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## Will the Government deliver on its new childhood obesity strategy?

Written by Bruce Reilly, Political Consultant on 13 June 2018



The Government will shortly publish a 'refreshed' childhood obesity plan, two years after the original watered-down strategy was released to a muted reception. MPs and campaigners are calling (again) for bold action, so what can we expect from the updated plan and what tests will it have to meet this time around?

The Commons Health and Social Care Committee has reported on its inquiry into childhood obesity bringing forward a long list of asks for the Government, with a particular focus on the marketing and pricing of unhealthy food and drinks. With an emboldened Jeremy Hunt, supportive DCMS ministers and a general sense that 'something must be done', the Committee has not held back, calling for a 9pm watershed for advertising of junk food and a ban on cartoon characters being used for promotions.

The report sets a very public benchmark for the Government's plan, and ministers would be wise to take note of the Committee's recommendations, for fear of incurring the quiet wrath of its chair, Sarah Wollaston. Although, ministers have certainly been eager to appear receptive to new ideas and have already given away a few hints about their planned approach.

Steve Brine, the enthusiastic public health minister, provided some details during his grilling in front of the Committee recently: not only will there be a target date for the eradication of childhood obesity, but he would like to see the testing of innovative approaches to combating the condition across local authorities. He was also very sympathetic to "levelling the playing field" for retailers and businesses that were "doing the right thing". It would be surprising too if ministers did not heed the calls from the Committee and all major opposition party leaders for a ban on price promotions and pre-9pm advertising of unhealthy foods, with reports that such measures are expected to be included in the strategy already.

If the Government is fearful of a backlash against more pressure on retailers and producers, they need only look at the public support for curbs on plastic waste and microbeads to see that intervention could be a popular move. The food and drink industry must also know that this is the way the political winds are blowing, and whilst many manufacturers are already ahead of the game in terms of reformulation, the lack of progress in meeting a voluntary 5 per cent sugar reduction target earlier this year suggests a mandatory approach may become necessary.

There has also been a sustained campaign on age restrictions for the sale of energy drinks from MPs from all parties, with Theresa May having to respond to the calls during PMQs earlier this year and an open Science and Technology Committee inquiry into the issue. The APPG for Obesity has also called for improved treatment of obesity, not just prevention. What does seem to be lacking in much of the recent debate is the role of physical activity, and it remains to be seen whether the Government will go beyond their existing sports strategy.

All things considered, it is clear that that the new childhood obesity strategy will require political will if it is to be effective and May knows the association unhealthy weight has with inequality and mental health, two of her policy priorities. With heightened expectations and clear demands from MPs, what ultimately could be the critical factor in the new strategies' success is the Prime Minister's desire to avoid even more criticism with everything else on her plate.

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