



## **Position statement: food and diet**

### **The problem**

There is a clear and increasingly well understood link between obesity and numerous cancers - 13, according to Cancer Research UK.<sup>1</sup> These include cancers of the breast and bowel (two of the most common types), pancreatic and oesophageal cancer (some of the hardest to treat), as well as cancers of the womb, kidney and liver.

During the last 30 years the British have become one of the most overweight nations in Europe. In the WHO European Regional Obesity Report for 2022 the British are identified as being in the top three nations for obesity out of a total of almost 60 European countries.<sup>2</sup> This has severe consequences for British health.

Red and processed meats also have a role in causing bowel cancer, and are suspected of a role in stomach and pancreatic cancers.<sup>3</sup>

Reducing cancer risk is also recognised as one of the benefits of a diet high in fibre.<sup>4</sup>

### **Nature of the problem**

We believe that progress in this area can best be achieved by addressing the issue in terms of food and diet. This is broader than a simple focus on obesity, makes the need for structural changes to our food supply clearer, and will be more persuasive to many audiences.

The rise in obesity levels over recent decades has been overwhelmingly caused by major structural changes to the food we buy and how we buy it. Over the same period, supermarkets came to dominate food retail: in most places, buying fresh and healthy food at affordable prices now requires access to a supermarket.

From the 1970s onwards, ready-made, “ultra-processed” foods became more common in our diets: they offer poor nutrition, and are high in salt, fat and sugar. The UK has the highest consumption of these foods in Europe.<sup>5</sup>

Takeaway food options have also expanded considerably, mostly offering tasty but unhealthy meals. In economically deprived areas, “unhealthy high streets” include higher density of payday loan, alcohol, gambling and food takeaway outlets. At the same time, over a million people live in “food deserts”, and do not have easy access to anywhere selling healthy food at affordable prices.<sup>6</sup>



There is therefore a strong food-related dimension to health inequalities in the UK.

## **Recommendations**

Structural change is needed throughout our food supply system in order to improve our health outcomes, including the prevention of cancer.

There are many possible tools for achieving this. The Soft Drinks Industry Levy (“sugar tax”) prompted many companies to reformulate their products so that they contain less sugar. Similar measures should be used to improve the quality of food and drink products across the board, including reducing sugars and fats.

Unhealthy high streets and food deserts can be addressed via planning reform, and a collaborative approach between supermarkets and government both locally and centrally. The power of supermarkets more broadly could be leveraged to good effect: they are being prohibited from heavily promoting unhealthy foods from October 2023, and could be required to promote the sale of healthy food items over unhealthy ones.<sup>7</sup>

The Government should commit to food improvements that are stipulated by law as opposed to being left to voluntary action.

Messaging and information to equip people to make healthy choices should continue to be part of the policy mix, but cannot succeed on their own.

## **About CancerWatch**

CancerWatch is an organisation made up of people whose lives have been affected by cancer, who are passionate about eliminating preventable cancers in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/causes-of-cancer/bodyweight-and-cancer/how-does-obesity-cause-cancer>

<sup>2</sup> <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/353747/9789289057738-eng.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/causes-of-cancer/diet-and-cancer/does-eating-processed-and-red-meat-cause-cancer>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/causes-of-cancer/diet-and-cancer/wholegrains-fibre-and-cancer-risk>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.fph.org.uk/media/2957/covid-19-and-food-a-fph-position-paper.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://news.sky.com/story/uk-food-deserts-1-2-million-people-too-far-from-supermarkets-to-get-cheap-fresh-food-11523391>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restricting-promotions-of-products-high-in-fat-sugar-or-salt-by-location-and-by-volume-price/restricting-promotions-of-products-high-in-fat-sugar-or-salt-by-location-and-by-volume-price-implementation-guidance>