

Budget 2016: The Sociology of Sugar

by **Alex Pickerden**, University of Lincoln

As I write this blog post I am in the middle of finishing a bottle of fizzy drink. I know for many people that the consumption of fizzy drinks (Dr Pepper, Coca-Cola and Sprite etc.) have become part of a daily routine. The same however, can be said for eating chocolate bars, enjoying a tub of ice-cream and settling down for tea and biscuits in the afternoon. Currently the politics is rather different because these products have not had a new tax introduced on them. So why is the 'sugar tax' only on fizzy drinks? Why does it not cover other sugar laden products? What is the purpose of this tax? Most importantly, will the tax work?



Taking the first two questions together, many have argued that people tend to see chocolate, cakes and ice-cream as *treats* (Triggle, 2016). Therefore, they are more aware of the sugary content products such as those contain. In contrast, people tend to drink fizzy drinks on a daily basis and they become common-place in the diets of many individuals as well as a central component to an average families shopping trolley intake. Individual lifestyle and family background are important points to consider when reflecting who is going to be most affected by this tax. In addition, fizzy drinks offer no nutritional value and are viewed as *empty calories* (Triggle, 2016). What is more alarming for a active sports enthusiast like myself is the constant witnessing of fizzy drinks being used before and after physical activity to act as a form of hydration. Knowledge is a key concept often overlooked and dismissed in this debate. While it is clear that fizzy drinks have *addictive qualities* and steps should be taken to discourage any excessive consumption, I wonder if a sugar tax is the best method for achieving this goal.

The purpose of this tax is to reduce childhood obesity and raise money to invest in primary school physical education provision. These are noble ambitions and present a direction of travel I very much support. Jamie Oliver has long campaigned on this issue and he tweeted that this was “a big moment in child health”. The Sports Minister Tracey Crouch also tweeted that the extra money raised from the tax will “help more children become physically active and combat obesity”. However, I do have some reservations.

Firstly, there is some debate about how much this tax will raise in revenue. Official statistics indicate the tax will raise some £520 million, although this figure is disputed. While the education budget, relative to other departments, has been largely protected by both the Coalition government and the current Conservative administration, the resources available to schools and teachers are already stretched. The phasing out of school sports partnerships and the absence of a comprehensive plan for physical education and school sport, in both the primary and secondary stages, is a major concern (Phillpots, 2013). Moreover, the provision of physical education in

primary schools and the capacity of teachers to develop and engage with the physical education curriculum is challenging given the distinct lack of clarity around the subjects aims and its place in education and society (Bailey et al., 2009).

George Osborne delivered his eighth budget as Chancellor of the Exchequer and proclaimed, “This was a budget for the next generation” (Osborne, 2016). The introduction of policies such as a lifetime ISA to encourage young people to save, a reduction in corporation tax and an increase in small business rate relief to increase investment and productivity in the economy have broadly been welcomed by commentators. Nevertheless, it also remains the case that the growth figures were forecast down on the previous year’s projections and there remains a £55 billion pound black hole in the public finances (Wright & Cooper, 2016).

One cannot help but be sceptical. After all, Osborne is a political Chancellor who has one eye fixed on the looming European Union Referendum and the other quietly overseeing his own leadership ambitions. My fear is that the sugar tax is merely a political gimmick designed to distort the current economic and political reality. If the government was really focused on childhood obesity they would come forward with plans to introduce a national sports plan that fostered a framework for high quality physical education and school sport which placed long-term physical activity and healthy lifestyles at the heart of a rejuvenated citizenship curriculum. Instead, we have an increase in the amount of money people will have to pay in order to consume fizzy drinks.

The policy seems as if it is something being rushed into, despite the fact it has been on the political agenda for a considerable period of time. I do not doubt the potential benefits of this move, both for reducing pressures on the National Health Service and promoting healthier lifestyles. But in order to tackle childhood obesity effectively policies should not be made in isolation. A rise in tax on fizzy drinks should be accompanied by a commitment to improve nutritional education. More information on leading healthy lifestyles and learning the importance of engaging in consistent physical activity should be made available. The introduction of a framework for effective physical education and school sport provision should also be central to this endeavour alongside a national plan for sport. Will the sugar tax work? I do not know. It seems like a good idea, but it sounds and feels like a political ploy. If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck it isn’t a mongoose!

References

Bailey, R., Armour, K., Kirk, D. and Jess, M. (2009) The educational benefits claimed for physical education and school sport: an academic review, *Research Papers in Education*, 24(1), pp.1-27.

Osborne, G. (2016) Budget 2016: George Osborne’s speech. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/budget-2016-george-osbornes-speech> [Accessed March 17th 2016].

Phillpots, L. (2013) An analysis of the policy process for physical education and school sport: the rise and demise of school sport partnerships, *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 5(2), pp.193-211.

Triggle, N. (2016) Sugar tax: How it will work? [online] Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-35824071> [Accessed March 17th 2016].

Wright, O. and Cooper, C. (2016) Budget 2016: George Osborne’s sugar tax hides £55bn black hole in public finances [online] Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/budget-2016-george-osborne-sugar-tax-black-hole-economic-gloom-forecast-public-finances-a6935161.html>. [Accessed March 17th 2016].

March 18th, 2016 | [Current Events](#) | [0 Comments](#)

☺