

**ROUNDTABLE REPORT**

# **ACCELERATING SALT REDUCTION IN THE UK**



**March 2022**

## Acknowledgements

- All participants for their valuable contributions
- Katharine Jenner RNutr, Director of Action on Salt and WASSH, for moderating the roundtable
- Mhairi Brown RNutr, Policy and Public Affairs Manager and WASSH Lead, and Harriet Burt ANutr, Policy and Communications Officer, for facilitating the roundtable and report development

## About Action on Salt

Action on Salt is a group concerned with salt and its effects on health, supported by 22 expert scientific members. Established in 1996, Action on Salt is successfully working to reach a consensus with the food industry and Government over the harmful effects of a high salt diet and bring about a reduction in the amount of salt in processed foods as well as salt added during cooking, and at the table.

## About World Action on Salt, Sugar and Health

World Action on Salt, Sugar and Health (WASSH) is a global group with the mission to improve the health of populations throughout the world by achieving a gradual reduction in salt, sugar and excess calorie intake. Established in 2005 to translate the success of the UK's salt reduction programme worldwide, WASSH provide resources and expert advice. WASSH have a network of more than 600 members in 100 countries, all of whom are working towards reducing population salt, sugar and calorie intake.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK's salt reduction programme is well established but in recent years it has struggled to achieve the level of success seen between 2006 - 2011, when the programme was managed by the Food Standards Agency. The policy landscape has been dominated by obesity as opposed to cardiovascular prevention for several years, and in key policies due to come into place in 2022/23 salt has not been included. Meanwhile, international salt reduction work is gaining momentum.

During Salt Awareness Week 2022, Action on Salt and WASSH hosted a virtual roundtable event with key stakeholders to discuss the UK's salt reduction programme and identify how to accelerate progress.

## Discussion Summary

- Strengths of the policy include the significant progress already made, widely available technical solutions, government commitment to salt reduction via salt reduction targets, and advocacy which holds food companies to account
- Weaknesses include the voluntary nature of the policy, the current political focus on obesity prevention appears to have side-lined salt reduction, and new product development which doesn't necessarily adhere to the targets
- Barriers to progress include the lack of a 'level playing field', the focus on sugar and calorie reduction, the range of stakeholders who have no knowledge of the need to reduce salt intake, and the focus on personal responsibility
- In the short term, salt reduction must be kept on the agenda by supporting the National Food Strategy, engaging with a wider range of stakeholders, targeting shareholders, and reframing salt reduction to gain public support

## Key Reflections

- Salt is a chemical additive and has trace calories, making it easier to reduce in food products than sugar and saturated fat
- The political focus in recent years has been on obesity prevention, and rightly so, but salt reduction is a key prevention initiative to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease - the cause of one in four deaths in the UK
- The voluntary nature of the UK's salt reduction programme is an issue; all sectors of the food industry must be involved to ensure progress which could be achieved via mandatory targets
- The public must be mobilised to demand lower salt products, in order to influence the food industry and the government to take more action
- A wider range of stakeholders should be involved in the policy, including retail buyers and taste panel participants
- Salt reduction is a global issue and countries worldwide are taking action. We can learn from and build on their success

# BACKGROUND

The UK's salt reduction programme is well established but in recent years it has struggled to achieve the level of success seen between 2006 and 2011. Following positive progress under the Food Standards Agency, responsibility for salt reduction has transferred several times, which has included placing salt reduction under a public-private partnership that is widely recognised to be a failure. The reformulation programme has since expanded to include sugar and calorie reduction which has seen pushback from the food industry and little progress.

The policy landscape has been dominated by obesity as opposed to cardiovascular prevention for several years, and in key policies due to come into place in 2022/23 salt has not been included; incoming advertising and promotion restrictions focus on sugar and calories instead.

In parallel with this and the ever-increasing body of evidence implicating salt in cardiovascular disease (CVD), international salt reduction work is gaining momentum. More than 90 countries have a salt reduction programme in place, and 57 countries have salt targets, including 19 sets of mandated targets. The World Health Organization (WHO) have released Global Sodium Benchmarks to accelerate progress, which have since been adopted by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), and in many cases these salt reduction targets are more ambitious than the UK targets.

Salt reduction is internationally recognised as a powerful and cost-effective prevention policy. New evidence from South Africa shows their mandated salt targets have led to a 1.2g/day drop in population salt intake between 2016 and 2021, which will have a large beneficial impact on population health.

During **Salt Awareness Week 2022 (14-20 March)**, Action on Salt and WASSH hosted a virtual roundtable event with key stakeholders to discuss the UK's salt reduction programme. The purpose of the roundtable was to create consensus that salt reduction progress is needed to prevent cardiovascular disease, responsible for one in four deaths in the UK, and identify how to accelerate progress.

Participants discussed broad themes, drawing on their diverse experiences in public health and prevention to identify common ground on the need for salt reduction in the UK, and highlight barriers and opportunities to achieving progress in salt reduction.

# ATTENDEES AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

## Attendees

- Dr Lauren Bandy, Research Fellow, University of Oxford
- Claire Baseley RNutr, Freelance Registered Nutritionist
- Mhairi Brown RNutr, Policy and Public Affairs Manager and Programme Manager, Action on Salt and WASSH
- Harriet Burt ANutr, Policy and Communications Officer, Action on Salt and WASSH
- Prof Simon Capewell, Professor of Public Health, Policy & Systems, University of Liverpool
- Prof Franco Cappuccio, Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine and Epidemiology, University of Warwick
- Prof Amandine Garde, Professor of Law, Liverpool Law School
- Nicole Ide, Technical Advisor - Sodium and Surveillance, Resolve to Save Lives
- Katharine Jenner RNutr, Director, Action on Salt and WASSH
- Christine Johnson, Former Assistant Commissioner, Bureau of Chronic Disease Prevention and Tobacco Control, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
- Caroline Klinge, Director, Klinge Chemicals Ltd
- Prof Graham MacGregor, Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine and Chair of Action on Salt and WASSH, Queen Mary University of London
- Prof Chris Millett, Professor of Public Health, Imperial College London
- Jo Nicholas, Team Leader - Dietary Data, Office for Health Improvement and Disparities
- Charlotte Radcliffe RNutr, The Nutrition Consultant
- The Rt Hon. the Lord Rooker
- Jenny Rosborough RNutr, Head of Nutrition, Jamie Oliver Ltd
- Charlotte Stirling Reed RNutr, The Baby and Child Nutritionist
- Chris Thomas, Senior Research Fellow, IPPR

## Discussion Topics

The following broad questions were sent to participants in advance of the discussion, to structure the discussion and help participants prepare.

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current salt reduction programme?
2. What are the main barriers to progress?
3. What are the immediate steps and shifts necessary to address the challenges?

# DISCUSSION SUMMARY

## Strengths and Weaknesses of the UK's Salt Reduction Policy

### **Technical solutions already exist to make further reductions in salt content**

The group unanimously agreed that salt reduction is achievable and sustainable. Unlike other reformulation programmes, salt has trace calories and is a chemical additive. Participants compared salt reduction to sugar reduction, highlighting limited technical issues for salt reduction and salt replacers, such as potassium chloride, that can be used for more challenging food categories such as meat.

When discussing salt replacers however, participants raised that salt replacers were widely recommended for use by the food industry but this general recommendation was withdrawn while the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) and the Committee on Toxicity (COT) assessed the evidence on the impact of increased potassium on population health. The SACN/COT report was released in 2017, but the government still have not reissued their recommendation that salt replacers can be used which has impacted on companies' willingness to use them.

### **Significant progress has already been made which must be built upon**

The group agreed that significant progress has been made with salt reduction in the UK. Progress from the early 2000s to 2011 in particular was highlighted, during which time there were large reductions in the salt content of many food products, a consequent fall in population salt intake and a fall in average population blood pressure. Specific examples of falls in product salt content included salt reduction in bread which has seen a 20% reduction in salt content across the board. More generally, the comprehensive nature of the salt reduction targets, which cover the out of home sector in addition to retail, was highlighted as a key strength.

Participants discussed the fact that taste buds adapt to gradually decreasing salt content, and even in an environment where the food industry drives our taste preferences, over time consumers do not want products with excessive salt.

### **The government appear committed to salt reduction on the surface**

An apparent continued commitment to salt reduction from the government was raised by several participants. Indicators raised included the release of updated salt reduction targets in 2020, to be met by 2024, the inclusion of salt reduction within the Prevention Green Paper (2019), and the commitment to measure population salt intake in 2023. The group highlighted representative population salt intake data as another key strength to aid monitoring of the policy.

In addition, the prominence of salt reduction within the National Food Strategy and the proposal of a salt reformulation tax of £6/kg on wholesale salt intended for use by food manufacturers was lauded as impactful, even if not adopted at this stage by the government. For example, it was credited with reinvigorating manufacturers /retailers' interest in reducing salt in their products, e.g. using low-sodium potassium salts.

## **Advocacy has helped spur progress**

Several participants shared that advocacy highlighting industry progress and 'naming and shaming' the products that do not achieve reductions in salt was a huge benefit. Participants said that avoiding bad press was a major motivating factor for food companies and helps drive progress.

Participants also recognised that salt reduction is a global issue and not specific to the UK. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals were raised as a driver of progress on issues such as salt reduction and the group agreed there is a need to look to other countries to assess how they have achieved progress in this area.

## **The voluntary nature of the policy is a leading weakness**

A range of weaknesses were highlighted by the group, with a leading weakness being the voluntary nature of the programme. In recent years, progress has stagnated. Participants raised a lack of transparent monitoring and evaluation – while top level time series data was published in 2018 and 2019 by the government, company-specific progress is not reported and so companies can get away with making little or no progress.

Building on the weakness of the voluntary nature of the policy, participants discussed that only the most committed companies participate in such voluntary initiatives; companies who chose not to participate do so to avoid being compromised on taste against their competitors. Participants also discussed the range of pressures on the food industry, and while customers regularly ask for lower sugar products, there is less demand for salt reduction. Responsibility for salt reduction tends to fall to lower seniority staff within the company, and therefore does not get the necessary attention within the business. Small companies face significant challenges, particularly around convincing suppliers to change their practices and produce lower salt products for them. They don't have the buying power to achieve this, particularly where different machinery is needed to produce products with a lower salt content.

## **Obesity prevention has been prioritised, to the detriment of salt reduction**

Given the wider focus on obesity prevention in recent years, participants felt that political commitment to salt reduction has decreased, leading to a lack of pressure on companies to continue on their salt reduction journey. A lack of reduction in the salt content of cheddar cheese was highlighted, alongside companies operating in the out of home sector. Salt levels in out of home products and meals tend to be much higher than equivalent products available in the retail sector, indicating that the out of home salt targets have largely been ineffective.

## **New product development does not necessarily adhere to the policy**

Participants were optimistic that further reductions in salt are achievable, as demonstrated by companies releasing products that have '30% less salt' that are typically sold at a higher price than their higher salt equivalent. Additionally, new product development does not appear to include a requirement for lower salt content. Participants discussed the example of meat alternatives which tend to be benchmarked against salty meat equivalents.



While participants acknowledged that some meat alternative substitutes have a bitter taste and therefore require additional ingredients to mask this, a large proportion of the population have moved to flexitarian diets, and will therefore be consuming these products more frequently.

## **Main Barriers to Progress**

### **Food companies lack a level playing field**

As highlighted in the discussion around weaknesses of the policy, the voluntary nature of the policy was raised as a significant barrier to progress. Participants discussed the lack of a level playing field for companies, with few companies willing to 'put their head above the parapet' and take a lead on salt reduction due to fears that their reformulated products will lose sales.

However, alongside a reduced focus on salt reduction from the government, ideology has changed to focus more on free markets and free will. Participants expressed concerns that mandatory salt targets would not be possible under the current administration, but acknowledged that the Soft Drinks Industry Levy was introduced under a Conservative government. While the National Food Strategy's proposal of a reformulation tax similarly may not be adopted, participants agreed that exploring other fiscal measures would be useful, given success seen in countries such as Hungary and Chile.

### **Sugar and calorie reduction are higher priority**

Obesity prevention has led to an inevitable shift in focus to sugar and calorie reduction, to the detriment of salt reduction – participants raised the exclusion of salt content criteria from Transport for London's restrictions on unhealthy food and drink advertising across the network. Obesity is a visible condition; hypertension is not, and stroke and heart disease do not tend to occur until later in life, making the health impacts of salt less tangible.

### **Various stakeholders need to be engaged in the policy**

Practical issues focused on retail buyers and developers. Retailer buyers are mandated to buy food at a good price with a good profit margin; nutrition and health are secondary concerns. Participants discussed the need for buyers to be informed about salt, so that this can factor into their negotiations with suppliers. The importance of companies having salt reduction as a target within their internal policy documents was also highlighted, as without this it is unlikely that it will receive any attention given the many other competing priorities in retail buying and product development.

Moreover, companies have competing demands as they are being asked to meet calorie and sugar reduction targets, as well as salt reduction targets. It would be helpful for product development teams if the three sets of targets were more aligned. Manufacturers use professional tasters with highly tuned taste buds when testing new products or reformulations. Participants highlighted that this sets the bar too high for a reformulated product tasting the same as the old one, and a range of people are needed on taste panels.

## **Personal Responsibility versus 'Responsible Society'**

Participants discussed the need to shift thinking from the idea of personal responsibility to a 'responsible society'. Within the Human Rights framework, humans have the right to a healthy food environment, the right to information about what they are eating, the right to an education. Many are currently being denied these rights and participants discussed the need to get people angry about this fact. Participants also raised the need for more focus on those living with diet-related health conditions to amplify their voices and experiences and show the food industry and the government the impact of unhealthy food on the population.

## **Immediate Steps and Shifts Needed**

### **Keep salt reduction on the agenda**

The group agreed that while the policy may not be achieving the necessary progress, it is important to continue 'banging the drum' on the need for salt reduction. Participants discussed the need to amplify the link between salt intake and cardiovascular disease and also to position salt reduction as essential alongside sugar and calorie reduction, given the same stakeholders are involved across all reformulation programmes. The group also agreed to keep mandatory targets on the table, and to build upon the government's own language that if voluntary initiatives fail, then stricter action will be taken.

### **Support the National Food Strategy Proposals**

Participants agreed it was important that there was broad support for the National Food Strategy's proposal to introduce mandatory reporting for all food companies, on metrics including sales of food and drink high in fat, sugar and/or salt, sales of vegetables, sales of fruit and food waste. This would provide more transparency on the practices of these companies, and generate free data for policy makers, researchers and health charities. Participants also raised that this data could help create a need for mandatory targets and fiscal measures to ensure a healthier food supply to consumers.

### **Engage a range of stakeholders**

Participants highlighted the need to educate different stakeholders on the impacts of salt and health. The UK's salt reduction policy began as a two-pronged approach, targeting manufactures and consumers. Consumers took steps to reduce their own salt intake and raised complaints to manufacturers about their food being too salty. This helped get salt reduction on the industry's agenda.

Many small businesses do not have nutrition departments, highlighting a need for more education and awareness raising within the food industry - mandating salt reduction would bring all companies in line, but in the interim education is needed. Participants acknowledged the lack of technical guidance available for companies, and the need for resources on taste replacers, such as mushroom powder.

Salt replacers should also be championed; participants raised that in the US, the more consumer-friendly 'potassium salt', in place of potassium chloride, has been approved for use on product packaging, encouraging more companies to use them.

## Salt reduction is a global issue

Continuing the theme of salt reduction being a global issue, participants discussed the need to look to what other countries are doing and the progress they are achieving. International surveys to compare levels of salt in the same product, sold in different countries, and create case studies was raised as a potential strategy, alongside continuing work with the World Health Organization to produce practical guidance and resources for companies.

## Target shareholders to achieve progress

Other strategies included putting pressure on shareholders, using similar methods to groups such as ShareAction. Shareholders are key stakeholders, and putting pressure on them regarding the salt content of the products their companies produce is an effective alternative lever to progress.

Mandating and strengthening procurement standards for the public sector was also discussed. Given the size of the public sector, ensuring all food and catering offered has a lower salt content would have a huge impact on health. Participants rounded off the discussion by exploring a reframing of salt reduction to gain public support - moving the emphasis to the more tangible concept of taste as opposed to health - including taglines such as '**Salt is not the gateway to good taste**' and '**Salt leaves a bad taste in your mouth**'.

# KEY REFLECTIONS

- Salt is a chemical additive and has trace calories, making it easier to reduce in food products than sugar and saturated fat
- The political focus in recent years has been on obesity prevention, and rightly so, but salt reduction is a key prevention initiative to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease - the cause of one in four deaths in the UK
- The voluntary nature of the UK's salt reduction programme is an issue; all sectors of the food industry must be involved to ensure progress which could be achieved via mandatory targets
- The public must be mobilised to demand lower salt products, in order to influence the food industry and the government to take more action
- A wider range of stakeholders should be involved in the policy, including retail buyers and taste panel participants
- Salt reduction is a global issue and countries worldwide are taking action. We can learn from and build on their success

# USEFUL RESOURCES

World Health Organization (WHO). [The SHAKE Technical Package for Salt Reduction](#). 2016

WASSH and WHO South East Asia Region. [Setting Salt Reduction Targets](#). 2021

WHO. [WHO global sodium benchmarks for different food categories](#). 2021

Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). [Updated PAHO Regional Sodium Targets: A Tool to Tackle the Burden of Diet-related Noncommunicable Diseases](#). 2021

WASSH and WHO South East Asia Region. [Salt Reduction in the Out of Home Sector](#). 2021

Action on Salt. [Salt and the Health of Your Children](#)

LINKS. [Sodium Reduction Framework](#).

WHO Europe. [Accelerating salt reduction in Europe: a country support package to reduce population salt intake in the WHO European Region](#). 2020

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. [Global Sodium Reduction Strategies course](#).



