



Television advertising of food and drink products to children

Options for new restrictions

Publication date: **28 March 2006**

Closing Date for Responses: **30 June 2006**

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Foreword

In recent years there has been growing social and public policy concern about the increase in childhood obesity. That increase has been driven by a complex web of inter-related factors in which changes in life-style, changes in diet and changes in marketing and promotion all play their part.

Against that background, Ofcom was asked in 2004 to research the impact of television advertising of food and drink to children in this mix; and to consider proposals on strengthening its rules on television advertising of food and soft drinks to children. The report published by Ofcom in July 2004, building on extensive previous research, showed that television food advertising has a modest direct effect and a larger but unquantifiable indirect effect on children's preferences, consumption and behaviour. Our conclusion was that the status quo was an undesirable option and that there is a case for strengthening the rules on advertising to children.

In the meantime, the market has already produced a significant shift in the balance of television food promotion to children: the overall volume of food, drink and restaurant advertising to children dropped by around 13 per cent in 2005; and a number of food and soft drink manufacturers have voluntarily decided to withdraw from television advertising in children's airtime.

The television advertising industry's self-regulatory body, BCAP, has also proposed a range of restrictions on advertising techniques and treatments in television food advertising to children. Ofcom welcomes these proposals which form an integral part of the policy options we are consulting on.

That leaves the important issue of whether, and if so what, further volume restrictions there should be on food advertising to children. Ofcom has concluded that some form of volume restriction is justified and proportionate. But, as is the case with many social policy issues, there is no easy one size fits all, or one size suits all, policy prescription. This difficulty is reflected in the absence to date of any proposals from industry, beyond BCAP's treatment changes, which can command broad support across broadcasters, advertisers, retailers and food manufacturers.

In this document, therefore, we consult on a range of three core options for different types of volume restriction, designed to produce the best balance between an effective shift in television food advertising to impact on children's preferences and behaviours without an unduly adverse effect on the funding for range and quality in children's programmes or on the legitimate activities of food manufacturers and retailers. Each option has its own advantages and disadvantages. Ofcom is agnostic as between them: this is an open consultation.

Indeed, Ofcom actively invites proposals for a fourth option, which could be a permutation of the package of measures in the three core options or could be a completely new proposal. We would welcome any such option capable of commanding broad support and of making a positive and substantive contribution to changing children's preferences, behaviour and consumption of food and drink.

We seek your views. Changes in television food advertising have a part, but a modest part, to play in the overall mix that produces the solution that society as a whole wishes to see: a change in children's behaviour, parental responsibility, schools policy, opportunities for exercise, food promotion, and many other factors that will enable our children to live healthy lives today and tomorrow.

Stephen A. Carter, Chief Executive

