Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

I congratulate the Government on including in the Queen's Speech a measure to introduce a levy on sugary drinks manufacturers. I do so because it cannot be acceptable in our society that we continue to allow 25% of the most disadvantaged children to leave primary school not just overweight, but obese. I congratulate the Chancellor on looking at the evidence that the gap between the most advantaged and disadvantaged children with childhood obesity has been increasing, based on data from the child measurement programme.

It is important to tackle the problem and to look not just at obesity, but at the effect on children's teeth. We know that the commonest reason for primary school children to be admitted to hospital is to have their rotten teeth removed. The Chancellor is right to target sugary drinks manufacturers. As Alison Thewliss pointed out, those are empty calories with no nutritional value whatsoever. When we see that a third of teenagers' calorie intake from sugars is from sugary drinks, it is right that we do everything we can.

The measure is progressive. I welcome the contribution that it will make as part of a wider strategy to tackle childhood obesity. It will encourage manufacturers to reformulate their products to bring in lower levels of sugar. I would like the Chancellor, perhaps when he responds to the debate, to set out what he is doing alongside manufacturers to encourage them to introduce a price differential associated with the levy bands so that we can guide people to make healthier choices.

I particularly welcome the fact that this money will be hypothecated. As a result, we will see a doubling of the school sport premium for primary schools. We will also see an expansion of the breakfast club programme in the most disadvantaged areas, and up to 1,600 schools will benefit. The accusation that is often made is that the levy is regressive, not progressive, but that is countered simply by the fact that it is the most disadvantaged communities that will benefit most from hypothecation.

I urge the Chancellor to go further and to extend this measure to milky drinks with high levels of added sugar. Milk is good for children, and we should be sending a clear message that it is good, but milk with nine teaspoons of sugar in it is not good for children's health or their teeth. I also agree with the hon. Lady's point about alcoholic mixers. I therefore hope that the Chancellor will look again at extending this measure, because I think much more benefit could come from it if he did.

On the other proposals in the Queen's Speech, I thank the Chancellor for the measures he will introduce on broadband. As a Member representing a rural community where businesses and local residents alike are disadvantaged by not having access to high-speed broadband, I think these measures will be very welcome. Likewise, I welcome the commitment to bring forward a fair funding formula for schools such as those in the west country, which have been severely disadvantaged up until now.
I know that many other Members want to speak, so let me say in closing that I welcome the measures in the Queen's Speech. This is a bold and brave Chancellor—the Health Committee called for bold and brave measures to tackle childhood obesity, and that is what we have seen from the Chancellor in this Queen's Speech. I hope he will stiffen his sinews, resist the efforts of the drinks manufacturers to oppose this measure and encourage them to look at how they can improve the health of our nation and our children by supporting reformulation.

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