

Too many takeaways? How the food environment affects the health and wellbeing of communities

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About the research

Fast food outlets offer cheap, tasty and energy-dense food but lack nutritional value. The high levels of fat, sugar and salt are linked to obesity and related health conditions, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke and some cancers.

In recent years the rhetoric of 'food choices' has focused on individuals' own responsibility to eat well, ignoring the environment within which decisions are made. Yet, a growing body of evidence underlines the association between exposure to fast food outlets and health problems. Fast food outlets cluster in neighbourhoods of high deprivation, and so could play a role in reinforcing inequalities in disease, diet and rates of obesity. There is also concern at the lack of alternative spaces for young people to meet and socialise in the community.

The research project 'Who Decides What's in my Fridge' worked with three community organisations in Bristol to understand how local environments influence the decisions individuals make about food. There are 494 fast food takeaways in Bristol. This means that of all local authorities in England, Bristol has the eighth highest number of outlets.

Obesity is a major public health crisis and the built environment is one of the many complex factors that influence whether or not people are obese or overweight. This briefing highlights some of the policy changes that could help make Bristol a healthier city.

"We don't have a single youth club, any safe places where youngsters can come together and have a good time. So the takeaways become the place where youngsters meet."

- Aisha

Policy implications

- Health and planning policies need to be better integrated to reduce obesity and improve health and wellbeing in communities. Local authorities should engage more closely with the city planning process to ensure that the food retail environment offers healthy, affordable choices.
- More robust measures are required to control the proliferation of takeaways. These could include extending exclusion zones around schools and restricting numbers of hot food takeaways in town centres and local neighbourhoods.
- Local authorities should encourage existing hot food outlets to provide healthier eating options and to reformulate their menus to reduce the sugar, salt and fat content of food. More councils should issue guidance to hot food takeaways to provide healthy eating options, and run Healthy Catering Award schemes to raise the profile.



Key findings

This Bristol-based study worked with a Somali Women's Group to explore how local environments influence the decisions that individuals make about food. The group were particularly concerned about the health impacts of fast food takeaways on children and young people in their neighbourhoods. In Easton and Lawrence Hill, the two wards where project participants live, the number of fast food takeaways is 44 and 22 respectively, compared to, for example, 7 in Clifton and 9 in Horfield. This means that children and young people in certain parts of the city are more exposed to unhealthy food.

"Takeaways are everywhere – near schools, near my house. The children love it. Whenever they have £2 they go and buy it." - Sahra

More than 20 Local Authorities in the UK have introduced restrictions on takeaway outlets to curb the proliferation of fast food takeaways in a bid to curb obesity levels and improve health. Bristol's Local Plan states that "takeaways in close proximity (400 metres) to schools and youth facilities will not be permitted where they would be likely to influence behaviour harmful to health or the promotion of healthy lifestyles". This is a welcome first step, but a more robust approach is needed to address the scale of the problem. For example, in Brighton the exclusion zone around schools has been increased to 800 metres, and Medway Council have developed guidance to restrict hot food takeaways to 10% in town centres and 15% in neighbourhood and local centres.

Image by Ibolya Feher



Further information

Find out more about the research project at:

www.productivemargins.ac.uk/

The following reports provide useful case studies and guidance for Local Authorities:

Local Government Association report 'Tipping the scales: Case studies on the use of planning powers to limit hot food takeaways' (2016): http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/publications/-/journal_content/56/10180/7711925/PUBLICATION

Public Health England report 'Obesity and the environment briefing: regulating the growth of fast food outlets' (2014): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/obesity-and-the-environment-briefing-regulating-the-growth-of-fast-food-outlets>

Greater London Authority's 'Takeaways Toolkit' (2012): <https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/takeawaystoolkit.pdf>

Joint briefing from Public Health England, the Town and Country Planning Association and Local Government Association 'Building the foundations: Tackling obesity through planning and development' (2016): http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/7632544/L16-6+building+the+foundations+-+tackling+obesity_v05.pdf/a5cc1a11-57b2-46e3-bb30-2b2a01635d1a

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