Labour’s new approach to public health, launched today, forms part of a wider plan to improve health and ensure the NHS remains affordable and sustainable in the century of the ageing society.

Labour’s Shadow Health Secretary, Andy Burnham, will pledge to take tougher action to protect children from commercial pressures and the harm caused by alcohol, sugar and smoke.

In a speech at Demos, he will commit the next Labour Government to taking a new approach to public health. He will say that society can, and should, be doing more to give every child a healthier start in life. But rather than a ‘finger-wagging’ approach, Labour will instead empower adults with information to make healthier choices and support to get active.

Labour’s approach to public health is illustrated in a new food policy. Maximum limits will be set on levels of fat, salt and sugar in food marketed substantially to children. And to support the population as a whole, Labour will pursue improvements to food labelling to help people better understand what they are eating, including working at EU level to introduce traffic-light labelling of packaged food.

Action on public health is essential not only to improve health and wellbeing but to ensure the NHS remains sustainable for the long term. For example, figures show that unless firm action is taken to halt the rise in obesity and diabetes, the cost of diabetes to the NHS will rise from £10 billion to £17 billion a year by 2035.

As well as supporting more personal responsibility, Labour’s new public health approach places a new emphasis on community resilience and helping people look after each other, starting with cardiac arrest.
By the time they leave school, all young people will have had access to emergency first aid training including Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) and the use of defibrillators. Alongside that, Labour will propose a new plan to locate Automated External Defibrillators in major public places - shopping centres, airports, rail stations and sports stadia – and a new national open register of AEDs (available via digital apps) to give people instant information on where to find the nearest AED in an emergency situation.

Parents are responsible for securing the health of their children and will be better supported to do so. Labour believes Government action is justified to protect children as they do not make all their own choices and to support parents trying to make the best decisions for their children.

Labour’s new policy is intended to give new momentum to the public health debate which has stalled under David Cameron’s Government. Promised measures, such as on cigarette packaging, have failed to materialise and it has been left to Labour to lead the debate in Opposition by winning the fight for a ban on smoking in cars with children. Labour is proposing to kick-start public health policy back into life with a series of new measures:

- Placing the promotion of physical activity at the centre of public health policy with new, easily-understandable recommended levels of physical activity and a new national ambition. This will include a basic minimum that everyone who can should try to do, and a recommended level that we should aspire to get at least 50 per cent of people achieving by 2025;

- Targeted action on high-strength, low-cost alcohol which fuels binge drinking and does most harm to health, with a range of options on both price and bottle-size being explored;

- Standardised cigarette packaging to be introduced immediately to halt the industry’s increasingly sophisticated methods of recruiting new, young smokers; and a goal that children born in 2015 will become the first ‘smoke-free generation’.

In a speech on Thursday to launch the strategy, Andy Burnham MP, Labour’s Shadow Health Secretary, will say:

“Labour has traditionally led the way on public health and this new approach will chart a new course towards a healthy nation in the 21st Century. “In a century of rising demand, helping people take more responsibility for their own health will be essential if we are to ensure the NHS remains affordable and sustainable for the future.

“As part of this, children will need better protection from the pressures of modern living and the harm caused by alcohol, sugar and smoke and Labour will not flinch from taking the action needed to provide it. “David Cameron and his Government are too close to powerful vested interests to stand up for our children. “This new positive approach will help give all children a healthy start and help adults to get the most out of life.”

Luciana Berger MP, Labour’s Shadow Minister for Public Health, will say:

“Labour wants the next generation to be healthier than the last.

“We want every adult to be able to make informed, healthy choices that are right for them. Whether it is deciding to cycle to work, taking up a sport or quitting cigarettes, today we are setting a range of actions we will take to support people to achieve this.
“Alongside this, we are setting our clear intention to take robust action to protect children from harm where voluntary measures have failed including regulating to limit the amount of sugar, fat salt in food marketed substantially to children, introducing standardised packaging of tobacco that this Government has failed to achieve, and cracking down on the high-strength, low-cost alcohol products that fuel binge drinking and do most harm to health.”

Press Release: RCPH (15.01.15)

In response to Labour’s public health strategy launched today [15 January, 2015], Dr Colin Michie, Chair of the Nutrition Committee at the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, said:

“It’s promising to see child health being prioritised when it comes to public health. A political party that invests in early intervention and prevention will not only be safeguarding the health of future generations but also protecting the future of the NHS.

“With childhood obesity a ticking time bomb, it’s clear that nudging people to change behaviour alone isn’t working. We have to look at bold measures such as taxing foods high in fat, sugar and salt marketed at children, including sugary drinks, and banning junk food advertising prior to the 9pm watershed. It is also absolutely right that better food labelling is made mandatory. There has already been significant progress, with many supermarkets voluntarily introducing traffic light labelling – but let’s see it implemented across the board.

“As a children’s doctor, I’m also acutely aware of the damaging effects of alcohol on children and young people, and the pressure underage drinking puts on the health service through hospital admissions. Evidence suggests minimum unit pricing would lower consumption and starting with the cheapest alcohol that is fuelling the problem makes sense.

“Not only does protecting children make moral sense, it makes economic sense too. We urge whoever is in power following May’s general election to hold child health as a high priority and to lead with practical changes that give children and teenagers better opportunities for a healthy start to life.”