

Consumer attitudes towards the diet and food environment in Scotland

Background

Food Standards Scotland (FSS) identified a need to obtain up-to-date evidence on attitudes about diet, health and the food environment from people living across Scotland. This research will inform public health nutrition policy and consumer messaging around a healthy diet.

This is our second attitudinal survey, the first was published in 2015.

[Access our first attitudinal survey from 2015.](#)

This paper summaries the main findings from our recent ‘consumer attitudes towards the diet and food environment in Scotland’ report.

[Access our ‘Consumer attitudes towards the diet and food environment in Scotland’ report.](#)

Methods

A quantitative online survey to assess consumer attitudes towards the diet and food environment in Scotland was carried out on behalf of FSS, by JRS, an independent research consortium. JRS surveyed 1,574 nationally representative adults aged 16 years and over, with an additional boost to the sample of 250 parents with children aged under 16 living at home.

Three key topic areas were identified:

- Affordability of food and the impact of the cost of living situation
- Eating out of home and the use of technology
- The extent to which environmental sustainability is a priority for consumers

The section below provides a high level overview of the findings for each of the three topic areas.

Findings

Cost of living

Nearly two thirds of households in Scotland have expressed concern about their household finances, and numerous aspects of people's lives have been impacted negatively by the cost of living crisis. Two-thirds of respondents said they had reduced their home energy and heating use, and nearly half were going (or would *consider* going) without essential food items.

Most consumers have adapted their behaviour to minimise spend, with around half skipping, (or *considering* skipping) meals. Those from areas most affected by poverty have seen the biggest impacts. This is of even greater concern, as these households may have limited capacity to mitigate against the impacts.

The cost of living crisis has also affected respondent's shopping behaviours, in order to save money. Almost three fifths reported swapping to cheaper or unbranded products, buying more on promotion and buying fewer treat foods. More than a tenth had used a foodbank or food pantry and a further third would consider this in the future.

Just over one fifth said they were buying less fresh fruit and vegetables, which rose to just under a third for people in areas most affected by poverty. Around a third said their diet was less healthy as a result of the cost of living crisis, with healthy eating being considered less of a priority.

Out of home

Eating out of home, refers to:

- Any food or drink bought and eaten away from home, including 'on the go'
- Any takeaway or home delivered food, such as pizzas

While many have reduced frequency of eating out, those in younger age groups reported eating out most often. A quarter of those in the younger age groups (16-24 years) reported eating out once a week or more, with nearly a fifth ordering takeaways or delivery food at least once a week. Ordering takeaway and delivery food has been made easier and more convenient with smartphone apps and online ordering, with more than half of adults in Scotland using these. Four fifths of respondents agreed that its convenient to be able to order straight from their phones, and as a result more than half stated that they order more often than they otherwise would.

Promotional offers are widely used and their pull is clear; the widespread use of online promotional alerts has contributed to nearly two fifths of consumers ordering more food than they initially intended. Meal deals, discounts and free items are the offers most used and also most likely to encourage orders and ordering more.

While around half say it is not difficult to find healthy choices when eating out, it is more difficult with takeaways and delivery food than when eating out in a restaurant. However,

more than a quarter of adults in Scotland will not choose a healthy option when eating out of home.

Respondents reported that cheaper pricing and promotions for healthier foods were the most favoured ways of encouraging making healthier choices out of home. There is also significant support from over half of respondents for food businesses to play a role in promoting and facilitating healthy eating, with nearly three quarters of consumers particularly keen to see smaller portion sizes being offered, and healthier children's menus.

Almost half of all respondents thought out of home menus should show the full nutritional information of food, and a similar proportion said calories in food should be shown. Over two thirds of those who noticed calorie labelling reported that it impacted their behaviour, most commonly by encouraging lower calorie choices or making them think more about the food they order.

Sustainability

While more than half of consumers say sustainability and ethical sourcing of foods is important to them, in the context of other decision-making criteria, such as cost, taste, healthy food and finding something the whole family will eat, concerns around sustainability are a much lower priority.

Consumers regularly practice a range of actions to contribute to sustainability in relation to food, predominantly drinking tap water, reducing and recycling food waste and buying fruit and vegetables in season. With regards to making modifications to their diet, more than a third say they actively reduce meat consumption most or all of the time, while over a quarter actively reduce dairy intake. Over a third of respondents said they were eating less meat/fish in order to save money, however when asked to describe their diet in general, only a small proportion (9%) described it as 'actively reducing meat, dairy or animal products consumed'.

Nearly two thirds of consumers feel relatively well informed about how to make sustainable food choices when shopping, but much less well informed on making sustainable choices when purchasing food and drink out of home. Nearly two thirds felt that lower costs would encourage them to choose more sustainable options.

Conclusion

This attitudinal survey has shown that the cost of living crisis has impacted negatively on many people's ability to access food, due in part to costs being prioritised to other areas such as household energy bills.

With regards to eating out of home, the findings around use of apps and online ordering demonstrate how easy and convenient these methods are, raising concern about their ability to encourage ordering more often and in larger quantities.

Respondents felt that eating sustainably was a lower priority in the context of other decision making criteria, with lower cost sustainable options having the potential to encourage purchase, reflective of the current challenges around cost of living. We note the importance

of an approach to ensure that guidance on sustainable eating is available and that consumers have access to healthy and sustainable diets.

FSS have an online resource called [Eat Well, Your Way](#), which could help support people who are looking for '[healthier and cheaper ways to cook](#)'.