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Voters' Verdict on Health: What do Labour voters think about the role of government and businesses in shaping the nation's health?

November 2026

This briefing looks at the views of Labour's voter coalition on the role of government and businesses in shaping and improving the nation's health, particularly focussing on preventing poor health caused by tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy diets. This includes Labour's current voter base and those they have been losing since the 2024 general election.

Ten 75-minute online focus groups were held between 1 and 10 June 2026 with different voter groups. Groups were defined by current voting intention and voting history. This briefing draws on the groups held with Labour's key voter groups: core Labour voters who voted Labour in 2024 and intend to again (Core Labour), Labour-Reform switchers (Reform switchers), Labour-Lib Dem switchers (Lib Dem switchers) and Labour-Green switchers (Green switchers). The focus groups were supplemented with a short online survey on key issues discussed by the groups.

Summary

Interventions to improve people's health command strong support across Labour's electoral coalition. Support is not confined to Labour's traditional base but extends to some of the party's most electorally important target groups, including Labour voters who are now open to voting Reform. Labour's voter coalition think people's health is the product of multiple influences, from individual behaviour, financial circumstances, to public services, commercial environments and government policy. They believe in personal responsibility but that health outcomes are shaped by wider influences.

Labour's coalition is less divided than is often assumed on whether the government should intervene to support people to live healthier lives. There is widespread support for government action. Crucial to strong support for specific policy interventions is confidence they are likely to be effective, fair and compatible with the financial pressures facing ordinary households. Contrary to assumptions that voters are hostile to government intervention or concerned about perceived "nanny statism", our focus groups suggest they are supportive of action to improve the nation's health.

There is consensus across the coalition that large corporations in the food, alcohol and tobacco industries play a great and largely negative role in shaping the nation's health, putting profit ahead of health considerations. Labour voters do not want to see these corporations influencing government decision making on health policy.

When asked if they are concerned about the impact of industries on children's health, 69% are concerned about the tobacco industry (national average of 63%), 63% the alcohol industry (national average of 58%) and 74% the food industry (national average 65%).

64% of Labour voters want to see similar rules that limit the tobacco industry's contact with government, applied to alcohol and unhealthy food and drink companies (national average of 57%).

Views of Labour voters

1. **Labour voters view the importance of improving people's health and preventing ill health primarily through the lens of the NHS and the cost of living**

Action to prevent ill health is viewed primarily as a way of reducing pressure on the NHS by Labour voters. Labour voters from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (BC1) were particularly likely to discuss wider social and environmental influences on health whereas those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (C2D) rooted their views in the practical realities of maintaining healthy lifestyles in the current economic context.

> ***"I think ultimately if the health situation of the population improved, it will have a more beneficial effect across society in many ways, certainly economically. Healthier people should mean people getting less sick…being ill is a burden to us as a society. It's a cost from an NHS perspective, for example. So there's so many aspects where a healthy society will have many other positive ramifications across the economy as a whole"*** **– Male, 50s, Swindon North, Core Labour**

> ***"I think the government could help more potentially, because obviously things like drink, smoking, leads to addiction which obviously people then need help with that with public health and the NHS."*** **– Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Lib Dem switcher**

They are also concerned about healthy living becoming increasingly difficult due to the cost of living, healthy food being more expensive than unhealthy food, financial stress having a direct impact on health and wellbeing, and economic disadvantage contributing to poorer health outcomes.

Core Labour voters spoke about their concerns around wider social inequalities and the structural barriers to good public health, e.g. wealthier people having better access to education and resources to live healthier lives, and that if you are more deprived economically, you are more likely to have worse health outcomes. Among Reform switchers, concerns were expressed in more immediate terms to do with day-to-day living: household budgets, rising costs and the practical difficulty of making healthier choices when money is tight.

> ***"I think people are struggling and I think things like the costs of food prices are affecting people's diets"*** **– Female, 20s, Ashfield, Reform switcher**

> ***"I think it's difficult if you're on a very tight budget to eat healthily. We are at the mercy of the supermarkets. Wouldn't it be great if fruit and veg was subsidised? So it was the cheapest option, because the cheapest option is not necessarily the healthiest option right now."*** **– Male, 40s, Bolton West, Core Labour**

> ***"To go out and buy a healthy fresh cooked meal, you can buy a Rustler Burger for a pound. So people are choosing those options based on the cost."*** **– Female, 30s, Swindon North, Core Labour**

This shapes opinions on public health interventions, with general support for action being balanced against wider economic consequences that might increase the cost of living. Green switchers in particular argued that a healthy population and a healthy economy were interconnected, but some voters worried about policies that might undermine economic activity or place additional financial burdens on consumers and businesses.

> ***"It's getting the balance, isn't it? Because if you absolutely trash the economy, then unfortunately everything else does tend to go with it. People don't have so much money, so they're not so happy. They may not make such good choices with regards to food because they can't afford it."*** **– Female, 40s, Bristol Central, Green switcher**

> ***"I think if you're more deprived economically…you are more likely to have worse health outcomes."*** **– Female, 30s, Swindon North, Core Labour**

2. **Labour's coalition is pro government intervention to support people to live healthier lives, with confidence in the effectiveness, proportionality and enforcement of the measure a key driver of support**

Labour's target voters think the government has a strong role to play in supporting people to live healthier lives. Across the coalition there is support for government action. While Reform switchers were more instinctively focused on personal responsibility for one's own health, they still saw health outcomes as being shaped by the wider environment and therefore a shared responsibility.

> ***"I agree it's absolutely a shared responsibility. It's [businesses] responsibility. It's ours as well for what we choose to do and then also government's in terms of the laws and regulations and things like that. So I don't think it's just one person's responsibility. I think it's definitely shared."*** **– Female, 30s, Ashfield, Reform switcher**

> ***"Everyone wants to have their own personal choice, but I also think there are people who need to be in groups of people that need to be protected. So, I'm all in favour of the government, or for us to be part of a state that acts more like a nanny state."*** **– Male, 50s, Swindon North, Core Labour**

> ***"I think the government has a role in every part of this sort of stuff, like legislating against smoking indoors or drinking below a certain age."*** **– Male, 20s, Cheltenham, Lib Dem switcher**

> ***"I'm naturally quite libertarian with these things… but then I also think if there's a cost benefit and it's good for the overall benefit of the country… that is a good thing."*** **– Male, 30s, Bolton West, Core Labour**

Voters therefore saw some tension between regulatory intervention to improve public health and protecting personal freedom. However, concern about "nanny statism" was generally a much smaller factor in support for policies than confidence in the effectiveness and fairness of the interventions themselves.

> ***"I think a real win for the nanny state was the smoking ban…before it came in, no one really would've dreamt that people would've been prevented from smoking in pubs and there was obviously a backlash and what have you, but the long-term benefits to public health have been fantastic."*** **– Male, 40s, Bolton West, Core Labour**

Support for intervention increased when discussing specific policies versus in the abstract, and where there is clear evidence of public benefit and confidence in the effectiveness of the measure. For example, some Lib Dem switchers had an ideological opposition to intervention as might be expected but also expressed support for policies once their rationale and potential benefits were explained.

> ***"They should support people, but it's different things. It's prevention, it's regulation and its education, probably in equal measure"*** **– Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Lib Dem switcher**

> ***"I've got teenage children and I've just lost one parent…to COPD from smoking all her life and I'm just about to lose another one for the same reason because they all smoked…I think this is brilliant. I think this is absolutely brilliant and I work with children and I can see that less children smoke and I think this is brilliant."*** **– Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Lib Dem switcher**

> ***"I would just want to see how much effect...is it making to the cost of a bottle of decent whisky or gin, which let's be honest, those aren't the things that are causing the problem. So, I think I'd just want some more detail, but if it doesn't really affect those or it's minimal and it really does affect these nasty, cheap beers and ciders and gets rid of those, then all for it."*** **– Female, 40s, Bristol Central, Green switcher**

3. Labour voters distrust large corporations to put people's health before profit

Across every group of Labour voters, participants thought large food, alcohol and tobacco companies played a significant and largely negative role in shaping people's health. Labour voters across the political spectrum, from Green switchers, to core Labour, to Reform switchers, and across different social grades, told us that they did not trust businesses in these industries to prioritise and consider people's health.

> ***"The snack industry - the biscuits, the crisps, the sweets - is so huge. And of course they've got a huge amount of money behind them… it's just so readily available and relatively cheap."*** **– Male, 60s, Bristol Central, Lib Dem switcher**

> ***"Bigger national or multinational chain restaurants, they're using social media very cleverly… They're [children] on TikTok…they're being influenced by something they've seen."*** **– Male, 50s, Swindon North, Core Labour**

Labour voters think companies often prioritise profit over public wellbeing, and that big businesses use sophisticated marketing to encourage unhealthy behaviour. Some thought companies can be misleading about the nutrition of their products, for example by emphasising protein content to imply healthiness of a product. Labour voters are worried about how advertising is influencing health outcomes, particularly among children, and that companies are unlikely to engage in policy discussions in good faith where profits are at stake.

> ***"As a business, all they want to do is make a load of money… they're going to jump through every single loophole… It's all about the money, isn't it?"*** **– Male, 50s, Ashfield, Reform switcher**

> ***"They're just interested in how much profit they can make irrespective of the impact that's going to have long-term on the national health."*** **– Female, 50s, Ashfield, Reform switcher**

> ***"A lot of companies are making money by putting protein on things… They put another pound on it and then you buy it because you think it's healthy and it's not."*** **– Female, 30s, Ashfield, Reform switcher**

Labour voters notably distinguished between large multinational corporations and smaller local businesses - they saw large fast-food giants more negatively because they have significant social media, advertising, and marketing budgets, which are targeted at children. In contrast, small takeaways were seen as trying to make a living.

> ***"Because they're sort of rubbing it in your face, people like McDonald's, whereas the smaller ones don't."*** **– Female, 30s, Swindon North, Core Labour**

4. Across the coalition, voters did not want to see businesses in the food, tobacco, and alcohol industries influencing government policymaking on health

Given their views towards the motivations and role businesses in these industries play in shaping the health environment, Labour voters thought there was no place for them in government policymaking on health. Voters' views on this were generally governed by the principle that those with a financial interest that could be affected by health policy should not be at the table. This was not to say they thought economic considerations should be ignored, but rather that companies should not directly influence decision-making.

> ***"We've just got to be a lot more interventionist. You can't go to the likes of a McDonald's and gently speak to them about taking the nation's health to heart. The only way you're going to really hit them is by imposing legislative penalties."*** **– Male, 50s, Swindon North, Core Labour**

> ***"They're just interested in how much profit they can make irrespective of the impact that's going to have long-term on the national health."*** **– Female, 50s, Ashfield, Reform switcher**

> ***"[I don't want] anybody with investments involved or money involved [in government decisions]. I just want independent people."*** **– Female, 30s, Swindon North, Core Labour**

Instead, voters think that public health decisions should be informed by evidence and expertise, and that NHS professionals, experts, scientists and frontline workers are the most trusted voices when it comes to public health.

> ***"They should be listening to the scientific experts a lot more. We've got the top researchers when it comes to cancer care, heart specialists, lung specialists, the people that see firsthand the day-to-day effects of long-term smoking…those are the people they need to sit up and pay a lot more attention to."*** **– Male, 50s, Swindon North, Core Labour**

5. **Across groups of Labour voters, there was high support for government intervention aimed at children**

Labour's coalition is very supportive of interventions aimed at children, who are seen as a vulnerable group. While interventions aimed at adults are broadly supported, these are often balanced against considerations around personal freedom, proportionality, and effectiveness, whereas policies to prevent bad habits forming among children and to protect their future health command strong support.

> ***"Anything that'll help kids, reduce obesity, unhealthy food, I'm up for."*** **– Female, 40s, Bolton West, Core Labour**

> ***"There's a lot of benefits to living in an open and free democratic society, but I would argue that there are people in our society that don't really know what's best for them…particularly young people, children who perhaps don't have the knowledge or are old enough or mature enough to make the right decisions. So I think there are people that need to be and groups of people that need to be protected."*** **– Male, 50s, Swindon North, Core Labour**

How Labour voters responded to public health policy ideas

We showed participants three public health policies to understand their considerations when developing opinions on public health policy:

Smokefree Generation

There is strong support across the Labour coalition for policies to reduce smoking. Green switchers are especially positive, viewing the policy as a gradual and proportionate approach that avoids removing rights from existing smokers. Support could be increased by demonstrating how the effectiveness of the policy will be enforced in practice, as some voters suggested young people would simply find alternative ways to obtain tobacco. Policymakers should ensure enforceability measures are emphasised in public communications on this policy to reassure the public that it will work.

"I've got teenage kids. So under this, one of my children will never be allowed to buy tobacco. As a parent, it's a great feeling to know that that is just never going to be an issue for them." **– Female, 40s, Cheltenham, Lib Dem switcher**

"I think it's a good idea in theory and I think it does show that the government is trying to do something and I'm not sure what else they could have done really, but whether it'll stop is a different thing." **– Female, 40s, Ashfield, Reform switcher**

Restrictions on unhealthy food advertising

Labour voters strongly support further restrictions on junk food advertising, particularly when framed around protecting children. Labour voters across the political spectrum argued that social media and influencers now play a far greater role than traditional television advertising and that action must address these platforms.

"I think we talk about education to the younger generation is like what we've sort of been saying constantly throughout here. So I think it starts with that, doesn't it, in terms of the children and then their education needs to continue as they get older." **– Female, 30s, Ashfield, Reform switcher**

"I would say children don't actually watch the telly anymore…So they watch YouTube to death, but at sitting down and actually watching tele, I think will have very little bearing on them." **– Female, 40s, Bristol Central, Green switcher**

Minimum unit pricing for alcohol

Minimum unit pricing for alcohol attracted greater support once participants understood the rationale for increasing the price of high-strength alcohol and the type of alcohol it would affect. There was concern that price increases would disproportionately affect moderate drinkers and households already facing financial pressures. Social grade differences were particularly visible when responding to this policy; BC1 participants debated the balance between effectiveness and fairness, while C2D participants focused more directly on the immediate impact on household budgets and living costs. Framing that demonstrates a limited impact for most people will be important to secure greater support among Labour voters by addressing their concerns about this policy potentially targeting moderate drinkers.

"I think it's a positive step. I think particularly, like I say, the sales of shop bought alcohol and the ease and access of it is frightening and we all like to have a drink, but the impact it's having on the health of the nation, I think it needs to be addressed. So I think it's a good way to go" **– Female, 50s, Ashfield, Reform switcher**

"I do think it's a good idea as in it'll stop people buying the strongest, like the cheapest, strongest they can get" **– Female, 40s, Ashfield, Reform switcher**

"As long as it was looked at very carefully as to how much effect it's having on pricing of other things like your bottle of scotch, because those aren't the things that are causing the problems, is it? Your person having a couple of scotches on ice.[It's those] nasty cheap white ciders that your homeless people are glugging and youngsters." **– Female, 40s, Bristol Central, Green switcher**

"I think someone was saying earlier about the people who earn the most are going to be able to absorb this. People at the lower end of the scale [won't be able to] afford to have a glass of wine on an evening after a hard day's work" **– Female, 30s, Swindon, Core Labour**

There are clear messaging implications for Labour voters

Labour voters connect public health to everyday life, so using relatable language in the framing of interventions will be important to gain their trust and support. In our focus groups, Labour voters mostly moved away from more general or abstract policy language and talked about public health in terms of looking after family, going to work, affording healthy groceries, and living independent lives.

Labour voters link public health to pressure on the NHS. Using language around improving public health as a way of protecting NHS resources and ensuring services are available when people need them is likely to be more effective than framing around personal responsibility to live healthier lives.

Labour voters care about affordability and fairness when it comes to public health. Messages about making healthy choices easier, cheaper and more accessible resonated strongly across groups of Labour voters. Approaches or interventions that might increase costs or be punitive for individuals are less likely to be effective with Labour voters.

Labour voters respond well to arguments around protecting children's public health. Messaging that spells out the benefits for children is likely to be effective across Labour voter groups.

Labour voters respond well to arguments about holding powerful companies with commercial interests to account on public health. All groups of Labour voters were sceptical of large corporations' involvement with public health policy.

This work was commissioned by Action on Smoking and Health, the Alcohol Health Alliance and the Obesity Health Alliance. It was supported by Cancer Research UK, Changing Minds and UK Research and Innovation funding for "Local Health and Global Profits" (Grant no MR/Y030753/1) which is part of Population Health Improvement UK (PHI UK).