

Community consultation on food and drink marketing in the ACT

Key findings

Between 29 September and 23 November 2015, the ACT Government conducted a community consultation on ways to increase the availability and promotion of healthy food and drinks, and reduce the marketing of unhealthy food and drinks, particularly marketing aimed at children. Interested parties were invited to nominate actions that could be undertaken across the following settings:

- businesses, including supermarkets, shopping centres, cinemas, restaurants/cafes, quick service outlets, licensed clubs and hotels;
- sporting clubs and organisations, including through sponsorships; and
- ACT Government venues, such as GIO Stadium, Manuka Oval and Exhibition Park, and events.

The consultation, which was conducted under the auspices of the ACT Government's *Healthy Weight Action Plan*, sought to generate an expansive range of ideas on influencing food and drink marketing in the ACT towards healthier choices.

Responses to the consultation were sought via a *Time to Talk* online survey; email; pre-paid postcards; social media; and targeted forums for businesses, the community, sporting organisations and event organisers. The consultation attracted over 500 responses. The supporting social media campaign reached over 200,000 Facebook users and more than 32,000 Twitter users. The following sections provide a top level breakdown of the responses to the consultation by submission format and respondent type.

i) Written submissions – surveys and emails

A total of 227 written submissions to the public consultation were received, comprising 188 *Time to Talk* survey responses and 39 emails. The vast majority of written submissions (205) were from community members, including consumers, health professionals, teachers, academics and parents/carers. In addition, written responses were received from public health organisations (6) and community groups (2), food businesses (3), industry groups (5), sporting clubs (5) and event organisers (1).

There was a high level of engagement in the consultation by parents and carers. Of the 188 respondents who completed the *Time to Talk* survey, 130 (69 per cent) indicated that they have children living with them some or all of the time.

ii) Stakeholder forums and meetings

The following face-to-face forums and meetings were held during the consultation period:

- Community forum – 22 October 2015;
- Business forum (facilitated by the Canberra Business Chamber) – 27 October 2015;
- Sporting organisations and clubs forum – 10 November 2015;
- Meeting of major event organisers – 13 November 2015; and

- Meeting of elite sporting organisations – 13 November 2015.

Summary reports from the business and community, sports and event organiser forums are at [Attachments 1](#) and [2](#) respectively.

iii) Other responses

In addition to written submissions and participation in forums and meetings, interested parties were invited to share their views via written postcards (200) and social media (more than 100 comments received).

Summary of findings

The findings from the consultation showed strong community support for reducing the marketing of unhealthy food and drinks, and increasing the availability and promotion of healthier options. Support was particularly strong for actions to protect children from unhealthy food and drink marketing. A number of respondents noted the impact of marketing on children's food and drink preferences and purchase requests, and indicated support for restricting marketing techniques that cause their children to pester them for unhealthy products.

Selected quotes from consultation:

"Children are more vulnerable to marketing than parents, and targeting them creates problems for parents. It would help the community if parents didn't have to battle their kids every time they went to the supermarket."

"No unhealthy food at checkouts – pester power is too strong."

"Why do we allow marketing [of] unhealthy food and drinks, particularly to children, at all?"

A recurring theme to emerge from the consultation was the importance of ACT Government leadership. Suggestions from respondents included a role for government in educating and motivating consumers to look for and purchase healthier choices; in working with businesses, sporting clubs and event organisers to support change; and in role modelling health promoting strategies across ACT Government venues, events and workplaces. Support was also voiced for more clearly defining key terms including "unhealthy food" and "unhealthy food marketing" to assist stakeholders, including businesses and sporting clubs, to implement actions that support healthier choices.

Selected quotes from consultation:

"Lead the way for the rest of the community that healthy food is a government priority and if government can do it, so can private enterprise – if they don't do it then why should private enterprise?"

"Stop the marketing of unhealthy food and drinks on Government-controlled infrastructure."

"Define and regulate clearer interpretation of 'healthy' versus 'unhealthy' food and drinks – currently too ambiguous."

With regard to the costs and benefits of reducing unhealthy food and drink marketing, and increasing healthier alternatives, the views among respondents were mixed. Some felt that the benefits would far outweigh the costs, including in terms of greater consumer choice and patronage of businesses that provide healthier options, reductions in overweight and obesity, and long-term savings to the healthcare system. However, others were concerned about the costs to government of implementing interventions, and potential reductions in revenue as businesses, sporting clubs and event organisers transition to healthier choices.

Selected quotes from consultation:

“Restaurants/cafes/bistros might actually find that they get more patronage. I’d be more inclined to eat out if there was good healthy food on offer.”

“We would be healthier and more productive, less revenue would be spent on chronic diseases associated with poor lifestyle like obesity and COPD [Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease].”

“People may not choose the healthier options and this would make them [businesses] less financially viable.”

“The ACT could fund more sponsorship for clubs and sporting organisations. Although I would be worried about the opportunity cost in terms of loss of other services.”

On the issue of government intervention, again, respondent views were mixed. There was a strong level of support among community respondents for ‘tough’ measures, including regulation, legislation, bans on advertising, fines for non-compliance and taxation of unhealthy food and drinks. The need to protect children from unhealthy food and drink marketing was a recurring theme and the rationale provided by a number of community respondents for tough measures. Support for regulation was also strong among the public health organisations that responded to the consultation.

A smaller number of community respondents suggested that individuals have a right to choose the foods they purchase and consume, and argued against any form of government intervention. These sentiments were echoed by the industry groups that responded to the consultation, including peak bodies for the food manufacturing and advertising sectors. These respondents were largely not supportive of any form of government intervention beyond consumer education, and voiced strong opposition to any move towards greater regulation.

Selected quotes from consultation:

“We ban cigarettes. I think the time will come with junk food too.”

“Regulate the advertising and promotion of junk food to ensure it is not aimed at children and restrict the frequency of the advertisements.”

“Place a tax on sugar.”

“With regard to the marketing of junk food to children, recognising the urgency of the situation ... the evidence indicates a need for regulatory intervention.”

“Help individuals understand they are responsible for the decisions they make. Not the supermarket,

not the hotel, not the sporting club, not the ACT Government.”

“Do nothing! There is too much interference in our daily lives by government.”

“Empowering consumers through education to drive motivation and providing information to guide choice is the key to healthy eating.”

Business settings

Supermarkets were identified through the consultation as having an important role in shaping food purchase and consumption decisions. There was strong support from community respondents and public health advocates for reducing unhealthy food and drink marketing in supermarkets, and increasing the availability and promotion of healthier options. Suggestions included removing unhealthy food from checkouts/customer waiting areas; changing store layouts to ensure easy access to healthy choices; introducing prominent healthy food displays at the point-of-sale and on end of aisle shelving; separating healthy food and drinks from unhealthy options; and removing displays of unhealthy food and drinks from below a height of one metre from the floor. The opportunity to market healthy food and drinks, including through store catalogues and weekly specials, was also highlighted.

Selected quotes from consultation:

“Keep unhealthy food in the aisles, not at the checkout where children are waiting with parents.”

“Allow unhealthy food such as chocolate and lollies to only be sold on the top shelves at supermarkets.”

“At our local [supermarket] the lolly aisle is combined with the bread aisle. This should not be allowed.”

“In supermarkets, remove junk food displays in the areas utilised for waiting for self-serve checkouts.”

With regard to the implementation of such measures, suggestions ranged from working collaboratively with supermarkets to initiate change, including through the provision of incentives, education and support, to bans on the placement and marketing of unhealthy food and drinks, including at checkouts.

Selected quotes from consultation:

“Provide information and incentives to businesses to reduce the marketing they do of unhealthy food and drink. Develop case studies showing how this doesn’t affect their profits if accompanied by increased promotion of healthy food and drinks.”

“Legislate to prevent unhealthy food and drink being presented for purchase close to checkouts at level of small children.”

There was strong support from respondents to the consultation for improving the availability of healthy food and drinks through food service outlets, such as cafes, restaurants and clubs, and for ensuring such choices are appealing and price competitive. This included calls for healthier children's meals and the option of smaller portions for adults. It was also suggested that, when ordering meals, patrons be given the choice to substitute chips for healthier sides, including salads and steamed vegetables. A number of respondents highlighted a potential role for the ACT Government in providing incentives or support to food service outlets to supply and promote healthy menu options.

Selected quotes from consultation:

"In licensed clubs and hotels, often the only choices for kids' meals are deep fried foods such as nuggets and chips – everything seems to come with chips."

"[Offer] pricing incentives for smaller meal portion options."

"Maybe an award for ACT's healthiest club or venue recognising innovation in encouraging healthy lifestyle and food choices for kids."

The availability and marketing of unhealthy food and drinks at cinemas also attracted comment through the consultation. While some respondents felt that selling 'treat' foods in this setting was acceptable and appropriate, others called for healthier options, limits on unhealthy food and drink marketing and an end to 'super-sized' popcorn and drink deals.

Selected quotes from consultation:

"Cinemas are a treat ... unhealthy options here are not a concern because this is not the regular meal for children."

"Cinemas serve no healthy foods and everything is super sized."

"Have a healthier range of food at cinemas, and smaller portion sizes of unhealthy food."

Access to drinking water was a recurrent theme to emerge from the consultation. This included calls for improved access to free drinking water at shopping centres.

Sporting clubs and organisations

The consultation revealed strong support among respondents for the modelling of healthy behaviours through sporting clubs and organisations. Suggestions included restrictions on unhealthy food and drink marketing and sponsorships; healthy club fundraisers; the use of sports role models to promote healthy lifestyle choices; and a ban on the use of fast food vouchers as rewards for sporting achievement in junior clubs. Support was also strong for improving access to healthy food and drinks at sports venues and through sports canteens, and for making these options appealing and price competitive. A number of respondents voiced support for the installation of additional drinking water stations at ACT sports grounds and venues.

Selected quotes from consultation:

"No sponsorship of teams by soft drink and junk food."

"Prizes shouldn't be visits to fast food restaurants."

"Have healthy food options available, not only junk food and fast food. Stop having only white bread with sausages and egg/bacon!"

"Provide price equivalent or cheaper healthier options."

A common theme to emerge from the consultation was the need to support sporting clubs and organisations to transition towards healthier choices, and to divest from unhealthy food and drink sponsorships. Suggestions included assisting clubs to broker 'healthy' sponsorship deals; discounting ACT Government venue hire fees for clubs that meet 'healthy' criteria; providing business advice to sporting clubs on introducing and promoting healthy canteen menu items; and establishing a grants scheme for clubs to purchase equipment needed to prepare healthy food for sale through sports canteens.

Selected quotes from consultation:

"Sports teams should be given a guide/policy on choosing sponsors that promote healthy lifestyle choices."

"... introduce a brokerage system, managed through an independent organisation (such as a non-government agency), for managing the collection and distribution of sponsorship funding for sports clubs in a way that is equitable and responsible."

"It is actually mostly impossible to buy healthy food at sports events such as kids' soccer and weekend sports games at local ovals. Can there be some incentive or funding support to offer simple real food such as multigrain salad sandwiches and fruit?"

A number of respondents suggested that sporting clubs would face a loss of revenue if unhealthy food and drink marketing and sponsorships were restricted, or if sports canteens were limited to selling healthy options. It was noted that this could lead to additional costs being passed onto members and/or threaten the financial viability of clubs.

Selected quotes from consultation:

"Sporting clubs and organisations already struggle for sponsorship as it is. If you take away a valuable revenue stream it could have unintended effects - if sporting clubs cannot fund and close, then there won't be as many sports and there will be more overweight kids."

"Community sport clubs may experience financial loss from attempts to sell food with limited expiry date if their audience is not motivated to purchase the healthy options provided."

ACT Government venues and events

The ACT Government was identified through the consultation as having an important role in leading and role modelling health promoting strategies at government-owned venues and events. This

included calls for limits or restrictions on the marketing and promotion of unhealthy food and drinks; utilising venue signage to promote healthy choices; bans on the sale of sugar-sweetened beverages; and increased access to healthy food and drinks, including free drinking water. A number of respondents suggested that ACT Government contracts be used to influence food and drink marketing and provision at Territory venues and events. Others suggested the use of policy, regulation or incentives to support healthier choices.

Selected quotes from consultation:

“Ensure via a staged process, at least 50 per cent of all advertising at government owned sporting venues is healthy.”

“Healthy options, such as healthy food and drink should be for sale at these places. No need to get rid of the junk food, but at least give the people who want to be healthy, the option to do so.”

“Install lots of water bubblers.”

“ACT Government have the power to restrict the sale and promotion of unhealthy food through the contracts they develop with the vendors. The sale and promotion of unhealthy food should be restricted under contractual arrangements.”

“Government could subsidise or run some healthy food outlets at the venues in competition with other outlets.”

Other suggestions

Other suggestions raised through the consultation included the use of planning laws to restrict the location of fast food outlets; establishing unhealthy food and drink marketing exclusion zones (of at least 200 metres) near children’s settings; mandating an unhealthy marketing exclusion zone in shopping centres in general concourses and in child-designated areas; banning toy give-aways and supersizing deals with the sale of unhealthy food and drinks; and ensuring the promotion of unhealthy food and drinks is not perpetuated through schools, including through fundraising, branded equipment/materials and the curriculum. It was also suggested that an independent system is developed to monitor, evaluate and regularly report on the extent of population exposure to food and drink marketing in the ACT. Education was a recurrent theme to emerge from the consultation. This included calls to educate children about healthy food, and to empower and motivate consumers to look for and purchase healthier options.

There were also calls among some respondents for the ACT Government to advocate for change at the national level, including in partnership with other states and territories. Suggestions included advocating for a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, banning unhealthy food and drink sponsorship of national sporting organisations, and further restricting unhealthy food and drink marketing through national media channels (e.g. television, internet).

Acknowledgement

The ACT Government thanks all respondents who took the time to share their views through this consultation process. This feedback will be used by the ACT Government in determining next steps.