

Examining Factors Facilitating Fast Food Consumption in Whitley



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Abstract

Background The prevalence of overweight and obesity has been steadily increasing in England since the early 1990s. The consumption of fast food has long been associated with the development of overweight and obesity. This study explores the local influences and broader societal factors driving fast food consumption in Whitley.

Methods Data were collected using a mixed-methods approach that combined semi-structured interviews with participant observation.

Results Participants ($n=5$) attributed their desire to consume fast food to its convenience, the influence of advertising, the social environment as well as the local environment.

Conclusion The findings of this study suggest that a multiplicity of factors influence the consumption of fast food. This study highlights the inadequacies of local policy in combatting the increasing proliferation of fast food outlets and advertising.

FoodSEqual



1 - Introduction

The World Health Organisation defines overweight as a “condition of excessive fat deposits” and obesity as a “chronic complex disease defined by excessive fat deposits that can impair health” (WHO, 2025). Recent government data indicates that, over the past 30 years, the proportion of adults in England who are either overweight or obese has been steadily increasing (Stiebahl, 2025). Since 1993, the proportion of the population identified as being overweight or obese has risen from 52.9% to 63.9%.

Research indicates that the consumption of energy-dense, fast food, high in fat, salt and sugar, is linked with the development of obesity and overweight as well as other non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and cancer (Cena and Calder, 2020; Garcia et al., 2012; Zou and Lin, 2024). Understanding the factors that enable the consumption of fast food is essential for developing effective strategies to combat the obesity epidemic, particularly in areas of high deprivation where fast food outlets are more densely concentrated (PHE, 2018). The purpose of this study is to understand the individual and broader societal factors facilitating the consumption of fast food in Whitley in order to inform local policy as well as to focus future research.

2 - Literature review

Understanding the factors driving fast food consumption in the UK requires a multidimensional

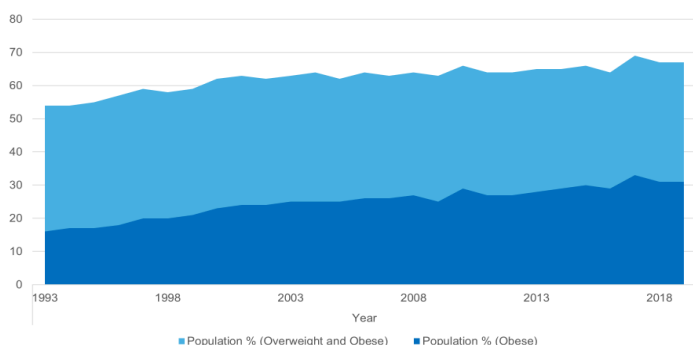


Figure 1 - Adult overweight and obesity prevalence in England since 1993 (data from NHS England, 2022)

approach due to the complex interplay of individual, financial, social and environmental influences that shape dietary behaviour. Through a review of the relevant literature, this section seeks to provide an overview of the determinants of fast food consumption.

2.1 - Individual

Dimbleby (2021) outlines how biological predilections steer us in the direction of calorie-dense foods (such as fast food), high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) because in the wild they were once rare and precious. We find these foods particularly palatable. A number of cross-sectional studies (Bakhtiar et al., 2024; Majabadi et al., 2016) affirm the notion that taste is a key contributing factor to the consumption of fast food. Janssen et al. (2017) challenge the assumption that HFSS foods are inherently tasty, arguing that taste is subjective and varies cross-culturally. Nevertheless, studies (Glanz et al., 1998) highlighting the strategic utilisation of fat, salt and sugar by food manufacturers to increase the palatability of their products, reinforce the theory that taste is a key determinant of fast food consumption.

Psychological factors play an equally influential role as biological predilections in shaping our dietary behaviour. Garza et al. (2015) demonstrate that greater impulsivity is generally associated with increased frequency of fast food consumption. Individuals can have a greater biological predisposition towards impulsivity, therefore increasing their likelihood to consume highly palatable food such as fast food. Furthermore, hormonal reward mechanisms

are ingrained into our diet (Dimbleby, 2021). Stress can sensitise an individual to consume HFSS foods (Garber and Lustig, 2011) due to the fact that their consumption results in a rush of dopamine (Nagvanshi, 2024). On this basis, the concept of food addiction has been greatly debated amongst the scientific community. While Fortuna (2012) likens food dependence to drug dependence, identifying that they share many of the same neural pathways regarding both craving and loss of control, Corwin (2011 as cited in Janssen et al., 2017) argues that food addiction cannot be recognised as a legitimate condition due to the fact that food is a necessary component of life.

2.2 - Financial

The success of the fast food market has been rooted in the ability of fast food companies to produce food that is both affordable and convenient (DeMaria., 2003, as cited in Janssen et al., 2017). Dimbleby (2021) posits that manufacturers, incentivised by profit-maximisation, in conjunction with consumers, guided by biological predispositions, have perpetuated a reinforcing feedback loop wherein the production of calorie-dense food has been prioritised. He terms this phenomenon, the 'Junk Food Cycle'. This has ultimately resulted in healthier food costing relatively more per calorie (Jones et al., 2014), one reason amongst many why poor diet is an acute problem amongst the UK's least affluent communities (Burgoine et al., 2018).

Numerous studies (Bilbîie et al., 2021; Majabadi et al., 2016; Song, 2016; Tomašević et al., 2020) uphold the

theory that cost is a key determinant of fast food consumption, asserting that the low cost of fast food is an alluring factor in particular for young people - a demographic disproportionately represented in low-wage employment (Murphy and Bukata, 2023). Moreover, Dimpleby (2021) rightly highlights that the cost of home-cooking does not only account for the purchase of, but also the means by which to store and cook food items. However, cost does not wholly influence an individual's decision to consume fast food. A significant body of research (Ayo and Bonabana-Wabbi, 2012; Dave et al., 2009; Dunn et al., 2011; Lun et al., 2021) highlights that convenience plays a major role in motivating fast food consumption. Jabs and Devine (2006) assert that time-scarcity induces individuals to consume food that requires less preparation. Individuals seeking professional success, as well as families in poverty are more susceptible to time-scarcity, hence are more inclined to consume fast food (Janssen et al., 2017). There is also a strong psychological component to the food that individuals living in poverty buy and eat. Poverty causes high levels of stress, sleeplessness and cognitive overload (Lararia et al., 2017 as cited in Dimpleby, 2021). This not only reduces an individual's capacity to resist temptation, but also makes the purchase of fast food a more viable alternative to planning and cooking a meal from scratch.

2.3 - Social

Beyond individual factors and financial circumstances, wider social influences play a significant role in shaping dietary behaviour. A number of

cross-sectional studies investigating the predictors of fast food consumption through the lens of planned behaviour theory (Asadpour et al., 2023; Bilbâie et al., 2021; Didarloo et al., 2022; Ghoochani et al., 2018; Sajjad et al., 2023), outline that social pressure is positively associated with fast food consumption. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent amongst younger demographics. Majabadi et al. (2016) found that adolescents have a tendency to consume fast food unwillingly in order to conform with their friends' behaviour. This aligns with the findings of Higgs (2015) which highlight that social acceptance concerns play a key role in modelling food intake.

Alongside subjective peer norms, other factors influence younger demographics to consume fast food. Firstly, fast food outlets – in particular those with seating – serve as sustainable locations for young people to socialise (Savory et al., 2025; Shaw et al., 2023). Shaw et al. (2023) found that young people often value the social occasions surrounding food choices more than the food itself and that the relaxed atmosphere of fast food outlets make them viable locations to facilitate socialisation. Song (2016) attributes young children's desire to consume fast food to the effectiveness of advertising strategies, particularly the use of 'kid-friendly' packaging and the inclusion of complimentary toys. Fast food companies have an incentive to advertise to young children as they lack nutritional knowledge and develop their dietary preferences at an early age (De Cosmi et al., 2017; Lee and Lien, 2015).

Less healthy takeaway food choice has been shown to be associated with poorer level of education (Miura et al. 2009; Miura et al. 2012). Janssen et al. (2017) suggest that health literacy is a stronger determinant of unhealthy lifestyle behaviours such as poor diet. Health literacy refers to an individual's knowledge and skills in matters of health and illness (Nutbeam, 2008). Culinary skills are an integral component of health literacy. Dimpleby (2021) outlines how culinary skills and knowledge have diminished in the UK across every social class since convenience food has become widely available. This is a continuing trend as one generation after another grows up without being exposed to home cooking practices. Men in particular cite lack of culinary skills as being a motivating factor in purchasing fast food (Didarloo et al., 2022; Mercille et al., 2016).

2.4 - Environmental

The environments in which we live, work and travel also exert an influence on our dietary behavior. The High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) define the food environment (or 'foodscape') as the *"physical, economic, political and socio-cultural context in which consumers engage with the food system to make their decisions about acquiring, preparing and consuming food"* (HLPE, 2017, p.28). The food environment can be broadly categorised into three domains; accessibility, availability and the organisational environment (i.e. home, school or work) (Vonthron et al., 2020). Numerous academics indicate that a positive association exists between accessibility and

availability of fast food outlets and an individual's propensity to consume fast food (Islam and Ullah, 2010; Moore et al., 2009; Saha et al., 2022). Nonetheless, Richardson et al. (2011) disputes the notion that such a correlation exists, however it's important to recognise that the validity of this research is compromised by its cross-sectionality.

Environments that encourage the consumption of fast food are referred to as 'obesogenic'. Babey et al. (2008) amongst others (Bevel et al., 2023; Libuy et al., 2022; Spence et al., 2009) highlight that a correlation exists between obesogenic environments and non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, obesity and cancer, hence there has been much research into the measures of obesogenic environments (Charreire et al., 2010; Glover et al., 2022; Mahendra, 2017). Dimpleby (2021) and Keeble et al. (2021) note that the UK's most deprived neighbourhoods are at greatest risk of being obesogenic, having almost double the density of fast food outlets in comparison to that of the UK's least deprived neighbourhoods as well as greater online access to food delivery outlets.

3 - Policy Review

Implementing effective, wide-ranging policy is essential in disincentivising the consumption of fast food. This section aims to summarise national and local policy designed to discourage fast food consumption.

3.1 - National

According to the Food Foundation (2023), one-third of advertising spend by the food industry is devoted to the marketing of confectionery, snacks, desserts and soft drinks. Only 1% of advertising budgets are spent on marketing fruit and vegetables. This is reflective of the 'Junk Food Cycle' in which food industry manufacturers perpetuate demand for HFSS food. Research indicates that HFSS food marketing greatly contributes to shaping children's dietary behaviour (Food Foundation, 2017). Unsurprisingly therefore, forthcoming national policy is targeted specifically at restricting fast food advertising to children.

TV and online advertising restrictions for less healthy food or drink items are due to come into force in the UK on the 5th of January 2026 under the Communications Act 2003, as amended by the Health and Care Act 2022 (Conway, 2025). Restrictions, which include the introduction of a 9pm watershed for adverts for HFSS products, are estimated to reduce children's exposure to HFSS advertising by 72%. The legislation was due to come into power on the 1st of October 2025 alongside a restriction on the promotion of HFSS products by volume price (e.g. multibuy offers) (DHSC, 2023), however was postponed to allow for consultation on the draft of secondary legislation that would explicitly exempt brand advertising from the restrictions. This delay in the implementation of the legislation was widely criticised by the press who highlighted that it would have a direct effect on childhood obesity prevalence (Gregory, 2025) as well as future cancer risk (Clark, 2022). The

policy itself however, was enthusiastically welcomed; Wigmore (2024) citing the Director of the Centre for Food Policy who stated that it would be an essential measure helping to curb the nation's growing health challenges. Nevertheless, Wigmore (2024) highlights that while necessary, this policy alone will not be sufficient in eradicating childhood obesity calling for robust reinforcement mechanisms as well as revised national dietary guidelines to combat national health concerns.

These policy measures will operate in conjunction with pre-existing national regulation on the advertising and nutrient content of HFSS products. In 2007, HFSS product adverts were prohibited from being aired during or adjacent to television programmes likely to appeal to younger audiences (Conway, 2025). In 2017, the Conservative government scaled up restrictions, banning HFSS product adverts from appearing in media made specifically for under-16s (such as children's magazines) (Conway, 2025). During their tenure the Conservative government also introduced the Soft Drinks Industry Levy, designed to increase the price of all soft drinks containing added sugar in an attempt to disincentivise their consumption (HMRC, 2016). Revenue from the levy was initially invested in programmes tackling childhood obesity; however since its first year, revenue has been gradually subsumed into the general tax pot (Metcalf, 2022). The restrictions on the promotion of HFSS products by volume price will accompany existing legislation, introduced in 2022, on the restriction of the promotion of HFSS products by location (i.e. store entrances, aisle ends and checkouts) (DHSC, 2023).

Despite the promising nature of these two restrictions, it is important to note that they will only apply to medium and large businesses with 50 employees or more.

Carbone and Zoellner (2012) assert that improved health literacy is positively associated with healthier eating practices. Under Boris Johnson's Conservative Government, legislation designed to improve health literacy was introduced making it compulsory for large businesses (with 250 employees or more) to display calorie information on their menus. However, this policy measure was met with negative media attention in regard to the detrimental effect it could have for people with eating disorders (Javed, 2022; Rackham, 2022).

All aforementioned policies apply to the entirety of the UK however, public health policy is a devolved matter for Scotland and Wales. The Welsh Government is due to implement its own additional regulations that restrict promotions encouraging overconsumption and the presentation of HFSS products by location (Conway, 2025). In contrast, the Scottish Government has failed to propose any new legislation (despite carrying out extensive consultation). Nevertheless, they have brought forward a number of proposed regulations including a restriction on multi-buy offers on HFSS products, unlimited refills on soft HFSS drinks as well as on temporary price reductions for HFSS products (Conway, 2025).

3.2 - Local

3.2.1 - Planning

Local policy measures prohibiting planning permission of new hot food takeaways (HFT) have proven to be effective in promoting a healthier food environment (Brown et al., 2022) as well as in reducing childhood obesity inequality (Xiang et al., 2024). In Section 8 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024) set out two recommendations to local planning authorities on the provision of HFTs: i) to refuse applications for new HFTs and fast food outlets within walking distance of schools and other places where young children congregate, and ii) to refuse applications for new HFT where there is evidence that a concentration of such uses is having an adverse impact on local health.

Consequently, a number of councils across the country introduced policies restricting planning permission for new HFTs in the vicinity of schools. The buffer zone surrounding existing or proposed schools within which construction of new HFT is prohibited differs cross-council; some opt for a zone of 200 metres (IC, 2016; THC, 2020), others 400 metres (BNESC, 2024; CC, 2023; GLA, 2021; LC, 2019). Through conversing with school students, Savory et al. (2025) recognise the shortfalls of this policy. Firstly, that it's limited in exclusively restricting planning permission to new HFT's, thus is ineffective in areas already highly saturated in fast food outlets. Secondly, HFTs provide school students with affordable alternatives to school food as well as safe community spaces for socialisation. In order to positively influence

students dietary behavior without infringing on their ability to socialise, shortcomings in local school food environments must be recognised.

Other popular measures implemented by local councils in an attempt to satisfy the recommendations of the NPPF are: i) the limitation of the number of HFTs in designated centres or frontages by proportion (typically ranging between 5-20%), and ii) the restriction of planning permission to new HFTs where it would result in there being greater than two HFTs located adjacently (GLA, 2021). It is important to recognise however, that the adoption of planning policy to restrict HFTs can negatively affect the local economy. Derbyshire et al. (2024) assert the importance of properly assessing the potential economic impacts of HFT restriction before implementing policy.

3.2.2 - Advertising

In February 2019, Transport for London (TfL) introduced a pioneering ban on the advertisement of HFSS products in underground tubes, bus stops and railway stations (Yau, 2022). Research of Yau et al. (2022) indicates that TfL's restrictions resulted in relative reductions in energy, sugar, and fat purchased from HFSS products. The efficacy of TfL's ban inspired numerous local authorities across the country to implement similar policies (McKevitt et al., 2023).

3.3 - Reading Borough Council

The main consideration for Reading Borough Council (RBC) in deciding planning applications is the updated

Reading Borough Local Plan (RBC, 2025a). Initially adopted on the 4th of November 2019, RBC released an updated version to their Local Plan in May of 2025. The plan will guide development in the borough through to 2041.

Under RL3 of the Local Plan, RBC outline the circumstances under which the development of a new takeaway unit (A5) in district, major local and local centres can be permitted:

RL3.a: *“There would be no more than 2 consecutive sui generis takeaways, and no more than 30% of the length of the Key Frontage would be in takeaway use.”*

...

RL3.c: *“Where the Key Frontages within a centre as identified on the Proposals Map are proposed to significantly change, or have already significantly changed, as a result of redevelopment, meaning that criterion a) cannot be applied, proposals should ensure that ground floor concentrations of sui generis takeaways are avoided.”*

In comparison to that of other councils, RBC planning policy on the development of new takeaway units is limited. There exists no current policy in the updated Reading Borough Local Plan on the restriction of takeaway unit development in the vicinity of schools. This is in direct contradiction to the recommendations of the NPPF. Furthermore, the permitted percentage

of takeaway unit usage of Key Frontages in Reading (30%), greatly exceeds the policy ceiling set by that of other local councils (5-20%). The most recent monitoring report on RL3.a (RBC, 2023) concluded that no Key Frontage in Reading exceeded the 30% policy ceiling. However, analysis undertaken as part of this study indicates that four of 17 Key Frontages now exceed the limit; all four are located within Whitley.

Table 1 - Proportion A5 use across Key Frontages in Reading

Key Frontage	Number of A5 Units	Total Number of Units	2023 A5 %	2025 A5 %
Basingstoke Road North	4	13	15.7	30.8
Caversham	11	118	3.2	9.3
Cemetery Junction	9	40	14.0	22.5
Christchurch Road	5	14	13.6	35.7
Coronation Square	1	11	18.5	9.1
Dee Park	0	3	0.0	0.0
Emmer Green	4	16	20.1	25.0
Erleigh Road	1	11	8.8	9.1
The Medway	5	30	11.9	16.7
Northumberland Avenue North	3	9	24.1	33.3
Oxford Road West	22	136	7.3	16.2
Shinfield Road	10	17	29.6	58.8
Tilehurst Triangle	8	52	6.9	15.4

Wensley Road	1	5	19.3	20.0
Whitley	6	24	17.8	25.0
Whitley Wood	1	7	0.0	14.3
Wokingham Road	14	48	20.8	29.2

At present, no policy on advertising content exists in Reading beyond what is already set out by the Advertising Standards Authority¹. This is despite the recommendations of the 'Healthy Weight Needs Assessment' (RBC, 2025b) for RBC to adopt a healthier advertising policy and reduce the advertisement of fast food near places where children congregate (i.e. schools and nurseries). Government endorsed research (DHSC, 2021) indicates that exposure to HFSS advertising directly affects the dietary behaviour of children. Nevertheless, Sirrell (2022) highlights the pervasive presence of fast food advertising throughout Reading.

4 - Methodology

A qualitative, mixed-method approach, combining semi-structured interviews with participant observation, was undertaken to explore individual and broader contextual factors influencing fast food consumption in Whitley.

4.1 - Setting and Sampling

¹ Since the completion of this paper, Reading Borough Council has introduced restrictions on fast food advertising. For details see Reading Borough Council at: <https://media.reading.gov.uk/news/reading-restricts-junk-food-advertising-as-child-obesity-hits-33-percent>

Data were collected in Whitley, a suburb of Reading located South of the town centre. The area experiences a range of challenges relating to financial, mental and physical health (UKRI, 2025). The majority of Whitley's Lower-layer Super Output Areas rank in the top 50% most deprived nationally (MHCLG, 2020). Whitley also ranks poorly on a sub-domain of the Access to Health Assets and Hazards Index concerning fast food (RBC, 2025b). Participants were purposively sampled from within Whitley in collaboration with the Whitley Community Development Association.

4.2 - Data Collection

4.2.1 - Interviews

Five one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were performed at the Whitley Social Club and Cafe (WSCC) between the 3rd and 4th of September 2025, each lasting between 12 and 31 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide was used and treated as a flexible tool to follow-up leads and develop theoretical categories previously outlined following an extensive review of the relevant literature, and prior research on barriers and facilitators to healthy eating in Whitley. The guide had been developed and piloted in consultation with two local residents, both of whom had experience in community research. The responses of participants were recorded only upon their agreement and transcribed verbatim for the purpose of data analysis. Consent was obtained in written form prior to the commencement of all interviews and all participants were informed that they

could stop the interview at any point. Confidentiality was assured for each participant via the allocation of pseudonyms.

4.2.2 - Participant Observation

Watson (in Hay and Cope, 2021, p.125) defines participant observation as *“a method whereby researchers themselves are the instrument processing and recording observations directly as data, with the researcher participating in daily life while observing... those practices.”* Considering the fact that WSCC also serves as a centre for surplus food redistribution, it felt as though the ideal environment in which to gain a better understanding of broader attitudes towards food in Whitley. Field notes were recorded there on the daily happenings of food consumption across the 3rd and 4th of September 2025.

Given that data obtained through the process of participant observation is derived from researcher's observations, rigorous reflexivity was required. Throughout the research process I carefully considered how my positionality influenced the manner in which research was being conducted. My position as an 'outsider' is likely to have resulted in more spurious responses, thus I sought to develop rapport prior to engaging in discussion on fast food consumption in an effort to gain participant's trust. Participant observation also required me to continually inform participants that I was engaging in research.

4.3 - Data Analysis

Although specialised computer software (e.g. NVivo) facilitates the ease of transcription and content analysis of interviews, this study utilised alternative standard procedure for transcript analysis. Firstly, transcribed audio-recordings were read through several times to gain a full understanding of the acquired data. Subsequently, thematic analysis of the transcribed audio-recordings was conducted in order to identify key themes and sub-themes. Following a process of coding, excerpts from the transcripts were chosen that best illustrated these key themes.

Data acquired through the process of participant observation was similarly analysed. Key themes and sub-themes were identified in transcribed field notes and coded accordingly. Further to this, excerpts were chosen for data presentation that exemplified the findings of the author.

5 - Discussion

The following sections explore the factors facilitating fast food consumption in Whitley. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts identified five key factors affecting consumption: cost, convenience, the social environment, the local environment and advertising.

5.1 - Interview Data

5.1.1 - Cost

“I do love a boneless banquet but... it's so expensive now! It used to be an affordable takeaway!”

(Participant D)

Where previous studies (Bîlbîie et al., 2021; Majabadi et al., 2016; Song, 2016; Tomašević et al., 2020) have concluded that cost is a facilitating factor of fast food consumption, this study noticed a marked difference. Cost was determinably a factor in discerning where participants ordered their takeaways from, however, participants commented on the fact that they less frequently consumed takeaways following the Covid-19 pandemic, due to a perceived increase in their price. This is logical given that since the announcement of lockdown measures, the average price of takeaways has risen more so than that of any other consumer good in the UK (ONS, 2025).

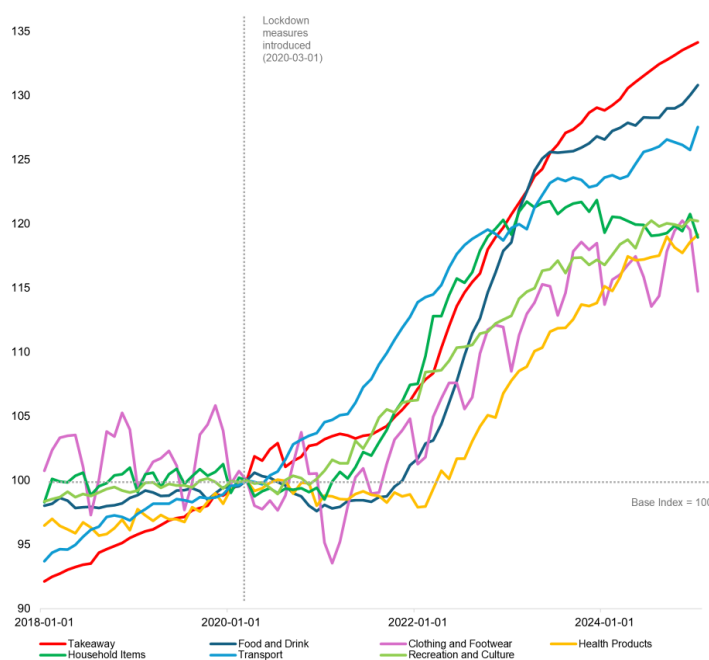


Figure 2 - Price Index of consumer goods in the UK (data from ONS, 2025)

5.1.2 - Convenience

All participants expressed that convenience plays a major role in determining the frequency with which they consumed fast food.

“I want a takeaway... [when] I don’t want to do the cooking or cleaning.”

(Participant B)

Generally, participants attributed their desire to consume fast food to the fact that it does not require them to clean up after themselves; food can be eaten out of the packaging in which it is provided which saves them from cleaning any crockery, cutlery or cooking equipment. Additionally, the time saved through not having to cook allows for participants to stay out later with friends or work longer, more awkward, hours.

“If I am feeling poorly and don’t have the energy to cook then I will order a takeaway.”

(Participant D)

60% of participants cited stress or ill-health as being a key reason as to why they consume fast food. The ease of ordering a takeaway prevents participants from having to focus energy into cooking, allowing them to focus their energy into other activities such as recovery or socialising with family and friends. Takeaways were seen to be a treat to reward participants when they were experiencing bouts of hardship.

5.1.3 - Social Environment

““Please Nan can we [get a McDonalds]!”, “Oh alright!”, I say, just to get ‘em to be quiet.”

(Participant B)

Other key factors driving fast food consumption in Whitley are rooted in the social environment. Participants noted the influence of their children or grandchildren on their dietary behaviour. Promotional toys and kid-friendly packaging encouraged children to pressure their parents into purchasing fast food. Participants commented that they often give in to the pressure of their children in order to evade the stress that accompanies confrontation.

“You see some old people in the queue... and you think, “How many people have they seen today?”, because that might be their first conversation!”

(Participant D)

Participant D commented on the social value of fast food outlets, citing in particular the New City Fish Bar (NCFB) on Buckland Road. The special offer that the NCFB offers to pensioners every Friday lunch time provides Whitley’s older residents with a space in which to socialise. Participant D remarked that they were unsure as to whether some attendees of the NCFB regularly socialise outside of this space. Participant E highlighted that Whitley lacks a designated safe space in which the local community can socialise over healthy food. Participant D highlighted that a further reason for the success of the NCFB amongst older residents in Whitley is the fact that they only take cash payment. Technological ability was frequently cited by other participants as a barrier

to fast food consumption whereby the process to order food required use of a touchscreen kiosk or a mobile phone.

5.1.4 - Local Environment

"I think though, if I lived up there [Shinfield Road Key Frontage] I would go more."

(Participant B)

Participants indicated that their local food environment impacts greatly on their propensity to consume fast food. Participants frequently commented on the variety of fast food outlets and that that provides them with agency to explore their tastes. The number of fast food outlets was also seen to impact consumption as participants often remarked on how tempting it was to purchase fast food having walked past a fast food outlet. Furthermore, the location of stores, in particular along Key Frontages where it is common to catch a bus, was seen to play a key role in facilitating fast food consumption; participant C stated: *"I get on the bus and get off and the Burger King is [right] there!"*

5.1.5 - Advertising

"If I am having a bad day and something comes up on the telly, I might just think, 'Yeah, that will sit well.'"

(Participant E)

Regardless of whether it was for a brand or a specific product, advertising was seen to help drive the consumption of fast food in Whitley. Participants D and E commented on the fact that the advertisement of new food products and toys on the TV has resulted in their children placing pressure on them to purchase

fast food. However, it is important to highlight that advertising impacted consumption rates amongst adults, not only children. Participant B in particular remarked that advertisements on the bus have previously driven them to purchase fast food.

5.2 - Participant Observation Data

Data obtained through the process of participant observation revealed greater insights into the broader attitude towards food in Whitley. Operating within the WSCC is a surplus food redistribution initiative; the Surplus Food Project (SFP). The SFP operates on a self-help basis, Monday to Friday from 10:00 to 13:00, providing local residents with improved access to food through the removal of economic barriers. The SFP offers a wide range of food: fresh bread, a great number and variety of fruit and vegetables as well as a selection of tinned goods. However, it was noted over the two days spent at the WSCC, there was a tendency for the surplus food provided by the fast food company Greggs, to disappear first. Additionally, although the cafe at the WSCC offers a wide range of food items, from cooked breakfasts and chips to veggie wraps and salad, customers routinely opted for the objectively healthier options, for example, a bowl of chips with additional salt and ketchup. Slushies, a drink deemed by the Food Standards Authority to be unsafe for children under the age of seven (FSA, 2025), were seen to be consumed unusually early in the morning by both children and adults. Both observations point toward there being a greater preference amongst the community in Whitley to consume healthier food.

5.3 - Limitations

It is important to note however, that this study faced a number of limitations particularly in regard to the collection of data. Firstly, due to time constraints, the number of interviews that could be conducted was limited. Additionally, due to the environment in which interviews were being conducted, their length was modest. A greater number and length of interviews would have permitted data saturation to be achieved thus, deeper insights to be made into the factors facilitating fast food consumption in Whitley.

Furthermore, the length of time spent conducting participant observation was severely constrained. Similarly, a greater time spent, and a deeper involvement in activities within the WSCC, would have allowed for more nuanced insights to be made into the wider factors facilitating fast food consumption as well as broader dietary behaviour in Whitley.

Finally, the demographic of interviewees may have played a role in skewing data. Interviewees were predominantly of an older generation. Health concerns therefore played a major role in determining participants dietary behaviour. Moreover, it ought to be taken into account that all participants actively engaged with the local community development association. Comments made regarding the desire for a greater number of community spaces in which to socialise over food, may therefore have been biased. A more diverse demographic pool would likely have enhanced the dataset.

6 - Conclusion

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study explored the factors facilitating fast food consumption in Whitley. In spite of its limitations, this study found that the key factors driving the consumption of fast food in Whitley are convenience and advertising, as well as the social and local food environment. These findings showcase the complex interplay of influences that shape dietary behaviour, highlighting the need for effective interventions to address both individual as well as broader contextual factors.

7 - Recommendations

7.1 - Policy

7.1.1 - Planning

The results of this study have indicated that the local food environment directly influences the dietary behaviour of Whitley's residents. This study therefore recommends that Reading Borough Council (RBC) seek to align their planning policy with that of other local councils and the recommendations of the National Planning Policy Framework. This alignment should include the reduction of the policy ceiling regarding Key Frontage use from 30%, as well as the introduction of measures restricting the development of new hot food takeaways within the vicinity of schools, especially given that children were found to play an influential role in fast food consumption in Whitley. Additionally, this study calls for RBC to

provide an updated monitoring report on the proportion of Key Frontage unit use.

7.1.2 - Advertising

Furthermore, this study has highlighted the ability of advertisement to directly influence the dietary behaviour of Whitley's residents. Where there currently exists no specific policy, RBC should explore the possibility of introducing restrictions designed to prevent the prevalence of fast food advertisement, especially given the proven efficacy of such bans (Yau et al., 2022).

7.2 - Future Research

The study highlighted that convenience played a key role in driving fast food consumption in Whitley. Participants frequently cited the time and effort saved from cooking and cleaning as a primary reason for consuming takeaways. This study also demonstrated the ability that fast food outlets have to foster social connectivity as well the community's desire for a safe space in which to socialise over healthy food.

Conlon (2025) highlights the potential of public diners to address both issues simultaneously. Public diners, defined as state-supported restaurants serving affordable, healthy fast food (Nourish Scotland, 2019), were run across the UK between the 1940s and the 1960s. At their peak, over 2,000 public diners were in operation, which is comparable to that of Gregg's current scale of national operation. The UK Research and Innovation fund has recently allocated funding

towards Nourish Scotland and the University of Nottingham to conduct research into the role that public diners can play in reducing health inequalities in the UK (Chworow, 2025).

To address the multiplicity of factors facilitating fast food consumption, this study recommends for future research to be conducted into the possibility of introducing public diners to Whitley.

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