

## Government's "nudging" policies on behaviour are too weak on their own, report says

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Attempts to "nudge" people to change their lifestyle and behaviour to improve health will fail unless they are strengthened by more concrete measures, claim peers.

A House of Lords science and technology subcommittee has criticised the government's approach of nudging people's behaviour, describing it as weak. It also condemned current voluntary agreements between the government and certain businesses over public health.

The committee's report, published on 19 July, says that the government should rethink various types of policy interventions to change behaviour, including information or marketing campaigns, taxation, regulation, and legislation.

The report, the result of a year long investigation into the way the government tries to influence people's behaviour, concludes that nudges in isolation are often ineffective and that the government should use a range of interventions.

Peers on the committee questioned the government's evidence base for the "nudging" approach and its cost effectiveness and long term effects.

They found that although much was understood about human behaviour from basic research, there was little evidence about how this understanding could be applied in practice to change behaviour.

The peers recommend that the government evaluate its own behaviour change interventions rigorously and establish new evidence by commissioning and funding more applied behavioural research.

They also call for the government to appoint an independent chief social scientist to provide them with robust and independent scientific advice.

As part of the inquiry the committee examined in depth interventions to change people's behaviour to prevent and tackle obesity (including through food labelling and restrictions on advertising). Current voluntary agreements with businesses in relation to public health had major failings, the peers say, and were not a proportionate response to the scale of the problem of obesity.

A role for businesses in this effort was welcome in theory, said the peers, referring to the government's public health responsibility deal network, a collaboration between the government, industry, and health bodies to come up with a series of voluntary pledges designed to improve public health.

However, they were sceptical about the effectiveness of voluntary agreements with commercial organisations, given the potential conflicts of interests.

The report therefore recommends that the government specify clearly what it wants businesses to do and what steps it will take to achieve the same result if voluntary agreements are not forthcoming or prove ineffective. Any voluntary agreements should be independently evaluated against measurable and time limited outcomes, it says.

The government should also take steps to implement a "traffic light" system of nutritional labelling on all food packaging.

The committee's chairwoman, Julia Neuberger, said, "There are all manner of things that the government wants us to do—lose weight, give up smoking, use the car less, give blood—but how can they get us to do them? It won't be easy, and this inquiry has shown that it certainly won't be achieved through using 'nudges,' or any other sort of intervention, in isolation.

"We welcome this government's desire to take the science behind behaviour change seriously in an attempt to find an effective solution.

"But changing the behaviour of a population is likely to take time, perhaps a generation or more. The government needs to be braver about mixing and matching policy measures, using both incentives and disincentives to bring about change."

*Behaviour Change* is at [www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/science-and-technology-sub-committee-i/](http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/science-and-technology-sub-committee-i/).

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