

Local Government Association briefing

Addressing the incidence of obesity

House of Lords debate

18 July 2018



KEY MESSAGES

- Obesity is a complex problem with a large number of different but often interlinked causes. Councils take obesity seriously as evidenced by the fact they have spent over £15 billion on public health since 2013, with over £1 billion tackling child and adult obesity, and physical inactivity.ⁱ
- Despite reductions to the public health budget, councils report a 50 per cent increase in spend between 2013/14 and 2016/17 on childhood obesity, and a 60 per cent increase for childhood physical inactivity in the same period.ⁱⁱ
- Analysis of a recent survey conducted by the LGA among local leaders on public health delivered by their local authority showed that the top priority for public health is to give children and young people the best start in life (88 per cent). The health issues that respondents' councils are most concerned with at the present time are mental health (27 per cent) and obesity in children.ⁱⁱⁱ
- LGA research shows 1 in 10 children in primary school are obese, rising to 1 in 5 by the end of primary education. The 'obesity gap' is widening with those living in deprived communities twice as likely to be obese as those in the most affluent areas.
- Today's obese children will be tomorrow's obese adults, and with this comes a range of costly and debilitating major health conditions. To tackle this issue, councils across England have adopted a variety of methods to reduce childhood obesity in their areas.^{iv}
- At a national level, Government should integrate tackling obesity across different policies. For example, greater funding of sustainable travel such as cycling and walking initiatives can promote exercise which reduces obesity whilst also reducing car use, generating wider benefits around reducing congestion and emissions
- We are calling for fundamental reforms to tackle childhood obesity. This includes giving councils more of a say on how the sugar levy is spent; giving councils the power to ban junk food advertising on their high streets and near schools; and to close the loophole which exempts nearly 4000 academies in England from having to provide healthy school meals.

Briefing

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FURTHER INFORMATION

LGA report: Healthy weight, healthy futures: Local government action to tackle childhood obesity'

Our paper 'Healthy weight, healthy futures: Local government action to tackle childhood obesity' (updated 2018) collates case studies across different councils demonstrating different initiatives including promoting exercise and working with different agencies and stakeholders to effect transformative change and attitude shift. Whilst there is no 'one size fits all' prescription to cure obesity, these initiatives provide examples of good practice and creative pilot schemes that are transferable, and feed into local and national strategy.^v

Sugar reduction and the Soft Drinks Industry Levy

The Public Health England (PHE) voluntary sugar reduction programme and the Soft Drinks Industry Levy are welcome steps that this Government has taken to proactively tackle childhood obesity. We encourage the Government to go further, and make the sugar reduction programme mandatory to ensure that it achieves significant reductions in childhood obesity. We hope that the Government will set out the steps it will take if it becomes clear that the voluntary programme is not enough of an incentive for businesses to reformulate their products.

The introduction of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy has already had a positive impact on the reformulation by some soft drink manufacturers', which is welcome. However, it is disappointing that only £100 million of the proceeds from the levy is earmarked as new money to invest in children's sports and healthy eating programmes. The remainder of the levy will be diverted to address gaps in existing departmental funding. Public health teams in local government should be able to decide how the levy is spent. Councils are uniquely placed to work with schools, parents, businesses and the voluntary and community sector to ensure that funding goes to where it is needed most, and on the interventions that are proven to reduce child obesity.

Priorities for further action

A cross-government approach

Obesity is a complex problem with a large number of different but often interlinked causes. Data from National Statistics show that in 2016/17 there were 10,705 hospital admissions with a primary diagnosis of obesity. This is an increase of 8 per cent on 2015/16.^{vi}

No single measure is likely to be effective on its own in tackling obesity. We welcome the Government's commitment to tackling obesity and the measures they are putting in place to address the problem, including a soft drinks industry levy and reducing the amount of sugar and calories in foods.

It is vital that all departments across Whitehall contribute to this policy area. This will ensure that positive steps taken forward by one department are supported and amplified by the work in other departments. For example, if increasing physical activity levels in adults and children is a key priority for the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), the work of the Department of Transport (DfT) on active travel (walking and cycling) should be feeding into this objective.

The role of licensing, planning and place-shaping

People's environment should make it easy to lead healthier lifestyles. We need to plan places with space for children to play and encourage modest exercise for everyone, whether walking, cycling, or enjoying nature, and spaces for sport and recreation. This requires robust policies, organisational structures, professional practices and social and cultural change.

Addressing the proliferation of fast food is a particular concern for many of our residents. Councils do not want to make life unnecessarily difficult for restaurant and catering businesses. We need a flourishing hospitality sector in our towns and cities: it is good for both the day and night-time economies and creates balanced and busy town centres. Where councils have introduced restrictions on takeaways through their planning policies, they are also working with businesses to help them make a healthier offer to their customers. Engaging with businesses has seen some improve their offer with advice from environmental health and public health staff, and some competing for awards for healthier food.

There is the potential for local government to use some of its powers in a variety of ways to combat obesity and try to dilute some of the effects of our obesogenic environment.^{vii} For example, the National Planning Policy Framework makes it clear that the planning system can play an important role in creating healthy, inclusive communities. For some years, a number of local authorities have been using their planning powers to try to restrict the growth of hot food takeaways near schools and in town centres. There are now over 50 councils which have introduced restrictions on fast food outlets, these outlets tend to sell food that is high in fat and salt, and low in fibre, fruit and vegetables.^{viii}

One obstacle however, is that councils' planning powers can do nothing to address the clustering of fast food outlets that are already in place. Nor can planning decisions influence the quality or nutritional value of takeaway food. Planning experts point out that the planning system is currently not designed to deal with the detail of how a business is operated, but rather with how land is used. Despite this, there are ways that councils can change their planning requirements to have an impact on future developments. So, although the planning system alone cannot solve the problem of obesity, there are still positive steps that can be taken.

Further research and perhaps legislative change may be required before an effective redesign of damaging food environments can be achieved.

Working with schools

There is more to tackling childhood obesity than simply getting children playing sport at school. Over the year, children spend a relatively small proportion of their time at school, and an even smaller time doing PE or playing sports while they are at school. Investments in this area, could be better directed by looking at building activity into lessons, on the walk to school, on the weekend, during the holidays and at home.

We are also calling for funding to be made available to offer accessible physical activity sessions over holiday periods. This would avoid a cliff-edge fall in activity during school holidays. UKactive research^x has found that children are losing around 80 per cent of the fitness they build up during the school year due to inactive summer holidays.

Nutrition in school meals is another area where a change could be delivered quickly and without incurring any costs to the public purse. Standards for school

food became mandatory in council-maintained schools and some academies in January 2015. The standards restrict the amount of sugary, fried and fatty foods in school meals and require pupils to be offered at least one portion of vegetables or salad as part of their lunch each day. They are mandatory in all council schools, new academies and schools that became academies between 2008 and 2010.

However, for schools that became academies between 2010 and 2014, the food standards are voluntary. We are calling for the Government to close this loophole, which will make all academies follow the standards for school foods. This will ensure that all children attending school in England are eating healthy food while they are at school.

The environment immediately around schools is also important. We need to be able to make changes to our environment if we are to tackle obesity, and although this will not solve the obesity crisis by itself, being able to limit children's exposure to unhealthy food products would be an important step forward. For example, a University of Stirling study^x recently found that three quarters of all food and drink advertisements, including outdoor billboards, seen by children are for unhealthy products. The study also found that children were highly susceptible to advertising, with nearly half saying they had bought one or more food or drink item in response to seeing an advert.

Currently, the only powers available to local authorities extend to the positioning of the billboard, not the content of the advertising. Giving councils powers to control the exposure of advertising around schools and nurseries could therefore significantly change the messages children receive about health eating while they are out in their local communities. It is not right while we are trying to educate children around the importance of maintaining a healthy diet, they are subjected to excessive food advertising that is high in fat, salt and sugar.

LGA responds to launch of Child Obesity Strategy

Responding to the launch of the Government’s latest Childhood Obesity Plan, Cllr Izzi Seccombe, Chairman of the Local Government Association’s Community Wellbeing Board, said:

“This latest plan is desperately needed if we are to seriously tackle the child obesity crisis this country is experiencing.

“With the UK already the most obese nation in western Europe and more than 22,000 children classed as severely obese when they leave primary school, urgent action is needed to prevent today’s obese children becoming tomorrow’s obese adults.

“We are pleased that the Government’s plan includes clearer food labelling, which the LGA has long-called for, plus measures to introduce mandatory calorie information on menus, improve food standards and physical activity in schools and the option to introduce further fiscal measures.

“A specific programme to help to support councils develop their existing powers is also good news.

“It is a bold ambition to halve childhood obesity by 2030 but we remain determined to work with government on introducing further measures to address this crisis that are not included in the plan, including giving councils powers to ban junk food advertising near schools and the need for specialised support for obese and seriously obese children.

“Councils need to be properly resourced if they are to carry out their public health responsibilities effectively and this needs to be balanced against their already over-stretched budgets, otherwise the ill health consequences of obesity in our younger generation risks causing NHS costs to snowball.”

ⁱ Local Authority Revenue and Expenditure Figures, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-revenue-expenditure-and-financing-england-2016-to-2017-individual-local-authority-data-outturn>

ⁱⁱ Local Government Revenue Outturn Spend Data 2013/14 – 2016/17ⁱⁱ

Local Authority Spend £m	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18 (Est)	Total
Child Obesity	30,213	37,694	40,931	44,211	40,269	193,318
Child Physical Activity	18,555	27,920	27,101	29,591	29,066	132,233
National Child Measurement Programme	19,385	19,398	21,494	20,197	26,204	106,678
Adult Obesity	59,267	63,108	61,279	58,862	56,161	298,677
Adult Physical Activity	50,192	67,137	69,449	69,376	65,582	321,736
	177,612	215,257	220,254	222,310	217,282	1,052,642

ⁱⁱⁱ Public Health Perceptions Survey (Nov 2017), Local Government Association, <https://www.local.gov.uk/public-health-perceptions-survey>

^{iv} ‘Healthy weight, healthy futures’ – Local government action to tackle childhood obesity, LGA, February 2018,

<https://www.local.gov.uk/healthy-weight-healthy-futures-local-government-action-tackle-childhood-obesity-0>

^{vi} Statistics on Obesity, Physical Activity and Diet 2017 , National Statistics,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statistics-on-obesity-physical-activity-and-diet-england-2017>

^{vii} Building the foundations: tackling obesity through planning and development, LGA,

<https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/building-foundations-tack-f8d.pdf>

^{viii} Tipping the scales-Case studies on the use of planning powers to limit hot food takeaway

<https://www.local.gov.uk/tipping-scales>

^{ix} Blueprint for an Active Britain: Milestone Review, UKActive

http://www.ukactive.com/downloads/managed/ukactives_Blueprint_for_an_Active_Britain_-_online.pdf

^x 'The Impact of Food and Drink Marketing on Scotland's Children and Young People' Stirling University (2015)

<https://www.stir.ac.uk/news/2015/12/childrens-choices-influenced-by-dominance-of-junk-food-marketing/>