

EVERYWHERE WE GO, WE'RE SURROUNDED

Young people explore how to
make the food system healthier
in Oxfordshire





YOUTH POWER

Bite Back is a youth-activist movement campaigning to redesign the food system to put child health first. We work with brilliant young people across the country who are on the frontlines of a food system that is rigged against them.

We believe it is important to empower young people by providing them with opportunities to use their voices to advocate for change, particularly on issues that impact them directly. Policy that is disconnected from the lived experience of the people it affects often falters. So, in the October half term in 2024, we brought together a small group of young people from across Oxfordshire to explore issues relating to the local food environment and child health. We listened to their stories of what it's like to be young people growing up

in Oxfordshire, and how it should be easy to be healthy, but it's not.

The young people showed genuine dedication to help improve their area, giving up two days of their valuable half term. Across the two days, they took part in a range of workshops and went out onto the streets to collect evidence. Most hadn't taken part in anything like this before and in addition to exploring the food environment locally, they had a chance to develop their communication, teamwork, research and content-creation skills.

This report brings together the young peoples' stories with the evidence we collected documenting the problems we discussed.

THE FOOD SYSTEM IN OXFORDSHIRE



Over 170,000 young people live in Oxfordshire.¹ They want to live healthily but our streets are flooded with fast food outlets, school food is often unhealthy and our leisure centres have vending machines full of junk. And to make it worse, children are being bombarded with junk food ads. Whether it's on giant billboards, on the side of phone boxes and bus stops, or on the buses themselves - junk food is always in the spotlight. We know advertising works. That's why big food companies spend millions of pounds every year doing it.

Over a third of 10/11-year-olds leave primary school at risk of food-related ill health in their future. It's even worse for children living in the more deprived areas.² This is not fair.

The good news? Change is possible. Local

leaders in England have demonstrated this with some really great results!³ We want the same for Oxfordshire. That's why we have produced this report to demonstrate how the problem shows up in young people's lives. We hope that it will inspire our leaders to take action and make it easier for young people in Oxfordshire to live healthily.

In this report, we have focused on two aspects of the local food environment: 1) junk food advertising and, 2) the food that is on offer in council-controlled spaces like leisure centres. The young people also raised wider food environment issues, which were out of scope for this report but we want to acknowledge, including poor quality school food, and how they were constantly targeted with junk food ads on their phones.

1. <https://insight.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/population>

2. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2023-24-school-year>

3. London: <https://www.lshmt.ac.uk/newsevents/news/2022/transport-londons-junk-food-advertising-restrictions-linked-reductions-high>
Gateshead: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c8xpe1lej5l0>

CAPTURING JUNK FOOD ADS IN OXFORDSHIRE

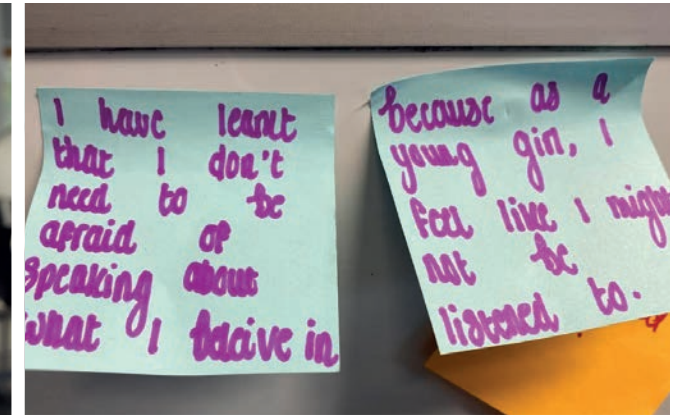
It's too easy to spot adverts for unhealthy food or drink in Oxfordshire, especially if you spend any time in the more built up areas. They're everywhere! We know this is a problem so we wanted to showcase it for everyone to see. To do this, we spent a few days walking around the county taking photos of all the ads we saw.

On Monday 16 September 2024, we were in Oxford. Starting at the train station, we walked through the centre of town, down Iffley Road, and then back up Cowley Road. We headed east along Headington Road and London Road, then came back into town and travelled north out of the city

via Banbury Road, and finally, south via Woodstock Road.

On Monday 11 November 2024, we also visited Didcot, Banbury and Bicester. The evidence we have gathered doesn't cover every inch of Oxfordshire, but we think it gives a good indication of how junk food ads manifest across some of the more populated areas. You can read more about how we approached collecting this evidence in Appendix 1.

We covered a lot of ground, and saw loads of adverts! **In total we came across 185 food and drink adverts, almost half**



You can watch the video we made with the young people here. If you want to find out more, please do get in touch.

(84 = 45%) of which were for unhealthy products. Most of them were found in the Oxford area - but Didcot and Banbury were pretty saturated as well. There were a variety of types of advertising units, like phone boxes, billboards and bus stops. And there were a variety of different products and brands, all of which are detailed later in this report.

The short of it is: there are too many adverts for unhealthy food and drink in Oxfordshire, and our local leaders need to change this!

Definition:

We use 'junk food ads' and 'adverts for unhealthy food and drink' interchangeably in this report. What we mean by this is any advert for a food or drink product that is classed as high in fat, sugar or salt (HFSS), as determined by the government's Nutrient Profiling Model. See our analysis of products in Appendix 2.



This map pinpoints every HFSS advert we saw in Oxford

1

NOWHERE TO HIDE IN OXFORD

Most of the junk food ads we found (59 = 70%) were in and around Oxford. In the city centre, there were ads for chocolate, crisps, burgers and a sugary drink. The three main roads out of the city coming off The Plain (A420, B480 or A4158) were particularly covered, with 36 unhealthy ads found on these roads alone. These are roads used regularly by young people for travelling to

school and to the city centre. We compared the locations of the ads we found in Oxford to local schools. We found that **12 schools in the area had at least one junk food ad within 400m of the school gates, or approximately a 5-minute walk away.** One primary school on Cowley Road had 5 junk food ads within this distance, including: a burger, two

packets of crisps, a bar of chocolate and a sugary cereal bar. In total, there were 24 junk food ads within 400m of schools.

2

SAME STORY IN BANBURY AND DIDCOT

Despite being smaller towns, we still found loads of junk food ads in both Didcot and Banbury. As we left the train station in Didcot, a bus with a pizza ad splattered across the side drove right past us. In total, we saw 10 junk food ads in Didcot while walking on Station Road, Broadway, and the centre of town.

In Banbury, the bus stops on Bridge Street were particularly bad - they were covered in adverts for chocolate and biscuits. In total we found 15 ads for unhealthy food and drink in Banbury.

After seeing so many junk food ads elsewhere, we were surprised with what we saw in Bicester. We found just one advert for food and the product was not HFSS. Most of the adverts in Bicester were promoting local attractions and services like the museum, a local veterinary practice and a nearby gym. We hope this can serve as inspiration for the rest of the county.



When you are out with friends and you see a McDonald's advert, you think oooo that looks so good, let's go and get it.

Faith, young local participant



3

BUS STOPS ARE THE WORST

Young people take a lot of buses. It might be a journey to school and back, or a trip into town to meet friends. So, it was pretty devastating to see how many of the junk food ads we found were on bus stops. In total, 69 (82%) ads were on bus stops, while one was on the side of a bus. Six were on phone boxes, and eight were on other free standing units and billboards.



Another ad... It's even got a little cartoon on it to tempt the kids to get it. They're gonna see that when they're waiting for the bus to school and go oooh!

Young local participant, as they walked down Cowley Road, Oxford

In the spotlight

One of the most shocking adverts we came across was this Halloween themed advert for Haribo, found on a bus stop on Cowley Road. It was a digital ad that cycled through two variations, both featuring children. The sweets are almost 50% sugar!

We saw this advert while filming with the young people taking part in this project, which was on a different day to when we were collecting evidence in Oxford. Therefore, it is not included in the analysis detailed in Appendix 2.



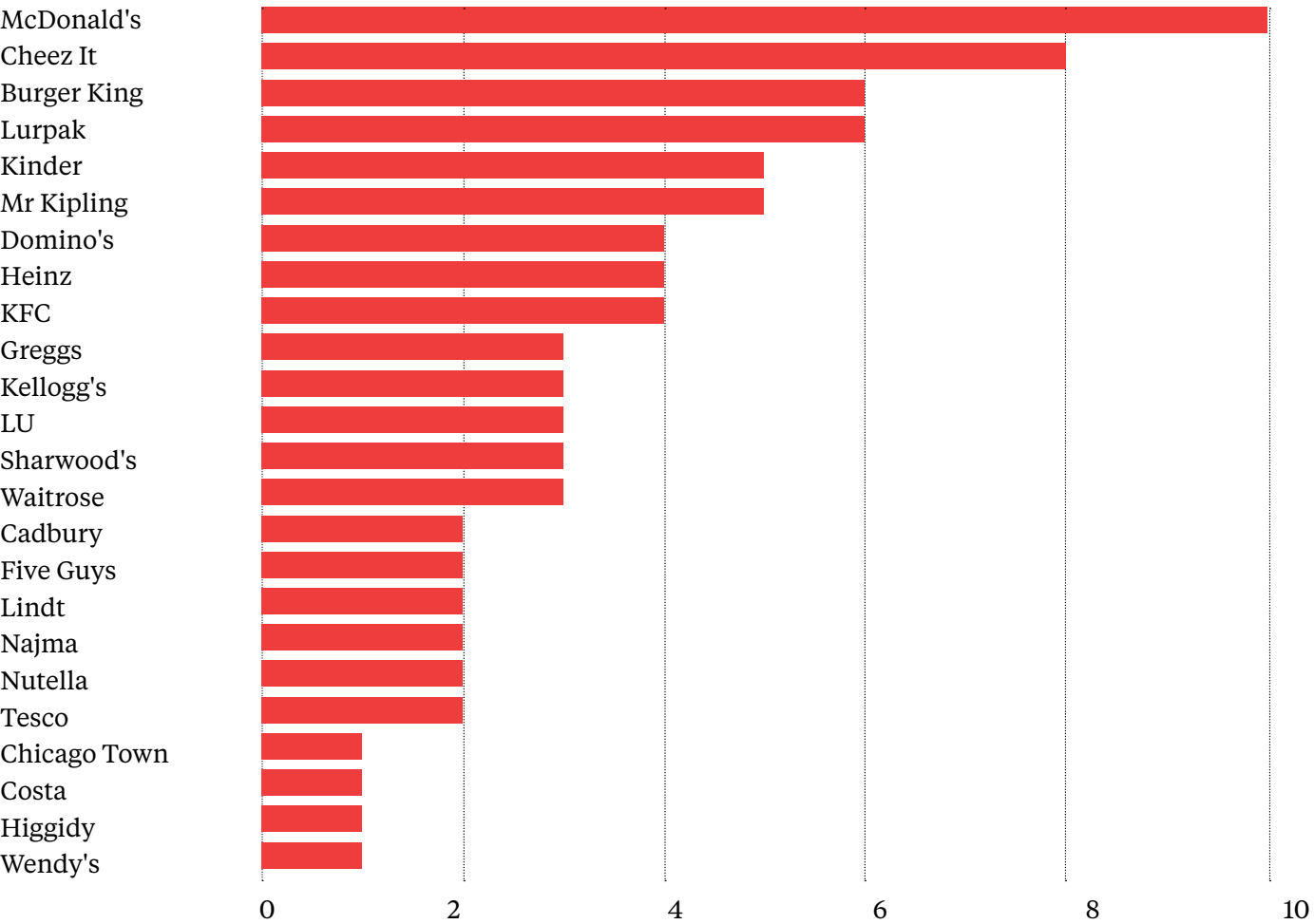
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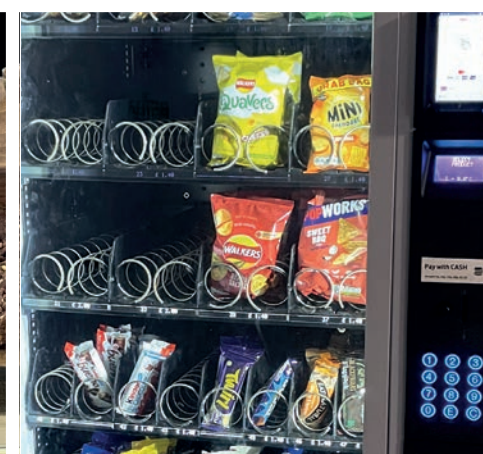
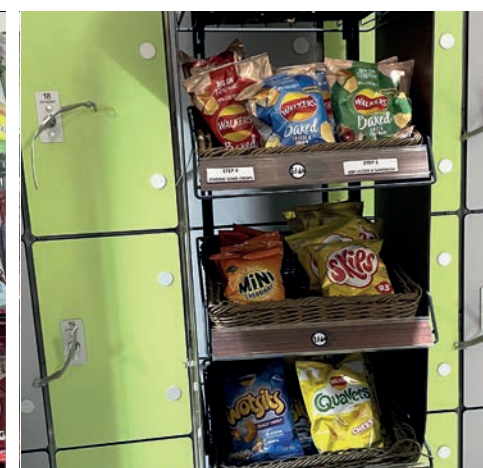
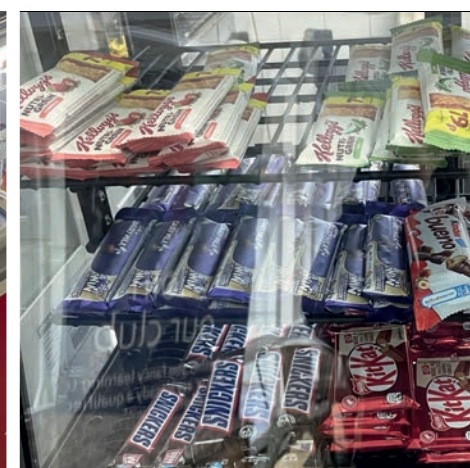
THE PRODUCTS AND BRANDS WE SAW

In total, we came across 84 adverts for unhealthy food and drink products in Oxfordshire. The most prevalent brand was McDonald's. The most common product seen was Cheez-It Snap'D Double Cheese crisps. We've featured a selection of the ads

we found in this report, showing a variety of different types of products and brands. The chart below shows the total number of ads from each brand. You can see a full breakdown of the results in Appendix 2.

Figure 1: Number of junk food ads seen per brand





EXPLORING OUR LEISURE CENTRES



Places like leisure centres and the ice rink offer 'convenient' food that are primarily chocolates, crisps and fizzy drinks. Some healthy options are there but are usually a bit more expensive. That affects the quality of a young person's lifestyle as we would have just exercised and then the first thing we are offered is rubbish rather than something substantial and healthy to fuel our body.

Romy, 17

Leisure centres are at the heart of communities. They provide safe and inclusive spaces for young people to socialise and be active with their friends. But there is an unfortunate association between these spaces and unhealthy food and drink. Bite Back has questioned why this is. As summed up by one of our young activists asking: "Why does my leisure centre smell like chips?"

We set out to find out what the reality is in Oxfordshire. In November 2024, we visited leisure centres in Banbury, Bicester, Carterton, Sandhills, Thame, Wantage, Witney, and the ice rink in Oxford. We documented the food and drink that was available to buy at each location - in vending machines, self service areas, and cafes. With 1 in 3 kids in the UK at risk from food-

related illnesses in their future,⁴ councils have a chance to make a real difference to their health by supporting leisure centres to improve their food and drink offer.

The wider public sector in England is encouraged to apply the government buying standards for food and catering services⁵ - this is to help ensure a healthy food environment in places including in leisure centres. One example is increasing fruit and vegetable consumption by selling a piece of fruit at a lower price than a dessert. Another is limiting the packet size of sweet and savoury snacks. Other ways to put healthier food in the spotlight could be by only putting healthier options on price promotion, and placing healthier options front and centre.⁶

⁴ <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2023-24-school-year>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainable-procurement-the-gbs-for-food-and-catering-services/government-buying-standard-for-food-and-catering-services>

⁶ <https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/resources/good-policy-for-good-food/>

1

VENDING MACHINES

Vending machines provide young people with quick and easy access to food and drink products at leisure centres. We found them in multiple locations across the sites we visited, including at the entrance to the building, in the gyms, and in or nearby the cafe areas.

We analysed every product that we found in vending machines across all sites using the Nutrient Profiling Model to determine which ones were high in fat, sugar or salt (HFSS). **Over half (147 of 272 = 53%) of all the products in vending machines were found to be HFSS.** Breaking it down by type, 12% (15 of 125) of drinks and 88% (130 of 147) of food products were HFSS.

We also have to highlight the marketing used on the vending machines. The most visually shocking one we came across was an M&M's machine: bright yellow, big and bold colours, with a friendly-looking cartoon character on the side - all things that make it appealing to children. Except for the sugarfree chewing gum, the products on offer were all sweets, sweet nut-based bars, chocolate and crisps. **93% (25 of 27) of products available in this vending machine were HFSS.**

We did find a few vending machines with health-based messaging on them: "Make a healthier choice today" and "Great tasting healthy foods". But once again, there were few, if any, healthy options to choose from.

2

CAFES AND SELF SERVE

Four of the leisure centres had a cafe or self service area that provided food and drink. The nutritional information was not available for all the products in these spaces (e.g. unpackaged food and drink like pizzas, doughnuts and milkshakes) so we were unable to repeat the same analysis as with vending machines. However, the pictures tell a clear story.

The location of products followed a familiar theme everywhere we went, with the unhealthier options given the spotlight. Sweet snacks like cakes, brownies and cookies were present on the front counter of every cafe we visited, while crisps and chocolate bars were placed prominently, and were difficult to miss. Two leisure

centres had a rather sad looking fruit bowl, placed either at the end of the counter, or behind a basket of confectionery.

Three of the cafes served hot food with a variety of offerings. Two venues sold items like burgers, jacket potatoes and breakfast baps, while the other served toasties and wraps. All three sold chips.

At this cafe, almost everything on offer at the counter were large sugary drinks, cakes, chocolate and crisps - there was no bottled water. There were very few healthier hot food options and the jacket potato with vegetables was the most expensive item on the menu (£6.30 compared to chips & cheese for £3.40).



TIME FOR YOU TO TAKE ACTION

It's been over 5 years since Sadiq Khan banned junk food ads from the London transport system (TfL), and it has been a huge success. Food and drink companies continue to advertise on the Tube but now promote their healthier products instead, while TfL's commercial revenues have increased every year outside of the pandemic (2020-21).⁷ The policy has led to Londoners being exposed to less unhealthy adverts, and in turn to buying less unhealthy products.⁸ Since then, 21 other local governments across England have championed children's health by bringing in their own healthier advertising policies.⁹

"Haringey's advertising policy is an integral part of its action to protect children's health and encourage healthy behaviours through targeted interventions. All agreements with external providers adhere to this policy and there has been no financial loss to the council as advertising spaces are allocated to other advertisements that don't promote HFSS products." - Haringey Council

This is the kind of action we want to see in Oxfordshire. The young people told us they want healthy food to be more accessible and affordable to them, and want to see less adverts for unhealthy products.

To the leaders of all local authorities in Oxfordshire - you have the power to make a real difference. So please take the following actions:

Bring in a healthier advertising policy on all advertising sites you control to promote healthier food options over junk food.

Work with council-controlled spaces such as leisure centres, with support from the specialist team in Public Health, to reduce the prevalence of unhealthy food, while making healthy food more available, accessible and affordable for young people.

7. TfL Advertising annual reports, 2019-20 - 2023-24, <https://tfl.gov.uk/corporate/publications-and-reports/commercial-media>

8. <https://www.ishtm.ac.uk/newsevents/news/2022/transport-londons-junk-food-advertising-restrictions-linked-reductions-high>

9. <https://www.sustainweb.org/commercial-determinants/which-local-governments-advertising-policy/>

**"Everywhere we look
and everywhere we
go, we are surrounded
by junk food ads. This
needs to stop. It is
negatively impacting
my generation's health."**

 **Poppy, 16**



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