



**FD** Food  
Drink  
Ireland  
**ibec**

# Reformulation

Sector priorities  
for future success



# Reformulation

**There is an ever-increasing focus on the nutritional value of food and drink products and a growing trend of health and well-being on the global market.**

Food and drink companies are constantly innovating in response to changing consumer lifestyles, tastes and demands. The Irish food and drink industry has shown its commitment over many years to investing in the research and development of innovative products which meet consumers' needs, without compromising taste or product safety. This innovation includes reformulation – the process by which food companies change product recipes to reduce fat, salt and sugar – adaptation of pack sizes and new product development.



Reformulation has been ongoing in the food and drink industry for decades. It is recognised in a major study by the McKinsey Global Institute as an effective way in which the sector can contribute to reducing obesity and improving public health<sup>1</sup>.

IUNA's National Children's Food Survey II<sup>2</sup> shows that Ireland has begun to make an impact on childhood obesity. This detailed survey shows reductions in obesity levels among Irish children between 2003-2004 and 2017-2018. It also found reductions in their intakes of calories, sugar and salt and increased intakes of dietary fibre. During this period, the food industry has made significant progress in food reformulation and new product development. This progress is further validated by the latest data from the Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI)<sup>3</sup> which also found that levels of overweight and obesity are now stabilising as children grow older.

1. Dobbs, R., Sawers, C. and Thompson, et al., McKinsey Global Institute (2014): Overcoming obesity: an initial economic analysis
2. Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance (IUNA) (2019): IUNA National Children's Food Survey II
3. Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI) in the Republic of Ireland (2017): Findings from 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2015

# The evolution of food and drink in Ireland

**In 2019, Food Drink Ireland (FDI) released a report based on a significant data gathering initiative to collect nutrient and sales volume data for 2005 and 2017 from 15 of its members.**

This report used an innovative modelling approach, developed with advice from the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI), to assess the impact of industry efforts on the daily diet of four population groups in Ireland: adults, teenagers, children and pre-schoolers. This report is the first of its kind in the world and shows the positive impact on the population's dietary intakes.

Of those products on the market in both 2005 and 2017, the report found significant reductions in salt, saturated fat and sugar:

- **Sodium reduced by 28%**
- **Saturated fat reduced by 10%**
- **Sugar reduced by 8%**

By incorporating sales volume data, the model captured changes in what consumers chose to purchase and consume. There were notable reductions in intakes of sugar and saturated fat across the various age cohorts and other positive developments in intakes from particular nutrients, age groups, categories and among high consumers. However, the changes in intakes fell short of what would be hoped for given the direct reformulation work undertaken by the food and drink industry. This is an important reminder that obesity is a complex, multi-faceted challenge and that all stakeholders will need to work in partnership to create lasting change. No single intervention can be successful in isolation.

With this report, the food and drink industry made a major contribution to the store of public knowledge on the impact of reformulation and other food industry activities on changes in intakes of sugar, salt, saturated fat, total fat and energy at the level of the daily diet. It is indicative of the industry's commitment to the societal effort to tackle obesity and to make progress towards meeting nutritional objectives for the Irish population. Combined with consumer education and other initiatives outlined in A Healthy Weight for Ireland: Obesity Policy and Action Plan<sup>4</sup>, the efforts of industry can help to improve public health.

4. Department of Health (2016): A Healthy Weight for Ireland: Obesity Policy and Action Plan, Ireland



# Government reformulation policy

The Obesity Policy and Action Plan recognises that the efforts of the food and drink industry can help to take further steps towards improving public health. Specifically, action 3.1 aims to agree food industry reformulation targets and review progress, with Ibec and FDI named as key partners in this process.

Any policy on reformulation will only be effective if it takes into account:

- There are significant differences between categories in terms of market dynamics, history of reformulation, technical barriers, range of alternatives and consumption patterns. What is feasible to achieve must be assessed at category level and must never compromise food safety or increase food waste.
- Bespoke products for the Irish market are difficult to produce/source due to the small size of the market. This highlights the importance of aligning reformulation policy with the UK and, if possible, other EU countries to ensure that companies can maximise the efficiency of their reformulation work. Alignment in other areas, such as labelling, is also important.
- When aligning with other programmes, learnings and feasibility for implementation in Ireland should be taken on board. Due to data and resource availability, it may be impossible to exactly replicate other approaches. Solutions that are fair and workable in the Irish market must be found.
- Significant additional reformulation will require large investments in research and development. State supports should be mobilised to incentivise this R&D activity. For instance, the Revenue Commissioner's rules that define R&D and innovation are out of date and not fit for purpose for the food and drink sector. Current definitions are narrow and need to be widened.



# The future of reformulation

**FDI member companies across different categories have been at the cutting edge of reformulation for decades, working to reduce the levels of salt, fat and saturated fat and sugar in their products without compromising taste or product safety.**

Reformulated products must still meet the standards of taste and other sensorial expectations from consumers, otherwise they could potentially fail on the market which would have negative financial implications for manufacturers and may cause consumers to switch to unreformulated products.

This is a continuous process and is an ongoing focus in food and drink companies. They will continue to make changes to their product portfolios, introducing a host of new products to the market and offering consumers a choice of lower calorie alternatives to their favourite products. As many categories reach technical limits to reformulation, reduced portion sizes and new pack formats will play an increasingly important role.

The food and drink industry is committed to ongoing engagement with the FSAI and Department of Health to maximise population health. Detailed category consultations, SME engagement and discussions with the out of home sector should be prioritised by government. Working with industry on reformulation must take place in combination with initiatives from government, the health service, educators and consumers themselves.





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FDI is the main trade association for the food and drink industry in Ireland. It represents the interests of over 150 food, drink and non-food grocery manufacturers and suppliers.

FDI provides leadership and direction on a number of key strategic issues, including the economic importance and reputation of the sector, competitiveness, innovation, trade, skills, regulation and general food chain policy.