



THE
BUCHANAN
INSTITUTE

Tackling Childhood Obesity in Scotland

Group Members:

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The Issue

In Scotland, 26% of children are overweight, with 16% at risk of obesity. Those from the most deprived socio-economic backgrounds are at greater risk of suffering from the consequences of health inequalities, primarily obesity. Obesity increases the risk of a number of health complications such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and kidney diseases, with estimates of the cost of obesity to the NHS in Scotland being between £360-600 million annually. Current action against childhood obesity is clearly insufficient.

Implementation Risks

In order for this policy to be properly and coherently implemented, there needs to be a convergence across stakeholder groups in the understanding of the benefits of the programme and an increase in active communication around the issues. Educational stakeholders have been found to resent the politicised nature of universal free school meals and question the correlation between nutrition and educational attainment and participation. It is also a risky time to implement these policies due to the nature of recent budget cuts and the current recession as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Proposal

1. An extension of the free school meals programme with universal free school meals being available, at a minimum, for those in compulsory full-time education.
2. Healthy fruits to be provided at no extra cost to students in primary schools as an alternative to the usually available sugary, high in trans-fat snacks.
3. Following the success of the “Water Only Schools” policy in England, funding to be provided for the trial of the same program within Scottish schools where plain water and reduced fat milk will be the only allowed beverages in school.

Benefits

Providing universal free school meals hugely increases the intake of healthy food for those from the lowest socio-economic background, due the elimination of the stigma and eligibility issues associated with means-tested free school meals; this significantly reduces health inequalities in children across social classes. Free school meals and nutritional programmes such as the Free Fruit Initiative and the Water Only Schools policy are also shown to have a positive effect on student attainment. The effect of such programmes particularly improves the outcomes of the lowest achievers, thus helping to reduce educational inequalities, while also improving attendance across the board. There is also evidence that these programmes reduce pressure on health services due to improving diet as the children move into adulthood.