



Health and Social Care Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

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From Rt Hon. Jeremy Hunt MP

3 November 2020

Rt Hon Matt Hancock
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

Letter by Email

Dear Matt,

Congratulations on the publication of the Government's obesity strategy in July this year, which is extremely timely given the evidence showing a clear and consistent trend of an increased risk of hospitalisation, admission to intensive care and death for people living with obesity.

As you are aware, this is not the first government obesity strategy. Prior to July's strategy, three chapters of *Childhood Obesity: A plan for action* were published, containing almost all the same policy commitments and consultation processes. Despite many of these consultations being conducted, no government decisions made were made and there was no implementation of - let alone evaluation process started for - policies such as the 9pm watershed on HFSS products and menu labelling in the out of home sector. This is very concerning given that less than a year after chapter 3 was published, a pandemic with serious associated risks for those living with obesity struck. (My submission to the Select Committee's follow up inquiry in Oct 2019 contains further details: <https://www.cedar.iph.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Childhood-Obesity-Plan-Progress-Report-Submission-by-CEDAR-MRC-Epidemiology-Unit-University-of-Cambridge.pdf>)

The Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us that we cannot afford to wait any longer before implementing policies that will help us all to live and enjoy a healthier life, regardless of our circumstances, budgets or where we live. The benefits will not only be in preventing us from being in a more vulnerable position in a future crisis, but also efforts to facilitate a healthier population simultaneously facilitate the building of a healthier and more prosperous environment, economy and more.

The Government has promised it will publish details about when the policies in the July obesity strategy, such as menu labelling and the 9pm watershed on HFSS products, will be implemented and how by the end of 2020. Can you confirm this is going to happen? And can you confirm that you will publish full details of the implementation and evaluation process with this? In 7. "What next?" of the strategy, there are eight additional proposed policies with minimal detail about when and how they will be carried forward and implemented. Can you elaborate on the implementation and evaluation processes of those too? Finally, the same week the obesity strategy was published, part 1 of the National Food Strategy was published, which contained a vast number of food, nutrition and obesity-related policy recommendations. How are these being considered by you and the Government? Will they be brought into the policy plans for the obesity strategy?

I look forward to your response, which I would be grateful for by 17 November 2020.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jeremy'.

Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Chair, Health and Social Care Committee



Department of Health & Social Care

*From Jo Churchill MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Prevention,
Public Health and Primary Care*

Rt. Hon. Jeremy Hunt MP

By email

18th November 2020

Dear Jeremy,

Thank you for your letter of 3 November about the obesity strategy and for the Committee's ongoing work in this area.

Living with obesity reduces life expectancy and increases the chance of serious diseases such as cancer, heart disease and type 2 diabetes, as you know. Recently we have seen consistent evidence that people who are overweight or living with obesity who contract Covid-19 are more likely to be admitted to hospital, admitted to an Intensive Care Unit and sadly to die from Covid-19 compared to those of a healthy body weight status.

Excess weight is one of the few modifiable factors for Covid-19 and so supporting people to achieve a healthier weight will be crucial to keeping people fit and well as we move forward.

We published "Tackling obesity: empowering adults and children to live healthier lives" in July. The strategy focuses on tackling the causes of obesity, improving diets and preventing ill health. It demonstrates an overarching campaign to reduce obesity, takes forward actions from previous chapters of the childhood obesity plan and sets out measures to get the nation fit and healthy, protect against Covid-19 and protect the NHS.

We have seen some important successes since the Government published the first chapter of the childhood obesity plan in 2016, including average sugar content of drinks subject to the soft drinks industry levy decreasing by 43.7% between 2015 and 2019, and significant investment being made in schools to promote physical activity and healthy eating. There has also been success in some categories of the sugar reduction programme including around a 13% reduction of sugar in breakfast cereals, yogurts and fromage frais. We are also working with councils to reduce obesity locally through a range of schemes.

As part of progressing actions set out in the second chapter of the childhood obesity plan and following national public consultations, through the strategy we have confirmed that we will introduce a 9pm watershed on TV for adverts for high fat, salt

and sugar (HFSS) products; we will legislate to stop the promotion of HFSS products by volume and prominent locations both online and in store in England; and, we will introduce legislation to require large out-of-home sector businesses, with 250 or more employees, to calorie label the food they sell.

We have published the response to the consultation on out-of-home calorie labelling and are looking to introduce legislation early next year. We have made clear that the post-implementation review will be used to consider whether to extend the policy to smaller businesses in the future. We will shortly publish the responses to the consultations on promotions and advertising, and have launched a 6-week consultation on introducing a total restriction for HFSS adverts online which runs until 22 December. We are committed to implementing the advertising restrictions both on TV and online by the end of 2022 and the policy will be subject to a post implementation review. The promotions consultation response will set out our planned timetable for implementing and evaluating this policy.

All regulatory policies in the obesity strategy will be subject to post-implementation reviews to consider their effectiveness and whether revisions or extensions to the policies are required to support reducing obesity levels.

The Department has an overarching, peer-reviewed evaluation strategy which aims to maximise learning and feedback from what are clearly innovative interventions as well as supporting a wider programme of more cross-cutting research that will help us understand more about the systems that sustain and promote obesity and how ordinary people, particularly those from minority groups and more deprived circumstances, are responding to our policies. Resources for the evaluation strategy come from a range of sources including the National Institute for Health Research, a flexible programme budget and by influencing and co-ordinating wider research activity conducted by academic and health systems collaborators.

Our obesity strategy sets out measures we need to take, particularly in response to Covid-19, but we are under no illusions that further measures will be needed. We remain committed to reviewing what more can be done to make sure we meet our ambition of halving childhood obesity and will continue to monitor progress and emerging evidence carefully. As part of this process, we have set out further areas where we are taking action including supporting people to lose weight, working with industry through the sugar reduction and reformulation programme, and consulting on marketing and labelling of infant foods. We will be providing further details about these actions as soon as we can.

In addition, PHE and NICE are working together to re-review the evidence on vitamin D and Covid-19 and are due to publish in mid-December 2020.

We have been clear that our policies are informed by the latest research and emerging evidence, including from debates in Parliament and various reports from key stakeholders including the Health and Social Care Select Committee. I am grateful to the Committee for its contribution. The National Food Strategy forms part of this process and the Government is committed to publishing a white paper within six months of the publication of the second part of the report.

The Prime Minister is determined to reduce obesity to better prepare the country for future health crises. He has been clear that we must have a care for the health of our population, and we will be healthier, fitter and more resistant to diseases like Covid-19 if we can tackle obesity.

We will continue to follow the evidence and consider what more we can do. We all have a lot to gain by reducing obesity and it is vital for us all to work together to achieve this.

JO CHURCHILL