

Are you in a healthy place right now?**Neighbourhood food environments, diet and health – Research and policy meeting**

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Agenda and abstracts**10.40 Welcome and Introduction – Prof Nick Wareham, Director of CEDAR and MRC Epidemiology Unit, University of Cambridge****10.50 Session 1: School food environments***Can the environment in and around schools support a healthy diet?*

Chair: Dr John Battersby, Consultant in Public Health Medicine, Public Health England.

Dr Flo Harrison, Career Development Fellow, University of East Anglia & CEDAR

Schools are attractive settings in which to intervene to promote healthy behaviours among children; they offer the prospect of reaching large numbers of children, and the educational and physical environment they provide gives the opportunity to promote and contribute to a healthy diet. The neighbourhood around the school is a key part of the school food environment, and one in which there is a growing interest in intervening. Several recent reports suggest restricting the location of fast-food outlets near to schools as a means of tackling the obesity epidemic. But, what evidence exists to support such a policy? Research to date has typically approached this question through two different routes. The first comprises large-scale, population-based studies that attempt to quantify children's environments and relate them to overall diet or body weight measures. The second takes a smaller scale, observational approach to understand how school children interact with the school neighbourhood at specific times of day. Results from these two streams of research are not consistent, and neither provide strong evidence in support of current policy recommendations. However, the existing evidence base does point us in useful future directions; understanding the contribution of food purchased in the school fringe to overall diet, observing the school fringe interactions of younger children and their parents, and identifying ways of improving our models of what constitutes the school neighbourhood.

Malcolm Clark, Co-ordinator, Children's Food Campaign

With the School Food Plan and related developments, there has recently been a concerted push on improving school food. Unlike in 2005-6, this time the focus has not just been on the food served at lunch and breaks (important as that is), but on the wider school food environment – the dining room experience and a whole school approach, integrating food, cooking skills and food education into the school curriculum and extra-curricular activities. The greater focus, resources and support has the buy-in of headteachers, governors and caterers in some schools; but not everywhere. Some of the challenges in rolling out good practice are down to school and council leadership; but some barriers are more political - the academies programme in particular, and also the lack of a monitoring and inspection regime for the school food standards. There have also been missed opportunities: on not implementing the recommendations of the Food Growing in Schools Taskforce, on the challenges specific to secondary schools, and on use of the Pupil Premium. The issue of commercialisation in schools – the food industry's reaching of pupils via curricular materials, sponsorship of school activities or equipment, and even branded outlets – is also something that has not been satisfactorily addressed. However, the bar is increasingly being set high for the school food environment. Beyond the school gates it is completely different world, which is why there is much to commend a closed-site policy, at least in the short-term, or else initiatives such as Box Chicken. For longer-term solutions, the answer lies in Town Halls and at Westminster. Councils should not only tighten their planning policies, but also seek to introduce 'healthy havens' in areas where children congregate after school and at weekends: getting rid of the junk, and promoting healthier alternatives in leisure centres, parks, libraries and other public spaces.

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For a healthier high street – enabling (secondary) pupils to travel to/from school, and meet up afterwards in a non-obesogenic environment – the government also needs to step in: setting strict rules on food promotion and introducing a sugary drinks duty so that the least healthy options are no longer so attractive.

Open discussion – implications for research, policy and knowledge exchange.

11.50 Ten minute comfort break

12.00 Session 2: Takeaways, diet and health

Is the proliferation of takeaway food outlets contributing to unhealthy diet and obesity?

Chair: Alison Tedstone, Director of Diet and Obesity / Chief Nutritionist, Public Health England.

Dr Thomas Burgoine, Career Development Fellow, University of Cambridge & CEDAR

Neighbourhood food environment characteristics are increasingly seen to matter for health. Takeaway food outlets in particular have proliferated in our towns and cities over recent decades, and are commonly implicated in societal trends of increased takeaway food consumption and an obesity 'epidemic'. It follows that observed systematic differences in neighbourhood exposure to takeaway food outlets across socioeconomic lines may contribute to inequalities in diet and health. However, while foods available from takeaway outlets tend to be less healthy than those prepared within the home, associations between neighbourhood food access, dietary behaviours and body weight have typically proved difficult to ascertain. Further, individual-level markers of socioeconomic status such as education and income may influence the extent to which neighbourhood takeaway exposures are translated into behaviours and weight. The extent of this moderation is however not well understood. This talk will highlight recent, innovative CEDAR and other research that is unpicking the importance and magnitude of these neighbourhood effects, as well as their potential specificity across social groups. Although imperfect, this increasingly sophisticated evidence base is beginning to assert neighbourhood level takeaway food outlet regulation as a promising strategy for health improvement. Such policies may also serve to reduce UK socioeconomic inequalities in both diet and body weight.

Peter Wright, Environmental Health and Trading Standards Manager, Gateshead Council

The 200,000 residents of Gateshead have a wide choice of takeaway food outlets, and that choice is expanding and evolving. In addition to the national chains, there are approaching 200 independent takeaway outlets in the borough. In collaboration with the local Public Health team, Gateshead Council's Environmental Health service carried out a survey of the nutritional content of food sold by these independent outlets. This survey revealed a surprisingly large range in levels of calories, fat and saturated fat in the food they sold. However, although the range was large, most samples were clustered towards the higher end of the scale. It also revealed a number of other difficulties faced by local people when making sensible food choices, problems experienced by businesses facing large levels of local competition, rapid evolution in the marketing and supply of takeaway food and particular problems faced by local planning authorities in classifying and counting takeaways, and in controlling their proliferation. When businesses were given their results, only a tiny minority were interested in receiving help to make their dishes healthier. Those that did ask for help found it difficult to obtain good information on the nutritional quality of the wholesale food products that went into their dishes, or to gain any competitive advantage by offering food with improved nutritional quality. This is not an issue that will be satisfactorily resolved by voluntary improvement, education, advice or any other "easy" intervention. Without political will and a determination to limit the proliferation of takeaway food businesses we are unlikely to make any meaningful impact on the impact of poor diet on significant parts of the population. Although we can estimate the current and future impact of this on the current generation, we do not yet know the epigenetic impact of this for future generations.

Open discussion – implications for research, policy and knowledge exchange.

13.00 Lunch and posters

14.00 Keynote – Prof Martin White, Lead for Research in Dietary Behaviours and Public Health Interventions, CEDAR, University of Cambridge

The physical reach of an individual or household has expanded dramatically over the last 250 years, as has the sources of our food. Mechanised transport, industrial production, the advent of telecommunications, the internet and mobile technology have seen us go from a local, essentially subsistence economy to one in which a majority of our food is pre-processed. We have seen the rise and fall of the high street, the emergence of the supermarket and superstore, and the rapid growth of the supermarket convenience store and out of home ready to eat food outlets.

But our exposure to food has become hugely shaped by more than just the retail environment. Food now permeates almost every aspect of our lives. We have outdoor advertising on billboards, bus stops and telephone boxes. We are exposed to food advertising on commercial TV, radio and in the cinema. Food advertising also penetrates the internet via web sites and social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, now accessed universally via mobile devices. This panoply of marketing is sophisticated, highly targeted and costs the food industry in excess of \$5 billion/year. Most of it remains unregulated in the UK. A significant proportion of the marketing effort is directed at children, and involves methods that go beyond traditional advertising.

If we are to tackle obesity and its consequences, we need to understand better the complex web of environments in which we are exposed to food and its promotion. We need to quantify this wide range of influences, model their impacts and monitor them over time, so that we know which to address with greatest priority. We need to determine a range of cost-effective, population level interventions. We also need to understand better the food industry, since it is a key upstream determinant of diet. Population level interventions may be as important at a local level as nationally and internationally.

14.40 Session 3: Socioeconomic inequalities in the food environment and health

Are inequalities in neighbourhood food environments contributing to inequalities in health?

Chair: Prof Nick Wareham, CEDAR Director, University of Cambridge

Prof Steven Cummins, Professor of Population Health & NIHR Senior Fellow, LSHTM

Living in a deprived area is associated with the prevalence of obesity and poor diet. These areas often lack access to supermarkets or other food stores with a good range of healthy produce. Therefore, interventions in the retail food environment have, in theory, the potential to be effective strategies for improving eating behaviour and health outcomes. However, knowledge of the effect of this environment on diet consists largely of evidence generated from cross-sectional, and sometimes from longitudinal epidemiological sources. Cross-sectional studies generally indicate that poor quality food environments are associated with unhealthy diet and obesity, although many of these studies originate in the USA. Outside of the USA, the evidence base is limited, findings are equivocal and great variation in study design and methods make it hard to properly synthesise findings. Researchers and policymakers have therefore demanded better evidence to support 'causal' inference in the environmental determinants of diet. Research on food environment interventions and natural experiments provide the most robust approach to understand causality but these studies are limited in number and show overall mixed results. Part of the problem may be the limited 'uptake' or use of new, healthier food outlets shown in some studies of new neighbourhood supermarkets. It is evident that simply introducing supermarkets in deprived areas does not provide a solution to healthier eating and obesity. How then can we improve on what we know to help support better decision making in this important policy area?

Mark Plummer, Team Leader, Planning for Housing, Department for Communities and Local Government

Open discussion – implications for research, policy and knowledge exchange.

15.40 Tea and networking. You are welcome to stay on after 4pm to continue the discussion.