



Childhood obesity: a plan for action – Chapter 2

To: England

For info: Contacts from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Key Issues

Childhood obesity is one of the biggest health problems this country faces. The government have stated that an ambitious approach is required to meet and beat the challenge of childhood obesity.

The government first published a plan for action in August 2016 and two years on, a further plan for action was published on 25 June 2018 with the aim of both cementing the action already taken and to expand the focus into other areas.

1. Introduction

In introducing the 'Childhood obesity: a plan for action – Chapter 2', the government state that childhood obesity is one of the biggest health problems this country faces with nearly a quarter of children in England being classed as obese or overweight by the time they start primary school at aged five and this rises to one third by the time they leave at aged 11. The UK is ranked as the worst country in Western Europe for childhood obesity.

The government are setting a national ambition to halve childhood obesity and significantly reduce the gap in obesity between children from the most and least deprived areas by 2030, and state that the action they propose to take to meet this ambition is justified by the profound health effects of childhood obesity.

To meet this target, the government advises that a balanced approach is required, that takes into consideration the steps that they need to take to create a fair food environment that does not drive excess consumption and which makes the healthy choice the easy choice; whilst ensuring parents are able to choose what food they feed their families and have access to affordable healthy food options.

This briefing provides a summary of the Childhood obesity: a plan for action – Chapter 2.

2. Background

In August 2016, the Childhood obesity: a plan for action was published which was based on the best evidence and was informed by expert opinion. The plan identified the central issue that needed to be tackled to reduce childhood obesity and outlined a variety of measures that would be taken to address the issue including the following: -

- Introducing a soft drinks industry levy
- Taking out 20% of sugar in products
- Supporting innovation to help businesses to make their products healthier
- Developing a new framework by updating the nutrient profile model
- Making healthy options available in the public sector
- Continuing to provide support with the cost of healthy food for those who need it most
- Helping all children to enjoy an hour of physical activity every day
- Improving the co-ordination of quality sport and physical activity programmes for schools
- Creating a new healthy rating scheme for primary schools
- Making school food healthier
- Clearer food labelling
- Supporting early years settings
- Harnessing the best new technology
- Enabling health professionals to support families

At the time the plan was published the government stated that it was the start of the conversation and further action would be published in due course.

3. Summary of actions

3.1. Sugar reduction

At the heart of the plan published in August 2016 was the ambition to make the food our children eat healthier. Reducing sugar content in the food children eat most was a key part of that objective. The Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) was introduced to incentivise industry to reduce the sugar content of soft drinks, and it is reported in the new plan that this has delivered strong results, with the majority of the soft drink industry reducing the sugar content before the Levy came into force on 6th April 2018.

In addition, the government challenged industry to take 20% of sugar out of the food most commonly eaten by children by 2020, with a 5% reduction target for the first year. They advise that this action has already led to many parts of the food and drink industry removing sugar from their most popular products.

It is also reported that an increasing consumer demand for healthier food and drink has been seen as a result of these programmes with large parts of the food and drink industry taking this seriously. However, despite some sections of industry meeting the 5% one-year progress target, overall the 5% goal has not been achieved. To ensure the progress is continued on sugar reduction the government proposed the following measures: -

- HM Treasury will consider the sugar reduction progress achieved in sugary milk drinks as part of its 2020 review of the milk drinks exemption from SDIL. Sugary milk drinks may be included in the SDIL if insufficient progress on reduction has been made.

- A consultation will take place before the end of 2018 on our intention to introduce legislation ending the sale of energy drinks to children.
- Consideration could also be given to further use of the tax system to promote healthy food if the voluntary sugar reduction programme does not deliver sufficient progress.

In 2019, government have advised that they will look at the level of progress made towards a 20% sugar reduction in the foods most commonly eaten by children and will be able to assess if this challenge has been met in 2020. It is commented in the plan that they will not shy away from further action, including mandatory and fiscal levers, if industry is failing to face up to the scale of the problem through voluntary reduction programmes.

3.2. Calorie reduction

In introducing this action, it is reported that childhood obesity is not just about eating too much sugar; it is about the whole diet with the average overweight and obese children consuming up to 500 extra calories per day. To address this, the government started work in 2017 on a calorie reduction programme, which challenges all food and drink companies - whether they are manufacturers, retailers, restaurants or takeaways - to reduce the calories by 20% in a range of everyday foods consumed by children by 2024. The aim of this is to help make sure children and their families are able to buy healthier food. The government advise they will monitor progress against this target closely once the programme begins, and government are considering what additional steps could be taken if progress is not delivered.

An additional area of focus that the government is turning their attention to is how people make choices about the food they buy, particularly pre-prepared food, and it is the government's belief that it is crucial that parents and individuals are given the information they need to make the most informed decisions about the food they choose for their families.

To ensure there is continued progress on calorie reduction and transparent information for parents, the government are intending to do the following: -

- Introduce legislation to mandate consistent calorie labelling for the out of home sector (e.g. restaurants, cafes and takeaways) in England, and will consult on the proposals before the end of 2018.
- Explore what additional opportunities leaving the European Union presents for food labelling in England that displays world-leading, simple nutritional information as well as information on origin and welfare standards.

It is also commented in the new plan that the government will continue to work with the devolved administrations to explore the potential for common approaches.

3.3. Advertising and promotions

The government states that tackling obesity requires us to look at all factors that influence food choices. Every day people are presented with constant encouragement and opportunity to eat the least healthy foods, facing numerous decisions about the food we and our children eat. It is believed by government that this is created by the advertisements our children see on TV and online; the

range of foods sold in our local shops or delivered straight to our doors; and the food that is promoted in-store and online. All of this is intended to influence the choices we make about the food we buy our children.

In the 2016 plan, the government committed to updating the current marketing restrictions to ensure that they reflected the latest dietary advice. They confirm that this work is underway with Public Health England (PHE) currently consulting on updating the Nutrient Profiling Model. This tool will be used to define what products can and cannot be shown during children's programming. However, despite strict restrictions around children's TV it is known that the impact will be limited if they do not reflect their media habits across all the media platforms which they use.

To make more progress to reduce the marketing and promotion of unhealthy food and drink - and the government are intending to: -

- Consult before the end of 2018 on introducing a 9pm watershed on TV advertising for High in Fat Sugar and Salt (HFSS) and similar protection for children viewing adverts online, with the aim of limiting children's exposure to HFSS advertising and driving further reformulation. In addition, the options will be explored to ensure that any restrictions are proportionate, help to incentivise reformulation in line with the aims of the sugar and calorie reduction programmes, and consider a focus on those products that children consume and most contribute to the problem of childhood obesity.
- Currently online advertising rules are drawn up by the Committee of Advertising Practice, which works alongside the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), on a self-regulatory basis. The government will consider whether this continues to be the right approach for protecting children from the advertising of unhealthy food and drinks, or whether legislation is necessary. The government state that they will ensure that any further restrictions are designed effectively for the digital space, taking into account how content is consumed online and considering options for enforcement.

It is the view of the government that where food is placed in shops and how it is promoted can influence the way we shop and it is more common for HFSS products to be placed in the most prominent places in store and sold on promotion, e.g. with 'buy one get one free' offers. Whilst some retailers have taken the first steps to redressing this by removing confectionary from checkouts or restricting price promotions but this is not the case for all retailers. The government believe that wherever parents shop, they should not be bombarded with promotions for HFSS products. Therefore, to create a level playing field they intend to: -

- Ban price promotions such as buy one get one free and multi-buy offers or unlimited refills of unhealthy foods and drinks in the retail and out of home sector through legislation and will issue a consultation on the proposal before the end of 2018.
- Ban the promotion of unhealthy food and drink by location (at checkouts, the end of aisles and store entrances) in the retail and out of home sector through legislation. A consultation will be issued before the end of 2018.

3.4. Local areas

The government recognise that where people live also has a huge role to play in tackling childhood obesity, whether it is the way our towns and cities are designed to ensure greater active travel or safe physical activity, or how many fast food outlets can operate near schools. Each local authority already has a range of powers to find local solutions to their own level of childhood obesity but while some are already taking bold action, others are not.

The government state that they want to make sure that all local authorities are empowered and confident in finding what works for them, whilst learning how local authorities both here and internationally have tackled the problem. In order to do this the government are proposing to develop: -

- A trailblazer programme with local authority partners to show what can be achieved within existing powers and understand “what works” in different communities.
- Resources that support local authorities who want to use their powers and will help set out the economic business case for a healthy food environment and provide up to date guidance and training for planning inspectors.

3.5. Schools

It is the government’s belief that schools have a fundamental role to play in helping equip children with the knowledge they need to make healthy choices for themselves, and in creating a healthy environment for children to learn and play. They remain committed to delivering the actions in the 2016 plan which set out a commitment to support all children with high quality nutrition and at least 30 minutes of physical activity per day while at school.

The government state that they have already seen the money raised by the Soft Drinks Industry Levy flowing into schools, funding breakfast clubs for the most disadvantaged children and being invested in PE and school sport. In addition, they advise that there has been investment in significant funding measures to increase cycling and walking to school. To further support schools in their role the government are intending to: -

- Be bold in the update of the School Food Standards to reduce sugar consumption. The update will be coupled with detailed guidance to caterers and schools so they are well prepared to adapt to the changes.
- Consult, before the end of 2018, on strengthening the nutrition standards in the Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services, to bring them into line with the latest scientific dietary advice.
- Review how the least active children are being engaged in physical activity in and around the school day.
- Promote a national ambition for every primary school to adopt an active mile initiative, such as the Daily Mile.
- Invest over £1.6million during 2018/19 to support cycling and walking to school.

In addition: -

- A consultation will be published before the end of 2018, on plans to use Healthy Start vouchers to provide additional support to children from lower income families.
- Ofsted is developing a new inspection framework for September 2019. This will consider how schools build knowledge across the whole curriculum and how they support pupils' personal development more broadly, including in relation to healthy behaviours.
- Ofsted will undertake research into what a curriculum that supports good physical development in the early years looks like.

3.6. Delivering the national ambition

It is reported in the new plan that change is starting to be embedded and there are many examples of good practice highlighted in the document. However, the government believe this is not where it needs to be. The scale of the challenge means that government, the food and drink industry, the NHS, local authorities, schools and families all need to play their part in helping to tackle childhood obesity and be ambitious in doing so.

The government state that they are confident that the additional actions outlined in the new plan will help parents make the best decisions for their families by changing the default in our food environments, so that healthier choices become the easiest choices. Whilst the majority of actions in this plan will relate to England only, there is a commitment that work will continue with the devolved administrations to deliver the best outcome for all.

It is stated, that no single action or single plan will help solve the challenge of childhood obesity on its own and the government advise that they will continue to review progress made against the measures already introduced; the evidence base for action; and the changing face of food and retail environments. Alongside this they will continue to invite and listen to views on what actions are needed and why.

3.7. Conclusion

In concluding, the government acknowledge that their ambition is bold but a simple one and state their commitment to halve childhood obesity and significantly reduce the gap in obesity between children from the most and least deprived areas by 2030. It is reported that there is a lot to be gained by beating obesity and the government advise that it is vital for all parties to work together to achieve this, particularly to support parents, especially in the most deprived families and areas, to help their children have the best start in life. It is the government's belief that the evidence-based actions that are proposed will do this by encouraging healthier choices and making these more readily available and identifiable to parents.

Taken together, the actions in this plan and the ones in train from 2016, are world leading. However, the government confirm that they are committed to reviewing what more can be done to make sure their ambition is met and will continue to monitor progress and emerging evidence carefully. In addition, where progress is not being delivered, there is a commitment to consider what further action can be taken to help achieve what no other country in the world has yet achieved: success in tackling childhood obesity.

APSE Comment

The recent report published by the Health and Social Care Committee, '**Childhood obesity: Time for action,**' recommended a '**whole-system approach and recognised that Local Authorities are will placed to be at the forefront of driving obesity reduction at the local level. APSE is disappointed that the plan for action has not fully taken on board the recommendations made by the Committee in this respect.**

APSE welcomes the efforts to encourage physical activity. However, the role of Local Authorities in providing infrastructure for delivering activity is we feel undervalued with too much emphasis on the 190 days a year children spend at school and little on the 175 they do not.

The renewed commitment to update the school food standards and the introduction of a healthy rating scheme for schools are welcomed. However, the plan does not specify a timeline which is a concern. In addition, there are very few details outlined regarding the introduction of the healthy rating scheme which again is a concern.

On a final note, the plan proposal to make sure food provided to pupils is nutritious and high quality is certainly a welcome ambition but this will not be achievable without a change in Government policy to make the standards mandatory in all schools.

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