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Theme 3: The West Sussex Food System and its Wider Influences

Chapter 7: Food as a Commercial Determinant of Health in West Sussex



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Chapter 7: Food as a commercial determinant of health in West Sussex

This chapter discusses the increasing awareness of food as a commercial determinant of health. We discuss what this term means and explore how food and nutrition choices impacting on health are influenced by the commercial sector. We will reflect on the importance in recognising this impact and highlight how, despite this influential relationship with the commercial sector often being viewed on a multi-national scale, we can and do locally influence this impact.

This chapter will examine which population groups are most at risk from the commercial determinants of health and starts to explore potential actions we could take locally to promote relationships with businesses for population health improvement.

Summary

- Commercial determinants of health describe how the actions of companies impact on population health, whether that be directly or indirectly, positively or negatively.
- Individual food choices and the wider food environment are impacted by actions and influences from the commercial sector.
- Children and young people and those living in more deprived areas may be more at risk from the negative impacts of the commercial determinants of health influencing food choices.
- There is ongoing national and local work which stands to mitigate against potentially harmful influences from the commercial sector in relation to our food choices.
- In West Sussex, the Creating Healthy and Sustainable places framework provides public health guidance to support healthy and sustainable development locally, providing a toolkit for local decision makers involved in place development. This framework includes a consideration to the impact on healthy foods when planning for and understanding the health impact of local design and development.
- Influencing the local food economy in West Sussex requires collaboration across multiple teams, and organisations including engagement with businesses and continued support from wider food partnerships and networks locally.
- There is a lack of local data to help understand our population's views or perspective in relation to the influence the commercial sector has on food choice.

Defining the Commercial Determinants of Health

In 2023 the Lancet, one of the world's leading medical journals focussed a series of papers on the Commercial Determinants of Health. This series of papers aimed to conceptualise the relationship between the commercial sector and health, which spans across complex political, economic and social systems.

The Lancet defined the commercial determinants of health as¹:

"The systems, practices, and pathways through which commercial actors drive health and equity".

To put it simply, commercial determinants of health generally refer to the actions of companies and how they impact on societies health, whether that be directly or indirectly, positively or negatively. This often relates to how these sectors influence choice but also links into the wider impacts companies have on our environment.² Companies and industry are vital to health, for example they provide healthcare and medicines, employment opportunities (with unemployment a known circumstance associated with poorer health³), and they produce safe products for consumption to name a few. However, there are industries which manufacture and advertise products which are now widely recognised risk factors for poorer health and disease, such as tobacco, alcohol and gambling outlets⁴.

Examples of methods that can be used by the commercial sector to influence health related habits include⁵:

- Lobbying
- Manufacturing doubt on the evidence of harm of a product
- Product marketing and advertising
- Promoting individual choice and responsibility for food consumption opposed to taking commercial responsibility and acknowledgement of influence

Figure 1 below was published as part of the Lancet series focussed on the Commercial Determinants of Health⁶. This figure visualises the pathways in which the commercial sector can influence health. This highlights how commercial actions feed into the wider political and economic system that frames health, and how this impact can contribute to the ill-health and health inequities seen on the local population level. This figure also illustrates the practices that can be used by the commercial sector to cause this impact. Although complex and expansive, the model shows us the process by which these influences arise and the actions which can impact on population health.

Figure 1: Commercial determinants of health model

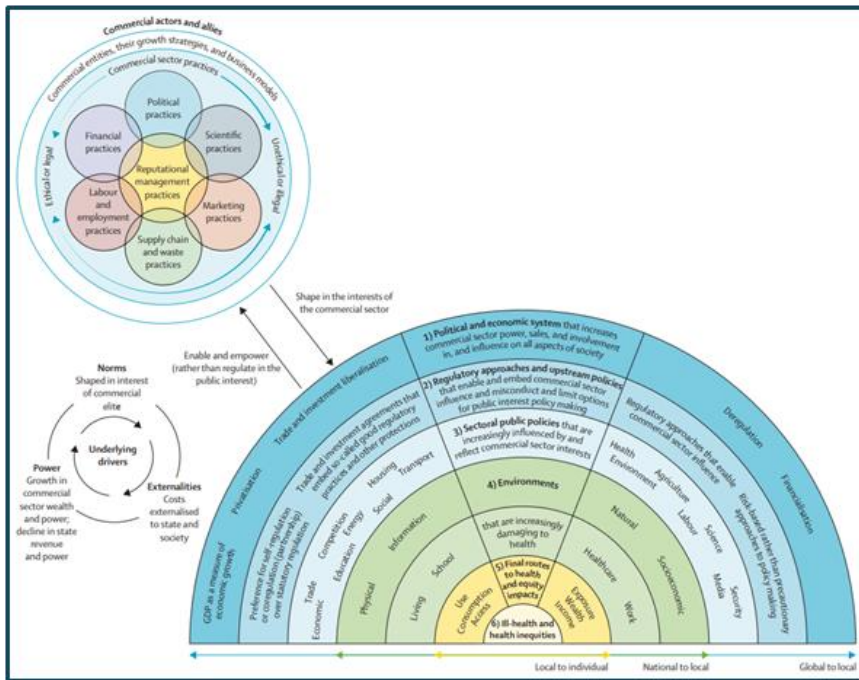


Figure 1: Model of the commercial determinants of health. This model highlights how the practices commercial actors and allies utilise to shape the commercial influence, and in turn how the political, economic and environmental systems enable and empower the commercial sector. This describes the underlying drivers as norms, power and externalities, showing cyclical relationship between them.

How are the commercial determinants of health linked to food and nutrition?

Food - and in turn - nutrition consumption is a daily requirement for our population. As highlighted throughout this needs assessment the West Sussex population are not meeting all their nutritional requirements. Ultra processed foods and the commercial operations surrounding their production are one of the four private commercial industries (alongside tobacco, fossil fuels and alcohol) causing one third of preventable deaths globally⁷. This highlights the potential scale of the detrimental influence that commercial food systems can have on health.

There are many mechanisms in which the commercial sector can influence food and nutrition choices and behaviours. Examples of this include tailored food marketing, advertisement, reward-based consumption and company affiliated sponsorship. As an example, **over a third (36%)** of food and soft drink advertising spend is on confectionery, snacks, desserts and soft drinks, compared to **just 2%** of fruit and vegetables⁸. There have been steps taken on a local and a national scale to regulate these direct and indirect actions and in turn the overall influence from these commercial sectors. We will discuss a

case study later in the chapter of a place-based intervention which aimed to reduce commercial influence on food choices via advertising.

This impact on health is not solely due to the food product that is manufactured and consumed. Health is also affected by the wider environment and the systems which enable these products to be consumed and easily available as a choice to our population. This highlights how commercial determinants can link with the creation of an obesogenic environment, which is the term used to describe an environment that is more likely to promote weight gain and obesity in individuals or a community, due to an environment with a greater number of accessible unhealthy food options and more limited opportunities for physical activity⁹. The obesogenic environment disproportionately poses a greater reality and risk for those living in our more deprived communities, which means our communities face an unfair and unequal burden from environmental factors which influence our food and nutrition choices. Chapter 6 (Availability and Access) and Chapter 8 (Food Poverty) describes this relationship between food availability and deprivation more extensively. This is experienced across West Sussex, and on a wider national scale across our high streets and community environments¹⁰.

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Regulation of the food industry is even more challenging given its influence now extends outside of the traditional methods of food marketing via TV and physical space advertising. There is recognition of the impact that social media may have as a commercial determinant, through the creation of the digital food environment impacting people's food choices. This evidence was identified in the first scoping review published in 2025 exploring the global current evidence¹¹. This research extends the framing and impact from an obesogenic environment outside of our traditional high street environment. Although a relatively new area of research and development, given the extensive use of mobile phones in our young people it is an important factor to consider. Although locally there are limitations on what we can do to impact that platform, it is important to provide people with the awareness of the risks of misinformation and food choice influence via their social media. Providing support on how to navigate this alongside other key messages for safe social media usage.

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How do we intervene to promote health?

Although often framed as a root cause of harm to health, the strength of influence of business on the food environment presents an opportunity to promote health. This does not just need to be solely focussed on the responsibility of the large multinational companies and should also consider the role and influence of our local food economy in West Sussex and its ability to promote healthier food and nutrition access and availability to residents to support healthier choices.

A counter argument against the need to intervene with the commercial sector is the framing of personal responsibility in relation to food choice. This view stands that, 'as individuals in a society we must take responsibility for what we choose to consume'¹² however, as evidenced in previous chapters of this needs assessment we know that not all of our population has equal opportunities to enact those choices; whether that be through socioeconomic means or the physical environment and settings they find themselves in, which can make the healthier choice not the default and harder to exercise. This suggests the need to acknowledge and take collective responsibility in West Sussex to support availability and access to healthy foods locally to address inequalities.

Creating healthy and sustainable places: A framework for West Sussex

In West Sussex the Creating Healthy and Sustainable places framework provides public health guidance to decision makers including planners, developers and other professionals to achieve healthy and sustainable development locally. This includes a focus on creating a healthy food environment, recommending provision of community food growing spaces during development planning and implementation.

The Creating Healthy and Sustainable places framework can be accessed here: [Creating healthy and sustainable places. A framework for West Sussex](#).

This framework provides a toolkit and lists considerations for decision makers who want to reduce the risk of local developments contributing to the wider obesogenic environment. Although not a statutory planning document it is intended as a useful guide to support conversations on healthy development locally.

Health Promotion Interventions

Figure 2 below shows the Nuffield Intervention Ladder. This describes intervention levels to support health promotion, increasing from the lowest least restrictive level to the most restrictive level. It is clear across these levels how the commercial sector can interact with many health choices (particularly in relation to food choices), and how the health promotion interventions can operate from working with the commercial sector to support a change in health choices, through to mandating a restriction on the actions of the commercial sector to restrict choices viewed as unhealthy.

Figure 2: Nuffield Intervention Ladder

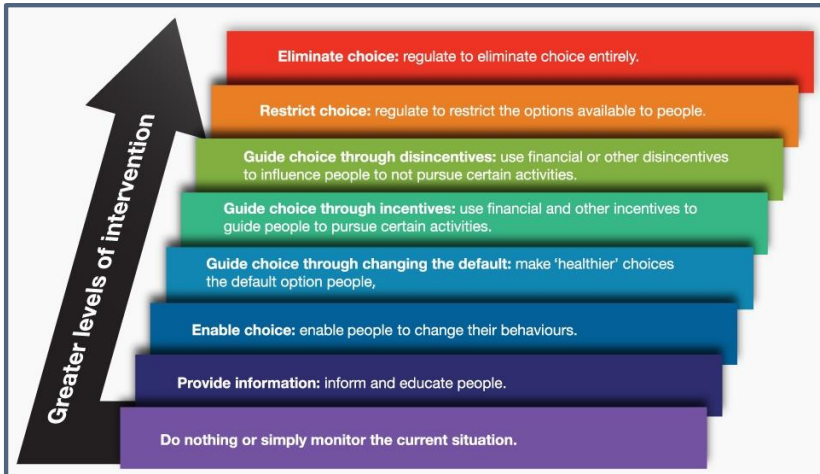


Figure 1: Nuffield Intervention Ladder. This rainbow ladder highlights levels of health promotion interventions in a ladder format, starting at the lowest least restrictive measure of a health promotion action, increasing to clear intervention actions to disincentive or restrict the unhealthy action or promote the healthy action.

Health promotion intervention - high level of restriction

The Soft Drinks Industry Levy introduced in 2018, often referred to as the 'sugar tax' is an example of where responsibility and restriction was mandated on the food industry. This levy attached an additional cost to soft drinks which exceeded the gram per 100ml requirement for sugar content. The industry was given options regarding their next actions. They could opt to reformulate products to meet the statutory requirements, consume the cost of the levy directly if the product is not reformulated, or put the full or the partial cost of levy onto the consumer. Most companies opted to reformulate their products prior to the introduction of this levy¹³. This levy has been viewed as being effective in reducing sugar intake of adults and children, with evidence supporting its impact in reducing the number of teeth extraction in children and possibly preventing some obesity in year 6 girls. Given the restriction was solely to soft drinks, this tackles a small fraction of the wider food environment consumed¹⁴.

Health Promotion intervention – medium level restriction

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) encourages local authorities to use their planning powers to limit the proliferation of uses like hot food takeaways, especially near schools and areas where children congregate. This is often achieved through local policies and supplementary planning documents that create "takeaway management zones" or "exclusion zones" One example policy is the East Sussex County Council public health hot food takeaway guidance that aims to support local planning authorities to promote healthy food environments and addressing health inequalities linked to unhealthy weight. This involves regulating numbers of hot food takeaways and their locations, particularly near schools and in areas with high obesity and deprivation rates¹⁵.

Health promotion intervention – medium level of restriction

The implementation of calorie labelling on menus and food labels in out-of-home food businesses in 2022 in England is another example of where an intervention has been implemented by businesses¹⁶. This intervention sits lower down the Nuffield Intervention Ladder than the sugar tax. Although the restriction was placed on businesses, the aim of the intervention was to provide information to consumers to inform and guide food choices. There is emerging evidence to suggest that calorie labelling can result in a small reduction in the calories individuals choose to eat¹⁷.

Upcoming health promotion interventions – medium level restriction

On a national level a new healthy standard policy, published as part of UK 10-year Health Plan for England will see new healthy sales standards placed on large companies in the food sector, primarily our supermarket chains. This policy aims to increase the average healthiness of sales through new mandatory targets¹⁸. This policy sits alongside restriction of junk food advertising which we will shortly discuss, in efforts to reduce the current obesity burden.

Groups at increased risk of harm from the commercial determinants of health

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Although all population groups will be influenced subconsciously or consciously by the commercial sector, we know that some groups are more likely to be influenced than others. There are two groups in particular which are more likely to be impacted by the commercial determinants of the health, these are:

Children and Young People

Research shows that marketing tactics, such as advertising through traditional routes of television and now through the expanding area of social media, can impact on what and when children want to eat¹⁹. This has led to national governmental decision to place restrictions on TV advertisements. The restriction, which was originally aimed to be implemented in October 2025, but was delayed to January 2026 (following food and advertising responses to the restrictions) and restricts online advertisements and places a watershed on television advertisements after 9pm, for products which are high in sugar, salt and calories²⁰. This is viewed as an important intervention in the national plan to reduce our rates of childhood obesity.

Habit formation and food choices are a key part of development for children and young people. Once habits are formed and enacted they are challenging to alter, so it is important that healthy habits are accessible and promoted from a young age. Local authorities regularly interact with settings that children and young people attend locally and can develop an understanding of the neighbourhood environment in which they will be making their independent food choices. Once build this picture can be used to guide where and how to act and use available powers to limit the commercial determinants of health for our children and young people.

Communities with greater levels of deprivation

National and local data highlights to us that we see a higher density of businesses promoting harmful products, including unhealthier foods in our communities where greater deprivation sits²¹. This same trend is seen with other recognised commercial determinants such as gambling outlets: in 2020, over one fifth (21%) of England's gambling outlets were

concentrated in areas in the most deprived decile²². This is an unfair impact which places individuals living in the communities affected at greater risk from commercial determinants that harm health. This picture needs to be factored in when considering the risks to our community from the commercial determinant's actions and where actions should be targeted.

What can be undertaken locally to impact?

Although often considered from a national viewpoint, we will explore in this section the commercial determinants from a local perspective. We will highlight a case study of a successful Transport for London intervention and ongoing work within our West Sussex local authority team, which impacts on the commercial determinants of health.

Case Study: Advertisement ban, Transport for London

Action: In February 2019 Transport for London (TfL) implemented a ban for advertising high fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) foods and drinks across its networks, this included advertisements on underground, buses and train stations²³.

This was introduced as one intervention of the broader public health initiative to tackle childhood obesity in London

Successes: The restriction is predicted to have considerable health and economic gains, in terms of NHS and social care costs across the lifetime of the current population. This benefit is expected to be greatest in those from the most socioeconomically deprived groups²⁴



Challenges: Some seemingly 'unhealthy' foods from well-known brands affiliated with HFSS can still be advertised on public transport, if they meet the criteria for advertisement. This has led to some questioning in the restrictiveness of the intervention

Wider Uptake: In 2021 Bristol became the first area outside of London to implement a similar advertising ban. They widened this advertising restriction to other known advertised harms such as alcohol and gambling. Since then, a small number of other local authorities across the UK have followed suit to restrict local advertisement of high salt and saturated fat foods. A common highlighted logistical issue in this initiative is the fragmentation of travel companies in each local authority, and in turn how this restricts the ability for an advertising ban agreement with one company to make a substantial impact on all travel advertising across a give location. This was not a challenge in the Transport for London intervention as it is main provider of all travel across the city.

Local functions which involve food regulation

West Sussex Trading Standards Team

This team within West Sussex holds responsibility for enforcing food law in West Sussex alongside their counterparts within Environmental Health in the borough and district councils. Trading Standards officers play a crucial role in food standards law enforcement, ensuring food sold is safe, accurately described and properly labelled. This includes ensuring correct allergen information is provided, that banned ingredients are not present in foods, claims made about food are accurate, together with checking food labels

and investigating complaints. The food officers' work aims to ensure high food standards across West Sussex whether at manufacturers, catering establishments such as restaurants and cafes as well as retailers.

The Role of Local Planning Authorities

Effective regulation of hot food takeaways often requires collaboration between planning and public health teams. This is because planning permission is generally required for new hot food takeaways, including extensions, changes of use, and alterations to the building's appearance.

Public health teams support in generating data to describe areas with high density of hot food takeaways, locations with high levels of obesity and other vulnerable populations such as schools. This data supports the decision to approve an application for a hot food takeaway, refuse or approve with conditions such as limitations on opening hours, waste disposal, or noise levels. In West Sussex, the responsibility to regulate hot food takeaways lies with the local planning authorities, with locality-based criteria. More work is currently being undertaken by West Sussex County Council to support local policy development for hot food takeaways.

See Chapter 6 for the visual representation of the distribution of hot food takeaways within West Sussex.

Environmental Health Officers

Environmental health officers work in District and Borough Councils across West Sussex. There are currently six Environmental Health teams spanning the county. A large part of their role with food and nutrition involves carrying out Food Hygiene inspections. This is a process where environmental health officers assess a local food business to ensure it complies with food safety laws and standards, ensuring that the food produced or provided by a business is safe for human consumption. Part of this role also ensures assessing allergy awareness and labelling of foods.

Another aspect of the role which can involve food businesses is the Environmental Health teams work with the UK Health Security Agency when local follow up is required in relation to infectious disease surveillance. The work with food businesses generally involves outbreak investigation follow-up and ensuring food safety following spread of an infectious gastrointestinal illness related to a given food establishment.

Food Businesses

Table 1 shows the number of businesses requiring Food Standards Agency rating in West Sussex, categorised by district and borough area:

District/Borough	Adur	Arun	Chichester	Crawley	Horsham	Mid Sussex	Worthing
Number of food businesses	456	1280	1400	937	1209	1348	993

Table 1 - Number of food businesses by district and borough level in West Sussex

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Within West Sussex we have many food businesses extending across the county. The above table shows the number of businesses registered in each district and borough, highlighting the breadth of opportunity for impact/interaction in this area, but also challenge given the density and variety of businesses.

Potential local areas of focus for supportive work on food as a commercial determinants of health

There are many organisations that are important to engage with when considering local actions to mitigate the impact from the commercial determinants on local food choices.

Some considerations for these actions include:

- To focus local work on the population groups we know are most at risk from the commercial influences which can negatively impact on health: children and young people and communities with greater levels of deprivation.
- Consideration of the food environment interlinks closely with the impact from the commercial determinants of health, the wide use and uptake of the West Sussex Creating Healthy and Sustainable places framework will help to ensure healthy future local development, supportive of ensuring access to healthy fresh food.
- Local advertising and planning restrictions do impact the influence from the commercial determinants of health on populations. We should consider the feasibility in adopting advertising restrictions in West Sussex engaging with local authority colleagues from other areas who have implemented the restrictions
- Continue collaboration with local planning services, particularly when considering restrictions of unhealthy food around areas we know our children and young people spend time, such as schools and playgrounds as well as areas in West Sussex known to already have high density of takeaways and unhealthy food provisions.
- Consider the room for local influence of procurement practice of food contracts in organisations such as leisure centres to promote healthy options and restrict the commercial presence of unhealthy commodities.

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Summary

This chapter highlights the importance in recognising the influence of the commercial determinants of health, in relation to the food and nutrition status of our West Sussex population. This area overlaps and interacts with some other of the chapters in our Theme 3 section of the needs assessment and cannot necessarily be viewed in silo. Based on national evidence, we have identified children and young people and those living in our more deprived communities being more at risk of negative impacts. Given the number of food businesses locally it is important to consider how interactions between public health and commercial sector can be framed to promote population health. There are opportunities to work from examples and guidance from local authority colleagues in other areas to act complimenting ongoing national work in this arena.

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