

A flavour of the future: What does the Government's public health agenda mean for the food industry?

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Introduction

Westminster Advisers held a roundtable policy discussion focusing on the Government's agenda for improving public health and its implications for the food and drink industry.

Senior representatives from across the food and drink industry came together to discuss the practical implementation of the Government's public health policies and the role of the sector in tackling the growing obesity epidemic.

Chaired by Laura Donnelly, Health Correspondent at the *Sunday Telegraph*, the roundtable saw speeches from Richard Cienciala, Deputy Director of the Obesity Programme at the Department of Health, John Stevenson MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Food & Drink Manufacturing and Andrea Martinez-Inchausti, Deputy Director of Food Policy at the British Retail Consortium, putting forward the views of the key groups involved in the debate over food and public health policy.



The presentations and the discussion which followed raised a number of issues around the Government's Public Health Responsibility Deals, how best to educate consumers about the content of products and the role of business in helping to tackle obesity more widely.

This briefing provides a summary of the key themes which emerged from the discussion and draws some conclusions from the roundtable.

Current policy direction

The Government has made a priority of addressing the public health challenge of rising obesity rates in the UK. Latest figures show child obesity rates stabilising, while the rise of adult obesity continues unabated.

A range of measures are being explored to tackle this trend by encouraging greater personal responsibility for healthy eating among the population.

The role of business is integral to this. The introduction of Public Health Responsibility Deals for the food industry has marked a change of direction by the Coalition from previous administrations. Rather than an emphasis on legislation, the Coalition is working in partnership with the industry to develop healthier products and encourage consumers to lead healthier lives.

Delegates agreed that reaction to the policy has been mixed. Whilst the industry itself has welcomed the move, it

was acknowledged that charities and campaigning bodies still retain serious concerns about this approach.

Current policy builds on the positive work the industry has already carried out around reformulation - reducing fat, sugar and salt content. However, this continues to be criticised by public health campaigners who use the argument that companies have been slow to bring about these changes, as evidence that the Government's policy faces significant challenges if it is to be successfully implemented.

Despite such concerns it was felt that the role of business in tackling public health challenges such as obesity was fundamental and that the new policy direction would enable to the industry to fully contribute to these objectives.

In particular, the responsibility deals are an opportunity to harness the creative energy of business and guide the behaviour of consumers in a manner that is often hard for legislation alone to achieve. Furthermore, given the increasing problems of obesity and ill health within the UK, it was felt that such an approach provided a quicker method of tackling these problems than the legislative and regulatory compliance path.

Delegates welcomed the '*real sense of partnership*' that the public responsibility deals offered, although there was a sense that some parts of the sector had been excluded from discussions between the Department of Health and the industry in the process of developing policy. There was a sense among delegates that the Public Health Responsibility Deals should promote what is good to eat, not just explain what you shouldn't. Yet in this regard, with many of the core groups, such as meat, fish, dairy & vegetable producers not having been involved in discussions, it was felt that an opportunity had been missed and further engagement would add benefit to the Government's agenda.

The importance of education

There was widespread agreement amongst delegates that the issue of education is vitally important in tackling public health challenges and that the food industry needs to play a key role in this process.

Simply making healthy products available to consumers will not, of course, necessarily mean that they are bought. As such there is a need for a multi-faceted approach in which increasing the availability of healthy products needs to take place alongside a communications drive to improve consumer understanding of the benefits of choosing these products.

Delegates agreed that targeting education at children and young adults was an important and effective way of ensuring that good habits were fostered at an early age, rather than attempting to change behaviour later in life. There remains a need for joined-up government in this area. With the current review of the National Curriculum, the role of the Department for Education will be vitally important in ensuring that education about nutrition and healthy eating is effectively promoted in schools. However, delegates expressed concern that this was not occurring.

In this regard, the role that the Government's Change4Life campaign has played was acknowledged. Delegates suggested that they would like to see a new model developed to allow business to work more easily with the Change4Life campaign to help communicate the importance of healthy eating.

The challenges of localism

The new framework around public health seeks to promote innovative ways of tackling problems such as obesity. In this regard, the role of local authorities, with their new responsibilities for public health, will be increasingly important to businesses and will provide opportunities

for innovative schemes run on a local scale to tackle specific problems.

The establishment of Health & Wellbeing Boards within local authorities will see councils taking a far more prominent role in tackling public health issues. Businesses will need to work in partnership with individual authorities in order to develop appropriate methods of tackling problems facing particular areas.

Whilst this localist direction of policy presents an opportunity for businesses and local authorities to create and pilot innovative ways of promoting public health, delegates highlighted their concern that such a policy may lead to a widening of health inequalities. The needs of poorer communities differ from those that are more affluent. In some areas there will be a greater need for education and information about the need for healthy eating, whilst in others the provision of alternatives to unhealthy products will be more vital.

Ensuring appropriate policies are in place in the right areas will be vital to the success of the Government's agenda on public health.

Concerns going forward

Whilst the Government's reforms have been broadly welcomed by the industry, a number of delegates raised concerns as the policy moves forward.

The potential extra burdens the reforms may place on businesses are a priority for the sector. With SMEs accounting for much of the food retail industry, ensuring that these reforms don't place an extra cost on firms already struggling economically was of paramount importance for many delegates. There was a worry that as compliance with standards rises, it will have a large impact on the future viability of various food markets.

Although the policy is currently in the early stages of implementation,

delegates suggested there was a lack of clarity around the timescales in which successful shifts in health should be determined. Questions were raised about how the process should be evaluated and how long should be allowed before stronger interventions, including recourse to legislation, are used, if the approach isn't having the desired effect.

With the Department of Health soon to publish its Obesity Strategy along with launch of the Calorie Reduction Programme, commitment from businesses to this new approach will be tested as they begin to have to deliver on pledges. There was a lack of consensus among delegates around whether commitment from business will be strong enough to stave off the need for legislation.

Delegates also highlighted how wider perceptions about the industry often do fail to chime with the work and activity the sector has been undertaking. There was a feeling among delegates that partnership with Government and the industry's engagement in improving the health content of products has taken place largely behind closed doors. As such, it was felt that there was a greater need for openness to ensure the positive and collaborative work the industry is doing is recognised. Work on food labelling is a prime example of this, with the voluntary approach taken by the industry having resulted in products carrying extensive information about their nutritional value. Despite this there remain concerns as to whether consumers understand the information available to them, or trust what they read.

Westminster Advisers commissioned private polling with YouGov to explore this issue in greater detail. The findings of the research confirm the views of delegates around the public's perception of the food and drink industry. Our polling found that **only 25% of people trust the health claims made by food companies, whilst 48% actively distrust such claims.**

Given the work that the industry has been doing to improve the health content of its products, along with playing an active role in driving forward the Government's public health agenda,

there seems a need for the industry to ensure it is effectively communicating this and to be more open and transparent about the work it is undertaking.

Conclusions

- The introduction of Public Health Responsibility Deals marks a departure for policy in tackling public health challenges and provides both opportunities and challenges for the industry. In this respect the UK is developing a revolutionary new approach to public health policy, one that has few, if any precedents elsewhere in the world.
- Given the pressing nature of a number of public policy challenges and the UK's increasing obesity problem, harnessing the creative role of business in influencing consumer behaviour will be vital to tackling such problems.
- As the obligations of businesses under the new Public Health Responsibility Deals become apparent, the commitment of the industry will be tested. The forthcoming Obesity Strategy and Calorie Reduction Programme will provide a strong indication as to the extra responsibility the industry will have to take on.
- Plenty of questions remain around the successful implementation of the Government's public health strategy. In particular, there is a lack of consensus around appropriate measures and timescales in which to assess the approach and the point at which stronger interventions and the use of legislation may be needed. How far and how soon will the Government have to move up the 'ladder of interventions'?
- Whilst the Government's localist agenda provides opportunities for the industry to develop innovative practices in partnership with local authorities, the effect this will have on health inequalities remains unclear. Will there still be a need for central coordination of policy to ensure disparities across sections of the population do not increase?
- The increased availability of healthy products will not alone resolve the obesity problems the UK faces. Continued nutritional education programmes aimed, in particular, at children and young people will help ensure that the right information about healthy eating is learnt at an early age, rather than having to focus on changing behaviour further down the line.
- The public do not trust claims made by the food industry. This is in spite of collaboration between the industry and Government to improve the health content of products and to promote healthier living. There is a need on the part of the industry to communicate its activities effectively.

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