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Dear NHS colleagues

Thank you for your letter of 28 May to the First Minister and the Chief Medical Officer for Scotland setting out proposals to improve the current food environment to support healthier choices and environmental sustainability. I am replying as diet and obesity fall within my portfolio. I apologise for the delay in doing so.

The current pandemic has reinforced the importance of tackling poor diet and obesity. We are already taking bold, comprehensive action on obesity and the food environment through our [Diet and Healthy Weight Delivery Plan](#), published in 2018, which sets out ambitious, wide-ranging action to support people to eat well and have a healthy weight. While it is well established that living with overweight and obesity increases the risk of health harm, we are also aware of emerging evidence - including the recent Public Health England [report](#) on disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19 - that people living with obesity may be at risk of poorer health outcomes from COVID-19. Whilst we will continue to be guided by the evidence in assessing the risks from the virus, I agree that none of us can simply return to 'business as usual' as we emerge from this pandemic.

We are committed to introducing a Bill to restrict the promotion and marketing of foods high in fat, sugar or salt (HFSS) as soon as it is possible, having taken into account the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown. In taking stock, we will be able to consider fully whether a more wide-ranging Bill is required to tackle Scotland's diet and weight problem after the pandemic.

I also recognise that advertising is a significant driver of behavioural change. I have consistently pressed the UK Government to ban advertising of HFSS foods on TV and online before the 9pm



watershed. I therefore welcome the UK Government's recently announced commitment to pursue these actions and to consult on a full ban of online HFSS advertising.

I have also continued to urge the UK Government to further use the tax system to make healthy food cheaper and to reduce the purchase of HFSS foods, and to devolve the necessary competences to the Scottish Parliament in this area to ensure a fuller range of levers are open for consideration. I support the Soft Drinks Industry Levy, which came into effect across the UK in April 2018, and have expressed by continued disappointment that there is, as yet, still no firm commitment by the UK Government to bring milk-based drinks high in sugar within the scope of the Levy, especially as many of these drinks are targeted at children.

We are helping Scottish small and medium-sized enterprises to innovate and reformulate to produce healthier products; providing £200,000 over 3 years to March 2021 to support reformulation, including access to practical advice, academic and technical expertise.

The Eatwell Guide, revised in 2016, forms the basis of dietary recommendations in the UK, including Scotland. This includes dietary advice for those who choose to consume less animal derived foods and more plant derived foods by including alternatives to dairy, and animal sources of protein. However, the Eatwell Guide does not recommend a specifically plant-based diet, and we have no plans to recommend a plant-based diet exclusively.

The importance of Omega 3 fats is reflected in the Scottish Dietary Goals, which were revised in 2016, incorporating the latest [scientific evidence](#) on diet and health. It is recommended to consume one portion of oil rich fish every week. Fish intake remains low across the population, and supplementation does provide an alternative way to increase Omega 3 intake, however, as you state, there are concerns about the sustainability of producing fish oil supplements. Omega 3 supplements can be produced from non-fish sources such as some micro-algae, but their impact on health is less well established. We currently have no plans to promote alternate sources of long-chain Omega-3 fats.

The Carbon Trust have produced [research](#) showing that a diet following The Eatwell Guide produces less carbon emissions. For an equivalent provision of energy, the Eatwell Guide has a 32% lower environmental footprint than the current UK diet.

Scotland's public sector is leading the way in promoting healthier food. There are statutory regulations for schools to ensure that our children get the most nutritious start in life. In hospitals, we provide food appropriate to patients' needs, while visitors and staff can eat in a Healthyliving Award (HLA) canteen. We are continuing to build on this work.

The Scottish Government has and will continue to support our agricultural industry as we work to ensure the transition to an environmentally and economically sustainable future. Through the Agri-environment and climate and Beef Efficiency schemes, we have supported farmers and crofters in the uptake of actions aimed at protecting and enhancing bio-diversity as well as air and water quality and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The Scottish Government supported Soil Regenerative

Agriculture Group is focused on how to best protect and enhance farm soils and disseminate these practice and their benefits to the wider agricultural community. To promote and encourage the uptake of wider low carbon environmentally sustainable practices, we support programmes and initiatives such as the Farm Advisory Service, Farming For a Better Climate, Monitor Farm Programme and the Soil Nutrient Network, which provide a wealth of information, advice, and resources including, for example, farm carbon audits that are available to the industry free of charge.

Yours faithfully



Joe FitzPatrick

