Tackling dietary inequalities in the UK food system: An exploration of stakeholders’ experiences to deliver national recommendations for policy and health care practitioners.

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A framework for action
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At both national and global levels, dietary consumption patterns need to change to address environmental, health and inequality challenges. Despite considerable policy interventions, the prevalence of overweight and obesity in the United Kingdom has continued to rise with obesity now a leading cause of mortality and morbidity. Moreover, the current cost of living crisis has exacerbated this association and also worsened the physical and mental health outcomes of the most vulnerable groups in our society.

Obesity prevalence is greater among those on lower incomes and the current UK food system, including government policies, does not effectively address this. Current behavioural approaches - focused on consumer’s responsibility - without the support of structural changes in the system, will widen the inequalities gap and increase obesity and food insecurity stigmas.

In this White Paper, we present the findings from two of the FIO Food project stakeholders’ workshops that we ran at the beginning of 2024. We have co-produced knowledge across academics, stakeholders and consumers’ lived experience to formulate actions for policy makers and health care professionals. All of these insights were equally needed to explore potential avenues that can be applied in the food system to promote healthier and more sustainable choices in the food retail environment, particularly among those with greater health risks.

Policy and health care actions are urgently needed to address the underlying economic factors contributing to food insecurity and obesity, to improve access to and affordability of healthy and sustainable foods for all. To tackle the obesogenic environment, a whole system approach is needed with policies and interventions that are complementary and synergistic.

PROJECT LEAD
PROFESSOR ALEXANDRA JOHNSTONE
April 2024
Project approach

The FIO Food project is one of eleven interdisciplinary research projects which have received a share of £14 million through the second call of the Transforming the UK Food System for Healthy People and a Healthy Environment SPF Programme. The TUKFS programme is delivered by UKRI, in partnership with the Global Food Security Programme, BBSRC, ESRC, MRC, NERC, Defra, DHSC, Innovate UK and FSA.

Project aim
The FIO Food project aims to provide actionable evidence for policy on retail strategies to address dietary inequalities in people living with obesity and food insecurity, to support sustainable and healthier food choices in the UK food system.

Whole system approach
Increasing food prices are more than just regulated by industry and the top British retailers, hence a holistic approach needs to be considered. The UK food system is intricate and includes a wide spectrum of interconnected stakeholder networks involved in production, processing, sales, consumption, and waste management. Each network has its own agendas and priorities, hence aligning common goals can be extremely challenging.

For this reason, a whole-system approach is a preferential outlook [1] as it allows for the exploration of different perspectives and trade-offs of the transformations to help achieve a compromise between often competing priorities of food systems actors (e.g. profit-orientated retailers vs. health-seeking consumers). A whole system approach also helps to understand the multifaceted factors that drive food system components, e.g. geographical, social, political, legal, fiscal and environmental [2].

Food systems mapping has become increasingly popular in recent years because it can support finding complementary, and potentially synergistic solutions to a healthier and more sustainable food environment [3].

The FIO Food project is comprised of four interlinked work packages, with collaboration, teamwork, and co-production [4] at the heart. Our novel approach allows us to combine our knowledge of large-scale population data with an understanding of the lived experience of food shopping for people living with obesity and food insecurity.
Is the cost-of-living crisis feeding the paradox of obesity and food insecurities in the UK?

The cost-of-living crisis is impacting the obesity epidemic in the UK, exacerbating diet and health inequalities for those living with obesity.

In high-income countries, diet quality and health status are strongly correlated with socioeconomic status. In Scotland, obesity rates are 38% in areas in the highest quintile of deprivation (based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) and 20% in areas in the lowest social deprivation quintile [5].

Around two thirds of adults in the UK are living with overweight or obesity [6], which is at the core of many disease processes and is associated with increased mortality and morbidity [7]. Furthermore, obesity places a burden on our healthcare system. It is estimated that by 2035, the annual global economic impact of overweight and obesity will reach $4.32tn - a staggering 3% of global gross domestic product, which is comparable with the impact of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 [8].

The cost-of-living crisis is impacting the obesity epidemic in the UK, exacerbating diet and health inequalities for those living with obesity.

The FIO Food project’s focus is on addressing what initially sounds like opposite issues - overconsumption of food and food insecurity - however, are actually inter-related. These problems are multi-dimensional, each carrying its own set of complications. Our goal is to identify how we can provide realistic and robust solutions whilst paying close attention to the cost-of-living crisis.

The figure below illustrates the inter-connections between the cost-of-living crisis, food insecurity, diet quality, and coping strategies, whereby the cost of living crisis is amplifying food insecurity, which can affect diet quality if mitigating coping strategies are limited. This in turn can contribute to the increasing prevalence of obesity and poor health.

Source: Johnstone & Lonnie (2023) Obesity doi:10.1002/oby.23740
Using the FIO Food project’s insights, our aim was to triangulate perspectives from key stakeholder groups to identify potential solution avenues to transform the food system to enable people living with food insecurity and obesity to make healthier and more sustainable food choices.

Purpose
To facilitate the action mapping exercise, we ran two in-person workshops – Edinburgh (30th Jan 2024) and London (16th Feb 2024). Both meetings included talks from key stakeholder delegates, Q&A opportunities, facilitated workshop sessions, and case studies from Nourish Scotland and Feast with Us.

Deliverables
The key output of these events were to deliver this White Paper with recommendations shared across the TUKFS network, health care professionals, policymakers, local authorities, and retail. Furthermore, both workshops provided unique opportunities for networking and collaboration planning.

Participation
The workshops brought together 61 FIO Food project stakeholders to address the perspectives of key actors in the UK food system. The transdisciplinary co-production approach was applied to integrate knowledge from science and lived experience of the stakeholders.

Workshop attendees

19 Academics
From University of Aberdeen, University of Edinburgh, University College London, Leeds Beckett University, University of Liverpool, University of Leeds, Kingston University, Robert Gordon University.

11 Government and local authorities

10 Health and nutrition-focused charity
Members of British Nutrition Foundation, Nourish Scotland, NESTA, Community Food Initiatives North East (CFINE), Feast with us, Food Foundation

7 Industry representatives
Delegates from the Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD), Food and Drink Federation (FDF) Scotland, Sainsbury’s, Nutrition Talent.

7 Patient & public involvement advocates
Members of Obesity Voices, Veg Advocates and Nourish Scotland

7 Health care professionals
Representatives of NHS and Public Health Scotland
Workshop highlights

Attendees discussing barriers and facilitators in transforming the food system to promote healthier dietary choices using the Co-Create tool (Edinburgh, 30th January 2024).

Methods

A deliberative method was applied to facilitate the action mapping exercise. We chose the Co-create Dialogue Forum which provides an inclusive space for debate and co-creation across different disciplines. Using a large whiteboard canvas and a five-step process, participants were invited to connect with others, discuss key barriers and facilitators in improving the food system environment, and collaborate on actions. The tool was designed to engage decision makers to raise awareness and act on participants’ ideas.

Next, all notes were gathered and transferred to a virtual space (Miro board) and thematically analysed by the FIO Food team. This analysis followed the principals outlined in the ‘Whole systems approach to obesity’ report [9]. Finally, all themes were visually illustrated using infographics that can be found on the following pages.
TACKLING DIETARY INEQUALITIES: A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

**Public**
- Mandatory requirement for equal input from people with lived experience in all policy making groups
- Consumer insights within the impact assessment for any policy
- Transcending politics & input from different agencies
- Clear strategies for the public

**Government**
- Food Minister to find a common ground for food policy and to govern, monitor and enforce good practice
- Learn from the COVID-19 pandemic and how barriers were broken down
- More time & care (given to a wider-ranging issue)
- Overhaul the benefit system
- Build national consensus on diet - dissemination of national dietary recommendations among decision makers
- Range of policies without the stigma (mental health, obesity, food insecurity)
- Evidence-based cross-party policies
- Consistent policies across political terms
- Align policy to health, sustainability and economy

**Local authorities**
- Localised food production
- Mobilise fruit and vegetables to food desserts
- Improve the Healthy Start scheme
- Join up community groups to share best practice and deliver a more unified solution

**Retail**
- Deliver evidence-based policies to help companies address unhealthy food sales
- Explore mechanisms including taxation on unhealthy commodities (HFSS - high fat, salt, sugar)
- Adoption of the current planned regulations on multibuys and advertising
- Mandatory disclosures for business so everyone is held to account to disclose the healthiness of sales
- Reformulation of food, clear food labelling & emphasis on the balanced diet
- Strengthen enforcement on marketing, advertising, and product placement to minimise the exceptions

**Research**
- Open up to iterative research (allow adjustments and non-linear processes)
- Systems thinking in all levels of discussions
- Consider cost effective 'fail fast' methods (rapid feedback and learning from mistakes) where applicable to inform action at pace

**Finances**
- Long-term, evidence-based investments and sustainable funding
- Reallocation of funding to find out what works & save money on failed policies

**Stigma & responsibility**
- Encourage local vegetable farmers with subsidies, e.g. for regenerative agriculture or to support apprenticeships to develop skills to support future local food production
- Improve food access for all, but particularly for children (revisi free school meals policies and affordability of lunchbox items), rural communities, and vulnerable communities in the cities
- Reframe the language around obesity and food insecurity - not an individual’s responsibility (avoid punitive attitudes)
- Improve support for individuals to make healthier choices
- Change lifestyle targets for those with food insecurity and obesity to lose diet & health inequality gap

**Food access**
- Food access on the agenda at every health and social health checkpoint
- Focus on health & nutrition (not illness and body weight) - positive messages
- Use promotion of sustainability as a lever for healthier choices

**Focus on health**
- Food culture
- Food access
- Focus on health & nutrition (not illness and body weight) - positive messages
- Use promotion of sustainability as a lever for healthier choices

**Education & communication**
- Allocate funding for continuous evaluation of evidence-based policies, practices and their impact
- Create a shared learning agenda on best practices
- Education for health promotion staff, e.g. disordered eating
- Clear communication to stakeholders - open dialogue

**Partnership & planning**
- Roll out good practice (learn from what has been done & worked in other countries)
- Working in partnership with charities (avoid duplicating work)
- Long term vision (min 20 years) and collaborative planning (inc. primary production)

Please feel free to share the infographic on social media, crediting the @FIOFood project.
TACKLING DIETARY INEQUALITIES: A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

Please feel free to share the infographic on social media, crediting the @FIOFood project.
Key points

- Policymakers need to adopt collaborative and inclusive approaches in designing, implementing, and evaluating regional and/or UK-wide policies, taking into account the perspectives of all stakeholders. This can be achieved with co-production as an integral element of all public decision processes to reflect the needs of people living with obesity and food insecurity.

- Food systems are complex and dynamic entities. Transdisciplinary approaches are critical in addressing complex issues and often unpredictable dynamics of changing trajectories due to local, national or external geopolitical and environmental factors. Partnerships with multiple organisations are essential in leveraging resources, expertise, and knowledge to achieve successful policy outcomes.

- Sustainable, long-term funding for research is vital to provide robust evidence to support policy decisions and establish frameworks for evaluation and monitoring of policies to ensure that they are evidence-based and implemented with integrity and accountability, with no unintended consequences.

- Nutrition training needs to be embedded in medical training along with raising awareness among health care professionals (HCP) around the stigma of living with obesity and food insecurity. Particular emphasis should be placed on communication between the patient and HCP to ensure the language used is sensitive and culturally responsive to diverse group of patients. Lastly, methods of food insecurity assessment in healthcare settings should be investigated to identify individuals with higher risks of limited food access.

- Positive messages should be promoted in all food-related policies with health and well-being (rather than illness and body weight) as a key outcome.

- Identifying and sharing good practices can boost food system transformation by promoting learning across sectors and stakeholders.

*Recommendations in this White Paper have been co-developed during the workshops and formulated with the FIO Food project stakeholders including patient and public involvement (PPI) advocates. The document has been registered on the Open Science Framework (OSF) and is open for ongoing consultations.

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Lonnie, M., Crabtree, D., & Johnstone, A. on behalf of the FIO Food Team (2024). Tackling dietary inequalities in the UK food system: An exploration of stakeholders’ experiences to deliver national recommendations for policy and health care practitioners (a framework for action). Retrieved from osf.io/evc8y.
The value of co-production

Feedback & evaluation
Below are quotes from the workshop participants who were asked to complete evaluation forms at the end of the meetings. Feedback was grouped into three themes, which provided directions for future co-production activities for the FIO Food project and other organisations.

Which topic or aspect was most useful or interesting?
Policy workshop - innovative approach taken and fascinating insights!

The workshop - very lovely to feel heard and feel like our contribution is meaningful and being taken forward

Emphasis on PPI & patient voice

The group session where everyone had to make their meaningful input

Talking about obesity from a patient perspective

The reminder about the importance of true & meaningful engagement and co-production

Consider co-production of solutions I haven't thought before

For me it was very useful to hear and discuss the clinical aspect and obesity-food insecurity stigma

The research that is going on; The Feast work were really inspiring but the entire [FIO Food] project is awesome - well done! [Loved the activity and Nadya [PPI representative and speaker in London] was also inspiring]

Did the workshop changed your views?
Made me realise that government policy makers and the vast majority of HCP are as frustrated as me

Learning how removing unhealthy items from the checkouts can affect a shop.

Hearing from those with lived experience - very helpful and learning about dignity

Obstacles for policy recommendations

Consider co-production solutions I haven't thought before

I wasn't aware of the negative language within the clinical environment

Eye opening to things in areas I am new to

Good to hear the narrative from public health is moving away from blame + shame

Suggestions for the future
Bring other issues into discussion: mental health (depression), eating disorders, sustainability, climate change

Impact/opportunities on the good food nation to impact of local community food sector who are often front line to food insecurity

Corner shop & out of home environment might be challenging but should be included alongside supermarket in policy
References


2. Global Food Security Programme. A food systems approach to policy for health and sustainability.


5. Scottish Government (2022) Scottish Health Survey 2021

6. Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) (2023). Obesity Profile: short statistical commentary May 2023


FIO Food publications


Thank you to all the stakeholders and excellent speakers (Heather Kelman, Dr Adrian Brown & Patient and Public Involvement Representatives) who provided extremely valuable contributions in presenting different perspectives on the problem of obesity and food insecurity.

Also, a big thank you to NESTA who kindly offered their space, technical support and hospitality for the workshop in London.

And a very special thank you to all Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) Advocates who shared their experience of living with obesity and food insecurity, providing often very personal, eye-opening insights which triggered an honest discussion between all attendees involved. We are very grateful to the Food Foundation’s Veg Advocates, Obesity Voices and Nourish Scotland who enabled participation of their PPI groups in the workshops.
The FIO Food Team and Collaborators (from left): Prof. Charlotte Hardman, Dr Thomas Sawczuk, Nilani Sritharan, Dr Adrian Brown, Prof. Alex Johnstone, Prof. Mark Green, Prof. Michelle Morris, Dr Hannah Greatwood, Dr Claire Griffiths, Dr Rebecca Stone, Hannah Skeggs, Prof. Mark Gilthorpe, Maddie Thomas, Dr George Saunders, Dr Emma Hunter, Dr Daniel Crabtree, Dr Mariana Dineva, Dr Marta Lonnie

Let’s keep in touch!

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