

Government must ensure that children are not exposed to unhealthy food and drink marketing through government funded breakfast clubs—and must phase out existing industry influence in UK schools and nurseries

An open letter from public health experts, doctors, academics, campaigners, and peers of the realm, calling on the secretaries of state for education and for health and social care to end stealth marketing in UK schools and nurseries by businesses that sell products high in fat, salt, or sugar

Dear Secretaries of State,

We note and welcome this government's progressive commitments to protect children from the harms caused by the unhealthy food and drink industry, including restrictions on TV and online advertising.¹

We also note and welcome this government's commitment to free breakfast clubs in every primary school.²

We believe this government can now make good on its commitment to protect children from being exposed to advertising of less healthy food and drinks—by ensuring that children are not exposed to brands that promote products high in fat, salt, or sugar (HFSS foods)* through these government supported breakfast clubs.

Indeed, the unhealthy food and drink industry's widespread influence in schools and nurseries—exposed this week in an investigation by leading UK medical journal *The BMJ*—should be phased out.

We the undersigned are therefore calling on the government to take the three vital steps outlined below, to protect children from the vested interests of the unhealthy food and drink industry* in our education and childcare systems.

Stealth marketing

The BMJ investigation shows that action urgently needs to be taken against stealth marketing by this industry that is rife in schools and early years settings³—and yet such marketing falls outside the scope of the government's advertising restriction plans.

Unhealthy food and drink is one of the three biggest killers in the UK (alongside tobacco and alcohol).⁴ This industry is being permitted to target the youngest in our society, through breakfast clubs and so called “healthy eating” campaigns and “free” materials, in schools and early years

¹ <https://www.bmj.com/content/386/bmj.q2006>

² <https://labour.org.uk/updates/stories/labours-plan-for-childcare-and-early-education/>

³ Wilkinson E. Food industry has infiltrated UK children's education: stealth marketing exposed. *BMJ* 2024;387:q2661

⁴ Obesity Health Alliance, Alcohol Health Alliance, Action on Smoking and Health. Holding us back: tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink: Advocating for a coherent health policy approach. 2023. Available from: <https://ahauk.org/wpcontent/uploads/2023/11/Holding-us-back-report-FINAL.pdf>

settings. Evidence shows that exposure to unhealthy products increases consumption both directly,⁵ and via adversely affecting the social norms, cultural values, and beliefs that underpin food behaviours.⁷

This targeting is particularly egregious because those children who are most likely to need such resources are also those who most need protecting from the harms caused by the unhealthy food and drinks industry: 46% of year six (age 10-11) children in England who live in the most disadvantaged areas are currently living with overweight or obesity, compared with 26% in the least disadvantaged areas.⁸

Tactics in common with alcohol and tobacco

The unhealthy food and drinks industry's presence in schools and early years settings is consistent with common tactics that have been identified across different unhealthy commodity industries, including alcohol and tobacco, to challenge regulations and policy that aim to reduce consumption.⁹ Two of these tactics are particularly in evidence in this situation.

Firstly, the industry is using Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to gild brands' reputation at the expense of public health and wellbeing. Their presence in schools is deflecting attention from the harms they cause, and at the same time promoting their brands and business.¹⁰ *The BMJ's* investigation highlights breakfast clubs sponsored by Kellogg's and Greggs that over 25 years have reached many thousands of primary school children.

Secondly in evidence is the use of proxies, often presented as trade organisations, to communicate their messages without always being transparent about the funding behind these front groups. This includes the British Nutrition Foundation (BNF) "education programme" *Food—a Fact of Life*, which has been running in UK schools for over 30 years. BNF is entirely funded by its members, which include British Sugar, Coca Cola, Kellogg's, Mars, and McDonald's.

⁵ Boyland EJ, Harrold JA, Kirkham TC, Corker C, Cuddy J, Evans D, Dovey TM, Lawton CL, Blundell JE, Halford JCG (2011). Food commercials increase preference for energy-dense foods, particularly in children who watch more television. *Pediatrics*, 128(1): e93-e10

⁶ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2791859>

⁷ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0195666318307803>

⁸ Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID). Obesity Profile. 2023. Available from: <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/national-child-measurement-programme>

⁹ <https://obesityhealthalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Killer-Tactics-2024-2.pdf>

¹⁰ WHO Regional Office for Europe. Commercial determinants of noncommunicable diseases in the WHO European Region. 2024. Available from: Commercial Determinants of Noncommunicable Diseases in the WHO European Region

Evidence from Wales shows that more than one in six schools uses resources from supermarkets and/or trade organisations in teaching about food and nutrition. Around 7% used resources provided by fast food companies, and 6% from soft drink and energy drink companies.¹¹

Greg Fell, president of the Association of Directors of Public Health, told *The BMJ*:

“There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that by being involved in school programmes, harmful products are normalised.”^{12 13}

We the undersigned are calling for children to be protected from these vested interests of the unhealthy food and drink industry* in our schools and early years settings.

We are asking that:

1. The **implementation of government funded breakfast clubs** is carried out with strong nutritional standards, and without the presence of any branding relating to HFSS food and drinks businesses and their representative organisations*.
2. The government includes school and nursery clubs and activities, and school and nursery educational materials and resources, in all **future regulation of food and drink advertising and marketing**.
3. Schools and nurseries, and clubs and activities in schools and nurseries, **reject all future branded sponsorship** of, and educational materials and resources branded by HFSS food and drinks businesses and their representative organisations.*

We urge you, the Secretaries of State for Education, and for Health and Social Care, to review and recognise the damaging presence that the unhealthy food and drinks industry* has in UK schools and early years settings – and take these three crucial steps to remove this influence and support the healthy development of the nation’s children.

Signatories

- Dr Kamran Abbasi, Editor-in-Chief, The BMJ
- Michael Baber, Director, Health Action Research Group
- Professor Emma Boyland, Professor of Food Marketing & Child Health, University of Liverpool
- Dr Hannah Brinsden, Head of Policy and Advocacy, Food Foundation

¹¹ SHRN School Environment Questionnaire 2022

¹² <https://academic.oup.com/jcr/article-abstract/41/1/119/1810274?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=true>

¹³ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8754310/#abstract1>

- Maria Bryant, Professor of Public Health Nutrition, FixourFood in schools lead, University of York
- Professor James P Byrne, President, British Obesity and Metabolic Surgery Society
- Dr Carol Dezateux, Professor of Clinical Epidemiology and Health Data Science, Queen Mary University of London; honorary consultant, Barts NHS Health Trust
- Simon Dixon, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, Royal Society for Public Health
- Naomi Duncan, Chief Executive, Chefs in Schools
- Greg Fell, President, Association of Directors of Public Health
- Amandine Garde, Professor and Founding Director of the Law & Non-Communicable Diseases Research Unit, University of Liverpool
- Greg Garrett, Executive Director, ATNi (Access to Nutrition initiative)
- Stuart Gillespie, writer; consultant on food justice, nutrition and health
- Baroness Mary Goudie, House of Lords
- Dr Kawther Hashem, Head of Research and Impact, Action on Sugar
- Benjamin Hawkins, Senior Research Associate, MRC Epidemiology Unit, University of Cambridge.
- Professor Nicola Heslehurst, Professor of Maternal and Child Nutrition, Newcastle University; President, UK Association for the Study of Obesity
- Katharine Jenner, Director, Obesity Health Alliance
- Lord John R Krebs of Wytham, House of Lords
- Dr Beckie Lang, Chief Executive, HENRY
- Dr Jane Lockie, chair of Trustees, TastEd (Retired Paediatric Anaesthetist)
- Nason Maani, Lecturer in Inequalities and Global Health Policy, Global Health Policy Unit, University of Edinburgh
- Alison Morton, CEO, Institute of Health Visiting
- Dr Jason O'Rourke, President, Sapere AISB
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- Matthew Philpott, Executive Director, Health Equalities Group
- Sonia Pombo, Head of Research and Impact, Action on Salt
- Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick, House of Lords
- Dr Kath Roberts, Senior Lecturer in Public Health Nutrition, University of York
- Dr Vicky Sibson, Director, First Steps Nutrition Trust
- Professor Tom Solomon CBE FRCP FMedSci, Academic Vice President, Royal College of Physicians
- Dr Helen Stewart, Officer for Health Inequalities, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
- Karen Thomas, Health Improvement Specialist in Public Health; Registered Dietitian; Committee Member, British Dietetic Association Obesity Specialist Group
- James Toop, Chief Executive, Bite Back
- Dr [May van Schalkwyk](#), Honorary Research Fellow, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
- Dr Chris van Tulcken, Associate Professor, University College London

- Baroness Joan Walmsley, House of Lords
- Paul Wright - Public Health & Political Director - Children's Alliance

****Defining “the unhealthy food and drink industry”***

The [House of Lords Food Diet and Obesity Committee’s October 2024 report ‘Recipe for Health’](#) has already called for the exclusion of “food businesses that derive more than a proportion of sales (to be defined by the Food Standards Agency) from less healthy products from any discussions on the formation of policy on food, diet and obesity prevention. This should also apply to the industry associations that represent these businesses”. This definition could also be used to define the industry, businesses, companies and representative organisations to which this letter refers.

This letter intends to include in the definition of brands and products those that are HFSS-synonymous or have the effect of promoting HFSS foods (even if they themselves are not classified as HFSS under the government’s Nutrient Profiling Model).

The nutrient composition of many commercial infant foods is inconsistent with UK dietary recommendations for this age group, particularly for sugar and salt,¹⁴ and the House of Lords report called for “strong mandatory compositional and marketing standards for commercial infant foods”.