



An Appetite for Change

Reimagining our food environment



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Executive summary

The Food Environment is everything around us that shapes what we eat, such as norms, prices, and the food that's in our shops, advertised, and on offer. Today our food environment is overflowing with tempting, cheap and heavily marketed unhealthy options, and that's affecting our health.

In 2025, we ran a Citizen Engagement Programme to understand what people across the island of Ireland think about the food around them and to find out what a healthy food environment would look like to them.

People shared their visions and insights that will now help drive further conversations about the food environment among communities, the media and policymakers. It will also help to inform subsequent phases of the Food Environment campaign and related policy developments by reflecting peoples lived experience.

The Food Environment campaign is a systems approach being undertaken by the Departments of Health in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, the Public Health Agency, the Health Services Executive, the Food Standards Agency, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and Safefood to seek to change the food environment so that healthy eating is within the reach of every child in every community.

The citizen engagement programme

We recruited M-CO, a multidisciplinary consultancy specialising in consultation and engagement, to deliver the Citizen Engagement programme.

In the workshops, M-CO facilitators guided people through creative and thoughtful conversations, working towards reimagining what 6 food environments should look like. The 6 food environments we focused on were:

- food shops
- food delivery
- eating out
- food on-the-go
- education, care, and workspaces
- food adverts and social media

Award-winning illustrator Steve Doogan attended each workshop, creating illustrations of group ideas in real time. He refined these sketches into a series of 24 illustrations – 4 for each food environment.

Facilitators recorded discussions, ideas and photography in each workshop and identified key themes.

Key themes

A vibrant mix of ideas and insights emerged during the workshops, with common themes across the 6 food environments. These included:

Community food systems: People yearn for the main streets of the past, with local shops offering local produce, such as grocers, bakers, and butchers. They talk about the connectivity and sense of community these local businesses foster, as well as the access to fresh food they provide.

Regulation of marketing and promotions: There is strong support for stricter rules on the marketing of unhealthy foods, particularly to children, young people, and vulnerable adults.

Government incentives: People want more substantial incentives to make healthy choices easier and affordable for everyone. They also wish to reduce taxes and provide grants for suppliers of healthier food.

Clear and consistent information: People are confused by food information on products. They want a clear, uniform food labelling system to help them understand what is in their food.

Prominence of healthy food in supermarkets: They believe supermarkets and food outlet spaces must be redesigned to make healthy food more visible – and make unhealthy foods less visible and less convenient, particularly for children.

Healthier portion options: There is a desire for greater control over meal portions and the design of meals when eating out.

Policy action

The Food Environment campaign includes a Food Environment Forum, which brings together key organisations that shape policy and partnerships across the island of Ireland. The Forum has created a roadmap that lists actions by the various organisations to drive change which includes possible policy actions.

To understand what people want to see happen first, we asked participants at the end of each workshop to vote on the policy they felt should be prioritised.

Banning unhealthy food adverts aimed at children across all advertising platforms was the most popular, followed by ensuring that all public food environments offer easily accessible healthy food.

Driving dialogue

We developed an exhibition, Appetite for Change, which will present the outcomes of the citizen engagement, bringing visitors through the challenges and the visions of those who took part in the workshops. It will take place in Belfast and Dublin in early 2026. We hope it will then travel around the island, to spark conversations in local communities and generate momentum behind the call for a healthier food environment.

Conclusion

There is an overwhelming appetite for change. People want significant change in the design of our food environment and want action across society, including policy changes from government.

Introduction

The Food Environment public health campaign aims to protect children's health by ensuring they can access safe and healthy food.

Food-related ill-health is now the biggest cause of preventable illness and death in the developed world, far greater than smoking. One in 4 children in Northern Ireland and one in 5 in Ireland live with either overweight or obesity. These children are more at risk of life-altering diseases later in life, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and many common cancers. They are also at risk of experiencing poor psychological and social effects during their childhood due to weight stigmatisation.

The food that surrounds us – our food environment – encourages us to eat unhealthily at nearly every turn we take. We are bombarded with marketing and promotions for unhealthy food and drink. The pricing and availability of unhealthy food and drink make it the cheaper, easier option, which we purchase and consume without a second thought. We know children are particularly targeted.

The Citizen Engagement Programme is part of the Food Environment campaign, bringing communities together to talk about food and co-create a vision of what a healthy food environment looks like.



Engagement process



Talk about food

M-CO was appointed through a tender process to deliver the programme. People from diverse community groups across the island were selected to reimagine healthier food environments.

Recruitment approach

The recruitment process used Purposive Sampling, a method that selects people based on experiences or specific characteristics that align with the desired project outcomes.

We identified a long list of community groups representing a diversity of interests, experiences, and locations under these types:

- Parents
- Sports
- Multi-cultural
- Mental health
- Food interest
- Higher education
- Community

People were selected from the following groups:

- Top of The Rock Healthy Living Centre, Belfast
- Action Mental Health, Downpatrick
- Resurgam Healthy Living Centre, Lisburn
- African Caribbean Support Organisation, Belfast
- Galway City Partnership, Galway City
- Limerick City Partnership Men's Shed, Limerick
- Scoil Neasín, Artane, Dublin
- Mol an Óige Community National School, Ennistymon, Co Clare

- Carrick-on-Shannon Watersports Club, Leitrim
- Kilbogget Park Sports Group, Dublin
- MTU Culinary Student Group, Cork.
- Public Participation Network, Sligo

We held workshops with each group in their local meeting spot. The workshops facilitated creative, thoughtful, guided conversations to reimagine the future of the food environment. In community spaces, we created a safe, positive and encouraging atmosphere to foster an 'every idea is a good idea' environment so that everyone could engage in discussions.

The workshops explored 6 food environments, based on the World Health Organization definition of the food environment:

- Food shops
- Food delivery
- Eating out
- Food on-the-go
- Education, care and workspaces
- Food adverts and social media

In each workshop, people were split into 2 breakout groups to brainstorm ideas for improving 2 of the food environments, ensuring that all environments were discussed equally throughout the programme. The brainstorming session ended with the selection of the most popular ideas, from each group. The groups came back together to present and vote on the ideas they felt would be most impactful in creating a healthier food environment.

Participants also voted on policies from the Food Environment Forum's Roadmap. They voted on which of the policy actions should be implemented first (see Table 1).

Illustrations

Illustrator Steve Doogan was at each workshop sketching animated visualisations of the ideas generated. These sketches brought a vibrancy and a sense of fun to the workshops, and people were delighted to see their ideas come to life.



Illustrator Steve Doogan sketching in his workshop.

Identifying workshop outputs

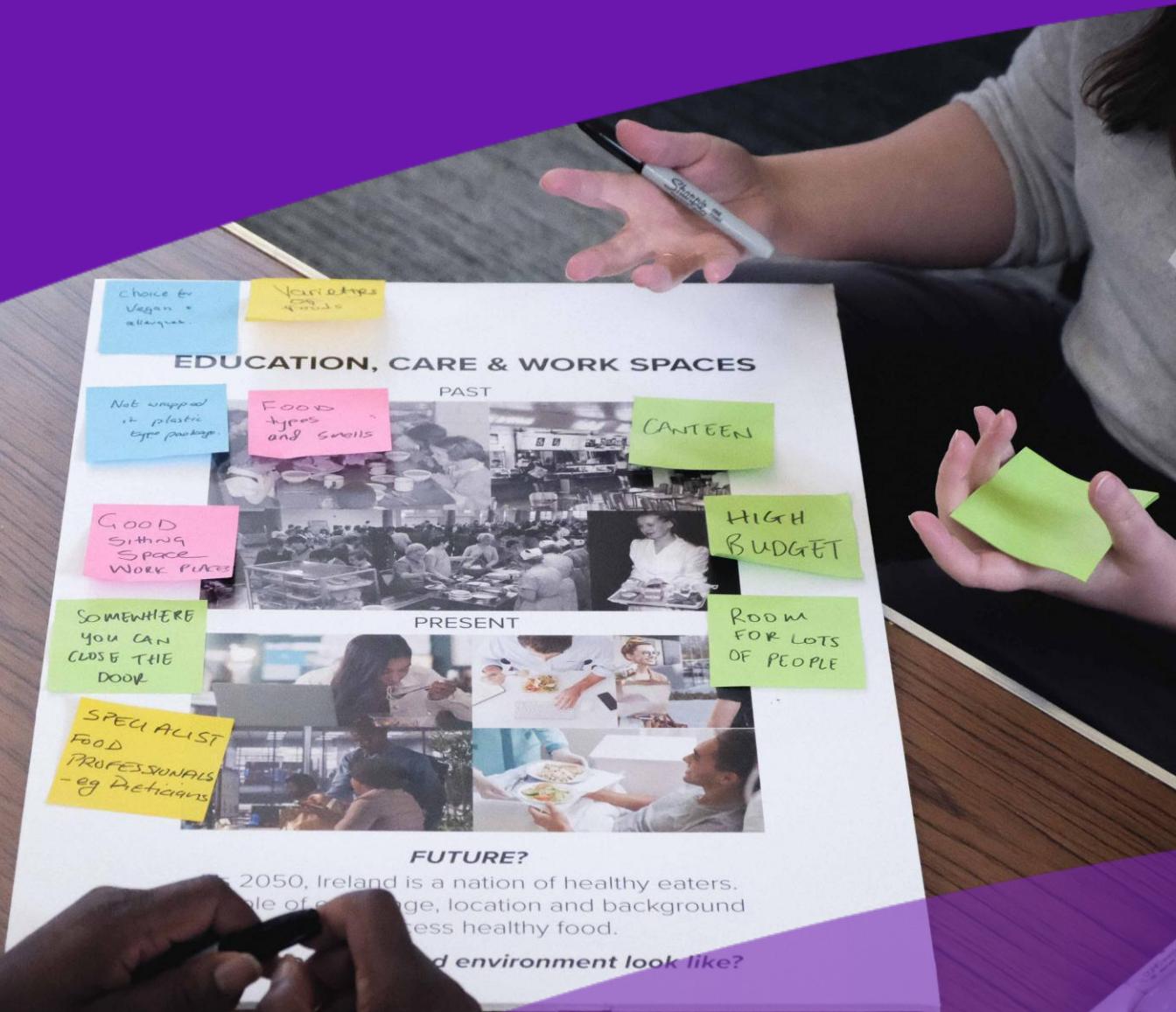
We clustered and summarised visions and ideas to produce a list of the most popular ideas for each food environment. Steve created refined illustrations for these ideas. We then identified key themes emerging from the workshops.

Driving and sustaining dialogue

An exhibition, *Appetite for Change*, will bring to life the vibrancy and passion of the workshops. It will take place in Belfast and Dublin in early 2026. Central to the exhibition will be large-scale versions of Steve's illustrations, along with key quotes about the visions. Each exhibition will conclude with an expert panel discussion.

The exhibition aims to energise viewers and encourage them to be part of positive change. By sharing people's visions and desires, the event will enhance stakeholders' and policymakers' knowledge and awareness of the food environment and of what people across the island want it to be.

Key themes



People want change

The programme produced robust, diverse discussions and ideas that represent voices across the island of Ireland. It shows that people want food environments that make healthy choices easy, affordable, and accessible. They support stronger regulation of marketing; smaller portion sizes; and redesigned retail layouts to reduce the constant pull of unhealthy food.

1. Community food systems

People struggle to access fresh, local, affordable food, and they believe local producers and growers are struggling to survive. They call out the depersonalisation of food shopping and eating experiences – with self-service checkouts, self-ordering kiosks and app-based ordering – which can intensify loneliness in communities.

People yearn for main streets lined with a local grocer, butcher, greengrocer and bakers that they had in the past. They believed this would enhance the food environment and strengthen community connections. People also called for more community involvement in food production through collaborative growing and cooking initiatives.

2. Government incentives

People want incentives to make healthy food choices easier and more affordable. Suggestions include:

- reward-based club card systems that incentivise healthy eating
- vouchers to support the buying of healthy food for children and for those who struggle to afford healthy food

People believe that small suppliers offering healthy, local food struggle to survive against conglomerates and large-scale retailers and producers. They suggested small suppliers should have grants or reduced taxes, to make healthier food cheaper for everyone.

3. Regulation of marketing and promotion

People are overwhelmed by the constant, clever and pervasive advertising of unhealthy foods across mainstream media, social media, retail spaces and public places. Many people feel tempted by promotions and deals that can make it hard to resist unhealthy choices.

People want stricter rules on how unhealthy food can be marketed, particularly to children, young people and vulnerable adults. They suggest regulating the timing and placement of adverts and banning certain types of advertising entirely. People also want restrictions on 2-for-1 deals and in-store or online pushes that disproportionately feature unhealthy options.

They highlight the possible role of influencers, community leaders and public figures in normalising healthy eating, and call for balanced marketing that reframes healthy food as enjoyable and desirable.

4. Clear and consistent information

People are confused by food information on packaging and at the point of sale, including product health claims, nutrition labels, ingredient lists, menu labelling and health warnings.

They want food information to be communicated clearly, consistently and in a way that is easy for all to understand.

They envision truthful, easy-to-understand nutrition and food safety labelling on products. They propose information or warnings on products high in sugar, salt or other concerning ingredients, including in places where such information is often absent, such as restaurants and takeaways.

5. Prominence of healthy food in supermarkets

There is a desire to see shops redesigned, so that unhealthy foods are less prominent and harder to access – making healthier choices the easier, default option.

Many believe redesigning retail spaces is essential, to make unhealthy foods less visible and harder to access. They say current layouts and packaging strategies favour unhealthy food. They point to the placement of sugary or high-fat snacks at children's eye level, making them hard to avoid.

Some people wanted more radical action, such as treating sugar like tobacco or alcohol by keeping it behind the counter and regulating who can buy it and in what quantity.

6. Healthier portion options

When eating out, people want more healthy options. They also want more control over menu choices, to allow for substitution of ingredients and smaller portions.

People are frustrated with their current eating-out and take-away environments, which they feel encourage us to choose larger, less healthy options.

They believe that menus and in-store ordering systems, particularly in takeaways and fast-food outlets, exert a bias towards deals that promote excess ordering and larger, unhealthier portion sizes. Rather than defaulting to unhealthy add-ins like sugar, salt, or butter, they want an “opt-in” approach.

Healthy food environments



Food environment ideas

This is a summary of the key ideas for each of the 6 food environments that were shared in the workshops.

Food shops

- **More local, smaller 'corner' shops** like butchers, bakers, and fruit and vegetable shops. Provide more physical spaces for local producers in towns and markets.
- **Improve the layout of food retail spaces** to make healthier choices the easier, default option. Some suggest putting unhealthy food behind the counter like alcohol and cigarettes. Others recommend making the 'healthy food' sections more appealing in terms of layout, presentation, and location in the shop.
- **Clear food labelling** to help people make informed decisions, including healthy options and requirements, and health warnings. People are confused by health claims and health facts and want clearer information.
- **Incentivise healthier eating and shopping habits** through loyalty cards or apps that warn people about unhealthy food or allergens. Likewise, the system would encourage healthy eating through rewards points or discounts.
- **An in-store nutritional advice service** which would support the reimagining of food retail spaces. People could get advice from experts and learn about cooking skills and individualised dietary requirements.
- **Develop innovative technology** which would deliver personalised food choices to shoppers' trolleys when they enter a supermarket – making it easier to avoid the temptation of special offers on unhealthy food.
- **Support urban food markets and farm shops** to sell organic, healthy produce from local suppliers and producers.
- **Incentivise the sale of loose fruit and vegetables** so shoppers can control how much they buy, reducing costs and waste.



Food on-the-go

- **Make fresh fruit free, available, and accessible** in public spaces so everyone can eat healthy snacks, such as fruit trees on city streets or free fruit in petrol stations, universities, and shops.
- **Introduce healthy vending machines** that stock only healthy snacks, presented appealingly.
- **Subsidise healthier options** that make it easier for 'on-the-go' locations, such as petrol stations, to stock them.
- **Run small food supplier pilots** in petrol stations that provide designated spaces to promote local artisan produce, giving them the chance to promote their products in outlets with high footfall.
- **Ban vending machines** selling unhealthy foods.
- **Introduce self-catering facilities** in on-the-go outlets as user-centred spaces where people can bring their own ingredients and cook meals.
- **Introduce free water stations** across the island of Ireland.



Food delivery

- **Increase healthy 'ready-to-cook' delivery options** so people can order affordable meal kits and delivery boxes rather than takeaways or unhealthy ready-made meals. These kits would help develop healthy cooking habits and promote healthy eating.
- **Incentivise healthy food delivery services** by offering lower delivery charges or discounts on healthier options. Healthier food deliveries would encourage healthy food choices and support healthy food suppliers.
- **Introduce healthy delivery vans** to deliver local produce and fresh ingredients, such as milk, yoghurt, and fruit and vegetables, like the old-style milkman or vegetable van.
- **Increase healthy takeaway and drive-through options** to expand healthy food options.
- **Support drone delivery services** of locally grown, seasonal products to make healthy food fast, easy, and convenient.
- **Redesign and regulate delivery apps** to limit unhealthy food promotions.
- **Ban fast-food takeaway meal deals** that encourage people to buy multiple unhealthy items, such as fizzy drinks, chips, ice cream, and add-ons.

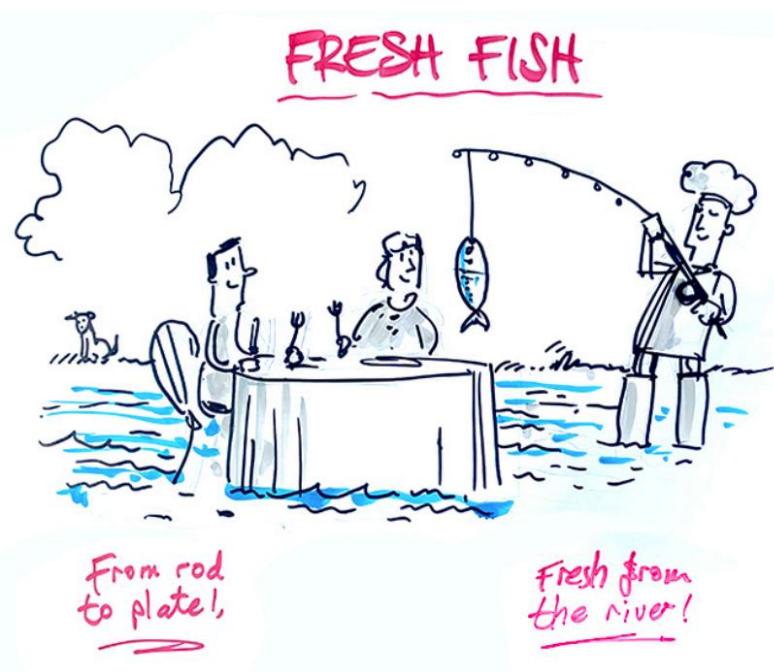
Regulate touchscreen ordering to encourage in-person ordering and promote healthier choices.

- **Make takeaway packaging include nutritional information** so people can easily read and understand ingredients and nutritional information.



Eating out

- **Introduce colour-coded menus** with a traffic-light system, indicating a scale from healthy to unhealthy food options. This visual cue would help customers to make informed food choices.
- **Introduce accreditations for healthy restaurants** based on nutrition, atmosphere, cleanliness, and the availability of healthy options.
- **Make personalised food options** available in restaurants to allow customers to swap ingredients for healthier substitutes.
- **Introduce government regulations on the number of fast-food outlets** and unhealthy restaurants allowed in a particular area.
- **Incentivise healthy, fresh local produce** and encourage restaurants to provide attractive healthy dishes by offering grants or tax breaks.
- **Ensure smaller, cheaper, healthier portions** are available in all restaurants.
- **Encourage** everyone to grow their own food in gardens or allotments.



Education, care and workspaces

- **Provide designated eating time and comfortable spaces** in work and school settings, to encourage children and adults to sit, pause and enjoy their food during the day.
- **Introduce subsidised healthy food** in work settings, schools, and hospitals. Support these subsidies by offering vouchers to ensure everyone, especially children, can afford healthy food.
- **Introduce kitchens and chefs** in schools, offices, and hospitals so that freshly cooked hot meals are available to everyone.
- **Develop communal kitchen spaces** so people can prepare food and have control over the food they eat outside the home.
- **Healthy eating policies** that mandate the type of food offered in public spaces such as universities, schools, hospitals, and sports clubs.
- **Appoint Food Development Officers** to help implement healthy eating policies and ensure their success, supported and guided by Healthy Eating policies.

- **Introduce community cooking classes** in schools, work settings, and community centres to develop people's cooking skills and knowledge about healthy eating.

KIDS MAKING THEIR OWN FOOD for LUNCHES



Food adverts and social media

- **Use unhealthy food marketing tactics** to promote healthy food.
- **Ban unhealthy food and junk food adverts**, especially those targeting children and young people. The ban should include false health claims and food promotions by celebrities, influencers and sports personalities that set unrealistic goals and standards.
- **Ban 2-for-1 offers on unhealthy foods**, particularly deals that encourage overconsumption of harmful products.
- **Put negative visuals on unhealthy food packaging**, like alcohol and cigarette health warnings, showing the negative health effects, to dissuade people from buying them.

- **Have more adverts showing the impact of healthy eating habits** to inspire people to make healthier food choices.
- **Regulating when and where certain unhealthy foods** can be advertised, such as restrictions around school and university locations or during mealtimes.
- **Support healthy food influencers to promote** healthy food products, healthy food culture, cooking, habits, and lifestyles.

MORE AD-FREE ENVIRONMENTS



Policy preferences



Priority policy actions

The Food Environment Forum roadmap sets out several actions being taken by organisations to drive change, including possible policy actions.

To understand the kind of policy action people want to see happen first, we asked participants at the end of each workshop to vote which of these policies they felt should be prioritised.

The action most supported was banning unhealthy food advertising to children, followed by ensuring public food environments serve healthy food and regulating in-store food displays to make healthy options more visible. Table 1 gives the complete ranking of actions.

Table 1: Policy action ranking table

Ranking	Policy action
1	Ban unhealthy food ads aimed at kids, for example on billboards, posters, social media, YouTube, television and radio.
2	Ensure public food environments such as hospitals, councils, parks and other public areas are serving healthy food.
3	Make a law about how shops display food, to make healthy food easier to see.
4	Change the food available to children through sports clubs or leisure centres.
5	Make a law so that restaurants and take-aways have to offer healthier, right-sized portions for kids.
6	Make a law that limits how many fast-food restaurants or take-aways can be in a community.
7	Ban the advertising and selling of unhealthy food on public transport.

Conclusion



Drawing on the Citizen Engagement programme, we created 'Appetite for Change,' an exhibition showcasing people's vision for a healthier food environment. The exhibition will be held in Belfast and Dublin in early 2026.

The programme's outcomes will facilitate ongoing dialogue among communities, the media, and policymakers, and will guide the next phase of our Food Environment campaign and related policy initiatives.

Overall, people showed strong support for change in the food environment and expressed optimism about broader societal progress.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all participants and group leaders who contributed their time, ideas and perspectives to the Citizen Engagement programme.

This report was prepared in conjunction with M-CO who were responsible for the design and delivery of the Citizen Engagement Programme.

