

The Child's Obesity Strategy

How our young people would solve the childhood obesity crisis





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FOREWORD

It seems that everybody has a view about what is making our children obese. Sugar-laden fizzy drinks, the demise of cookery lessons and the rise of easily accessible, calorie-dense fast food are just some of the reasons offered as to why the UK has one of the highest levels of childhood obesity in Europe.

Childhood obesity has significant consequences for our children's physical and mental health and wellbeing - both in childhood and for their future life as an adult - as well as the long-term future of the NHS. Children and young people who are obese are more likely to grow up to become adults who are obese, with increased risk of morbidity and a markedly lower life expectancy than someone of a healthy weight.

The Government has said that it wants the publication of the much delayed childhood obesity strategy to be a "game-changing moment" and we welcome its imminent arrival. Industry, politicians, health professionals, academics and celebrities have been consulted in the process of developing the strategy; but have young people themselves been asked what they think? RSPH and Slimming World did just that, and the results make fascinating reading.

Young people want meaningful and consistent nutrition information about what they eat and drink. They are also very aware of the power of advertising of unhealthy food, often targeted at young people and they want protecting from it.

In this report we share what young people have to say about some of the ideas that the government think will help to solve the obesity epidemic, and reveal what teenagers would do if they were in charge.

The UK is in the grip of an obesity epidemic, and unless it is stopped in its tracks, this crisis is set to become a catastrophe. We cannot afford to ignore these young voices, and we urge the Government to listen to, and engage with, the people who most need the nation's support to lead happier and healthier lives.



Shirley Cramer
CBE Chief Executive
Royal Society for Public Health



Jan Boxshall
Managing Director,
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Paul Sacher
Child obesity expert and
Slimming World adviser

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WHY ARE OUR CHILDREN OBESE?

The UK is in the grip of an obesity epidemic, and it is not just limited to the adult population; we have one of the highest levels of childhood obesity in Europe. ⁽¹⁾ Prevalence of obesity in children aged 2-15 rose steadily in the UK from 1995 to 2005, when it reached its peak at around 18% for both boys and girls. ⁽²⁾ The most up-to-date figures show that 9.5% of Reception (4-5 year olds) and 19.1% of Year 6 pupils (10-11 year olds) are obese. ⁽³⁾ There is also a strong correlation between deprivation and prevalence of obesity, with rates of obesity on leaving primary school in areas in the most deprived decile at 24.7% compared with 13.1% in areas in the least deprived decile. ⁽³⁾

Childhood obesity has significant consequences for children's physical and mental health and wellbeing, as well as the long-term future of the NHS. Obesity in children is associated with a number of physical health conditions including asthma and other respiratory problems, early puberty, some cancers and skin infections. ⁽⁴⁾ Obese children are twice as likely to develop type-2 diabetes. ⁽⁵⁾ In addition, childhood obesity is linked as both a cause and consequence of a number of psychological disorders such as anxiety, poor self-esteem, poor body image and eating disorders. ⁽⁶⁾ ⁽⁷⁾ Children and young people with obesity are more likely to grow up to become adults with obesity ⁽⁸⁾ who can expect to have both significant excess morbidity and a markedly lower life expectancy than someone of a healthy weight. ⁽⁹⁾

A quarter of the adult population is already obese, ⁽¹⁰⁾ costing the NHS a staggering £4.2 billion per year. ⁽¹¹⁾ It is expected that obesity rates will rise to half of all adults by 2050, more than doubling NHS costs to £10 billion a year and with wider economic costs to the nation of almost £50 billion. ⁽¹²⁾ Given the difficulty of reversing obesity in adulthood, it is crucial that prevention in childhood is prioritised. The causes of childhood obesity are multifaceted, including behavioural, environmental and genetic factors. ⁽¹³⁾ Genetic causes of obesity are rare, and the rising prevalence of childhood obesity in stable populations suggests that behavioural and environmental factors must underlie the childhood obesity epidemic. ⁽¹⁴⁾

Childhood obesity has proliferated in recent decades in part due to children living increasingly sedentary lifestyles where physical activity has declined and activities such as watching TV, playing video games and time spent on smart phones has increased. ⁽¹⁵⁾ In 1995, the average child spent 3 hours a day in front of a screen, compared to 6 hours today. ⁽¹⁶⁾ More time spent in front of a screen not only means less time spent being active but it has also been shown that watching TV increases desire for food and energy intake in children ⁽¹⁷⁾ and that if children eat or drink while watching TV, they consume more calories. ⁽¹⁸⁾ Rapidly changing dietary practices have also contributed towards the childhood obesity epidemic. Developed nations, such as the UK, are subject to an increased prevalence of high-sugar carbonated beverages, aggressive marketing practices by food companies, elevated purchasing power of the consumer and relatively low priced energy-dense foods that are freely available to children. ⁽¹⁹⁾ The ready availability of calorie-dense food seems to have a clear correlation with obesity levels. This can currently be seen in rapidly developing countries around the world such as Mexico, Brazil and India where increasingly Westernised diets are coinciding with rising obesity rates. ⁽²⁰⁾ If concerted efforts are not made as a matter of urgency to reverse the trend of childhood obesity, then the NHS will be left to deal with the disastrous consequences of rising avoidable illness – a strain which the already overstretched service will be unable to sustain.

Obesity rates over time

Childhood obesity has increased since 1995, when 11 per cent of boys and 12 per cent of girls aged 2-15 were obese. There was a steady increase up to around 2004 and 2005, when obesity peaked at 18 per cent to 19 per cent among both boys and girls, but levels have been slightly lower since then.

There were differences in trends according to age. Among children aged 11-15, the proportion who were obese has remained at a broadly similar level (with some fluctuation) since the peak in 2004/2005.

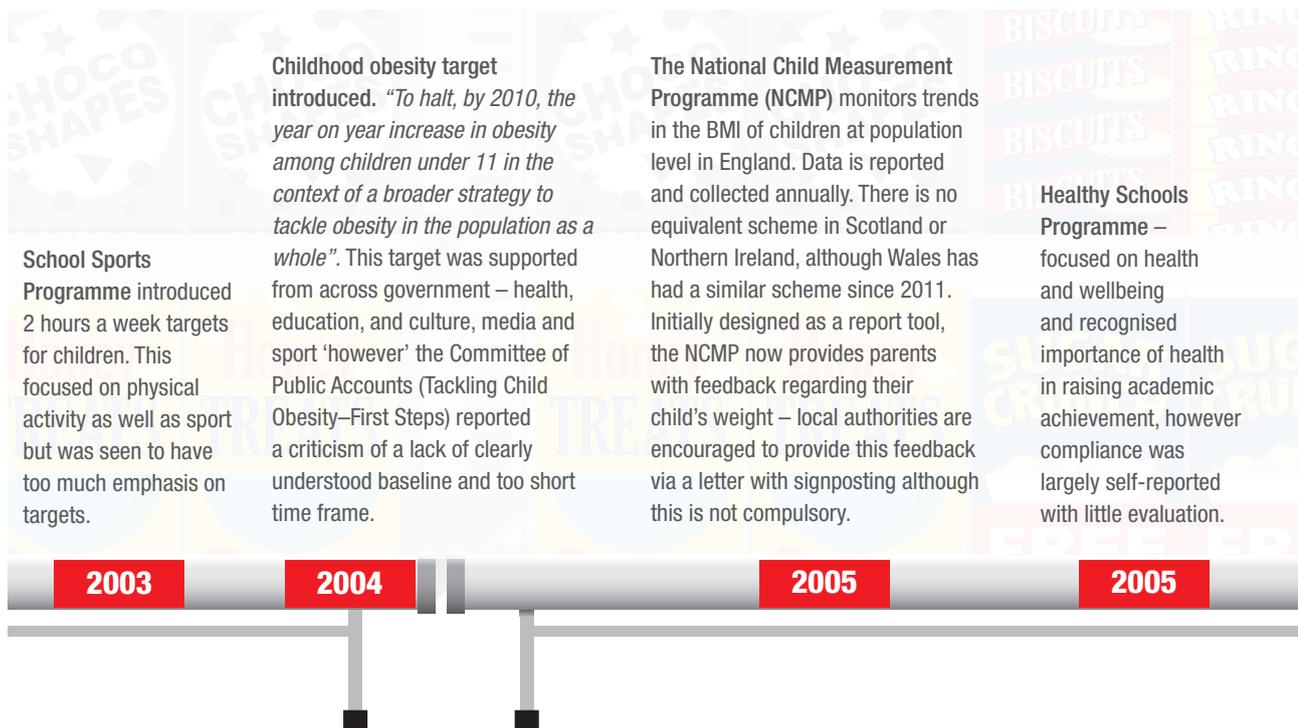
Among those aged 2-10 the proportion who were obese has decreased significantly from 17 per cent of both boys and girls in 2005 to 13 per cent of boys and 12 per cent of girls in 2013.

Source: *Statistics on Obesity, Physical Activity and Diet: England 2015, Health and Social Care Information Centre*

“ If we are to have any chance of people following healthy eating advice, then the public health community needs to be speaking with one voice. ”

Shirley Cramer CBE, Chief Executive of RSPH

Recent timeline of childhood obesity

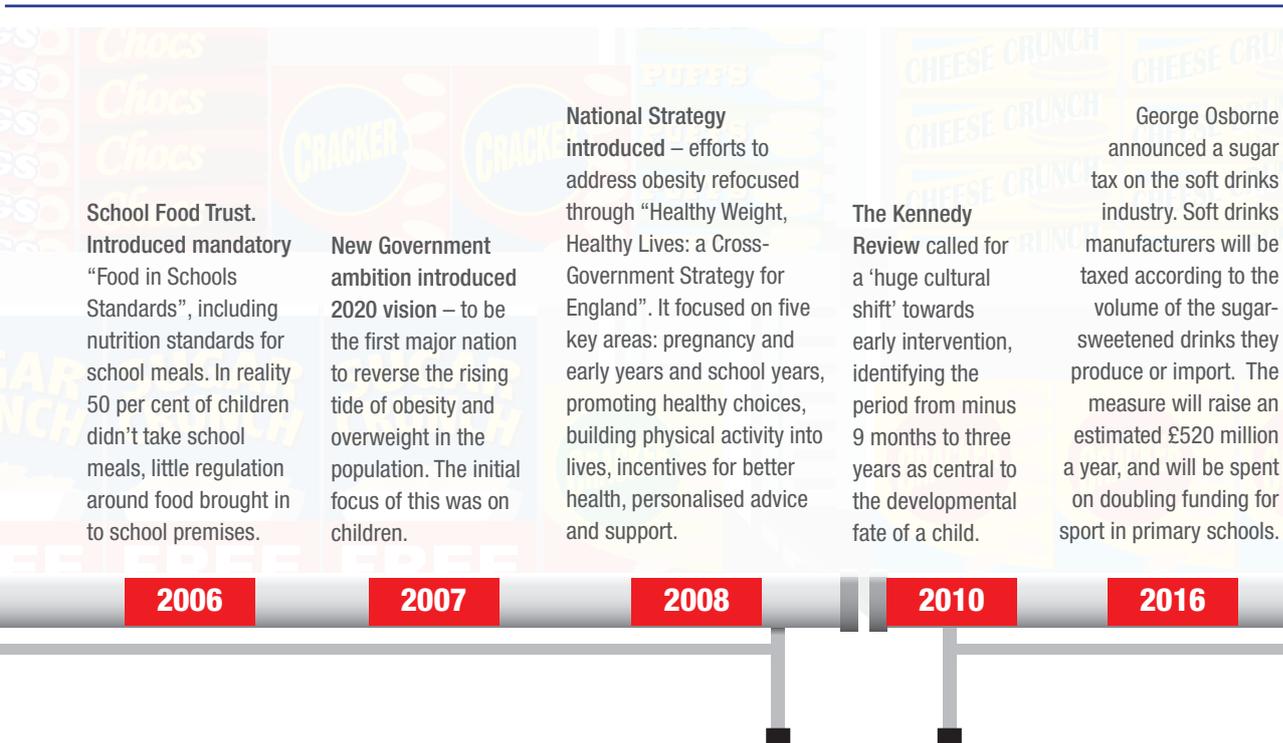


What do experts think?

Health experts agree that the government must take immediate and decisive action.

Janet Davies, Chief Executive & General Secretary of the Royal College of Nursing, said:
“Obesity is affecting children’s health and restricting their lives so action is needed now. “Nurses working in this field know that prevention is best, as it can be very difficult to rectify the problem, so the Chancellor’s announcement of a sugar tax on drinks manufacturers is a good step towards prevention.”

Shirley Cramer CBE, Chief Executive of RSPH, expressed serious concern at a report from the National Obesity Forum which has criticised official nutritional advice and made the counter-intuitive suggestion that people should be encouraged to eat more fat to combat obesity. Ms Cramer commented: *“When it comes to knowing what constitutes a healthy diet, there is so much conflicting advice out there that the public no longer knows which way is up – and headline-grabbing reports such as this one will not help. “If we are to have any chance of people following healthy eating advice, then the public health community needs to be speaking with one voice.”*



WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE SAY?

Our methodology – examining young people’s views on the obesity crisis

We gathered the views of 17 young people from a cross section of socio-economic groups from across the UK at an initial workshop on 14 May 2016. In addition to exploring the areas identified by the Health Select Committee in 2015, we also asked young people to give us their views on what might be behind the childhood obesity epidemic. We also asked what the solutions to the obesity crisis might be. Participants’ responses were analysed and reported and grouped into themes. These findings helped us to develop survey questions.

Following this workshop, we conducted a national online survey of 570 young people aged between 13 and 18 years old between June 1 and 10 2016.

The young people suggested action on a number of different fronts, with suggested policies aimed at Government, food manufacturers, retailers, schools and regulators.

In the next section we set out the results of the survey, along with some suggested initiatives young people thought would make a positive difference to tackling childhood obesity. These initiatives can be grouped into the following areas:

- Better food labelling
- Making takeaways more of a treat
- Supermarkets promoting and rewarding healthier options
- Activities during school and leisure time



RSPH Obesity conference group

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NEW IDEAS ^{from young people} AIMED AT TACKLING CHILDHOOD OBESITY

i) Labelling the point

What do young people say?

- Over 4 in 5 (86.5%) think that food and drinks should include recommended nutritional information for young people, not just adults
- Nearly 4 in 5 (81.7%) think food manufacturers are misleading people when they provide fat, salt and sugar for single servings (or per 100g) rather than for the entire product
- Over 4 in 5 (83.9%) think soft drinks should show how many teaspoons of sugar they contain
- Over one third (41.8%) think that foods high in fat, salt and sugar should be in plain packaging
- One third (32.6%) support film-style age limit classifications labels for food and drink

What needs to happen?

Young people felt that while there is a lot of nutrition information on food and drink products it is often difficult to translate this into their everyday lives. They also reported that nutrition information is hard to read and guidelines are provided for adults, not children. A number of different initiatives were suggested, aimed at making nutrition information clearer and getting across the health consequences of obesity.

- **Provide nutrition guideline information for kids, not just adults**

Most food labels only contain information for adults' daily recommended intake and not kids. By providing information for young people, this would help children become more aware of their sugar intake and help them to understand how much they should really be consuming.

- **Clearer information on the sugar content of food and drink**

Young people recognize the risks of eating too much sugar and were keen for food and drink products to show more clearly the amount of sugar the products contain. One suggestion was to include illustrations of sugar cubes on packaging of soft drinks, as a visual illustration which could help young people understand how much sugar really is in a drink.

In addition, young people felt that food and drink should reveal the amount of sugar in the whole product rather than per serving, as in many cases people consume a product in its entirety rather than a fraction of it. Per serving amounts often give people the impression that the food contains less sugar than it actually does, they said.

- **More explicit health warnings**

A couple of different suggestions were made to help young people better understand the health implications of consuming foods which are high in fat, salt and sugar, and also to help them moderate their consumption of different types of food and drink. These included cigarette-style health warnings which would visually display the health consequences caused by over-consumption of “unhealthy” food and drink.



“ Nutrition information is often written in small and inconspicuous font, which makes it difficult to read how unhealthy the product is or the harmful effects. By making simple changes to the layout on food packaging and how it is presented, we can make a huge impact to how children are fed and what food choices they make. ”

Nigham Jahangiri and Shannon Cottell



ii) Takeaway the temptation

What do young people say?

- Over two-thirds (71%) believe that takeaway food high in fat, salt or sugar should come with a health warning about the risks of obesity
- Over half of the young people we surveyed had ordered a takeaway using their mobile phone
- 1 in 4 young people (24.6%) have ordered a takeaway to their school
- Over one third (41.7%) of young people could walk from their school to somewhere selling unhealthy food and drink in under 2 minutes
- Around one in three young people (66%) have seen advertising of junk food and fast food takeaways on bus tickets
- Over three quarters (78.1%) believe that food ordering apps should provide the nutrition content of their meals
- Three quarters (75.1%) believe that takeaways should make healthier meal deals cheaper than unhealthy offers
- Over one third (40.6%) believe food ordering apps should ask user's age, and half (50%) believe takeaways shouldn't be delivered to schools
- Almost one third (31.8%) have gone to a fast food takeaway specifically because they offer free Wi-Fi

What needs to happen?

While there has been good progress in terms of school food standards, there is a risk that the popularity and ready availability of fast food may undermine these efforts. Fast food takeaways are particularly popular with young people, although this is of concern given that typical meals are energy dense and served in large portion sizes. While some Local Authorities have drawn up plans to restrict the number of fast food outlets near schools, young people said that because there are so many schools this might be problematic.

• Introduce age or delivery restrictions on fast food to schools

Our research has found that three quarters of parents would support restrictions on fast food takeaways delivering to schools. Two thirds believe that fast food takeaways should not serve young people during school hours. Given the progress made on school food standards it is important not to undermine these efforts by ensuring that we make it more difficult for school children to access foods which are high in fat, salt and sugar. This could be achieved in part by restricting the delivery of fast food takeaways to schools, or ensuring fast food takeaways are prohibited from serving school kids during school hours.

- **Greater restrictions on fast food advertising**

Restrictions on the advertising of unhealthy food (including fast food) during children's TV shows and programmes watched by a higher proportion of children were introduced in 2009. However, advertising of unhealthy food continues through other channels such as social media and websites. Our research with young people shows that three quarters have seen adverts for unhealthy food, such as fast food, on social media apps. The Committee of Advertising Practice has launched a consultation to limit where ads promoting products high in fat, salt and sugar can appear in media including the press, posters, billboards, magazines and online.

- **Make better use of free Wi-Fi to promote healthy activities to young people**

One third of young people told us that they go to fast food restaurants to take advantage of the free Wi-Fi which they offer. It was suggested that as part of the sign-up for the Wi-Fi, fast food restaurants could advertise healthy food and activities to young people. Free Wi-Fi could also be offered in healthier environments eg. leisure centres or parks.



“ There should be an age restriction on fast food takeaways - so that no under 16s can buy them during school hours. This will help the child obesity crisis by educating children from a young age about what foods can do to their bodies. If they have learnt this from a young age then they will most likely carry the information through into adulthood. ”

Scarlett Turner

“ I have noticed the amount of advertising on public transport. Whether this is posters on the side of the bus or on the back of the bus tickets. Either way, this undoubtedly encourages young people to visit the nearest fast food chain and get something unhealthy. ”

Malik Thomas



iii) Retail therapy

What do young people say?

- Over half (53%) believe that junk food should be positioned on higher shelves away from eye-line of young people
- Almost half (47%) think there should be limits on BOGOFs for junk food
- Almost 4 in 5 (80%) believe supermarkets should offer free fruit and vegetables to children to snack on while shopping with their parents
- Almost 4 in 5 (78%) would use a loyalty card that rewarded healthy choices
- Over one third (38%) believe that special offers should only be available on healthy food

What needs to happen?

• Position unhealthier food and drink on higher shelves

Studies have shown that up to 90% of the products children see at supermarkets as their parents queue are high in fat, salt or sugar. While some shops and supermarkets have clamped down on unhealthy food at check-outs, young people believe that more can be done and one suggestion was to position unhealthier food on higher shelves away from the eye-line of young people.

• Give out 'wonky' fruit and vegetables to children and young people

Another suggestion, aimed at curtailing pester power, but which would also encourage fruit and veg consumption by young people and minimize food wastage is for supermarkets to hand out free 'wonky' fruit and veg to children and young people as they enter the store with their parents. 'Wonky' fruit and veg is perfectly edible but often rejected by supermarkets due to blemishes or unusual shape.

• Develop a loyalty card which rewards healthy choices

Most supermarket loyalty cards reward shoppers for how much they spend, rather than what they purchase. The vast majority of young people would support and use a loyalty card which rewarded healthy purchases with points which could be redeemed for fun activities or gym membership.

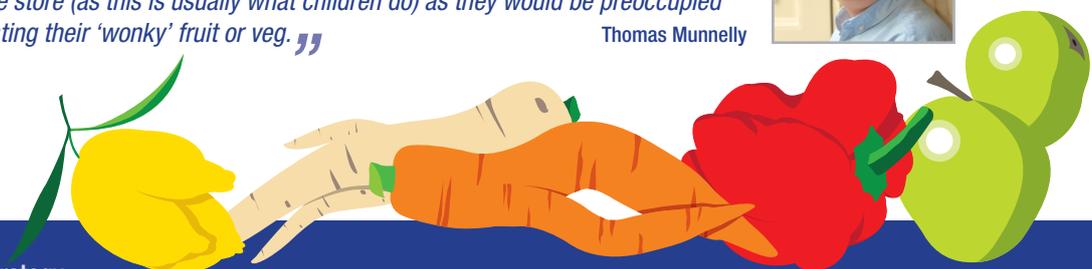


“ I think a loyalty card would encourage children and teenagers to eat more fruit and vegetables. This card could also give young people special offers on activities such as going to the gym which will encourage exercise. So more fruit and vegetables could also mean more activity. ”

Gemma Timoney

“ Supermarkets could give out free “wonky fruit and veg” to children with their parents, when they enter the store or in little bags to take away and eat at home. This would help tackle childhood obesity as the children would be less likely to ask their parents for unhealthy snacks that they may see in the store (as this is usually what children do) as they would be preoccupied eating their ‘wonky’ fruit or veg. ”

Thomas Munnelly



iv) Educating and activating

What do young people say?

- 1 in 4 agree they have no healthy meal options available at schools
- Over half (60%) say it is easy to get unhealthy food from somewhere other than school during the day
- Around three quarters (75%) would be more likely to eat healthily if schools offered more appealing food
- Over two thirds (70%) would be more likely to eat healthily if school meals were cheaper than less healthy meals
- Over 4 in 5 (85%) would like schools to provide nutrition lessons so they can learn more about healthy eating
- Nearly half of kids would be more physically active if their schools had better sports equipment
- Nearly three-quarters (73%) would join gyms if they had memberships aimed at young people

What needs to happen?

- Ensure schools provide lessons about good nutrition
- All schools to provide healthy meals and snacks which are also cheaper than alternative options
- Introduce age-appropriate activities for kids in gyms and leisure centres



“ One of the reasons why more young people are overweight is because they can't afford activities such as gym memberships, don't know how they are supposed to be working out and don't realise that there are ways to make it a fun and enjoyable thing. We believe that by lowering the gym prices and giving the right education on what to do and how to use the gym, as well as adding in classes for young people we can massively reduce the percentage of overweight young people. ”

Alana Gillings



SUMMARY OF WHAT ACTION WE CAN TAKE

Better food labelling

- Provide nutrition guideline information for kids, not just adults
- Clearer information on the sugar content of food and drink
- More explicit health warnings

Making takeaways more of a treat

- Introduce age or delivery restrictions on fast food to schools
- Greater restrictions on fast food advertising
- Make better use of free Wi-Fi to promote healthy activities to young people

Supermarkets promoting and rewarding healthier options

- Position unhealthier food and drink on higher shelves
- Give out 'wonky' fruit and vegetables to children and young people
- Develop a loyalty card which rewards healthy choices

Activities during school and leisure time

- Ensure schools provide lessons about good nutrition
- All schools to provide healthy meals and snacks which are also cheaper than alternative options
- Introduce supervised kids/young people time and age-appropriate activities in gyms and leisure centres

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