THE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY SELECT COMMITTEE: BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

Thank you for your letter dated 22 July and for inviting me to give evidence before your Committee. As you know, I believe that policy focused on behavioural change has the potential to improve outcomes across a wide range of policy areas, so I am very pleased that you share my interest in this area.

I am also pleased that you think, as I do, that the work of the Behavioural Insights Team should be commended, not just in helping to spread understanding of behavioural science interventions, but in their use of Randomised Controlled Trials.

You suggested that you would like more information to substantiate their findings on taxation and organ donation. So I would like to draw your attention to the two publications on these precise subjects that the Behavioural Insights Team has published on its website and in academic journals:

- ‘Applying Behavioural Insights to Organ Donation’, which includes a regression table setting out all of the results; and
- ‘The Behaviouralist as Tax Collector’, an academic article which sets out the results from the team’s tax trials.

We agree with the Committee’s recommendation to publish additional evaluation data, so I am pleased to inform you that the Behavioural Insights Team has numerous papers that will be submitted to academic journals for peer review over the coming 12 months.

You will also be aware of the many other papers that the Behavioural Insights Team has published since you originally launched your Inquiry, including their ‘EAST’ framework (which also served as the team’s annual report this year). In the knowledge that the Committee and others find their stand-alone annual reports useful, the Behavioural Insights Team will also start publishing annual updates again at the end of each financial year.

Your letter correctly asserted that I believe that non-regulatory levers are not necessarily an alternative to regulation, and that both should be considered as options for eliciting behaviour change. But you also expressed some concerns in relation to particular programmes that I would like to address. In relation to the Public Health Responsibility Deal, you will be pleased to learn that the Department of Health has commissioned an independent evaluation which is being undertaken by a respected research team at the London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Outputs from the evaluation will be produced throughout the project with an anticipated final completion date in late 2015. Two articles have already been published, including one looking at voluntary agreements more generally.

In relation to the Change4Life programme, the Public Health England Marketing Strategy (2014 to 2017) was published on 3 July 2014 and includes evaluation findings for Change4Life. The findings show that the Change4Life campaign has been successful in engaging the public and working with commercial partners to deliver behaviour change. For example, data collected by Kantar shows changes in purchasing patterns during campaign times – an 8.6% reduction of sugary carbonated beverage purchases during the campaign period of January compared to the same period in the previous year (taking in to consideration annual declines in sugar sweetened beverage consumption).
Your letter also mentioned the 2010 NICE guidance which recommended consideration of a minimum unit price for alcohol. You suggested that no action had been taken, but the Government has in fact undertaken a considerable amount of work in this area. The Government consulted, from November 2012, on a proposal to introduce a minimum unit price at a level of 45p per unit of alcohol in England and Wales. The Government’s response to the consultation in July 2013 set out our reasons for not proceeding at the present time, while making clear that the policy remains under consideration while further evidence is gathered. So we have already explained why we did not decide to introduce this policy at that point in time. But I would of course be happy to clarify any further questions you might have in this area.

In relation to the Local Sustainable Transport Fund, the Committee will be pleased to learn that in July 2014, the Department commissioned two new research studies which are expected to capture the medium and long-term impacts of investment in sustainable transport. The first research project will allow the Department to recognise early successes, identify where issues may be arising, and provide expert feedback to improve the projects’ monitoring and evaluation processes. The second project will explore data related to the retention of smarter choices programmes within the three Sustainable Travel Towns (Darlington, Peterborough and Worcester) that received £10 million funding from 2004 to 2009. Some sustainable travel initiatives and funding have continued since 2009. This project will allow the Department to better understand the longer term impacts of investment in sustainable transport. The evidence from these projects will inform future strategies and policies related to sustainable transport investment.

You raised your recommendation to appoint a Chief Social Scientist. As I said at the time, we have people who champion effective use of social research and social science at the very highest levels in Government. This includes Dr. David Halpern, as I mentioned at the time. But it also includes several other social scientists who sit on the Heads of Analysis group chaired by Sir Nicholas Macpherson, including Dave Ramsden (Chief Economist) and Jenny Dibden (Head of Government Social Research). As heads of their professions, they provide oversight to ensure the provision of robust social science advice within government. In addition, two incumbent Chief Scientific Advisors are also social scientists, namely Dr. Tim Leunig at DfE and Professor Bernard Silverman FAcSS at the Home Office.

It is a fundamental principle of good public services that decisions are made on the basis of strong evidence and what we know works, at both the national and local level. As you note, the What Works centres are synthesising the evidence base in particular areas and putting it into the hands of local level decision makers, but this information is also crucial to policy makers in central government and Ministers.

As the What Works Centres are independent (and rightly so), we can not specify what exact proportions of work they carry out, but they are already making an impact in both central government and at the local level. However, it is worth noting that the What Works Centres are actively building links with policy makers in relevant departments according to policy area, and with HM Treasury.

For example, the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth is working directly with BIS analysts supporting the cross-departmental Local Growth team, looking at how they can advise on evaluation methods and building local analytical capacity, as part of the projects in the Local Growth Deals. The more established centres are also leading the way in directly evaluating interventions – the Sutton Trust/Education Endowment Foundation have funded 87 projects to date, all of which have been, or will be evaluated. They are working directly with Cabinet Office to test the impact of social action on young people’s engagement and attainment at school through two trials, including rigorous evaluations.

Many of the centres are in their infancy, but are already making real impact in government, and over time will help us to take a much more systematic approach to tracking what works from the view of government policy. My office would, of course, be happy to arrange meetings with each of the What Works Centres heads, should you find that useful.

So in summary, I share your interest, your encouragement, and some of your concerns in the areas we discussed.

OLIVER LETWIN