

Food Active – Submission to the Autumn 2021 Joint Spending Review

SPENDING REVIEW

1. Public Health Funding Uplift

At the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review, the UK Government must deliver an increased, sustainable, long term funding settlement for local public health in England.

Public health is a critical service in improving population health and addressing inequalities. It has played a pivotal role in local responses to Covid-19 in the last 18 months but is now facing the consequences of this through heightened workloads to start to readdress some of their local priorities, programmes and services after the disruption Covid-19 has caused.

Through our network of local authorities in the North West and in other Northern regions of England, we have consistently found many public health colleagues have had their capacity significantly reduced and diverted towards Covid for over a year now.

This long-term disruption to their usual work programmes and strategies on issues such as obesity mean many are now attempting to re-invigorate this work after a lengthy pause and having to start to rebuild momentum that has been at a standstill since March 2020.

Local public health has been at the forefront of local responses to Covid-19. They need more support and funding now than ever before, therefore Food Active supports an increase of at least £1bn extra a year in the Public Health Grant, and future annual increases to correlated with NHS budget increases. They also need stable funding arrangements over the years to come, so they can make long term plans for strategies and commissioning of local services.

By increasing funding for the Public Health Grant, we can also help to relieve some of the huge pressures facing the NHS – which was already under strain before the pandemic arrived, due to high levels of non-communicable and preventable diseases that can require costly and long-term treatment – from tooth extractions, to type 2 diabetes, to diet-related cancers.

Furthermore, given the evidence linking obesity and inequalities to poorer Covid-19 outcomes, increased investment in local public health is critical if we are to build more resilience in our communities in the face of future pandemics and threats to public health.

2. Sustainable Weight Management Service Funding

Weight management services are crucial in supporting people with obesity to manage their weight. With the majority of adults in the UK experiencing overweight or obesity and the prevalence either staying the same or in some groups increasing, widespread, effective and sustainable weight management services will play an important role in tackling obesity.

There has been a consistent problem of ‘short-termism’ in funding for obesity services. The 2018 inquiry by the APPG on Obesity received many examples of funding being provided to create or expand an obesity service for a set time period, at the end of which the service closed¹.

The UK Government has announced an additional £100 million of funding to councils in England and NHS to expand access to weight-management services² – but this has not been confirmed as a long-term funding package and includes only very limited provision for services for children and young people, who we know are also experiencing high levels of obesity. Some of our local authority network members have raised concerns about short-term funding for weight management services, and how effective this really is in terms of supporting individuals to manage their weight. Losing weight slowly, through small changes to our behaviours and lifestyle choices, is shown to be a more effective approach than one that is time limited³. Short-term funding can result in services having a short shelf-life, rather than providing long-term sustained support and can make it difficult for local authorities to make long term plans.

Our Local Authority colleagues also recognise the importance of applying a strong evidence base when investing in weight management services and interventions and whether the ‘short-termism’ of some of this investment provides value for money in having a real impact on levels of overweight and obesity.

Whilst provision of services and support for individuals to lose weight and improve their health and well-being is vital, we should also recognise and prioritise strategies, in addition, that we know can have a real impact on obesity – and perhaps place a greater focus on wider environmental and societal factors that play a significant role in determining our weight status and shape our behaviours. Obesity is a complex public health challenge driven by a mixture of the social, economic, biological and environmental factors that shape our lives and individual behaviours. Tier 2 services, often a 12-week multicomponent intervention of diet and physical activity, aim to treat the symptoms of obesity – but ultimately at the end of the programme and/or when the funding runs out, we are essentially sending people back into the environments that caused obesity with no more support. Therefore we need investment to support structural change, in addition to providing weight management services and support.

Furthermore, lack of appropriate funding is an ongoing barrier to accessing treatment. In England, local authorities commission some (but not all) weight management services and have experienced historic year-on-year public health budget cuts, which has had an impact on their ability to commission weight-management services. Many of our network members prior to the new funding did not currently offer a Tier 2 service in their locality. A new service may be instated as a result of the additional funding granted this year, however due to capacity issues these may not be sustained after the 12-month funding period.

About Food Active

Food Active is a healthy weight programme delivered by the Health Equalities Group, and commissioned by local authority public health teams, NHS organisations, and Public Health England teams at both regional and national level.

Food Active’s core aim is to address the social, environmental, economic and legislative factors which influence people’s lifestyle choices and behaviours, with a specific focus on healthy weight.

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¹ APPG on Obesity 2018 *The Current Landscape of Obesity Services: a Report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Obesity*

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5975e650be6594496c79e2fb/t/5af9b5cb03ce64f8a7aa20e5/1526314445852/APPG+on+Obesity+-+Report+2018.pdf>

² DHSC 2021 'New specialised support to help those living with obesity to lose weight' (press release, 4 March)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-specialised-support-to-help-those-living-with-obesity-to-lose-weight>

³ <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/should-you-lose-weight-fast/>