

Food & Healthy Weight Policy Development



SPECTRUM

SHAPING PUBLIC HEALTH POLICIES
TO REDUCE INEQUALITIES AND HARM

Food and Healthy Weight Policy Development: Impact Case Study

Background

Rates of overweight and obesity among children, young people, and adults [remain high in the UK](#) and globally, contributing to [physical and mental health challenges](#).

Progress on policies to address this in the UK has been limited. Between 1992 and 2020, 689 policies were proposed within 14 obesity strategies, but most have not been implemented.

Evidence highlights growing recognition of the structural drivers behind overweight and obesity; however, policies still tend to focus downstream, [emphasising individual behaviours](#) rather than addressing broader systemic factors.

There have been increased calls for policies aiming to achieve a healthy weight across the UK. These have had particular emphasis on addressing marketing, price and availability of high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) products, with a need for research to examine food policy-related problems and propose robust, publicly-supported solutions.

Impacts

SPECTRUM researchers were involved in the development of [Turning the Tide: A 10-Year Healthy Weight Strategy](#) published in 2021, which presented a long-term vision for reducing obesity and achieving a healthy weight across the UK. This evidence-informed agenda included 30 recommendations primarily targeted at UK government including action on online advertising of unhealthy foods as well as improving treatment services. The strategy was developed collaboratively by the [Obesity Health Alliance](#) (OHA), a SPECTRUM partner, with input from SPECTRUM researchers who led on the evidence reviews conducted to inform the strategy.

The strategy cites studies led by SPECTRUM researchers. The strategy has been referenced in reports by the [Local Government Association](#) and several local authorities, such as in [Nottingham](#) and [Shropshire](#), advocating for policies set out in the strategy.



In 2020

SPECTRUM researchers responded to the UK consultation on [introducing a total online advertising restriction for HFSS products](#), with researchers engaging with a range of advocacy and voluntary sector organisations during the consultation period to advise on SPECTRUM research. This consultation led to the [advertising restrictions on TV and online for HFSS products](#), due to come into effect in October 2025.

In 2023

The OHA with Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) and the Alcohol Health Alliance (AHA) published [Holding us back: tobacco, alcohol an unhealthy food and drink](#), citing a range of studies conducted by SPECTRUM researchers. The report has since been cited in several policy documents, including the [Get Britain Working White Paper](#) and a [briefing report by The Health Foundation](#).

In 2024

SPECTRUM researchers contributed to the development of the [Scottish Government's forthcoming Population Health Framework](#). This will be underpinned by an evidence review that includes content on the commercial determinants of health and also cites a number of studies from consortium research teams.

About the research

[The OHA strategy](#) referred to results from a [study](#) that demonstrated that when considering improving the regulation of HFSS food online advertising to children, industry and non-industry actors competed in a 'moral framing battle', using children's rights or business rights to support or oppose the strengthening of advertising regulation in the UK.

Research that informed the Holding Us Back report and the 2020 UK consultation on online advertising of HFSS products examined how sports sponsorship by the HFSS producers was framed in UK news media, finding that much newspaper reporting fell into two overarching frames:

- Public Health
- Industry



The public health frame rejected sport sponsorship by HFSS companies, calling for such sponsorship to be restricted or banned, as it contributed to an environment that promoted excessive HFSS food consumption.

The industry frame, however, characterised sport sponsorship by HFSS companies as a form of corporate social responsibility and the industry as a good 'moral' actor that should be part of the solution to addressing obesity.

[The Population Health Framework](#) evidence review was informed by, among other studies, [research](#) examining children's, parents' and professionals' views on the regulation of online advertising of HFSS food to children, and demonstrated that the majority of participants wanted strengthened regulation of online advertising of HFSS food.

In 2023, SPECTRUM researchers published a [study](#) examining obesity policy, arguing that although several population-level policies have been proposed at UK government level, they remain framed in such a way that promotes a focus on 'problematic' individual behaviour, and ignores the role of the HFSS product industry in contributing to poor dietary health. A further 2023 [study](#) reported that in the broader public health literature, arguments made to support or oppose government action on dietary policy included 'individual choice', 'responsibility for health', and 'fairness'. Both studies have informed discussions with voluntary sector and policy stakeholders in devolved and UK governments.



References

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