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# Tackling unhealthy food and obesity: how far will the new Labour government go?

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The King's speech confirmed Labour's manifesto commitments to "restrict the advertising of junk food to children along with the sale of high caffeine energy drinks to children."<sup>1 2</sup> It's a welcome signal that Labour is taking childhood obesity seriously. Although it will be rightly applauded, more still needs to be done to reverse persistently high obesity rates and entrenched inequalities.

Data from the National Childhood Measurement Programme show that in 2022-23, more than one in five (21%) children aged 4-5 years and one in three (37%) children aged 10-11 years were living with either overweight or obesity.<sup>3</sup>

Both rates are lower than in 2021-22, but they are still higher among children aged 10-11 years than before the pandemic and stark inequalities persist. Rates of obesity among 4-5 year olds living in the 10% most deprived areas in the country are 12%—twice as high as in the least deprived areas where rates are just 6%. For children aged 10-11 years the difference is even greater, with rates of 30% in the most deprived areas compared with 13% in the least.<sup>3</sup>

Reversing long standing increases in child and adult obesity—and improving people's diets by making it easier for everyone to access healthy food—would be hugely beneficial to the nation's health and to society as a whole.

Children and adults with obesity are more likely to develop conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, and joint disease. In turn, these conditions are contributing to rising rates of economic inactivity among working age adults in the UK and are estimated to have cost the NHS £11bn in 2021.<sup>4 5</sup> As well as causing obesity, unhealthy food is associated with a number of diseases independent of weight. For example, sugar sweetened beverages are associated with risk of developing diabetes,<sup>6</sup> and there is growing evidence linking ultra-processed foods to a range of adverse health outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

Restricting unhealthy food advertising and banning high caffeine drink sales are policies from the previous Conservative government that were never implemented.<sup>8</sup> Both will help to start tackling some of the key commercial drivers of poor diet and ill health. Indeed, the previous government's own consultation suggested that banning junk food adverts on television after 9 pm and online could lead to around £2bn in health benefits alone.<sup>9</sup>

## The need for wider action

Obesity and consumption of unhealthy food are shaped by wider social, economic, and environmental factors. For example, people living in the 20% most deprived areas of England are over four times more

likely to have limited access to green space than people living in the least deprived areas, yet have five times the density of fast food outlets.<sup>10 11</sup> Having limited finances may mean living somewhere where there aren't nearby shops selling fresh food, not having a car or being able to afford public transport to access them, and not having the time to prepare and cook meals because of working multiple jobs or having caring responsibilities.

Tackling these wider factors within the food and drink sector means greater recognition of the role that food and drink corporations play in influencing individual behaviour, and bolder use of tax and regulation such as expanding the Soft Drink Industry Levy to include unhealthy food, as well as measures to restrict industry interference in policy making.<sup>12</sup>

More specific local policies to support councils should include changes to planning law to help local authorities limit the opening of unhealthy takeaways (as promised in Labour's Child Health Action Plan), updating national planning guidance to ensure health is given greater weight in planning decisions, and introducing new powers for local authorities to restrict junk food advertising on non-council owned billboards.<sup>13</sup>

## Taking a whole government approach

Beyond specific risk factors such as unhealthy food—and the welcome action on limiting tobacco sales—measures also need to tackle the building blocks of health such as a fair income, secure employment, and quality housing. This will need a whole government approach.<sup>12</sup> Legislation announced in the King's speech to increase provision of high quality homes and improve renters' rights are important steps in the right direction. It is also promising to see a child poverty strategy being developed to help keep families out of poverty longer term, supported by a child poverty unit. More immediately the two-child limit and benefit cap should be ended.

Local and regional authorities also have crucial roles across many of these wider social and environmental factors, yet councils have been hit by substantial cuts to their spending power alongside rising costs of delivering services. Local authority public health budgets, for example, have been cut by 28% per person in real terms since 2015-16 with funding increasingly misaligned with local needs.<sup>14</sup> Providing more sustainable local funding, with multi-year settlements, will be key to reversing long term declines in service provision and tackling skilled workforce shortages in areas such as trading standards, licensing, and planning.

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UK life expectancy gains have stalled, the burden of preventable ill health is rising, and inequalities are widening. A mission led government presents an opportunity not just to tackle obesity, but to reverse these trends more broadly. Labour's early intention to take direct action on childhood obesity is a positive signal, but more will be needed in the coming years to make a step change in improving the nation's health and tackling inequalities.

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