

# Obesity has a simple cause: the food industry is poison...

Published: January 13, 2026, 6:36 am

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I missed the fact that the House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee published a report entitled '[Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#)' on 24 October this year.

The Report is not perfect: it does not understand the role of fat in our diet and probably over-emphasises the role of carbohydrates. As a result, but this point apart, it is exceptionally good.

The whole report - which I spent last night reading - is laden with quotable paragraphs, so I will have to be decidedly selective. This is the core finding:

*Obesity and its consequences constitute a public health emergency that represents a ticking time bomb for the nation's health, wellbeing and finances. This emergency is primarily driven by over-consumption of unhealthy foods.*

*In light of this, our central recommendation is that the Government must as a matter of urgency adopt a new, comprehensive and integrated food strategy to address the wide-ranging consequences of the food system failures identified in this report. Implementation of such a strategy will only be successful on the basis of strong and accountable leadership at the highest level of government.*

It is in the context of the need for urgent and bold action that we make this report for debate.

As they then note:

*Over the last 30 years, successive governments have proposed around 700 policies to tackle obesity. Yet in spite of all these initiatives, the obesity crisis has intensified during that period. At the heart of this failure of government policy are:*

*\* A continued focus on failed policies founded on individual responsibility and voluntary regulation arising from an unjustified fear of the so-called 'nanny state';*

- \* *A lack of a coherent strategy to tackle obesity across the life course and embracing all dimensions of the food system;*
- \* *A lack of leadership and direction at the centre of government, resulting in inadequate coordination across key government departments; and*
- \* *A lack of a long-term strategic approach to oversight and regulation of the food system.*

*We recommend:*

*(a)The Government should introduce a new overarching legislative framework for a healthier food system.*

*(b)This legislation should require that the Government publish a new, comprehensive and integrated long-term food strategy, setting out targets for the food system and the Government's plans to introduce, implement and enforce policy interventions to achieve those targets.*

*(c)As part of this new legislative framework, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) should be given oversight of the food system. This oversight role should be transparent and independent of industry. It should include monitoring and reporting annually to Parliament against targets for sales of healthier and less healthy foods, on the overall healthiness of diets, on related national health outcomes, and on progress against Government strategy.*

*(d)The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care should be accountable to Parliament for progress made against these objectives, at the apex of an effective cross-departmental governance structure (including a dedicated Cabinet Committee) on food policy, supported by a properly resourced Office for Health Improvement and Disparities.*

*(e)The Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer should play key leadership roles in enforcing and delivering this programme.*

*(f)An obligation should be placed on the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to lay before Parliament a Government response to Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) recommendations within two months of their publication.*

*Note that they explicitly blame the neoliberal agenda and the far-right culture emanating from Tufton Street for the crisis that we face.*

*When discussing the food industry, they say:*

*The food industry bears major responsibility for the obesity public health emergency:*

- \* The junk food cycle incentivises the food industry to develop and market unhealthy products through increasingly sophisticated techniques.*
- \* This has created an obesogenic food environment, with devastating implications for dietary patterns and health outcomes.*
- \* The food industry should be expected to take action to break this negative cycle. Yet, notwithstanding some examples of positive action, the profit incentives in the system have been too strong for any such action to have had a substantive effect. There is now a case for making the food industry bear a fair share of the cost of tackling this crisis through new taxation and regulation. Given this, the food industry must take responsibility for the costs of compliance with future regulation.*
- \* One symptom of the problem is the way that the food industry seeks through sophisticated lobbying strategies to influence both Government policymaking and academic research for its own ends. Evidence suggests that such lobbying has been influential.*
- \* This underlines the need for more scientific research independent of industry on food, diet and health, and on food and health policy, and to ensure that there are effective funding mechanisms in place for such research to be undertaken.*
- \* There is a clear conflict of interest in Government engagement with industry during the policy development process. While it may be appropriate to engage with industry regarding the practical application of food industry regulation once it has been decided upon, this must be subject to full transparency and clear rules of engagement.*

*The Government must:*

- (a) Now make a decisive shift away from voluntary measures to a system of mandatory regulation of the food industry.*
- (b) Fundamentally reshape the incentives for the food industry through a coherent and integrated set of policy interventions to reduce the production and consumption of less healthy foods, and drive production and sales of healthier foods.*
- (c) Exclude food businesses that derive more than a proportion of sales (to be defined by the Food Standards Agency) from less healthy products from any discussions on the formation of policy on food, diet and obesity prevention. This should also apply to the industry associations that represent these businesses.*
- (d) Devise and publish by the end of 2025 a code of conduct on ministerial and officials' meetings (whether in-person or virtually) with food businesses, to be employed consistently across all government departments. The minutes of all such meetings should be published.*

*I think that recommendation (c) is pivotal.*

And when it comes to ultra-processed foods, they say:

*The concept of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) is a matter of intensive public discussion and scientific debate. The evidence we have heard suggests:*

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*The concept of UPFs (based on the NOVA classification) can be a useful tool for describing the way in which the food system incentivises the production and marketing of cheaply produced, highly palatable, energy dense and nutritionally poor foods, and drives unhealthy diets and obesity.*

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*However, it is widely considered that the NOVA classification of UPFs lacks sufficient precision to be suitable for the characterisation or regulation of individual foods. There therefore remains debate over the extent to which it should be used in policymaking.*

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*Notwithstanding these limitations, the rapidly growing epidemiological evidence showing a correlation between consumption of UPFs defined using the NOVA classification and poor health outcomes is alarming. There is a significant overlap between UPFs and foods high in calories, saturated fat, salt and sugar and low in fruit, vegetables, nuts, fibre and protein (HFSS). Many UPFs are therefore already considered less healthy under the UK's dietary guidelines and the regulations they underpin.*

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*Beyond energy and nutrient content, causal links between other properties of UPFs and poor health outcomes have not thus far been clearly demonstrated and the existence of such links remains scientifically uncertain.*

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*There are also strong views on both sides of the argument over whether industry has influenced the scientific research on UPFs.*

The evidence is, in their opinion, overwhelming. The need for reform is urgent. The cause of our problem is not that we do not have cures for obesity - as Wes Streeting would have it with his drug-based solutions - but that the food industry is poisoning us.

The answer is not drug-based in that case. It has to come down to improving the quality of our food. When will Wes Streeting take note?