

Starting Well, Keeping Well

Liberal Reform Evidence Submission

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Introduction

As a Liberal party, it is important that policy reflect the traditions of our philosophy. In respect to public health policy, the focus of much of this consultation, JS Mill's 'harm principle' (where attempts to limit the activities of individuals, unless those activities present the threat of harm to others, are deemed unwarranted), is particularly relevant. As unhealthy lifestyles do not meet this standard, policy should revolve around increased levels of education, so that individuals are in a better position to make more informed choices, but ultimately their freedom to choose is not restricted. Areas of this consultation that do concern other-regarding harm, such as air pollution, justify more interventionist policy, but such policy should continue to be distinctly liberal and not statist.

A disappointing aspect of this consultation therefore is that it does not appear to be the case that current Liberal Democrat support for policies such as the sugar tax and minimum unit alcohol pricing is up for review. These policies are not only paternalistic but also damaging and ultimately unlikely to be successful. For a start, both policies are likely to have a particularly detrimental impact on the budgets of the poor; sugar consumption has been shown to be highest in the most deprived segments of society¹, and as such a tax hits these individuals hardest, meanwhile minimum unit alcohol pricing by design only affects alcohol products affordable to the poorest, leaving more expensive products unchanged (this is especially perverse considering alcohol consumption generally falls as income falls²), neither of these policies are therefore suitable for a party committed to ensuring that none are enslaved by poverty.

Nor does evidence suggest that these policies are likely to be effective. Both policies rely on the idea that sugar and alcohol are *price elastic*, and as such demand will fall as price rises, but this is not the case. Evidence³ suggests that both are *price inelastic*, and therefore a rise in price will not reduce consumption (as demonstrated by the implementation of a sugar tax in Mexico, which did not lead to a reduction in sugary drinks consumption⁴). In the case of alcohol, price inelasticity increases for the heaviest drinkers⁵, meaning that price rises are least likely to decrease the consumption of those who do so in the most harmful manner.

Therefore, the policy proposals contained in this submission should be seen as replacements for these current Liberal Democrat policies, as opposed to additional policy to sit alongside them.

¹ Ntouva, Tsakos, and Watt, 'Sugars Consumption in a Low-Income Sample of British Young People and Adults'.

² ONS, 'Adult Drinking Habits in Great Britain'.

³ Yucai Wang, 'The Impact of Soda Taxes on Consumer Welfare: Implications of Storability and Taste Heterogeneity'.

⁴ Snowden, 'Mexico Was Meant to Prove a Sugar Tax Worked. New Figures Tell a Different Story'.

⁵ Manning, Blumberg, and Moulton, 'The Demand for Alcohol'.

Enabling Healthier Choice

How can we make healthier choices more convenient, desirable and/or affordable, and what are the best opportunities for engaging people so they adopt healthier behaviours?

If 'healthier choices' is interpreted as meaning decisions that prolong life, the evidence is clear that the best methods of improving life expectancy* are not so much interventions that in some way enhance or prohibit certain lifestyle choices, but instead tackle wider societal problems.

Data from the ONS suggests that wealth and education play a crucial role in an individual's life expectancy⁶. This is unsurprising, as we know that, for example, economic factors are often cited as barriers to consuming a healthier diet⁷, whilst there is clear evidence that education improves public health⁸. Therefore, policies aimed at improving educational standards and eradicating poverty are likely to be the most effective in improving both the desirability and affordability of healthier choices.

Policies to eradicate poverty are beyond the scope of this submission, but there are certain policies that could be implemented to improve education in making healthier choices. In particular, public information campaigns focusing on healthy lifestyles should be relaunched, as these have been proven to be successful when in operation. The '5 A Day' campaign increased consumption of fruit and vegetables by 0.3 portions a day whilst in operation between 2003 and 2006⁹, but since then fruit and vegetable purchases have declined, and by 2015 had fallen below 2002 levels¹⁰. Similarly, the 2009 'Change4Life' media campaign was very successful at increasing awareness of the campaigns priorities but suffered from a lack of long-term engagement from those it was aimed at¹¹. Liberal Democrat policy should seek to relaunch and revitalise both campaigns, aiming to learn from the flaws associate with the previous incarnations of both and recognising the need to sustain campaigns as the challenges are recurrent.

**NB: As liberals, we should appreciate and respect that not all individuals may wish to conform to the notion that a longer life expectancy is preferable to a shorter, more indulgent life.*

⁶ ONS, 'An Overview of Lifestyles and Wider Characteristics Linked to Healthy Life Expectancy in England: June 2017'.

⁷ National Obesity Observatory, 'Knowledge and Attitudes towards Healthy Eating and Physical Activity: What the Data Tell Us'.

⁸ Hahn and Truman, 'Education Improves Public Health and Promotes Health Equity'.

⁹ Capacci and Mazzocchi, 'Five-a-Day, a Price to Pay'.

¹⁰ DEFRA, 'Food Statistics Pocketbook 2015'.

¹¹ Croker, Lucas, and Wardle, 'Cluster-Randomised Trial to Evaluate the "Change for Life" Mass Media/ Social Marketing Campaign in the UK'.

What changes to regulation are needed to reduce consumption of unhealthy products across the population?

A particular area in which regulation is currently undermining efforts to reduce harm is that of tobacco smoking, where regulation is either deterring or forbidding the consumption and/or promotion of healthier alternatives, in particular e-cigarettes and 'heat-not-burn' products. A recent report by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee¹², chaired by the Liberal Democrat MP Norman Lamb, lays out the problems with current regulation, and Liberal Democrat policy should be based on its findings.

Party policy should seek to:

- Allow health professionals to recommend e-cigarettes as a cessation aid to patients seeking to quit smoking.
- Allow e-cigarette manufacturers and retailers to make explicit substantiated claims about the benefits of 'vaping' as compared to conventional smoking in advertising.
- Allow for the use of e-cigarettes in public outdoor spaces, including train platforms.
- Remove limits on the strength of e-cigarette refills and restrictions on tank size.
- Ensure the taxation of smoking products accurately reflects their potential for harm, seeing e-cigarettes being taxed at a lower rate than traditional cigarettes.
- Discontinue the ban on 'Snus' oral tobacco.

N.B: Some of these regulations are set at an EU level; should the UK remain a member of the EU, party policy should instead pivot to lobbying for the relaxation of these EU regulations.

¹² House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 'E-Cigarettes'.

How can we better protect people from the dangers of air pollution?

In order to improve air pollution in major cities, it is clear that we must reduce traffic congestion. In order to this, we should utilise both technology and market mechanisms.

London's congestion charge is a good starting point. According to Transport for London, since the introduction of the original charging zone in 2002, 80,000 fewer cars enter that original zone each day¹³. This can be improved upon, and the improved method of congestion charging could then be rolled out to major cities across the UK. In order to improve congestion charging we should:

- Increase the cost of the charge, in order to further deter the use of cars in cities, reinvesting increased revenues in public transport.
- Remove exclusions for all private hire vehicles, including black cabs in London.
- Adopt the Stockholm approach to congestion charging, where Automatic Number Plate Recognition is used to detect vehicles entering and leaving the charging zone, charging more for crossing the cordon at peak times, as well as spending extended periods of time within the zone¹⁴. This will 'nudge' road users into entering the city at off-peak times for shorter periods of time.

To add to this, congestion in major cities could be further reduced by promoting ride-sharing with multiple passengers, using technology such as UberPool and City Mapper's 'SmartRide' service.

¹³ Transport for London, 'Congestion Charge Factsheet'.

¹⁴ London Assembly Transport Committee, 'London Stalling Reducing Traffic Congestion in London'.

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