Diet & Obesity Focus Group:

Focus group with young people exploring views, opinions and ideas around diet and obesity including healthy eating, advertising and ideas.

Scottish Youth Parliament

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Introduction

The Scottish Government currently have a public consultation on improving Scotland's health 'A Healthier Future – Action and Ambitions on Diet, Activity and Healthy Weight'. To support this consultation, the Scottish Youth Parliament held a focus group with 11 young people exploring their views and opinions around the topic of diet and obesity. The focus of the discussions were around healthy eating, advertising and ideas which are all key areas for discussion in the consultation.

In addition to this, local consultations were also carried out by MSYPs and 34 responses were gathered.

Summary

The following summarises the main findings from the focus group and consultations.

- **Education**

Education was continually highlighted throughout the findings as something that should be improved in relation to children and young peoples' knowledge and understanding of healthy eating. Although some members did speak of learning about the 'food pyramid' there was a consensus that this did not go far enough in terms of fully understanding how to cook a healthy meal, shop for fresh healthy food and general life skills around the cost of healthy eating habits. Suggested actions were based around early learning about healthy eating and shopping so that this type of lifestyle will become the norm and be continued through secondary school and into adulthood.

- **Cost**

The 'cost' of healthy eating was continually cited as having a negative impact on food choice. Nearly all participants said that cost had an impact when they made food choices and healthy things were 'a treat' as these were items that were expensive in comparison to 'unhealthy' things that were cheaper and in 'targeted deals'.

- **Advertising and labelling**

Advertising targeting unhealthy foods was something that all groups felt was a concern as this was an incentive to buy something cheaper but also something mostly more unhealthy. It was suggested that supermarkets could do more to support a change in culture to buy more healthy products but there was a realisation that this was not in the interest of the large cooperate brands or the retailer. A reduction in advertising of unhealthy foods was cited as a positive step and more advertising of healthier options

could work towards a change in the choices people make. Actions to combat unhealthy eating included advertising that showed the negative impacts – similar to smoking and drinking advertising, as participants thought people don't fully understand the long-term impacts of unhealthy habits. In relation to traffic light labelling, more 'education' to fully understand the concept was cited as something that could be done in an education setting. Also, there were suggestions that labelling could include 'how many calories to burn of this item' and they argued that there shouldn't be an assumption that everyone understands the current labelling.

- **Incentives**

Specific incentives to encourage healthy eating were noted as a positive step. For example, 'extra points on supermarket Club Cards' when a particular amount of your food shopping bill is deemed healthy. These points could then be used for either money off as it is currently, or other types of incentives. Other existing incentives were discussed such as the 'Sweat Coin' which is an App where you build up Coins (by doing 10,000 steps or other exercise) to be used for either fitness clothes, or access to other more exclusive gyms or used with other retailers. Incentives were suggested as an action that could have a positive impact in encouraging a healthier lifestyle.

Findings

Healthy Eating

1) What does healthy eating mean to you?

The consensus from the group was that 'it's expensive to eat healthy' but also due to heightened awareness around health and wellbeing 'it's also complicated as some websites give different views on what is good and bad to eat'. The group felt that there was 'too much information and no clear information' around healthy eating. However, in terms of trying to be healthy they agreed it was 'hard when you're busy and can be easier to pick something up quickly to eat'. Some participants in this group are still in secondary school and argued that 'what we learn in school is not useful – school dinners could be much better with more options'. The group mentioned that many young people choose to eat out-with school at lunchtime and recognised that this 'was not the best as it's normally a local take away' but they noted that 'there is something wrong when school dinner is more expensive than say a Subway'. This was discussed as a particular concern and they agreed 'more could be done in school 'to explain what healthy eating means'. Another member noted 'my school reduces meals at lunch so pupils can spend the same as they do outside school'.

Group 2

In contrast to group 1, members in group 2 suggested eating 'fruit and vegetables' and 'eating things that don't taste good' as a description to what healthy eating means. Others noted they think healthy eating means things 'that don't have sugar, fat salt etc. but also having 'a wee bit of chocolate, but not a lot of chocolate' but everything 'in moderation'. This group had some interesting thoughts around what a vegetarian diet consists of 'people assume vegetarian means healthy but it's not, everything is frozen, for example Quorn'. The group spoke about the 'food pyramid that you are taught in school' and this is something that came to mind when speaking about healthy eating and they understood it was 'all about a balanced diet'. This group had an understanding of ready meals 'people think they are being healthy by eating 500 calorie ready meals but there are hidden ingredients in ready meals'. They also thought 'home cooking is healthy' but were aware that when 'you are not putting in excess, for example, salt'.

2) When you choose what to eat, how much do you consider your health?

Many of the participants in this group said that they 'sometimes get guilty' when they know they have eaten something that's not so healthy. However, another participant said 'if there was a chocolate for a pound or a yogurt, I'd rather get a yogurt'. Discussions naturally led to cost verses healthy eating and participants agreed that 'cost does always impact decisions too'. There were some different views too 'I don't think I think about it when I'm eating a McDonalds' in contrast to 'at lunch I always try and have a salad, but I think it's about educating people about being healthy'. In discussions to consider what would encourage people to eat more healthy, participants noted 'there should be more focus on the consequences of eating unhealthy – like they do with drugs and drink advertising so it's more of a shock factor - with pictures as they do with other things like cigarette packages'. The group referred back to how important education is and noted that 'early education is key to get into good habits'.

Group 2

Similar to group 1, four out of six participants answered 'not at all' in terms of thinking about their health. Also similar to group 1, there were specific factors that impacted choice such as 'time, price and convenience'. One participant said she 'considered the health of her son when considering what he should eat, but does not consider herself'. Discussions around 'the cost' of eating healthy arose again particularly 'for vegan, vegetarian, gluten free' as the group thought although it is easier to eat a diet like this 'the cost is still much higher'.

This group also spoke about the changing landscape in terms of the information available around the topic of healthy eating 'people are a lot more aware of health e.g. YouTube and social media has a lot of influence on young people's diets', 'including the link between body image and social media'. The group discussed concerns around the balance between healthy eating and people not eating at all' and said there needs to be an awareness around concentrating too much focus on diet and obesity which takes the focus away from eating disorders'. The group agreed there was a 'link between junk food, crisps and periods of stress, for example during prelims'. However, some of the group felt 'better for eating healthy food, plus you also have pride in this'.

3) If someone asked you to make a healthy dinner, what would you suggest and would you be able to make/cook it yourself?

The group felt that they didn't have loads of skills when it came to cooking but some said 'I eat a lot of pasta because it's easy' and 'I make soup as you just throw everything in and that's it'. At this point two of our members noted that at their workplace (Scottish Parliament) they had a 'great canteen' and everyday this is something they 'looked forward to' as they know the 'choice and quality are really good'. Some members said it 'was hard to find the time to cook while you are studying and working' and therefore

making it harder to 'make healthy meals'. Once again the discussion reverted back to education and the group thought 'I think if you were showed early how to cook – you are more likely to cook for yourself'.

Group 2

Nearly all of the group said they could cook something, 'stir-fry, pasta' and one couldn't cook at all. Half of the group (3) said they could make the dinner themselves and 2 said they were not sure and one couldn't make it. They were aware that 'a big issue was adding cheese to everything'.

4) **Do you think the information on food packages which provide calories and serving sizes (e.g. traffic light labelling) is easy to understand? How could this information be further communicated to families?**

(4 and 5 answered together)

5) **Do you have any ideas how the traffic light labelling method could be strengthened?**

The answer to this question was a resounding 'no', it is not easy to understand and that it was also 'confusing'. A further discussion was had around who developed the traffic light labelling system and the group felt very strongly about the 'lack of education on this' as some young people in the group did not clearly understand 'what the foods are under each colour code'. It was also noted by all in this group that there should be 'public advertising around food to catch people's attention'. For example, the group discussed various food items and thought 'if a pizza box says it is 1000 Kcal it means nothing – but if it said how long it would take to burn off this type of food, this would make an impact'. It was also noted that information could be displayed in other ways to be more inclusive for everyone, for example it was suggested that 'smiley faces as an option of explaining what is good and not so good'

Group 2 (4&5)

In this group, 2 participants 'only just realised the traffic light system exists' and they did not know what the different colours meant. They agreed it wouldn't be easy to understand as 'the traffic light system doesn't reflect differences in guideline daily amount for e.g. men verses women or adult verses child'. They also highlighted how companies 'tend to put the traffic lights right down in the bottom corner of the package…deliberately concealing so you have to look for it as companies know that it would put you off'. The group had a good awareness in relation to 'companies not being legally obliged to put the traffic light system on packaging' but they would prefer this to 'listing calories on packaging'. Further education to fully understand this type of labelling

was highlighted as the majority of the group were unsure of the difference between 'saturated fat and fat'. Overall, this group said 'information on food packages does not influence' whether or not they buy it. Similar to group 1, they said the 'serving sizes were confusing' and wondered 'where did it come from'.

Group 2 (Q5)

This group were clear that the traffic light labelling 'should be better communicated in general and it 'should be mandatory'. In addition to this, they said there should be 'another column to traffic lights to show how much exercise is needed to work off calories' of the particular item. Education in school was mentioned as a place that could play an important role 'we should have this added to home economics classes or PSHE classes'. To further strengthen this type of labelling, it was suggested that 'companies making fast food should be encouraged to be more blunt' in relation to details on the label and 'calories are always left white, this should be coloured too'.

6) **Do you have any ideas as to what would help you in terms of being able to cook a healthy meal?**

There seemed to be a consensus in group 1 that whenever the term 'healthy meal' was discussed, it was always classed as being 'too expensive and no deals available'. The group thought that school had a role to play in terms of 'effective home economic classes' which should educate young people on 'making healthy meals and not cupcakes and scones'. Although the group agreed it's not about making home economics compulsory but schools could 'stress its importance in terms of shopping for food and then making a meal'. In addition to this, the group also thought that 'Personal and Social Education (PSE) could promote healthy eating'. Education around healthy eating was discussed as something that could be further strengthened 'promotion at primary school should be improved'. The food pyramid as an educational tool was discussed by all in the group but they all agreed 'the food pyramid doesn't really go into enough detail about healthy eating and I'm only now understanding the traffic light labelling'. In relation to education in secondary school, the group argued that 'waiting until 6th year to do the survival cooking course was not effective as we didn't learn about the right stuff'. Instead of learning about a 'balanced meal' the group said they learned 'how to cook burgers and scones'

There was also consensus that cooking should be 'linked to actual shopping and budgeting to include practical learning by getting out to the supermarket'. Some participants also suggested the reason schools did not explore other types of food 'was because it was cheaper and the ingredients for scones/fairy cakes would last longer'. Cost was also mentioned as an impact on young people and families as 'pupils have to provide the vegetables if they want to make a meal and had to pay £10 a term' which was putting young people from disadvantaged families under pressure.

All of the participants in this group cited cost as factor in relation to making a healthy meal. Some argued there was a 'gap in the market for healthy fast food' and the conversation was directed towards linking healthy food with 'convenience foods'. The type of supermarket near where you live was also mentioned as having an impact on what you choose to eat and similar to group 1, many spoke about 'going to the shop at break time and lunchtime being cheaper than eating school meals' was noted as a concern for young people. In relation to school meals 'portion size not big enough and again were cited as being 'too expensive' with 'no fruit in school canteen'. There seemed to be an appetite for eating school meals but the group raised some points 'the way food was presented in school the salad bowl covered in cling film and not displayed at the front and you don't want to ask for it'.

Advertising

1) **How does food advertising influence you when buying food? For example, are you more likely to buy something that is - buy one get one free or a meal deal even though you know these items are higher in sugar/salt content?**

The group all agreed that advertising did impact them and that 'supermarkets do play a part in the choices made'. One young person in this group worked for Lidl and said that 'all the deals are always on unhealthy foods, although Lidl do put healthy snacks at the counter which is not what many other supermarkets do'. They also discussed bigger food chains and how advertising impacted them 'Dominos used to have 2 for Tuesday and this kind of advertising shouldn't be allowed'. Overall they thought that price did make a difference to their choices' and this is a challenge in terms of a change of mind-set towards healthy eating for young people.

Group 2

Similar to group 1, this group thought that there was 'much more advertising on unhealthy foods' and that there is 'always unhealthy things that are on offer, 'right in front of you in shops'. Once again cost was an influencing factor 'wouldn't buy deals if single items were more reasonably priced' and another said they 'would never buy Ben and Jerry's if not on deal'. They also thought supermarkets targeting deals impacted choices 'pushing deals on tills, often on unhealthy items' and 'sweets positioned at the ends of isles in shops' all were having a negative impact. Others also thought that advertising and deals on fast food 'lead you to buying more than you would have otherwise' and this will have a long term impact on health. There was an appetite in this group for 'more deals on fruit but it's too expensive' and this is challenging for young people.

2) **What role do you think advertising could have in promoting healthy eating?**

The group thought there could be 'incentives when you buy something healthy, like extra points on club cards' as they felt it was incentives and 'deals' that were appealing to them. They also highlighted the powerful influence and impact that the bigger brands such as 'Coke-Cola' have on them as young people and understand these multinational brands 'trump' other advertising.

Group 2

This group thought 'advertising needs to be 'more fun'; 'puns'; 'more targeting advertising to different groups'; 'Colourful'; 'Less formal'. However, they also thought it was important that the 'focus should be on having everything in moderation. It is about teaching people that it is about a combination'. Similar to group 1, this group thought You Tube could have a role to play in relation to influencing positive messages and in conversation about the role of endorsements, some members in the group said they would listen to someone 'normal' like 'reality TV starts such as Charlotte from Geordie Shore' mostly because these people are 'not linked to those in the food and health industry'.

3) **What type of advertising do you think would make an impact which would improve Scotland's attitude towards weight, diet and activity?**

It was suggested that advertising around healthy eating needs to be 'creative rather than too in your face and make it positive' as the group thought sometimes advertising around personal choices can become too 'patronising'. Other ways of advertising reaching young people such as 'YouTube' were suggested but again this should be 'discrete' and 'realistic' to catch people's attention.

Group 2

The group agreed that the right advertising could have an impact 'a version of tasty' for young people with ingredients that young people can afford to have but 'these videos often show ingredients not found in the daily household'. They also thought that other media platforms could impact such as the 'positive role of programmes like Masterchef and Hell's Kitchen which show normal people cooking with normal ingredients'.

Ideas

1) Do you have any ideas on how we can improve diet and influence healthy eating choices?

Once again school was discussed as a place where the group felt they could be learning more about healthy eating, for example 'an assembly on healthy eating and this could lead to a whole school approach'. However, the group noted that every local authority 'is different' but overall there was agreement for more 'basic cooking skills' to be taught in school along with the practical side such a 'shopping skills'.

2) What would encourage you to lead a healthier, more active lifestyle?

3) What do you think could be done to help people to lead a healthy lifestyle and be more active?

Questions 2 and 3 were answered together at the end of session and the group agreed that 'incentives' such as 'extra club card points' when a proportion of your shopping is classed as "healthy" could be an idea. These points would then accumulate to either extra money off your next shopping bill or 'vouchers' for use in a specific place such as 'cinema' or a 'nice gym'.

One participant discussed the 'Sweat Coin' which is an App that gives you digital currency whenever you work out and with these Sweat Coins you can then buy items like new fitness clothes, other services or access to specific fitness classes or watches. The group thought this was a really good idea

Group 2

Education was discussed again and this group thought that 'changing the school curriculum' was a good place to start in relation to educating young people on healthy eating. The cost of food was also highlighted 'make things cheaper as melon is now my treat, and chocolate is my every day' and in relation to exercise it 'costs a lot to go to a gym or swimming pool'. They thought 'a lot of people don't realise how important diet is compared to exercise'; 'Exercise is now a lot about the muscles, looking good, achieving a certain look, not health'. They raised this as a concern and thought that 'a lot of people get unhealthy in their attempt to achieve this certain image'

Local consultation responses from 34 participants

<u>**Healthy Eating**</u>

- **What does healthy eating mean to you?**

'Getting slim, getting fit, looking and feeling good

Fruit and Vegetables

- Eating from all 5 sections of the Eat Well plate in the correct moderations

- Eating three meals a day

- Avoiding snacking, and having bigger meals

Eating a balanced diet, meaning getting the right amount of fruit, veg, proteins etc. into your body for i

No junk food

Fruit

A bit

5 portions fruit and veg

The world! I just couldn't eat anything unhealthy!

Nothing

Healthy eating means taking an active interest in your diet and trying to identify foods that you can cut

Down on such as sugary foods and replace them with an alternative and more healthy option like fruit an

Not much

Having a balanced diet and everything in moderation

Watching my calorie intake and making sure I drink lots of water and include fruit and veg in my diet.

Eating at least 5 portions of fruit and veg a day.

Balancing fibre, protein and carbs.

Making good food choices, less sugar and only healthy fats

A variety of foods with some in moderation.

Eating well by having healthy and nutritious food do that I feel energised and good.

eating in moderation

Something

Having a balanced diet and exercise

A varied diet with the necessary vitamins and minerals the body requires

Eating healthy foods eg. Fruit and veg

No cake

Everything but I don't eat healthy

A balanced diet

Variety of fruit and veg

Not too much on anything

Fruit and Veg, and no fatty foods

A balanced diet (eating from all food groups, some more in moderation than others!)

Eating a balanced diet which includes all food groups.

fruit, vegetables, healthy eating choices, calories in not exceeding calories out

low fat and low sugar

Living a longer and more fulfilling life

- **When you choose what to eat, how much do you consider your health?**

A lot x 16 responses

A little x 12 responses

Not at all x 5

- **Do you think the information on food packages which provide calories and serving sizes (e.g. traffic light labelling) is easy to understand?**

'Yes' x 19 responses

'Could be better' x 8 responses

'No' x 3 responses

'I don't know what this is' x 2 responses

- **Do you have any ideas how the traffic light labelling method could be strengthened?**

'Traffic lighting the calorie section which is always left white yet it's the section we are told to look at when buying food. Some packaging tell you calories per so many grams and not per item etc. so making that a bit easier to work out would make things a bit easier'

'Some explanation of the percentages / values - each different section of the traffic light system has different numbers and values associated with it, so perhaps a small table could be put nearby it to help explain the values more fully'

No x4 responses

I find the system incredibly useful and easy to follow.

Add recommended daily amounts of food

No sorry

The percentages bit is difficult to understand

It needs to be standardised. Different retailers tackle it differently.

No I think people just need to make more of an effort to read and understand the information

More specific calorie information. I don't think people realise how few calories per day they actually requ

Make it colourful

Pie chart instead with colours

Consistency across brands

Focus on portion/pack not per 100g

I think people, generally lack understanding of the info within the labels,

So there should be more information on these

No

 'Colour blind friendly? more of a feature on packaging

 I am uncertain as to the relevancy of the bit at the bottom (typical values as sold).

 No idea x 4

 Write in English

 Make it bigger

 On more products

 Stop selling any products that have a red light on the packaging!!! #SOCIALJUSTICE WOOOOO!!!!!
 Some explanation of the percentages / values each different section of the traffic light system has
 Different numbers and values associated with it, so perhaps a small table could be put nearby
 It to help explain
  It could be emboldened and put into the front of the packet in a more visible area to be more
  Transparent in attitude towards customers
  Not really, maybe a clearer note of the adult daily calories to help with meal and portion planning,
  Also children's calorie allowance

Advertising

- **How does food advertising influence you when buying food? For example, are you more likely to buy something that is - buy one get one free or a meal deal even though you know these items are higher in sugar/salt content?**

'Yes, I am more likely to buy unhealthy food if it is on a deal' x 14 responses
'No, I only buy what I need/want x 15 responses
'Not sure' x 3 responses

- **Does advertising influence your eating?**
  'Yes' x 13 responses
  'No' x 14 responses
  'Not sure' x 5 responses
  'No, I only buy what I need/want' x 1 response

Ideas

- **Do you have any ideas on how we can improve diet and influence healthy eating choices?**

Leave a social justice quote on all packaging

No deals e.g. buy one get one free on unhealthy food

'I guess education and a reduction of advertisement for unhealthy foods, however I'm uncertain as to whether that will be possible'

Educate parents
Think before eating stop being an idiot
No x 6
Increase awareness, often fruits can cost higher amounts at different types of season and

Can off-put people as a result of high cost

Education at school, if kids learn early about food they will hopefully carry this in to adulthood

No deals e.g. buy one get one free on unhealthy food.

A cultural shift needs to take place. It is a massive problem. In a school set up, less access

to 'unhealthy' foods would be a start. Perhaps more time for subjects like HE and PE to properly

educate pupils and not 'skimming the surface'.

 'It's important that young people are aware of the nutritional benefits of food so they can make

Sensible and informed choices about what they eat.

Home economics has an important role in educating young people about nutrition

Education – people need to know that they are consuming too many calories. They also

Need to realise that exercise doesn't burn as many calories as they think. Emphasis on eating

Healthy food and only eating when hungry

Reduce the deals on unhealthy choices.

Increase knowledge about how to prepare vegetables and fruit etc.

Should learn effects of bad eating choices in PSE lessons

No more free cakes in school

Health ambassadors that share their ideas

Need to look at what is being offered in school as 'healthy choices'. HE in schools needs to

be made compulsory

- **What do you think could be done to help people to lead a healthy lifestyle and be more**

Active?

more positive media
Education and more publicity
Try and nensure folk have time to take exercise, inform them more of the benefits of simple exercise
Promote free exercise where available.
Community health projects
I couldn't say for sure. Sorry.
Educate when young
Encourage sports
We need to make sure that young people see it as every day. Run a mile, eat healthily in schools, etc
Will all encourage healthy attitudes when they are older
The
Gym
Make them run
Education
ENCOURAGE SOCIAL JUSTICE PROTESTS AND BE ACTIVE!!!!
Nothing
Increase the amount of advertising used. A hard line approach is often more effective.
The price of gyms are so expensive and even someone like myself who leads a healthy lifestyle
I don't want to pay that amount for a gym membership
Lowering the cost of gyms and putting on free weight loss classes would encourage more

People to lead healthy life style

Apps that set targets which could possibly be entered into a prize draw or for discounted access to sports facilities

It needs to start at home, students have lots of input at school but if there is no support at home they have little choice in what they eat

More recipe/meal plan and shopping list apps could be useful as it allows people to create effective meal plans which is cheaper in the long run and easy for people to track what they are eating

Children need to be taught about the importance of health from a young age.

Parents need to be incentivised to buy healthier foods for their kids

There needs to be a cultural shift – the time of the school day could be flexible to

The time of the year/amount of daylight, perhaps encouraging more people to be active before

Or after school/work but this would require a huge cultural shift for society

More education in school, especially the early years.

Keep showing the benefits