

BITE BACK - WRITTEN EVIDENCE (FDO0028)

About Bite Back

Bite Back is a youth activist movement fighting for a fairer food system where healthy food is available, accessible and affordable for every child. Our Youth Board is made up of 50 passionate young activists who want a higher standard from food marketing and from everyday food itself. And we mobilise other young people in the fight for better food: there are over 75,000 people in the Bite Back movement, who have taken 790,103 actions for child health since 2019.

Since our launch in 2019, Bite Back has carried out multiple rounds of research with representative samples of young people from across the UK and the results show loud and clear: the majority of young people want to see change! For example¹

- 82% support extending free school meals to all children from families living in poverty.
- 83% support making healthier food more available and affordable in the places where they hang out.
- 64% support ending junk food advertising on TV; 61% support ending it online; and 53% support ending it on public transport and in the street.
- 84% said they would buy healthier options if food and drink companies made them cheaper than unhealthy options. And 83% said they would buy healthier options if food and drink companies made them tastier than unhealthy options.

The voices of young people are seldom heard in conversations about health. At Bite Back, we're working to change that, and we are delighted that the Committee has invited youth activists to share their testimony in May 2024 as part of this inquiry.

Our proposal

A typical teen diet is worlds away from recommendations around sugar, fruit and vegetables, and fibre. 11-18-year-olds have, on average, over double the recommended amount of added sugar, half the recommended fibre, fruit and vegetable intakes².

¹ Savanta / Bite Back, June 2023, 1,062 young people aged 13-18

² Public Health England (2020) NDNS: results from years 9 to 11 (2016 to 2017 and

The Government, food and drink companies, and advertisers must make it easier for all young people to eat healthily. Significant action is needed to ensure the Government meets its target of halving childhood obesity by 2030. When the ambition was set in 2018, 20.1% of Year 6 children were living with obesity³; this rose to 22.7% in 2022/23⁴.

Young people want food and drink companies to be held to higher standards, protecting children

Bite Back's latest research shows that the majority of global food businesses are reliant on selling unhealthy products in the UK. For seven of the ten businesses we investigated, analysis conducted by the University of Oxford indicates that in 2022, more than two-thirds of their sales came from packaged food and drinks that are classed as high in fat, sugar or salt (HFSS) and therefore unhealthy.⁵ And the top five categories of food and drink products by sales value are chocolate, savoury snacks, reduced sugar soft drinks, regular soft drinks and ice cream - none of which are reflected in the Eatwell Guide. A continuous cycle of developing, marketing and selling processed products high in fat, sugar or salt is highly profitable for so many businesses, but is taking a massive toll on health.

"Before joining Bite Back I blamed myself, unable to see the insurmountable flood of junk we are submerged in. Junk food has become the cultural wallpaper, infiltrating our streets, sports and celebrations; and it's endangering the health of my generation. The good news is that it doesn't have to be like this." Alice, Bite Back youth activist

Advertising should be a force for good, but currently that isn't the case. Each year food and drink companies spend millions of pounds on a range of marketing techniques designed to do one simple thing - put junk food in the spotlight. Bite Back's analysis of Nielsen Ad Intel advertising spend data found that in 2022, all food manufacturers in the UK spent £55

2018 to 2019): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/ndns-results-from-years-9-to-11-2016-to-2017-and-2018-to-2019>

³ NHS Digital (2022) National Childhood Measurement Programme 2017-18: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2017-18-school-year>

⁴ NHS Digital (2023) National Childhood Measurement Programme 2022/23 <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2022-23-school-year>

⁵ Bite Back (2024). Fuel us, don't fool us: How food giants rig the system against children's health (Manufacturers)

million on digital and social media adverts for food and drink products from four food categories that are associated with children's excess sugar and calorie intake - biscuits, chocolate, crisps and ice cream.⁶ And Bite Back's analysis of digital and social media advertising spend by the top ten biggest spending fast food outlets and delivery platforms found spend increased by £37.5m to £88 million between 2021 and 2022 - an increase of 75%.⁷

Advertising has an overwhelming influence on young people, who are exposed to around 15 billion adverts online for products high in fat, salt or sugar (HFSS) each year.⁸ Unhealthy food advertising has been shown to increase children's recognition of brands, as well as increasing the amount of unhealthy food children ask for, buy and eat.⁹ Companies are always coming up with clever new ways to entice young people into buying their products. In survey of 1,000 13-19-year-olds, six in 10 (59%) reported having a food and drink brand (e.g. McDonald's) or food delivery platform (e.g. Just Eat) app installed on their phone, via which brands can send highly personalised marketing for products and discounts, at targeted times.¹⁰ Bite Back's young activists want this bombardment of unhealthy food advertising to end. The full implementation of the significantly delayed policy to restrict HFSS advertising online and on TV before 9 pm is critical.

"To order from delivery platforms you need to have an account, and once you have an account they can contact you with promotions and "reminders to buy from them" whenever they want to. So when it's a Friday afternoon and I'm making my way home from a long day at

⁶ Bite Back (2024). Fuel us, don't fool us: How food giants rig the system against children's health (Manufacturers)

⁷ Bite Back (2023) New stats show fast food giants spending record sums on marketing tactics as food prices soar

<https://www.biteback2030.com/our-activists/stories/new-stats-show-fast-food-giants-spending-record-sums-on-marketing-tactics-as-food-prices-soar/>

⁸ Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Department of Health and Social Care, 2021. Introducing a total online advertising restriction for products high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS). <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/total-restriction-of-online-advertising-for-products-high-in-fat-sugar-and-salt-hfss/introducing-a-total-online-advertising-restriction-for-products-high-in-fat-sugar-and-salt-hfss>

⁹ M. Tatlow-Golden and A. Garde (2020) Digital food marketing to children: exploitation, surveillance and rights violations, *Global Food Security* 27:100423

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2020.100423>

¹⁰ Bite Back 2030 (2023). Enticing, Effective and Everywhere: How Brands are Keeping Unhealthy Food and Drink in the Spotlight with Digital Marketing to Young People.

<https://www.biteback2030.com/sites/default/files/2023-05/Enticing-Effective-Everywhere-FINAL.pdf>

university, I check my phone and the first thing I see is a message from Uber Eats telling me about a 40% discount when I order from a selection of restaurants (most of which are fast food places). Maybe I wasn't even considering ordering takeaway food but now that they've planted the seed in my head I'm more likely to go and buy something." Becky, Bite Back youth activist

Young people are passionate about food and drink companies being more honest and transparent, including in how they communicate what is in their products. Currently, the traffic light labelling system is voluntary and therefore applied inconsistently; and health and nutrition claims on unhealthy products are misleading. Bite Back's research found over half (57%) of food and drink products popular with teens, and with 'health halos' driven by health and nutrition claims, are high in either salt, saturated fat or sugar and would receive a red traffic light label.¹¹ Bite Back will shortly launch new research showing that the majority of food products produced by the leading food businesses operating in the UK that use child appealing packaging are unhealthy. Bite Back will share this with the Committee when published.

"When I go to a shop with my little sister, she goes straight for the bright packaging, for products with characters and colours, and of course they're the unhealthy products. It annoys me that companies use these tactics to attract children to buy their products and personify unhealthy products to make them more friendly and appealing. Cartoon characters on packaging correspond with adverts on TV and social media, so you see a friendly character on TV and then of course you want a product that has the same friendly character on the packaging." Vin, Bite Back youth activist

Recommendations for Government

- Fully implement legislation restricting the marketing of food and drinks high in fat, sugar or salt (HFSS).
- Build on existing rules with new measures to curb outdoor advertisements, sport sponsorship, owned media and brand advertising by junk food giants.
- Bring in mandatory front-of-pack labelling and stop the use of child-appealing techniques, and health and nutrition claims on packaging of unhealthy food and drinks.

¹¹ Bite Back (2021) Don't Hide What's Inside
https://biteback.contentfiles.net/media/documents/Dont_Hide_Whats_Inside.pdf

- Use the tax system to incentivise businesses to commit to healthier sales targets.
- Mandate businesses to report publicly and consistently on health and sustainability.
- Look at how the successful soft drinks levy could be applied to other unhealthy and highly processed food and drinks.

Young people want healthy high streets

The places young people spend time in are flooded with unhealthy food options, with the most deprived areas worst affected. There is a lack of availability of healthy food and drinks in spaces relevant to young people such as cinemas and sports clubs. Young people crave spaces that fulfil their social needs, but in their absence, they turn to commercial options, which often means fast food outlets or dessert bars. There is evidence linking the density of fast food outlets to the level of area deprivation, with higher concentrations of unhealthy outlets in more deprived areas,¹² and children can now access them via their phones - our research shows that six in ten young people have a delivery app installed on their phone.¹³

Local government can take steps to help our streets be healthy places for young people, wherever they live. National planning and licensing policies should be updated to make children's health an explicit priority to enable and empower local authorities to prioritise health in planning decisions (such as limiting new fast food outlets). Spaces where children and young people spend time should be protected by mandating health zones with fast food exclusion zones and restricting the operation of mobile food outlets.

"When I go shopping for example at Westfield, there's only fast food like McDonald's. Westfield is the only social space that we have access to in East London. You have the downstairs which is fast food, then the upstairs has the restaurants where you can get good food with vegetables and nutrients - but the good food options are too expensive." Victor, Bite Back activist, 15

Recommendations for Government

¹² Public Health England (2018) Fast food outlets: density by local authority in England. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fast-food-outlets-density-by-local-authority-in-england>

¹³ Savanta / Bite Back, June 2023, 1,062 young people aged 13-18

- Update national planning and licensing policies to make children's health an explicit priority.
- Introduce 'health zones' in local communities with fast food exclusion spaces and restrict the operation of mobile food outlets, to protect children.

Young people want all children to have access to healthy, nutritious food throughout the school day

Children typically spend 190 days each year in school making it the perfect environment for ensuring all children can enjoy delicious and nutritious food regardless of where they live and their different family circumstances. Free school meals significantly improve attendance¹⁴ and educational outcomes.^{15,16} They improve food security and help families save on food costs. They improve diet quality and can help combat childhood obesity. Extending free school meals to all school children in England living in families receiving Universal Credit or equivalent benefits – an additional 1.4 million children – would cost £477 million a year.¹⁷ The core benefits over 20 years add up to £8.9 billion. This is a return of £1.38 for every £1 invested.

The eligibility threshold has not kept pace with rises to cost of living and food inflation - research suggests around 900,000 children living in households defined as in poverty do not qualify¹⁸. And with the cost of living crisis, young people have shared stories of turning to local fast food outlets for cheaper - but unhealthy - alternatives to school food.

"Pupils from my area are buying two big bags of crisps for £1 before school and they will eat that at lunch because it is cheaper than canteen food." Bite Back activist, 15

¹⁴ Kitchen S et al. (2012). Evaluation of the Free School Meals Pilot. Impact Report. National Centre for Social Research Ref: DFE-RR227. ISBN: 978-1-78105-124-5.

¹⁵ Institute for Social and Economic Research (2009). Healthy School Meals and Educational Outcomes: <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/iser/2009-01>

¹⁶ Food Foundation (2021). Peas Please Progress Report <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/2021-peas-please-progress-report>

¹⁷ Impact on Urban Health (2022). Investing in Children's Future: A Cost Benefit Analysis of Free School Meal Provision Expansion. <https://urbanhealth.org.uk/insights/reports/expanding-free-school-meals-a-cost-benefit-analysis>

¹⁸ Child Poverty Action Group (July 2023) https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/Free_school_meals_July_2023.pdf

Many of the young activists at Bite Back have personal experiences of food insecurity and receiving free school meals. Since 2021 and the ongoing cost of living crisis, we have been calling for an urgent extension of free school meal eligibility to all children in households in receipt of Universal Credit (or equivalent benefits). In January 2023, Bite Back Youth Board members handed in over 250,000 signatures supporting the expansion of free school meals to Number 10, and they have been met with an abundance of public support in person and online.

"I've been on free school meals my whole life and can tell you how much of a difference it makes to my health and happiness. At lunchtime, I'm relieved to know I'll have a hot meal waiting for me and will have the energy and nutrition to keep me going in school." Bite Back activist, 15

Bite Back 2030 is a member of the School Food Review Working Group, which was set up in 2021 by leading practitioners, frontline teams and campaigners working to improve school food across the country. Across the UK, there is no consistent assessment, monitoring or reporting of compliance with the standards for school food. This means the quality is variable, with some children benefiting nutritious delicious food, while others receive lower quality meals. Youth insights suggest that the School Food Standards are routinely not being upheld with junk food routinely available.¹⁹ The current standards do not reflect the latest dietary guidelines on fibre and free sugars - the Government has been promising to update the School Food Standards since 2016, but no progress has been made. The Food Standards Agency piloted a scheme to check compliance with School Food Standards. They recently published an update confirming that this is feasible and we encourage the Government to roll this scheme out more widely.

Recommendations for Government

- Ensure every child living in poverty receives a free school meal by extending eligibility and automatically signing them up.
- Raise the quality of the school food with higher standards to ensure school food is better for children and the planet.
- Ensure these school food standards are delivered by rolling through a new reporting system ensuring school leaders set a whole school strategy for food.

¹⁹ Bite Back (2021) Spill the Beans <https://www.biteback2030.com/spill-the-beans>

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