Food prices and Food Poverty

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

In the brief time that I have to speak, I shall make three points: first, about the link between food poverty and obesity; secondly, about the impact of loss leaders; and thirdly, about the role of local food production.

Data from the health and social care information centre show that one third of children are now obese, but the link between deprivation and the risk of obesity is stark. We see it in reception class, but it becomes even starker as children move through to year 6, where currently 23.6% of the poorest children, but only 12.8% of the wealthiest, are obese. The reason why is the difficulty not just with buying food, but with the types of food that are the cheapest, with people's choices being driven by supermarkets and with the operation of loss leaders.

I would not call on the adjudicator to issue an outright ban on loss leaders, because previous inquiries have shown that such action does not reduce the cost of food overall, but there needs to be much greater clarity about the cross-subsidies that loss leaders introduce, as subsidising products such as alcohol, chocolate and crisps increases the cost of much healthier foods. We need to address that issue, because one of the Labour Government's greatest failures, as identified by the King's Fund, was in making progress on health inequalities, which we cannot address without tackling issues such as alcohol and nutrition. That is an important point, because obesity affects children's life chances and costs the rest of us. We know that, unless we address obesity, by 2050 it will cost the country about Â£10 billion a year, so the adjudicator represents good value for money.

In addition to addressing loss leaders and ensuring that people have access to good-quality food, Ministers should also consider the role of local food production. I pay tribute to Transition Town Totnes and the Campaign to Protect Rural England for clearly setting out how supporting good, local, sustainable food webs and delivering good, fresh, seasonal produce does not necessarily result in higher prices, and for showing that we can use measures to encourage the right choice to be the healthy choice.

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