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**Health leaders issue stark warning to Prime Minister:   
Don’t U-turn on children’s health**

Leaders from the UK’s largest health charities and medical organisations have today issued a warning to the Prime Minister, urging him to not dilute new laws which could prevent thousands of children from developing overweight and obesity.

Members of the Obesity Health Alliance, a coalition of health organisations including the British Heart Foundation, Cancer Research UK and the Royal College of Physicians, say swift measures to address obesity are vital if the Government is going to realise its targets of halving childhood obesity by 2030, narrow the gap in healthy life expectancy, and tackle the NHS backlog.

The warning comes after persistent rumours that the Prime Minister and his new policy chief, Andrew Griffith MP, are being heavily lobbied by the advertising industry and by multinational food companies to delay and water down incoming new laws to restrict multi-buy promotions on unhealthy food in shops, and a 9pm watershed on TV and total ban online on junk food adverts. To concede now would see the Government renege on repeated commitments to these policies, including most recently from the Secretary of State for Health, Sajid Javid, who only last week insisted the Government is absolutely committed to the measures. Parliament passed the promotions restrictions into law last November and is currently on track to do the same for the advertising restrictions.

It would also fly in the face of public opinion, which new polling[[1]](#footnote-1) has revealed is firmly in support of tighter rules on junk food marketing tactics:

* 74% of people support stopping junk food adverts being shown on TV before 9pm
* 74% of people support stopping junk food adverts being shown online
* 72% want to see restrictions on shops promoting unhealthy foods in prominent areas such as at checkouts and in shop entrances
* 57% welcome restrictions on multi-buy promotional offers (e.g., buy-one-get-one free) on unhealthy foods in shops

Levels of childhood obesity are now at a devastating all-time high, having risen by 4.6% in the last year alone. 28% of children now start primary school with a weight classed as overweight or obese, rising to 41% in 11–12-year-olds[[2]](#footnote-2). Children from the most deprived backgrounds are more than twice as likely to have obesity than the most affluent children, meaning addressing obesity is a core part of levelling up the UK.

**Caroline Cerny, Alliance Lead at the Obesity Health Alliance said:**

“*In 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson promised the nation he would make healthier choices easier for everyone. Rowing back on these promises now would leave him with the legacy as the leader who cancelled laws which would prevent thousands of children from developing obesity.”*

**Michelle Mitchell, Cancer Research UK’s Chief Executive, said:**

*"These proposed restrictions – which the Prime Minister backed – are crucial to reduce childhood obesity, help prevent more cancers in future and save lives****.*** *The evidence hasn't changed, in fact the need to act only grows as childhood obesity increases. We urge the Prime Minister to hold fast and put the nations’ health first, not bow to industry pressure."*

**Dr Charmaine Griffiths, Chief Executive at the British Heart Foundation, said:**

*“Addressing the UK’s stubbornly high obesity rates is going to take far, far more than personal willpower alone. It is simply impossible to expect that we can level up life expectancies across the UK’s poorest communities without full implementation of the landmark obesity strategy.”*

**Chris Askew OBE, Chief Executive at Diabetes UK, said:**

*“Living with overweight and obesity is one of the main risk factors for developing type 2 diabetes. With nearly 1,600 children and young people in England now living with the condition, there can be no doubt that urgent action is needed to improve the health of our nation.*

*“Type 2 diabetes is very serious, particularly for children, so the prospect of these important measures being cancelled is extremely concerning.*

*“The Government must build on its recent commitments to prevent overweight and obesity, not drop them, as the need to support people to live healthier lives and reduce obesity levels is clearly more vital than ever.”*

**Professor Rachel Batterham, Royal College of Physicians special adviser on obesity, said:**

*“It is incredibly concerning to hear that the prime minister might row back on plans to stem the tide of aggressive marketing of unhealthy food and drink. This could have devastating consequences, particularly for children and young people.*

*“Around one in five children in the UK is living with obesity, and we now know much more about why. Some people have genes that protect them against developing obesity, and others have genes that make them more prone to putting on weight.*

*“If we lived in a healthy environment, this wouldn’t be such an issue, but we aren’t. We’re surrounded by foods high in fat, salt and sugar, and endless prompts to eat them. That’s why measures to restrict marketing tactics like buy one get one free and promoting junk food at checkouts and aisle ends are so important.”*

**Dev Sharma, 17, Youth Chair of Bite Back 2030:**

*"We know how influential and well funded the food industry is and that they are pushing back against bans on junk food promotions. We need the Government to stand strong for child health by sticking to the legislation. Currently the health of 3 million children in the UK is at risk from having overweight or obesity - that’s ten times the number of 50 years ago. It’s not children that have changed, it's the world that surrounds us - it is literally flooded with junk food and billions is being spent on ensuring it stays centre stage. We now have the opportunity to redesign the system to protect the futures of millions of children."*

**Notes to editors**

* The new laws restricting promotions of some foods high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) were passed via the Food (Promotion and Placement) (England) Regulations 2021 and are due to be implemented in medium and large retail outlets from October 2022. They apply to multi-buy promotions and location-based promotions at shop entrances, aisle ends and checkouts.
* Laws limiting the advertising of some HFSS products on TV and online are going through Parliament as part of the Health and Social Care Bill. They include a 9pm watershed on TV and total ban on paid for adverts online and due to be implemented from January 2023.
* The UK Government committed to halving childhood obesity and closing the inequality gap by 2030 in its 2018 ‘Child Obesity: Chapter 2’. In 2018 child obesity prevalence was 9.7% in reception aged children and 20.2 in year 6 children. It is now 14.4% and 25.5% in reception and year 6 children respectively.
* The 2022 ‘Levelling Up White Paper’ committed to narrowing the gap in Healthy Life Expectancy (HLE) between local areas where it is highest and lowest by 2030 and increasing HLE by five years by 2035.
* The 2022 ‘Delivery plan for tackling the COVID-19 backlog of elective care’ set a target for eliminating waits of longer than a year for elective care by March 2025.

1. Savanta ComRes interviewed 2,245 nationally representative UK adults aged 18+ online between 4th and 6th February 2022. Savanta ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. NCD Risk NHS Digital (2021). National Child Measurement Programme, England 2020/21 School Year. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)