



Focus on Food

How cost of living pressures are affecting consumers' food shopping and eating habits

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Introduction

In response to rising living costs experienced by consumers in Northern Ireland, the Consumer Council commissioned Perceptive Insight Market Research Limited to undertake a series of 12 focus group discussions, from August 2022 to January 2023.

The aim was to develop a greater understanding of the issues that consumers in Northern Ireland have encountered in relation to increased food prices and wider cost of living pressures. Specifically, we wanted to hear about consumer's shopping and cooking behaviours, coping strategies, and their views on the current situation. The research included sessions held with the Consumer Council's priority groups: older consumers, consumers with a disability or long-term health condition, consumers on a low-income, and consumers living in rural areas. We also heard from participants recruited from the general public, generally representative of the Northern Ireland population, and parents with school-age children, some of whom had additional needs.

Key Observations

- Food affordability is by far the most dominant concern expressed by consumers across all income groups, but particularly for low-income consumers, those with young families and consumers with a disability or long-term health condition.
- Participants expressed surprise and disbelief at how quickly food prices had escalated, commenting this had taken place so rapidly and at such a scale they felt they had been "caught off guard".
- Consumers are pragmatic in response to cost of living pressures and most report a range of behaviours designed to cope with higher bills. Cutting back, shopping around, looking for deals and monitoring spending all feature highly in the activities and behaviours discussed by participants.

- Despite rising food prices, participants care about quality and choice, with many highlighting the negative impact that cost is having on their ability to access healthier food choices.
- When we asked about consumers' emotions in relation to rising food prices the responses were stark, with the top four responses being Anxious (73%), Angry (56%), Frustrated (56%), and Stressed (56%).
- Participants were candid when discussing their financial situation, sharing they had accessed, or would soon need to access support from a food bank. However, participants whilst divulging this would often express feelings of shame and embarrassment.
- Focus group discussions often turned to the impact that food prices and wider cost of living pressures are having on participant's and/or their family's mental health, and how food costs often impacted on their ability to socialise, leading to feelings of social isolation.

Methodology

Twelve focus groups were undertaken and in total our researchers heard from 94 consumers. The discussions were hosted via video call.

August 2022

Topic 1: Feeding the family

- Low-income families in general
- Low-income families who have children with additional needs

Topic 2: Older consumers' food shopping concerns and behaviours

September 2022

Topic 3: Coping with the cost of living

- Consumers in general
- Low-income consumers

Topic 4: Food shopping concerns and behaviours of consumers with a disability or long-term health condition

November 2022

Topic 5: Food sustainability

- Consumers in general
- Low-income consumers

Topic 6: Rural consumers' food shopping concerns and behaviours

January 2023

Topic 7: Post-Christmas food costs

- Families with school-age children
- Low-income families with school-age children

Topic 8: Low-income consumers' food shopping concerns and behaviours

Main findings

Affordability

Participants noticed how prices had risen in all product categories, but gave mention to dairy products, including butter and milk; meat, including chicken and beef; fresh fruit; eggs; bread; cereal; and items associated with dietary restrictions like dairy-free or gluten-free products.

"Most days my kids get toast because the cereal is just so expensive."

Male, Lisburn, 40-49, Low-income consumer with additional needs

"It's scary that you don't really feel you have much choice, you just have to pay the wee bit extra."

Female, Belfast, 40-49, Low-income priority group

"It's a struggle week to week. You're counting the pennies constantly in the copper jars to try and get money out for just like the milk and the bread."

Male, Lisburn, 40-49, Low-income with additional needs

“Breakfast, I don't eat breakfast anymore. Lunch time, it's basically just a loaf of bread that lasts throughout the week for myself, whereas the child, obviously the child will eat normal, but I've definitely eaten a lot less in the last three, four months and then I think the wintertime I don't know what's going to happen there but could be worse.”

Male, Belfast, 30-39, Low-income priority group

“...My oil tank is sitting empty at the minute. I can't afford to put oil in the tank at this moment in time because I've just had to buy food...It's heating or eating. I hope the stigma is going to go away because you know what? I'm sitting here with very little in my bank account thinking I might have to go to a food bank. I might have to because I don't work now. I used to work but I had to stop working because my illness has got worse... I thought, I'm going to have to go into my overdraft to get food.”

Female, 30-39, County Fermanagh, Disability consumers

I think our bread consumption has doubled in the last couple of months because we're eating bread when we should be eating better food, if you know what I mean. We're not eating good balanced meals. We're eating just to get filled up sometimes.”

Male, 70-79, Older consumer priority group

Shopping habits

Rising food prices have led consumers to make changes to their food shopping behaviours, including:

- Switching to a discounter supermarket, in some cases overcoming previous hesitancy about shopping in a 'low-budget' setting;
- Visiting discounter variety stores, especially for cleaning products and snack foods;
- Switching to local suppliers like a butchers, factory or farm shops;
- Doing more of their food shopping online to help stick to a budget; and

- Increasingly shopping in the “reduced” section of supermarkets.

Overall, participants mentioned being more aware of what they are buying and how much it costs.

Healthy eating

Focus group participants had a good understanding of what constituted healthy eating, which they generally associated with:

- Consuming more fruit and vegetables;
- Preparing home cooked meals;
- Eating fewer calories/eating in moderation; and
- Combining with exercise.

When asked about barriers that prevent achieving a healthy diet, affordability was a key concern. The majority of participants felt it was cheaper to buy less healthful items like convenience foods, snacks and treats than buying fruit, vegetables and items to cook a meal from scratch.

Fruit was mentioned by many with young families, with parents reporting how instead of buying a variety of fruits, they now tended to restrict their purchase to one type of fruit at a time, usually the one that is on offer on a given day. Some also said they had switched to cheaper alternatives like frozen fruit and vegetables, which they viewed as being not as healthy.

“We would kind of buy a lot less fruit than we used to because the prices are just obscene...even though it benefits [my daughter], we just can't afford it.”

Male, Belfast, 30-39, Low-income

“Healthy eating sounds good. But the price of vegetables and fruit is through the roof at the minute.”

Male, 60-69, Older consumers priority group

“You're not getting your five-a-day every day.”

Female, 60-69, Older consumers priority group

“Healthy food is so expensive, so expensive. Breads, meat, eggs, everything that you need for healthiness is just ridiculous. Where it's just easy to buy a cheeseburger or something for 99p.”

Male, 30-39, Poyntzpass, Low-income

“You have to kind of cut back on the healthy, and the unhealthy is actually cheaper now”.

Female, Hamiltonsbawn, 40-49, Low income

Participants also acknowledged there were other factors which impacted eating healthily. Convenience was talked about a lot, with many stating how the time and effort involved in preparing healthier meals from scratch often made it difficult to fit in to busy schedules.

“Sometimes you would come home with the intention of eating really healthy, and you'd be like, all right, I'm going to have this for my dinner. And then by the time you get home and you get the kids settled and you get homework done and stuff, you're like, you know what, we'll just get a Chinese, or you'll just get chippie or you'll get a pizza or something, and it's easier.”

Male, 30-39, Antrim, Rural consumers priority group

“But I can understand for families here, or somebody who's working, because now I would make things that you start from scratch. But when I was working, I wouldn't have done that. In fact, I worked as a carer and I sat in the car and I had a curry chip because I hadn't time to do anything else.”

Female, 60-69, Portadown, General public

“I just don't have the time by the time I finish work. And then I try to go to the gym and then I try to cook and see my mum and basically do everything. And there's

not enough hours in the day. So yeah, I do buy the odd jar like of pesto and pasta for handiness.”

Female, 40-49, Lisbellaw, General public

“It depends on what time you have, what time you get in from work and what time kids activities start up. But yes, different at the weekends, you’d cook from scratch for Sunday dinner and stuff like that.”

Female, 30-39, Newry, Low-income

“The more convenient it is, the better in my house, really. Plus, I hate cooking.”

Female, 50-59, Fermanagh, Rural consumers priority group

One parent shared how they made it work in their family:

“We cook as much as we can because the kids actually enjoy cooking too so it’s a good help. They might not always come out the way you want, but I still have to eat it.”

Male, 40-49, Enniskillen, Low-income

Convenience was also a factor talked about by participants in the disability and long-term health condition priority group. One participant mentioned how because of their disability they often resorted to convenience meals, as they become easily exhausted. Issues with spasms also affected this participant’s ability to cook and deal safely with hot items.

“Because of my disability, I can’t always be standing up and cooking and things like that, and my right arm gives way, so I do get convenience meals as well. So my microwave gets used quite a lot, actually. The ready meals have gone a lot dearer, but for me, it’s a convenience.”

Female 30-39, County Fermanagh, Disability or long-term health condition priority group

Some focus group participants discussed how willpower was also a big factor, with many opting for easy/comfort food. It was notable however that several participants reported having cut back buying takeaway food due to the high cost.

Catering to different eating preferences, particularly in families with fussy eaters was another barrier mentioned by a number of participants in trying to eat more healthily. Some parents shared that while they would like to have home-cooked meals for the family, their children preferred less healthy food like chicken nuggets and other frozen foods. Therefore, rather than cooking multiple meals for different family members, they often have the same food their children have.

One participant highlighted they usually cook the same repertoire of meals because they were unsure of whether their children would be willing to eat new meals, and they couldn't risk wasting the money spent on the food.

“Well, for the fruit, I have to make him a smoothie. He does not eat vegetables, so I make them a smoothie and a handful of spinach in it. My daughter will just eat them, not a problem. And then the other one, he would eat anything. But my son will not eat, not unless it's into a smoothie because he does not touch vegetables at all.”

Female, 40-49, Ballymena, Low-income priority group

Pack sizes were also seen as a deterrent for some smaller households and those living alone.

“They've sort of got bags for everybody who's got partners or families and all this. Whereas if you're cooking a one-man meal and some nights I do, you're throwing half of it out.”

Male, 60-69, Comber, General public

Saving on other bills

Participants reported other activities they're undertaking to bring down the cost of their household bills. Some discussed the struggle of compromising on heating in order to be able to provide meals for the family, and others anticipated how a time will come soon when they would have to choose between food and heating due to the high costs.

Participants shared how they are consciously:

- Switching off lights;
- Avoiding unnecessary car journeys;

- Reducing the use of the tumble dryer (but were worried about their ability to dry clothes in the winter); and
- Restricting unnecessary purchases such as clothes; and
- Teaching their children about the need to control spending.

“They can put on an extra jumper and grab a blanket, they can keep warm that way, but we do have to feed them, so something has to give. So it will obviously be your heating, you have to feed your children.”

Female, Hamiltonsbawn, 40-49, Low-income priority group

Saving money in the kitchen

Consumers have also become more aware of home energy costs associated with cooking, with some of the participants reporting how they have begun to use different cooking appliances to save money i.e., a slow cooker, air fryer, microwave, or halogen oven.

“Every time I put the oven on, I'm like it's just chicken nuggets and waffles and chips and things for the little one. I think every night it's going on and I'm thinking I'm now conscious of that actually.”

Female, 30-39, County Fermanagh, Disability or long-term health condition priority group

“I've also got an air fryer that cuts down electric. If I want to cook something, a small meal, in an oven, then I don't have to heat the proper oven. I can use the air fryer which helps.”

Male, 60-69, Comber, General public

“My slow cooker is never off now. Before, like, once in a blue moon I used it, but now I'm throwing stews and casseroles and things in it because I know I'm sort of, like, budgeting how much a dinner will cost and it feeds everybody. That you're not doing two and three different dinners. And it's cheaper to use the slow cooker than using the oven.”

Female, 30-39, County Armagh, Low-income

“So you do kind of factor that in [energy cost], with the price, the way things are the minute, you don't want to be spending an absolute fortune on the meal and then spending an absolute fortune cooking the thing either. It's probably cheaper going out by the time you got it all done.”

Male, 30-39, Antrim, Rural consumers priority group

In terms of cooking habits, participants also reported they were doing more batch-cooking to save both time and money and cooking multiple items in the oven at once to make the most out of energy use.

“You sort of grew up like that, with my mother doing things like that, you didn't waste food and that sort of thing. So maybe we have an advantage over the younger generation.”

Female, 60-69, Older consumers priority group

“I've started to do things like when I'm making a roast on a Sunday, maybe putting a casserole in the bottom of the oven so that's for the next day, so that the oven is not on twice. The next day then the oven doesn't need to go on. That's to save a wee bit.”

Female, 50-59, Ballymena, General Public

Other approaches to saving on cooking costs included:

- Preparing quick meals like stir-fries to reduce the amount of gas/electricity used;
- Only boiling a kettle when the whole family sit down for a cup of tea rather than using it multiple times during the day. (This participant had used a card meter in the past so they knew which appliances had the worst energy consumption);
- Using the barbeque to save some money (the participant had some spare gas left in the cylinder); and
- Cooking at night because the participant said it is a cheaper tariff at this time.

Avoiding food waste

Several participants commented on the large amount of food wastage taking place. They felt the rising cost of living was helping people become more conscious of food waste and taking measures to reduce it.

“I think you're a bit more conscious of not wasting food now because it is so expensive. If you have something left over, it is going to make you something the next day, whether it be a sandwich for your lunch or you're going to make it in some form of dinner, stir fry it up or whatever.”

Male, 40-49, Enniskillen, Low-income priority group

“If we had pasta the night before, I'd keep some for my lunch tomorrow to save me having to make something and use more food that I don't need to use. I would have just went and got whatever I wanted for my lunch. But I can't afford it, so I just got whatever there is.”

Female, Lisburn, 39-39, Low-income with additional needs

“If I notice something's going to go off, I'll freeze it, or I'll cook it and then freeze it, so that I can use it. But then that just means that my freezer is full all the time.”

Female, 20-29, Belfast, General Public

Accessing support

Food banks

With low-income households increasingly struggling with the cost of living, we were keen to hear if people had sought help from their local food bank. Latest figures from Trussell Trust Northern Ireland highlights increased demand, with food banks in their network having distributed more than double the amount of food parcels than they did five years ago.

A number of focus group participants indicated they had recently used a food bank, with several others saying they were on the brink of reaching out to one in the near future.

“Well, I've had a broken relationship, so I had to get a food bank there for the first time in my life. So a bit embarrassing. But to be honest with you, I actually got a really good parcel of food from them, so, yeah, I definitely notice my money is just not the same.”

Female, 40-49, Ballymena, Low-income

“It has to be a food bank because I've just split up with my husband, so I've not got any money. Money that I did have is just gone. I've had to go to the food bank because I've not had a choice.”

Female, 50-59, near Ballymoney, Disability or long-term health condition priority group

“I have used the food banks before. I had to use it two or three times going into Christmas last year. Sometimes it's really, really, really tough.”

Female, Lisburn, 30-39, Low income with additional needs

It was concerning that many participants, whilst indicating they needed support, were not sure how to access it.

“I'm on a low income, I'm only working part time, 10 hours a week. And he has recently, like three years ago, started his own business...very much still only getting it off the ground. But because he has a business and I work and we have a mortgage, we don't check any boxes of being poor, you know what I mean?”

Female, 30-39, Fermanagh, Low-income priority group

“It depends on your circumstance and what access that you've got. Like if you've got a social worker involved or health officer involved, or GP involved or housing officer involved. It really depends on who you can sort of access, I think you can self-refer too.”

Female, 30-39, Burren, County Down, Rural consumers

Some participants felt the stigma associated with food banks might be slowly disappearing as more people use them. Regrettably though, it was clear a sense of embarrassment or shame persisted for those who had recently turned to food banks

for support. One participant commented how she had worked all her life and never thought that she would end up in a position of no savings and not having enough money for food. Another participant shared that while she was embarrassed to use it, she was very grateful for the supplies.

"[I felt] embarrassed. Especially if you meet somebody walking in and I'd go in with a cap on, a hoody, sunglasses... I was delighted with it because there was everything in it. There was shampoo, toilet rolls, shower gel and then your tin foods obviously, pasta, rice, stuff like that."

Female, 40-49, Ballymena, Low income

Social Supermarkets

There were low levels of awareness about social supermarkets amongst participants. The social supermarket model aims to offer more choice and to remove the stigma as shoppers pay a small sum to shop there, and can avail of a wider range of goods, including fresh produce. The aim is to roll these out across the 11 council areas in Northern Ireland and to provide a referral network to other advice agencies, therefore offering a 'more than food' approach. Most focus group participants felt social supermarkets were a good idea.

"It's basically a step up before you use the food bank."

Male, 60-69, Comber, General public

Community fridges

One participant mentioned a community fridge that she uses, which works to reduce wastage by using food that would otherwise go into the landfill. Supermarkets donate food, mainly perishable goods such as bread, fruit and vegetables. This, however, is not a daily occurrence and it is only open when supermarkets donate items. She explained that each person can take and fill a bag with whatever they need, at no cost. On hearing this, most participants thought this was a great idea. It was also felt this might overcome some of the stigma associated with food banks as a community fridge is presented as being good for the environment.

"I have to say I would use it, the fresh vegetables and loads of different types of things, and I would go sometimes and pick up things... I think is great for the

community. And they save so many hundreds of tonnes of food going to the landfill every year.”

Female, 60-69, Older consumers priority group

Healthy Start Scheme

Awareness levels of the Healthy Start Scheme was mixed. The scheme issues recipients with a card that can be used in shops to help buy healthy food and milk. Eligibility is determined by several criteria, but it is primarily for those who are more than 10 weeks pregnant or have a child/children under the age of four, and are in receipt of benefits and/or earn below a certain threshold.

Those who had availed of the scheme talked about some of the limitations of use, for example the range of shops you could use it in, although this may have pre-dated the move from paper vouchers to a digitalised card.

Others talked about how the scheme could only be used for cow's milk and not substitutes for those with dairy intolerance or other dietary restrictions.

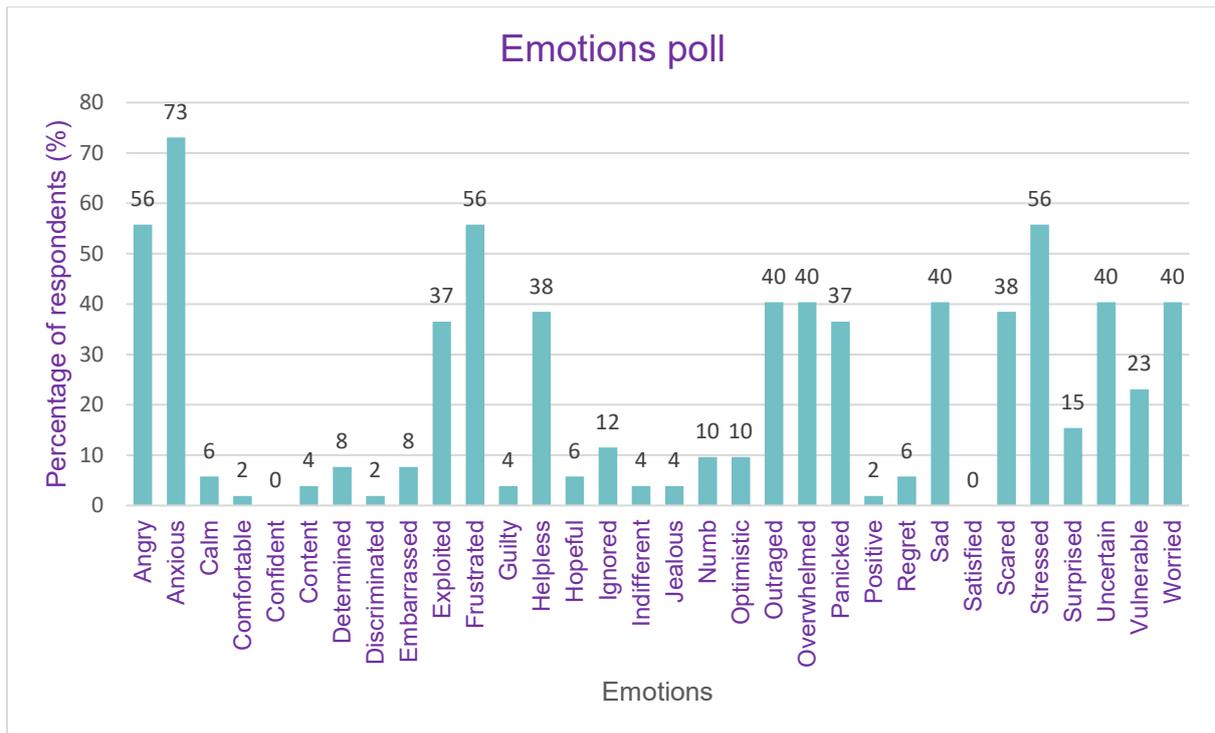
One participant was currently pregnant and benefitting from the scheme. However, she had been unaware that she could avail of it from when she was ten weeks pregnant and has therefore missed out on 30 weeks' worth of benefits.

Feelings about food prices

This research focused through the year on how consumers in Northern Ireland were coping with household expenditure, and what they were doing in response.

However, we also wanted to get a sense of how rising food prices were impacting consumers on an emotional level.

Participants from six of the focus groups (52 respondents) were presented with an 'emotions poll' containing an extensive list of positive and negative emotions. They were asked to select the emotions they felt best reflected their feelings about the rising cost of food. The combined results are shown in the following chart:



The most common emotions chosen by participants include:

- Anxious (73%);
- Angry (56%);
- Frustrated (56%);
- Stressed (56%);
- Outraged (40%);
- Overwhelmed (40%);
- Sad (40%);
- Uncertain (40%); and
- Worried (40%).

This was followed by Helpless (38%), Scared (38%), Exploited (37%) and Panicked (37%).

The lowest scoring responses were:

- Confident (0%);

- Satisfied (0%);
- Positive (2%);
- Comfortable (2%); and
- Discriminated (2%)

On reviewing the responses from their group, participants commented that it was comforting to know they were not on their own and that other people were feeling the same way.

Participants reflected on their sense of surprise at how quickly food prices had escalated, commenting this had taken place so rapidly and at such a scale that they felt they had been “caught off guard”, and without warning.

“So it pretty much happened overnight. I think that’s what annoyed a lot of people and upset a lot of people.”

Male, 40-49, Newry, General public

One participant said they felt shocked when they read that the price of groceries increased by 14.5% and were frustrated that wages had not kept pace.

There was a lot of discussion in the groups trying to unpick why we are in the situation we are in. Several participants were curious to know if there were any resources that provided further information and clarity on the current situation and an explanation of why prices are increasing at the current rate.

Some commented how the rising cost of fuel and raw materials had resulted in increased production costs and attributed this to why food prices had risen. Participants went further to say that while the war in Ukraine had an impact, and they felt that irrespective of the situation, everything was now being blamed on the war, which made them question what was true. Others discussed the impact of COVID-19.

“I think it’s pretty much we’re paying for all the COVID-19, all the furlough, and all that there. So that’s why I think with today’s news with the energy cap and all that there, they’re trying to bring it back, a bit more normality back to it.”

Male, 40-49, Newry, General public

Many participants talked about the uncertainty of the whole situation. They did not know what to expect and therefore found it difficult to prepare themselves, leading to a sense of helplessness and a lack of control.

Feeling exploited

Some participants were angry and felt exploited, pointing to the reports about the big companies who in their eyes were making large profits out of others’ misfortune. Suspicion was expressed that those in power were manipulating the situation; and felt it was unfair how those in charge of setting the prices would not have to deal with the repercussions on the ground.

“I said jealous as well [in the emotions poll] because the people that have decided all these prices, they will never have to worry about the price of their shop, ever. And it’s everyone else that has to deal with it.”

Female, 20-29, Belfast, Low-income

Concern for others

Participants expressed concern for farmers, stating how they were not receiving the higher prices that customers were paying at supermarkets.

“It’s sad to see because I speak with a lot of farmers at work and stuff and they’re saying the price of milk is going up in general, but the price that they’re getting is not going up. But their price of electric is going up and their price of gas is going up and the price of feed and stuff is going up. Everybody’s concerned, everybody’s worried about it.”

Male, 30-39, Antrim, Rural consumers priority group

Some participants talked about their concern for others in their community who were worse off than them and may be struggling to feed themselves and their children.

“But my heart just goes out to families, people who are trying to feed a family and I don't know how they'll do it and maybe have a mortgage and everything. I just think it's terrible.”

Female, 60-69, Portadown, General public

Several participants observed how the middle working class are also struggling. They attributed this to wages not increasing in line with the cost of living, and at the same time not being eligible to receive financial support.

Some participants expressed worry for small businesses, hospitality and the self-employed like hairdressers and tradespeople. They anticipated that as people spend more on essential items, they will have less money to spend on non-essential things and these types of businesses and individuals will struggle to earn a living.

Mental health

Participants shared how the current situation has had an impact on their mental health. Parents discussed trying to mask their feelings so as to not worry their children.

“Yeah, we sort of try and keep our feelings to ourselves. We don't really want to show too much towards the boys. Don't want them getting worried about it. I think if they start worrying about it, then just don't know what way it's going to affect them.”

Male, 40-49, Irvingstown, General public

Other parents shared their concerns for children who have had to live through the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had already taken a toll on them, and then entering a culture of worry which has created an atmosphere of doom and gloom. Many said in their view, society was likely to see increased levels of people suffering from depression.

“I have a son who is affected by depression, and I think the way the world is at the minute, it's all doom and gloom. I think there's going to be a lot more mental health issues and God forbid there's going to be a lot more suicide,

because people are going to be in a really bad financial place and I would worry about what's going to come."

Female, 40-49, Lisbellaw, General public

"I actually had to stop reading news and stuff, because it was really causing such anxiety and I think that's what's happened at the minute. Everything is just doom and gloom and if you really take it all on board, it's just overwhelming."

Female, 60-69, Portadown, General public

Future outlook

Participants were asked if they think that things will get better or worse in the next six to 12 months in terms of managing food prices. Overall, participants were pessimistic about what the future held.

"I think it's definitely going to get worse. I think people are going to be on their knees before it gets better."

Male, 60-69, Comber, General public

"I think people will die; I really do. And I never could have dreamt that people in this country could die because they can't eat."

Female, 50-59, Saintfield, County Down, Older consumers

No one could envisage the situation improving. Some commented that it would get worse because they would have to start heating their home in winter which would add to their current spending. One participant suggested that while prices might steady out, they were unlikely to decrease, commenting that this would result in more profits for certain companies.

When asked how long they thought it would be until things got better, one participant felt that when the Ukraine war stopped, things like the price of fuel might start to change. On the whole though participants were unable to see light at the end of the tunnel.

Conclusions

Unsurprisingly, participants found it difficult to pinpoint changes that would help the current situation, other than the obvious and fundamental change being an uplift in income levels, and/or a downshift in food prices and other essential areas of household spend.

One solution discussed was government intervention, but participants were unsure how this would be implemented, or indeed sustained.

“I almost want to say I wish the government could help more, but I don't know what the government can do and I don't know what plans the government has. They're saying people with disabilities will get one payment of £150, but then they're not entitled to another payment for the warm home scheme or things like that. It seems to be they're taking from one and giving to the other and vice versa. I don't know, I just think we all need more help.”

Female, 30-39, County Fermanagh, Older consumers priority group

It was felt by many that supermarkets could do more in terms of lowering prices, especially as they were perceived buy most to be making large profits.

“Maybe the supermarkets could provide more because they're making such profits. The sales that they have, really, I think they pass the rising costs onto the consumer as opposed to absorbing the costs because their profits continue to rise all the time.”

- Male, 50-59, Ballymena, Low Income

In terms of cost, consumers were largely in agreement that healthy food costs considerably more than less healthy food. This is not simply a perception held by consumers about the comparative cost of healthy versus less healthy foods.

Analysis undertaken by the University of Cambridge for The Broken Plate report published by the Food Foundation in 2023¹, found that foods considered to be more healthy, as defined by the Government's Nutrient Profile Model, are over twice as

¹ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/broken-plate-2023#cost>

expensive as less healthy foods per calorie (£10.00 per 1,000kcal compared to £4.45). When broken down by Eatwell Guide², fruit and vegetables remain the most expensive category by a significant margin, costing on average £11.79 per 1,000kcal compared with food and drink high in fat and/ or sugar costing just £5.82 per 1,000kcal. One consequence is that the most deprived fifth of adults in the UK consume less fruit and vegetables (37% less), oily fish (54% less) and dietary fibre (17% less); and 56% of calories consumed by older children and adults are from ultra-processed foods³.

Tackling the high cost of healthy nutritious food, and the imbalance of healthy versus less healthy food promotions to improve accessibility for those on a lower income is an intervention that would need to be government led, but the food industry clearly has its part to play.

On a practical level, participants also discussed supermarkets providing guidance on cooking healthily for those on a low-budget. One participant mentioned the reintroduction of recipe cards that can be picked up in-store, and suggested that if the items on that recipe were on offer that week, it would encourage people to go for a healthier option.

“The likes of Asda and Tesco, produce the cards, and they could make the products cheaper for that recipe and that would help people buy it and batch it or whatever. Rather than looking through the YouTube and still going to have to buy the expensive stuff, they could produce the card and reduce the cost of the ingredients on that card.”

- Male, 60-69, Comber, General public

Supermarkets do have a wide range of resources online, in apps and in their magazines to help with meal ideas, however, it is possible that placing hardcopy

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eatwell-guide>

³ Madruga, M., Martínez Steele, E. et al. (2022). Trends in food consumption according to the degree of food processing among the UK population over 11 years. British Journal of Nutrition.

recipe cards (with a QR code) in a prominent position in-store would help those who have not pre-planned in advance of their shop, or those who operate mostly offline.

There was a lot of interest in community initiatives when these were discussed in the focus groups. In particular, the Community Fridge⁴ idea generated a good deal of enthusiasm, particularly as it had an environmental benefit, which it was felt would remove the stigma associated with other sources of support.

What was also clear from the focus group discussions is that consumers want to understand why they are being hit with higher prices. It may not change the situation, but an explanation, devoid of sensationalism, and clearer forecasting as to what lies ahead may combat the helplessness and lack of control voiced by participants.

⁴ <https://www.sustainableni.org/case-study/growing-network-community-fridges-northern-ireland>



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