

Junk Food and Poor Policy?

How weak rules undermine health and economic growth in New Zealand and how to fix it



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About Mahi A Rongo The Helen Clark Foundation

Mahi a Rongo | The Helen Clark Foundation is an independent public policy think tank based in Auckland, at the Auckland University of Technology.

It is funded by members and donations. We advocate for ideas and encourage debate; we do not campaign for political parties or candidates. Launched in March 2019, The Foundation produces research and discussion papers on a broad range of economic, social, and environmental issues.

Our Philosophy

New problems confront our society and our environment, both in New Zealand and internationally. Unacceptable levels of inequality persist. Women's interests remain under-represented. Through new technology we are more connected than ever, yet loneliness is increasing, and civic engagement is declining. Environmental neglect continues despite greater awareness. We aim to address these issues in a manner consistent with the values of former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark ONZ, who serves as our patron.

Our Purpose

The Foundation publishes research that aims to contribute to a more just, sustainable, and peaceful society. Our goal is to gather, interpret, and communicate evidence in order to both diagnose the problems we face and propose new solutions to tackle them. We welcome your support. Please see our website www.helenclark.foundation

Acknowledgements

This report draws on the report *Fit for the Future: A Fair Deal on Food for a Healthier Britain*, published by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change in July 2023. The Tony Blair Institute's report presented a compelling, cross-party case to tackle obesity in Britain and served as an important reference point in developing our recommendations for the New Zealand context. Accordingly, similarities in framing, language, and recommendations are deliberate, reflecting the applicability of the Tony Blair Institute's findings to the New Zealand context.

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Foreword

As a passionate advocate for health and wellbeing, I have seen firsthand the urgent need for action to combat obesity in our country, particularly in the most deprived areas.

The stark reality is that unhealthy food options are often more accessible and affordable than nutritious meals, making it increasingly difficult for families to make healthy choices.

It baffles me that purchasing unhealthy foods is typically cheaper than providing our children with wholesome meals or basic necessities like school uniforms. This economic disparity highlights critical questions about our priorities and the systems governing access to healthy food. The rising rates of obesity, accompanied by severe health and economic implications, demand a bold response. Our current strategies have proven inadequate, and it is clear that we must seek new pathways to address this crisis.

Children are particularly vulnerable, navigating a landscape filled with aggressive marketing tactics and an abundance of inexpensive, unhealthy food choices. Under these circumstances, expecting them to make informed decisions about nutrition is unrealistic. True choice requires equal opportunities, yet many children face environments that severely limit their options, effectively trapping them in a cycle of poor nutrition.

If we genuinely care about the future of our nation, we must confront the systemic factors contributing to the obesity epidemic.

It is crucial for our political leaders to recognise the seriousness of this issue; ignoring the realities of our health crisis could lead us to repeat the failures of past policies.

Our national struggle with obesity places a heavy burden on our healthcare system and economy, costing society significantly.

The recommendations presented in the Helen Clark Foundation's report emphasise the need for immediate governmental action. These proposals, supported by health professionals and successful in other countries, represent a critical opportunity for change. Now is the time to implement these strategies decisively for the wellbeing of our children and the health of our nation.

We must transform our health food deserts, often referred to as fast food swamps, into communities where nutritious food is accessible and affordable for all.

If we can help, we should... and we need to do it before it's too late. The health of future generations depends on it.



Dave Letele
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Executive Summary

New Zealand needs a new approach to prevent and treat obesity to create a healthier and more prosperous country.

Today, more than one in three New Zealand adults is living with obesity – the third highest rate in the OECD (OECD, 2019) – while as many as one in eight New Zealand children also lives with obesity (Ministry of Health, 2023, 2024a). These numbers are significantly worse for Māori and Pasifika. Obesity has now overtaken smoking as the leading risk factor for death and disability (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, n.d.).

For the sake of New Zealand’s future, politicians must act – the health of the next generation and our economic prosperity rely on it.

The prevailing governmental approach has been largely based on promoting personal responsibility – namely, that people can and must take responsibility for their health and the choices they make. But the food system is stacked against individuals – people cannot easily change if they live in an environment that makes that change difficult or impossible. It is no longer excusable to pursue this failed approach.

For New Zealanders to be healthy, they need to live in a healthy environment and be able to access nutritious food. If politicians fail to accept this, the same failed policies of the past will continue.

New Zealand needs transformative change to shift the obesity conversation from individuals’ choices to New Zealand’s commercial food environment and the social determinants of poor nutrition. Our streets, supermarket shelves, and many school canteens are packed with food that is convenient, highly processed, and high in fat, salt, and sugar, while our airwaves amplify sophisticated marketing of these unhealthy products. Meanwhile, healthy food is becoming more expensive (Public Health Advisory Committee, 2024) which makes it even more difficult for many people to eat well.

There is a clear appetite for change – over two-thirds of New Zealanders support tougher rules on marketing

unhealthy food to children, with an overwhelming majority in favour of restrictions to prevent children being exposed to television advertisements for unhealthy food (Castles, 2021).

We know transformative change to improve health is possible because we have acted in the past. Until the 1990s, tobacco smoking was largely viewed as a personal choice in New Zealand. Governments had invested in education campaigns to encourage behavioural change, with limited effect. Then politicians accepted the impact of marketing on choice and addiction, and chose to regulate tobacco advertising and sponsorship. The focus shifted away from individuals and onto tobacco as a harmful product and the corporate practices that drove its production, retail availability, and promotion.

This changed the narrative and carved out a political space for law, regulation, and policies that protected New Zealanders, especially children. A significant decline in smoking rates followed. The politicians who acted left an enduring legacy; today, faced with an obesity crisis, politicians have an equally important opportunity to act.

To tackle obesity, government must take action to:

1. **Create a commercial food environment that makes it easier to eat healthily.**
2. **Embed healthier food across all key public sector and educational entities such as hospitals, early childhood education, and schools to promote long-term health – particularly for children and the vulnerable.**
3. **Consider adopting new treatments to improve the prevention and treatment of obesity as complementary tools for those at most risk.**



The state can take concrete steps towards breaking the cycle of declining health, weak economic growth (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2024), and an ever-greater proportion of money spent on treating illness rather than preventing it. Instead, public policy should shift towards prioritising prevention, keeping people healthier and supporting New Zealanders to live longer, more productive working lives.

Politicians have an opportunity to create a healthier, more prosperous New Zealand

New Zealand has taken pride in being innovative in public policy and making common-sense decisions to tackle difficult challenges and protect its citizens. It now needs to apply that spirit to confronting the obesity epidemic as it is falling behind national (Aotearoa's Food Environment Dashboard, n.d.) and international benchmarks (World Cancer Research Fund, n.d.) on policies that would reduce obesity and create a healthy food environment. This risks undermining progress towards achieving the Government Policy Statement on Health 2024–2027 (Ministry of Health, 2024b) from the outset. New Zealand's rates of obesity are among the highest in the world, and on current settings are likely to rise further (see figure 1). An estimated two million New Zealanders will be affected by 2038 (University of Otago, 2018), and this comes with increased risks of many types of cancer, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and musculoskeletal conditions.

Nearly \$2 billion is spent annually (Hāpai te Hauora Māori Public Health, 2021) on treating obesity related diseases – which is 8 per cent of the health budget. As rates of obesity rise, more taxpayer dollars will be needed to fund the health service. Recent research commissioned by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (2023) found that the personal cost of obesity to the individual is three times as much as that spent on treating it.

But it is not just our health that is suffering. Our economy is being held back to the tune of up to \$9 billion in lost

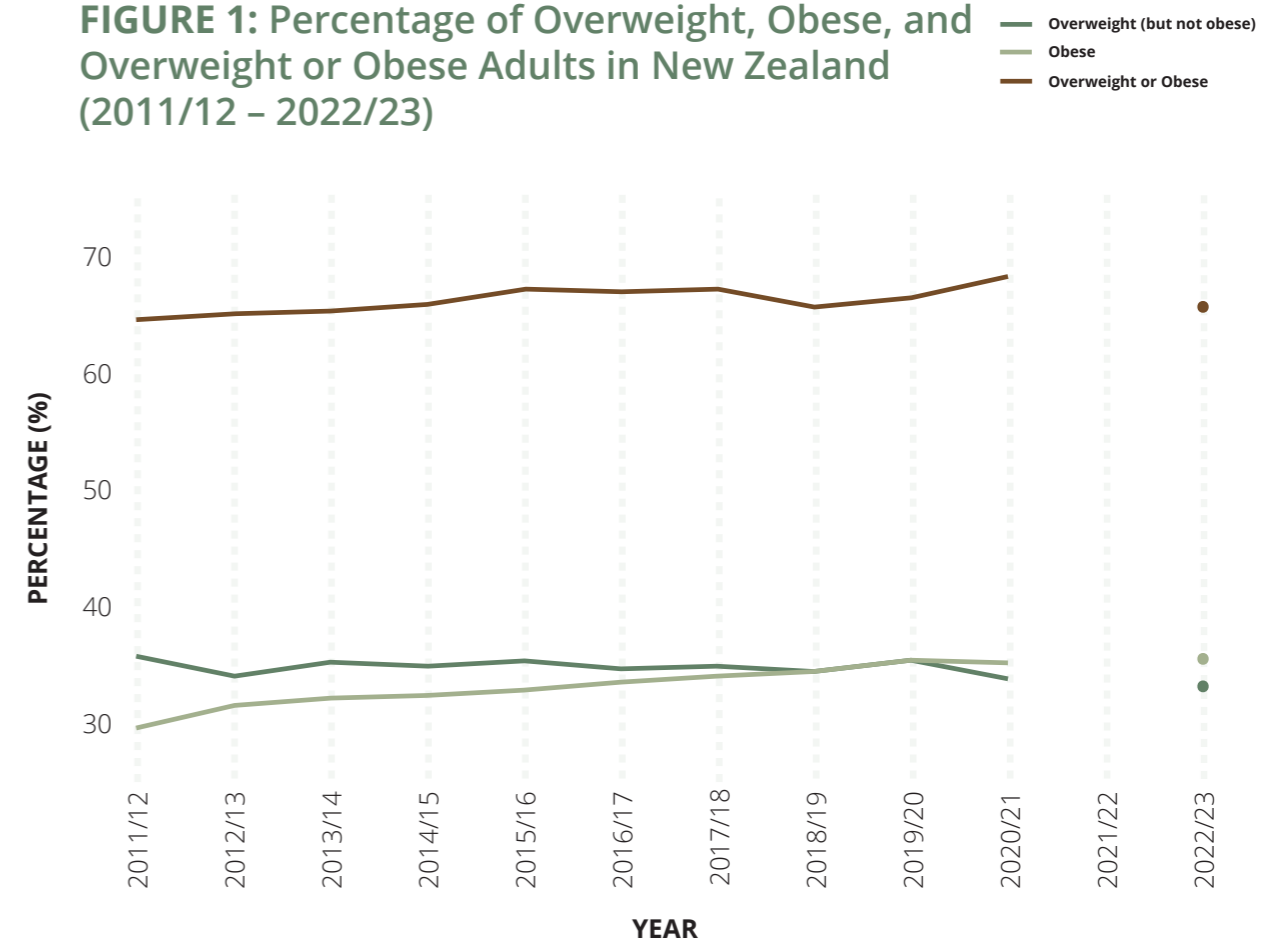
productivity annually (Hāpai te Hauora Māori Public Health, 2021), reflecting a wide range of factors, including increased healthcare costs, reduced life expectancy, reduced wages, and stigma. We are not only becoming a sicker nation, but a poorer one too.

Few New Zealand governments have taken decisive, evidence-based steps to reduce obesity over the long-term, opting instead for various voluntary schemes (such as the Health Star rating system) or industry-led approaches, piecemeal policy tweaks, or brief campaigns focused on personal responsibility that haven't seriously engaged with improving the commercial food environment.

New Zealand is one of the few developed countries without a national obesity strategy. The status quo is not working; New Zealand needs to reimagine its approach to obesity and tackle its root causes.

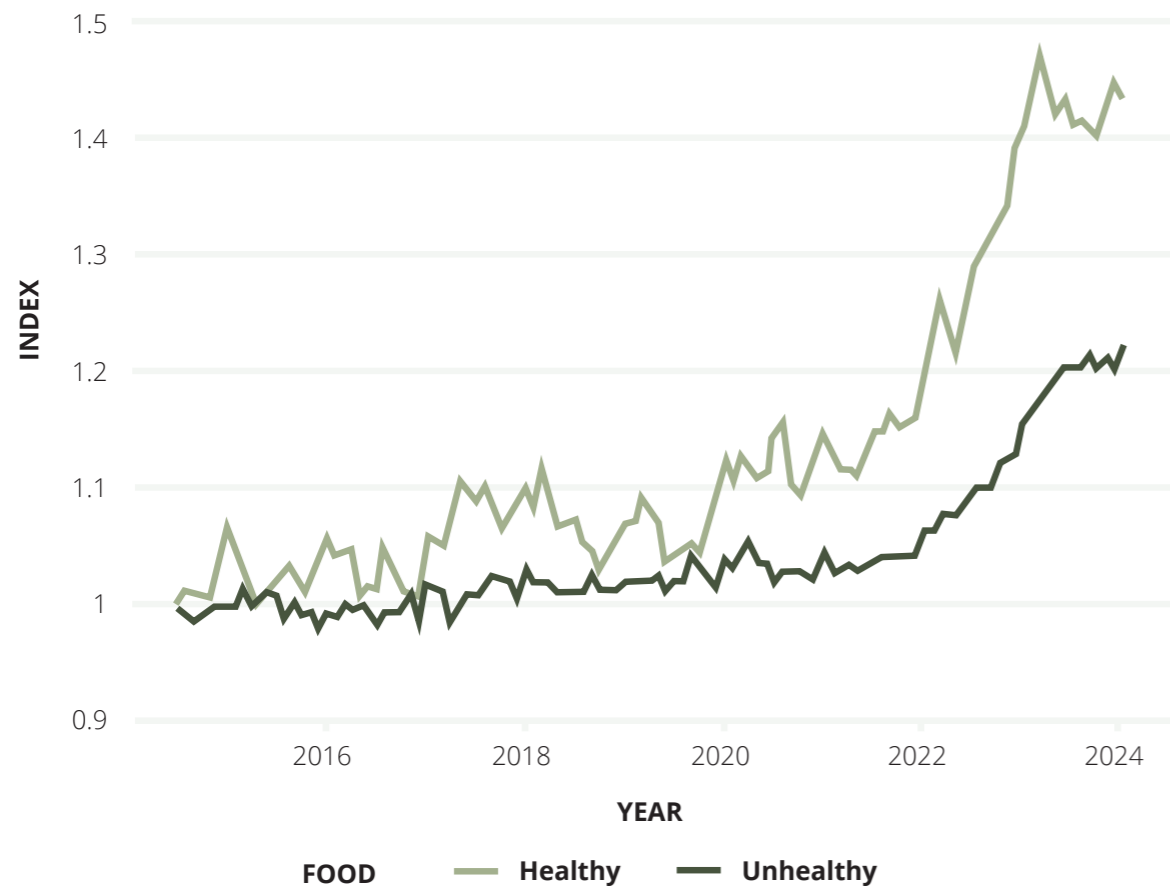
Regardless of political ideology, all New Zealand politicians should be concerned with making it easier for New Zealanders to be healthy. This objective should rise above political differences and form the basis of a cross-party consensus that can survive any change of government. Politicians must again demonstrate political will and ambition by establishing an aspirational and enduring cross-party agenda that will create a healthier food environment for the health and prosperity of the nation.

FIGURE 1: Percentage of Overweight, Obese, and Overweight or Obese Adults in New Zealand (2011/12 – 2022/23)



An approach that saves lives, costs less, and protects our health system

FIGURE 2: New Zealand Food Price Index monthly weighted average prices by healthy and unhealthy foods 2014–2024



Source: StatsNZ, Food price index: September 2023 (cited in Public Health Advisory Committee, 2024)

New Zealand’s current approach to obesity policy appears to rely on the assumption that individuals can navigate a commercial food environment where unhealthy, cheap food is readily available and healthy options are expensive and getting more so (see figure 2). Many companies reap substantial profits from these unhealthy products, while the government and taxpayers foot the costs associated with obesity to our health system and the economy.

Successive Governments over the past 30 years have implemented piecemeal policies to tackle obesity while rates have continued to rise. Most of these policies have relied on 1) voluntary industry-designed measures that are ambiguously worded and poorly enforced (Public Health Communication Centre Aotearoa, 2023) or 2) personal responsibility and behavioural change, such as exercise and education. After decades of rising obesity rates, it is clear this approach has not worked.

Even when steps to address the root causes of obesity have been taken, some politicians and other actors have stoked fears of ‘nanny-statism’ (Otago Daily Times, 2008) or of ‘woke foods’ (Anderson, 2024) unnecessarily costing taxpayers. Recent suggestions to restrict the advertising of unhealthy food to children have been countered by industry advocates, who argue that this could lead to the cancellation of major community events sponsored by industry (Espiner, 2023). This makes it more difficult for politicians to take long-term, effective action.

In 2008, the then Government implemented National Administration Guideline (5) of 2007 (Education Review Office, 2008) to provide that “where food and beverages are sold on schools’ premises, to make only healthy options available” (Scoop, 2008). This clause in the guideline was removed by the incoming government the following year in the belief that individual schools should make such decisions, not central government (New Zealand Government, 2009). Some schools carried on with aspects of the previous policy, for example as ‘water-only’ schools, preventing the sale and consumption of sugary drinks, but overall this was a lost opportunity to promote healthy eating habits.

The biggest challenge to overcoming policy inertia is clearly political. Yet, politicians are out of step with a public that appears to support stronger government intervention to create a healthier food environment. Consumer New Zealand research (Castles, 2021) found that over two-thirds of New Zealanders are supportive of tougher rules on marketing unhealthy food and drinks to children, with an overwhelming 92 per cent of these respondents also supporting government restrictions to protect children

being exposed to TV ads for unhealthy food and drinks. On average, children see advertisements for unhealthy food over 68 times per day (Health Coalition Aotearoa, 2024) and for every \$1 of advertising spent by the food and beverage industry (Garton et al., 2022), \$17 of revenue is generated. Meanwhile, New Zealand appears to lag behind comparable countries in reducing children’s exposure to ads for unhealthy foods (Public Health Communication Centre Aotearoa, 2023).

That does not mean the task of preventing obesity rests only with the government and industry. The role of individuals will always be important. Yet, the belief that most people can maintain their health while the environment actively makes this more difficult is both naive and disproven by our worsening obesity statistics. To truly enable all New Zealanders to be healthy, they need to also be living in a healthy environment.

Most of us know what a healthy diet looks like, but accessing it is increasingly difficult, especially for those most deprived. Recent research by Health Coalition Aotearoa and the Helen Clark Foundation (Shand, 2022) showed there are around three times as many fast food outlets and convenience stores per 10,000 people in the most deprived vis-a-vis the least deprived communities, and unhealthy food and drinks comprise 36 per cent of New Zealand food bills (Mackay et al., 2018).

There are ways to ensure the pillars of a healthy food environment are in place across the country. The New Zealand health system is one of the largest providers of food and drink services in the country, serving millions of meals per year. At the same time, over 230,000 school children are eligible for free school meals through the popular Ka Ora, Ka Ako programme (Ministry of Education, 2024), with very strong public support (Health Coalition Aotearoa, n.d.) for this to be expanded to at least 50 per cent of schools. The Government has an opportunity to lead by example by embedding healthier food options across all government entities.

Finally, while reducing overall obesity levels in New Zealand is a priority, some people will always be at higher risk. The Government must ensure that effective options to prevent and treat obesity are available for those who qualify. Crucially, work to create a healthier food environment must continue in parallel with supporting people to become healthier. It doesn’t make sense to provide cutting-edge treatments and surgery only for individuals to continue to live in the unhealthy food environment that contributed to their obesity in the first place.

THE TREATY OF WAITANGI AND NEW ZEALAND'S UNHEALTHY FOOD ENVIRONMENT

New Zealand's approach to reducing obesity must also be consistent with the Crown's obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi. While all New Zealanders are affected by New Zealand's unhealthy food environment, Māori are disproportionately so, being exposed to unhealthy food marketing twice as often as non-Māori and living among more unhealthy food outlets than for non-Māori (Public Health Advisory Committee, 2024). This shows in the figures, with nearly half of all Māori living with obesity and the rate of obesity among Māori children six percentage points higher than for non-Māori. Further, Māori are also more likely to suffer dental caries and experience higher rates of diabetes than non-Māori.

Under Clause 3 of the Treaty of Waitangi, the Crown gave an assurance that the Queen's Royal protection and all the rights and privileges given to British Subjects would be extended to Māori citizens. The consistently worse health outcomes experienced by Māori populations in New Zealand and their disproportionate exposure to an unhealthy food environment could be interpreted as a breach of this clause and, therefore, a breach of the Treaty itself. The Treaty principle of Active Protection of Māori interests, rights, and taonga requires a stronger stance from the government in enforcing healthy public policy. This principle was found by the Waitangi Tribunal (2023) to apply to combatting ill-health. Likewise, various New Zealand legislation (such as the NZ Public Health and Disability Act) (Came et al., 2018) obliges the Crown to work towards eliminating entrenched health inequities between Māori and other New Zealanders.

Our country's unhealthy food environment is, if anything, even more damaging for Pacific people living in New Zealand, with over 67 per cent of Pasifika adults and 28 per cent of Pasifika children living with obesity.

Effective reform of the unhealthy food environment – as set out in this report – requires deep and meaningful partnership with those most affected, including with Māori. With the disestablishment of the Māori Health Authority, the most appropriate bodies to lead this are Iwi-Māori Partnership Boards and the Hauora Māori Advisory Committee.



A step change in the Government's approach to obesity

New Zealand needs a new approach to tackling obesity. The food system is stacked against individuals and needs to be transformed. This means the Government must intervene to create a healthier food environment that will support better choices and healthier lives for New Zealanders, as well as reduce the strain on the health system. People cannot be expected to make healthy choices when faced with a range of unhealthy options. This is especially the case in the most deprived communities where unhealthy food options are more prevalent.

Ongoing failure to act will continue to hamper New Zealand in the coming years – making New Zealanders less healthy and less productive.

New Zealand's obesity rates are a long-term problem and require a long-term solution. What is needed is a coherent and ambitious plan to reform the food environment. This should include government procurement of healthy and nutritious food and harnessing new ways of preventing and treating obesity.

01

Create a commercial food environment that makes it easier to eat healthily

A healthy commercial food environment is a cornerstone of a healthy population. New Zealand's food environment is flooded with cheap, unhealthy, and easily accessible food that is aggressively marketed to children and adults.

Through a combination of regulation and incentives, the Government can drive positive transformation of the commercial food environment to support Kiwis to access healthier choices. For example, the current industry-led voluntary system governing food and beverage marketing is clearly insufficient to deal with the growing obesity epidemic and is in desperate need of reform, particularly as junk food marketing aggressively expands beyond the traditional areas of TV and radio, to the internet, social media, and even gaming (Thomas, 2024).

This is also reflected in our neighbourhoods. Given that fast-food outlets are more highly concentrated in deprived areas (Sushil et al., 2017), local government should be more empowered to determine rules around unhealthy food outlets in specific locations, as it is with alcohol outlets.

To make a meaningful difference, New Zealand needs robust, enforceable regulations that are agile enough to meet the challenges of today. Such interventions have proved effective in other countries with minimal impact on consumers. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Conservative Government established the 2016 Soft Drinks Industry Levy applied to soft drinks containing added sugar. This is a key pillar of the UK's Childhood Obesity Strategy (Department of Health and Social Care, 2016), and has led to a 35 per cent reduction in the total sugar sold in soft drinks by retailers and manufacturers over four years and a reduction in hospital admissions among children for tooth extractions (Rogers et al., 2023). This is despite sales of the affected products remaining stable throughout. This has been attributed to industry largely opting to reformulate their products to include less sugar rather than pay the levy. In New Zealand, reformulation of bread and cereal products has resulted in meaningful reductions in sodium and sugar content.

Moreover, modelling (Cleghorn et al., 2019) suggests wider reformulation of unhealthy foods presents a cost-effective way for New Zealand to improve health outcomes and reduce healthcare costs. Nor is it just the UK where such interventions have been implemented – some form of sugary drinks levy is now in place in over 100 jurisdictions (Breadon & Geraghty, 2024), with a range of options for ensuring such schemes are implemented efficiently and equitably. In New Zealand, this is particularly important; sugary drinks account for up to 17 per cent of total sugar intake (Public Health Advisory Committee, 2024). A reduction in consumption of sugary drinks (Mhurchu et al., 2014) would prevent as many deaths each year as those who die from cervical cancer annually.

In New Zealand, priorities to create a healthy commercial food environment should include:

- Introducing fiscal levers similar to the UK's Soft Drinks Industry Levy to incentivise reformulation of products high in sugar and salt. If phased in at an appropriate pace, food companies should be able to reformulate their products and avoid paying the levy.
- Regulating for comprehensive protection of children and young people from junk food marketing by restricting advertising of products high in fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS) in shops, online, on TV and radio, in sports sponsorship, and the wider environment. For example, the UK Government has introduced a ban on junk food advertising on TV before 9 pm (Boyd & Fatima, 2024), and a total ban on paid-for online adverts to tackle childhood obesity.
- Shifting from an industry self-regulatory code to unambiguous mandatory advertising rules that can be transparently and consistently monitored for effectiveness and legally enforced.
- Regulating for mandatory use of the health star rating on all packaged food as currently advocated (Morton, 2024) helps to inform consumers how products fit into a healthy diet and is widely used in Latin America.
- Strengthening planning laws, as called for in the Public Health Advisory Committee report (2024), to give local councils the ability to limit the prevalence of unhealthy food outlets, particularly around schools.

02

Improve access to healthy food across state entities

The Government can lead from the front and show it is serious about tackling obesity. This should begin with a commitment to providing healthy food in schools and hospitals, for example, building on and strengthening promising work in recent years, such as removing sugary drinks in schools (Ministry of Education, 2023) and improving the availability of healthy food in hospitals (Mackay et al., 2024) and defence force canteens. Hundreds of thousands of people consume government-procured food in these institutions every day with the potential for population-level impact being significant. Establishing healthy food environments in these institutions would also reinforce social norms around healthy eating, helping to promote both supply and demand for more and cheaper healthy food options across New Zealand.

Priority areas include:

- Committing to long-term funding of the Healthy School Lunch Programme Ka Ora, Ka Ako, and expanding it to reach at least 50 per cent of all schools.
- Setting higher standards for schools to ensure all food and drink served or sold by schools is healthy.
- Developing, implementing, and enforcing healthy food policies for all hospitals, defence force, prisons, and government organisation canteens.
- Moving beyond voluntary guidelines to develop rules for government procurement that ensure taxpayer money is spent only on healthy foods within government entities such as hospitals and schools.

03

Consider adopting new treatments to improve the prevention and treatment of obesity as complementary tools for those at most risk

While preventing obesity and creating healthy commercial food environments is the healthiest and most cost-effective option, some people will still be at increased risk of obesity and should receive clinically and cost-effective interventions. This will benefit the individual, the health system, and the taxpayer. To maximise the effectiveness of any intervention, it is critical that the environment to which individuals return is one that supports them to maintain good health, rather than one rife with sophisticated marketing of unhealthy food.

There is a range of cutting-edge new technologies and treatments that are quickly becoming available to prevent and treat obesity. These will quickly emerge as highly effective, complementary tools to help many of those living with obesity to live healthy lives. Yet these tools should not be seen as the sole solution – New Zealand's high rates of obesity require a broad approach across a range of interventions. Recent research commissioned by the Tony Blair Institute and undertaken by the London Business School (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2024) has found that new drugs to treat obesity could lead to a 0.3 per cent improvement in annual GDP within five years. In New Zealand, which could mean an improvement in GDP of up to \$1.2 billion.

Priority areas include:

- Modelling the impact of modern weight loss drugs in the New Zealand population to understand the effectiveness in weight reduction, and broader health and economic impacts. These drugs have been shown to reduce incidence of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and other conditions linked to obesity and overweight.
- Building on this, following regulatory agencies in other countries, such as the UK (Department of Health and Social Care Media Centre, 2023), by expanding the eligibility criteria of weight loss drugs such as Wegovy, beyond type 2 diabetes to include weight management.
- Conducting a full review of weight-management services to identify how to utilise new digital tools and artificial intelligence to scale these services and provide care and advice to those who need it.

Conclusion

Government has a responsibility to protect the health of citizens, and must take the bold actions needed to tackle obesity.

If implemented effectively and supported by an enduring cross-party consensus, a new approach to preventing obesity will substantially improve health outcomes in New Zealand, while driving productivity and allowing businesses to grow.

This is a duty that today's politicians have to the next generation. Those who act will leave proud legacies – having protected the health of our nation, the future of our children, and the strength of our economy.



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