



Policy to improve England's diet has failed, study finds

Zosia Kmietowicz

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Evidence is scant that a voluntary agreement between the government and food manufacturers to improve eating habits has worked, a study has concluded.¹

The food “responsibility deal” was launched by the coalition government in March 2011 as a key policy, aimed at improving public health by reducing the prevalence of obesity and other conditions caused by poor diet.² Food and drink manufacturers pledged to cut calories, saturated fats, and sugar in processed foods; improve labelling; and increase consumption of fruit and vegetables.

But an analysis of whether the pledges have had the anticipated effect shows that the policy has come up short. Most of the interventions introduced as a result of the deal would have happened anyway, concluded the researchers, from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, who have been evaluating the deal on behalf of the Department of Health for England.

They also found that strategies that would have led to improved diets, such as food pricing, restrictions on marketing, and reducing sugar intake, were not included in the food pledges.

Writing in the journal *Food Policy*, the researchers wrote, “Irrespective of the nature of a public health policy to improve nutritional health, pledges or proposed actions need to be evidence-based, well-defined, and measurable, pushing actors to go beyond ‘business as usual’ and setting out clear penalties for not demonstrating progress.”

But representatives of the food industry said that manufacturers had “stepped up” to the challenge of delivering the deal. Barbara Gallani, director of regulation, science, and health at the Food and Drink Federation, said that its members were “proud of the commitment they’ve shown to improving the health of their customers, employees, and the people in their communities.”

- 1 Knai C, Petticrew M, Durand MA, et al. Has a public-private partnership resulted in action on healthier diets in England? An analysis of the Public Health Responsibility Deal food pledges. *Food Policy* May 2015, doi:10.1016/j.foodpol.2015.04.002.
- 2 O'Dowd A. Government's public health responsibility deal is met with scepticism. *BMJ* 2011;342:d1702.

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