

Making sense of UPFs: a public dialogue

An overview and summary of draft findings

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UK Research
and Innovation

sciencewise 



Food
Standards
Agency



About HVM

Hopkins
Van Mil

For twenty years Hopkins Van Mil (HVM) has specialised in deliberative techniques. We bring people together from across society to examine issues which have uncertainties, complex challenges and opportunities, on which a broad range of viewpoints need to be heard.



We work independently, creating safe and trusted spaces for productive and engaging discussions on the important issues of our day.



What is public dialogue?

To be public dialogue a process must involve:

1. Discussion between participants.
2. Facilitators supporting the discussion through a carefully designed, objectively framed, process.
3. A range of inputs including specialist presentations and other written/ visual information exposing participants to evidence on known viewpoints and perspectives.
4. A clear task related to having influence on a specific decision, policy, programme or service.

Dialogue is particularly useful when the decisions or policies involve complex issues, uncertainty, or conflicting beliefs and values, and/ or in a situation where one view might otherwise dominate.



Dialogue aims

This public dialogue set out to ensure that the views of people across the UK feed into UKRI research and innovation research priorities and programmes at an early stage.

It aimed to develop understanding of public perspectives on:

- What participants consider to be important paths for research;
- How UPFs impact the health and wellbeing of the population;
- The potential for policy actions in the area of diet and health.

Key objective: to map, explore and prioritise gaps in UKRI research agendas, areas of uncertainty and future research needs.

7 Locations:

Kirkcaldy West Belfast

Swansea Taunton

Liverpool Middlesbrough

London Borough of Newham



Who took part?

- 132 people across the UK;
- Broadly reflective of the UK population: in locations with different geographies and food distribution/ retail characteristics, for example remote rural areas and densely populated urban areas.

The dialogue:

- Used inclusive approaches;
- Took place in each devolved nation, to mirror the devolved nature of food policy;
- Avoided locations chosen for previous food system related dialogues;
- Chose some locations closer to where research teams are located to support the involvement of specialists for the in-person sessions.

18 specialist presenters providing evidence, information and insight from which participants could develop their thinking and views on UPFs.

April

May

June

September

Webinar

Online: 6-7:30pm
An introduction to the topic and to research.

Workshop 2

Online: 6-8:30pm
Exploring health and environment.
Power in the system.

Workshop 4

In-person:
5:30-8:30pm
A fieldtrip in the area. UPFs in context.

Workshop 6

In-person:
11am-4pm
Participants & stakeholders reviewing the draft findings.

Workshop 1

Online: 6-8:30pm
Explaining the food system, food processing.

Workshop 3

Online: 6-8:30pm
Food regulation & the food industry.

Workshop 5

In-person:
10am-4pm
Bringing the thinking together. Identifying research needs.

Online space, for asynchronous review of materials, reflection on the discussions and to collate pre-workshop task information.

Lived experience films – Postcode films

Weight related health conditions:



People who are time poor:



Young people:



Handouts, information & case studies

Food system animation



Case studies

- Savoury and sweet packaged snacks
- Alternative proteins
- Packaged bread

Participant-led inputs

- Images of healthy/ unhealthy foods
- UPF challenges
- Field trip notes
- Visions for 2035 with the challenges solved
- Recommended research areas

What is research?

- An overview of types of research
- An explanation of correlation and causation



*Making sense of UPFs:
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Overview of findings

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“How can we be the country that’s second only to the US in the world with so much UPFs in our diets. That’s really shocked me. That’s surely going to have consequences for us. If not now, then for future generations.” Swansea, Workshop 5

*A call for research
and clarity*

Shock was expressed by how widespread UPFs are in UK diets. As a result participants believe comprehensive research on UPFs is needed.

- They call for:
 - Clarity on UPF impacts on physical and mental health – particularly for children;
 - Power to shift from food companies to government and the public – informed by scientific evidence.
- Many support immediate action on UPFs in relation to their most serious concerns, especially in relation to child health and non-communicable diseases;
- They express strong concern that the food system creates an illusion of choice, while leaving decisions to market forces;
- There is deep mistrust in industry messaging on UPFs;
- There is greater trust in publicly funded research, including in collaboration with industry in certain circumstances.

Science is still uncertain, which is why we are doing this. I know our speakers have been presenting harms, but they've also shown where it's not clear the link between harms and UPFs. It's a bit woolly, isn't it?



*Acknowledging
complexity*

Participants' responses to complexity:

- The complexity of the topic was understood;
- This includes reflections on the thorny trade-offs involved e.g., convenience and affordability against potential harmful impacts on health and the environment.

This led them to:

- Embed in their research priorities the need for clarity on UPFs;
- Articulate why they felt public dialogue is a valuable method for understanding these complexities in depth.

Research priorities

- 1. UPFs research:** on the impact of ultra-processed foods on health, and the impact on the environment of their production
- 2. Behavioural research:** on people's interactions with UPFs
- 3. Structural research:** on broader societal factors affecting UPF production and consumption.



Priorities for UPF research

Understanding the impact of UPFs and their production:

Participants felt it was most important to understand how and to what extent UPFs impact on physical/ mental health. This meant understanding *how* UPF consumption might lead to poor health outcomes e.g. through, for example, underpinning biology and bioscience research.

They wish specifically to clarify the confusing UPF landscape:

- Are some UPFs better or worse for you than others?
- What are the “good” and what are the “bad” UPFs
- Can UPFs be eaten as part of a healthy, balanced and sustainable diet?

They want an agreed definition for UPFs: to drive research, policy, industry action and people’s food consumption.

Participants prioritised research on UPFs which leads to:

- An understanding of any specific impacts on child development;
- Scenario building e.g.,
 - What would happen to the nation’s health in coming decades if there is no change in the consumption of UPFs?
 - What would happen if UPFs were removed from all diets in coming decades?
- A greater and in-depth analysis of the impacts of UPFs on the environment, particularly in the face of the climate crisis.



Priorities for behavioural research

UPF consumption in the context of overall patterns of eating:

The highest priority under behavioural research was to understand which ways of shifting people towards healthy diets are effective.

They were interested in the:

- Most effective education and awareness raising strategies (including for children and young people);
- Effectiveness of front of pack labelling schemes;
- Mechanisms through which behaviour change is most effective.

Many participants prioritised research which seeks to understand the factors affecting current UPF consumption in the UK. As a result, they were curious about:

- What people already know about UPFs;
- The role of cultural attitudes and food practices in differences between UPF consumption of different groups;
- The extent to which price changes would affect UPF consumption;
- Motivations to buying UPFs;
- Barriers to healthy diets.



Priorities for structural research

The affordability and accessibility of healthy food

The highest priority area for research at this systemic level.

Participants were interested in research on how to make healthy foods cheaper, and:

- The effects of taxes and subsidies on UPF/ fresh food consumption;
- Any links between accessibility and affordability of fresh food e.g., the extent to which UPFs make up a higher proportion of foods that are available in more deprived areas including the impact of the:
 - decline of the high street on the foods available;
 - Rise of food delivery platforms and widespread advertising of UPFs.
- The effectiveness of specific schemes on making healthier choices affordable and accessible e.g., community food hubs, local food production, allotment schemes;
- The impact of trade with other countries on the availability of UPFs in the UK.





Principles for research

Participants discussed the principles that underlie their decisions on research priorities as being:

- Include long-term studies, without precluding action now;
- Create research partnerships and collaborations, nationally, e.g. academia and the NHS, with industry and internationally;
- Include and account for diverse populations: differences in impact according to age, gender, race and pre-existing health conditions;
- Be independent of industry influence, whilst retaining the principle of cross-sectoral collaboration;
- Be transparent – in methods and findings;
- Ensure research plans account for potential changes in eating behaviours over time;
- To assist in addressing key societal challenges including rising diet related diseases and health inequalities.

Participants expressed deep concern about UPFs and that they are “everywhere”. Their priority research areas were proposed because of the scale of impact they felt the research could have. Three main pathways:



Government:

- Helping to decide whether government should take action to reduce/ restrict UPFs – and what that action should be.

Society:

- Support public awareness and decision-making over their food purchasing decisions and engagement in food-related issues e.g.
 - Concerns for public health, especially children and young people
 - Concerns for the environment
 - Concerns that the food system has embedded inequality
 - A fear that society has relinquished control of what is available and affordable on our High Streets to vested interests - rather than to good public policy in the best interests of communities.

Industry:

- Supporting the reformulation of UPFs – safer/ less harmful
- Retaining some benefits of UPFs

We need specific evidence to support government policy development and decrease the impact on everyone's health.

Why trust is an issue

There's like a manipulation of language because you see a lot of products and they're very misleading where they'll all be like, "Oh, this is protein."

Participants highlighted:

- Words used in advertising and promotions which they described as “insidious”, “crafty” and “manipulative”;
- Their view that society is being lulled into a false sense of security with health messaging on UPFs packaging and in advertising;
- Packaging which is attractive – particularly to children and young people using bright colours and cartoon characters;
- Positioning in shops and along the aisles draws people to make purchases they wouldn't have made otherwise, “UPFs are everywhere”;
- Deals and offers on UPFs “Four for a pound”, or additional store points.

There was like a healthy options protein bar where it was just all really big writing telling you nine or ten grams of protein in a pack and high in fibre. So, you're under the false illusion that you're shopping healthy when really if you look at ingredients it's just bad.

People spoke of receiving information on food/ diet from:

- Advertising, marketing and information on food packaging
- Media/ social media
- The NHS and government

Trusted information is defined by participants as provided by those who do not have a vested interest and have credentials in their field.

As a result participants speak of trusting academia, researchers and scientists as providing evidence-based independent information on UPFs.

I trusted the information we had from the specialists last week. They had the credentials and were open about any biases they might have. They were knowledgeable, it feels credible.

The advertising you see, and the social media influencers who push this stuff, are so seductive. It attracts young people who will become addicted to the colourful packaging as well as what's in it.

We know that certain things are harmful. Why not start with that and get the ball rolling.

- Significant support for research
- Give people more information on UPFs now – put information on packaging about what we know now so people can make informed decisions;
- But don't take any more dramatic policy action until the research has given us evidence on potential harms;
- Others feel there is enough to go on now, and that not taking action about some UPFs is stalling by those with vested interests;
- Concern how long it can take from research findings to policy change.

Participants were more likely to support immediate action on UPFs when they saw the potential harms as being both serious and urgent.

I think in the past I think history's shown it's not best to wait. It's better to act. Because I think we've probably waited in the past on stuff like tobacco. They waited a long time on that, and obviously now we all know the bad effects of that. Yes, I would say, we've got enough evidence out there about diabetes, obesity, and mental health.


It's a bit of a grey area, because they're saying there's a correlation - but it's not quite the cause. There is something there, but they can't quite pinpoint it, which is stopping us make certain actions to help, society. We'll need all the research.

Balancing risk

If you are battling against hugely powerful companies that produce foods that have a negative impact, the only way that you're going to be able to prevent them from continuing the way that they're going is to have absolute proof of there is a direct correlation, and then there is a causation effect.

Power in the system

For most power is equated with money. Concerns included:

- Consolidation and concentration of power
 - The size (and limited number of overarching) food companies was seen as giving them undue influence
 - Choice was seen as an illusion in the context of the food environment
- 
- Many of the final research priorities were focused on power and driving industry change
 - A belief that having certainty on causal impacts of UPFs would force change



Key messages

1. Surprise and shock at how embedded UPFs are in UK diets;
2. Participants want a greater awareness of UPFs and their impacts;
3. An ambitious call for research to bring certainty;
4. A balance – action now or action when more evidence is in place;
5. Strong concern that the food system has been set up to create an illusion of choice, that society has left decisions on food availability, affordability and accessibility to the market;
6. Scepticism on industry-led messaging on UPFs;
7. A high-level of trust is placed in publicly funded researchers, scientists and specialists, collaborating, including with industry, to provide credible and transparent information on UPFs;
8. A call for a redistribution of power informed by scientific evidence;

Participants see this as a vast topic. They felt the dialogue was a foundational piece of deliberation from which much more work should flow to make sense of UPFs, including for research, policy and action.



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