Dear Sarah

Thank you for taking the time to speak to me on Friday. I am following up our phone conversation in writing to reaffirm with you that Duncan’s position is fully supported by the PHE Board.

As you know and as we discussed, 1 in 3 eleven year olds are obese or overweight. Based on this trend, 1 in 3 adults will be obese by 2030. I know from our Board discussions with the NHS England Board, and with UK experts, that there is no greater challenge for PHE than that caused by poor diet and obesity. And I can assure you that from its inception PHE has made tackling obesity a top priority, and has made good progress.

In particular, the SACN report, for which PHE provided both the technical support and the secretariat, has put the relationship between obesity and high sugar diets beyond doubt. As a result the Governments of all four home nations have agreed to a halving of the recommended sugar intake to only 5% of calorie intake. PHE has publicly stated that sugar sweetened beverages have no place in a child’s daily diet, one of the first times any government body has been so explicit about a particular food group. The current momentum to secure reductions in sugar consumption has its basis in the SACN report, which provides PHE with the scientific evidence on which any move to tackle sugar consumption is based, and will continue to be based, in the near future.

The Board understands that reducing sugar consumption to 5% will be a demanding challenge for PHE. High sugar foods are ubiquitous in modern society, as are the advertising, marketing and promotions to encourage consumers to buy and consume more. Success will require clear government leadership and action across Government, to change the food that is eaten and the way it is sold. There are no silver bullets and PHE’s efforts will need to be sustained over time.

For this reason, the Board believes that the only course of action for PHE is to work with the Government to support it as it produces the most credible evidenced based strategy to tackle childhood obesity. The challenge is not simply for the Department of Health, but Government-wide. The Board respects the challenge facing the Secretary of State for Health in securing cross-Government agreement, and has agreed that it would be appropriate for PHE to publish its evidence alongside his strategy after he has had the time he needs to secure agreement.

Dr Sarah Wollaston MP
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House of Commons
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Sent by post and email

19 October 2015
From its first meeting, the Board has assured the independence of the evidence provided by PHE. If there were any suggestion that the evidence review on sugar reduction would not be published, or that it were to be fettered in any way, the Board would react publicly. But there is no such suggestion of this, and the Board will ensure that this does not happen.

I can assure you that the Board is delighted that your Committee has chosen to prioritise obesity and is grateful for your support in securing real action. PHE has already made a difference in tackling excess sugar and the Board will continue to encourage PHE to continue to use all its talents to further this cause.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

Professor David Heymann CBE, Chair Public Health England

cc: PHE Board