Sugar’s web of influence 3: Why the responsibility deal is a “dead duck” for sugar reduction

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New evidence suggests that food companies are unlikely to meet a pledge under the government’s voluntary scheme to reduce the calories in their products by 5%. So what hope is there for the campaign to reduce sugar by 40% without regulation, asks Jonathan Gornall?

Since its launch in March 2011, the voluntary “responsibility deal” with industry has been the mainstay of the government’s public health policy in England. It has also been one of the most valuable tools at the disposal of a sugar industry keen to persuade would be regulators that it is a good corporate neighbour that can keep its own house in order.

Under the umbrella of the deal’s food network, all the major supermarkets and key manufacturers—including Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and leading confectionery companies—have signed up to one or more of nine collective “pledges.” These have included commitments to introduce front of pack nutrition labelling and remove trans fats from products. But the main initiative, inspired by the government’s 2011 “Call to action” over obesity, has been calorie reduction.

Thirty nine companies signed up to “support and enable our customers to eat and drink fewer calories through actions such as product/menu reformulation, reviewing portion sizes, education and information, and actions to shift the marketing mix towards lower calorie options.”

Whether any of this has had any meaningful impact on public health will remain unclear until at least late 2015, when the Department of Health says it plans to publish the findings of an independent evaluation of the deal it has commissioned from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Numbers don’t add up
But it isn’t likely, according to Giles Quick, a director at market research company Kantar Worldpanel, which produces data on consumers’ food purchasing habits. He
says there is a fatal flaw in the responsibility deal’s plan to reduce the nation’s calorie intake by 5%

Kantar’s 30,000 strong demographically balanced consumer panel is the largest single source of insights into the behaviour of UK shoppers, and the data it produces are used by everyone from companies to the Department of Health, and in monitoring elements of the responsibility deal. Members of the continuous panel capture the barcodes of all their grocery purchases with an infrared scanner, and because the on-pack nutritional values are linked to the barcodes, Kantar and its clients can get a precise understanding of nutritional trends in product manufacture and purchasing.

And what that tells Quick is that while the government has been striving to remove 5% of calories from the food chain, the calorie density of products—the average number of calories in any given weight—has increased by far more.

Kantar’s latest analysis of the contents of the nation’s shopping baskets shows that in the year ending March 2014 the number of calories in the food and drink bought for home consumption by British households was 11.7% higher than in the same period in 2006. The volumes of sugar (up 10.9%), fat (12.4%), and saturates (13.3%) had all increased, suggesting that companies’ pledges to reduce calories in a range of specific products have had little overall public health effect.

Besides, says Quick, “The responsibility deal was bound to fail right from the start, even if it ‘succeeded’ … Even if all the pledges were met, it would be impossible to meet the 5% reduction, because the sum of the pledges clearly doesn’t equal the government’s ambition.”

But the deal isn’t failing industry. It is in the happy position of being seen to be a good corporate neighbour, embracing public health initiatives, while quietly vetoing those that threaten it financially.

There is mounting evidence that industry is growing tired of playing nicely with the Department of Health, putting its foot down to protect its core commercial interests and, when it comes to sugar, drawing a line in the sand and threatening to derail this key plank of the government’s public health policy if it doesn’t get its way (box).

**Promotions on unhealthy foods**

The limits of industry’s patience with the deal were shown last March, when the Department of Health tabled a paper for the industry members of the food network’s high level support group, proposing that they finally got to grips with the promotion of foods high in fat, salt, and sugar—the final outstanding element in the list of priorities that had been drawn up for the network at the outset.

The previous year, the paper reminded the industry delegates, the group had “agreed that we should seek action that would improve the nutritional content of consumers’
food baskets by altering the environment that they shop in and the offers and promotions that they are exposed to.”

There were six industry representatives present at the meeting—from PepsiCo, the Food and Drink Federation, British Hospitality Association, the British Retail Consortium, Tesco, and Sodexo—and they all said no.

“For several months,” the minutes of the meeting noted, the retail members of the group “had been giving thought to what action might take place in-store.” While they thought that the consensus based approach had worked well “on the more defined topics, such as for pledges on reformulation,” they had “found it difficult to reach a consensus on such a commercially sensitive topic.”

A DH spokesperson would not confirm that it had been obliged to drop promotion from the responsibility deal but said: “We encourage businesses to make individual voluntary commitments on food promotions and are keen for them to let us know of any examples of good practice which can be shared.”

It was, she added, the Food and Drink Federation and the British Retail Consortium who “told us they cannot identify areas where their members can take collective action on promotions. This is why they were asked to consider any individual actions they could take.”

Barbara Gallani, director of regulation, science, and health for the Food and Drink Federation, denied industry was cherry picking responsibility deal initiatives that suited it.

“The benefit the responsibility deal has brought to the stakeholders involved has been to provide clarity on priorities,” she told The BMJ, “and if you put too many priorities on the table then you dilute the opportunity to make changes happen.”

And sugar, it is clear, is one priority too many for industry’s taste. At a meeting at the Department of Health on 2 July last year, industry members of the food network’s high level steering group sat through two presentations on sugar. The first was about the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition’s draft report, Carbohydrates and Health, presented by Ian Macdonald, chair of the carbohydrates working group. The other, by Alison Tedstone, director of diet and obesity at Public Health England, outlined the organisation’s perspective on sugar following its publication of Sugar Reduction: Responding to the Challenge.

Afterwards, Susan Jebb, professor of diet and population health at Oxford University, who chairs the food network steering group, asked members whether they thought a specific pledge to reduce sugar would be appropriate. Again, they all said no.
“I asked them that because clearly the outside world and the public health campaigners have been calling for that,” Jebb told The BMJ, referring to Action on Sugar’s campaign to have the amount of sugar in foods and drinks reduced in the same way that salt had been.

“Industry,” she added, “feel that sugar reduction is already well covered under calorie reduction, and I think it would be fair to say there was no appetite for additional targets.”

Very true, says the Food and Drink Federation. “The food industry has always been reluctant to accept individual nutrients messages, because consumers do not go to the shops to buy salt, sugar, and saturated fats, they go to buy different foods they then combine into diets,” says Gallani. “So the most important thing is to provide clear messages about how to achieve balanced varied diets in the context of a healthy lifestyle [and] switching the focus onto sugar is not necessarily helpful.”

Jebb agrees. She believes that “on one level” Action on Sugar does a good job: “They keep the debate going and they put pressure on industry and government to take action,” she said. “But I worry about giving consumers this single line that [dealing with obesity] is as simple as just cutting out sugar, and it’s not. For many people as much as two thirds of their sugar intake comes from sugary drinks and confectionery, and I think we should be singling those foods out as being the real areas of concern.”

But what I hear Action on Sugar doing is worrying people about the sugar in baked beans … there is a danger that they oversell the dangers of sugar to people, rather than talking about a whole diet approach.”

She defended the responsibility deal’s focus on overall calorie reduction. “I was very keen that that’s how we should frame it and remain very committed to that approach,” she said. “I personally don’t believe it is helpful to say to people that sugar is the be all and end all of everything, and if you just cut sugar everything else will be fine. Because I don’t believe it will be.”

But David Haslam, chair of the National Obesity Forum and a member of Action on Sugar’s steering committee, says that after decades of public health having been wrongly focused on the dangers of fat—thanks in part to the early findings of Ancel Keys’ subsequently controversial Seven Countries Study—it is hard to oversell the dangers of sugar. “We’ve been getting it wrong for so long in demonising fat whereas all the recent evidence suggests sugar is the real factor to blame,” he said. “I’m not saying we should completely ignore fat, but targeting fat has been dragging us in the wrong direction. That’s gone on for so long that at this stage I think that focusing on sugar, and only on sugar, is beneficial. For sugar the evidence is clear cut and we mustn’t deflect the message. This is the big one, this is the important one, this is what we should concentrate on solely and exclusively at this stage.”
For his part, Graham MacGregor, professor of cardiovascular medicine at the Wolfson Institute, Queen Mary University of London, and cofounder of Action on Sugar, makes no secret of his view that the responsibility deal, whose members are so reluctant to tackle sugar head-on, “is a dead duck. How can you make any industry responsible for policing itself? It just doesn’t work.”

Cooperative approach

By rights, industry and Action on Sugar should not be on friendly terms. But it is an illustration of the complexities of the debate about sugar and health that industry now seems to be entertaining overtures from the group, which is determined to work outside the framework of the responsibility deal.

Katharine Jenner, chief executive of Blood Pressure UK and campaign director for Action on Sugar, told *The BMJ* the organisation was attempting to replicate the success of its predecessor organisation, Consensus Action on Salt and Health (CASH), and had had a series of informal talks with companies such as Tesco, Marks and Spencer, Waitrose, and Asda and organisations, including AB Sugar and the British Soft Drinks Association.

The model, says Jenner, would follow that laid down by CASH for salt reduction. “Then, we spoke to all of the retailers before taking a plan to the Food Standards Agency to say that we’ve spoken to industry and many of the big companies would be keen to do something, so now let’s formalise it by coming up with a plan. “We’re adopting the same approach now, sitting down and discussing with lots of different companies what their issues and barriers would be and also whether they would be willing to work on sugar reduction separate to the responsibility deal’s calorie pledge.”

CASH’s salt plan, she said, had been “grounded in science and developed in conjunction with the food industry. The responsibility deal pledges haven’t been, and most of the food industry and most of the other non-governmental organisations think they are just not fit for purpose.”

The responsibility deal had served a purpose, she said, “which was to show that industry has a role. But industry can’t be in charge of creating policy; it just doesn’t make any logical sense.”

But success for Action on Sugar’s scheme ultimately depends on the government agreeing to adopt the salt reduction model for sugar, and on industry believing it is a practical proposition.

The group started well. A headline-rich launch in January 2014, in which Action on Sugar highlighted the apparent conflicts of interest of several members of a government committee reviewing guidance on carbohydrates in the diet, won it an audience with
health secretary Jeremy Hunt and an invitation from him to produce a plan for preventing childhood obesity.\textsuperscript{5, 6}

The 11 page document, which laid the blame for the epidemic squarely on “the constant availability and consumption of ultra-processed foods and sweetened soft drinks,” was delivered six months later. It pulled no punches, opening with an attack on the government’s treasured responsibility deal, which had “not had any effect on calorie intake on a public health scale.” Curbs on the advertising and marketing of “sugar-laden” foods “have not worked and have been bypassed by the food industry.” Now, “a radical but simple solution” was required.\textsuperscript{7}

Action on Sugar proposed a carbon copy of its successful salt strategy: a “systematic and unobtrusive reformulation programme for manufacturers to gradually reduce the amount of sugar that is added to soft drinks and foods,” achieving a reduction in sugar of 40% by 2020.

The group also sought an end to all forms of marketing of unhealthy foods and drinks to children, an end to sports sponsorship associated with “junk food,” and a limiting of the availability and portion size of “ultra-processed foods and sweetened soft drinks.”

All these measures, of course, would require a commitment from the government to regulation that the very existence of the responsibility deal shows it has not been willing to entertain, not to mention industry embracing proposals it has already rejected. Even less likely, from the government’s perspective, was a further suggestion that the threat of a sugar tax should be wielded to “incentivise” the production of healthier food. And, with its final “key action” to prevent obesity, the group strayed even further into a political minefield.

Shortly after taking office as secretary of state in 2010, Hunt’s predecessor Andrew Lansley, founder of the responsibility deal, kept a pre-election promise and took responsibility for nutrition away from the Food Standards Agency, bringing it under his purview at the Department of Health, where it remains. The move, he said at the time, would mean “a more co-ordinated and coherent policy making process and a more effective potential partnership between Government and external stakeholders.”\textsuperscript{8} In effect, the move gave Lansley direct control of the relationship with the manufacturers on which his voluntary responsibility deal depended.

Although the salt reduction model introduced in the UK by CASH has been adopted successfully in other countries, including the US, Canada, Australia, and Brazil, MacGregor says progress in the UK faltered after Lansley stripped the Food Standards Agency of responsibility for setting industry’s targets. After 2012, no further targets were set, “so that the whole salt thing stopped and the industry quite quickly got the message that no-one’s really watching, they can do what they like.”
The suggestion now that the government should “remove responsibility for nutrition from the Department of Health and return it to an independent agency” carries with it a clear implied criticism of the department and, rather like the assault on the effectiveness of the responsibility deal, is unlikely to endear the document to the health secretary.

At the time of writing, the health secretary had not responded to Action on Sugar’s plan for dealing with childhood obesity.

Box 1
How a major supermarket reacted to the prospect of UK sugar tax

When Philip Clarke, then chief executive of Tesco, arrived at the Department of Health, London, a little before 9 am on 6 August 2013 for a meeting with health secretary Jeremy Hunt, he was not expecting to find sugar on the table.

Clarke had sought the meeting with Hunt to discuss the company’s commitment to the responsibility deal and outline its ongoing plans to contribute to the fight against obesity.

Without doubt, Tesco was the responsibility deal’s star performer. It had signed up to more pledges than any other retailer; removed a billion calories from its own brand soft drinks; committed to calorie reduction pledges related to portion size, reformulation of products, and the introduction of alternative low calorie ranges; and had led the way in persuading all major UK retailers to sign up to traffic light nutrition labelling on food.

But Hunt, Clarke was to discover during the meeting, wanted more—including, quite possibly, a tax on sugar.

The mention of a sugar tax seemed to push the embattled Tesco chief, beset by shareholder concerns that the leading supermarket chain’s market share was being eroded by discount stores Lidl and Aldi, to the limits of his patience.

A letter Clarke sent to Hunt the following day, obtained by The BMJ under the Freedom of Information Act (see thebmj.com), clearly sets out Tesco’s plans and commitments and then repeatedly asks for clarity and long term vision from the government. Clarke comes across as deeply frustrated with a government that industry sees as constantly moving goalposts.

He indicates that the government’s war on obesity was a hopelessly fragmented assault and its effectiveness was being undermined by poor leadership, the involvement of too many parties, and a lack of joined-up thinking, of which the relatively sudden isolation of sugar as its latest bête noir was symptomatic.

The letter amounted to a warning shot across the bows of the responsibility deal. Tesco was, he said, “always keen to work with government to positively influence change and improve the lives of our colleagues and customers.” But such a partnership had to be based on “a clear understanding of the issue and shared clarity on how it can be addressed.” Tesco was keen “to help shape the strategy to tackle obesity” but needed “clarity on the long-term vision and stepping stones to achieve this.”

To drive long term behavioural change, Clarke continued, “we need an ambitious, evidence-based, long term strategy for public health … there simply is no ‘silver bullet’ to reverse this challenge overnight.”

In a remarkable section, Clarke even suggested the answer might lie in legislation—a measure that successive governments had repeatedly shied away from and for which the responsibility deal was established as a politically palatable alternative.

“Given the scale of the issue,” Clarke wrote, “joined up action across government, industry and health NGOs was the only way to influence change and, provided it was “appropriate, targeted and evidence-based,” a “legislative approach may be required to overcome some issues.”
For Tesco, which in the past has complained to ministers that it has been put at a competitive
disadvantage by leading with responsibility deal initiatives when competitors have not followed,
legislation would have the benefit of “levelling the playing field, requiring all of those who contribute
to the obesity challenge . . . to play their part.”

Tesco was examining the impact on customer behaviour of Hungary’s tax on salt, sugar, and energy
drinks—and “we detect none.” It believed the policy “fails to address the issue of obesity as it
focuses on a limited number of products and fails to educate consumers on healthy lifestyle
choices.”

Furthermore, though manufacturers in Hungary had been forced to reformulate certain products, the
effect was far less focused than that achieved by the UK’s responsibility deal, which had “driven
significant reductions in calories and salt and will shortly be extended to incorporate saturated fats.”

Whether Hunt was in any way alarmed by Clarke’s letter was not apparent from his anodyne reply,
also seen by The BMJ. But he should have been. Under a year later, with Tesco’s sales declining to a
20 year low, it was announced that Clarke would be replaced by Unilever’s former chairman Dave
Lewis. With the likes of Aldi and Lidl snapping at Tesco’s heels, and the weight of City expectations heavy on
his shoulders, Lewis is even more likely than Clarke to play hardball, and it remains to be seen what
part social responsibility in general, and the responsibility deal in particular, will play in his plans to
boost profits and shareholder confidence.

References