

Eat for free and child food insecurity

Consultation and research report

January 2021



Key details

A consultation on proposed changes to Newham's Eat for Free programme was held between 17th December 2020 and 17th January 2021. In addition to an on-line consultation questionnaire, which received 603 responses (subject to a separate report), the council commissioned independent research and consultation organisation, Public Perspectives, to conduct a series of in-depth stakeholder interviews and focus groups with parents and guardians.



Following the council deciding in response to the initial consultation results not to adopt any of the proposals for change, **these interviews and focus groups were expanded to discuss wider issues related to child food insecurity in Newham***. This is to help inform a review and action plan to improve access to sufficient and healthy food amongst the borough's children and families, linked to key steps in the borough's health and wellbeing strategy - 50 Steps to a Healthier Newham.

The methods involved:

- 4 on-line focus groups, conducted using Zoom and each lasting 90 minutes, involving a total of 29 parents/guardians, reflecting the demographics of the borough and from diverse backgrounds (see overleaf for more details). Participants were recruited via expressions of interest in the consultation questionnaire.
- 8 in-depth telephone interviews with stakeholders, each lasting approximately 30 minutes, involved in Newham's Food Alliance and/or working with children and families experiencing food insecurity, as well as local school teachers.



This report highlights the key findings from the stakeholder interviews and focus groups, including quotes and case studies to help evidence and bring the findings to life. Volume and strength of opinion is mentioned textually rather than numerically, given that the research is qualitative in nature. The report includes a summary of the key points and issues for the council to consider in understanding and reducing child food insecurity in the borough.

The focus groups and interviews were conducted w/s 18th January 2021.



*The Food Foundation defines 'Being food secure' as being sure of your ability to secure enough food of sufficient quality and quantity, to allow you to stay healthy and participate in society.

Participant details



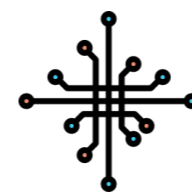
29 parents/guardians across **4** on-line focus groups



8 telephone stakeholder interviews



20 women / **9** men



10 White British-Irish parents

19 Non-White British-Irish parents



8 parents with pre-primary school aged children

26 parents with primary school aged children

10 parents with secondary school aged children



8 parents of children eligible for free school meals



Parents from across the borough, with at least 2-3 per Citizen Assembly area

Some parents had children in both pre-primary, primary and secondary school.

In general, there was consistency in opinion between different participants. Where there are any differences, these are clearly noted in the report.

Summary of key findings (1 of 3)

Eat for free scheme

Parents and stakeholders tended to **oppose the consultation proposals and welcomed the council's decision to not make changes to the Eat for free scheme, especially under the current circumstances of the pandemic** where families are struggling more than ever (although a minority said they would consider contributing to the cost if the savings supported families in need and they asked for the council to revisit the proposals for change once the local area has recovered from the pandemic).

Participants said they **supported and valued the Eat for free scheme because it has positive benefits** around healthy eating, child development and education, forming good eating habits and is an important financial benefit, especially for parents that are 'Just about managing' (JAMS) or the 'working poor'.

Child food insecurity in Newham

Participants supported the focus on understanding and reducing child food insecurity, which several had personally experienced. Participants said the **conditions exist in Newham that mean child food insecurity is a major concern**. These conditions include deprivation, disadvantage, diversity, large numbers of migrants, and associated financial, health, cultural, language and digital exclusion issues, as well as a lack of knowledge and skills around healthy eating. **In turn, food insecurity impacts negatively on families and children's development, education, and physical and emotional health / wellbeing.**

The impact of the pandemic on child food insecurity

Participants said the **pandemic has worsened the situation and increased food insecurity of many families in Newham who were already struggling**, especially families in deprived areas, facing disadvantage. Similarly, it has **brought families previously not struggling or 'just above the line' into a situation where they are on lower incomes and at greater risk of food insecurity**. Some participants said that the pandemic and its impact on their finances and lives **had caused anxiety and worry about feeding their families and affected their self-esteem**.

Summary of key findings (2 of 3)

Reducing child food insecurity

The Eat for free scheme and school holiday/out of school support: Participants returned full circle and re-stressed the importance of the Eat for free scheme in helping ensure that children get a nutritious and hot meal, helping alleviate child food insecurity. They also mentioned the need for support for families that are struggling during the school holidays or when schools are in lockdown, in consideration of 'holiday hunger'.

Food banks and the Newham Food Alliance: Participants highlighted the importance of food banks in helping the community, especially during the pandemic. They called for improvements to turn local food banks into the 'gold standard', increasing awareness and access, providing holistic support, helping reduce the stigma, and ensuring they offer food that is both nutritious, culturally sensitive and meets different dietary requirements.

Addressing underlying issues behind child food insecurity: Most participants said that schemes such as Eat for free, school holiday vouchers/food parcels and food banks only help alleviate the symptoms of child food insecurity and do not address the underlying issues that cause it in the first place. These include wider and fundamental issues around poverty and low incomes, as well as a lack of skills around healthy eating and financial skills and education. Participants said these underlying issues are multi-faceted and deep-seated, complex and challenging to address. Consequently, they said that a long-term commitment and approaches are required to help address these issues, and in turn reduce child food insecurity.

Improving family skills, education and resilience: Participants said there should be investment to help educate families, parents and children about healthy eating and finances, and develop skills such as budgeting, reducing costs and saving, meal planning, shopping wisely, healthy cooking, as well as changing attitudes and behaviour around food, which they considered important root causes behind child food insecurity. Similarly, some stakeholders said that this should also include addressing related issues such as digital exclusion, language barriers, increasing the resilience of families and empowering them so they can help themselves.

Summary of key findings (3 of 3)

Reducing child food insecurity (contd)

Schools (and other children and family services) as a hub for developing skills and reducing food insecurity: There is scope to share, encourage and fund good practice between schools around promoting and supporting healthy eating amongst pupils and families. In essence, there were calls from participants for schools and other children and family settings to become ‘hubs’ for promoting healthy eating, improving the skills and education around food of children and families, sign-posting and helping families access support, and reducing food insecurity.

The role of the community and a strong voluntary and community sector: Stakeholders in particular stressed the importance of the community in helping support each other, building on local community groups such as Mutual Aid groups that have emerged during the pandemic. They also stressed the importance of a strong and well funded voluntary and community sector (VCS), including the need for a boroughwide infrastructure organisation and working in partnership with the council, to help the VCS support local families to reduce food insecurity and tackle the underlying issues.

Build on existing initiatives, engage with families and stakeholders, and a long-term approach: Participants welcomed the opportunity to discuss child food insecurity and asked that the council continues to engage with residents and stakeholders to inform plans, feedback about actions and involve them in the delivery of activity (or in other words be part of the solution). They also said that it is important to continue with, and build upon, initiatives developed during the pandemic (such as the Newham Food Alliance and Newham Social Welfare Alliance), once the pandemic is over, as part of a long-term commitment to reduce child food insecurity and the underlying issues, as well as supporting the recovery from the pandemic.

Eat for free scheme



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Opposition to the proposed changes to Eat for free and support for the decision to not make any changes to the scheme

Participants mainly reflected the views expressed through the on-line consultation questionnaire, opposing proposals to charge parents for school meals under the Eat for free scheme, and consequently being supportive of the council's decision not to make any changes to the scheme.

Some participants said that the Eat for free scheme should not be targeted to make savings, especially in the current circumstances of the pandemic.



I think the Eat for free scheme is a really important benefit for families and children, especially in this borough with its diversity, disadvantages and deprivation. I'm glad to hear that the proposals will not be implemented and the Eat for free will continue as it is.
Stakeholder



I thought it was a bit under-hand that the council was considering making savings by cutting the Eat for free scheme. I couldn't really believe it was being considered. It felt like penny pinching. It should be an area we protect, for the future of our children. Having a good meal means everything. It shouldn't be up for grabs as a way to make savings.

Female, aged 35-44, Non-White British, Primary school aged children

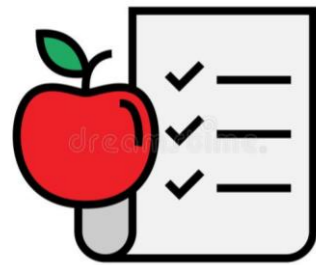


I'm glad to hear that the council listened and saw sense. It's a victory for consultation. I think it is important that children get a good, hot, healthy meal at school. If anything, I'd like the scheme extended to older children at secondary school too, although I know that would be pushing it. But the point is that it's important, especially in the current circumstances when families are struggling more than ever. It just felt wrong to try to cut it now. So I support the decision and it's good they want to look at reducing food insecurity more generally. Male, aged 45-54, Non-White British, Primary and Secondary school aged children

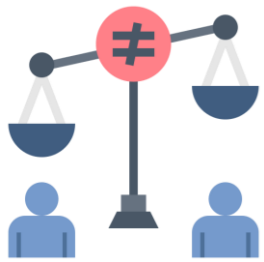
Reasons for valuing the Eat for free scheme include healthy eating and financial benefits



- Ensures that all primary school children get a **healthy, nutritious, hot meal**, which they otherwise might not at home or if school meals were not free, due to issues around food insecurity.
- This is important because it supports **child development and educational outcomes**.



- Helps **form positive eating habits** amongst young children, by being exposed to healthy eating, variety and different foods and tastes they may not experience at home.



- Creates '**food equality**' and **community amongst pupils**, all eating similar food in a similar environment, rather than comparing packed lunches (or lack there of), or separation between those that have a packed lunch and those that have school meals, including pupils eligible for statutory free school meals.



- Considered an **important financial benefit to parents**, especially those that are just above the threshold for statutory free school meals, but struggling and at risk of 'falling through the cracks' – the 'JAMS - Just About Managing' or the 'working poor'.
- This is seen as **particularly important in the current circumstances** when families are under even greater financial pressure than before.
- The proposed changes were seen as **adding 'another increased cost of living'** experienced by spending more time at home during the pandemic feeding the whole family three meals a day, plus increased costs through other council measures such as changes to parking charges, council tax increases and emissions charges.

A few participants said those that can afford to pay, should contribute as long as the savings are invested to support those most in need

In each group, one or two participants (as well as one or two stakeholders) held different views to the mainstream, similar in proportion to those in the on-line consultation questionnaire.

These participants said that whilst they valued the Eat for free scheme, they felt parents that can afford to pay, should contribute. However, they mainly only said this on the proviso that the savings are spent on children and families most in need, or other essential services.

Similarly, these participants tended to say they understood that it may not be the right time now to change the scheme, due to the pandemic, but that the decision should be reviewed once the local area has recovered.



I was one of those in the minority that supported making a contribution. There are lots of people in the borough that can afford to contribute or pay for a school meal. I feel that some of the spending on Eat for free might be wasted on those that don't need it, and not being best spent on those that do. I understand not making changes now, it's not a good time. But I would like the council to revisit this again in a couple of years time, once we're fully past the pandemic. Female, aged 35-44, White British, Primary and Secondary school aged children



The value and importance of the Eat for free scheme to local families

Value of the scheme:

I was really worried that there would be changes to it [the Eat for free scheme]. It helps us financially and I feel like it is one of those few benefits that working families get. Even contributing a couple of pound per meal per child could be the difference for us. And I know this sounds bad, but because we're both working we're time poor. We don't have time to make packed lunches. And sometimes when I come home I don't feel under pressure to cook a really good meal, knowing that my children have had one at school. It's one less stress. I also like how they get to eat different things. They're fussy eaters at home, but it turns out at school they're trying all sorts of different things – the other children and teachers encourage them to and that can only be a good thing for them.

Cheryl and her husband are in their early 40s and have three children, two in primary school and one in secondary school. They both work, but feel like they are *“living just above the line”*. They have lived in different parts of the borough over the past 10 years, and now live in Canning Town. They value the Eat for free scheme because it ensures their children get a nutritious hot meal, exposes their children to different foods and tastes, and it saves them some much needed money (and time). They can also see the importance of the scheme for other people and families around them, who are often struggling, especially in the current circumstances of the pandemic.

Importance to other families:

We all know that Newham is one of the most deprived and diverse areas in London and the UK. Even though I feel like we struggle sometimes, I see people struggling much more than us. We've got some friends that we help go to the local foodbank and pick things up. I know people that have lost their jobs during the pandemic and now need help. Having free school meals is really important to these families, as it is for us.

**Child food insecurity in
Newham**



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All participants supported the focus on understanding and reducing child food insecurity, which they considered an important issue in Newham

Participants said the conditions exist in Newham that mean child food insecurity is a major concern. These conditions include deprivation, disadvantage, diversity, large numbers of migrants, and associated financial, health, cultural, language and digital exclusion issues, as well as a lack of knowledge and skills around healthy eating. In turn, food insecurity impacts negatively on families and children's development, education, and physical and emotional health and wellbeing.

Participants provided examples of their own personal experience of food insecurity, as well as the experience of other families in the borough, in their communities and through their work.

“ Food insecurity is something that affects children and families across Britain and London, but I think it is something that particularly affects families in Newham. That's one of the reasons for the Eat for free scheme. I've seen children coming into school without breakfast, or having a packed lunch comprised of a packet of crisps, or saving their dinner money up to buy chicken and chips after school. These aren't one-offs, they happen regularly. It's a major issue and concern, especially because you can see how it affects their concentration, development and education. So I'm really pleased that the council wants to do more to address this issue. Stakeholder

“ I think food insecurity is rooted in wider issues around poverty, deprivation and diversity. I know people that are really struggling financially. They struggle to pay their rent. They have to prioritise keeping a roof over their head and staying warm. Food is one of those bills they can cut down or out. They will buy food that is practical and stretches. Unfortunately, often the food that is bad for you is cheaper, and that is what they end up buying. A lot of the time it is also to do with not knowing any better or not being able to do things like shop on-line. I know people that have struggled in this way, and it nearly destroys them – no parent wants to feel like they're not feeding their children properly, let alone the negative effects of an unhealthy diet. Female, aged 25-34, Non-White British, Pre-primary and Primary school aged children



The experience and impact of child and family food insecurity

Living on low income and food insecurity:

“ I know what it is like to feel poor and not have much money. We’re not too bad at the moment because I’m working, but money is still tight. There have been lots of times in my life when it’s come to the end of the day, week or month and we’ve not had enough money to pay for essentials like rent or heating. I’ve had to go without dinners so I can feed my kids and I’m used to going to the shop with only a couple of pound in my purse to buy food for the family or asking a friend to borrow some money. I’ve had to shop around for bargains, look at the reduced counter and often have to leave things at the till if I don’t have enough money. I like to think that my children don’t miss out, but I’d be lying. I try to prioritise feeding them, but sometimes you’re forced to buy cheap cuts of meat or frozen pizzas and chips because its cheaper than fresh vegetables. They like it, but I know it’s not that good for them, but it fills their bellies at least.

Karin is in her 20s, lives in Plaistow and has two children of primary school age. She currently works part-time, but has been in and out of employment over the past decade. She spoke openly about living on low income, her experience of food insecurity and its impact on her and her children.

The impact of food insecurity:

“ It makes you feel like a bad parent, like a failure, because you can’t feed your children properly. I know it isn’t great for their health and growing, and it isn’t good for mine either missing meals and stressing about it. I admit that there’s been times when they haven’t had a proper breakfast or a good hot meal for dinner, which can’t be good for them and means they must sometimes go to school and not be able to do as well as other children. Being poor is like a constant cloud over you, you’re always worrying about money – there’s no break from it.

**The impact of the
pandemic on child food
insecurity**



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The pandemic has worsened and exacerbated already existing child food insecurity and the underlying issues

Participants said that the pandemic has worsened the situation and increased food insecurity of many families in Newham who were already struggling, especially families in deprived areas, facing disadvantage. Similarly, it has brought families previously not struggling or 'just above the line' into a situation where they are on lower incomes and at greater risk of food insecurity. This includes reducing incomes due to unemployment, furlough or pay cuts, insecure incomes, increased costs because children are not in school as much, and similarly less access to school meals.

The above is reflected in the significant growth in the number of people accessing food banks and food parcels locally.

Some participants said that the pandemic and its impact on their finances and lives had caused anxiety and worry about feeding their families and affected their self-esteem, including stigma around accessing food banks.

In this sense, food insecurity is part of a bigger picture of problems increased through the pandemic and that will likely last way beyond the pandemic due to the scars it will leave behind, in particular around financial security, social welfare and physical and emotional wellbeing.

“ We’ve seen a massive increase in the use of our food banks during the pandemic. We’ve seen desperate people in desperate situations, with hardly any money. Some of these people are not normally people you would expect to see, but the pandemic has dragged them down into desperate situations where things have got a lot harder for them. They are on much lower incomes and struggling to pay their bills. Many of the people we support are in insecure employment, cash in hand and have either become unemployed or lost income during the pandemic. And then to add to this, their children aren’t in school, they don’t get school meals anymore, they need more food in the cupboards to feed hungry families and we see a lot of what we call ‘holiday hunger’. So they come to us because they don’t have money to feed their family, let alone pay their rent or heating. You can really see that they feel desperate, they’re struggling to manage with all the stress and anxiety, and they feel this stigma having to come to a food bank, which of course they shouldn’t. These problems existed long before the pandemic, but it’s made them worse and the scars of the pandemic means these problems will be a big issue for a long time, even if we do get to return to some sort of normal in a few months. Stakeholder



The impact of the pandemic, affecting finances and pulling families into food insecurity

Impact of the pandemic and food insecurity:

“ Before the pandemic, I guess like everyone, we had plans and we were doing o.k. We weren't rich, but we had a good and stable income, we could do pretty much what we wanted, with little financial worries. But it's been flipped on its head. Our income has dropped and our costs have increased with all the family at home all the time. We just about earn enough now to pay our mortgage and bills, but at the end of the month there is not much left. I worry about how I'm going to feed the family. It's got so bad on a couple of occasions that we had to get help from the food bank. It was a life saver, but I didn't like doing it. I know this sounds snobby, but I never thought food banks were for people like me. We work hard, do o.k, but due to circumstances out of our control we're really struggling, so much so that I don't always know if I can put food on the table. So you end up shopping as cheaply as you can and cutting costs.

Julie is in her 40s and lives with her husband and three pre-primary and primary school aged children in Manor Park. During the pandemic her husband has had to take a pay cut and they are concerned that he will be made redundant in the near future. Julie herself is mainly looking after the family home, although she also freelances on a self-employed basis, which has all but dried up during the pandemic. The loss of income has pulled Julie and her family into a financially difficult and insecure situation, where they have needed to receive help from food banks. She and her husband are very worried and anxious about the future and the impact on her children.

Anxiety about the future:

“ We're really worried about the future. My husband might lose his job and then we'd be in big trouble. We've managed to just about keep paying our mortgage, but that would be the next thing to go. We'd have to get a payment holiday or something and we'd probably end up in arrears. It would be either that or not managing to feed the family. The future feels very uncertain. It makes us anxious and isn't good for our health or relationship, and that then affects our children.

**Reducing child food
insecurity**



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The Eat for free scheme and school holiday/out of school support

Participants returned full circle and re-stressed the importance of the Eat for free scheme in helping ensure that children get a nutritious and hot meal, helping alleviate child food insecurity.

They also discussed the need for support for families that are struggling during the school holidays or when schools are in lockdown, in consideration of 'holiday hunger'. This included a discussion about the pros and cons of vouchers and parcels, with a general consensus that both approaches should have safeguards to ensure the provision of healthy food.

“ I was very relieved to hear that the Eat for free scheme is continuing. For many children the school meal will be their best meal of the day. I think changing the scheme could have been catastrophic, especially in these times. I think it would have represented a moral crisis, a crisis of empathy with families that are struggling. So the Eat for free scheme is an essential tool that the council has in tackling child food insecurity. If anything, I'd like to see it extended to older age groups and ensure there is continued provision in the holidays to tackle holiday hunger. Stakeholder

“ Things like free schools meals, Eat for free and the food parcels and vouchers for children in the holidays or when schools are in lockdown are really important for families like mine. It helps ensure my children get food and a good meal. In my experience, I preferred the vouchers because the food parcels are not really culturally sensitive or sensitive to different dietary requirements. We've had to throw some of it away or give it to others. So if they do food parcels they need to be healthy and they need to be relevant for people in different circumstances. But they also need to make sure that the vouchers are only used to buy healthy food. Female, aged 35-44, Non-White British, Pre-primary, Primary and Secondary school aged children

Food banks and the Newham Food Alliance

Most residents involved in the focus groups were not aware of the Newham Food Alliance, but appreciated the importance of local food banks in helping alleviate child food insecurity, especially in the current circumstances.

Stakeholders involved in local food banks highlighted their importance in helping the community, especially during the pandemic. They called for improvements to turn local food banks into the 'gold standard', increasing awareness and access, providing holistic support, helping reduce the stigma, and ensuring they offer food that is both nutritious, culturally sensitive and meets different dietary requirements. These points were also expressed by residents in the focus groups that have received support or had engagement with local food banks.

“ Food banks have been essential during the pandemic and are well placed to support the local community. The Newham Food Alliance has been an excellent initiative that has coordinated and managed surplus food supplies, and long may it continue. But I do think we can do more for them to be run as a 'gold standard' service. More like a shop, with less barriers to accessing them and where people can choose items that are culturally relevant to them, rather than just being given a random bag of food. It's all part of an approach of food banks helping to empower local people and providing holistic support, including around things like access to savings and debt support. Stakeholder

“ I've not heard of the Newham Food Alliance but it sounds like a good initiative. I personally know and value the role of food banks. They have been really important to some people during the pandemic. But I'm not sure if everyone knows how to access them or feels comfortable going to them, there's a stigma attached to it. I think there is more that could be done to make visiting a food bank more like visiting a normal shop so that it doesn't put people off, and they can choose the food they want, as long as it is healthy of course. Female, aged 25-34, Non-White British, Primary school aged children

Addressing underlying issues behind child food insecurity

Most participants said that schemes such as Eat for free, school holiday vouchers/food parcels and food banks only help alleviate the symptoms of child food insecurity and do not address the underlying issues that cause it in the first place. These include wider and fundamental issues around poverty and low incomes, as well as a lack of skills around healthy eating and financial skills and education.

Participants said these underlying issues are multi-faceted and deep-seated, complex and challenging to address. Consequently, they said that a long-term commitment and approaches are required to help address these issues, and in turn reduce child food insecurity.

“Initiatives like Eat for free and food banks are at best a sticking plaster. They only serve to dampen down the problems, but they don't resolve it. Food insecurity can not be seen in isolation. It has to be seen within the wider context of poverty and the resilience and skills of local people. These issues have been exacerbated during the pandemic, and so we need to use this as an opportunity to start thinking about the future and dealing with these fundamental problems. But it will not be easy because these are complex issues. I want to see the council and its partners make a long-term pledge to reduce poverty, and as part of this deal with food insecurity. This will require long-term planning and sustained investment and activity. Stakeholder

Improving family skills, education and resilience

Participants said that a lack of skills and education around healthy eating, as well as wider issues such as managing money, are an important root cause behind child food insecurity.

They said there should be investment to help educate families, parents and children about healthy eating and finances, and develop skills such as budgeting, reducing costs and saving, meal planning, shopping wisely, healthy cooking, as well as changing attitudes and behaviour around food.

Similarly, some stakeholders said that this should also include addressing related issues such as digital exclusion, language barriers, increasing the resilience of families and empowering them so they can help themselves.

““ Lack of skills and education around money and healthy eating are definitely behind a lot of this. Parents are pushing poor attitudes and behaviours on to their children, it’s a vicious cycle. There should be greater investment and activity to improve money and food skills, targeting those most in need, just as they do with things like Triple P. And I think it goes beyond just simple courses and support, but should be tied into an ethos of helping people to help themselves, by increasing their resilience and skills and overcoming barriers like language and digital exclusion. Stakeholder

““ I don’t think any parent deliberately means to not feed their children properly. A lot of it is because they don’t know better. I had to teach myself to budget and manage my finances. I learnt how to plan meals and shop cheaply, but wisely, to make my pennies go as far as possible to feed my family. I’m not sure there’s that much out there to help with educating parents and children about these things. I saw that M&S promoted meal plans to show how you could feed a family for £5. This shows what can be done and I think simple things like that could be included in food parcels or with vouchers to start giving people the skills they need because otherwise they’ll always be reliant on receiving the packages or handouts. Female, aged 35-44, Non-White British, Primary and Secondary school aged children

Schools (and other children and family services) as a hub for developing skills and reducing food insecurity

Several examples were provided of schools supporting their pupils and families to reduce child food insecurity. This includes offering all pupils a free breakfast (e.g. Magic breakfast), handing food to pupils on arrival, providing pupils with fruit at the end of the school day, achieving 'Healthy School' status, helping families access free school meals or sign-up to school meal pay cards, or providing healthy cooking classes to pupils and parents.

There is scope for this good practice to be shared and encouraged amongst schools, potentially with funding to support implementation. In essence, there were calls from participants for schools and other children and family settings to become 'hubs' for promoting healthy eating, improving the skills and education around food of children and families, sign-posting and helping families access support, and reducing food insecurity.

“ Schools and family centres are at the heart of their communities, and I think they have an important role to play in acting as a hub to promote healthy eating. Helping form good habits at a young age and upskilling and educating pupils is a start, and the children can then pass these skills on to others in the family. And schools can also act as a way of signposting parents to further support, to improve their skills or access financial or food help. Many schools are doing this sort of thing already, but it is often on the initiative of the school. It needs to be a boroughwide initiative, with consistent practice across all schools. Stakeholder

“ Our school is a healthy eating school and does quite a lot to encourage healthy eating, including providing free breakfasts and running healthy eating cooking classes for pupils. I think it's interesting that there's real variation between schools, even in things like what's on the menu. Surely there must be a way to share good practice and help schools adopt best practice. Male, aged 35-44, White British, Primary school aged children

The role of the community and a strong voluntary and community sector

Stakeholders in particular stressed the importance of the community in helping support each other, building on local community groups such as Mutual Aid groups that have emerged during the pandemic.

They also stressed the importance of a strong and well funded voluntary and community sector (VCS), including the need for a boroughwide infrastructure organisation and working in partnership with the council, to help the VCS support local families to reduce food insecurity and tackle the underlying issues.

“ The council can't do all this on its own. It needs to work in partnership with the voluntary and community sector to be sustainable and reach different parts of the community. This requires funding, support and a strong VCS infrastructure organisation that can bring this all together across the borough. Initiatives like the Newham Food Alliance and Newham Social Welfare Alliance are examples of the council and the VCS working well together to support local families. Stakeholder

“ The pandemic has caused a lot of problems and made things like food insecurity worse. These issues existed before and they'll exist after the pandemic. But one thing that's positive is that local people have come together to help each other. I'm part of a local group and we want to work in our community to support people to recover from the pandemic. I think groups like ours will be really important in helping struggling families in our communities and neighbourhoods with things like financial help and advice, jobs and making sure people can feed their families. I think we're well placed to reach and engage with these people, instead of outside organisations. Male, aged 45-54, Non-White British, Primary and Secondary school aged children

Build on existing initiatives, engage with families and stakeholders, and a long-term approach

Participants welcomed the opportunity to discuss child food insecurity and asked that the council continues to engage with residents and stakeholders to inform plans, feedback about actions and involve them in the delivery of activity.

They also said that it is important to continue with, and build upon, initiatives developed during the pandemic, once the pandemic is over, as part of a long-term commitment to reduce child food insecurity and the underlying issues, as well as supporting the recovery from the pandemic.

“ It is good that the council is reviewing issues around child food insecurity and wanting to engage with us. I think we need to be part of the review and also part of the solution. There’s always a risk that nothing comes of these reviews, but action is needed. The pandemic and its recovery will take time and poverty and food insecurity are long-term and intractable issues, so we need a long term solution. I’d be worried that initiatives that are working and important, like the Newham Food Alliance and Social Welfare Alliance, will be seen as just initiatives for the pandemic and once its over they’ll stop. It should be the opposite. They need to be strengthened and new initiatives launched to make inroads once and for all into these issues. Stakeholder

“ I’m really glad the council has not made changes to Eat for free and I’m pleased that they have almost flipped and want to look at how to help struggling families. It’s a good sign and it’s good that they’re involving and listening to residents. They need to keep that up. This can’t be a short-term, political thing, they’ve got to do something now and over several years to really try to deal with all these problems. Female, aged 35-44, Non-White British, Primary and Secondary school aged children