



Western  
Sydney  
Leadership  
Dialogue

# Banning junk food advertising on NSW public transport

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# Overweight & obesity in GWS

## CURRENT SITUATION

People's lives can be remarkably impacted by living with overweight and obesity. Almost 60% of adults and 19% of children in NSW were above a healthy weight in 2020<sup>1</sup>. The future of healthcare and community services is looking increasingly strained and complicated. It's anticipated that 1 in 4 people will be living with 2 or more chronic health conditions by 2031<sup>2</sup>. With inactivity and unhealthy diet being key drivers of obesity and chronic diseases, urgent action is needed to address these areas.

The situation is amplified in Greater Western Sydney (GWS). The populations of the South West Sydney, Western Sydney and Nepean Blue Mountains Local Health Districts each have a higher proportions of overweight residents than the national average, and this includes children<sup>3</sup>. Factors including obesogenic build environments, lower socioeconomic status in comparison to other areas of Sydney, and issues with health literacy are all contributing factors in the region.

The impact of an overweight population has compounding effects over time which further entrenches health inequities across Greater Sydney. Being overweight substantially increases the risk of a person having a stroke or developing a chronic illness including type 2 diabetes, hypertension, or heart disease<sup>4</sup>. The stigma experienced by those who are overweight also reduces the likelihood of them seeking medical help until issues become acute<sup>5</sup>.

The flow-on effect of high rates of obesity double down on some groups of the region's community. On average, Aboriginal identifying persons in GWS are 50% more likely to be diagnosed with type 2 diabetes than non-identifying residents. GWS residents from the Pacific Islands are 40% more likely to develop further complications related to diabetes after diagnosis than those who were born in Australia or Western Europe<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, obesity is both the top risk factor for post-menopausal breast cancer and has found to be a significant barrier to women seeking breast screening<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> NSW Health Eating and Active Living Strategy 2022-32, 2022

<sup>2</sup> NSW Health Eating and Active Living Strategy 2022-32, 2022

<sup>3</sup> McBride, K, n.d., <https://rb.gy/wuwk6>

<sup>4</sup> McBride, K, n.d., <https://rb.gy/wuwk6>

<sup>5</sup> McBride, K, n.d., <https://rb.gy/wuwk6>

<sup>6</sup> Western Sydney Diabetes, 2022, [shorturl.at/cBGJ7](https://shorturl.at/cBGJ7)

<sup>7</sup> McBride, K, n.d., <https://rb.gy/wuwk6>

# Banning discretionary food & drink advertising on NSW public transport assets

## A CALL FROM HEALTH ADVOCATES

The Dialogue examined the alarming and growing rates of diabetes across Greater Western Sydney in 2019. The worrying trend is exacerbated by an obesogenic built environment with a range of underlying factors to blame. Since then, the problem has only worsened, so it is timely to take another look at the prevalence of overweight, obesity and diabetes in GWS. Banning the advertising of discretionary food & drink advertising on NSW public transport assets is one relatively small step we can take in the direction of **a more proactive, preventative approach to health in the region.**

**This an evidence-based, internationally proven policy intervention.** Restricting the advertising of discretionary food is a recommended policy tool for addressing obesity and improving population health<sup>8</sup>. Research has found that discretionary food advertising influences children to eat more calories<sup>9</sup>, their brand preferences, eating habits, and weight outcomes<sup>10</sup>.

The Food Policy Index rated the previous NSW Government's public support for population nutrition and restriction of children's exposure to the promotion of unhealthy foods as poor in 2022<sup>11</sup>. This policy intervention directly addresses both outcomes; presenting the current NSW Government with **the perfect opportunity to both prove and improve their dedication to the health of NSW residents.**



### Explainer: Discretionary foods

'Discretionary foods' are those which are not included in the five food groups as they are too high in fat, sugar, salt, or alcohol to be necessary for a healthy diet.

Discretionary foods are often energy-dense and nutrient-poor, and are associated with an increased risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas, C, et al., 2022, <https://rb.gy/lwiv4>

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, C, et al., 2022, <https://rb.gy/lwiv4>

<sup>10</sup> Joint Statement, 2022, <https://rb.gy/yekm0>

<sup>11</sup> Food Policy Index, 2022, <https://rb.gy/avr4t>

Image: Sydney Morning Herald, 2018

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# Our responsibility: reducing the obesogenic environment for our children

## PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST

Children are not immune to this issue. Overweight and obesity impacts both the psychological and physical wellbeing of children, and these effects are often carried into adulthood. Obese children are highly likely to grow into obese adults and to be affected by obesity related illnesses such as type 2 diabetes and hypertension.<sup>12</sup>

Children in NSW are being raised in an obesogenic environment, and this immersion hinders their development of healthy eating habits.<sup>13</sup> A contributing factor to this environment is the endless discretionary food advertisements that children are exposed to while travelling to school. Research has shown that children living in Greater Sydney are exposed to 1,000 junk food advertisements a year if they take the bus to school, and 2,800 if they travel via train<sup>14</sup>.

This is an issue that can be directly addressed by the NSW Government. When Greater Sydney school routes were analysed, it was found that 97.4% of advertisements were on NSW Government-owned infrastructure. One-third of these advertisements were for food or drinks, with most promoting discretionary products<sup>15</sup>.



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<sup>12</sup> Richmond, K.J., et al., 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yscbry7d>

<sup>13</sup> Richmond, K.J., et al., 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yscbry7d>

<sup>14</sup> Richmond, K.J., et al., 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yscbry7d>

Image: Cancer Council NSW

# Transport for London "junk food" advertising ban

## A CASE STUDY

The Mayor of London banned the advertising of food and drink that was high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) from London's tube and bus network, as part of measures to address childhood obesity in early 2019. The policy utilised (and continues to use) the UK Nutrient Profiling Model to determine which advertisements included foods that were HFSS, and so not allowed to advertise.

Evaluations of the project conducted three years later found that the intervention was "very likely" to have reduced incidences of obesity and obesity-related illnesses. Additionally, while the ban was aimed at addressing childhood obesity, adult behaviours were also potentially influenced. Two different studies both showed a reduction of HFSS purchasing by approximately 1000 calories per week. Impacts were also found to be larger in households where the main food shopper was living with overweight or obesity.

Estimated results include:



# Recommendations

## 1

### CREATE NSW VERSION OF THE UK NUTRIENT PROFILING MODEL

To evaluate which foods classify as discretionary, and therefore not eligible for advertisements.

## 2

### BAN THE ADVERTISEMENT OF DISCRETIONARY FOODS ON PUBLICLY-OWNED NSW TRANSPORT ASSETS

This should include:

- Trains (Light, Metro & Heavy)
- Busses
- Stations & stops associated with public transport.



Image left: Cancer Council, 2018  
Image right: Sydney Health Law, 2017

## Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue

The Dialogue is a not-for-profit, community initiative leading a national conversation about Greater Western Sydney.


The Dialogue facilitates interaction between key opinion leaders, across industry, government, academia and the community, to inform public policy debate and to advance a Western Sydney regional agenda through research, analysis, advocacy & events.

If you would like to know about partnering with the Dialogue, please email [info@westernsydney.org.au](mailto:info@westernsydney.org.au) requesting our company credentials or an event sponsorship prospectus.

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