

# HEALTH FOR ALL

Consensus Action on Salt, Sugar and Health  
2024 Manifesto



# The food we eat is now the biggest cause of death and disability, worldwide.

Foods high in fat, salt and sugar are impacting our health, and disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable groups in society. The cost to society is huge, with growing numbers of people of working age no longer fit enough to work. This is putting an unprecedented strain on both the economy and the NHS.

Consuming a diet that is affordable and nutritious is a basic requirement for good health, but we cannot expect people to achieve this when there are unnecessarily high levels of calories, salt and sugar already in the foods we buy. If we want people to eat well, then we must do our due diligence and provide them with access to that.

## The Need for Action

- ★ **The escalating costs to the NHS of diet related disease e.g. hypertension (£2.1 billion) [1], obesity (£6.1 billion) [2] and type 2 diabetes (£12 billion) [3] are unsustainable, but in many cases are entirely preventable.**
- ★ **Providing available, accessible, and affordable healthy food is essential in preventing premature death and disability and reducing the cost of a poor diet on the NHS.**
- ★ **The new government needs to create history and be the first to prioritise prevention.**

# Consensus Action on Salt, Sugar and Health's Top Three Priority Areas

## 1

### Improve nutritional composition of food and drink

The previous government set voluntary reformulation programmes for salt, sugars and calories, in an attempt to challenge food businesses to improve the nutritional quality of their products. These are all set to be completed by the end of 2025, but the programmes in their current form and management are weak [4,5]. The targets should ensure overall sweetness and saltiness of products are reduced rather than solely relying on artificial replacers, and fibre, wholegrain cereals and fruit and vegetables (excluding juices) should be seen to increase in these products.

They are also riddled with loopholes, with sugar and calorie reduction targets exclusive to limited categories of food and drink, allowing businesses to cherry-pick reformulation to suit their agenda. The exclusion of commercial baby food and drink in any of these programmes, is one such example.

The intended purpose for reformulation is to improve the nutritional quality of all food and drink sold and produced in the UK, and its success is dependent on strong compliance by all businesses. For these programmes to reach their full potential and achieve their intended impact, we must ensure that future programmes are enforced, comprehensive and transparent.

#### Actions

- ★ **Set mandatory salt, sugar and calorie maximum targets for food and drink businesses, including the out of home sector**
- ★ **Strong, transparent monitoring and enforcement, to assess business compliance and progress**
- ★ **Release commercial baby food and drinks compositional guidelines**
- ★ **Commit to regularly assess changes in population diets through dietary food surveys and urinary sodium analyses**
- ★ **Provide sufficient resources to Government bodies responsible for reformulation**

## 2

# Introduce levies to further incentivise change

More than 75% of the salt we eat is already in the foods we buy, and 60% of the added sugar in our diets come from biscuits, confectionery and desserts alone. Fiscal measures can successfully incentivise food and drink businesses to produce and sell healthier products and should now be applied to the main contributors of salt, sugar and calories to the UK diet as recommended in the National Food Strategy [6]:

*'A tax on the amount of sugar and salt used in these [processed] foods will create significant incentive for companies to reformulate their products so as to avoid having to put the price up, which would be damaging to their business in the UK's highly competitive and price-sensitive food market.'*

*The unique Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) strongly supports the implementation of reformulation and since it was first introduced in 2018, has resulted in reducing the average amount of sugar in soft drinks by 46%, without harming sales to the soft drinks industry [7]. This is in stark contrast to the failed voluntary sugar reduction programme, which has only reduced sugars in food by 3.5%.*

*Its impact has also been associated with reduced cases of obesity in Year 6 girls and a 12% reduction in cases of children going to hospital for tooth extractions. Yet 6 years on, there has been no increase in the rates of tax in line with inflation, unlike other levies e.g. tobacco [8].*

A new levy on salt and sugar could prevent up to two million cases of disease over 25 years, gain 3.7 million quality-adjusted life years, have an economic worth of £77.9 billion over 25 years and raise between £2.9bn - 3.4bn per year for HM Treasury that should be invested into children's health [7].

## Actions

- ★ **Extend the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) to juice and sugary milk-based drinks**
- ★ **Gradually decrease the thresholds within the SDIL to further encourage reformulation, with rates increased in line with inflation**
- ★ **Build on the success of the SDIL and consider levies for salt and sugar in key contributors, to incentivise reformulation**
- ★ **Hypothecated money should be spent primarily on financing children's health, whether directly or by funding an independent agency to enforce reformulation, and funding local and national programmes preventing obesity, type 2 diabetes and hypertension**

# 3

## Create healthy environments

Our environment has the greatest influence on what we can eat and drink. A access to healthy, affordable and equitable food is often dependent on many factors, many of which are out of our control. Improving the food environment is therefore pivotal if we are to provide people with healthier options.

We want to shift our environments so that the healthier choice is the easier choice. This includes making foods high in fat, salt and sugar, less accessible, and healthier foods more affordable. But currently, businesses prioritise the promotion and advertisement of their less healthy foods, which are energy dense, nutrient poor, cheap to produce and highly profitable.

There is an imbalance in advertising for example, with just 1% of food and soft drink advertising spend going towards fruit and vegetables compared to 33% on confectionery, snacks, desserts and soft drinks alone [9]. Volume-based promotions, whilst framed as cost-saving to the consumer, has also been found to increase the amount of unhealthy food and drink people buy by at least 6% of total sugar purchases (i.e. 30kcal per person per day) [10].

Energy drinks are popular amongst children, yet contain staggering levels of sugar and caffeine which are detrimental to children's health, not just on dental health, but also heart disease, allergies, insulin resistance and mental health problems [11]. Many supermarkets have voluntarily banned the sale of energy drinks to under 16-year-olds but this has not been supported by similar action in convenience stores. To create a level-playing field it is vital that the Government explicitly bans the sale of energy drinks to under 16-year-olds from all outlets.

Finally, front-of-pack labelling (FOPL) is crucial in helping people make more informed and healthier choices [12], but the current colour coded system, which has been in place since 2013, is only voluntary, with many businesses choosing not to adopt this measure, particularly on foods which are high in fat, salt and sugar. If we want to support healthier choices, then a mandatory approach to labelling would create a level playing field where we all have the same information about our food, regardless of where we buy it or which brand we choose. This should extend not just to store bought packaged foods, but to the out of home sector too. In 2022, new legislation required calories to be displayed on restaurant menus, but consumers are still none the wiser on the saturated fat, sugars and salt content of these meals, many of which are often far exceeding nutritional requirements for healthy eating.

### Actions

- ★ **Ensure the legislation on volume-based promotions restrictions of unhealthy food is fully implemented with no further delays beyond October 2025**
- ★ **Only healthy (non-HFSS) products should be marketed across all platforms, including TV, digital and print marketing with no further delays beyond October 2025**
- ★ **Legally ban the sale of energy drinks to children under 16 across all stores**
- ★ **Front-of-pack colour coded nutrition labelling should be made mandatory on all products sold in retailer and out of home, with stricter criteria for high fat, salt and sugar**

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Consensus Action on Salt, Sugar and Health (CASSH) is a registered charity dedicated to reducing dietary salt, sugar and calorie consumption to improve the health of populations in the UK and worldwide. The charity is formed of three research and advocacy groups: Action on Salt, Action on Sugar and World Action on Salt, Sugar & Health (WASSH).

