

Controlling the proliferation of fast food outlets

Meeting of Policy Development Board

16 March 2009

Report from Jenny Morris, Principal Policy Officer

1.0 Summary and recommendations

- 1.1 Improving diet and health is a long-term task that will require a wide range of initiatives to deliver improved outcomes. Ready access to retail outlets offering affordable healthier options in the local environment must be a key plank to any successful strategy.
- 1.2 The proliferation of fast food outlets (FFOs) contributes to the obesogenic environment and local communities should be able, through their local authority, to limit the opening of new FFOs, particularly in sensitive areas such as around schools and parks.
- 1.3 PDB is requested to note the issues related to FFOs contained in the paper and support the proposal to work with City University to advocate the need for more proactive public health and planning policy approaches to limit the proliferation of FFOs.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Tackling obesity and promoting healthy eating is high on the public health agenda. The CIEH has, for some time, been working to support the need for improvement through a range of mechanisms such as publishing reports¹, introducing toolkits², supporting healthy eating awards^{3,4} and more generally seeking to identify areas where EHPs can develop and promote interventions.

¹ Purdy J; McFarlane G; Harvey H; Rugkasa J; Willis K (2007) *Food poverty and policy in Northern Ireland*

² Eat clever toolkit.

³ Healthy options award. CIEH (Wales)

⁴ Heartbeat Award

- 2.2 Arising from such activities partnerships have been created that will enable new policy areas to be identified that provide opportunities for CIEH and EHP action. One particularly strong link is being forged with City University, through Professor Tim Lang and Dr Martin Caraher.
- 2.3 A key focus for the Government agenda is tackling obesity and the recent launch of 'Change 4 life' has further identified the pressing need to address the increasing problems amongst the young. This is the most recent strategy for addressing health and diet in children, with targets beyond school eating.
- 2.4 Within schools the introduction of nutritional standards is beginning to drive change but there is considerable work to be done in reducing consumption of foods high in fat, salt and sugar. Whilst change was always considered to require long term input concerns have been expressed about the take up of school meals and the alternative provisions available in the vicinity. When considering alternative provision outside the school there has been a particular focus on the number and proximity of FFOs.
- 2.5 FFOs have become a focus of attention as the food they serve is often high in fat, salt and sugar and healthier options, if available, are generally limited. Concern about the proliferation of FFOs was confirmed in the recent obesity strategy for England "Healthy Weight; Healthy Lives"⁵ which indicated opportunities for local authorities to control establishment of FFOs through planning.

"Local authorities can use existing planning powers to control more carefully the number and location of fast food outlets in their local areas. The Government will promote these powers to local authorities and PCTs to highlight the impact that they can have on promoting healthy weight, for instance through managing the proliferation of fast food outlets, particularly in proximity to parks and schools"

3.0 Current situation

- 3.1 A number of studies on the issue of the impact of FFOs on diet and health have been carried out both in the United States and in Britain. These have indicated a link between consumption of food and drink from FFOs and greater likelihood of obesity.
- 3.2 Dr Caraher and his colleagues have carried out two recent studies on FFOs in Tower Hamlets due to the prevalence of obesity within the Borough. The first looked at the impact of FFOs on schools and children's food choices and dietary health. The second mapped the location and numbers of FFOs as well as considering their wider influences on family food choices.
- 3.3 The mapping exercise showed that physical access to shops was adequate and that nearly all households were within a ten minute walk of a grocery store and a fast food outlet. Whilst this might suggest equal access to healthier and less healthy choices the study found that the grocery stores only offered a very limited range of healthier foods. The mapping indicated that Tower Hamlets had a high concentration of FFOs across the whole Borough (i.e. not specifically concentrated around schools but within easy reach of most households) compared to the national average.

⁵ HM Government (2008) *Healthy Weight; Healthy Lives: A cross-government strategy for England*. Department of Health; Department for Children, Schools and Families. London

- 3.4 Food samples were taken from a number of outlets, to represent the range of FFOs within the second study area. Contents were analysed and nutrient profiles produced, based on the model used by the Food Standards Agency for front of pack signpost labelling. The calorific contents were also assessed and predictive modelling applied to calculate the contribution of fast food meals to recommended energy requirements.
- 3.5 Many of the foods had an unhealthy nutrient profile with high levels of fat and salt. As the foods sampled were savoury high levels of sugar were not anticipated nor found. Calorific content varied dependent on the type of meal and number of meals consumed.
- 3.6 Observation of the use of a sample of FFOs showed the propensity for children and young adults to eat relatively large amounts of fast food.
- 3.7 Applying the model data to the recommendations for a 14-year-old child it was shown that three fast food meals could contribute up to 25% of the average energy requirement for a whole week.
- 3.8 The ease of access to unhealthy food and the low price of fast food will contribute to the creation of an obesogenic environment. School pupils have ready access to FFOs when travelling to and from school.
- 3.9 The study notes that Tower Hamlets new spatial planning strategy has a key objective to strengthen town/neighbourhood centres, which could lead to zoning for planning purposes, a control mechanism that has been suggested to limit the growth of obesogenic environments in the United States⁶.
- 3.10 The study also notes that currently Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 6: Planning for Town Centres is under review. It is suggested that given the proposal in Healthy Weight: Healthy Lives around use of planning powers this might, where local communities identify the need, be a mechanism through which limiting the proliferation of FFOs could be achieved.
- 3.11 In other areas such as Leicester supplementary planning guidance has been introduced under the Use Classes Order to limit A5 (FFO) premises. Similar measures have been introduced in Waltham Forest and in Westminster new FFOs are resisted in 'stressed areas' through a joint planning/licensing approach.
- 3.12 This suggests that if the review of PPS6 does not provide a mechanism for limiting FFO openings it may be achieved by local authorities introducing supplementary planning guidance or creating by-laws.
- 3.13 As yet it appears that the use of planning tools to control FFO opening is limited, even where issues around FFOs and schools have been identified. Whilst action has been promised as part of the Healthy Weight; Healthy Lives strategy as yet there are no indications when or if this will occur. The lack of central action so far and the increasing incidence of obesity indicate a need for concerted action for which the CIEH, in partnership with City University, should advocate.

⁶ Samia Mair J, Pierce M and Teret S. (2005) *The use of zoning to restrict Fast Food Outlets: A potential strategy to combat obesity*. <http://www.publichealthlaw.net/>

4.0 Implications

Environmental:	None specific
Equal opportunities:	None specific
Financial:	None specific
Legal:	None specific
Personnel:	Within food policy activities
Public health:	None specific
Public relations:	None specific

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