

# POSITION STATEMENT: CHILDHOOD OBESITY

## KEY MESSAGES

- The UK has some of the worst rates of childhood obesity in Europe.
- Obesity during childhood has significant short term and long term effects on several physiological mechanisms in the body.
- Childhood obesity presents a multidimensional challenge to policymakers and public health, requiring urgent action.

### Definition:

Childhood obesity is defined using children's Body Mass Index (BMI), which is specific to children's age and sex and compared to centiles on growth charts, to take into account variations in body composition between ages and girls and boys. Children measuring above the 95<sup>th</sup> centile on growth charts are classified as obese [1].

### Why is childhood obesity such an issue?

Childhood obesity poses a serious concern to children's health. It's widespread, the prevalence remains high and the consequences are costly to health and the economy.

### Overview of childhood obesity in the UK

- 1/5 of reception and 1/3 year 6 children are now overweight or obese, with trends in obesity continuing to show year on year increases [2, 3].
- By 2020, almost half of all children are projected to be overweight or obese [4].
- Disproportionately burdened in the North West of England; prevalence of overweight and obesity in year 6 children is 6% greater than the national average in Manchester [2].
- Widening inequalities in obesity by deprivation. The most deprived children are twice as likely to be obese than least deprived. Further influenced by ethnicity and gender [5].
- Estimated wider costs of obesity: £27bn annually through healthcare, social care, medication and related sick days [6]

### What does the evidence say?

- Immediate health risks of childhood obesity include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, impaired glucose tolerance, joint problems and fatty liver diseases [7, 8].
- Children's psychological health is significantly affected by obesity – including behaviour, social skills and interaction, self-esteem and anxiety [9].
- Links to poor sleeping patterns and insomnia [10].
- Obese children have poorer attendance, concentration and educational attainment in school [11]
- 40% of overweight children will continue to have increased weight during adolescence and 75–80% of obese adolescents will become obese adults [12, 13].
- Obese children are at higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some cancers in later life [9, 13].

### Current UK interventions

**Change 4 Life Campaign:** Launched in 2009 by the Department of Health as the first campaign designed to tackle obesity, to encourage families to 'eat well, move more, live longer'. No evaluation data to show impact on obesity [15].

**School Food Standards:** Introduced in 2015 to guarantee all maintained school food is healthy and nutritious, helping children to develop healthy eating habits and guaranteeing one nutritious meal at lunchtime.

However, these standards do not apply to nurseries and academies set up before 2014, which are free to serve unhealthy food and drink options to school pupils and staff [16].

**Universal Infant Free Schools Meals:** Introduced in 2015 to provide a free nutritious school lunch for all children from Reception to Year 2, and encourage uptake of school meals. Plans to scrap the policy in 2017 were met with a petition which led to the proposal being overturned. There are calls to extend free school meals beyond Year 3 to all pupils [17].

**The Public Health Responsibility Deal:** Introduced in 2011, this policy measure aimed to engage with influential organisations to improve public health. Many businesses pledged to commitments, including improved labelling information, calorie/saturated fat reduction and reducing the marketing of products high in fat, sugar and salt. The deal has had little impact on public health, with most organisations failing to meet the pledges, largely owing to the fact they were voluntary [18].

**The Childhood Obesity Plan:** The Childhood Obesity Plan was published in August 2016 [19]. A Soft Drinks Industry Levy will be implemented in April 2018 as part of a wider sugar reduction programme. Generated revenue from the levy will be invested into Healthy Pupils Capital Fund which will increase opportunities to extend the school day and expand breakfast clubs. Plans for a voluntary calorie reduction programme have been announced, reducing calories in foods popular with children such as ready meals, pizzas, burgers and savoury snacks. However, the plan has come under criticism for some significant missed opportunities, such as extending restrictions of junk food marketing to general audience viewing and websites.

The dominance of voluntary pledges has also raised concerns, given the experience from the Public Health Responsibility Deal. Addressing the use of price promotions products high in fat, sugar and salt in the retail environment and extending school food standards to nurseries and all academies were also left out of the plan [20].

## Our position and what we will do

**Policy change:** In order to help local authorities align policies to tackle unhealthy weight, we have developed the Local Authority Declaration on Healthy Weight. We will continue to work with local authorities to encourage adoption of the declaration. It is essential that policymakers take a whole systems approach to create a healthier environment.

**Partnerships:** We are a member of the Obesity Health Alliance, a coalition of over 40 organisations joining forces to tackle obesity. The 3 key areas identified for action include protecting children from junk food marketing on all platforms, a levy on soft drinks and reducing saturated fat, sugar and salt in food. We will continue to support the organisation and share our expertise in tackling overweight and obesity with other members.

**Advocacy:** We campaigned for a sugar tax in the years running up to its introduction and created the campaign Give Up Loving Pop (GULP) to raise awareness of the health harms of drinking sugary drinks in children. Along with other advocacy and campaign groups across the UK, we played an important role in the development of the soft drinks industry levy by raising public awareness and sensitising stakeholders to the issue.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Local and national government must take a whole systems approach to tackling overweight and obesity to create a healthier food environment for children.
- Healthy weight should be considered in all policies – from transport to housing to town planning.
- Evaluation of future policies and interventions must be carried out to evidence the impact on the prevalence of obesity.

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