WHEREVER YOU LOOK, THERE'S UNHEALTHY FOOD

Local evidence and lived experience: how young people see the food environment in Essex

BITE BACK



WHY THIS MATTERS

Our food system is broken. Unhealthy food is all around us, healthy options are inaccessible and more expensive than unhealthy options, and big brands relentlessly market their unhealthy products everywhere we go.

All the while, we're in the midst of a global epidemic of food-related ill health. In England, over a third of 10/11-year-olds leave primary school at risk of food related ill health in their future, like Type 2 Diabetes, heart disease or stroke.

That's one in three children at risk of getting sick or worse, because of food that is being manufactured and heavily marketed by companies we see on our high streets every day. For those who come from more underserved communities, the risks are even higher.

That's why Bite Back exists. We're a youth activist movement fighting to change the way unhealthy food is made, marketed, and sold - especially to children.

But here's the thing: decisions about food and children's health are often made without input from young people. Companies, leaders and the food sector more generally talk about young people all the time, but how often do they actually listen? That's why we ran this project. We brought together a group of passionate young people from all over Essex and gave them the opportunity to speak - to share their experiences **and valuable insights on how the food system impacts their lives.**

1. NHS Digital. (2024). National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/24 School Year





YOUTH VOICE IN ESSEX

In February 2025, Bite Back held a two-day workshop in Chelmsford, Essex, to explore the local food system, from a youth perspective. We looked at the availability and affordability of healthy food in schools, on high streets, and places young people hang out. And we looked at how unhealthy food and drink is advertised. And guess what? It's worse than you might think.

The young people involved were aged 14-18, most of whom had never done anything like this before. They gave up two days of their half-term to take part, learning new skills like teamwork, communication, public speaking and research. And most importantly, they shared their stories, their own lived experiences and their ideas for change.

This report - and the video we made with the young people for this project - bring together the insights we gathered from the young people, alongside evidence we collected in Essex that highlights some of the issues covered in the workshop. It is organised into three sections:

1. Schools - we explored the availability of healthy food in schools, how accessible and affordable it is compared to the less healthy options.

2. Streets - We looked at where young people hang out, what type of food is available, how affordable it is, and the way it is marketed to them on the streets of Essex.

3. Unhealthy food adverts in Essex - we undertook local research to find out how prevalent unhealthy food and drink advertising really is in Essex.

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

The young people spent an afternoon exploring the food environment in Chelmsford





It was a very fun, mind-opening experience, and I really enjoyed meeting everyone, and hearing different people's ideas.

[redacted] **Goda,** 14, Brentwood

SCHOOLS

School should be one of the key places where children are guaranteed at least one great, nutritious meal a day. Most young people spend around 190 days a year at school. Each one is a chance to fuel their minds and bodies with something good.

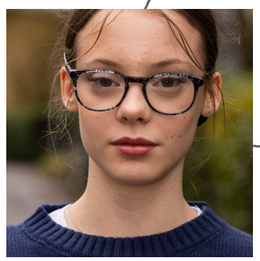
Through our 'Bite Back in Schools' programme - which 6 secondary schools in Essex are currently taking part in - we've seen the reality: across the country, school food isn't good enough and there's huge variation in quality between schools. And when we spoke to young people in Essex, their stories backed that up. Two things came out prominently from our discussions.

1. UNHEALTHY FOOD IS CHEAPER THAN HEALTHY OPTIONS

We've heard this time and time before. The young people told us a variety of stories about how the healthier options on offer are more expensive and often come in smaller portions than the less healthy options. When eating healthily means getting less food and spending more, it's no surprise they are frustrated.

2. HEALTHIER OPTIONS ARE OFTEN EITHER NON-EXISTENT, UNAPPEALING OR OUT OF SIGHT

The young people talked about the quality of school food generally, saying it should be improved across the board. They specifically called out the prevalence of sugary products and noted that healthy options tend to look unappealing. They also talked about the placement of healthier options being in less prominent places, leading to some students not even knowing they were available.



"At my school the healthier options tend to be more expensive. We have small fruit pots but they're too small to actually fill someone up."

Erin, 14, Maldon

Some of the young people raised other barriers to eating healthily at school. One of these was the length of the lunch break, with three young people saying they no longer had a dedicated lunch break, and instead had 20-30 minute breaks, resulting in long queues and no time to sit and eat a meal. Another young person talked about the lack of clean and working water fountains in school.

They also spoke a lot about the local environment surrounding the school, and the food that is on offer as they travel to and from school each day. The next section of the report explores these places.

Finally, one young person spoke positively about the food available in their school, saying healthy options, such as a salad bar, are available every day. This reflects existing youth testimony, that the quality of food available to young people in schools is akin to a postcode lottery.

SPILL THE BEANS

"Healthy options are not pushed to the front as they should be, and look less appealing."
- **John**, 14, Braintree

"Our food is super greasy, to the point where it's soggy"
- **Reece**, 15, Rochford

"The healthy range in my school isn't very good, there's a fruit basket in the main canteen but they don't make it very known or appetising."
- **Daphne**, 14, Brentwood

"It's cheaper to buy a panini or chocolate bar than a fruit pot"
- **Beau**, 16, Rochford

STREETS

The young people told us that they spend a lot of time in their town centres with their friends, and they use the public transport system in Essex to get around. We wanted to understand their experiences when out and about in Essex, when it comes to food.

There were two key issues that the young people brought up when talking about food on their high streets. First was simply the options available and the price. And second, was the bombardment of advertising for unhealthy food they face all over their public spaces.

1. FLOOD OF CHEAP, UNHEALTHY FOOD ON THE HIGH STREET

Mirroring their experiences at school, the young people told us about the lack of truly affordable healthy options available to them in their town centres and near their schools. As we have heard from other young people previously, they described their high streets as being flooded with fast food outlets, offering cheap deals that entice students in after school.



"There is not anything healthy in my area which to me is a shock, everything is very unhealthy"

Angel, 16, Chelmsford



"There aren't a lot of healthy options surrounding me... [in my area] it's flooded with fast food"

Hannah, 15, Basildon



To be clear, when we talk about 'unhealthy food' we mean any food or drink product that is classed as high in fat, salt or sugar (HFSS) using the government's Nutrient Profiling Model. This is used in national and local policies that restrict unhealthy food ads - like on Transport for London, as well as on TV and online. You can read more about how we collected the evidence and did our analysis in the Appendix.

2. UNHEALTHY FOOD ADVERTS EVERYWHERE

As you've read, it is already hard enough for young people in Essex to access affordable and nutritious food on their high streets and in their schools. But what makes it worse, they told us, is the overwhelming and inescapable barrage of unhealthy food ads they encounter every day. The next section of the report explores this in detail.



"As a young person we go for the cheap more convenient option... but if there were healthier options that were also cheap we would go for them"

Beau, 16, Rochford

UNHEALTHY FOOD ADS IN ESSEX

Food and drink businesses spend millions on marketing designed to do one simple thing — ensure their products are centre stage in our minds. A wealth of evidence now demonstrates the link between food advertising and the food and drink products children prefer, ask for, and consume.[3]

Businesses invest so much money in outdoor advertising because they know it's worth it. Outdoor advertising is highly visible and claimed to reach 98% of the UK population each week.[4] A recent systematic review found that unhealthy food and drinks are much more likely to be advertised on outdoor media - with around 63% less healthy.[5]

And so it wasn't hard to find unhealthy food adverts in Essex. As the young people said, they really were everywhere! We held the workshop in Chelmsford and were confronted by loads of adverts before we'd even left the train station.

Burgers, chocolate, crisps, milkshakes... Think of any unhealthy food or drink and you can be pretty sure we saw it being advertised in Essex. It was shocking! So, we at Bite Back decided to explore further to find out how prevalent unhealthy food and drink advertising really is and what young people are up against. To do this, we travelled across Essex between February and April 2025 and took photos of all the adverts for food and drink we could find. We analysed each ad to identify if it was for unhealthy food or not.

BITE BACK REVEALS

Two thirds (255/385 = 66%) of all food and drink ads surveyed in Essex were for unhealthy products. Wow!

In the following pages, we take a closer look at the results from our survey.







Every point on this map is an unhealthy food or drink advert we found in Essex between Feb and Apr 2025

3. Boyland E, et al. (2016). Advertising as a cue to consume: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effects of acute exposure to unhealthy food and nonalcoholic beverage advertising on intake in children and adults, The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, 103, I(2):519–533
4. https://www.outsmart.org.uk/why-ooh-works
5. Finlay, A., Robinson, E., Jones, A. et al. A scoping review of outdoor food marketing: exposure, power and impacts on eating behaviour and health. BMC Public Health 22, 1431 (2022).

WHAT WE FOUND









Unhealthy food ads in Essex, by district

District	No. food ads	No. unhealthy food ads	% of unhealthy food ads
Basildon	81	56	69%
Braintree	16	11	69%
Brentwood	19	12	63%
Castle Point	25	19	76%
Chelmsford	48	35	73%
Colchester	17	13	76%
Epping Forest	53	27	51%
Harlow	67	41	61%
Maldon	3	2	67%
Rochford	31	17	55%
Tendring	25	22	88%
Uttlesford	0	0	N/A
Total	385	255	66%

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A PROBLEM ACROSS THE WHOLE COUNTY

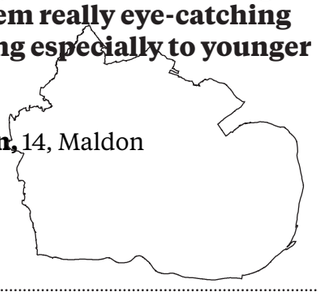
The total number of unhealthy food ads we found varied from place to place, but for 11 out of the 12 districts in Essex, at least half of all food and drink ads were for unhealthy products. It was much worse for 7 of them, with that number rising to over two thirds. This mirrors evidence Bite Back has collected in other locations across England.[6]

The worst affected district in Essex was Tendring, where we found a whopping 9 in 10 (21/24 = 88%) adverts for food and drink were for unhealthy products. Within Tendring, Clacton was particularly saturated - every single food and drink ad (18/18 = 100%!) we saw was for an unhealthy product.

Uttlesford, a largely rural area with the lowest population density of all Essex districts, was the exception, no food and drink adverts at all being found in the district during our survey.[7]

"I think that they target young people with the bright colours and things like that, that seem really eye-catching and appealing especially to younger children.

[redacted], Erin, 14, Maldon



6 Bite Back, (2025), Advertising: Are food giants bombarding young people on our streets?

7 Office for National Statistics, Population density, https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/TS006/editions/2021/versions/4

2

THE MOST DEPRIVED AREAS FARE THE WORST

We looked at the difference between areas based on levels of deprivation.

SHOCKING

The percentage of unhealthy food ads in the most deprived areas of Essex was significantly higher (88%) than in the least deprived (62%).[8]

Both are still much too high, but it looks like those already facing the biggest challenges are also being targeted with a higher rate of unhealthy food ads.

3

PUBLIC TRANSPORT COVERED IN ADS

The public transport system should provide a positive service for people living in Essex, but most of the unhealthy food ads we found (203/255 = 80%) were either on bus stops or within train stations. The rest were on billboards, phone boxes or free standing units.

8 UK Government, (2019), English indices of deprivation 2019: mapping resources















"[Young people] don't realise that they are being manipulated into thinking that fast food is the best option."

Daphne, 14, Brentwood



"It's a massive problem, they are absolutely everywhere in every corner of your eye, and you don't even realise it."

Kacie, 17, Rochford

4

UNHEALTHY FOOD ADS NEAR SCHOOLS

The young people had told us how difficult it is for them to eat healthily in school, and how the food options nearby were generally unhealthy. So we wanted to find out the extent to which unhealthy food ads appear near their schools too.

We compared the locations of every unhealthy food ad we found, to the locations of every primary and secondary school in Essex.

WOW!

We found that 45 schools in Essex have at least one unhealthy food ad within 400m - about a five minute walk.



"It is a problem as [most of the] adverts we see advertised show junk food - it is showing how easily available it is."

Amy, 16, Rochford











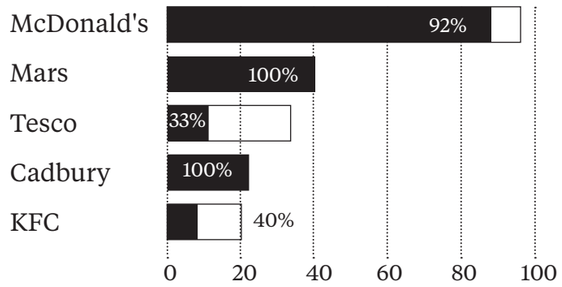


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BIG BRANDS DOMINATE

There were many different types of products being advertised across Essex, such as chocolate, crisps and burgers, from 48 different brands. Given Bite Back's recent analysis of advertising across England, we were not surprised at all to find that McDonald's was the biggest advertiser, with 96 adverts coming from them alone, of which 88 (92%) were for unhealthy food. That means over a third of all the unhealthy food ads we saw in Essex were for McDonald's products!

The top five most frequent brands advertising food and drink in Essex





"The adverts are big, bright and do tempt us with offers"

Arjun, 14, Chelmsford

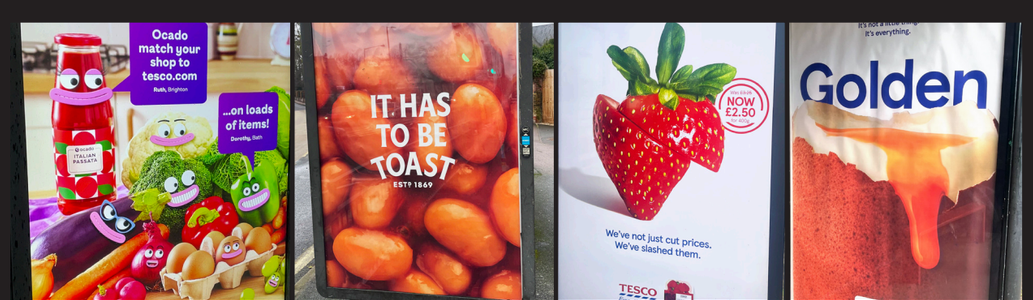
POSITIVE PROGRESS

Restricting hot food takeaways
An evaluation by Cambridge University looked at the 35 Local Authorities that had introduced takeaway exclusion zones by 2017. It found an 81% reduction in new takeaway openings compared to what would otherwise have been expected, six years after introduction. Further modelling showed that these policies would positively impact health, with reduced rates of food-related conditions such as type 2 diabetes.

Making school food healthier
Our Bite Back in Schools programme has shown how student-led action can transform the school food environment. In some schools, students identified the lack of accessible, affordable drinking water. Their response: introduce hydration stations, distribute reusable water bottles, and offer fruit-infused options, helping to reduce reliance on sugary drinks. Students also reimagined recipes, reducing sugar in flapjacks and brownies, and made healthy options more visible and appealing.

Removing unhealthy food ads from public places
In 2019, Transport for London (TfL) imposed restrictions on advertising unhealthy food and drink products. Now when you travel on the Tube, you'll see that companies promote their healthier options instead. Londoners are exposed to less unhealthy adverts, and in turn buy less unhealthy products. TfL's commercial revenue has continued to grow every year outside of the pandemic. Inspired by London's success, over 20 local councils in the UK have followed suit.

A few healthier ads in Essex - We did find some adverts for healthier products in Essex, from brands such as Tesco, Ocado and Heinz. It was great to see, even if they were few and far between. Amongst other products being advertised, we saw strawberries and eggs - which made a nice change!



BITE BACK'S CALL TO ACTION

To all our local leaders, to businesses and schools, please hear our voices and use your power to make Essex a happier, healthier place for young people to grow up in. We want healthier food at school, affordable and more accessible healthy food on our high streets, and an end to unhealthy food advertising across the county. Thank you!

APPENDIX 1
METHODOLOGY

Advertising data collection
Google Maps was used to identify the areas in Essex to include in the research project. This was done by finding the areas on the map that were shaded in grey, which represent greater population density. The following steps were taken to locate all identifiable advertising units in each hub:
1. Zoomed into each hub on Google Maps and identified all the major roads.
2. Switched to Google Earth view.
3. Looked for advertising units while moving along the roads and pinpointed their location on a separate map as they were found.
4. Repeated this for all major roads within the hub.
Each location identified above was plotted onto a map. Google was then used to plot a route. Each location was visited once between February and April 2025. If the location had an advertising unit featuring a food or a non-alcohol drink product or brand, a photo was taken.

Nutrition data analysis
The advertisements captured were grouped by brand and product. The nutrient profile could only be determined for identifiable products. 385 out of 407 advertisements were for identifiable products. 22 adverts were excluded from the analysis: 11 were brand-only adverts; 10 were for delivery platforms where the meal advertised could not be identified; 1 advert featured a limited time offer product where the nutrition information is no longer available.

Nutrition information per 100g was collected from company websites. The nutrient profile score was calculated for each identifiable product using the government's nutrient profiling model (NPM)[9], to determine if a product was high in fat, salt and/or sugar (HFSS); see Appendix 2 for further detail.

Location of adverts
The geo-location of each advert was used to determine the proportion of adverts (and HFSS/non-HFSS) per decile of deprivation (1-10), using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (2019). Neighbourhoods were categorised into deciles, each representative of 10% of the English population by deprivation – a value of 1 represents the 10% most deprived areas and a value of 10 represents the 10% least deprived areas.

The locations were also analysed against the coordinates of each primary and secondary school in Essex. A 400m buffer - considered a 5-minute walk and easily accessible for school pupils - was used as a proxy to measure proximity to schools. The results were broken down by district.

Limitations
An starting assumption was made that advertising units are generally placed in areas that are expected to have high footfall and/or transport links, so that was the focus of this research. Some adverts in more rural areas may have been missed.
Google Earth is not always up to date so some advertising hoardings may have been missed.
The scoping of Google street view for advertising units was completed by one individual, and therefore, it is possible that additional advertising units were missed.
Adverts change over time, so collecting evidence over one day may not accurately represent the full range of typical advertisements.

District	Basildon	Brentwood	Castle Point	Chelmsford	Colchester	Epping Forest	Harlow	Maldon	Rochford	Total
No. schools with an HFSS ad within 400m	18	2	6	1	3	2	10	1	2	45

N.B. Only districts where unhealthy food and drink ads were found near schools are featured in this table

9 The Nutrient Profiling Model, Department of Health and Social Care, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-nutrient-profiling-model

APPENDIX 2
PRODUCT ANALYSIS

Below are all the food and drink products we saw being advertised in Essex. Food products that score 4 and above, and drinks that score 1 and above using the Nutrient Profiling Model, are classed as high in fat, salt and/or sugar (HFSS). Nutritional information was taken from the brand's website and estimations made due to incomplete information have been noted in the table.
The McDonald's advert for a Happy Meal shows the packaging without products; it was classified as HFSS given that a Cheeseburger, which is an HFSS product, is offered in the combination.

Table 3: Products advertised in Essex

Brand and Product	No. of sightings	HFSS?	Note
Mars Twix	40	HFSS	
McDonald's Happy Meal (Cheeseburger)	30	HFSS	
Cadbury Dairy Milk Easter Egg	17	HFSS	
McDonald's Cheeseburger	17	HFSS	
McDonald's Philly Cheese Stack	17	HFSS	Estimated weight
Pepsi Max	15	No	
Heinz Baked Beans	14	No	
Tesco Tesco Finest Rhubarb & Custard Hot Cross Buns	14	No	
Just Eat - Egg	10	No	
Just Eat - Parmesan	9	HFSS	
KFC Original Ranch Rice Bowl	8	No	Estimated fibre & weight
McDonald's McCrispy	7	No	Estimated weight
Sprite Sprite Zero	7	No	
Tesco Strawberries	7	No	
Burger King Whopper Burger	6	No	Estimated fibre
Geeta's Mango chutney	6	HFSS	

Brand and Product	No. of sightings	HFSS?	Note
McDonald's Strawberry Milkshake	6	HFSS	
Tesco Honey Nut Corn Flakes	6	HFSS	
Greggs Bacon Breakfast Roll	5	HFSS	Estimated fibre
Greggs Hot Southern Fried Chicken Baguette	5	HFSS	
Mr Kipling Signature Collection Gooey Brownie Bites Double Chocolate x10	5	HFSS	
Tesco Tesco Finest 6 Pork Sausages	5	HFSS	
Cadbury Dairy Milk Chocolate Bar	4	HFSS	
Costa Ham & Cheese Toastie	4	HFSS	
KFC Gravy	4	HFSS	
KFC Kentucky Original Wrap	4	No	
KFC Zinger Double Down	4	HFSS	
McDonald's Chilli Double Cheeseburger	4	HFSS	
Sharwoods Plain Poppadoms	4	HFSS	
Subway Taco Beef Saver Sub	4	No	
BirdsEye Crispy Chips	3	No	
Burger King Dorito's King Box (BBQ Double Melt)	3	HFSS	
Cheez-It CHEEZ-IT double cheese	3	HFSS	
Costa Croissant	3	HFSS	
Costa Latte	3	No	
Greggs Mayo Crispy Chicken Burger	3	No	
Greggs Southern Fried Chicken Goujons	3	HFSS	
Heinz Mayonnaise	3	HFSS	
M&S Dippy Whippy Loaded Egg	3	HFSS	
McDonald's Breakfast Wrap with Ketchup	3	HFSS	Estimated weight
McDonald's Hash Brown	3	HFSS	Estimated weight
McDonald's Sausage & Egg McMuffin	3	HFSS	

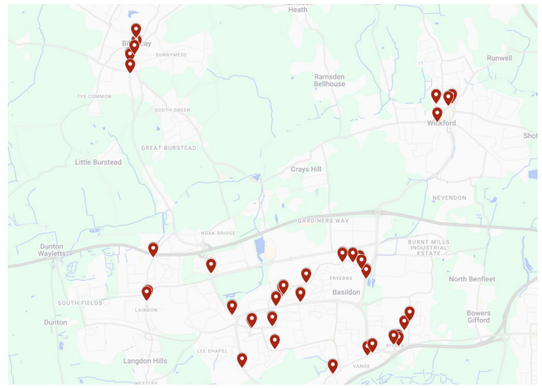
Brand and Product	No. of sightings	HFSS?	Note
Mr Kipling Chocolate and Fudge Loaf Cake	3	HFSS	
Pepsi Zero Sugar Strawberries 'N Cream Pepsi	3	No	
Reese's Peanut Butter Creme Egg	3	HFSS	Estimated fibre
Sharwoods Mango Chutney	3	HFSS	
Co-op - Egg	2	No	
Co-op Tomato Ketchup	2	HFSS	Estimated FVN
Kit Kat Double Chocolate Kit Kat	2	HFSS	
McDonald's BBQ Ranch Stack	2	HFSS	
Naked Blue Machine Smoothie	2	No	
Yeo Valley Little Yeos Blueberry & Banana Kids Yogurt	2	No	
Asda Ferrero Rocher	1	HFSS	Estimated fibre
Ben & Jerry's Cookie Dough Ice Cream	1	HFSS	Estimated fibre
Cadbury Chocolate Creme Egg	1	HFSS	
Co-op Chocolate & Salted Caramel Hot Cross Buns	1	No	
Co-op Marbled Millionaires Chocolate Egg	1	HFSS	
Extra Tropical Refreshers Gum	1	No	
Goodfella's Stonebaked Thin Pepperoni Pizza	1	No	
Gousto Spicy Chicken With Zingy Spinach Quinoa And Avocado	1	No	
Greggs Pepperoni Hot Shot Pizza	1	HFSS	
Heinz Cream Of Tomato Soup	1	No	
Holland & Barrett Bones & Muscles Muesli	1	No	
Irn Bru Irn-Bru	1	No	
Lindt CHOCO WAFER Milk Chocolate Sharing Box	1	HFSS	Estimated fibre
Lindt Lindt GOLD BUNNY Milk Chocolate	1	HFSS	Estimated fibre
Lurpak Butter - Slightly Salted	1	HFSS	

Brand and Product	No. of sightings	HFSS?	Note
M&S M&S Dougal the Puppy Easter Egg	1	HFSS	
M&S M&S Luxury Hot Cross Buns	1	No	
Magnum Bon Bon Gold Caramel Billionaire	1	HFSS	
Magnum Classic	1	HFSS	
McDonald's Big Mac	1	HFSS	
McDonald's Latte	1	No	Estimated weight
McDonald's Stormzy Meal (Regular Oreo McFlurry)	1	HFSS	
McDonald's Terry's Chocolate Orange Pie	1	HFSS	
McVitie's Jaffa Cakes Cola Bottle	1	HFSS	
Morrisons Milk Chocolate Digestives	1	HFSS	
Ocado - Egg	1	No	
Pip & Nut Crunchy Peanut Butter	1	No	
Rowse Runny Honey	1	HFSS	
Sainsbury's Barber's Mature Cruncher Cheese	1	HFSS	
Sainsbury's Whole Leg of Lamb	1	HFSS	
Strong Roots Crispy Pea & Lemon AirBites	1	No	
Subway Honey Mustard BBQ	1	No	
Tesco - Egg	1	No	
Tony's Chocolonely Milk Chocolate Bar	1	HFSS	
Uber Eats Sainsbury's Valentines Chocolate Truffles	1	HFSS	
Walkers and Heinz Walkers Heinz Ketchup Crisps	1	No	
Wendy's Dave's Single Cheeseburger	1	No	Estimated weight

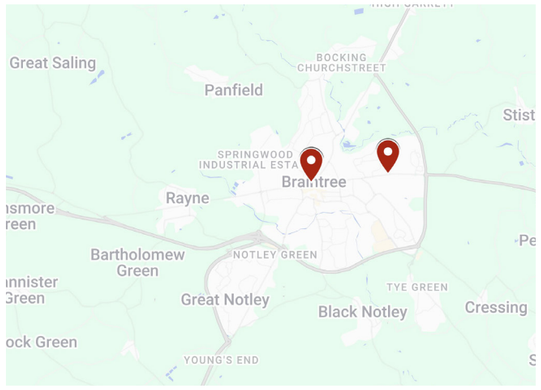
APPENDIX 3
DISTRICT MAPS

The maps below show the locations of the unhealthy food and drink adverts found in each district. No unhealthy food and drink adverts were found in Uttlesford. Our survey was undertaken between February and April 2025.

Basildon



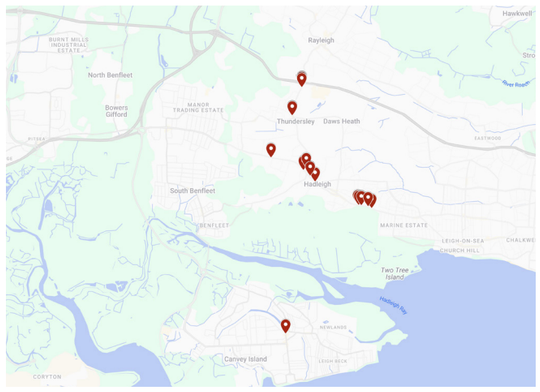
Braintree



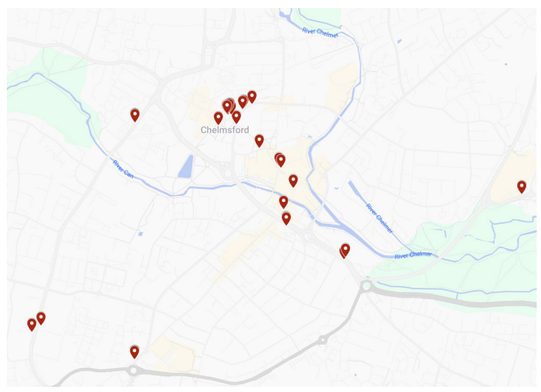
Brentwood



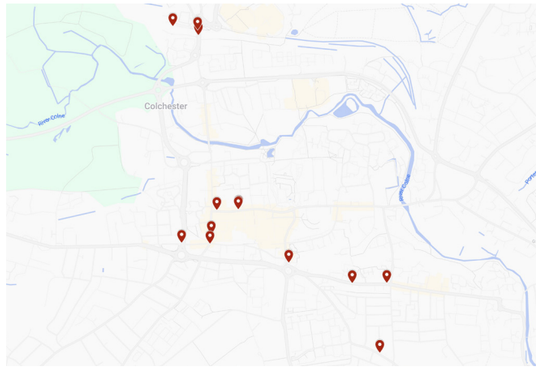
Castle Point



Chelmsford



Colchester



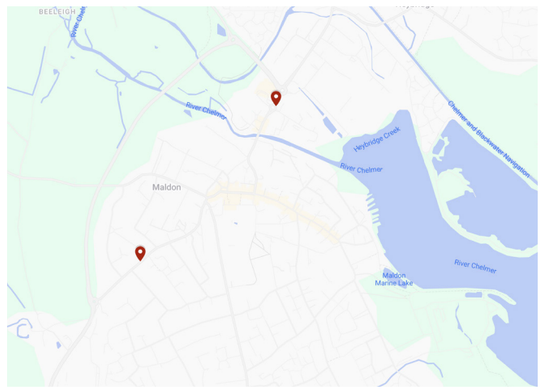
Epping Forest



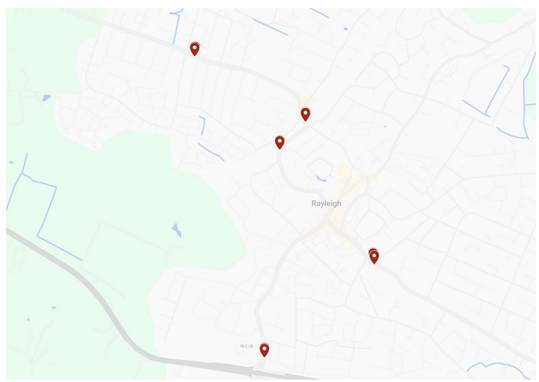
Harlow



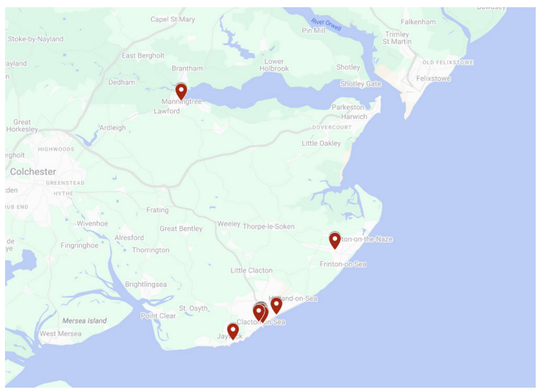
Maldon



Rochford



Tendring



PECKISH FOR A CHANGE?

If you'd like to hear more or are interested in working with Bite Back, please contact us on hello@biteback2030.com

"The health of a generation depends on this change. Nearly 1 in 3 young people will be affected by food-related ill health, so it's time to bite back!"

Thomas, 17, Basildon

BITE BACK

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