

# Health and Social Care Select Committee: Childhood Obesity Follow-up Inquiry

Written evidence submitted by Food Active – October 2019

Food Active is a healthy weight programme of work based in the North West of England, working to address the legislative, environmental, social and economic factors that influence people's lifestyle choices and behaviours. We are submitting evidence to this inquiry as tackling obesity at a local, regional and national footprint is at the heart of what we do.

For more information about this evidence, please contact Alex Holt, Food and Nutrition Lead:  
[alex.holt@foodactive.org.uk](mailto:alex.holt@foodactive.org.uk)

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## Summary:

- We are experiencing an obesity crisis in the UK and the issue is at a critical stage. In England, around one quarter of children start school aged 4-5 years old overweight or obese. This rises to as many as one in three by the time they leave school at the age of 10-11 years old. These are some of the highest levels across Europe, and if trends continue, half of all children will be overweight or obese by 2020 – which is now within touching distance<sup>1</sup>. Experiencing overweight and obesity during childhood can have both short-term impacts as well as long-lasting impacts, such as continuing to experience weight issues into adulthood and putting them at risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer and more<sup>2</sup>.
- Given the causes are multifactorial, so must be the solutions – which must be bold and ambitious, working simultaneously as part of a wider comprehensive strategy that tackles the many drivers of unhealthy weight. There is no one silver bullet to tackling obesity, and there must be a concerted effort by a wide range of stakeholders ranging from Government, schools, NHS and healthcare professionals, industry, workplaces, third sector and the public themselves.
- The Government has committed to halving childhood obesity by 2030. Whilst there has been progress in some areas as part of Chapter 1 and 2 of the Childhood Obesity Plan, we believe there is much work to be done if we are to face any chance of meeting this target.
- We recommend that the Government acts upon the series of other consultations that are still outstanding from the Childhood Obesity Plan: Chapter 2 imminently. We recognise that processing these consultations can take time, however if the Government are serious about addressing the childhood obesity crisis, further resource and support must be provided to the appropriate departments to support these consultations moving through. Food Active, as well as many other charities, third sector organisations and campaigners but also other industries and members of the public have spent a significant amount of time developing, consulting and submitting responses to these consultations. It is unfair to keep us and them waiting.
- We thank the Health Select Committee for the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. We are pleased to see them following up on previous inquiries and hope it will aid in monitoring progress and holding the Government to account.

Current progress:

1. We believe that there has simply not been enough progress in tackling obesity. This is illustrated by the fact that there has not been a significant shift in the prevalence of obesity nationally since the Government published their first Childhood Obesity Plan in 2016 - whilst the most recent data from the National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) for 2018/19 shows that the prevalence of obesity in 10-11 year olds has remained similar to that seen in 2017/18 (20.2%), in 4-5 year olds the prevalence has increased from 9.5% in 2017/18 to 9.7% in 2018/19<sup>3</sup>.

2. Below is our assessment of the proposed areas for action by the Government to tackle childhood obesity. We will use the following scale to indicate our assessment; MERIT (good progress), PASS (some progress) and FAIL (limited/no progress).

AREA OF ACTION	FOOD ACTIVE ASSESSMENT	MARK
3. Childhood Obesity Trailblazer Programme	<p>The trailblazer is one of the few proposals that we can confidently say that the Government has delivered on. Following an expression of interest (~100 local authorities) and an intense discovery phase (13 local authorities), it's now hands over to the five local authorities who were successful, to develop, test and deliver future local plans and strategies to tackle childhood obesity in their area with funding for three years.</p> <p><b>Steps Government should take</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure learning is shared and other local authorities benefit from the process.</li> <li>• Consider the sustainability of the programmes and how these can be supported after the three years of funding have finished</li> </ul>	MERIT
4. Sugar Reduction: Soft Drinks Industry Levy	<p>Data published just last month found that the SDIL has resulted in an impressive 28.8% sugar reduction per 100ml in sugar sweetened drinks. A consumer shift towards zero or lower sugar products was also found, with sugar purchased from soft drinks decreasing in all socio-economic groups. Finally, a staggering 30,133 tonnes of sugar were removed without reducing soft drink sales, resulting in around 37.5bn less kilocalories sold in sugary drinks each year.</p> <p><b>Steps Government should take</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extend the successful SDIL to include milk-based drinks</li> <li>• Challenge sugary drink companies to go one step further by lowering the lower threshold of the levy. A huge number of soft drinks are currently sitting just under the lower threshold at around 24g per serving. This is a great first</li> </ul>	MERIT

	<p>step – but given that they were able to reformulate very quickly, we think they can go even further.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consideration should also be made for those paying the upper threshold of the levy, signalling that they have made little effort to reformulate their drinks and whether or not the rate at this threshold should be raised.</li> <li>• Finally, we urge the Government to ringfence the revenue from the SDIL and ensure that it is only, as initially intended, invested back into measures that improve children’s health.</li> </ul>	
5. Energy drinks	<p>Following an 8-month delay between the consultation closing (Nov’18) and final details, we were extremely pleased to see details of a sales restriction on energy drinks to children published as part of the Prevention Green Paper and Childhood Obesity Plan Chapter 3. However, no official policy plans have been released yet.</p> <p><b>Steps Government should take</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We applaud the Government for deciding to take this important step. We recommend the Government publishes the outcome of this consultation and further details of the sales restriction swiftly. Children’s health now and in the future are depending on it.</li> </ul>	PASS
6. Mandating calorie labelling in the out of home sector	<p>This consultation closed in December 2018 and we are still waiting for the results to be published. We were disappointed to hear reports of leaked proposals that legislation will only apply to businesses with over 250 employees. Diabetes UK have calculated that such restrictions will only apply to 0.3% of out of home (OOH) outlets. Many of these businesses of this scale already display calorie information (i.e McDonalds and JD Wetherspoons) – so we believe that the actual impact on public health will be negligible<sup>4</sup>. If the leaked proposals are true, this is a significant missed opportunity by the Government to introduce change at a national level that will help to catalyse improvements in the food and drink provision in the OOH sector and help to better inform consumers about the type of food they are eating when out and about.</p> <p><b>Steps Government should take</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regardless of the outcome, we urge the Government to publish details and next steps for this consultation.</li> </ul>	FAIL

	Children's health now and in the future are depending on it.	
7. Restricting promotions on less healthy food by price and place	<p>Promised before the end of 2018, the consultation was finally published in the New Year and closed in April. Fast forward six months and there has been no further information from the Government to indicate any outcomes or if or when such details will be published. Our research in the North West shows that crisps, chocolate and sweets confectionery, yoghurt and sugar-sweetened beverages were the foods most commonly bought on promotion<sup>5</sup>.</p> <p><b>Steps Government should take</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We urge the Government to publish details and next steps for this consultation. Children's health now and in the future are depending on it.</li> </ul>	FAIL
8. Introducing further restrictions to less healthy food and drink advertising on TV and online	<p>Given the overwhelming body of evidence and strong public support for this policy change, we question whether the consultation process was really needed at all. Unfortunately, the Government has failed to reveal details of the consultation some four months after the closure of the consultation.</p> <p><b>Steps Government should take</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We urge the Government to publish details and next steps for this consultation. Cancer Research UK's guide to protecting the future generations demonstrates over 500 reasons, submitted by the public, as to why we need to prevent children from exposure to less healthy food and drink advertising<sup>6</sup>. The future of children's health cannot wait any longer.</li> </ul>	
9. Sugar Reduction: the Sugar Reduction Programme (SRP)	<p>Results from the voluntary SRP found a huge lack of progress made by the food industry that falls significantly short of meeting the 20% reduction target by 2020, averaging at just a 2.9% reduction in sugar across the eight food categories in two years<sup>7</sup>. In the OOH sector, there has been a 4.9% reduction in average sugar content since 2017. The report also found there had been <i>increases</i> of sugar content per 100g in two categories; puddings (+0.5%) and sweet Confectionery (+0.6%), with just two categories showing any sign of good progress (breakfast cereals and yogurts). When compared to the success of the SDIL, these results appear insignificant.</p> <p><b>Steps Government should take</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider legislative action to catalyse the sugar and calorie reduction programmes. The SDIL is a great example of</li> </ul>	FAIL

	<p>where fiscal measures can result in positive changes that can impact on public health, voluntary reformulation has been far less successful. We recommend that the Government considers this carefully.</p>	
10. Healthy Start Vouchers	<p>The Government promised this consultation ‘before the end of 2018’ as part of Chapter 2 and yet to date there is no sign of this being published, which is very disappointing. Recent reports have suggested that over 100,000 households missed out on Healthy Start Vouchers last year - resulting in about £26.8m worth of free fruit, vegetables and milk being lost<sup>8</sup>. It is clear that the current system on Healthy Start Vouchers needs reforming to ensure that lower income families are getting the support they need.</p> <p><b>Steps Government should take</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We urge the Government to not delay any further on opening up the consultation and to finally get this proposal in motion.</li> </ul>	FAIL
11. The school environment	<p>Perhaps the most disappointing area of all is around the school environment. Originally published in Chapter 1 in 2016, plans to update the school food standards to bring them into line with the latest dietary evidence were published. This has yet to be introduced, furthermore, the healthy schools rating scheme, promised for September 2017 has just been launched, nearly two later than planned and has been subject to significant criticism for its voluntary approach<sup>9</sup>.</p> <p>School food is an opportunity which must be grasped fully to improve the nutritional intake and development of healthy food preferences in our children.</p> <p><b>Steps Government should take</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review the School Food Standards, to include replacing all sugary puddings and desserts with fresh fruits, yoghurts and other healthier options</li> <li>• Commit to extending mandatory School Food Standards to all schools in receipt of public funding, including all types of academy.</li> <li>• Commit to using the review from the current ‘beta-version’ test phase for a full roll out of a more accessible, comprehensive Healthy Schools Ratings Scheme in time for the 2020-21 academic year, and ensure ratings are based on objective evidence, not just self-declaration</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider a properly managed Healthy Schools Ratings Scheme, overseen by an official government body such as OFSTED</li> </ul>	
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Further next steps:

12. It is important to acknowledge the political sensitivities that have been dominating the UK's politics over the past two years. However, childhood obesity continues to show few signs of slowing down and with the Government's commitment to halve childhood obesity by 2030 looking ever more unlikely, the Government must step up to the plate and put the health of the future generation first now.

**13. Delivering on Chapter 1 and 2**

As a priority and as stipulated in the table above, the Government should deliver on their promises made in Chapter 1 and 2 of the Childhood Obesity Plan, publish the results of outstanding consultations and implement necessary legislation. These concerns are also featured in the Chief Medical Officer's (CMO) report 'Time to solve childhood obesity' in Annex G, published less than a week ago<sup>10</sup>.

**14. Embarking on Chapter 3**

We were pleased to see more proposals to address obesity as part of Chapter 3, published in the Prevention Green Paper. In addition to the promises made in Chapter 1 and 2, we look forward to seeing these measures implemented without the delays witnessed in previous chapters.

**15. End public health funding cuts**

Significant cuts to public health teams at a local authority level in recent years is having a detrimental impact on levels of overweight and obesity. The current public health grant is £850 million lower in real terms than initial allocation in 2015/16,<sup>11</sup> leading to vital services being cut or reduced. We welcome the real terms increase to the Public Health Grant budget in September 2019 which will support local authorities to provide prevention and public health interventions.

**16. Going further to tackle childhood obesity**

We welcome the proposals outlined in Chapter 1, 2 and 3 yet we believe there are still areas to tackle. We fully endorse the series of bold and timely recommendations for action on tackling childhood obesity outlined in the recent CMO's report<sup>12</sup>. More specifically and as a priority, we would like to see the following action taken:

- Addressing sponsorship of high in fat, sugar and salt foods in sport. The relationship between sports boards, settings, teams and players with food and drink brands is long standing – a timely example of this is the recent KP sponsorship deal with the new ECB's (English Cricket Board) 'The Hundred' tournament set to kick off in summer 2020<sup>13</sup>. A range of high fat, sugar and/or salt snacks including McCoy's, Butterkist and Hula Hoops will be plastered over the shirts of famous cricketers and no doubt displayed across the ground, on volunteers and steward kits and on the pitch on game day – what kind of message does this give to younger audiences of the game?

- The use of cartoon, animated and TV characters on children’s food packaging is widely used by the food industry to appeal to children. We are working with the Children’s Food Campaign on a parent insight report to gather views on the effect of cartoon characters on their child’s eating behaviours. We hope to publish the report by the end of 2019.
- We believe that more needs to be done to ensure that healthier drink options such as plain milk and water are offered as the default in children’s meals in the out of home sector. There are concerns that sugar sweetened beverages are either promoted or offered in favour of water and/or milk. We are currently collecting data from parents and carers on this, and hope to publish the findings in the early 2020. Learning can be taken from legislation that has recently passed in Philadelphia on exactly this issue in restaurants<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> NHS Digital (2018) NCMP Data Profiles [online] Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2016-17-school-year>

<sup>2</sup> Public Health England (2017) Health matters: obesity and the food environment [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-obesity-and-the-food-environment/health-matters-obesity-and-the-food-environment--2>

<sup>3</sup> <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2018-19-school-year>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.diabetes.org.uk/get\\_involved/campaigning/food-upfront-campaign](https://www.diabetes.org.uk/get_involved/campaigning/food-upfront-campaign)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.foodactive.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Food-Active-Price-Promotions-on-Less-Healthy-Food-and-Drink.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> [https://twitter.com/CRUK\\_Policy/status/1181205257608683522/photo/1](https://twitter.com/CRUK_Policy/status/1181205257608683522/photo/1)

<sup>7</sup>

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/832182/Sugar\\_reduction\\_Yr2\\_progress\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/832182/Sugar_reduction_Yr2_progress_report.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.sustainweb.org/news/may19\\_thousands\\_miss\\_healthy\\_start\\_vouchers/](https://www.sustainweb.org/news/may19_thousands_miss_healthy_start_vouchers/)

<sup>9</sup> <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/healthy-schools-rating-scheme-finally-published-nearly-2-years-late/>

<sup>10</sup>

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/837907/cmo-special-report-childhood-obesity-october-2019.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/837907/cmo-special-report-childhood-obesity-october-2019.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> 2019. The King’s Fund. *Health charities make urgent call for £1 billion a year to reverse cuts to public health funding.*

<sup>12</sup>

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/837907/cmo-special-report-childhood-obesity-october-2019.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/837907/cmo-special-report-childhood-obesity-october-2019.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/cricket/2019/10/03/exclusive-hundred-attacked-health-groups-go-nuts-junk-food-sponsorship/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://philadelphia.cbslocal.com/2019/09/26/philadelphia-city-council-legislation-restaurants-kids-menu-healthy-beverage-childhood-obesity/>