

Impact of Coronavirus Control Measures on a Selection of Health Determinants in Scotland – One Year On Summary Report

Public poll commissioned by Obesity Action Scotland

March 2021

Impact of Coronavirus Control Measures on a Selection of Health Determinants in Scotland – A Year On: Summary Report

In March 2021 Obesity Action Scotland commissioned a poll to understand the continued effects of the coronavirus outbreak on a selection of health determinants a year after pandemic control measures were first introduced. This was a follow up to polling that we had undertaken in May 2020.¹ The Diffley Partnership was commissioned to carry out a representative poll among adults in Scotland. The polling fieldwork was carried out online between 24th and 26th March 2021. The survey was conducted among 2244 adults (aged 16+) in Scotland.¹

This Summary Report is accompanied by a Topline Results document summarising answers to the questions we asked. We are planning further detailed analysis of this data exploring themes within it and between the two time points. We will publish this further analysis soon.

Headline findings

We asked people in Scotland how health behaviours had changed since the coronavirus outbreak began, timing the survey at 1 year since initial lockdown measures were announced by Scottish Government and during the January – April 2021 lockdown. We were particularly interested in diet, body weight and shopping habits. We also asked about mental wellbeing.

The coronavirus outbreak has changed the health related behaviours of people in Scotland over a longer time period than was ever envisaged and the results are clear. Whilst there have been some positive changes the overwhelming message is of poorer diet quality, reduced physical activity levels, poorer mental wellbeing and weight gain.

Overall, younger people and women seem to have been more affected by the changes brought about by the response to the coronavirus outbreak.

Have changes been sustained?

Many of the favourable changes we saw in the initial May 2020 polling have continued through to the recent polling. People continue reporting that they are doing more of the following since pre-pandemic times: cooking from scratch (43%), eating together as a family (21%) and eating more fruit and vegetables (33%).

¹ See *Note on Methods* section at the end of the report

Q: Since the start of the Coronavirus outbreak, to what extent, if at all, are you doing more or less of the following?

	% reporting doing more than at start of outbreak	% reporting doing more than at start of outbreak	Change
Base: (May 2020, March 2021)	May 2020	March 2021	
Cooking meals from scratch (2079, 2244)	43	43	Unchanged
Eating together as a family (1029,1096)	21	21	Unchanged
Eating fruit and vegetables (fresh, frozen or tinned) (2079, 1100)	29	33	Increased
Consuming takeaways (2079, 2244)	12	31	Increased
Eating out of boredom (1022, 1113)	54	53	Relatively unchanged
Eating confectionery (2079, 2244)	47	42	Decreased
Eating cakes and biscuits (1063, 2244)	49	43	Decreased
Drinking alcohol (1018, 1189)	34	26	Decreased

There were some dietary changes of concern in our March 2020 report and it is useful to note the changes since then. Unsurprisingly there has been a notable increase in people who report eating more takeaways, nearly a third of people report consuming more takeaways now than before the pandemic. During the first polling many takeaways had closed completely but in the early 2021 lockdown many were operating in line with COVID guidelines and the home delivery of takeaway food had seen considerable growth over the year. Whilst the number of people reporting eating out of boredom remains relatively unchanged at 53% the number of people reporting eating confectionery and cakes and biscuits more has reduced. Whilst 26% of respondents admit to drinking more alcohol compared to before the outbreak this is a decrease since March 2020 when over a third were reporting drinking more alcohol.

Females report negative eating habits more than males: eating confectionery (47%), eating cakes and biscuits (50%), eating to cheer yourself up (54%) and eating out of boredom (59%).

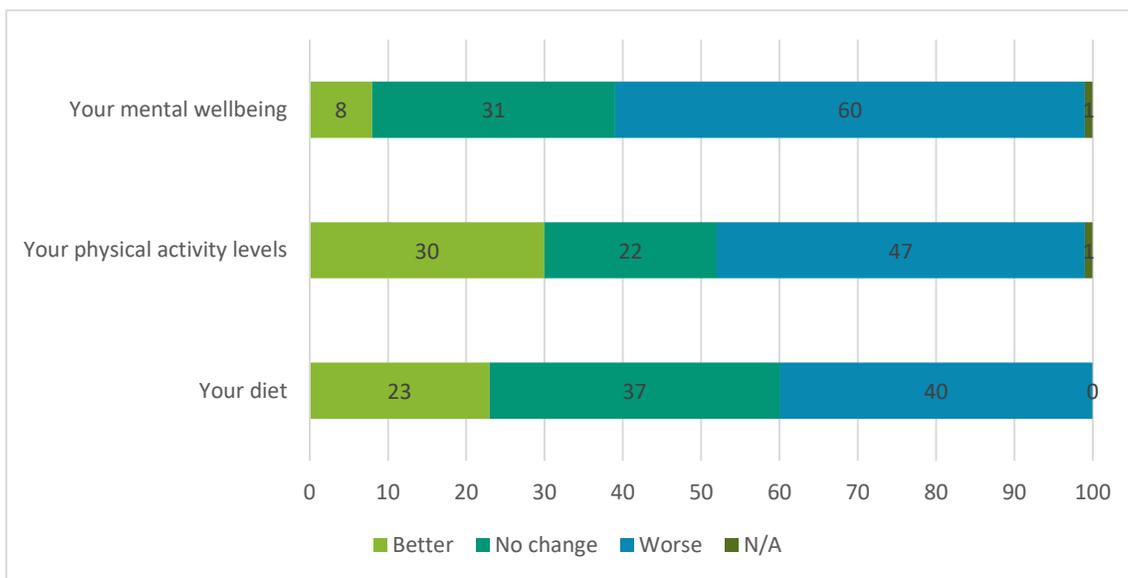
Younger people, those aged 16-24, report making unfavourable changes to their diets. For example, 54% of people aged 16-24 report consuming more takeaways since the outbreak of the virus while only 13% of those over 65 report such a change. Similarly, 24% of 16-24-year-olds say they are now eating to cheer themselves up compared to 8% of those over 65.

What changes in health behaviours are reported?

A considerable proportion of people in Scotland think that, since the coronavirus outbreak, important aspects of various health determinants have worsened. 60% think that their mental wellbeing has worsened, 47% that their physical activity levels have worsened and 40% that their diet has worsened. While for some there has been no change, these aspects have improved only for smaller proportions of people in Scotland.

Compared to our polling in May 2020 all of these areas have seen an increase in the proportion of people reporting that things have become worse.

Q: Thinking about the issues below, to what extent have they got better or worse since the Coronavirus outbreak?

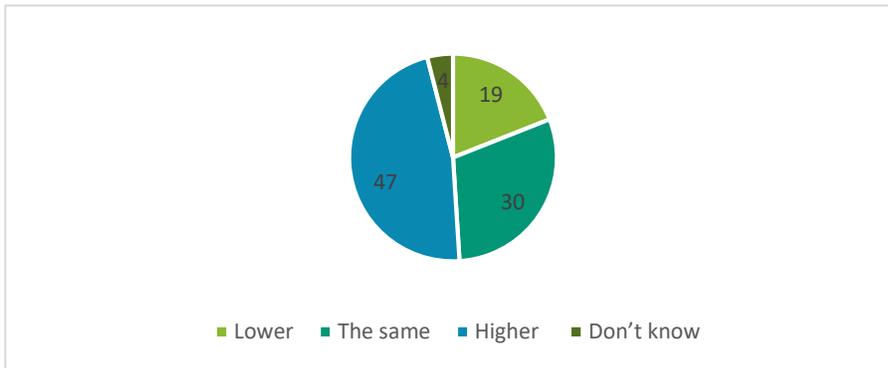


The respondents also tend to think that the diets, physical activity levels and mental wellbeing of people in their families have also become worse rather than better.

Impact on bodyweight

A significant proportion of people (47%) are reporting that their bodyweight has increased since pandemic control measures began to be introduced.

Q: How does your bodyweight now compare to pre-March 2020 (before the first lockdown)?



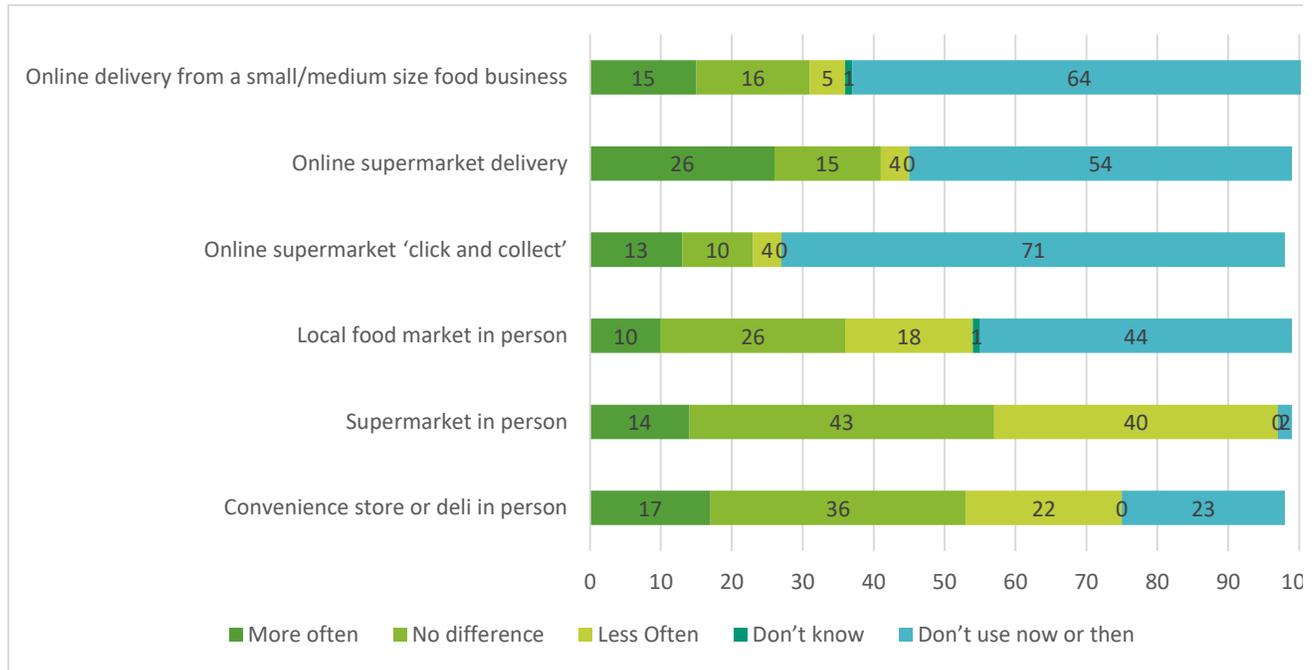
Of those reporting a change 62% have noticed it because of how clothes feel on them and 58% by measuring on scales. The majority of people report changes in physical activity (69%) and diet (58%) as a reason why they think their weight has changed.

How people shop for groceries

Shopping for groceries is an area where pandemic control measures could have had considerable impact on and we were interested in understanding any shift in patterns. Of the households we questioned 67% report shopping in the supermarket in person as the option they use most often while 20% use online supermarket delivery with a further 5% using online supermarket click and collect.

In terms of how shopping patterns have changed 40% of respondents report shopping in supermarkets in person less often than before the pandemic and 26 % report using online supermarket delivery more often. Of our respondents 54% report that they don't use online supermarket delivery now and didn't pre-pandemic either.

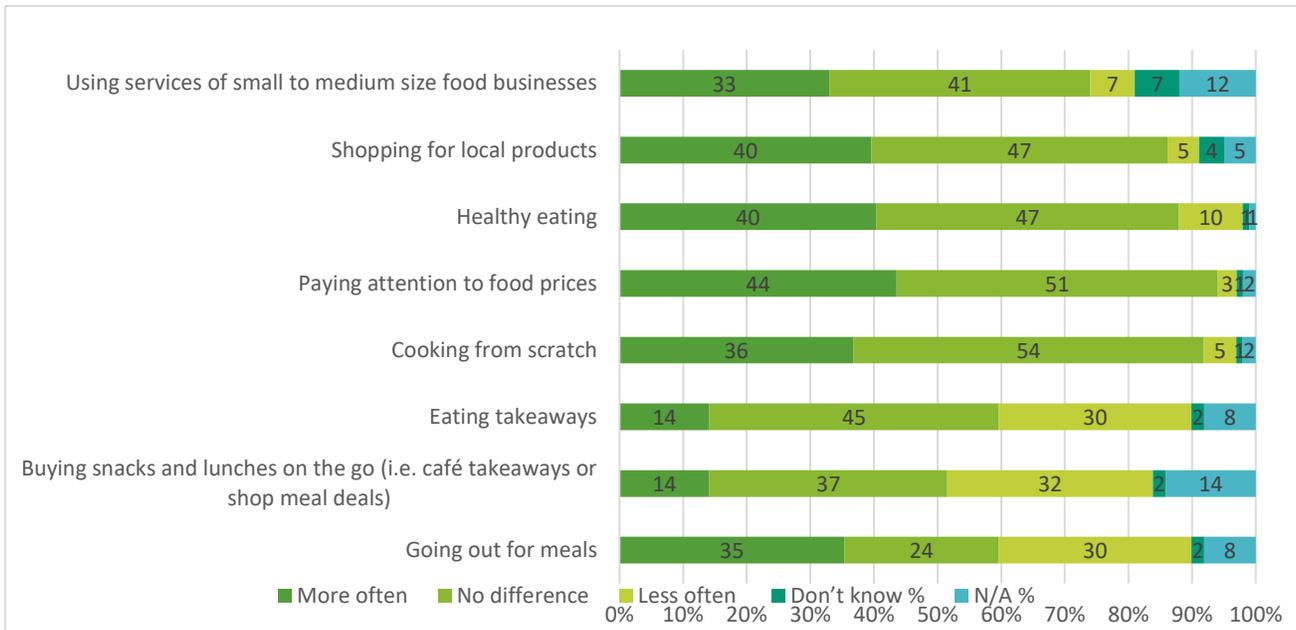
Q: Thinking about how your shopping for groceries nowadays compares to pre-March 2020 (before first lockdown), do you use each of the following more often, less often, or about the same nowadays?



Future Intentions

As we progress into further adaptation and recovery it will be useful to examine whether some of the changes people have implemented will continue beyond the period of restrictions. The respondents indicated that around two in five people will pay attention to food prices more often once the outbreak is over (44%), will eat healthy more often (40%) and will shop for local products (40%). Around a third of people will stop buying snacks and lunches on the go (32%). Once coronavirus restrictions are lifted, three in ten (30%) anticipate that they will eat takeaways less often than before the pandemic began.

Q: Once the covid-19 pandemic is over, do you think you will do more or less of the following than you did pre-March 2020 (before the first lockdown)?



Implications

Our lives have changed profoundly over the last year as we adapt to the control measures put in place to protect us from the Covid-19 pandemic. In March 2020 we anticipated from previous polling results that changes to our lives may impact on our weight. At the start of the pandemic 65% of adults in Scotland were in the overweight or obese category and this survey of over 2000 adults indicates that 47% of adults polled think their weight is higher than pre-pandemic times.

How people feel about their diet, physical activity and especially their mental wellbeing is an area of concern. A greater proportion of people report feeling that these aspects of their lives have become worse over the last year, higher than reported in the first lockdown. A staggering 60% of people feel their mental wellbeing is worse since the coronavirus outbreak.

Some of the favourable dietary changes related to food culture that we previously reported appear to have been sustained: people have been cooking from scratch more, eating together as a family more and eating more fruit and vegetables. However, it is clear that these positive changes do not outweigh the negative impact of the coronavirus outbreak. Some of the poorer aspects of diet whilst reduced since March 2020 are still high with many reporting eating out of boredom and eating to cheer themselves up.

The urgency to prevent obesity and reduce obesity levels in Scotland has never been so high. Obesity shortens life and increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, 13 types of cancer, cardiovascular disease and many other non-communicable diseases.ⁱⁱ We now know that obesity is also a factor in the severity of Covid-19.ⁱⁱⁱ

We must take urgent preventative action to achieve healthy weight in the Scottish population to not only build a healthy population in Scotland but one that is more resilient.

The recovery from COVID-19 presents us with an important opportunity to reprioritise and rebuild a healthy food and social environment and to address the inequality that underlies so many health issues in Scotland and the UK, including obesity prevalence. COVID-19 has changed how much we value food as a society^{iv}: we must now grasp the opportunity to create a society that values nutritious, sustainable foods. A joined-up approach to food system reform, linking health policy with all steps of the food system, is a vital part of addressing the current siloed approach, which prevents Scotland's food system and the Scottish Government's health priorities from delivering to their potential.

Note on methods

A sample of 2244 adults, invited from the *ScotPulse* panel of 30,000 adults (16+) in Scotland, completed the survey online. The geographic and demographic balance of the sample is evidenced in the sample breakdown (see Table 1 below). The sample size allows the ability to undertake sub-group analysis among, for example, different age groups, those from different socioeconomic backgrounds and those with existing health conditions. Overall, the sample allows for robust and reliable estimates, which policymakers can use for decision-making.

The questions used in this survey combine (1) questions used in official government surveys and the census to measure existing health conditions and educational qualifications, (2) questions used in GB-wide surveys, and (3) questions using well-defined and used 'Likert' scales.

This Summary Report is accompanied by the Topline Results document summarising answers to the questions we asked. We are planning further analysis of this data exploring stories within it. We will publish this further analysis soon.

Table 1. Sociodemographic description of the survey sample (n=2244, weighted).

Sociodemographic variable	Categories	Survey sample, n=2244
Gender (%)	Male	1077 (48)
	Female	1167 (52)
Age (%)	16-24	292 (13)
	25-34	337 (15)
	35-44	359 (16)
	45-54	404 (18)
	55-64	404 (18)
	65+	449 (20)
Social grade (%)	ABC1	1242 (55)
	C2DE	972 (43)
Number of people in household (%)	1	320 (14)
	2	953 (42)
	3	493 (22)
	4	372 (17)
	5+	106 (5)
Children in household (%)	No children	1734 (77)
	1 child	311 (14)
	2 children	154 (7)
	3 children	34 (2)
	4+ children	10 (*)
Local authority area* (%)	North	784 (35)
	East	532 (24)
	West	916 (41)
Urban/Rural (%)	Urban	1779 (79)
	Rural	432 (19)
Coronavirus-related lifestyle change (%)	Working from home	681 (30)
	Having a reduced income	398 (18)
	Shielding (vulnerable and not leaving home and minimising all non-essential contact within home)	271 (12)
	Furloughed	221 (10)
	Seeking help to afford food from family and/or friends	57 (3)
	Seeking help to afford food from emergency support such as a foodbank	30 (1)

* Local authority areas included North (Highland, Shetland, Orkney, Western Isles, Aberdeenshire, Aberdeen City, Moray, Dundee City, Angus and Perth and Kinross), West (Glasgow City, North Lanarkshire, South Lanarkshire, Dumfries and Galloway, Renfrewshire, East Renfrewshire, Inverclyde, West Dunbartonshire, East Dunbartonshire, Argyll and Bute, North Ayrshire, East Ayrshire and South Ayrshire), and East (Edinburgh City, Scottish Borders, Midlothian, East Lothian, West Lothian, Fife, Stirling, Falkirk, and Clackmannanshire).

ⁱ Obesity Action Scotland (2020) Lifestyle of Scotland's People Since the Coronavirus Outbreak – May 2020

ⁱⁱ Obesity Action Scotland (2019) Obesity in Scotland - Prevalence and Evidence Base - Nov 2019

ⁱⁱⁱ Obesity Action Scotland (2020) Obesity and COVID-19: an update of the evidence - Aug 2020

^{iv} Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts Manufactures and Commerce, Food Foundation (2020) BRITS SEE CLEANER AIR, STRONGER SOCIAL BONDS AND CHANGING FOOD HABITS AMID LOCKDOWN

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