

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

Chapter 9: Food Culture in West Sussex



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Chapter 9: Food Culture in West Sussex

This chapter discusses the concept of a food culture. Food culture is a term used to describe the attitudes, beliefs and practices that individuals or a group hold towards food. Food cultures can change over time and influence population and individual food choices. This chapter also highlights the importance of food culture and beliefs when designing food and nutrition promotion and interventions; this can be integral to increasing the uptake and sustainability of behaviour change towards improved nutrition.

Summary

- *Food culture* describes the attitudes, beliefs, and practices that individuals or groups hold towards food.
- Published NICE guidance highlights the importance of considering food culture when tailoring dietary interventions for overweight and obesity.
- Food culture is a vital local consideration, as it can affect dietary needs and the relevance of health promotion efforts. Attitudes, beliefs, and practices around food vary across age groups, communities, and over time. Reviewing food culture helps ensure that food-related programmes and interventions are relevant and appropriately supportive.
- A key factor in individual behaviour change is whether the recommended change feels attainable. If a food recommendation conflicts with an individual's or group's cultural norms this may hinder successful behaviour change.
- When nutrition recommendations and healthy food promotion are not culturally appropriate there is also a risk of exacerbating nutrition-related health inequalities.
- Local stakeholders working to improve food and nutrition should integrate food culture considerations into their work. This includes exploring how food culture interacts with cross-cutting priorities discussed in the wider food landscape chapter.

What do we mean by food & culture?

Food culture is a term used to describe the attitudes, beliefs and practices that individuals or groups hold towards food. This can encompass much more than just the consumption of food; this extends to the ingredients we choose to cook with, cooking methods, meal structures, food routines and the social interactions we have around food. This can vary between countries, communities, families and individuals.

Some cultural norms are deeply ingrained and can be established from our upbringing or influenced by our families. Some cultural food norms can be influenced by the setting or environment that an individual finds themselves in. For example, a school setting may provide a distinct 'food culture' to its pupils. We also have evidence that the cultural norms surrounding food can change if an individual's environment changes, or the ability to continue food cultural norms becomes more challenging¹.

Working in a way that is complimentary or aligned to diverse local food cultures and identifying and appreciating how cultural norms impact on food choices in our population, will better enable an environment which supports healthy and sustainable attitudes and beliefs towards food.

Food and Culture – key considerations

Translation of the Eatwell Guide Recommendations

The Eatwell Guide forms the basis of our dietary recommendations within the UK, as previously highlighted in earlier chapters of this needs assessment². It is now widely recognised that there is difficulty translating these evidenced based dietary recommendations to meet the personalised needs of individuals, particularly if taking cultural needs into account, as not all dietary consumption patterns are reflected in the the Eatwell Guide. The Eatwell Guide has been adapted to support translation of these evidence-based food recommendations for different communities. This is key to ensuring that food-based interventions are relevant and achievable for all communities.

Enfield council developed culturally adapted Eatwell Guides for those consuming traditional West African, East African, Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Polish diets³. The council changed the foods represented on the plate to ensure that the dietary recommendations were familiar and relevant to cultural diets being consumed within their local communities. When using the Eatwell Guide it is important to consider where further adaptations may be required based on West Sussex community demographics. We should continue to review factors contributing to current food culture. This includes country of birth-based approach to identifying a food culture as well as other considerations. When designing and delivering food-based interventions it is important to consider cultural appropriateness and other contextual factors which may impact on food and nutrition choices. This underlines the importance of co-design.

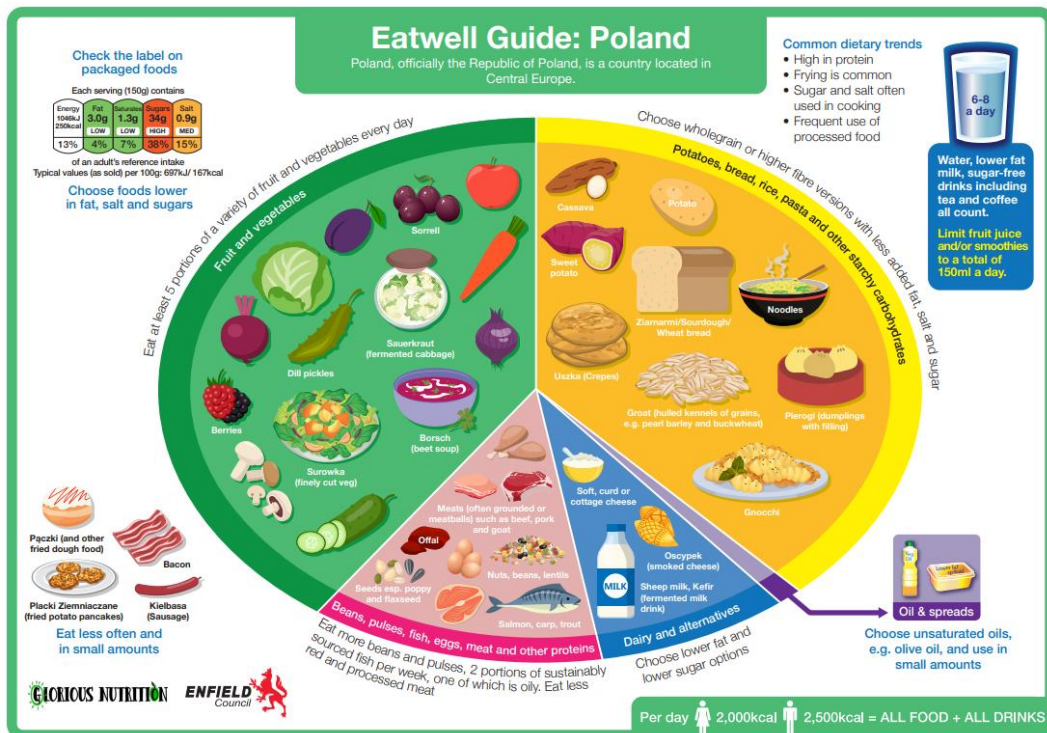


Figure 1 - Eatwell Guide: Polish adaption. Adapted by Enfield Council. Available here: https://www.enfield.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/30197/Culturally-adapted-eatwell-guides-Your-council.pdf

For example, evidence has shown that when the widely recognised Mediterranean dietary pattern, known for its health benefits, is implemented into a non-Mediterranean country, there have been challenges associated with the purchasing of ingredients and the way the foods are eaten, which restricts the adherence to the diet⁴. A key part of the work around the cultural nature of food and nutrition adherence is recognising that a blanket dietary approach for health promotion will not inform or support the whole population equally. Evaluation of interventions and working with communities will enable co-production of suitable dietary interventions, especially considering that food needs may not always be obvious. Cultural food needs should not be presumed based solely on country of birth, there are many factors that interplay to influence food choices and dietary patterns among individuals and communities, as highlighted through this chapter and the wider needs assessment.

Fruit and Vegetable Prescriptions – Alexandra Rose Charity

The Alexandra Rose Charity⁵, in collaboration with Lambeth and Tower Hamlets piloted an intervention which aimed to increase local fruit and vegetable consumption. Fruit and vegetable 'prescriptions' which could be redeemed at the local food market in a London community, were supplied to eligible individuals who were referred into the project by local social prescribers⁶. The voucher amount supplied per person was based on what a healthy and culturally appropriate shopping basket of fresh fruit and vegetables would cost from the market, where it was identified a large proportion of the community purchased their food, so appropriately contextualised to local need and local habits.

This community Eatwell project has received positive survey and focus group feedback for increasing fruit and vegetable consumption, as well as integrating individuals with other services within community hubs. This pilot highlights the power and value of considering community needs for fruit and vegetable consumption in their cultural context.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence: guidance for overweight and obesity management

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) publish evidence based best practice guidance that healthcare professionals utilise when considering appropriate healthcare management of their patients. The extract below is taken from the NICE guidance in relation to Overweight and Obesity Management:

NICE guidance: Overweight and Obesity Management

1.16 – Dietary Approaches

Use a flexible and individualised approach to tailor dietary interventions to achieve nutritional balance while reducing energy intake, taking into account:

- food preferences (including cultural preferences)
- personal circumstances (such as home environment and family finances)
- any comorbidities (such as eating disorders or disordered eating, type 1 diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease or non-alcoholic fatty liver disease)
- any restrictions in the range of foods they eat (for example because of neurodiversity, sensory problems, or coeliac disease)
- that in many cases weight regain may happen

This highlights the importance in considering an individual's circumstances when tailoring dietary interventions.

From a public health perspective, this list of approaches reinforces the importance in ensuring that health promotion messages, as well as food and nutrition interventions, are mindful of the diverse food cultures found in the local population. A range of tailored approaches may be required to convey a single dietary message to all.

Veganism

The Vegan diet is a dietary pattern where an individual only consumes plants and foods made from plants. In 2018 only 1% of the UK population reported to be following a Vegan diet, now this is around 3% of the population⁷. Adherence with this dietary pattern is more common in younger age groups, and is now a widely recognised dietary preference in the UK, alongside following a Vegetarian or Pescetarian diet which are more widely adopted⁸. In more recent years there have been greater conversations around the Vegan diet, and it is now a much more widely recognised dietary choice. In response there has been an associated increase in the number of 'meat alternative' and plant based options available in local supermarkets⁹. Secondary data analysis has identified these products as significantly more expensive than their meat counterparts and higher in sugar. The individual

consumption of processed foods versus whole foods in a vegan diet varies widely and with it so do individual health impacts. There are concerns regarding the health impacts from the ultra-processed nature of some these products¹⁰.

The reasons for adopting a plant-based diet vary but increasingly young people are citing the importance of the environmental impact of food production. Individuals are increasingly conscious of their climate impact and their individual responsibility to reduce this, which they believe following a plant-based diet supports¹¹. Educational signposting is important to ensure that the true environmental impact is understood, and so that individuals understand the risks of excluding any food groups. A vegan diet is not suitable for all population groups, for example young children or those with long-term medical conditions whose health might be better being supported by other dietary patterns¹², and there is a risk of micronutrient deficiencies if a vegan diet is not carefully planned.

A shift to a vegan diet may favour the consumption of a greater proportion of fruit and vegetables; given the plant-based nature of the diet. The data in this needs assessment shows that at national and West Sussex population levels we are not meeting the 5-a-day fruit and vegetable recommendation as laid out by the Eatwell Guide.

In 2019 the challenge initiative of “Meat Free Monday” was launched, promoting behaviour change to encourage initiating one plant-based day a week into an individual’s diet¹³. Evaluations of this initiative have shown that those who were engaged with the program via email sign up for a longer time, and younger participants, were more likely to stop eating meat as part of their diet¹⁴. A higher weekly meat consumption on sign up was associated with identifying greater barriers to changing behaviours, highlighting naturally that those already partially adopting the dietary pattern, or engaged with the concept of reducing weekly meat consumption were more likely to be successful in adhering to ‘Meat Free Monday’. This potentially flags groups who may more naturally adapt to dietary change. It also highlights that where a food culture being promoted is vastly different from the food norms, a greater number of barriers to adopting that change may operate.

Veganuary is another example of a not-for-profit campaign launched in 2014 which now has a global reach. It aims to promote trying a vegan diet for the month of January, providing recipe support and a media campaign through the month¹⁵.

Food consumption: In versus out of the home environment

An important consideration when factoring food behaviour change is appreciating where food is largely being consumed. The proportion of purchases which are ‘out of home sector’ will vary between individuals, families and communities.

Family Food Financial Year Ending (FYE) 2023¹⁶ presents the results from the FYE 2023 Family Food module of the Living Costs and Food Survey and covers household shopping and eating habits.

Around 4,000 households in the UK are surveyed annually. Households record their expenditure on, and purchased quantities of, food and drink both for the household and that which is consumed outside the home.

The greatest reduction in total household expenditure from the previous year identified by the Living Costs and Food Survey was in food and non-alcoholic drinks, suggesting households are consuming less food, or switching to lower cost or quality alternatives

where available: £29.66 per person per week was spent on household food and non-alcoholic drinks in FYE 2023, a decrease of 3.4% in real terms since FYE 2022.

When considering out of home expenditure, purchasing history from the survey has shown that between 2022 and 2023 purchases of takeaway food brought home increased by 9.5%. In FYE 2023, eating out expenditure saw an overall increase of 3.5% in real terms since FYE 2022, but a 42% decrease since FYE 2020, which was associated with the COVID pandemic.

Some key findings from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey 2019 to 2023 report from the food and drink from the out of home sector are¹⁷:

- Food and drink from the out of home sector contributed more to the energy and nutrient intakes of those aged 11 to 18 years and 19 to 64 years than of those in the extremities of the younger and older age groups
- Eating occasions in which food had been mostly bought from the out of home sector (including food delivery services and takeaways) accounted for 10% of all eating occasions overall, 11% for the 19 to 64 years age group and 12% for the 11 to 18 years age group per week
- Overall, food and drink consumed at out of home eating occasions contributed 12% of total energy intake. This increased to 23% when only those participants who reported consumption from the out of home sector were included.

Out of home sector' refers to any outlet where food or drink is prepared in a way that means it is ready for immediate consumption, on or off the premises (for example a cafe, pub or takeaway).

Religious Food Traditions

Religious food practices is an aspect which should also be considered under the umbrella term of food cultures. Specific food practices and restrictions can be followed as part of a religion¹⁸. It is important there is awareness and provision for these dietary practices across our anchor institutions within West Sussex.

NHS organisations must comply with the British Dietetic Association Nutrition and Hydration Digest for the patient provision of health care food and drink¹⁹. This guidance stipulates that specialist religious and cultural menus, that meet the needs of the population must be available to patients in the hospital premises, alongside other nutrition standards.

Food Culture Trends

An important factor for consideration is the recognition that food beliefs and attitudes contributing to food culture may change over time, but this change in beliefs may not necessarily be in keeping with nutrition-based evidence. For example, in recent years there has been a significant rise and discussion of the importance of the macronutrient protein, and the need to increase the protein intake as an individual. This discussion has been particularly focussed around the gym and fitness industry.

As we have evidenced from this needs assessment, protein is one of the basic food groups that we are meeting the required consumption level on a population level, particularly for

the younger population (see Chapter 4). This highlights the importance in the need to address certain attitudes and beliefs towards food with an approach which also considers the evidence behind this belief. This is particularly pertinent for evolving food cultures, to assess if attitudes and beliefs align with the available evidence when we are considering recommendations on a population level.

Another consideration linking to themes discussed in Chapter 7 is the consideration of the digital foodscape, which encompasses the digital technologies and platforms which shape our food-related content experiences online. An important aspect for consideration of the digital foodscape is the unregulated nature of the food messages. Interestingly in a UK review of digital food influencers, in the top 33 digital food influencers in the UK only 2 hold accreditations which make them qualified nutritionists²⁰. The digital foodscape is not inherently a negative development, as it opens the opportunity to widen the breadth of recipes and learn new cooking techniques. It does however highlight the potential for mixed food and nutrition messages to be conveyed, and the ability for food choices to be unconsciously influenced by the food affiliations of food influencers and the nature of the digital algorithm.

Why is consideration of food culture important?

Food beliefs, attitudes and practices stand as factors which will impact the food and nutrition choices that individuals make, and they influence the reasons behind making those decisions (alongside other factors discussed within Theme 3 of the needs assessment). Therefore, when working with communities and working on local dietary health promotion messages and programmes of work, food culture is an area which needs to be considered and adjusted for appropriately. Considering and engaging with the key food culture at play in each setting or community may support the recognition of barriers, and in turn the adaptations required to make a positive dietary choice or change.

If food culture is not appropriately considered, there are risks to us widening the inequalities in outcomes we see for food and nutrition as some communities and groups may not be appropriately reached by or benefiting from programmes or interventions. For example, making recommendations that are not culturally appropriate for some groups and therefore those recommendations being less likely to be taken up and leading to behaviour change. Or making recommendations that are culturally competent without considering the monetary costs attached to those recommendations, or the fact that groups you are working with are more likely to consume out-of-home sector foods and therefore the advice is less applicable, isolating or disadvantaging certain communities.

Food culture is recognised in the 10 priority outcomes in the UK government food strategy for England published in July 2025²¹. The priority actions are:

- 1) Celebrate and value UK, regional and local food cultures
- 2) People are more connected to their local food systems, and have the confidence, knowledge and skills to cook & eat healthily.

Food culture cannot be considered in silo, as there will be an element of practical constraints and other factors which will impact on dietary behaviours, but as highlighted by this chapter it is an important area to appreciate and understand.

Potential local considerations for food and culture work

- When considering and actioning work or programmes to improve food and nutrition outcomes, it is important to engage with the communities and settings being targeted to understand how food culture may be impacting on food and nutrition decisions, and what works for food behaviour change.
- Consider Eatwell Guide adaptations applicable to the West Sussex population and whether further development work could be done locally to adapt the Eatwell Guide design further within West Sussex.
- When targeting diet interventions and programmes, codesign and ensure that community voice is central to implementation to appreciate food beliefs, values and practices when developing these areas of work.

Summary

Food culture is a term used to describe the attitudes, beliefs and practices that individuals or groups hold towards food. Its importance is recognised in NICE guidance for overweight and obesity management as well as in the UK Government Food Strategy for England. Food cultures are complex and changing, interlinking with many of the factors discussed in this food landscape section (Theme 3). By engaging with communities, culturally appropriate dietary interventions can be designed, as shown by examples in this chapter. It is important to align nutritional evidence with appropriate recommendations and reflect on how recommendations should be adapted to meet culture shifts. The sources of information people access about food are key, including the emerging importance of online content. There are potential avenues locally to progress food and culture work further, in line with this needs assessment.

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