Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

It is a pleasure to follow John Mc Nally and my fellow Health Committee member, my hon. Friend Maggie Throup. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend Justin Tomlinson for bringing this very important debate to the House.

I realise that this is not a debate about the sugar levy per se, but I would like to state at the outset that I fully support the levy. In fact, if anything, I would like it to be extended to include milk-based sugary drinks. It addresses a very important issue, and it is worth reminding ourselves of the data on health inequality from obesity. Now, in the most disadvantaged areas, 26% of the most deprived children are leaving year 6 not just overweight but obese, with extraordinary long-term consequences for both their mental and physical health, so we should remain focused on what the purpose of the measure is.

Let me also stress that we should not think about tackling obesity as just about sport; it is also about nutrition. We should not lose sight of that in the debate. Reducing calories has to be the mainstay of addressing childhood obesity. That said, we should also have a message that exercise and physical activity matters, whatever one's age and weight, and has extraordinary benefits. I fully support the words of my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon about how we can incorporate sport as part of the anti-obesity strategy and about the importance of hypothecating the money raised by the sugary drinks levy so that it goes to these types of project and is focused on the most disadvantaged groups.

Julie Elliott Labour, Sunderland Central

Does the hon. Lady agree that the 26% in the most deprived areas are probably children from the families who are least able to afford some of the things that have been mentioned, such as the £12.50 a day for sports activities, and that the cost of things should not rule out children who probably need that activity more than others?

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I absolutely agree. It is essential, if we are to address some of the accusations that this is a regressive tax, that we ensure that it becomes progressive in the way the money and the resources are allocated. I think there has been a commitment to that. We can look at how the Government have stated they will spend the money—providing up to £285 million a year to give 25% of secondary schools in the most disadvantaged areas the opportunity to extend their school day, and £10 million of funding to expand breakfast clubs in the most disadvantaged areas. I absolutely agree with the hon. Members who have already commented that that could be extended into holiday periods. I am talking about how we look at nutrition, and expanding nutritional education and, in particular, targeting that on the most disadvantaged areas. We know that Mexico's experience is that those on the lowest incomes end up spending more of their income on products such as sugary drinks, so we must be absolutely clear that the benefit returns
primarily to the most disadvantaged, and of course it is the most disadvantaged areas that have the highest levels of childhood obesity, so I absolutely agree with what Julie Elliott has said.

This is primarily about school sport and how we hypothecate the money for activities in the most disadvantaged areas, although not just in the most disadvantaged areas. We have already heard the hon. Member for Falkirk pay tribute to Elaine Wyllie, and I add my tribute to her extraordinary achievements. She told me when I met her recently that if directors of public health take this initiative on board, that gives it much a greater impetus. She has looked at where it has been most successfully rolled out, and it is where directors of public health work together with education to push for it and see the benefits. Of course, the benefits are not just for children. The initiative is now being rolled out to families and staff in schools, so there is a whole-community approach to changing attitudes to mobility.

I would also like to make a point about active travel. The all-party parliamentary group on cycling, of which I am a member, held an inquiry in the last Parliament, “Get Britain Cycling”. One issue that was very clear from that was that active travel is one of the forms of activity that people are most likely to engage in over the long term. I therefore urge my hon. Friend the Minister to consider how schools can engage with the programme and get children cycling to school and college. My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash pointed out that the cost of a bike can sometimes be a deterrent, but there are many things we can do about rolling out Bikeability to all ages across schools and ensuring that we focus on active travel, because that is the form of activity that people are most likely to sustain throughout their life.

I would also like to pick out the importance of play. I pay tribute to Play Torbay, in my constituency, and the work it is doing. That has been pointed out by the all-party parliamentary group on a fit and healthy childhood. I do not know whether the Minister has had the chance to read its excellent report, which considered how we can use the money effectively. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash that evaluation is critical. We need to see what delivers results in the long term, particularly because, if the tax is effective in the way we hope it will be, the revenues raised from it will decrease as a result of behavioural change. We need to ensure that the money available is targeted in the most effective ways.

We should also look at the difference in activity rates between girls and boys. Girls are not as physically active; particularly as they go through the school years, activity levels decline. I urge the Minister to continue to support Sport England’s "This Girl Can" programme, which has already been referred to. We need to look across the piece and make sure we engage children at every level in a way that they are most likely to continue to keep active. I have a concern that if we just talk about sport, we risk taking our eye off the ball. Tackling obesity first and foremost has to involve calorie reduction. We must take empty, wasted calories out of children’s diets. There are other harms; obesity is not just about sugar levels. The biggest single cause of admission to hospital for primary school children is to remove their rotten teeth. The benefits of reducing sugar in children’s diets go beyond tackling obesity.

Will the Minister liaise with his colleagues on the rest of the money from the sugary drinks levy that we are raising? As it stands, the Government have indicated that a significant proportion will go towards the academisation programme, but now that there has been a change to the policy objective of forced academisation, I think the sugary drinks levy would command far greater public support if every penny of it was hypothecated to public health measures to support children, particularly at a time when public health grants are being cut and measures to support children who are already obese are being cut back in local authorities. I hope to see even more of the sugary drinks levy being hypothecated to
progressive measures to target children who are already obese and to help prevent children from becoming obese in the first place. I support my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon in saying that sport is a key part of that, and that matters whatever a child's weight and whatever a child's age.

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