kilburn. That does not sit well with me, especially given that, right now, nearly one in three children in the United Kingdom are facing a future of food-related ill health.

Children from the most disadvantaged areas, like Kilburn, are more likely to be affected by this. All I really want is for this generation to live as long as their parents. Honestly, I do not think that health should be a right of wealth in the first place. I really believe that those living in Kilburn have just as much of a right to access that healthy, affordable food as those living in West Hampstead.

Emmanuel Matuka: I am from Yorkshire, and it is a bit different, because there are not as many of the more affluent environments and places. Where I went to college during my A-levels, my college was surrounded by fast-food outlets and takeaway shops. As soon as you leave the front gates you can leave and enter the college by, you will be met with a row of pizza shops, burger shops and chicken shops right next to each other. Alongside that, the big fast-food chains, like McDonald's and KFC, are a mere few minutes' walk away. When you are constantly in that environment, especially right in the middle of exam season, it is suffocating, because those are your only options.

You asked me what the barriers are. That is the answer. Those are the only options that are available to us as young people. When you are in that environment day to day, especially through a busy school week, there is nothing more suffocating or annoying than seeing that.

Harrison Wright: For context, my situation is very similar to Emmanuel's. I live in Sandwell, more specifically Wednesbury, and it is in the 10th lowest economic local councils for the whole of the UK. I see this first hand. Simply, for me and my friends, there are no options out there. I walked through Wednesbury town this morning and there were three chicken shops, four pizza shops, four chip shops and a Greggs. That is it. That is all I could eat.

That does not sit right with me, because these companies spend millions of pounds flooding our high streets with these outlets, aiming it at me and my friends. I only have one friend who can drive. I do not always go out with him. You know what England is like. It rains. It is awful. Where am I supposed to go when it is pouring down with rain? I am not going to stand outside, am I? There is no space for young people to go, other than these outlets. That is the issue. There are no other options for us.

Q248 The Chair: Last week we were in Blackpool and the council told us that it had talked to a lot of the fast-food shops and persuaded some of them to have a healthy option available. I wondered whether any of you had gone into these fast-food places and asked whether there was a healthy option. If so, was there one?

Harrison Wright: I like to watch what I eat, because I want to live a long, healthy life, but because of the bombardment of these outlets I cannot. I go in these shops and look at the menu and there is literally nothing.

The Chair: There is nothing healthy on it.

Harrison Wright: Yes. If you go to the mainstream ones, they have a list of it, but it is more expensive. I am a student. I cannot afford the healthy option, so I have to go for the savers meal, which ultimately is unhealthy for me.

The Chair: Anisah, are there any healthy options in your area in the chicken shops?

Anisah Rahman: Even with the restaurants that introduce those healthy options, it is a lot more expensive. That makes it inaccessible to us, especially given that these fast-food shops offer alternatives that are a lot cheaper, which happen to be the unhealthy options in the first place. Thinking about the area of Kilburn, which I live very near, generally speaking I feel that it is flooded with those unhealthy options. That is what it is. If you look on the streets, you can see those countless different stores.

We also have all that advertising in the background, so it is already in our minds all the time. Coupled with all those things, it ends up having a very starring role in our minds, not only because of the marketing and the advertising but because of the environment and the fact that junk food is pretty much pouring out in the streets.

The Chair: Are there any rays of light in your area, Emmanuel?

Emmanuel Matuka: Very much like Anisah already said, junk food is in the spotlight. High streets are saturated with junk food and fast food. The local fish and chip man and I have a bit of a relationship. We have become quite close over the years. I have asked him in the past, "Are there any other healthier options?" As Harrison and Anisah both already so eloquently put it, they are always so much more expensive. When you are a student just trying to get through the day, it is not always an option.

Q249 **Baroness Jenkin of Kennington:** You are aware and looking for healthier options. We know that a lot of this fast food is basically addictive. How many of your friends who are not campaigners and not actively involved in understanding all these issues would choose a healthier option even if it were available? Would they be more likely to go for this more addictive junk food stuff?

Harrison Wright: One thing you cannot do is deny the tactic that these big junk food companies use to put this junk food in a starring role in my mind. As I walk to the bus stop, I see a McDonald's advert. As I get on the bus going to uni, I look out on the streets and see more adverts. Our high streets are flooded with junk-food advertising. Why should we have

to protect ourselves? Why should we have to choose the healthy option? There should be more healthy options out there for us.

Anisah Rahman: Echoing exactly what Harrison said, it is the fact that, if you think about it, these big food companies spend billions of pounds every year on advertising, marketing and targeting us. They put it in our heads that junk food has a starring role in our minds in the first place. A lot of young people are looking for those options in the first place. It is just the fact that it is inaccessible or not even affordable. There are those two massive problems that need to be overcome.

Emmanuel Matuka: It is really a battle of David versus Goliath. Like Anisah said, these big food corporations can spend billions on their advertising. We, as young people, see what they are paying for. We see why they are so good at being able to spend money on advertising, because we are the ones subjected to it day in, day out. It is not just by looking at billboards, ads and things of that nature; it is through social media as well, even on people's phones. It is inescapable. You cannot get away from just how good these junk-food corporations and giants are at marketing and targeting young people. When it is on social media, every bus you see and every train station you go to, you cannot avoid it.

Q250 **Baroness Jenkin of Kennington:** That is my main question. It is about how they do the marketing. Most of us will not be fully aware of what happens on your phones. Could you explain that a bit more for those of us who are not as proficient with social media and all the rest of it?

Harrison Wright: You have all the different social media apps and they are plastered with junk-food advertising. It is like cultural wallpaper. It is not just that. You get notifications through to your phone by these delivery service apps. I am not going to lie; I think everyone in the whole world is partial to a takeaway, so I have those apps on my phone. On my exam results day, before I even got a text from my dad I got a notification from Uber Eats. That is not right.

Baroness Jenkin of Kennington: I doubt that many of us use it, so it is worth you explaining it to us.

Anisah Rahman: These big food companies are really good at what they do, because they target us on the platforms that we all exist on. There is a bunch of different social media networks that I have already seen advertising on, like TikTok, which is a video platform where you can upload videos and things like that or watch things. Even on YouTube we have it. It is even on Instagram, which is another social media networking app. It is just meant to be to connect with friends and to see how everyone is, not to be bombarded with junk food adverts right then and there. It is even on Spotify, which is a music streaming platform. If you think about it, it is pretty insane.

Then, obviously, out in the world we have all those different billboards and signs telling you that one of these big fast-food outlets is very close. It is pretty much everywhere. We are constantly bombarded.

Emmanuel Matuka: They have touched on all the different mediums of social media that they can target you on. There is only one thing I would add on top of that. I finished my A-levels last year, so I am currently on a gap year, running away from education for as long as I can. During exam season, during A-levels, these big food corporations knew that I was doing exams. They knew the whole country was doing exams. I got so many texts, emails and notifications on my phone and saw so many things on social media about two-for-one deals for kids doing exams and, "If you come with your exam results, we'll give you a half-off deal", or whatever. They know this and actively target young people, especially at times like exam season, when young people and students are the most vulnerable. That is when they target you the hardest.

The Chair: You need a bit of comfort food.

Q251 **Baroness Boycott:** Thank you all very much. This is riveting. I wanted to ask you about the whole question of sports marketing and sports drinks and companies like Prime that exist entirely online. It started online and, as we have heard a bit about, they do different design bottles and the kids will trade them.

Harrison Wright: There is a Bite Back activist called Clemmie, and I am good friends with her. She said something that really stuck with me. She said that energy drinks are the currency of the playground. Nowadays, you go on social media and see all these energy drinks lined up, but in reality you do not know how much sugar there is in them. I have been walking to school where kids have not known the amount of sugar that is in them because of the misleading health claims, and they have just been drinking them. It is not their fault; it is the misleading health claims. You hear "energy drink" and think, "This is okay, because it relates to sports", but it is not.

Baroness Boycott: Does the fact that, say, the rugby is sponsored by Red Bull, which is not good for anybody, have a big influence? What do you have there?

Harrison Wright: This is a Monster Energy can. For context, an adult is meant to have 30 grams of sugar a day. Can anyone guess how much sugar is in this?

Baroness Boycott: Is it 70?

Harrison Wright: There are 55 grams of sugar in this one can of 500 millilitres. That is 14 teaspoons of sugar.

Baroness Boycott: How much does that cost you?

Harrison Wright: These range from about £2 to £3.

Baroness Boycott: Are they massively marketed on social media to you as a cool thing to have?

Harrison Wright: Yes. The can is quite cool.

Baroness Boycott: Yes, it is a very cool can.

Harrison Wright: There is the advertising, the colours and everything. They do different flavours, and this is made to attract young children.

Baroness Boycott: Who makes that? Who owns that company?

Harrison Wright: This is Monster Energy.

Baroness Boycott: We will look it up. Do not worry.

Harrison Wright: I am not 100% sure who owns it. Sorry.

Baroness Boycott: Do you feel that it is very misleading of the—so to speak—grown-up world of sport? It seems to me like it is often a bit like cigarettes. There is the fact that Coca-Cola sponsors the Olympics and all these energy drinks now are associating themselves with health.

Harrison Wright: Yes, 100Grass-roots football in the UK is sponsored by McDonald's.

Baroness Boycott: Can you name any more of those kinds of sport things?

Harrison Wright: Like you said, the Olympics is sponsored by Coca-Cola. The World Cup is sponsored by Coca-Cola. Should these not be sponsored by something healthy to put the healthy option in a starring role in young people's minds when they are watching these sports? I am a Tottenham fan. I cannot go to a Tottenham game without seeing these advertisements everywhere, plastered all over the stadium and on my journey on the way to the stadium.

Baroness Boycott: Presumably that follows through into what drinks you can buy in the stadium. The sponsors get the lion's share of the stalls.

Harrison Wright: Yes, of course. In the stadium they have soft drinks, alcohol and all of this. If I see an advert for this on my way to the game, subconsciously already in my brain I will want this.

Baroness Boycott: Is it good?

The Chair: Do you think it would make a difference if they called it a calories drink instead of an energy drink?

Baroness Boycott: Looking at that can, do you think that, as a regulation, it should have a warning? Should it say, "This is 55 spoons of sugar", in quite a large label, so that a kid could make a decision? Would that help?

Harrison Wright: Yes. This is nearly twice the amount of what an adult, never mind a child, should have in a day. If they called this a can of sugar, I do not think people would pick it up, would they?

Baroness Boycott: Nobody would have it.

The Chair: It would be honest, wouldn't it?

Q252 **The Earl of Caithness:** I wanted to follow up on what Baroness Boycott just touched on. Would it make any difference to you and your friends if there was a socking great big label on there saying whatever it says in order to try to put you off?

Harrison Wright: A million per cent. This should have a danger warning on. This should not be all consumed in one day. I have seen people drink three or four of these a day.

The Chair: So it is the portion size.

Harrison Wright: It is not just portion size. Fifty-five grams of sugar in one drink should not be allowed. Another Bite Back youth activist is Jacob. He had Innocent Bubbles. You hear the name "Innocent Smoothies" and you think "healthy and natural". Innocent is owned by Coca-Cola.

The Chair: You have to look very carefully at the label, don't you?

Harrison Wright: You do.

Anisah Rahman: That is the problem as well. This packaging and these labels are misleading. They are not up front about it. In the way they are marketed, it looks like it is healthy. We see things like "no added sugars", "healthy" and "whole grain", or sometimes the packaging is completely green. It is already deceptively marketed as healthy in the first place. You cannot really blame young people. They are vulnerable to these marketing tactics just because of the way these companies are deceptive and dishonest in the first place.

Baroness Boycott: They are very expensive; £3 is a lot of money.

Harrison Wright: Because of the amount of sugar in them, they are addictive. You have one flavour one day and another the next, because that is how they market them. The other cans are properly colourful, with nice names and everything, aimed at children. There is a pink can called Pipeline Punch. The alliteration alone will stick in a child's head if they hear that. They could see their favourite influencer on TikTok drinking it. That will stick in their head. Because of the misleading health claims, they will think, "Energy drink. That's really healthy. I'll drink this and do amazing at school". They are not.

The Chair: They are also fizzy, which makes them taste refreshing and you do not notice the sugar quite so much.

Harrison Wright: Yes.

Q253 **Baroness Pitkeathley:** Harrison, I know you are a student now, but it is not that long since you were at school. What was your experience of school dinners and eating in school? Was the food attractive, healthy and

accessible to you? How could it be made better if it was not up to standard?

Harrison Wright: My experience mirrors that of the whole of the UK for young people. Do not get me wrong. Some schools are doing it well, but if they are doing it well, why can the rest of the schools not? At Bite Back, we like to play on stories, because that is what we bring as young people. We have a Bite Back activist called Anica. She was meant to be here today, but she could not be, unfortunately. She was on free school meals and, for the last three years of her school life, she lived off a tuna sandwich every day. I bet you are thinking, "A tuna sandwich, maybe with a bit of lettuce and tomato in there", but it was white bread and tuna. That was it. It had no nutritional value at all.

Going back to my own experience, I can so vividly remember queuing up at lunchtime. I would be so excited to go to lunch, because I was hungry. You would get into the queue and wait for about half an hour. I would be with my friends. A lot of my friends were on free school meals, so this was the best value that they could get. You would get a chicken burger for £2. You might think of a chicken burger with mayo, lettuce and all the extras, but no, it was a fried chicken breast in a white bun. That is it. You would get a 50p cookie and a 35p bottle of water, and that was you done for the whole day. For some kids, that was their only meal.

The Chair: Do they have to buy water? Is there no water fountain in the school?

Harrison Wright: In schools there is. In my school in particular, I did not see one water fountain throughout the whole school. There were other drinks options, but these were fizzy or fruit juices, and they were a lot more than 35p. If you are on free school meals, the limit is £2.90. If you want anything above that, you cannot get it. This is wrong. If I think back to my friends and having conversations with them, they agreed with me in school that this school food is not attractive or appetising. If I talked to my friends who went to a different school, they would completely agree with me, because it is a vast experience of completely the same thing. How is this okay when one in three children, or one of us three, is at risk of food-related illness in the future? This is wrong.

Baroness Pitkeathley: How could this food be made better? Give us your suggestions for better school meals.

Harrison Wright: The fix will be different for each area and each young person, because every young person is different in schools. Everyone has different needs. If there were more healthy options on offer, and these were pushed to the front—rather than the chicken burger, something that looks appetising—that will make it better. There is a disparity between the cost of a fruit pot and a muffin. One of my friends told me that in their school a muffin is 50p but a fruit pot is £1.50. In the fruit pot there are soft, mushy grapes and a decaying apple from the day before. No one wants that. It is more expensive as well. This is preposterous.

Baroness Pitkeathley: Can you remember back to your days in primary school? Was the food any better there? Was it worse when you got to secondary school?

Harrison Wright: I can remember primary school. I loved primary school. It was my favourite time in life—no stress and no worries at all. All I had to worry about was my Xbox and doing a bit of homework. My nan was a chef in my primary school, and she would tell me first-hand about the lengths she had to go to to make the food stretch and the lack of nutrition in the food. It all came in powders or pre-packaged. There was no fresh cooking. My favourite thing in primary school lunch was ketchup, because of the amount of sugar in it; it made it taste fresher.

Baroness Pitkeathley: Do either of the other two remember their school dinners? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Emmanuel Matuka: I can definitely agree with Harrison. The standard of school food was just not where it should have been. One thing that people in power could do is ensure that school food standards are constantly being revised to ensure that, for the area that certain schools are in, they are up to par.

As well as that, one of the most heartbreaking things, especially from my area, was talking to my friends for the first time about how we all get our lunches, and then realising that I had friends who were on free school meals and would have to leverage when and where in the day they were going to eat. Like Harrison said, when you are on free school meals, there is a limit to how much you can spend during the day. I had certain friends who, because of the amount of money they were given as an allowance for the day, which had not increased while the prices of food in the canteen had increased with inflation, would be trying to get more with less money. They would then have to make decisions such as, "Am I going to eat at break time and then skip lunch, because I don't have enough money to get both, or am I going to eat at lunch and then skip break?"

Some of my friends would even have to message me the day before and ask, "Emmanuel, what lessons do we have in the morning? I just want to know if I have PE in the morning, so that I know whether to get something at break time, because I don't eat breakfast at home. Do I get something to eat at break time, which is then going to give me enough energy to get through PE, and then I will just skip the rest of the day, or do I soldier through until about lunchtime and then get enough energy to get through my exam that I have in period 5?" That was and still is the reality for a lot of young people in the UK.

The Chair: Have breakfast clubs helped at all? Was there a breakfast club in your school, Emmanuel?

Emmanuel Matuka: It was different. At my primary school, there was a breakfast club. Unfortunately, at my high school, there was not.

Q254 **Baroness Jenkin of Kennington:** I have recently been on a trip to one of the Chefs in Schools schools. They had quite recently moved from the local authority option of frozen burgers and chips every day to fresh cooked food. They have a salad bar and vegetables. It seemed to me that the children are becoming more used to it. It is the healthy option that we are looking for, but there was certainly no way that a couple of the children we were sitting with were going to eat those vegetables. We bribed them. We did everything we could to encourage them. My concern is whether, even if we were able to offer everybody a healthy option, they would eat it, or whether they are now too addicted to the fast-food option, if that is the right way to put it. I would be interested to know your thoughts on that.

Harrison Wright: As we said before, junk food plays a starring role in these children's minds, so it will be a hard switch over. Once that healthy option plays a starring role in their mind and they have that lightbulb switch, which is what we want at Bite Back, they will realise, "This is good for me".

Emmanuel Matuka: Just like Harrison said, one thing that would help is taking junk food out of the spotlight and replacing it with healthier options. People need to know that junk food is not the be all and end all. Our high streets are flooded with junk, and it is so hard to think about anything else when that is all that you see on a regular basis.

Q255 **Lord Colgrain:** You have covered a lot of my question, particularly with what you have just been saying, but let me ask it anyway and just add a bit to it. How important are fast-food outlets and takeaways for young people in your local area? That is in the context not just of food. Does it constitute a safe space and a place where people want to gather, congregate and be social? What could help young people access healthier options?

Anisah Rahman: Fast-food outlets and takeaways are truly the youth clubs of today. At least that is what I would say for my high street from the hours of 3 pm to 5 pm. Fast-food brands are very aware of that. They are viewed as these safe, warm spaces that provide not only free wifi but a space to hang out with our mates after school. I honestly believe that it is like that wherever you go. Any young person will say pretty much the same. I can understand why, because, truth be told, where are the healthier options when most high streets are dominated by fast food? There is literally virtually no space for those healthier spaces to even exist in the first place. Even if there was space for those healthier restaurants or shops, not everyone would be able to afford them. That brings in the other problem of it being inaccessible.

Just to home in on the point that I was talking about and the idea that the world is flooded with junk food and these fast-food options, it might be good for me to illustrate what my 14-year-old brother always looks at. This is the best way to understand the influence of these big fast-food outlets and brands. Even yesterday, on his bus ride and walk back home from school, he was pretty much surrounded by these McDonalds ads.

After looking at his mobile phone, he was then bombarded by KFC ads. As soon as he had come home, he was in his bedroom trying to do his schoolwork. He ended up trying to listen to his music on the online streaming platform Spotify, and he was interrupted by yet another McDonald's ad telling him to buy food—this time, a Happy Meal at around 6.15 pm, or dinner time. That is literally just yesterday—a day in the life of a 14-year-old boy.

The fact that he is not even protected from the influence of these big companies within the confines of his own bedroom is a bit insane. That is a huge thing just to try to think about. You cannot look left or right, up or down, without seeing a junk food ad. No one seems to be safe in the hands of these big food companies. It is an even worse and much more pressing issue, especially given that a third of us are already at risk of having our lives cut off by food-related conditions like type-2 diabetes and heart disease. All I am really asking is that these big fast-food shops leave my brother alone and that he be free from the pressures that they are imposing on him through their manipulative marketing practice.

Another thing that I wanted to point out, which I should have talked about earlier on, is the fact that we have started to see a huge increase in targeted ads from delivery apps. Our friend Anica told us how one of the delivery apps opened a pop-up store at her university campus. They were asking students to sign up in return for a free lunch. Once you have signed up, that is when these excessive emails start. You start getting constant notifications on your phone, with these delivery apps sending you special offers and exclusive deals.

It is inescapable, and not just from the advertising and marketing point of view. You also have the physical landscape of your streets dominated by these fast-food outlets. The fact that we see them as these safe, warm spaces and know that they provide us with the space to hang out and have free wifi is very overwhelming for a young person.

Lord Colgrain: Emmanuel, you look as though you are agreeing with every word.

Emmanuel Matuka: The only things that I can add to Anisah's fantastic points are my own personal experiences. You asked how important these fast-food outlets and takeaway shops are. I am from Yorkshire. Where I am from in Wakefield, and particularly in North Yorkshire, there are not a lot of places for young people to go. Wakefield is not really built for young people. It was built more for an older generation of people. Because of that, there is not a massive abundance of community centres or places for young people to just go, be, exist and explore whatever it is that they are interested in.

These takeaway shops are a lifeline for young people in Yorkshire. They are not just places where people go to eat. They are community centres. They are places where people go to hang out and just be with each other, talk, communicate and have experiences with each other. They are second libraries for some people. My college campus was really small, so

students had to leave campus in between lessons and at break and lunch times, simply because there was not enough space on campus for everyone in college to be there all at one time.

I would walk past some of the fast-food shops and takeaway outlets and see people revising in there. People develop relationships in those types of places, simply because there are not too many other places for young people to go. They are also places where people go to have impromptu therapy sessions. When I was 15, after football training my friends and I would go to the gym. After the gym we would all go to the same fast-food shop and just sit, hang out and talk. That was all before we went home. If there was a community centre, or just somewhere for us to be able to talk in that period after having played our sport, where we could just be, exist and have fun, that would have made the situation a lot better for us.

Harrison Wright: I would echo exactly what my fellow members have said. They said it perfectly. Fast-food shops are the youth clubs of today. With the mass closure, where else are young people meant to go?

Q256 **Lord Krebs:** In a way, you have answered my question, but I will put it to you anyway in case you want to add anything else. My question is the other side of the equation from what Alastair asked you about unhealthy food outlets. What would make it easier for you to access healthy food in the area that you live in?

Harrison Wright: It would be more options and more spaces for young people to exist in and grow as young people. I am still growing. I am 18. I am still going to develop into an adult. I want to be nurtured. I do not want to have to sit in a fast-food place. It is almost impossible to avoid them on a high street, especially in an area like Wednesbury.

Emmanuel Matuka: Speaking on behalf of the youth from North Yorkshire, we very much need more places for young people to be able to explore their interests and the things they would like to do and be in a more productive way. We need more youth clubs. We need more community centres. We need more productive ways in which we can engage a younger generation of people. As it is at the moment, we only have fast-food shops and takeaway outlets, which is simply not good enough.

Anisah Rahman: I would echo exactly what both of my colleagues have said. Generally speaking, we just need more protection from these big food companies. That is really what we are asking for. Placing all the responsibility on us as young people to avoid these corporations when they are spending billions of pounds on marketing, advertising and putting junk food in the spotlight is overwhelming for a young person.

I hope we have illustrated today, through all our personal experiences and those of our friends and family, just how overwhelming and inescapable it is, and just how bombarded we are by it all. I just want to emphasise how much we need protection from it. We really need to make

our high streets healthier, so that when I walk down Kilburn High Road it is not flooded with unhealthy food options. We really need the Government to protect people like me, my little brothers and my little sister, and to use their power to help the residents in those more disadvantaged areas to access what they need to grow and thrive.

Harrison Wright: Like Emmanuel and Anisah, I have two younger sisters. They are seven and 11. For this inquiry, I asked them, "What is your favourite cereal?" They picked Froot Loops. I think you can guess why: the pink packaging, the cereal, which looks appetising to a young child, and even the name, which is Froot Loops. "Froot" is not spelled correctly; it has a double O. On the back, it says "multi-grain source of fibre", but it does not mention the massive amount of sugar in it. It does not say that it is placed on a shelf low enough to be in their eyeline. There are so many other products just like this in the report that Bite Back has launched, and we would like to share this report with the committee. It goes into complete detail about why this is wrong and needs to stop.

We have other products that will shock you, because they shocked me. We have these two—Belvita and Nature Valley—which I am sure you have all seen in your lives at one point.

The Chair: "Added fibre", is it?

Harrison Wright: Yes, "high in fibre". This says, "Brighten your day". It does not say, "Have a spoonful of sugar for your breakfast", though, does it? This is wrong. This needs to change.

Anisah Rahman: They spend millions of pounds on targeting us. The false, misleading health claims, the packaging and the visuals are what they spend millions of pounds on every year, and this is what we as young people need protecting from.

The Chair: Can you tell us about the portion size that they are recommending? Is that really the amount that a child is likely to eat, or might they eat a little more?

Harrison Wright: On this box, it says 30 grams for a portion size. That is probably the size of my hand. No child will survive after a portion the size of my hands. Thirty grams contains 7.5 grams of sugar. No one is going to have 30 grams of this cereal, though, are they? It just shows the massive amount of sugar poured into these. No one is going to weigh out their cereal in the morning, are they? No child will. They will pick this up from the cupboard and just pour it into their bowl straightaway.

The Chair: Thank you. We like visual aids on this committee.

Q257 **Baroness Jenkin of Kennington:** Chris van Tulleken said that his daughter ate six adult portions of Coco Pops before she had finished. There is an increasing campaign about social media for children, although not just about food and so on. There is a discussion going on at the moment about banning it for under-16s, and that smartphones are doing

a lot of damage to children because they are completely addicted to them. Do you think it might help if social media was not available for under-16s?

Secondly, we have not talked at all about cooking. Do you cook at home? Do your families, your parents or your friends' families cook from scratch, or is it all pretty much bought-in food?

Harrison Wright: To address your first question, I do not think it should be banned for under-16s. If it were, Emmanuel would not be here today, because he would not be on the youth board. That is how he found Bite Back. Social media can be a tool to empower. Why does the onus have to be on the child? Why is it not on the big food corporations that are putting millions of pounds into these social media ads ultimately to exploit these young people and drain them of their money and their nutrition?

On cooking, do not underestimate the tactics that these big food companies use. Everyone, at one point, wants that comfort food. My mum cooks at home. I cook at home for my mum. I love cooking. I really enjoy it. I put my music on and I love it. That does not mean that, when I do not cook, we have ultra-processed foods and a takeaway every weekend. It is not about cooking. It is not about education. It is about protecting children from these massive food conglomerates.

Emmanuel Matuka: In addition to Harrison's point, it really is not about education, because no amount of education can protect young people and children from the amount of junk food advertising that is out there in the world today. These corporations can spend millions of pounds on their marketing. As young people, we are simply here to be subjected to it and take it; there is not much that we can really do. No amount of education will be able to fix that. All it takes is for people in power to hold these junk food companies accountable and restrict the amount of marketing and advertising that they can target specifically at young people.

Anisah Rahman: I will just reinforce what both boys are saying here, because everything that they are saying is pretty much right. The onus should not be on children. We should not be the ones having to avoid all these marketing practices or hide away in the first place. These companies should let us be free from the pressures that they are putting us under in the first place. They are the ones that are pumping billions of pounds into this marketing and advertising in the first place. They know that it is harmful. They know that they are targeting children. They are very well crafted in that sense. It really should not be up to us to have to hide and run away from it in the first place.

On the education point, no amount of education will ever compete with those millions of pounds that these big junk food companies are pumping in. They are very good at what they do. They are very good at how much money they spend on their well-crafted messages. We need protections from those big food companies in the first place.

Q258 **Lord McColl of Dulwich:** Have you found any really useful app that

advocates the right food at a reasonable price?

The Chair: That is a hard one.

Harrison Wright: Apps that aid cooking do exist, but they are not within my price range. At home, it is only me and my mum. It is my mum's salary that has to cover bills, food and everything. I still live at home for uni. Apps such as HelloFresh are completely out of our price range and completely unrealistic. We do not have time to sit down and cook a big, long meal like that. They say that it is quick, but it is not that quick if you are not a professional chef. We have to cook quick food on the go that we also want to be nutritional and healthy in the same way.

The Chair: A lot of people are very short of time, are they not?

Anisah Rahman: Harrison has pretty much captured it all, but affordability and accessibility are the problems. These healthier options are not always affordable or accessible to everyone, and that is part of the bigger problem.

The Chair: We take that point, thank you.

Q259 **Baroness Boycott:** Thank you all so much. You have been amazing. You have answered this question in lots of different ways through this session. We will be making a report. What are the most important things that the Government could and should do now to help change this?

Emmanuel Matuka: Simply put, with regard to junk food advertising, there need to be greater restrictions on these big food corporations and their advertising. They actively and continuously target a generation of young people in the UK with their malicious and relentless junk food advertising tactics. They do this on a daily basis, and there is not much that we as young people can do.

Baroness Boycott: People say that they want restrictions. What does that mean? Are you saying that you do not want any adverts? In London, Sadiq Khan has banned junk-food advertising on streets near bus stops. It is unlikely that the Government will be able to ban the whole lot, so what might be a doable compromise in the middle of that?

Emmanuel Matuka: To be quite honest, speaking on behalf of my generation of young people, this will sound quite blunt. You said that it would be difficult, but we need to end them. You have heard the stats already: one in three young people in the UK are at risk of diet-related ill health. That needs to change. The only way to change this in a real way, where people can see real results, is by ending them.

In the UK, too many young people are being subjected to a system that does not help them but actively targets them. We are here to just take the malicious targeting and advertising tactics of these big food corporations, which can spend millions of pounds on actively getting at us. All we can do is just sit there and take it. It puts the health of young people at risk. It puts the health of our younger siblings at risk. It puts the health of future generations at risk. It puts our futures at risk.

The main question was, "What could the Government do to fix this issue?" There need to be greater restrictions.

Baroness Boycott: The main thing is advertising restrictions.

Emmanuel Matuka: Yes, absolutely. It is a big issue.

Q260 **Baroness Suttie:** You have all made the point about restrictions very clearly, but you have also made the point about an alternative venue for young people to be in. This is a question for your imagination, but what would it look like, and what kinds of food and drink would be available? If you could advise the Government on exactly the kinds of places that young people could go to as an alternative, would it provide sport? Would it provide cooking facilities? What would it look like?

Baroness Jenkin of Kennington: You are very clear, and you are speaking on behalf of Bite Back, but do you not think that we would get some pushback from parents and other children who are not involved in your campaign, who would say, "We want to see these ads"? It is quite a controversial thing for us to say, "Ban all advertising on all junk foods and fast foods".

The Chair: There is a lot for you to chew on there. What would you like to say?

Harrison Wright: In all honesty, and to be blunt, I do not think parents would push back on it. If we showed them the statistics and the risk their child is at in the future, I do not think any parent who cares about their child would say no. Other young people would not want it either. They want a healthy future. We want healthy futures. We want to grow and prosper into the adults we are meant to be. We cannot do that with these junk food adverts.

In an ideal world, the venue would be a space that empowers young people to get involved with activism and pushes them to make their issues cared about and to be a better adult in society, free from junk food and advertising. It would provide anything that a young person needs and wants to grow into a young, healthy adult.

Anisah Rahman: To echo what everyone else has said, and to address the different questions, we want this generation to live for as long as the older generations above us. That is going to happen only if we make these changes. We cannot continue as we are right now, which is why we are talking about ending junk-food marketing. It is inescapable. It is wrong to allow these children and young people to be overwhelmed by it all and to have our choices influenced in the first place.

We also need to make our high streets healthy, so that when I walk down Kilburn high street, for example, it is not flooded with unhealthy food options in the first place. The Government need to help residents in more disadvantaged areas to access what they need to grow and thrive. One way you could do it is by introducing the right conditions to make high streets healthy in the first place specifically by introducing health zones in

local communities that exclude fast-food outlets in order to protect young people and children.

Emmanuel Matuka: As for the community centres and what they could entail, if kids are going somewhere to play sport, they should be given healthier food options. Things like water and good food should be available to them in those types of environments, because it creates a culture around community, sport and food that is really healthy and good and encouraging, and makes people want to go and continue to be a part of whatever is going on in that community centre.

I began to realise that for the first time when I was at my local takeaway shop. I talked about this with one of our staff members here, Ayesha. I do not know the name of the guy who owns the takeaway shop, and I have been going to his shop for around 17 years. I always call him "bossman" every time I enter the shop. That is just our way of communicating. Everyone in the community always calls him "bossman". He is the local bossman who owns the pizza shop. He and I have a really good relationship, because each and every time I go into his shop I am not just going there for food. As I said previously, these takeaway shops and fast-food outlets are a social hub for the whole community to gather together and talk.

I would like to see that same level of community, communion, friendship and joy in those community centres. When I go to bossman, I am not going there necessarily to buy something; I am just going there to say hello, to see how his day was or how his family is. We have that communication and that friendship.

In those community centres, you need to introduce the right kind of spirit with the things that are available and on offer. Kids need to be able to go there and have something productive to do outside of school. They will then be able to have that same level of community with whoever is there running it. That is so important for whichever community you are a part of.

You had a concern about what parents would think. I hope you have all had a lightbulb moment here today listening to us is. Particularly with all the parents we talk to and campaign with, even if they had no idea beforehand about the work that we do at Bite Back, by the end of the talk, debate or whatever it was that they saw you can tell that they have been impacted and affected in some way. When they begin to hear the stats and the figures, and they see other young people being passionate about this work, they begin to realise that these are real issues affecting not just children from low-income backgrounds but their children.

This issue of a broken food system is unique in the sense that it is not exclusive. Regardless of what socioeconomic class you come from or your background, if you are a young person in the UK you will suffer because of this broken food system. Once parents begin to realise that—and they will—you should not have any issues.

The Chair: Thank you. That is a very powerful way to end this session.

Harrison Wright: Can I just add to the last question? Without wishing to be cheeky, I have two asks of the Government. First, I ask that every child has access to nutritious food, whether that be on the high street or at school.

Secondly, we want to get rid of all misleading health claims on cereal boxes like these. I want this to be called a can of sugar. I want real labels on products. I want children to be informed about what they are drinking and what they are putting in their body.

I am just an 18 year-old from Birmingham. There is not a lot that I can do on my own. We at Bite Back are looking to create change. We have created change, but we cannot do this without the help of the Government. Who is going to protect us? We need the Government's help to protect every young person across the world.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Harrison, I am really sorry that I nearly cut you out there, because we are running out of time. Anybody who has seen and heard this evidence session this morning will be so impressed by your passion. You are all so articulate and you are very effective ambassadors for the cause that you fight for. We have listened with bated breath to everything that you have said this morning. It has been very effective. Thank you all very much indeed.