

8 June 2018

Reverend the Hon. Frederick John Nile, ED LTh MLC
Chair
Portfolio Committee No.1 – Premier and Finance
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

By email: portfoliocommittee1@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Re: Inquiry into fresh food pricing

Dear Reverend Nile,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this inquiry.

As the peak body for health and community services in NSW, the NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) works with and for people experiencing poverty and disadvantage in NSW to make positive change in our communities. For over 80 years we have supported the sector to deliver crucial services that make a difference.

In line with the Premier's Priority to reduce overweight and obesity rates of children by five percentage points by 2025, addressing childhood obesity has been a focus for NCOSS in recent years. This is also in recognition of the fact that the incidence of childhood overweight and obesity is unevenly distributed across society, with children from low socioeconomic backgrounds at greatest risk.¹

Our 2016 report [Overweight and obesity: Balancing the scales for vulnerable children](#) and [2018/19 Pre-Budget Submission](#) emphasised that a whole of community approach is needed to address the individual, familial and societal factors leading children experiencing poverty and disadvantage to be more at risk of being overweight. We enclose these reports for the Committee's consideration and reiterate the importance of their recommendations.

Of further relevance to this inquiry is our forthcoming annual Cost of Living report that surveys over 400 households living below the poverty line in NSW. This report will focus on the affordability, availability and accessibility of food for this cohort, and we will provide a copy of this report to the Committee when it becomes available in July 2018.

In addition to this material, we make brief comments addressing the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

¹ Jansen PW, et al (2013) Family and Neighbourhood Socioeconomic Inequalities in Childhood Trajectories of BMI and Overweight: Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. PLoS ONE 8(7)

(d) The prevalence of food insecurity in New South Wales

We know that families with little disposable income can find it very difficult to afford a healthy diet. NCOSS's 2015 Cost of Living survey found that 44% of NSW households on low to middle incomes were concerned about their ability to meet the costs of fresh food.²

The NSW Population Health Survey also demonstrates that 6.8% of disadvantaged households with children under the age of 15 experiencing food insecurity in NSW.³

Over three quarters of people experiencing or at risk of poverty in NSW believe access to affordable, healthy food would make a difference to their lives. – NCOSS Cost of Living Survey, April 2017

Among vulnerable groups, the rate of food insecurity can be far higher. For example, while the overall rate of food insecurity in NSW in 2014 was 6.9%, among Aboriginal people it was 18.5%.⁴ Geographical remoteness increases the risk of food insecurity, and as expected, levels of food insecurity rise in parallel to levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. People in the most disadvantaged quintile are more than twice as likely to experience food insecurity as their most advantaged counterparts.⁵

(e) The identification of 'food deserts' and any efforts to address them

Food deserts (locations where it is easier to access unhealthy food options than healthy ones) typically exist in communities that experience higher levels of disadvantage than others.

For example, research has demonstrated that 28% of neighborhoods in the Western Sydney are unhealthy food environments compared to 20% of suburbs in the North Shore.⁶ In Figure 1 below, researchers compared the number of neighborhoods in selected areas of the North Shore and Western Sydney containing three times as many take-away shops and alcohol outlets as greengrocers and supermarkets.⁷

"There are food deserts in Western Sydney where it's very hard to access healthy food, particularly when transport is an issue. At the same time, many families are not thinking about healthy food, but about how they can feed their families on a very limited budget."
NCOSS consultation in Western Sydney, August 2017

² NCOSS (2015) ["The experience of cost of living pressures for low to middle income families with dependent children in NSW"](#)

³ Health Statistics NSW (2013) Data from NSW Population Health Survey (SAPHaRI). Centre for Epidemiology and Evidence, NSW Ministry of Health.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Astell-Burt, T and Feng, X (2015) [Geographic inequity in healthy food environment and type 2 diabetes: can we please turn off the tap?](#)

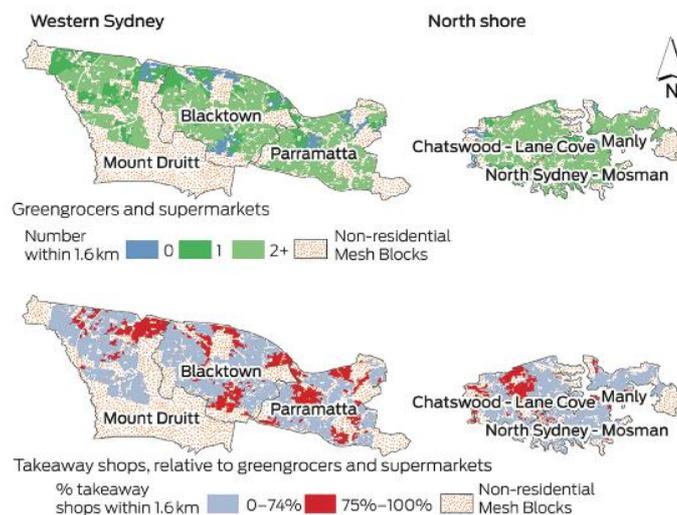


Figure 1

The placement of fast food and takeaway outlets is of particular concern when it comes to influencing the healthy behaviors of children and young people. In areas with higher levels of disadvantage, both primary and secondary schools are more likely to be in closer proximity to fast food restaurants.⁸

The effect of food deserts is exacerbated by the marketing of unhealthy to children. We urge the Committee to recommend the Government eliminated unhealthy marketing in spaces it owns or leases and takes action to remove unhealthy food marketing, promotion and sponsorship of all children's sport

Recommendation 1

The NSW Government should eliminate unhealthy marketing in spaces it owns or leases and take action to remove unhealthy food marketing, promotion and sponsorship of all children's sport.

Holistic and preventive steps need to be taken to address the effects of food deserts. We have called for health to be made an objective of planning law, to enable local Councils to consider the health effects of new developments.

Recommendation 2

The NSW Government should include health and well-being as an objective in the *Environmental, Planning and Assessment Act 1993*.

Our Pre-Budget submission emphasises the need for obesity prevention programs to be accessible to all, regardless of geographical location or socioeconomic status.

⁸ Ibid.

Recommendation 3

The NSW Government should invest an additional \$39 million in childhood obesity prevention with a focus on equitable access and opportunities in regional and remote NSW.

In particular, the NSW Government should:

- Trial a whole-of-community approach to childhood obesity prevention in at least four locations across regional and remote NSW, drawing on the approach taken in rural communities through Healthy Together Victoria and translational research currently being undertaken in Campbelltown through South Western Sydney Local Health District.
- Incorporate an equity measure into the Active Kids Rebate Program to increase the \$100 voucher to \$200 per school child, per calendar year, for vulnerable families on low incomes.
- Ensure regional and remote communities have equitable access to fresh drinking water in public places and schools through water fountains and refilling stations.

Finally, we endorse the Cancer Council's recommendations to this inquiry.

Conclusion

The cost of fresh healthy food has a major impact on people experiencing poverty and disadvantage, in terms of both their life and health outcomes. Accordingly, it is important to concentrate efforts on lowering the price of fresh food in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas.

We look forward to sharing further insights from our forthcoming Cost of Living report with the Committee to assist with the findings of this inquiry.

If you require further information in relation to our response, please contact Elyse Cain, Advocacy Manager on 02 8960 7912 or elyse@ncoss.org.au.

Yours sincerely



Tracy McLeod Howe
Chief Executive Officer