

Commercial Baby Foods in Crisis: Addressing Health, Marketing & Inequalities

Thursday 8 May 2025



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Welcome!

Barbara Crowther Children's Food Campaign



Today's panel

Our panellists



**Ali Morpeth
(RNutr)**



**Dr Diane
Threapleton**



**Charlotte
Sterling-Reed**



Dr Vicky Sibson



**Mary Needham
Carlton**

Poll Q1:

In what role are you
PRIMARILY joining us
today?



Poll Q2:

How far do you feel
current regulation of
the commercial baby
food sector is
adequate?



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Dr Diane Threapleton & Ali Morpeth University of Leeds



COMMERCIAL BABY FOODS

IN CRISIS

Addressing Health, Marketing and Inequalities



BACKGROUND

The team at Leeds working on commercial baby foods since 2018 in collaboration with WHO Europe

- Firstly, developing + validating an internationally recognised NPPM
- Now UK specific analysis



Dr Diane Threapleton
Senior Research Fellow



Ali Morpeth RNutr,
Visiting Research Fellow



Professor Janet Cade



Why babyfoods? Why now?

The commercial baby food sector **shapes early childhood nutrition** in the UK and around the world. Despite their trusted image, we found **significant concerns about the nutritional quality and marketing** of commercial foods aimed at young children under three years old.

Why? One main issue is that many products for this age group contain **high levels of sugars** which run counter to public health guidelines and may contribute to poor dietary habits from an early age.

Regulation is inadequate.



**“Baby food makers ... should focus on health.” -
Parent, Leeds**



The market is dominated by **HIGH SUGAR** purees, **SNACKS**, products that **PROMOTE WEANING TOO EARLY + POOR QUALITY** purees

Baby food regulations are **OUT-DATED & INSUFFICIENT**. Products in the baby food aisle have **NO LIMITS** for total or added sugar levels



Frequent use of inappropriate products contributes to **OVERWEIGHT, DENTAL DECAY** and **LIFELONG PREFERENCES** for sweet foods²



THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

The government's advisory group on nutrition says commercial baby foods are **NOT NEEDED FOR GOOD NUTRITION**¹⁵



PARENT PERCEPTION is that baby foods are well regulated and healthy



Brands use **MISLEADING 'halos'** in **MARKETING** - including messages about health + sustainability - to **ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO TRUST THEM**



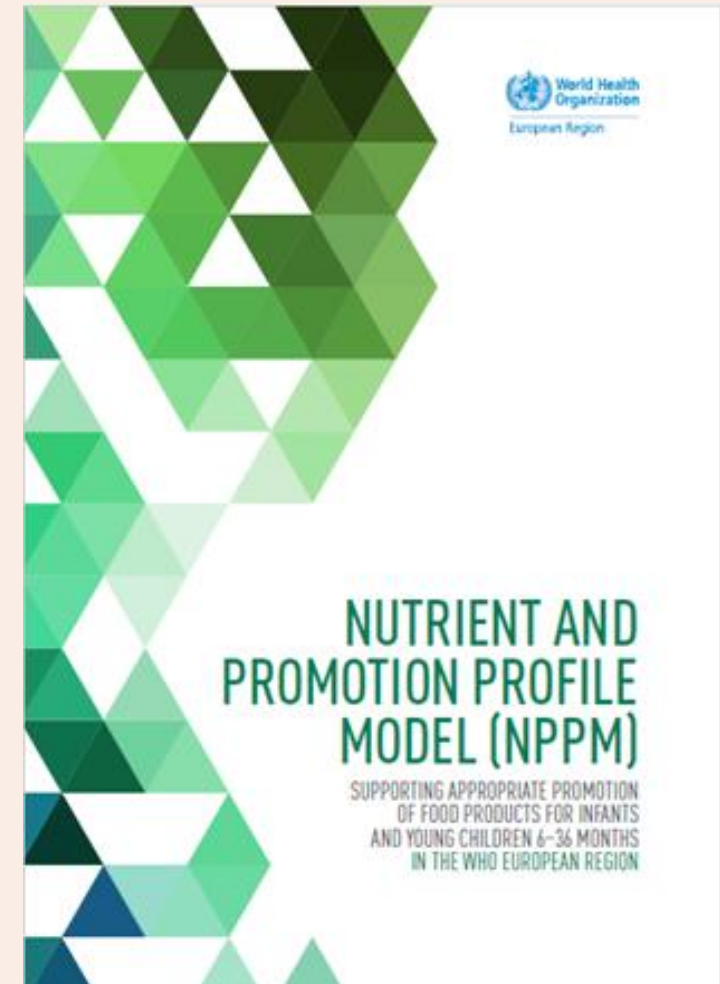
THE NPPM TOOL

NUTRIENT & PROMOTION PROFILE MODEL

NPPM 2022: SUPPORTING APPROPRIATE PROMOTION OF FOOD PRODUCTS FOR INFANTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN UNDER 36 MONTHS

TABLE 1: Summary of the World Health Organization Nutrient and Promotion Profile Model (NPPM)

NUTRITIONAL GUIDELINES	MARKETING AND PACKAGING GUIDELINES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No added sugars (including fruit juice)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Minimum age 6 months for all products
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No drinks or confectionery	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Max. age for purees 12 months
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Keep meals and snacks savoury (low in total sugar)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Front-of-pack warnings on products with high sugar levels
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No watery (low energy) cereals or purees	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clear product naming
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Small snack portions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Proportions of key ingredients listed on pack
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Minimum protein content in meals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Overt warnings not to drink via spouts
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No high fat or high salt products	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No nutrition, health or marketing claims
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limited fruit content in meals (to avoid sweetness)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Include a statement to protect and promote breastfeeding
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Products for older children should include 3 year+ labels



WHO Collaborating Centre
for Nutritional Epidemiology

METHODOLOGY

PRODUCT SAMPLING

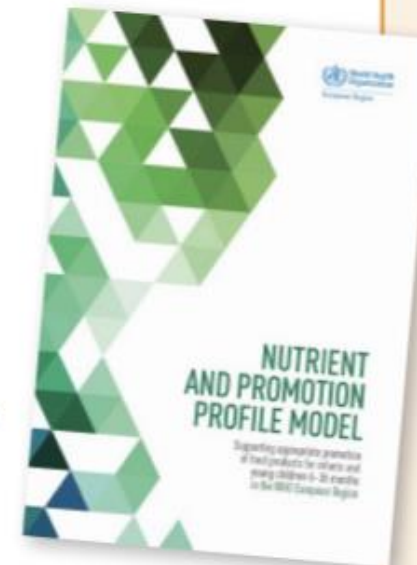


Sainsbury's

Websites of the 5 largest grocery retailers were accessed in June-August 2024 for foods and drinks marketed to babies and toddlers under 3 years

QUALITY & AFFORDABILITY ANALYSIS

Products were compared to the international best practice standards (NPPM) to evaluate levels of sugar, fat, protein and calories and identify inappropriate marketing practices.



Price data were also compared with product quality

PARENT INSIGHTS

UK-wide 1000-person survey

Small focus groups in Leeds

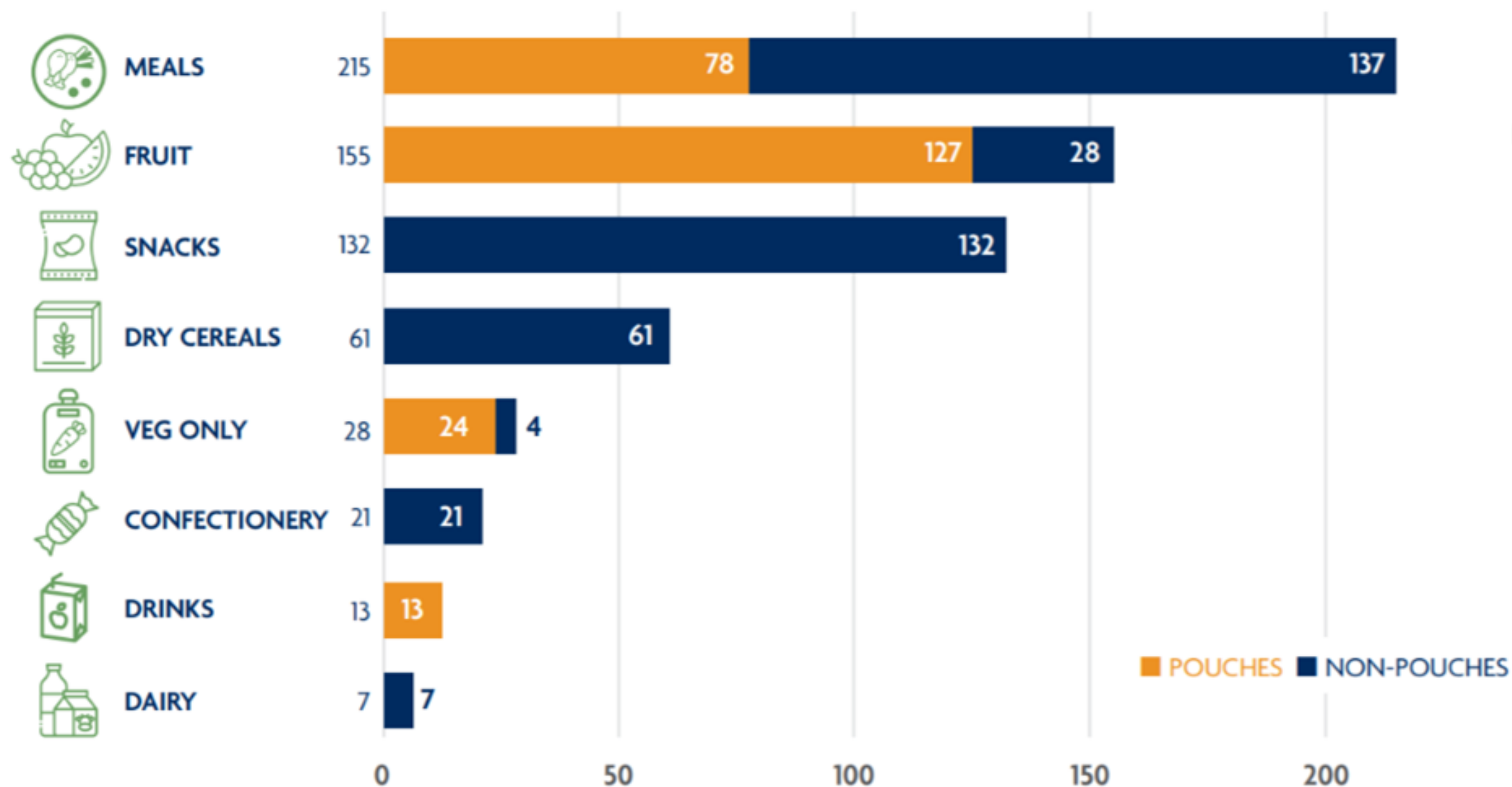
*How and why are products used?
Parent's concerns?
Impact of financial pressures?*

Engagement helped to contextualise understanding in our analysis, making recommendations meaningful to parents of young children



Evidence-based and actionable insights for policymakers, retailers and manufacturers

WHAT'S ON OFFER IN THE BABY FOOD AISLE?



Over **one third** of products (38%) were pouches with spouts

4 in 5 fruit products were sold in pouches with spouts

Baby foods in pouches with spouts are increasingly popular but often have limited textures, high water content (meaning low nutrient/energy density) and high free-sugar content⁹.

KEY PRODUCT FINDINGS

25% of all products would require a **front-of-pack warning label** for high sugar content

19% of all products were considered to have **misleading names**

51% of spout products with **no recommendation not to drink via the spout**

55% of snacks contain **added sugars**

31% of early weaning foods are sold as suitable from **4 months+** against NHS guidance

41% main meals **too sweet** (total sugar >15%)

21% ready to eat meals, fruit products were **too watery** (low energy density)



NPPM CATEGORY SPOTLIGHTS

Confectionery

- WHO stipulates these products are **unsuitable for under 3s**
- In the baby foods aisle we found **21 products classified as confectionery by WHO**
- On average they get **67% of their energy from sugar**

Examples of products classified as confectionery by WHO:



These products include fruit gums and chews made from concentrated/dehydrated fruit, with or without added sugars.

75%
calorie
s from
sugar



Marketing claims

- 1 of 5 a day
- Great for little ones learning to self-feed
- No artificial additives

NPPM CATEGORY SPOTLIGHTS

Snacks

- WHO recommends no more than **50Kcal per serving** and **max. 15% energy from sugar**, meaning they should be savoury
- We found **1/3 snacks are overly sweet** (>15% of calories from sugar)
- Over **half contained added sugars** (often concentrated juice)

Examples of products classified as snacks by WHO:



Added
sugar

28%
calories
from
sugar

Marketing claims

- A great finger food to keep with you when you're out and about as a nutritious snack between meals
- An ideal weaning food for your baby

NPPM CATEGORY SPOTLIGHTS

Fruit Products

- WHO stipulates that any product that is **ready to eat with more than 5% fruit** is classified as a fruit product
- **9 out of 10** fruit products are so high in sugar that, according to WHO, should have a **front of pack sugar warning label**.
- Many high sugar products were also **low in energy and contain less essential nutrients like fat and protein**.

Examples of products classified as fruit by WHO:



Marketing claims

- Immune support
- 2 of 5 a day

MARKETING EXAMPLES



Sold as
suitable
from 4
months

Weaning Advice: Ingredients suitable from 4 months. Government guidelines advise weaning from 6 months. Every baby is different.

We understand how snacks can play a **positive part in your little one's development**, helping to shape a healthy attitude towards food and eating for the future.

Sold as suitable
from 4 months
Undermining public
health guidelines



'Suitable first
food around 6
months'

'Encourages
self feeding'



29% fruit juice
concentrate

'These delicious toddler
biscuits are the perfect
snack to explore and play'



ALL GOOD INGREDIENTS: Natural Basmati Rice - Steamed (55%), Banana Puree (28%), Strawberry Puree (8%), Rice Syrup, Vegetable Oils (Sunflower, Rapeseed), Natural Flavouring, Salt.



85% energy
from sugar
Classed as
confectionery

SPOTLIGHT ON PRICE VS. QUALITY

Trends seen in price data: **lower price products were lower in quality**

**POUCHES EVEN
HIGHER IN SUGAR
WERE
CHEAPER**



**HIGH SUGAR
SNACKS
WERE
CHEAPER**



HIGH SUGAR SNACKS

(contain >15% energy from sugar)

LOWER SUGAR SNACKS

(contain ≤15% energy from sugar)

£1.86/100g

VS

£4.53/100g

Families shopping on a budget, who seek out cheaper snacks or meals, are more likely to take home products with **poorer nutrition and that are marketed in less responsible ways.**



1000 PARENTS TOLD US....



SNACKS:

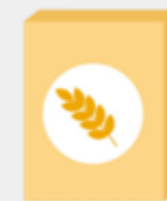
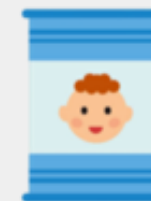
- Around 2/3 use savoury or sweet snacks daily or several times/week

READY-TO-EAT FRUIT PRODUCTS:

- 68% use daily/ few times per week
- 40% of parents with babies under 6 months use daily
- 1 in 5 parents still use these daily with their children aged 2 years

PERCEPTIONS:

- 56% of parents find it **challenging to identify healthier/nutritionally appropriate products** using packet information



PARENTS VOICE

“If you see that (4m label on pack) and you didn't know the government's advice and just think, okay, well, **four months, they're telling you that it's fine**”



“When I see **organic**, I expect it to be **healthy, nutritious** and free of all the preservatives or sugar”

“Sugar levels in baby food should be **regulated**”



“they're not regulated to the extent yet, as it could be, so it's pretty **misleading**”

“my opinion is that food should be sugar free for children” and
“sugar in food for a child is not good...**they don't need the extra sugar**”



“Absolutely **I would want a front of pack label** to tell me if a food is high in sugar”

PARENTS SUPPORT POLICY CHANGE



Front of Pack Labelling - 1000 person survey

- More than 7 in 10 parents agree with front of pack warnings for high sugar contents
- 63% agree with minimum age of 6 months

These sentiments were universal across those with children of different ages, household income, deprivation category, UK country, ethnicity.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

- › **Regulate the market** for foods for under-threes
- › **Adopt a standard nutrient profile model** to enable regulation (WHO NPPM is a ready-made tool)
- › Integrate **infant foods** into the government comprehensive **food strategy**



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RETAIL

- › **Prioritise healthier products** on shelf
- › Restrict promotions of **inappropriate products**
- › Restrict listings that are **not age-appropriate**
- › Do not situate baby foods in **promotional bays**



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MANUFACTURERS

- › Uphold NHS/WHO recommendations for **6m+**
- › Support goals to **reduce sugar intake, improve quality and support taste development**
- › **First foods (6-12m) more veg/ savoury flavours and be nutrient-dense**
- › Avoid excess pureeing/ **increase textures**
- › **Clean up pack/online messaging** to avoid misleading/persuasive claims inc health/green washing logos/ info
- › Statement to **protect/support breastfeeding**



CONCLUSIONS

Commercial baby food use is **widespread** (survey evidence)

Commercial baby food quality is **not good enough** (**nutrition & marketing**) (WHO standards, product evidence)

UK Regulation is outdated → changes needed

Retail + Manufacturers have an opportunity for positive action → **improvements in nutrition & marketing**

A gap exists between **appropriate nutrition** and **parent expectations** and what's on offer

Families support regulation to improve transparency and nutrition

Parents need help to navigate the market NOW - See our **Parent information sheet + tips**

Wider context of this research and policy changes:

How can we best support normalisation of simple healthy foods and home prepared meals

Thank you

Which? sustain

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Sustain kindly contributed towards our UK-wide parent poll



**Find the full report and
parent help sheet here**



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Dr Vicky Sibson

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Nutrition Trust



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Panel Q + A

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If you have 2 minutes ...

<https://www.sustainweb.org/news/action-mp-baby-food/>



Thank You!

<https://www.sustainweb.org/childrens-food-campaign/>

