

‘Fat taxes in the UK’: an update

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International developments

Since early October when **Denmark** introduced its tax on foods containing more than 2.3% saturated fat there has been much media publicity¹

In late October, the **French Parliament** passed legislation for a tax on sugary drinks (at a rate of 2 cents for a standard 33cl drink). This is projected to raise 280 million euros (twice as much as initially reported after parliament voted for a higher tax rate than that originally proposed) and will be earmarked to help combat obesity.²

Sustain’s advisor on the junk food tax now operating in **Hungary**, public policy expert Agócs Ádám, reported in October that a large number of Hungarian food companies have reformulated the ingredients of their products to avoid the government levy – supporting the idea that fiscal measures can encourage manufacturers to make their products healthier.

The feasibility of a sugar tax on sugar sweetened drinks is now being considered by the **Irish Government**. Their Department of Health special action group on obesity is looking at the issue in response to rising levels of overweight and obesity in Ireland.³

The President of the Australian Medical Association, Dr Steve Hambleton, has recently called for the **Australian Government** to embrace taxes on unhealthy food and drink in line with emerging policies elsewhere in the world.⁴ This is supported by the Australian Obesity Policy Coalition, which considers that a fat tax is needed to curb rising Australian obesity rates.⁵

UK developments

As we noted previously David Cameron has suggested that a new food tax may be necessary to curb soaring health costs and falling life expectancy. Referring to the Danish Fat Tax, the Prime Minister said at the Conservative Party Conference on 4th October that a similar move should not be ruled out in the UK. He told Radio 5 that “I think it is something we should look at”.⁶

The PM’s statement created a media frenzy, with Google News listing 205 international news articles reporting David Cameron’s comments. Since then, **some influential UK newspapers have come out in support of a ‘fat tax’.** These include the **Daily Mail⁷** and the **London Evening Standard.⁸** But then some of these newspapers seemed to waiver in their enthusiasm for the idea⁹

Later in the month, the Sun newspaper reported that Health **Secretary Andrew Lansley has “pledged to look at a fat tax on fatty foods”.**¹⁰ However, the trade press is already reporting that **Government insiders are downplaying speculation that ministers may bring in a Danish-style fat tax,** quoting an unnamed senior source as saying, “we don't think this is something the government intends to go ahead with.”¹¹

There have also been recent calls, reported by the BBC, for the Welsh Government to introduce a tax on fatty foods to help reduce the number of overweight people in Wales.¹²

In another significant development this month the Government launched its long-awaited obesity strategy, which it styled as a ‘call to action’. This was met with widespread criticism. For example, Jamie Oliver, who championed the 2005 transformation in school food standards, described the strategy as a “cop out”, condemning it as “worthless, regurgitated, patronising rubbish”.¹³ As might

have been expected the call to action was silent on the issue of fat taxes but also did not explicitly rule them out.

References and notes

¹ 'Denmark introduces the world's first food fat tax', BBC News, <http://bbc.in/rsib0H>

² 'France backs soft drinks tax', NACSONline, 25 October 2011: <http://bit.ly/vMdEje>

³ 'Would sweet tax leave a bitter taste?', The Irish Times, 18 October 2011: <http://bit.ly/qhZ9I9>

⁴ 'Anyone for a great big, fat tax', The Brisbane Times, 16 October 2011: <http://bit.ly/q6D7RV>

⁵ 'Fat tax may be good for Australians - Obesity Policy Coalition', News.com.au, 2 October 2011: <http://bit.ly/vtH7En>

⁶ 'UK could introduce fat tax, says David Cameron', The Guardian, 4 October 2011: <http://bit.ly/pRYWyp>; also: <http://www.channel5.com/shows/5-news-2/blogs/denmarks-fat-tax-a-good-idea>; http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/10/04/government-to-consider-f_n_993833.html; <http://chapman.dailymail.co.uk/2011/10/fat-tax-was-david-camerons-supersize-surprise.html>; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/8807376/Conservative-Party-Conference-2011-dont-rule-out-a-fat-tax-says-David-Cameron.html>

⁷ 'Why a fat tax is the best way to save the NHS billions' The Daily Mail, 5 October 2011: <http://bit.ly/uxmk72>

⁸ The Editorial of the London Evening Standard on 13 October, p.14, states, "To curb our consumption of processed, sugary food requires a willingness to take on the big food manufacturers and retailers. France, sensibly, is to tax sugary, carbonated drinks, a measure which could be usefully adopted here." <http://bit.ly/pVWv8D>

⁹ <http://lefeverblog.dailymail.co.uk/2011/10/a-fat-tax-wont-prevent-massive-obesity.html>;
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2047233/Obesity-UK-The-Jaffa-Cake-doughnuts-prove-fat-tax-work.html>

¹⁰ Reported in 'Eat 100 less calories per day, Andrew Lansley tells Brits', The Sun, 14 October 2011, <http://bit.ly/qk9Qo2>

¹¹ 'Calorie counting won't work, warns industry', The Grocer, 8 October 2011: <http://bit.ly/tMtEBM>

¹² 'Obesity expert wants fatty foods tax in Wales', BBC News, 28 October 2011: <http://bbc.in/sgCgGJ>

¹³ 'The obesity strategy is a cop out', The Guardian, 13 October 2011: <http://bit.ly/nOo8Mk>