MAY 2026

SALT OUT OUR SANDWICHES!

A nutritional analysis of the lunch-on-the-go staple

Action on Salt & Sugar

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents a comprehensive nutritional analysis of 546 ready-to-eat sandwiches available across UK retail and out-of-home (OOH) sectors. It assesses levels of key nutrients of concern, including salt, saturated fat, and fibre, and evaluates compliance with government reformulation targets, labelling criteria and wider public health policies.

The findings show that sandwiches, a staple of the UK diet and a core feature of meal deal culture, continue to make a significant contribution to excessive salt intake. More than 1 in 10 sandwiches exceed current UK salt and calorie reduction targets, while 44% would receive a red front-of-pack warning label for salt. In addition, around 1 in 4 sandwiches are classified as less healthy under current nutrient profiling regulations, limiting their eligibility for being promoted in stores and advertised on TV and online.

Large variations were observed both between and within companies and similar sandwich fillings, with some containing up to twice the salt of comparable alternatives. This degree of variation demonstrates that reformulation is feasible, yet progress under the voluntary salt reduction programme remains uneven.

In terms of sustainability, the analysis shows a continued dominance of meat-based options, with nearly three-quarters (74%) containing meat or fish. Plant-based options remain limited, accounting for just 6% in this survey, with several major retailers and food outlets offering no plant-based sandwiches at all. This imbalance reflects a wider food system heavily

reliant on industrial livestock production, which is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss and environmental degradation.

Given their widespread consumption, particularly among children and adults, sandwiches represent a critical opportunity for salt reduction and improved sustainability. Without stronger action, high salt intake will continue to drive preventable conditions such as hypertension, cardiovascular disease, stroke, and kidney disease, placing significant, yet avoidable pressure on the NHS. Increasing the availability of plant-rich options also represents a significant opportunity to improve public health, reduce environmental impact and support a more resilient food system.

These findings underscore the need for stronger government leadership and industry accountability, including mandatory salt targets, improving transparency through front-of-pack labelling across the entire food sector, and alignment with wider nutrition policies. Accelerated reformulation and increased availability of healthier, lower-salt options are both urgently needed and achievable.

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

44% of sandwiches qualify for high salt label

under current front-of-pack nutrition labelling criteria.

12% exceed salt targets

and 10% exceed calorie reduction targets.

Salt is inconsistently distributed across businesses and fillings

with some sandwiches containing up to twice the salt of comparable alternatives.

25% of sandwiches classified as 'less healthy'

under current High Fat, Salt and Sugar (HFSS) regulations - facing restrictions in promotion and advertising.

74% of sandwiches contain meat or fish

with plant alternatives accounting for only 6% of the total offering.

THE ISSUE

High salt intake is strongly linked to raised blood pressure, a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease, stroke and kidney disease. Reducing population salt intake remains one of the simplest and most cost-effective public health interventions available, with the potential to prevent thousands of premature deaths every year.

Despite this, salt intakes in the UK remain stubbornly high. Adults in England consume on average 8.4g of salt per day [1] – 40% above the maximum limit of 6g – with the majority coming from ready-to-eat foods and the OOH sector.

Sandwiches play a disproportionate role in this excess intake. Industry data indicates that sandwiches are among the most commonly consumed lunch options across all age groups and a staple of meal deal culture. [2,3] National Diet and Nutrition Survey data identifies sandwiches as major contributors to dietary salt, accounting for 11 - 12% of salt intake among adults and 13 - 15% among children. [4]

This contribution is driven by the cumulative salt content of common sandwich components. Sandwiches account for around half of all bread consumption, with bread itself a major source of salt in UK diets. [4] Popular filings, including cheese and processed meats, are also high in salt and widely used across sandwich ranges, [5,6] meaning routine lunch choices can quickly contribute a substantial amount of salt.

Public awareness of salt intake remains low, with many people unaware of recommended limits or where salt is coming from in their diets. [7] This sits parallel with high levels of undiagnosed high blood pressure, [8] leaving millions of people unknowingly at increased risk of preventable disease.
At the same time, the sandwich market continues to fall short in supporting healthier and more sustainable choices. Previous analysis [9] has shown a dominance of meat and cheese fillings, and limited availability of plant-based alternatives, which are often more expensive.

Taken together, the evidence highlights that sandwiches are a critical opportunity for action. Improving their nutritional quality, particularly through salt reduction, offers a practical and scalable route to improving population diets, reducing inequalities, and easing pressure on the NHS.

FINDINGS

OVERALL NUTRITION CONTENT

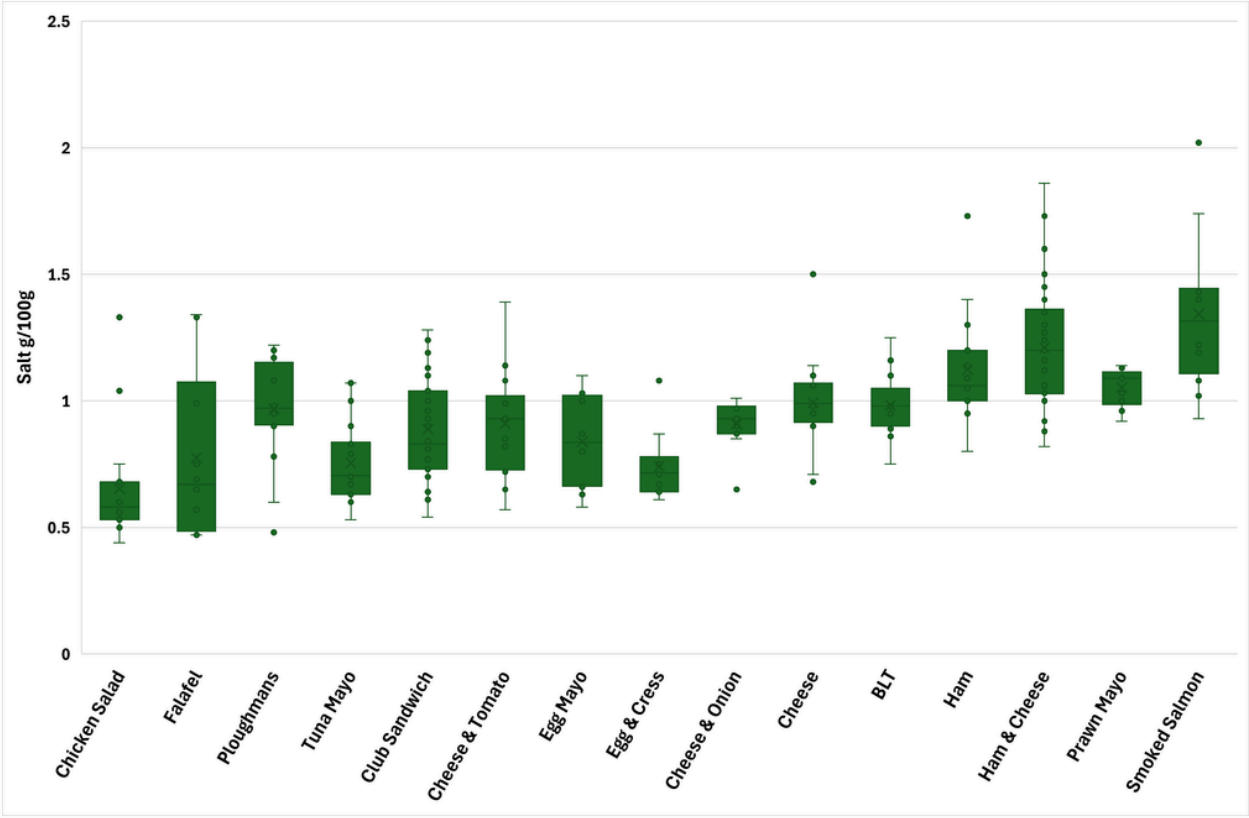
A total of 546 products were included in this analysis, with retailers accounting for the majority (62%), followed by OOH (35%) and manufacturers (3%).

On average, a typical sandwich contains 444kcal and provides 26% of daily maximum saturated fat intake, 31% maximum salt limit and only 14% of an adults daily fibre recommendation. [10] The most available fillings are listed in Table 1, alongside the large and significant range in saturated fat, salt and fibre. This gives a clear indication that salt reformulation is possible, in terms of technical feasibility as well as consumer acceptance (Figure 1).

Table 1. Average energy, fat, saturated fat, fibre and salt per serving, split by business type and category

Category	Number of Products	Energy kcal/serve (range)	Fat g/serve (range)	Saturated Fat g/serve (range)	Fibre g/serve (range)	Salt g/serve (range)
All	**546**	**444 (206-1067)**	**17.0 (2.4-67.0)**	**5.3 (0.5-36.0)**	**4.2 (0.9-17.8)**	**1.84 (0.60-6.88)**
OOH	**191**	**463 (206-1067)**	**18.6 (2.4-67.0)**	**6.2 (0.5-36.0)**	**4.3 (0.9-17.8)**	**2.08 (0.60-6.88)**
Retailer	**336**	**431 (244-759)**	**16.1 (3.2-43.3)**	**4.8 (0.5-14.5)**	**4.2 (1.2-14.0)**	**1.69 (0.75-3.78)**
Manufacturer	**19**	**488 (337-731)**	**17.3 (8.3-32.1)**	**3.6 (1.2-7.4)**	**4.8 (2.2-11.3)**	**1.90 (0.70-3.70)**
BLT	13	400 (317-454)	16.3 (11.3-24.9)	4.1 (1.2-8.0)	5.3 (2.0-11.8)	1.83 (1.41-2.34)
Cheese	15	414 (308-622)	18.3 (11.0-27.9)	9.4 (5.2-13.7)	3.2 (2.0-4.9)	1.56 (1.10-2.30)
Cheese & Tomato	19	461 (363-559)	21.4 (14.3-34.0)	9.3 (5.9-13.0)	4.3 (2.1-14.0)	1.66 (1.30-2.38)
Chicken Salad	17	445 (331-1067)	15.0 (5.2-66.0)	3.4 (0.9-18.0)	4.4 (2.4-6.1)	1.75 (0.99-6.88)
Club Sandwich	35	488 (302-759)	19.9 (11.0-34.9)	5.0 (2.2-11.0)	4.1 (1.7-13.5)	1.90 (1.00-3.4)
Ham	15	315 (244-644)	8.9 (4.6-31.6)	3.4 (1.1-6.8)	2.7 (1.7-4.9)	1.65 (1.19-2.54)
Ham & Cheese	37	468 (293-768)	18.5 (9.4-50.0)	8.9 (3.6-33.0)	3.6 (1.2-17.8)	2.25 (1.30 - 3.85)
Ploughman's	16	444 (322-643)	18.5 (14.0-28.5)	9.2 (4.9-12.1)	4.3 (2.0-6.6)	1.78 (0.96-2.82)
Smoked Salmon	13	419 (288-523)	17.0 (11.2-25.5)	5.0 (1.9-10.4)	4.4 (2.8-9.3)	2.54 (1.78-4.20)
Tuna Mayo	20	384 (257-668)	12.5 (4.9-25.3)	1.5 (0.7-5.0)	3.4 (1.3-5.8)	1.41 (0.82-2.46)

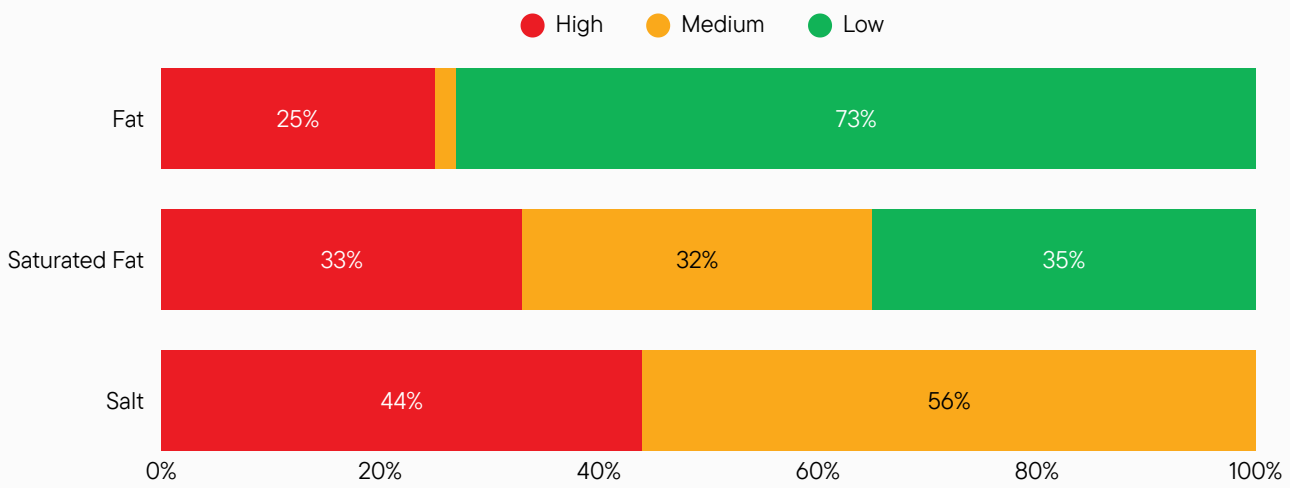
Figure 1. Variation in salt content per 100g across commonly available sandwich fillings



COMPARISON TO NUTRITION LABELLING CRITERIA

Across all the products analysed, 25% of sandwiches would be considered high in fat, 33% high in saturated fat, and 44% high in salt, according to the Government's colour-coded front of pack labelling criteria (Figure 2). [11] Seventy-four sandwiches were high in fat, saturated fat and salt simultaneously, with a significant share of PAUL's sandwich portfolio (67%) being high in all three, following by GAIL's (42%) and Marks & Spencer (33%).

Figure 2. Proportion of sandwiches defined as high, medium or low for fat, saturated fat and salt, according to front of pack labelling criteria



When broken down by sector, there was notable variation between businesses, with OOH reporting the highest proportion of sandwiches high in salt (59%), whereas retail had comparatively fewer (37%). The average fibre content was 4.2g per serving, which represents only 14% of an adult's recommended daily intake. In fact, across the board, 90% of the sandwiches surveyed would be considered low in fibre (<3g/100g or <1.5g per 100kcal). [12]

All sandwiches from four businesses had high levels of salt – GAIL's, Starbucks, Coco di Mama and Tootoomoo (Table 2). A significant number of businesses also had a high proportion of their sandwiches high in fat and saturated fat.

Pollen + Grace, The Gym Kitchen and Urban Rajah stood out for having no sandwiches high in fat, saturated fat, or salt.

Table 2. Proportion of sandwiches high in fat, saturated fat, and salt, and low in fibre. Sorted highest to lowest proportion for salt

Category	Number of products	High in Fat	High in Saturated Fat	High in Salt	Low in Fibre*
OOH					
GAIL's	12	100%	100%	100%	n/a*
Starbucks	9	n/a*	100%	100%	n/a*
PAUL	9	100%	78%	89%	100%
Pret A Manger	47	43%	32%	72%	74%
Subway	42	26%	31%	71%	95%
LEON	3	67%	33%	67%	100%
Costa Coffee	22	23%	68%	41%	82%
Greggs	35	0%	31%	31%	83%
Caffè Nero	12	25%	33%	25%	75%
Retail					
Marks & Spencer	54	50%	50%	72%	80%
Co-op	38	3%	26%	39%	87%
Aldi	32	13%	25%	38%	78%
Sainsbury's	43	21%	23%	35%	88%
Lidl	17	24%	29%	35%	100%
Waitrose	43	14%	26%	30%	86%
Tesco	65	20%	29%	25%	86%
Morrisons	24	13%	17%	17%	92%
ASDA	20	15%	25%	15%	90%

Manufacturer					
Coco di Mama	3	100%	33%	100%	100%
Tootoomoo	2	50%	0%	100%	100%
Tuk In	6	17%	0%	50%	67%
Pollen + Grace	2	0%	0%	0%	100%
The Gym Kitchen	3	0%	0%	0%	100%
Urban Rajah	2	0%	0%	0%	100%
Zinda Foods	1	0%	100%	0%	100%

*for businesses who provide insufficient nutrition information

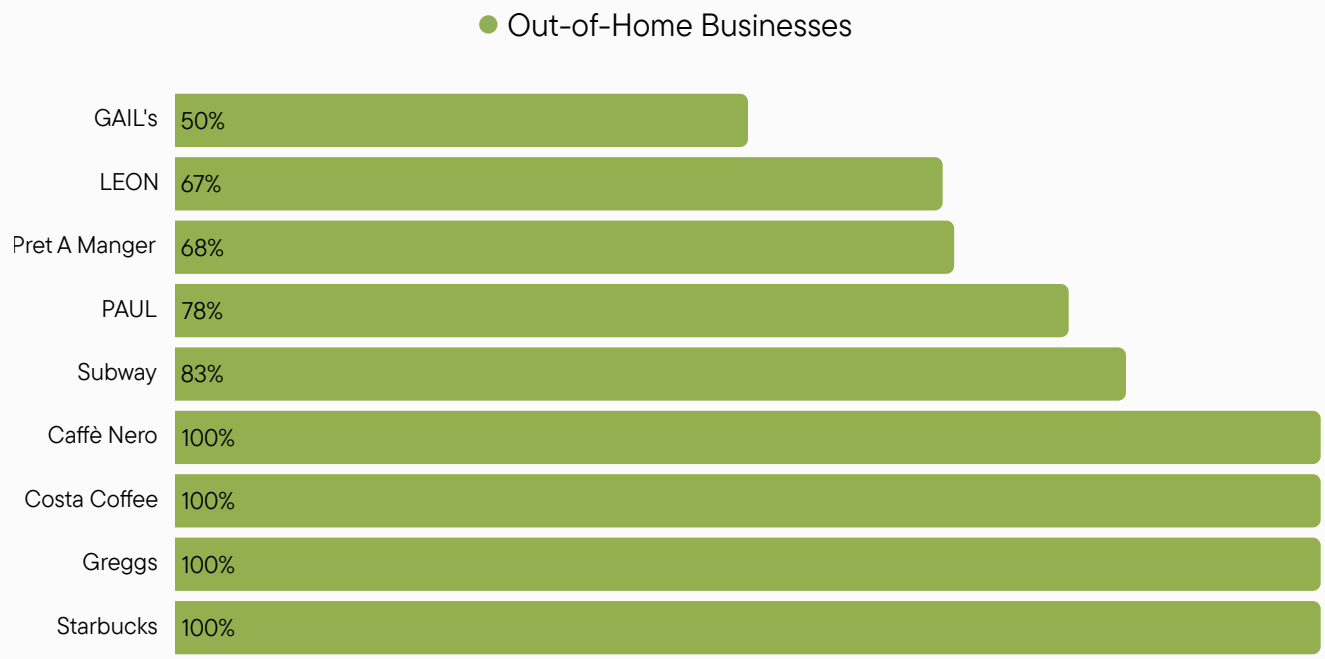
COMPLIANCE TO GOVERNMENT GUIDELINES

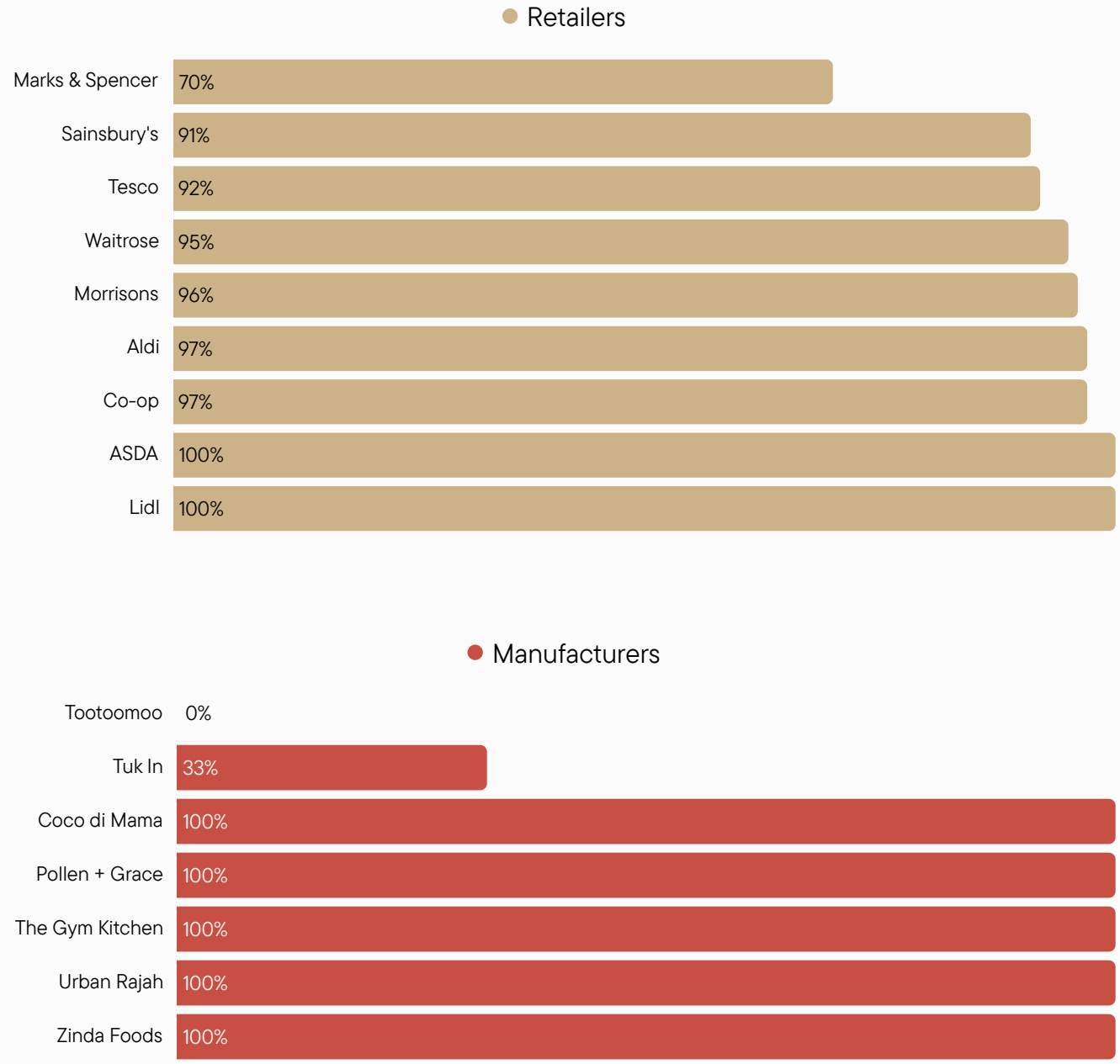
SALT TARGETS

Overall, 88% of sandwiches met the government salt reduction targets set in 2020. When examined by sector, compliance differed between OOH, retailer, and manufacturer products, with 84%, 91% and 68% meeting the targets, respectively. At the business level, there was considerable variation in compliance (Figure 3). Among retailers, all sandwiches produced by Asda and Lidl fell below the targets, while Marks & Spencer exhibited lower compliance, with only 70% of products meeting the targets.

Sandwiches from 4 OOH businesses (Caffe Nero, Costa Coffee, Gregg's and Starbucks) and 5 manufacturers (Coco di Mama, Pollen + Grace, Gym Kitchen, Urban Rajah and Zinda Foods) all met their respective salt targets, while other companies had lower compliance, highlighting marked inconsistencies in progress towards salt reduction across sectors and individual businesses.

Figure 3. Proportion of sandwiches complying with government salt targets

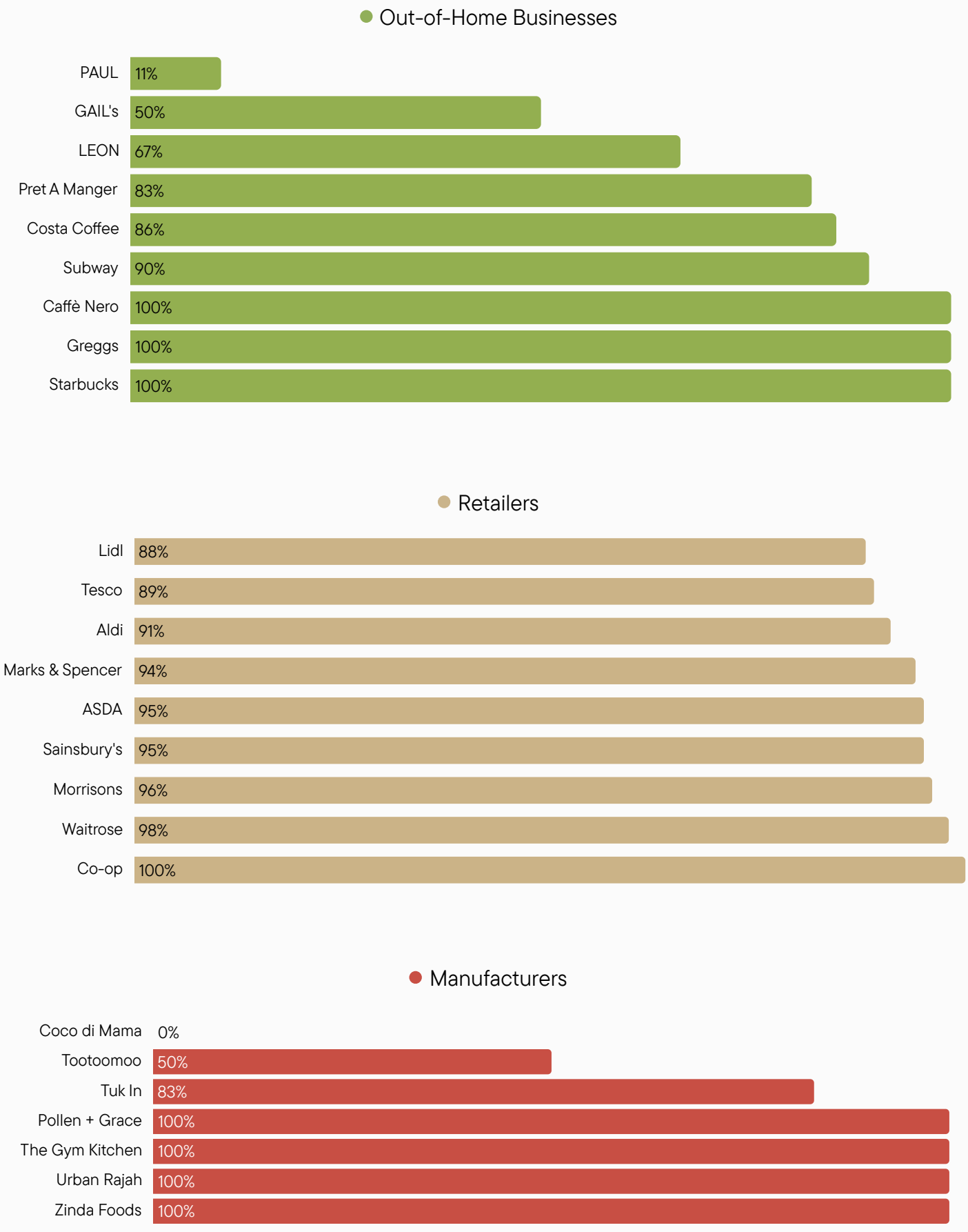




CALORIE TARGETS

Overall, 90% of sandwiches met the government calorie target. Retailers demonstrated the highest compliance (94%), followed by OOH (84%), while manufacturers showed lower compliance (74%). At the business level, substantial variation was observed (Figure 4). Within OOH, 3 businesses (Caffe Nero, Gregg's and Starbucks) fully complied with the calorie target, whereas PAUL showed the lowest (11%). The Co-op was the only retailer to have all its sandwiches below the calorie target, with Waitrose following closely behind. Four manufacturers had full compliance (Pollen + Grace, The Gym Kitchen, Urban Rajah and Zinda Foods) whilst all of the Coco di Mama sandwiches surveyed exceeded the calorie target.

Figure 4. Proportion of sandwiches complying with government calorie targets



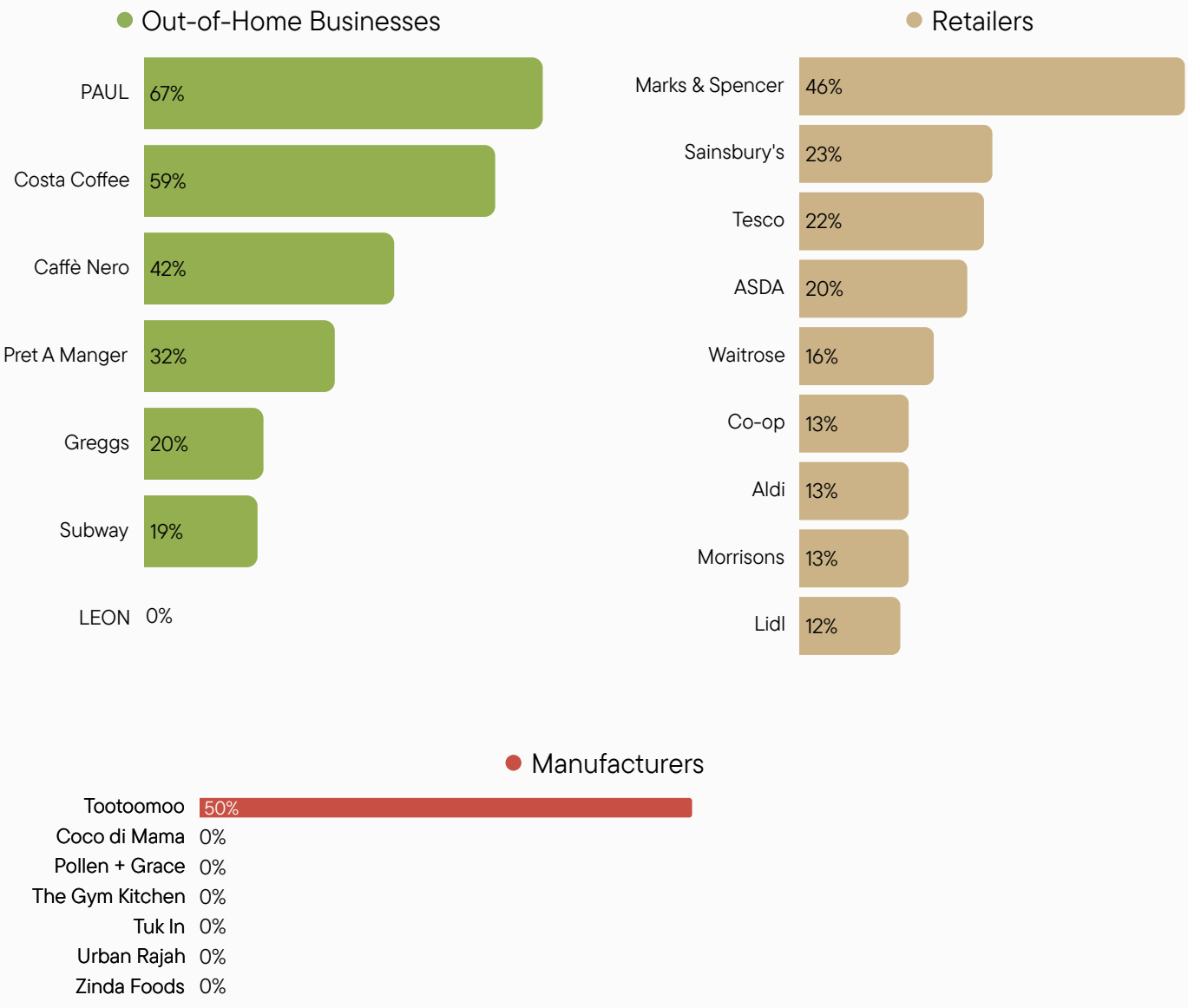
NUTRIENT PROFILING MODEL (NPM)

Overall, 1 in 4 (25%) sandwiches would be classified as less healthy (HFSS), under the current 2004/5 NPM (Figure 5). A higher proportion of HFSS sandwiches was found in OOH businesses (32%), compared with 22% of sandwiches available in retail settings. PAUL had a greater number of HFSS sandwiches (67%), followed by Costa Coffee (59%) and Caffè Nero (42%). In contrast, no products from LEON were classified as HFSS (Figure 5).

Among retailers, Marks & Spencer had the highest proportion of HFSS sandwiches (46%), and Lidl had the lowest (12%). Among manufacturers, most sandwiches were classified as non-HFSS , with the exception of Tootoomoo (50%).

Data for GAIL's and Starbucks were not included in this analysis due to insufficient publicly available nutritional information required to calculate the NPM.

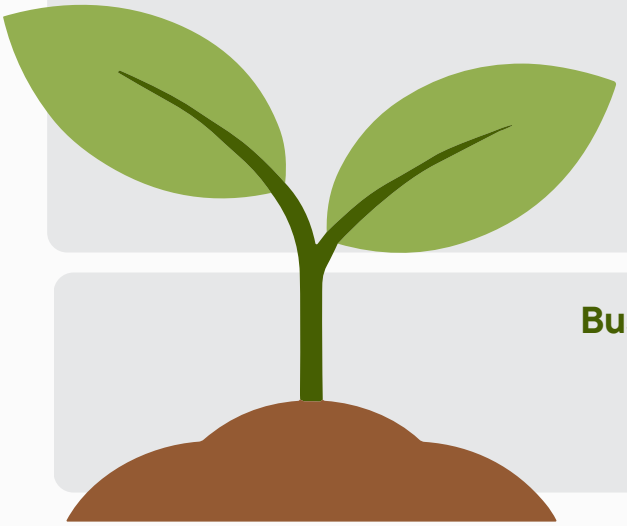
Figure 5. Percentage of sandwiches defined as HFSS according to the 2004/5 NPM



ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

With thanks to contributions from Eating Better.

Of the 546 sandwiches analysed, only 32 were plant-based, which accounts for approximately 6% of the total sandwiches available on the market. Three in four sandwiches (74%) available in retail and OOH, contained meat (including processed meat) or fish. These results show the dominance of meat in on-the-go foods, and sandwiches in particular, with dairy representing the majority of the non-meat offer (58%).



Businesses with NO plant-based options

- ✗ ASDA
- ✗ Caffe Nero
- ✗ Coco di Mama
- ✗ Gregg's
- ✗ LEON
- ✗ Lidl
- ✗ PAUL
- ✗ The Gym Kitchen
- ✗ Tootoomoo
- ✗ Zinda Foods

Businesses with ALL plant-based

- ✓ Urban Rajah
- ✓ Pollen + Grace

Our food system is a key driver of many environmental harms facing our planet today. As outlined in Eating Better's leading 2025 report, We need to talk about industrial livestock production, [13] industrial livestock production (ILP) of meat and dairy has profound environmental impacts that extend far beyond the farms themselves. ILP is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, water pollution, soil degradation, and biodiversity loss.

Furthermore, ILP sourced meat and dairy makes up the majority of what is sourced by retailers and the OOH sector for these sandwiches. On-the-go sandwiches are therefore having a huge detrimental environmental impact both in the UK and abroad. A shift toward plant-rich foods is one of the most powerful levers for cutting UK emissions, stopping biodiversity loss, improving public health through increasing intake of fibre, vitamins and minerals, and building long-term resilience in the food system.

THE CHICKEN CONUNDRUM

Chicken is the UK's favourite meat, and demand is reflected across the food industry – not least in the 1.1 billion birds raised for meat in an industrialised system in the UK in 2023 alone. [14] This appetite is mirrored in the findings of this survey: 190 sandwiches contained chicken, representing over a third (35%) of all products surveyed.

Demand for chicken is in part driven by the marketing of it as a 'healthy and sustainable' animal protein. Compared to red and processed meat, chicken scores favourably on nutritional credentials, and its lower greenhouse gas emissions per kg have positioned it as the responsible animal protein for environmentally conscious shoppers. [15]

However, this reputation deserves scrutiny. Focusing narrowly on carbon emissions risks obscuring the fuller environmental picture, a phenomenon sometimes called "carbon tunnel vision." Industrial chicken production contributes to water pollution, air pollution, and ecosystem degradation. This environmental harm carries direct public health consequences too, from contaminated waterways affecting local communities, to the accelerated spread of antimicrobial resistance driven by routine antibiotic use. If we look past the marketing, chicken's environmental credentials are more complicated than they first appear.

For further information about Eating Better visit their website.

COST

Plant based sandwiches were found to be the most expensive sandwiches in retail settings, with an average price of £3.41 per serve compared to £3.31 for meat and £2.87 for vegetarian fillings. In the OOH sector, on average, vegetarian fillings were the cheapest at £5.27 per serve, followed by plant-based (£5.63), with meat options being the most expensive (£6.13).

To look at whether there is a relationship between the cost of sandwiches and their nutritional content, products were split into 3 price categories. Most of the sandwiches surveyed cost between £3.00 and £3.99, with sandwiches in the higher range containing on average more energy, fat, saturated fat, and salt compared to those that typically cost less (Table 3).

Table 3. Average nutrition content of sandwiches per serving

Price Ranges	Number of products	Weight (g)	Energy kcal/serve	Fat g/serve	Saturated Fat g/serve	Fibre g/serve	Salt g/serve
<£2.99	134	185	403	14.5	4.4	3.7	1.50
£3.00 - £5.99	320	202	443	16.8	5.1	4.4	1.80
>£6.00	92	224	508	21.4	7.2	4.5	2.45

Across the price categories, sandwiches with a higher price point had a lower compliance to UK Government guidelines, with 28% exceeding the maximum salt targets, 27% exceeding the maximum calorie targets and 30% classified as HFSS (Table 4).

Table 4. Proportion of sandwiches complying with government guidelines

Price	Proportion of products exceeding the maximum salt targets	Proportion of products exceeding the maximum calorie targets	Proportion of products that are HFSS
<£3.00	4%	4%	23%
£3.00 - £5.99	11%	8%	24%
>£6.00	28%	27%	30%

CONCLUSION

As a widely consumed, everyday food, particularly within meal deals and on-the-go eating, sandwiches represent both a significant challenge and a clear opportunity for improving public health. Three key themes emerge from the findings.

REFORMULATION IS POSSIBLE AND DEMONSTRATED BY SOME COMPANIES

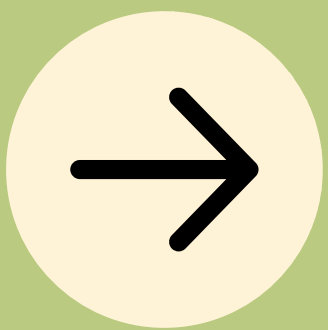
While most sandwiches meet current government salt and calorie targets, a substantial minority do not, and nearly half would receive a red front-of-pack warning label for salt. Large variations in salt content between comparable products and within the same businesses demonstrate that lower salt products are technically achievable and already present on the market. The persistence of high-salt products therefore reflects inconsistent implementation rather than limited feasibility, underscoring the need for stronger accountability and renewed momentum beyond voluntary programmes.

THE HEALTH PROFILE OF SANDWICHES VARIES SUBSTANTIALLY BETWEEN AND WITHIN BUSINESSES, WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSUMER CHOICE

One in four sandwiches is classified as less healthy under the 2004/5 NPM, limiting their eligibility for promotion and advertising. This variability shows that healthier options can be delivered at scale yet are not consistently prioritised. Given low public awareness of salt intake and high levels of undiagnosed hypertension, reliance on individual choice alone is insufficient; clearer labelling, reformulation, and sector-wide standards are essential to protect consumers and support healthier choices.

THE CURRENT SANDWICH MARKET REFLECTS A FOOD SYSTEM MISALIGNED WITH ENVIRONMENTAL AND LONG-TERM HEALTH GOALS

Meat-based sandwiches continue to dominate the market, while plant-based alternatives remain scarce. Increasing the availability, affordability and appeal of plant-based sandwich options represents a practical opportunity to improve fibre intake, reduce reliance on industrial livestock production, and support a more sustainable food system



Taken together, these findings show that sandwiches represent a critical leverage point for improving both public health and environmental sustainability. The scale of consumption, combined with the wide variation in nutritional quality and ingredient choices, demonstrates that healthier, lower-salt and more sustainable sandwiches are not only possible but already being delivered by some businesses.

The challenge is ensuring this becomes the norm and not the exception.

RECOMMENDATIONS

PUBLISH THE SALT REDUCTION TARGETS PROGRESS REVIEW AND SET NEXT STEPS

The 2024 salt reduction targets concluded over two years ago, yet no official assessment of industry progress has been published. The government should urgently release a comprehensive evaluation of compliance, clearly identifying where targets have been met, missed, or stalled. This should be accompanied by clear next steps, including revised targets, timeframes, and accountability mechanisms to address under-performance.

REINTEGRATE SALT REDUCTION AS A CORE PILLAR OF FOOD AND OBESITY POLICY

Salt reduction should be explicitly embedded into wider food and obesity policy frameworks, recognising its independent and complementary role in preventing hypertension, stroke, and cardiovascular disease. This should include:

- Mandatory, time-bound salt reduction targets across all relevant food categories.
- Explicit inclusion of salt within the Health Food Standard, alongside mandatory reporting of healthy and sustainable food sales.
- Consistent application of the updated 2018 NPM across labelling, health claims, marketing, promotions, and placement regulations, with no category-based exemptions for high salt foods.

ACCELERATE REFORMULATION THROUGH FISCAL AND REGULATORY MEASURES

Voluntary approaches alone have failed to deliver sustained reductions in salt. Building on the success of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL), the government should explore targeted fiscal measures to incentivise reformulation of high salt products, increase healthier options, and create a level playing field across industry.

STRENGTHEN NUTRITION INFORMATION REQUIREMENTS ACROSS RETAIL AND OOH FOOD

The government should improve the consistency and availability of nutrition information across both retail and out-of-home (OOH) food and drink. Where regulatory levels allow, this should include front-of-pack labelling for foods manufactured and sold within the UK, as well as extending clear and consistent nutrition labelling to the OOH sector. Improved visibility of salt content would support informed choice and provide additional incentive for reformulation.

METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION

Data for the full nutrition, ingredients, product weight, serving size and price for ready-made sandwiches was collected in January 2026 online and instore, from nine major retailers (Aldi, Asda, Co-op, Lidl, Marks & Spencer, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco, and Waitrose), including 7 manufacturer brands sold in retail (Coco di Mama, Pollen + Grace, The Gym Kitchen, Tootoomoo, Tuk In, Urban Rajah and Zinda) and 9 OOH outlets (Caffè Nero, Costa Coffee, GAILS's, Greggs, LEON, PAUL, Pret A Manger, Starbucks, and Subway) following strict inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
• Chilled pre-packed sandwiches, wraps, rolls, flatbreads, bagels • Meal deal main components (all flavours/variants) • Hot cabinet items (where full nutrition info available) • Ready-to-heat sandwich-style products	• Sushi, salads, rice bowls • Pastry-based items (e.g. sausage rolls, pasties) • Made-to-order items without standard nutrition info • Seasonal/limited-edition products • Products not currently available

All companies were contacted and given the opportunity for data verification. Please note, only products available for purchase in large supermarket chains in England were included in this report and may not reflect a business' complete portfolio.

DATA ANALYSIS

The nutritional content per 100g and per serve of each product was assessed against government policies to encourage industry reformulation. This includes assessment of front of pack nutrition labelling [11] as well as compliance to the Department of Health & Social Care's voluntary 2024 salt reduction targets [16] and 2025 calorie reduction targets [17]. Additional analysis was made against the 2004/5 Nutrient Profiling Model [18], which is currently being used in food policies to restrict advertising and promotion of less healthy food products.

ABOUT ACTION ON SALT & SUGAR

Action on Salt & Sugar is a non-profit organisation working to improve population health and food environments through impactful food and drink nutritional research. We inform policy, influence the food industry, raise awareness, and build advocacy for salt and sugar reformulation.

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