NIHR | Public Health Intervention Responsive Studies Teams

Healthier Advertising in Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan: Findings

Public Health Intervention Responsive Studies Team (PHIRST Insight)

The problem

- The UK is projected to be Europe's most obese country by 2030
- Advertising is recognised as an influential driver of behaviours and eating patterns
- There is currently no regulation of food and drink advertising across council-owned sites in Wales

The solution

- To implement a policy to restrict advertising of High Fat Sugar Salt (HFSS) foods and drinks on council owned sites e.g., bus stops

- The planned policy is for two regions of Wales – Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan

About the evaluation

- Co-produced evaluation design
- Two local authority teams were involved
- Public involvement within study management, conduct and dissemination
- 15-month study duration

Research Questions

Question	Method	Participant group
1. What are public perceptions around HFSS and non-HFSS advertising in their local area?	• Survey • Interviews • Focus groups	• Residents • Children aged 9-15-years
2. What are public perceptions around the planned HFSS policy?		
3. What are the perceived or potential impacts of the planned policy?	• Interviews • Focus groups	• Residents • Children aged 8-16-years • Policy, practice and advertising stakeholders
4. What are the barriers and facilitators to policy implementation?	• Interviews	• Residents • Policy, practice and advertising stakeholders

Resident survey

Survey: Participation

- 311 responses
- 77.5% identified as female
- Ages ranged from 16 to 65+ (39% aged 45-64)
- 89% of white ethnic origin
- 35% reported a household income >£50,000
- 22% never used the bus for transport

Survey results: Exposure to advertising

Past 7-days …

Reported 'YES' to ….	Overall	Region 1 (City)	Region 2 (Rural)	
Seeing local HFSS adverts	68.5%	132 (74.2%)	81 (60.9%)	*
Seeing local advertisements for HFSS food chains	74.3%	140 (78.7%)	91 (68.4%)	*
Seeing local HFSS adverts aimed at children	21.9%	41 (23%)	27 (20.3%)	

Survey results: Consumption of HFSS foods

Past 7-days ….

Reported 'YES' to ….	Overall	Region 1 (City)	Region 2 (Rural)	
Consuming HFSS foods	94.2%	169 (94.9%)	124 (93.2%)	
Consumption being influenced by advertisements seen	15.8%	38 (21.3%)	11 (8.3%)	*

One-to-one resident interviews

Resident interviews: Participation

- One-to-one interviews online or over the phone
- Duration ranged between 14-30 minutes

- 14 participants
- 71% identified as female
- Age range of 23 to 68 (mean 42.3yrs)
- 43% reported living with children
- Car or walking reported as main mode of transport

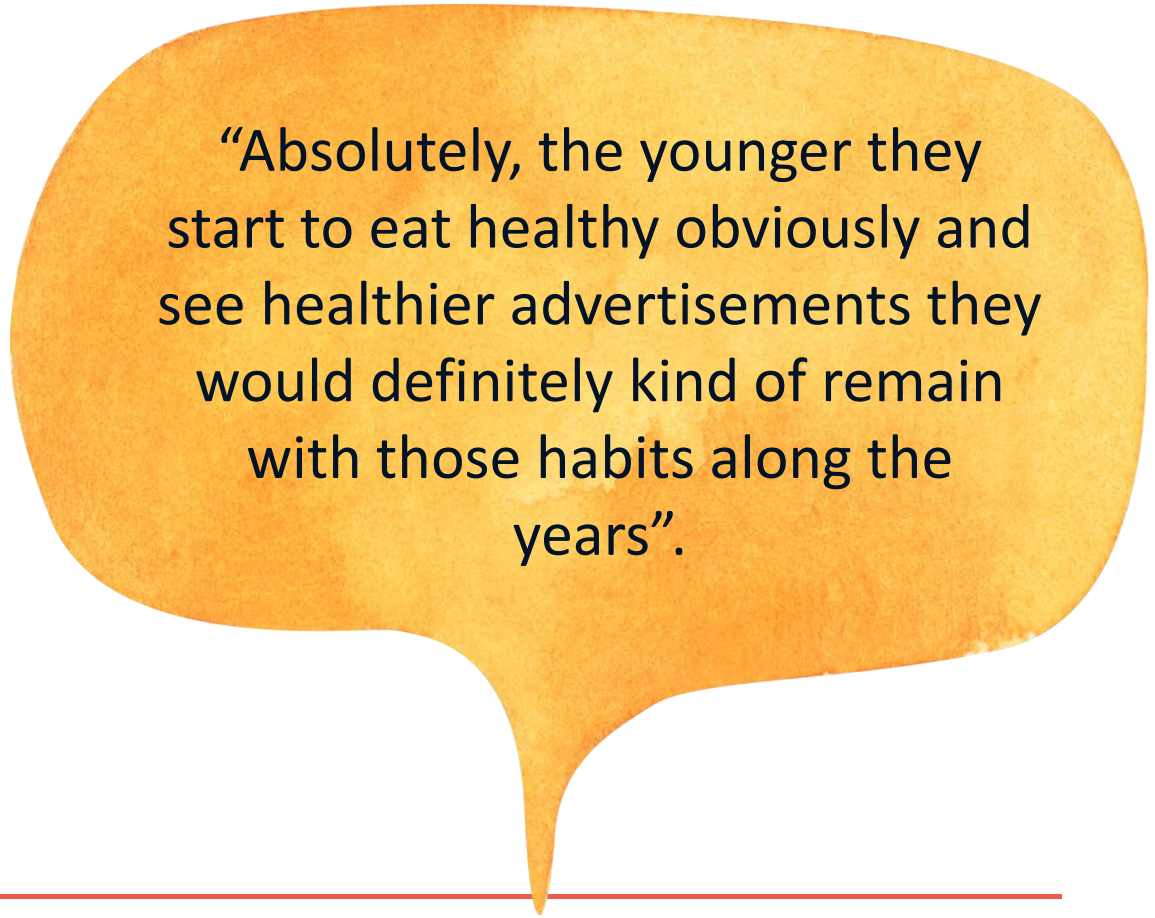
Resident views of the planned policy

- Most interviewees were in favour of the policy change

- Suggestions for implementation:
  - Regulations on HFSS food and drink advertising
  - Restrictions on deals/incentives
  - Introduction of general healthy lifestyle adverts
  - Restrictions on locations

Residents perceived impacts of the policy

- Reduce HFSS products purchased
- Increase non-HFSS products purchased
- Increase product choice
- Improve physical and mental health
- Positive impact on health services
- Window of opportunity for younger population



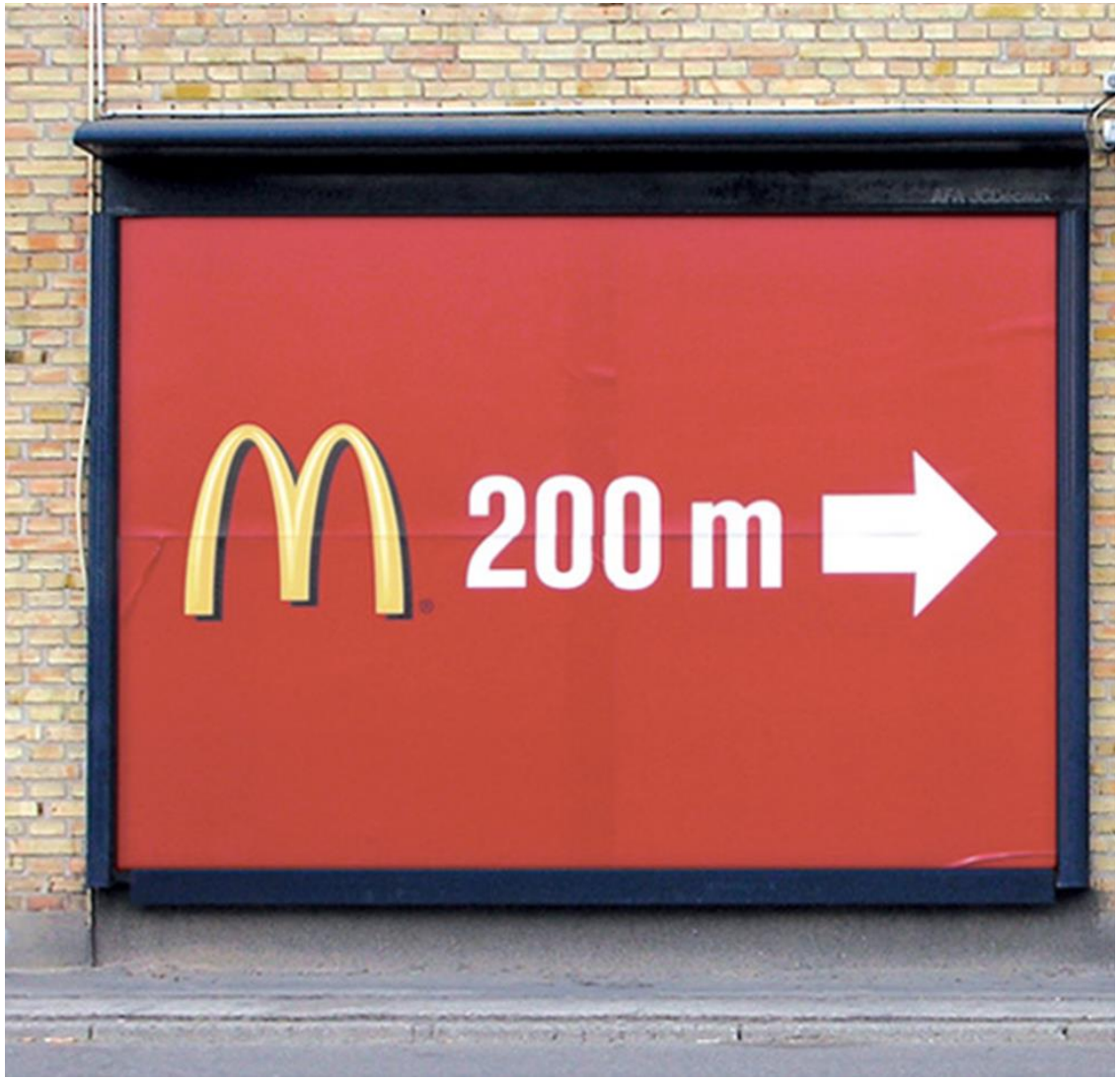
Residents perceived impacts of the policy

- Instances of scepticism towards the policy
- Views of minimum impact of adverts on consumption
- Greater influences among the wider environment
- Requires wider concurrent action

"the readily accessible healthy foods are more expensive than readily accessible fast foods, so as long as the price is unattractive, advertising is always gonna sort of have a limited impact, regardless of sort of whether it's adults or children."

Residents perceived barriers to introducing the policy

- Opposition from public - risk of acting like a nanny state
- Opposition from organisations that advertise products
- Reduction in income for the council
- Requirement for wider action (e.g., food pricing)
- HFSS organisations bypassing policy by advertising non-HFSS



"They'll always find cheeky ways won't they. They've got people working for them who will look at ways of getting round. Everything you put into place there'll be somebody who will try to get around it."

Focus groups with children & young people (CYP)

CYP focus groups – Participation

- Seven focus groups conducted
  - 5 primary schools
  - 2 secondary schools

- 49 young people aged 9-14 years participated

CYP: Awareness of advertising

- High level of awareness of adverts perceived to be HFSS
- Aware of advertising close to home, on the way to school, on busy roads and in the town centre.
- Able to easily describe advert content i.e. deals, price, new product promotions and brands

CYP: Influences of advertising on behaviours

- In general, participants reported that seeing advertising they considered to be HFSS made them want to try those products
- A few believed the adverts had no influence
- Young people would often buy HFSS products that they had seen advertised
- Many children reported asking their parents for the advertised HFSS products

CYP: Perceived positive impacts

- CYP were generally positive towards a HFSS policy change
- Perceived impacts included:
  - People eating healthier foods
  - Less temptation to eat HFSS products
  - Improved fitness
  - Increased revenue for businesses selling healthier foods

One-to-one stakeholder interviews

Stakeholder interviews: Participation

- One-to one online interviews
- Duration ranged between 19-42 minutes

- 12 participants comprising:
  - Council representatives
  - Health board representative
  - Practitioners
  - Policy makers
  - Advertising agency representative

Stakeholders: Perceived positive impacts (1)

- Majority believe the policy has potential for impact* including:
  - Changes in purchasing behaviour
  - Improved diets
  - Healthier weight in the population
  - Improved general health
  - Long term reduced pressure on the NHS

"The short term, hopefully less purchasing of these types of products, then in the long term what we're hoping is that would affect the obesity rate levels within South Wales and Cardiff and Vale area. It would then obviously reduce any pressures on the NHS."

*recognition that impacts likely to be realised in longer term, with biggest impact on young people and those in areas of deprivation

Stakeholders: Perceived positive impacts (2)

- Environment & sustainability impacts - reduction of highly processed food production if demands lower
- Improved local environments
- Future policy expansion e.g., inclusion of alcohol/gambling or sponsorship of events
- Increased business engagement and willingness to advertise healthier products generally

"In the long-term, I think it's the possibility of the policy expanding into other areas that, you know, public health – I know other areas across the UK have touched on alcohol, gambling, or even climate friendly. So, there's the scope for the policy to evolve to move into other areas."

Stakeholders: Perceived negative impacts

- Public perceptions i.e., Nanny state
- Business pushback
  - Increased workload to change advertising practices
  - Use of loopholes: Product reformulation, increased HFSS advertising on private sites and advertising non-HFSS products that are still unhealthy
  - Industry sponsored negative media coverage

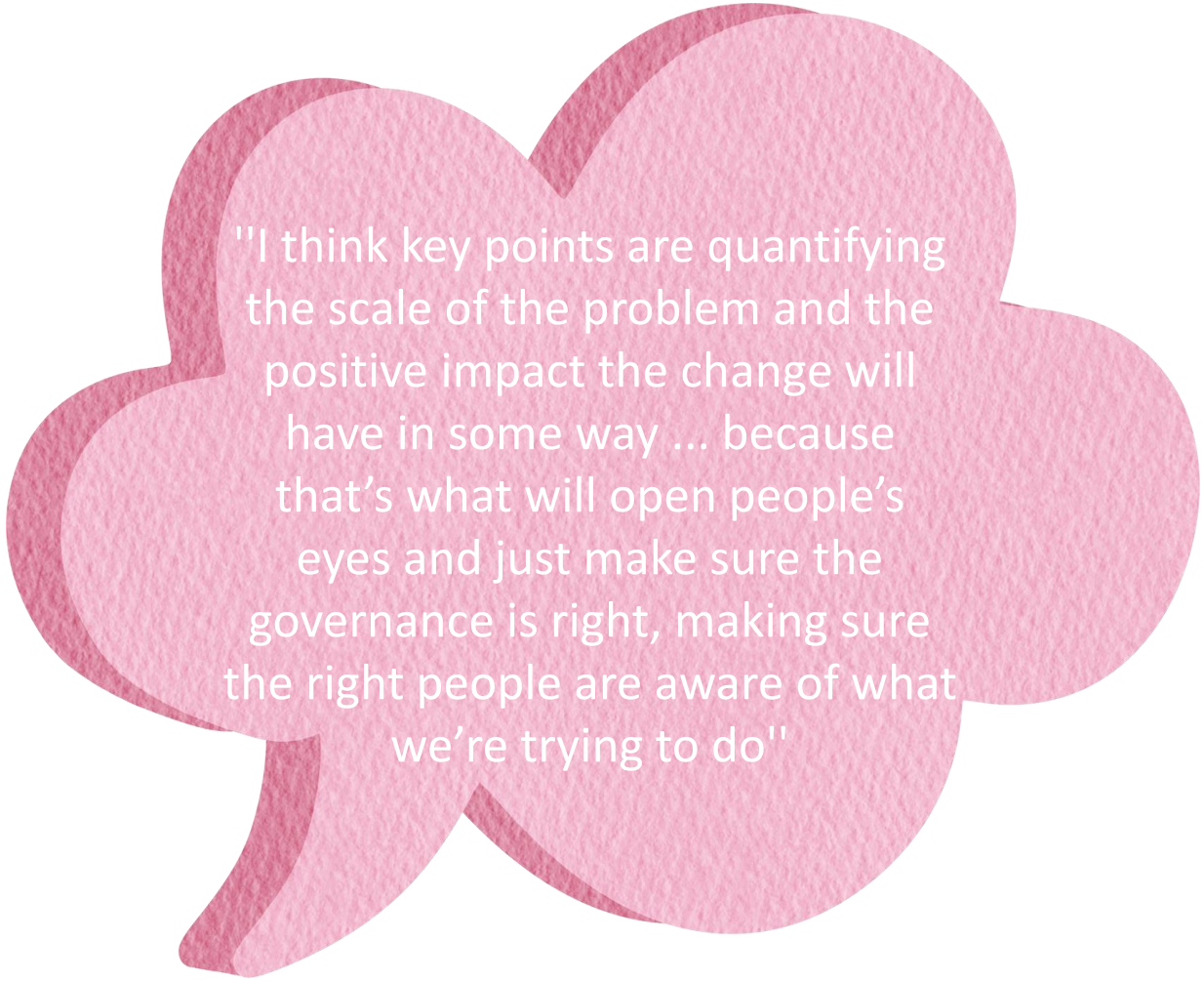
"Businesses will put their advertising wherever they can and they'll choose the path of least resistance and most impact and, if we take away one of those routes, it'll go somewhere else. Their advertising budgets won't change. So, whatever they would have spent on bus stops, they'll spend somewhere else."

Stakeholders: Perceived facilitators to implementation (1)

- Welsh Government engagement and backing
- Senior leadership support
- Wider national roundtable discussions
- Stakeholder buy-in

Stakeholders: Perceived facilitators to implementation (2)

- Learning from other areas with successful policy implementation
- Improved clarity around what the policy entail
- Evidence of financial and potential wider impacts
- Direct communication with policy makers



Stakeholders: Perceived barriers to implementation (1)

- Poor financial climate for local authorities
- Perceived risk of revenue loss by local authorities and advertising companies
- Lack of evidence to counter financial concerns

"I think at a senior level they're quite keen to get this off the ground, however their concerns are mainly to do with the bottom line, the financial impact. So I think so long as they don't have a big financial hit, they are quite content with the progression of this kind of policy."

Stakeholders: Perceived barriers to implementation (2)

- Business pushback
- Negative public perceptions
- Lack of engagement, misunderstanding and unclear communication within policy partners
- Possible political opposition

"I think these kind of policies … they tend to be party political in their support. And so, you know, they become a political football, witness the 20 mile an hour. So that will, in a city like Cardiff, I suspect that's not a big deal, but it can create unhelpful noise which makes people nervous, particularly when local authorities are cutting services."

Evaluation limitations

- Self-selecting sample for resident survey and follow-up interview
- Area bias shown among participating CYP
- Inability to link participant home and work locations to advertising mapping data

Evaluation strengths

- Mixed-methods design to address multiple research questions
- Diverse public involvement and engagement throughout (Public member, local youth group, PPI school and voluntary services)
- Representative sample of stakeholders interviewed

Summary of evaluation findings (1)

- High levels of awareness of perceived HFSS advertising found across both regions, with CYP presenting a higher awareness of advertising in their environment compared to adults
- Exposure to advertising is pervasive, as individuals frequently encounter ads while traveling across different towns and regions for work, leisure and daily routines

Summary of evaluation findings (2)

- There is general support for the planned advertising policy changes on council-owned or contracted sites
- Positive impacts identified included changes in food and drink purchasing, improved health and environmental benefits
- The policy was seen as especially impactful for children, young people, and residents in deprived areas, offering potential long-term health benefits
- Successful implementation could be supported by evidence, learning from similar policies, and effective communication with advertising companies, the public, and stakeholders.

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Research briefing: https://phirst.nihr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Healthier-Advertising-in-Cardiff-and-the-Vale-Reseach-Briefing.pdf

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