

Rt. Hon. Matt Hancock MP  
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care  
Department for Health and Social Care  
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Thursday 25 July, 2019

**RE: Food and health priorities**

Dear Secretary of State Matt Hancock,

Congratulations on your return to the role of Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. I write as the chief executive of Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming. We represent around 100 national public interest organisations and work with many more at local level. We also coordinate the Children's Food Campaign. Our alliance is interested in a great many of your policy areas, but are particularly interested in the following five relevant to your portfolio.

*1. Halving childhood obesity by 2030*

The Government has already set an ambitious target to halve childhood obesity by 2030, as well as tackle other diet-related diseases including Type 2 diabetes and heart disease. The Childhood Obesity Plan has cross-party and overwhelming public support, and 7 in 10 adults said they support the new Prime Minister continuing to prioritise [measures to tackle child obesity](#). We hope you will continue to build on this work, including championing the proposals you included in your Advancing Health Prevention Green Paper published on 23 July 2019.

The Chief Medical Officer recently announced that she would review what more can be done to meet the government's target of halving childhood obesity by 2030. We have fed in proposals from our alliance, many of which come from our Children's Food Campaign working party, which has over the years been an early champion and coordinated the third sector drive for a sugary drinks industry levy (working with Jamie Oliver and many others), along with restrictions on junk food advertising, higher standards in school food, and local Sugar Smart initiatives around the UK.

*2. Promoting sugar reduction and the Soft Drinks Industry Levy*

As Health Secretary, we hope you will continue to support the Soft Drinks Industry Levy, which has contributed to large scale sugar reduction and changes in consumer behaviour. It has not been regressive for those in the lowest income households who are most at risk of obesity and overweight. Your support would include reviewing the evidence relating to the impact of the levy for those drinks currently in scope, as well as progress in voluntary sugar reduction for milk-based drinks currently exempted, and considering whether extending the levy would drive faster reformulation and consumer behaviour change. HM Treasury has forecast income from the Soft Drinks Industry Levy of £340m for each financial year 2018/19 and 2019/20. 280,000 children in over 1,800 schools are now accessing a healthy breakfast on every school day, from £12 million of levy income invested in the national school breakfast scheme. With 1.8 to 2.5 million children living in food insecure households, and one in four children obese or overweight by the time they leave primary school, we strongly urge you to work closely with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and counterparts in the departments of Education, and Culture and Sport to advocate and implement the continuation of the levy and ring-fencing of income for programmes to improve children's food and health.

### *3. Increasing uptake of Healthy Start vouchers*

We would like to see the Government improve the Healthy Start scheme so that no one loses this benefit when switching to Universal Credit; that the value of the voucher increases to reflect the rising cost of food; and that training and promotion is properly invested in by national government so that local public health teams are well equipped to ensure all eligible young children and pregnant women receive the vouchers. We estimate that 130,000 eligible UK households are missing out on Healthy Start, equivalent to £28.6m of free fruit, veg and milk per year. Secondly, the value of Healthy Start vouchers has remained the same (£3.10 per child per week) for many years, whilst the costs of fruit, vegetables and milk have risen, and we would urge you to increase the value of the vouchers as one measure to promote healthy infant feeding and tackle health inequalities.

We suggest that a programme to promote uptake could be funded from the estimated £28.6 million of Healthy Start vouchers that went unclaimed last year. We suggest that an increase in the Healthy Start voucher value could be funded from the estimated £1.37 billion predicted to be raised by the Soft Drinks Industry Levy in 2020 to 2024. The Levy was established with public support that it should be ring-fenced for schemes that improve children's health, and yet we understand there have been no approaches to HM Treasury from any department to use future revenue towards these aims.

### *4. Updating School Food Standards and Healthy Schools Ratings*

We strongly wish to see the 'bold update' to School Food Standards announced in the Childhood Obesity Plan Chapter 2, and remain concerned at the slow progress and lack of oversight of compliance with school food standards. We are concerned that the new 'beta' Healthy Schools Rating Scheme recently announced by the Department for Education will not provide the assurances and independent oversight that compliance with the nutritional standards for school food needs. We urge you to use your influence with the Secretary of State for Education to use the results of the beta phase to deliver a more robust national ratings system that is mandatory, not voluntary, for all schools in receipt of government funding.

### *5. Providing funding for public health*

We welcome recent investment of £1.5m over the next three years in five local authority trailblazer programmes to tackle child obesity. However, 102 local authorities submitted expressions of interest in establishing targeted interventions designed to tackle the worst of obesogenic environments for children and young people, and work with those most at risk. The Association of Directors of Public Health estimates £1bn is needed to reverse years of cuts in public health spending budgets to build effective preventative health care programmes and tackle the causes of ill health. Recognising the cost of treating conditions related to obesity and being overweight to the NHS is approximately £6 billion per year, and the cost of obesity-related social care to local authorities is an estimated £352 million (Public Health England figures), we hope that as Secretary of State you will continue to work with Public Health England, health organisations and the Local Government Association to champion the case for increasing investment in public health for children and adults alike.

Thank you for considering this letter and the issues important to the Sustain alliance membership.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kath Dalmeny', with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.

Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive of Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming  
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