

POSITION STATEMENT: **JUNK FOOD PROMOTIONS**

KEY MESSAGES

- Price promotions in supermarkets, including supermarket websites, are often skewed towards less healthy foods, encouraging shoppers to consume excess calories.
- Location-based promotions can be particularly tempting for children, who use 'pester power' to persuade their parents to buy certain products with attractive, colourful packaging.
- The Government has announced restrictions on multi-buy price and location-based promotions of less healthy food and drink in the retail environment by 2022.

Promotions and our health

The average UK household spends over £3,000 in supermarket retailers every year [1] and price promotions on food and drink account for over half of all food items sold – equal to £50bn per year in consumer spending [2].

Promotions are a commonplace for all types of retailers, but specifically food retailers such as supermarkets, where we can find limitless choice of all kinds of foods – including those that are less healthy for us. More often than not, the pint of milk you popped to the shops for turned into five full carrier bags brought home, often thanks to endless discounts, promotions and an intentional store layout guiding you past special offers and tempting displays before you even get to the milk aisle.

Price and multi-buy promotions tend to be skewed towards products high in fat, sugar and/or salt [HFSS], which encourage shoppers to purchase less healthy options and contribute to excess calorie consumption [3]. Such promotions are often seen as cost-effective, when in fact they trigger excessive spending on spur of the moment, impulse buys yet contrary to public opinion, don't usually save the consumer any money [4].

Such promotions aren't just found in physical stores either, they are often mirrored online via online shopping. For example, Morrisons current online offers, located at the top of the offers page, include several discounted less healthy items such as Cadbury dessert pots, Sprite and Coca Cola 8 packs, ice cream bars and trifles [5].

What does the evidence say?

- Location based promotions place unhealthy children's food items with attractive and colourful packing at the child's eye level; or at the end of aisles and checkouts, resulting in children using 'pester power' to persuade their parents to buy [6].
- 'Buy one get one free' items are more than twice as likely to have red traffic light levels of fat than items as a whole [4].
- Research from Cancer Research UK found that individuals who spend more on promotional purchasing are 53% more likely to experience overweight and/or obesity [7].
- Research by Which? found that confectionary was overall more likely to be on promotion than fresh fruit or vegetables in supermarkets [7].
- Research from the Economic and Social Research Council found that buy one get one free offers were heavily skewed towards less healthy products and multibuy offers are frequently used to promote soft drinks and bakery products [2].
- Obesity Health Alliance found that 43% of all food and drink products located in prominent areas were for sugary food and drinks [8].
- One study found that UK families buy more ultra-processed foods than any others in Europe, amounting to 50.7% of the diet [9].
- A study by Which? found that many 'two for £3' type deals only appear to be a bargain because the product's price is hiked up shortly before introducing the offer [10].

Policy context

The Government proposed a consultation on introducing restrictions on the promotion of less healthy food and drink by price and place in 2018, as part of the Childhood Obesity Plan: Chapter 2. After significant delays, Food Active finally submitted a response to the Department for Health and Social Care's consultation in full support of such restrictions in April 2019.

After even more delays, the outcome of this consultation was eventually announced in 2020, featured as a key action in the National Obesity Strategy – which was published in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and growing evidence base linking obesity with COVID-19 severity in terms of the need for hospitalisation, ICU and mortality [11].

More details followed towards the end of 2020, with the Government announcing that by April 2022, restrictions will be introduced on the multi-buy promotions and location-based promotions (including websites) of less healthy food and drink in the retail environment [12]. Under new legislation, retailers will be barred from displaying less healthy foods and drinks defined by defined by the Nutrient Profiling Model (currently used to define food advertisements suitable for advertising on children's TV), including foods such as chocolate and sweets, crisps and soft drinks at checkouts or using them in multi-buy offers such as buy one, get one free and 2 for the price of 1.

The restrictions will also apply to store locations such as entrances, end of aisles, whilst online equivalents and free refills of sugary soft drinks will also be prohibited in the eating-out sector [13]. Food Active are however concerned about the loopholes that may arise due to the type of retailers in scope. Restrictions will apply to retailers with 50 or more employees, with smaller businesses exempt, and type of food exempt from location-based promotions only [12]. Acknowledging the support smaller independent businesses may require in the current climate, we are concerned that franchises of larger stores may be exempt under the current rules. We are also disappointed in the long implementation period, given the urgency of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Government's ambition of halving childhood obesity by 2030.

Our position and what we will do

Policy change: We will work with partners at the Obesity Health Alliance to support the implementation of new legislation on promotions by price and place on less healthy food and drink. We will ensure the pressure is maintained on Government to ensure the date of implementation (April 2022) is met, and ensure we expose any loopholes that arise from the new legislation.

Research: We will continue to explore areas within the food environment, including supermarkets, that may be contributing to the prevalence of obesity as part of our parents' perspectives research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Government should uphold its promise to introduce restrictions by mid 2022, and include a robust monitoring framework to review the policy and ensure it is fit for purpose.
- This policy should be introduced as part of a wider set of measures to address the marketing mix, for example, junk food marketing on TV and online platforms.
- Marketing strategies (such as price and place) should be utilised to influence healthier food purchasing behaviours in the supermarket environment.

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