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U.K. chicken restaurants drew 8.9% more visitors in the first half of 2026

New data suggests budget pressures and social media appeal made chicken shops a preferred alternative to pubs.

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Chicken restaurants in the U.K. drew more customers in the first half of 2026 as younger consumers looked for cheaper places to meet, while pub visits continued to fall for much of the year, according to new data from insights firm Meaningful Vision.

The firm said footfall at chicken restaurants rose 8.9% in the first six months of 2026, even as visits to fast-food restaurants overall slipped 0.9%. Within fast food, chicken was one of only two segments to post growth, alongside ethnic cuisine restaurants, where footfall increased 4.2%.

Meaningful Vision said the shift reflects pressure on younger consumers' budgets, strong social media attention and the cultural pull of U.S. chicken chains such as Wingstop, Popeyes and Dave's Hot Chicken. Maria Vanifatova, the company's chief executive, said weaker spending power among younger people was a major factor behind the trend.

"With the difficult jobs market for younger people, budgets are tighter and many have lower spending power," Vanifatova said. She added that a meal priced at £10 to £15 makes chicken shops "a much cheaper night out" and a more affordable place to spend time with friends than a pub or a casual dining restaurant.

The figures point to a broader change in where younger people are choosing to socialize, especially later in the day. Meaningful Vision said fast-food outlets recorded a 5.1% increase in footfall after 6 p.m. The company also said as many as 10% of coffee shop visits now take place in the evening, suggesting that some social occasions that might once have gone to pubs are moving to other formats.

Pub traffic has been under pressure for most of the year. Meaningful Vision said pub footfall fell 7.4% year over year in May and 5.5% in June. Visits edged up 0.2% in July during the men's football World Cup, but the firm said it expected that improvement to be temporary as younger consumers increasingly favored eateries and coffee shops.

Vanifatova said there is mixed evidence on Gen Z drinking habits, but she said the broad direction of travel is clear. "What's clear is that people are visiting the pub less frequently," she said. "The World Cup provided a temporary reprieve, but the overall trend is undoubtedly lower footfall."

That change matters beyond food sales. If more evening occasions move from pubs to chicken shops and coffee chains, beer, wine and spirits sales in pubs could come under added pressure, especially among younger adults who are already watching their

spending closely. The shift may also force pub operators and drinks suppliers to review pricing, promotions and product ranges to hold on to traffic.

At the same time, the data suggests some beverage categories could benefit from the move. Meaningful Vision said soft drinks are becoming a growth opportunity across hospitality, with fast-food operators expanding their soft drink selections by 30% since 2020. The company’s figures show coffee shops now offer an average of 46 cold drink items, compared with 28 in fast food and 16 in casual dining.

One of the fastest-growing areas has been matcha. Meaningful Vision said menus carried 16 different matcha options in June, and the drink was commanding a 25% price premium. That points to a wider effort by operators outside the pub sector to capture spending through drinks as well as food, particularly from younger customers looking for a lower-cost night out.

The numbers also show that not all restaurant segments are moving in the same direction. While total fast-food footfall was slightly lower in the first half, the strong rise for chicken outlets indicates that consumers are still willing to spend when the offer is seen as affordable, fashionable and suitable for group socializing. In the current market, operators that can combine price, convenience and a strong evening proposition appear to be gaining share.

For pubs, the latest data adds to concerns about weaker discretionary spending and changing behavior among younger adults. A short lift from a major sports event was not enough to reverse the wider decline. The growth in chicken restaurants, evening coffee visits and expanded soft drink menus suggests competition for after-work and evening trade is spreading well beyond traditional rivals in casual dining.