

# 21111 UK government may start offering financial rewards for becoming healthier

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The government is expanding access to weight loss services and may start offering people financial rewards for maintaining a healthy lifestyle as part of the fight against obesity.

The Department of Health and Social Care is giving the NHS and local councils in England £70m to pay for up to 700,000 overweight or obese people to go on weight management courses, such as those provided by Weight Watchers or Slimming World, or work with a personal coach to help them shed unwanted pounds.

Downing Street has recently been exploring the use of financial incentives to encourage people to lead healthier, more active lives and privately sought the views of leading health charities, such as the British Heart Foundation and Cancer Research UK. About two-thirds of adult Britons are overweight or obese.

Boris Johnson, who has become determined to undertake meaningful action against Britain's obesity crisis after his stint in hospital last year with Covid, endorsed the latest government action on bulging waistlines.

"Losing weight is hard, but making small changes can make a big difference. Being overweight increases the risk of becoming ill with Covid. If we all do our bit we can reduce our own health risks but also take pressure off the NHS," the prime minister said.

Katharine Jenner, the campaign director of Action on Sugar and Action on Salt, and an academic at Queen Mary University of London, said: "Whilst there are some effective weight management support services which are mainly accessed through the NHS, many are often limited, underfunded and have extensive waiting lists.

"It's therefore imperative that multi-disciplinary supported weight loss services are adequately funded and signposted and their long-term effectiveness properly researched."

Meanwhile, the UK could be flooded with cheap junk food as part of post-Brexit trade deals, threatening efforts to tackle obesity, a new report has warned.

Orla Delargy, head of public affairs at the food charity Sustain, said that several nations with which the UK is negotiating trade deals – the US, Canada and Australia – "are home to multinational food corporations and so have a strategic interest in increasing their junk food sales.

"The government has already removed tariffs entirely on cane sugar and has made it easier and cheaper to import junk food like biscuits, pizza, waffles and confectionery.

"If the UK's trade policy allows our markets to be swamped with cheap, un-nutritious food it could nudge low-income families towards unhealthy choices."