

## An End to Junk Food Marketing Online: Briefing paper for MPs

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As part of their longstanding ambition to address obesity in the UK, the Government has already committed to introducing a 9pm watershed on adverts for unhealthy food and is proposing to go further with a total restriction online. **This world-leading policy means children will only see healthier food adverts when they go online or use social media.**

The **Obesity Health Alliance** (OHA) is a coalition of over 40 health charities, medical royal colleges and campaign groups. We strongly support the Government's plans to end the digital marketing of unhealthy food and drinks.

- Currently, more than one in three children are above a healthy weight when they leave primary school<sup>1</sup>. There is pressing need for effective regulation to restrict junk food advertising as part of a comprehensive approach to reducing obesity.
- This policy would go further than any other country, showing the Government's commitment to improving children's health, now and in the future.

### Junk food marketing and the link to obesity

Food companies spend millions every year on a range of different digital marketing techniques to help keep junk food in the spotlight - they would not do this if advertising did not work.

- A wealth of evidence shows that there is a clear link between food advertising and the food children prefer<sup>2</sup>. Advertising influences how much children eat,<sup>3</sup> and leads to them 'pestering' parents to buy unhealthy products<sup>4</sup>.
- Research shows children are exposed to over 15 billion adverts for products high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) ever year<sup>5</sup>. This exposure is only set to surge with children increasingly spending more time online.

### The current rules are weak and do not protect children from seeing junk food adverts

- The rules ban HFSS advertising in media which is of obvious appeal to children or where more than 25% of the audience is under 16 years old. This is extremely hard to enforce in the online environment and creates significant loopholes and room for errors. Research from the ASA found 78 adverts for HFSS products on children's websites and YouTube channels aimed at children in just three months<sup>6</sup>.
- Children are exposed to junk food advertising when accessing online content that is popular with both adults and children. Plus, once content is shared (and most marketing content is designed to be shareable), there is no guarantee that children will not be exposed to that advertising.
- Children often use shared devices and use false ages to set up accounts, plus the lack of independent, publicly available data on audience measurement all undermines advertisers' ability to exclude children.

### Children will only see adverts for healthier food online

The restriction will **only** apply to adverts for food and drinks that contribute to children's excess sugar and calorie intake, that are also classed as high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS).

- This will include sweets, chocolate, ice cream, biscuits along with products like pizza, burgers and crisps.
- Marketing of staple products like butter, cheese, and olive oil **will not be affected** along with condiments and products like humous. Avocados will also not be included.

## **This policy will be a part of a package of measures to help make everyone healthier**

- The causes of obesity are complex, and a comprehensive approach is needed to address all the drivers that influence health and weight.
- Creating a healthier food environment is vital. This policy will align with other planned measures, including a 9pm watershed on unhealthy food advertising on TV, restrictions on promotions in shops and calorie labelling on menus and alcohol as well as an expansion of treatment services<sup>7</sup>.
- Introducing measures to restrict junk food advertising on TV and online, along with retail promotions simultaneously will prevent marketing spend displacing to other media channels and could encourage the food industry to reformulate their products in line with government targets.
- The full implementation of this comprehensive package of measures will help everyone to be healthy, regardless of their background or where they live.

## **A total restriction is the most effective way to protect children**

Due to the multiple formats, complexity, and fast changing nature of the digital marketing environment along with the issues in regulating this online media environment, we believe that ending all digital junk food marketing with a total restriction is the most effective way to protect children and will also benefit adults' health.

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<sup>1</sup> 2020. National Childhood Measurement Programme (NCMP) for England. 2019/2020 school year.

<sup>2</sup> Public Health England (2015). Sugar Reduction: the evidence for action.

<sup>3</sup> Boyland E, Nolan S, Kelly B (2016). Advertising as a cue to consume: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effects of acute exposure to unhealthy food and non-alcoholic beverage advertising on intake in children and adults. *Am J Clin Nutr.* 103(2):519-33.

<sup>4</sup> Hastings, G. (2006). The extent, nature and effects of food promotion to children: a review of the evidence. WHO 16.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Health and Social Care/ Department of Culture Media and Sport (2020). Evidence Note.

<sup>6</sup> Accessible at: <https://www.asa.org.uk/news/protecting-children-online.html>

<sup>7</sup> 2020. Department of Health and Social Care. Tackling Obesity: empowering adults and children to live healthier lives. Accessible at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-obesity-government-strategy>