

Health Select Committee - Progress on the Government's childhood obesity plan examined, October 29 2019: Supplementary information from Public Health England

Spend on Food

1. The World Economic Forum report there are eight countries in the world that spend less than 10% of their average household income on food. The figure for the United Kingdom (UK) (8.2%) is the lowest in Europe, and the third lowest worldwide¹, but these average figures will mask variation between households. This metric combines expenditure on food with household income, and therefore it is not possible to determine whether it is low prices or high household income which drive the result. However, the fact that spending on food is a relatively low proportion of income might suggest affordability is not a significant barrier to adopting healthier diets. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that achieving the UK dietary recommendations would cost no more than current dietary patterns². Comparisons on average prices alone from Eurostat suggest a common basket of food and non-alcoholic beverages in the UK costs slightly less than the European Union average³.

Current Obesity Prevalence Data – France and Paris⁴

2. In France, 11.9% of children aged five years old are overweight or obese and 3.5% are obese (2012-13)
3. In France, 18.1% of children aged 11 years old are overweight or obese and 3.6% are obese (2014-15)
4. In Paris, overweight and obesity prevalence is higher than at a national level except for obesity in 11-year olds
5. These figures have remained relatively stable or have decreased slightly since measurements started in 2002
6. These figures are higher than in England but cannot be compared directly with England figures as different child body mass index cut-off points are used⁵.
7. In England, the National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) measures the height and weight of all school children in Reception (aged four to five) and Year 6 (aged 10-11); over one million children are measured annually, and the participation rate is 95%.
8. The French survey uses a random sample of children (for 2014-2015, the sample size was 8,124 children). Data are collected at the end of nursery, primary and at the end of the first stage of secondary school (about 15 years old). Only one age group is surveyed every year. Since 2012, data are collected only every two years, meaning that each age group will now be surveyed only every six years.

¹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/12/this-map-shows-how-much-each-country-spends-on-food/>

² Scarborough P, Kaur A, Cobiac L, et al. Eatwell Guide: modelling the dietary and cost implications of incorporating new sugar and fibre guidelines. BMJ Open 2016; 6:e013182. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2016013182

³ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Comparative_price_levels_for_food,_beverages_and_tobacco

⁴ Sources: <https://www.ameli.fr/medecin/sante-prevention/enfants-et-adolescents/surpoids-et-obesite-infantile/un-enjeu-de-sante-publique> and http://www.sirsepaca.org/actualites/depot/171_actu_fichier_joint.pdf

⁵ This is explained in a Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition and Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health position statement available here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/339411/SACN_RCPCH_defining_child_underweight__overweight_and_obesity_in_the_UK_2012.pdf

School meals in France v England and United Kingdom

9. It is difficult to compare school lunches across countries as there are many different variables.
10. The European Union report, Mapping of National School Food Policies across the EU28 plus Norway and Switzerland, summaries nutrition-related content of national school food policies⁶. It includes a table in Annex 3 that compares food- and nutrient-based standards across countries. The report, School Meals in Europe, compares specific elements of school meals including distribution and service, food quality norms, nutrition education and good practice⁷.

Distance to shops and quality of diet

11. The low income diet and nutrition survey reported that social factors, such as access to cooking facilities and shops did not seem to be a limiting factor in terms of food consumption or nutrient intake, although more education was associated with better diets⁸
12. A 2012 systematic review reflected this finding, reporting that there was inconsistent evidence for a relationship between distance to a food store and the quality of the diet⁹.

Cost of healthy diets – United Kingdom and abroad

13. Evidence on the costs of a healthy diet from two United Kingdom-based studies^{5,10} is mixed, partly due to differences in methods and definitions of a 'healthy diet'. Recent evidence indicates the switch to a healthier diet would not imply an additional cost for consumers in the UK (average cost around £6 per day).
14. There is a lack of standardised comparisons on the cost of a healthy diet across different countries¹¹, but we do know that price promotions on high sugar products are more prominent in the UK than in other European countries¹² and this may increase any price differential.

⁶ <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC90452/lbna26651enn.pdf>

⁷ https://eurydice.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/meals_raport_ENG.pdf

⁸ Nelson M, Erens B, Bates B, Church S, Boshier T (2007) Low income diet and nutrition survey: Summary of key findings. London: TSO

⁹ Caspi CE, Sorensen G, Subramanian SV et al. The local food environment and diet: a systematic review. Health & Place 2012 1172-1187

¹⁰ Jones N, Tong T, Monsivais P. Meeting UK dietary recommendations is associated with higher estimated consumer food costs: an analysis using the National Diet and Nutrition Survey and consumer expenditure data, 2008–2012. Public Health Nutrition: 21(5), 948–956. doi:10.1017/S1368980017003275

¹¹ Rao M, Afshin A, Singh G, et al. Do healthier foods and diet patterns cost more than less healthy options? A systematic review and meta-analysis. BMJ Open 2013; 3:e004277. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2013004277

¹² Public Health England 2015. Sugar reduction. The evidence for action.