

POSITION STATEMENT: HEALTHIER VENDING

KEY MESSAGES

- A wide body of evidence suggests that vending machines contribute to the obesogenic environment, owing to their current poor offer of food and drink;
- There is a high demand for the adoption of healthier vending from councils and consumers however vending machine providers may face challenges to provide this;
- The Government should consider mandatory guidelines to provide a level playing field across providers and to improve the food and drink offer.

Overview

Obesity is one of the greatest threats to public health in the 21st century [1]. In the UK, more than one quarter on adults are obese and one fifth of 10-11-year olds are obese. Areas of higher deprivation are disproportionately burdened with health inequalities, meaning deprivation and obesity are intrinsically linked in areas such as the North of England [2]. In light of the obesity crisis and the unsustainable burden it is placing on the NHS, there is a growing demand to tackle the obesogenic environments that contribute to overweight and obesity. Vending machines are synonymous with high fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) 'snack' orientated food [3] and are often located in places where other food and drink options are limited. It has been suggested that revising the offer to be healthier could impact positively on the weight status of many individuals.

Vending machines and the obesogenic environment

There are over 500,000 vending machines located across the UK, dispensing over seven billion products each year [4]. Vending machines are often found in leisure and sports centres, hospitals, children's centres and the workplace [5, 6], and are seen by many as an added benefit to these settings, where food can be accessed quickly, easily and throughout the day. Unfortunately, research has shown that the products available in a typical vending machine tend to be 'snack' foods, which are often energy-dense and offer little in terms of nutritive value [7]. Healthier options are generally sparse, often higher in price and positioned poorly, away from the consumers main view, discouraging consumers from purchasing [8], thus making it easier for the consumer to choose the unhealthy option. This suggests that vending machines play a part in driving obesity, as they are not just adding to a pre-existing culture of snacking but are also deliberately aiming to sway consumers to choose the unhealthy alternatives [9, 8].

What does the evidence say?

- HFSS foods are widely available in vending machines. One study carried out at a U.K University found of the food and drink available in vending machines, 81% were high in fat, 61% high in saturated fat and 69% high in sugar; 75% of drinks were high in sugar [10].
- Several studies have reported that vending machines in schools, hospitals and work settings offer food and drinks that are low in fibre and high in calories, sugar and salt [11, 12, 13]
- Vending machine behaviours, such as vending machine accessibility and use, have been positively associated with consumption of snacks [14]
- Based on their current nutritional composition, most food and drink available in vending machines should be consumed occasionally at the very most and in small amounts [15]
- Vending machine use has been associated with low dietary quality in children [16]
- Restricting high-calorie options in vending machines stimulates healthier choices [8]
- The placement of foods is an important factor in purchasing habits; when moved to eye level, research shows the sales of healthier drinks increased when compared to less healthy products placed on the bottom rows [18]
- A nutrition intervention that did not limit freedom of choice found that exposure to healthier foods nudged towards better food choices [3].
- Healthier vending has been shown not to substantially impact upon sales, regardless of intervention. This is important to foster initiation and sustainability of healthier vending. [19]

Policy landscape

NICE Guidelines state that there needs to be healthier options in vending machines yet there is currently no Government legislation enforcing this in practice [6]. However, there have been a number of councils and NHS Trusts who have been proactive with regards to healthier vending.

The Department of Health and Social Care and Leeds Teaching Hospital teamed up with Selecta, a leading vending machine provider, to assess the potential challenges faced by healthier vending. The findings suggest simple changes can support a positive shift in purchasing behaviour and encourage healthier choices, while remaining commercially viable [18].

Blackpool Council have devised their own healthier vending guidelines that does not limit freedom of choice, instead providing more varied choice. Guideline state that 30% of the food and drink on sale needs to be classified as a healthier item and many less healthy options are available in smaller serving sizes. [20].

Salford Community Leisure have banned the sale of sugary drinks in their vending machines and cafes across all leisure centres. Drinks have been replaced with diet or sugar free alternatives and additional water, removing around 650kg of sugar from vending machines [21].

Such progress has not been seen equally across the country however and remains a challenging issue to many local authority public health departments.

In addition, further research however is required to assess effect on behaviour change around vending machine usage. Unpicking sales figures may help to give an indication whether these changes have reduced or increased sales – and of what products.

Our position and what we will do

Policy change: We will continue to support local authorities to adopt our Local Government Declaration on Healthy Weight. This declaration includes 14 commitments covering a wide range of areas to tackle, including reviewing provision of food and drink across all public institutions, such as schools, hospitals and leisure facilities (whereby vending machines are particularly common) to improve access to healthier options and limiting access to HFSS options.

Research: We will host a student placement to conduct a research project looking at the varieties and volume of energy and sports drinks sold in vending machines across leisure centres in Liverpool. The findings of this will be used to draft a project report, including a series of recommendations for providers and local authorities.

Knowledge share: We will continue to share good practice from local authorities across the Food Active network around healthier vending, to help provide shared learning and best practice between local authorities. In addition, we will write a template vending policy to support local authorities in developing their own vending guidance for providers locally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Appropriate governmental departments should introduce mandatory vending machine standards and policies to address the issue of less healthy food and drink options, including volume, positioning, portion size, cost and rebalancing towards healthier options.
- Local authorities should be provided with sufficient support and resource to enforce such policies locally, through trading standards departments for example.
- Take a whole systems approach to tackling obesity at a local level. Adopting the Local Government Declaration on Healthy Weight assists local agencies to align policies around healthy weight and consider the wider determinants of health, including vending machine usage.

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