

Children will be given shopping vouchers for walking to school

By Laura Donnelly, Health Correspondent 10:30AM GMT 28 Nov 2010

Children will be given shopping vouchers for walking to school under a radical Government plan to combat obesity.

The pilot schemes which reward children for walking to school have been funded by local councils and transport providers

Under the scheme, which will be part of a public health white paper to be announced on Tuesday, children will receive Topshop vouchers and cinema tickets for travelling to school on foot.

Every school in the country will be offered access to technology which would allow children to use swipe cards to track their journeys, so that points can be swapped for consumer rewards.

Under a pilot scheme under way in Wimbledon, south London, teenage girls receive a £5 Topshop voucher if they walk to school eight times, and an Odeon cinema ticket for five journeys, in a certain period.

The controversial initiative is one of several schemes endorsed in a strategy which will urge councils and businesses to find more "creative" ways to improve the nation's health.

Ministers say their approach is a departure from Labour's "nanny state" tactics which attempted to lecture people into changing their ways.

Instead, attempts to improve Britain's health will be based on a "nudge" theory, devised by two US economists, who say incentives and peer pressure are the best ways to prompt people out of bad habits.

While in opposition David Cameron was so impressed with the 2008 bestseller Nudge, by Chicago Business School economist Richard Thaler and Chicago Law School professor Cass Sunstein – which suggests how to influence human behaviour – that he required all shadow cabinet members to read it during their summer holidays.

Since the Coalition was formed, the Cabinet Office has set up a "behavioural insight team" – dubbed "the Nudge team".

Health secretary Andrew Lansley said Tuesday's white paper would set out a "radical, comprehensive" plan to focus the NHS on tackling the causes of ill health.

Mr Lansley said most people wanted to live healthy lives, but were more likely to do so if they had the right information and incentives.

He said: "An important part of this is harnessing the latest insights into behavioural science ... nudging individuals in the right direction and encouraging positive choices".

The Government has said it wants to work with food and alcohol retailers to improve the nation's habits, rather than introduce laws to regulate their produce and marketing.

However, the white paper will say that if businesses fail to meet deadlines to make voluntary changes it will consider introducing regulations.

The pilot schemes which reward children for walking to school has been funded by local councils and transport providers who wanted to ease congestion on local buses.

Secondary schoolchildren were given a swipe card, which they touched on receivers along official walking routes.

Research on the Wimbledon project found that for every £1 invested, the transport authority saved £24, while police spent 48 per cent less time dealing with accidents around overcrowded bus stops.

Ministers will also urge companies to do more to look after the health of their employees.

Under a pilot scheme, private companies will be asked to make it easier for working mothers to breastfeed, by providing those returning to work with private areas to breastfeed or express milk, as well as flexible breaks and places to store milk.

Facilities will also be introduced in 300 children's centres across the country.