

Listen & act:

Accessing healthy, affordable
food for Oxfordshire's children



**Proceedings of a Roundtable on
Addressing Child Food Poverty in Oxfordshire.**

Authors: Shobhana Nagraj, Fiona Steel, Claire Gray, Amy Paterson, Kelsi Farrington.

Background

One in three children in the UK live with daily food insecurity¹. Lack of access to nutritious food during pregnancy and infancy (first 1,000 days), early years (pre-school) and for school-age children and during adolescence (8,000 days of life: 0-19 years) has life-long health and socioeconomic consequences².

It is essential to ensure access to affordable, nutritious and sustainable food for all children to fulfil their full educational potential and thrive into adulthood.

With the rise in energy prices and cost of living crisis, more families now require emergency food provision, which can be associated with significant stigma³.

Providing universal food services is one way of reducing stigma.

There is now an ideal policy window to address the systemic issues affecting child food poverty locally and nationally and ensure optimal nutrition of all children.

In this report, we present the proceedings of a roundtable on addressing child food poverty in Oxfordshire and outline **3 key recommendations identified as local priorities, aligning with national policy**, to be implemented in Oxfordshire.

The Event

The roundtable on addressing child food poverty in Oxfordshire, entitled 'Listen & act: accessing healthy, affordable food for Oxfordshire's children' took place on 12th May 2023 at Somerville College, University of Oxford, UK. The event brought together key actors and stakeholders from across Oxfordshire.

Organisations Represented*

Achieve Oxfordshire, Citizens Advice Oxford, Cutteslowe Primary School, Donnington Doorstep, Flo's Oxford, Good Food Oxfordshire, Here for Health, Home-Start Oxford, Nuffield Department of Medicine, University of Oxford, and Oxford District Action on Child Poverty group (ODACP), OX4 Food Crew, Oxford Brookes Centre for Nutrition and Health, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford City Council, Oxford Mutual Aid, Oxfordshire County Council, Rose Hill Junior Youth Club, Sanctuary Housing, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils, University of Oxford, and The Chippy Larder.

*Permissions were obtained during the roundtable for all names within this report to be included.

Agenda

09:00 Coffee and Registration
 09:15 Welcome to Somerville College
 09:20 Introductions
 09:30 Setting the scene
 09:45 Food Strategy for Oxfordshire

Session 1: Outlining the situation on the ground in Oxfordshire

10:00 Children's voices
 10:45 Small group work: discussing the problems faced on the ground

11:15 COFFEE BREAK

Session 2: Examples of programmes implemented in Oxfordshire to improve child nutrition and well being

11:35 The wider picture: examples of good practice from Oxfordshire

12:45 LUNCH

Session 3: A multi-stakeholder, community wealth building approach to improve childhood nutrition in Oxfordshire

13:30 A multi-stakeholder approach to the Food Strategy
 13:45 How policy makers, local businesses and educators can make a difference
 14:30 Roundtable discussion
 14:45 Commitment Tree, next steps and close
 15:00 Networking and coffee (optional)

Facilitators



Dr Shobhana (Shobi) Nagraj is a Clinical Researcher at the Centre for Global Health Research, University of Oxford.



Frances Simpson is the Research Support Officer for the HSC research group at the Centre for Global Health Research, University of Oxford.



Fiona Steel is the Manager of Good Food Oxfordshire.



Kelsi Farrington is Project Lead at Good Food Oxfordshire.



Claire Gray is a Health Improvement Practitioner at Oxfordshire County Council.



Amy Paterson is a medical doctor and PhD student at the Pandemic Sciences Institute.

Session 1: Setting the Scene

The first session of the roundtable outlined the situation on the ground in Oxfordshire. This included an introduction from Baroness Janet Royall, Principal of Somerville College, highlighting the urgency of addressing child food poverty in the County, as well as presentations from: Dr Shobhana Nagraj, a Clinical Researcher at the Centre for Global Health Research, highlighting the importance of good nutrition for child development and health throughout the life course; Claire Gray, a Health Improvement Practitioner at Oxfordshire County Council, providing the Council's findings and recommendations from their recent health needs assessment; and Fiona Steel, the Manager of Good Food Oxfordshire, describing the Food Strategy for Oxfordshire.

Child Food Poverty in Oxfordshire – The Tale of Two Cities

Rates of child food poverty across Oxfordshire show a county of extremes. At the heart of child food poverty, is poverty itself. Income inequality drives health inequalities. There is an 11-year difference in male life expectancy between Oxford city centre and the OX4 postcode⁴.

In Oxford City, one third of children live in poverty, with daily food insecurity affecting nine children in every class of 30⁵. Several other areas of Oxfordshire are also affected by poverty and fall below the national average income⁶.

Both the Food Poverty Action Plan⁷ and the Oxfordshire Food Strategy highlight the need to tackle food poverty and diet-related ill-health as a key focus⁸.

The Food Poverty Action Plan for Oxfordshire identified a 3-tier approach to tackling food poverty⁹:

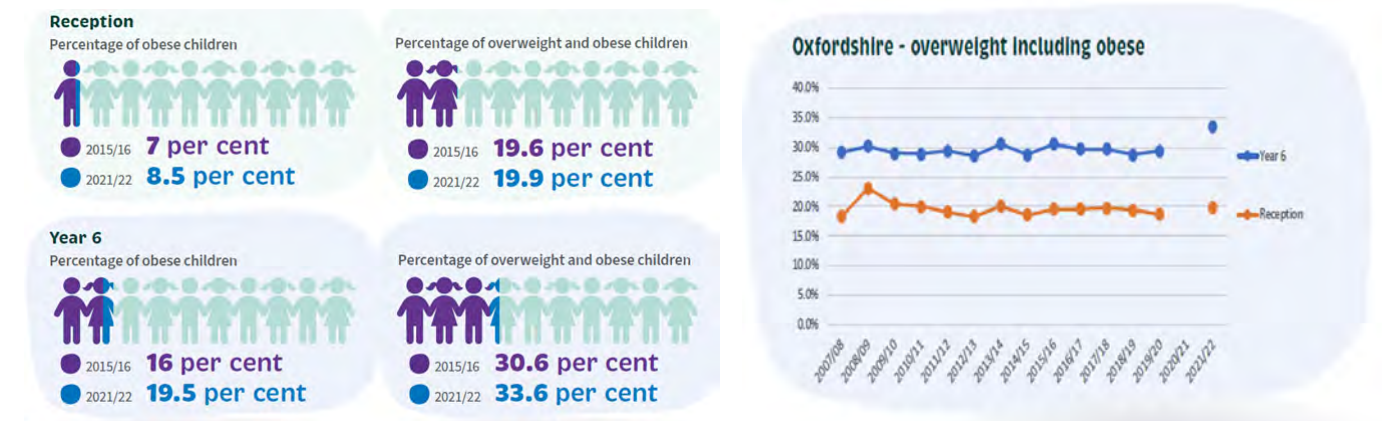
1. **Emergency food provision**, which is accessible to all in need, without shame or stigma.
2. **Building resilience** by supporting families with low-cost, healthy options. For example: through community larders, food-growing spaces, and fostering cooking and food-growing skills. This might be achieved by investing in groups building community cohesion around these elements.
3. **Preventing food poverty** through living wages, cash-first approaches, and longer-term investments such as extending the provision of free-school meals and the Holiday Activities and Food scheme.

Child food poverty results in a 'double burden of childhood malnutrition', leading to both underweight and overweight malnutrition¹⁰, being seen locally. Presentations from Good Food Oxfordshire and Oxfordshire County Council (and their Community Insights and School Food Surveys) at the roundtable outlined important information from the ground to guide further discussions around the priority areas for improving the nutrition and health of children in Oxfordshire.

The scale of child health issues

The proportion of children who were overweight or obese in Oxfordshire fell between 2018 and 2020.

Latest figures show this has risen. For Year 6, these are the highest numbers ever recorded (2021/22 data).



Source: 'Director of Public Health Annual report: Healthy weight, healthy communities, healthy lives', Oxfordshire County Council¹¹.

Prevent: To prevent excess weight, start early

With 6 in 10 adults in Oxfordshire living with overweight or obesity, we must take a **prevention-focussed approach**.



If you start Reception at a **healthy weight**, you have an **4 in 5** chance of staying a healthy weight until Year 6+



If you start Reception with **excess weight**, you have a **2 in 3** chance of still living with excess weight in Year 6



If you start Reception with **obesity**, you have a **9 in 10** chance of still living with excess weight in Year 6

So for prevention to be effective, we need to **start early**++.

Recommendations:

1. 0-5 years:

- Collate local data to assess for inequalities in breastfeeding continuation in Oxfordshire.
- Ensure continued focus on increasing awareness and uptake of the Healthy Start scheme across Oxfordshire that supports new parents with the cost of fresh produce.
- Work with Early Years providers to assess current food provision against national nutritional recommendations.

2. Children and young people (5-18 years):

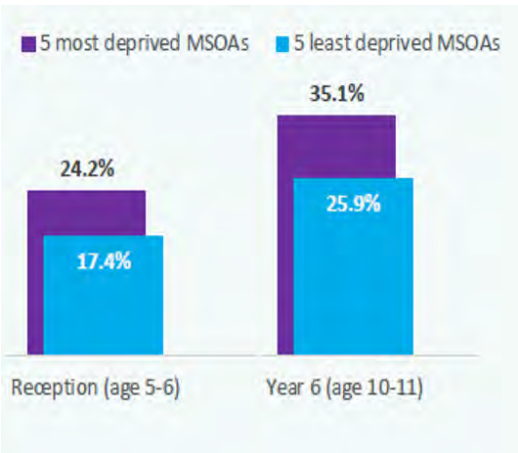
- Implement a whole school approach to promote healthier eating in school:
 - Children can receive free school meals without signalling this to peers.
 - Ensure school lunches are competitively priced and menus are shaped by parents and children.

Source: 'Recommendations from Oxfordshire Health Needs Assessment for promoting healthy weight', Oxfordshire County Council, 2023¹².

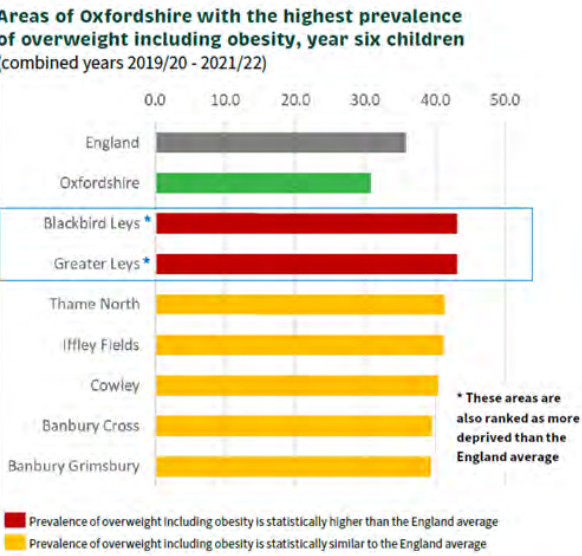
Inequalities for children

Children living in deprived areas are more likely to be overweight or obese.

Oxfordshire gap between 5 least and 5 most deprived areas: childhood overweight and obese (combined years data 2019-2022)



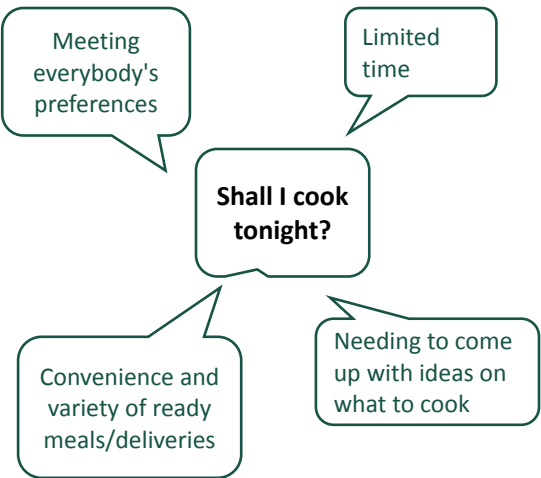
Areas of Oxfordshire with the highest prevalence in year 6 (overweight and obesity)



Source: 'Director of Public Health Annual report: Healthy weight, healthy communities, healthy lives', pp. 17-18, Oxfordshire County Council¹³.

Prevent: Make healthy behaviours more social and attractive to help them stick

This objective came from conversations with residents about the psychological and motivational barriers to cooking at home.



Recommendations:

1. Review existing cooking-related training to ensure it is meeting the specific needs identified by residents.
2. Work with providers of cooking-related activities to measure and increase uptake in key target groups (important life transition stages such as leaving home or becoming a new parent).



Source: 'Recommendations from Oxfordshire Health Needs Assessment for promoting healthy weight', Oxfordshire County Council, 2023¹⁴.

Hearing from a range of key actors in the field proved crucial for reaching a common understanding of the issues affecting child food poverty in Oxfordshire. Equally critical was the opportunity for group discussion at the end of Session 1, which ensured that voices from different sectors were heard and facilitated exchanges about the commonalities and differences between specific areas and populations within the area.

What we learnt about children and families' nutrition

Community insights

Life is complex and chaotic: "Many families tell us they have bigger issues to deal with than their child being a bit overweight."

Many people lack the **skills, capacity, or resources** to cook and to change routines and habits: "We don't plan, we live day to day."

Professionals can lack resources or skills to have **difficult conversations** about weight, food, and wellbeing to **help people to achieve a healthy weight**: "It is easier to talk about death than to talk about their child being overweight."

School food surveys (May 2021) and workshop (March 2022)

"We need to listen to children's voices - understanding why they sometimes avoid the food is powerful and can help with small changes."

Parents on school meals: "They try things they wouldn't at home then come back asking for it, it's fantastic."

Caterers need to keep their businesses viable and struggle to balance children's preferences for unhealthy food with their ambitions to provide nutritious meals.

Schools have the ambition to improve school food, but they lack the time, capacity, and resources necessary to make a significant change.



The following local priorities were identified by roundtable participants:

- Need for more user-friendly and cross-cultural information about childhood nutrition
- Decreasing reliance on voluntary organisations to deliver food services by national government
- Improved connections and collaborations between families, schools, and councils
- Improved support for teachers addressing childhood nutrition in schools
- Fostering of intergenerational cooking skills
- Stricter food advertising policies for Oxfordshire
- Emergency food provision and/or cash-first approaches to reduce stigma
- Universal free school meals to reduce stigma associated with child food poverty

Session 2: Amplifying grassroots successes in Oxfordshire

The rest of Session 1 included presentations by existing programmes implemented in Oxfordshire to improve child nutrition and well-being. This included: Lucy White from Home-Start Oxford, an organisation which offers free school meals in collaboration with a local primary school; Chris Chaundy from Rose Hill Junior Youth Club, a registered charity that runs youth clubs, a mentoring service and an allotment project; Melissa Latchman from Flo's Early Lives Equal Start programme, which addresses the gaps in food policy for pregnant mothers and early years; and, Rizvana Poole from The Chippy Larder, an organisation that not only provides surplus food to community members but also links them with farmers to reduce agricultural waste.



Rose Hill Junior Youth club supports children, young people and families through free youth club provision and activities in Oxford.



The Chippy Larder was formed with the idea of bringing a low-cost community food larder to Chipping Norton, however when the first Covid lockdown occurred in March 2020 we quickly adapted the launch plan to instead act as a free of charge food surplus food distribution point, available to all that needed it.



Home-Start is a local community network of trained volunteers and expert support helping families with young children through their challenging times.



A community-owned hub providing a welcoming, inclusive space to meet, work, play, learn, eat and foster people's connection to nature.

Children's voices were embedded throughout these presentations through illustrative quotes and videos. A parent volunteer from Home-Start Oxford's Growing Minds cooking group, Stacey Bickley, offered a first-hand account of the challenges faced by some Oxfordshire families and the positive impact of grassroots organisations on their lives.

Incorporating children's voices, parents' perspectives, and presentations about the ongoing challenges faced by grassroots organisations provided valuable insights and encouraged opportunities for networking between the broad range of organisations represented at the roundtable. This resulted in facilitating collaborations and discussions, which provided the potential to further and broaden the impact of these existing programmes. Local resources, including Good Food Oxfordshire's Food Map, were also highlighted.

Working to address these priorities for children and families

Community Food Services

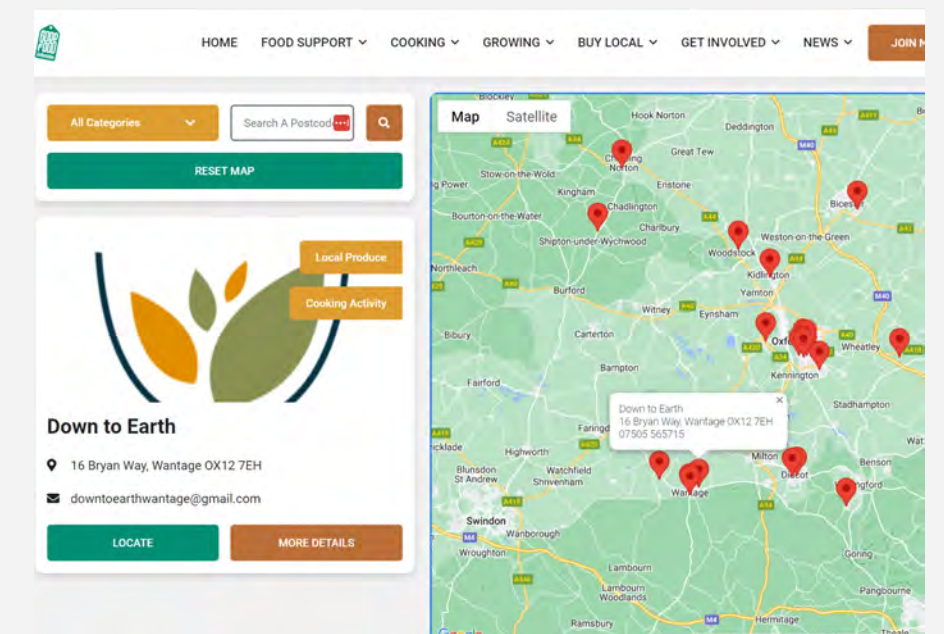
- Collective action to tackle food insecurity in each District - members include food banks, larders, fridges, local councils and VCS

Food Insecurity Awareness, Training and Resources

- Story-telling
- Food Insecurity, Healthy Start and Play:Full training

Cooking, Growing and Healthy Eating Project

- Mapping
- Identifying best practice and gaps
- Sharing resources
- Planning to address the gaps



Source: Good Food Oxfordshire's Food Map, 2023¹⁵.

Removing stigma from discourse on child food poverty

The next session was dedicated to combating the stigma associated with child food poverty including accessing emergency food services, free school meals and holiday activity and food programmes. During the session, the importance of promoting healthy food choices was highlighted, while simultaneously recognising systemic barriers to addressing stigma and accessing healthy food. Discussions revolved around the concept that healthy choices require healthy options, removing the blame from individuals and highlighting the need for collective, policy-based action.

There were also discussions around expanding free school meal programmes in Oxfordshire, to increase accessibility to healthy food and decrease stigma. This included presentation of case studies for expanding the free school meals programme across the UK, and an outline of a recent cost-benefit analysis¹⁶ which highlighted a positive return on investment.



The cost benefit case for school meals

Scenario 1: Extending Free School Meals to all children in England in households on Universal Credit

- Core benefits* over 20 years are £8.9 billion (compared to a cost of £6.4 billion)
- This is a return of £1.38 for every £1 invested

Scenario 2: Universal Free School Meals to all children in England

- Core benefits over 20 years are £41.3 billion (compared to a cost of £24.1 billion)
- This is a return of £1.71 for every £1 invested

*Core benefits

Education and employment:

- Improved educational attainment in the medium term – leading to improved productivity and employment longer term – and contributing to improved lifetime earnings and contributions.
- Improved ability to learn and reduced absenteeism in the short term – with linked cost savings for schools (such as catch-up programmes).

Health and nutrition:

- Reduced financial pressure for families on lower incomes – enabling the purchase of more nutritious food at home.
- Decreased incidence of obesity and diet-related diseases in childhood – the savings calculated are for the lower health costs of a reduction in obesity among children receiving FSM over the 2025–2045 period only.

Source: Good Food Oxfordshire, adapted from Impact on Urban Health report, 2022¹⁷.

GFO survey of Oxfordshire Schools, May 2021

86% of schools felt that there were children in their schools in need of, but not eligible for, Free School Meals

More than 20% of respondents were providing Free School Meals to children who are not eligible but in need

65.1% said they would like Free School Meals extended to all children with parents/carers in receipt of Universal Credit

62.8% of Oxfordshire schools would like to offer Universal Free School Meals

27.9% of respondents were concerned that the current infrastructure of their school couldn't cope

'Poverty is high in our ward. Not everyone qualifies for benefits... and on top [of that] then pay very high rents whilst earning low wages. Food poverty is real, and we would like to help our community but simply do not have the financial resource.'

Source: Good Food Oxfordshire, 2021¹⁸.

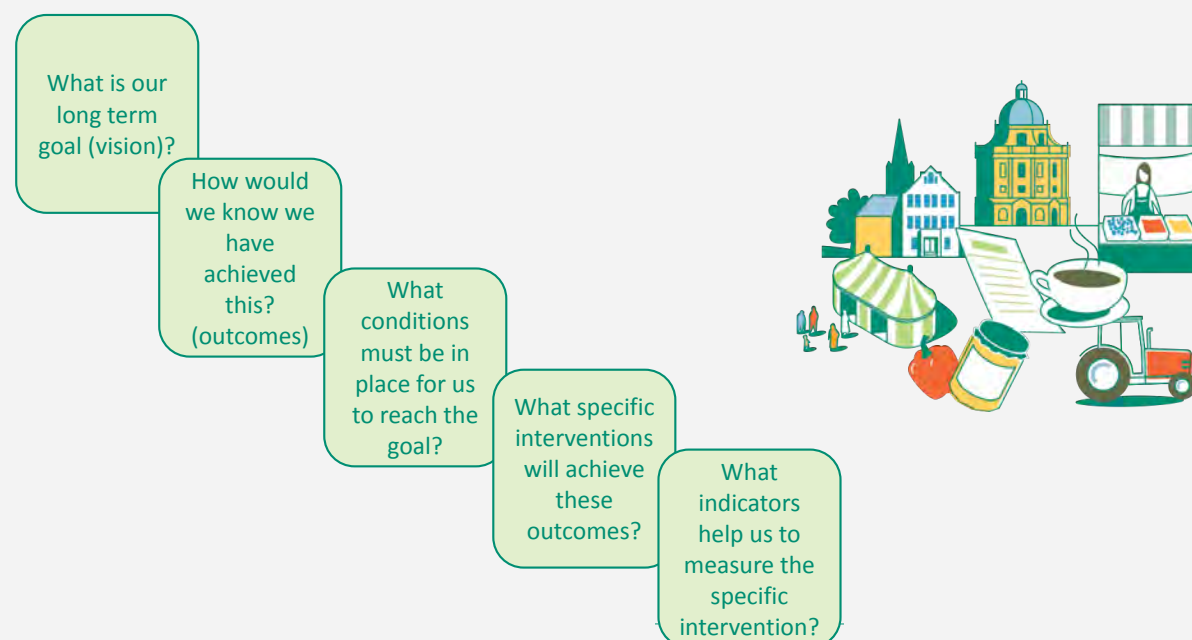
Session 3: A multi-stakeholder approach to improve childhood nutrition

The afternoon session was focused on potential solutions that could come from a multi-stakeholder approach to childhood nutrition in the County.

Formation of **Food Action Working Groups (FAWGs)**: Presentations outlined the formation of FAWGs across all five districts in Oxfordshire, which aim to deliver on strategic priorities in existing policies and plans. These priorities include tackling food poverty and diet-related ill-health, building vibrant food communities, growing the local food economy, strengthening short

and transparent supply chains, and improving the health and sustainability of institutional catering. A partnership between University of Oxford (Dr Shobhana Nagraj), Good Food Oxfordshire and the OX4 Food Crew, highlighted the importance of developing and clearly articulating the rationale for local food programmes and evidence-based policies using a Theory of Change (ToC) approach. Each FAWG is in the process of developing a ToC in line with the Oxfordshire Food Strategy.

Collective Action - Theory of Change Oxford City FAWG



Source: Good Food Oxfordshire, 2023¹⁹.

Everyone in Oxfordshire can enjoy the healthy and sustainable food that they need every day

Discussion and next steps

At the workshop we felt that certain priorities were more important for the City than others as represented in our post-it exercise summarised here.

Whilst we acknowledged that all of the priorities are interconnected we felt that Community Wealth Building was a key area that could drive progress in the other areas.

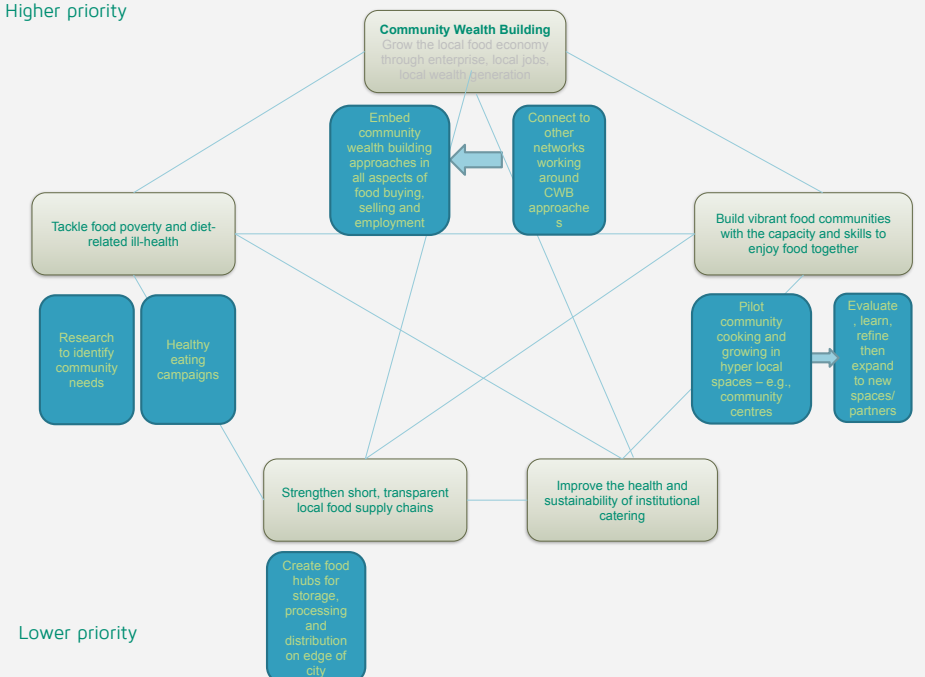
We slightly redefined the strategic priority around the local food economy to focus on Community Wealth Building

We acknowledged that the absence of some FAWG members would likely mean that we are missing some important perspectives

To that end we would like to use our next session together to review and build on this initial TOC

Higher priority

Lower priority



Source: Good Food Oxfordshire, 2023²⁰.

Harnessing the power of anchor institutions: This session outlined how policy makers, local businesses, and Higher Education Institutes could contribute to local food security. There were presentations and discussions around the role of major local employers who could act as 'anchor institutions' to contribute to poverty alleviation through community wealth building, offering employment opportunities, procurement of local services and support to local businesses, thereby tackling the root cause of child food poverty. Such anchor institutions included the University of Oxford, Oxford University Hospitals Foundation Trust, and local councils, as well as smaller anchor institutions in the community.

At the policy level, the Chair of the Child Poverty Scrutiny Review Group, Councillor Dr Hosnieh Djafari-Marbini, discussed the role of council and local anchor institutions. Rachel Piper, a representative from the University of Oxford's Public Engagement team spoke about the role of the University in supporting the local community, and Susan Thomas, a non-executive director of Good Food Oxfordshire, opened discussions regarding how supermarkets can be approached to engage with supporting childhood nutrition.

Cash-first approaches: Fran Bennett from Oxford and District Action on Child Poverty (ODACP) discussed the value of cash-first approaches to respond to food insecurity. She highlighted that there is little evidence of misuse of such funds, and that these are dignified and often stigma-free means of support — reiterating the importance of choice and options.

Community-led research partnerships: Annie Davy and Madhur Wale discussed the value of empowering community members to lead research on issues directly affecting them such as child nutrition, using the work of a community-owned hub in Oxfordshire called Flo's and the OX4 Food Crew initiative as a case study. The University of Oxford (Dr Shobhana Nagraj) has been working with the OX4 Food Crew and Good Food Oxfordshire to deliver a series of community-led research development days, including human-centred design and sense-making workshops to identify place-based research priorities and provide methodological guidance. Research projects have also been initiated as a result of these partnerships, including the 'Early Lives-Equal Start' project.



Early Lives – Equal Start

Mission: Making life better and tackling inequalities for mothers, birthing parents, and babies in OX4

What is it? A community project based at Flo's – the Place in the Park, aiming to support pregnant and birthing parents from marginalised communities to overcome practical and structural barriers to accessing the essential services they need for themselves and their babies to thrive in their early lives.

Responding to local and national research – eg Oxfordshire Healthwatch video 2019 MBRRACE-UK collaboration, led from Oxford Population Health's National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit (NPEU) 2022,

Who else is involved?: The midwives, community groups in and around OX4, Flo's community team, Oxfordshire Maternity Voices Partnership, local early years services working in or around OX4, OUH,

Who else do we want to work with? Local organisations supporting social and maternal justice around housing, immigration or other factors and able to provide support during the perinatal, birth and postnatal phases of family life.



Commitment tree

To close the event, attendees added their commitment to future actions towards improving food nutrition to a 'commitment tree' at the front of the room. These commitments included using the knowledge and information learned to validate the business case for provision of school meals, raising the voices of young people and their needs, a local policy brief, and new local collaborations.



Key recommendations for policy action

Recommendation 1:
Improve uptake of Healthy Start vouchers – ensuring optimal nutrition for mothers, babies and preschool infants.

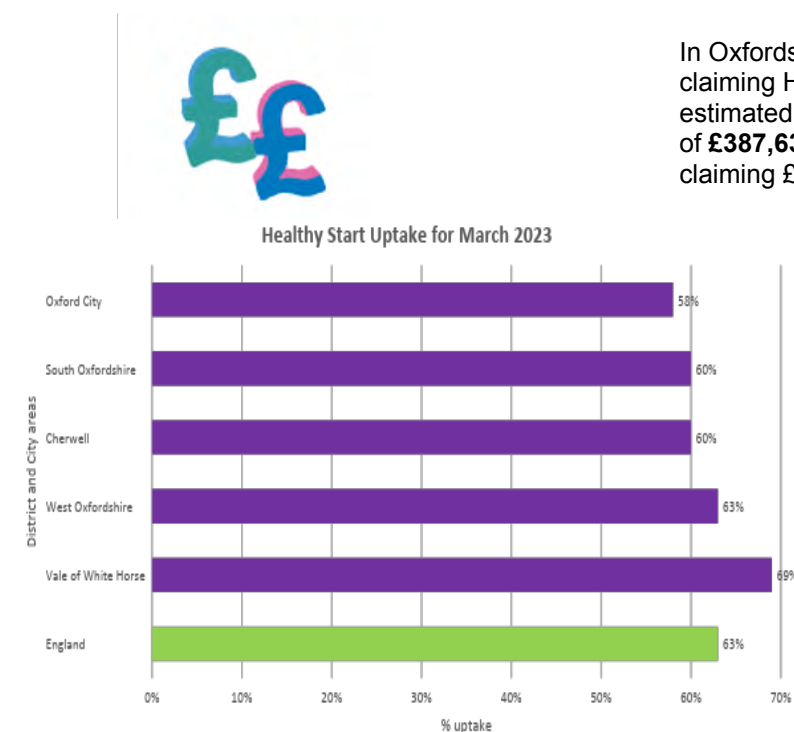
Life course approach to targeting childhood nutrition: the first 1,000 days of life.

Good nutrition in pregnancy and up to 2 years after a baby is born (the 'first 1,000 days') is crucial for lifelong health. It is during the first 1,000 days, that the child's brain begins to grow and learn²¹. Inadequate nutrition during this time has irreversible effects on childhood development, affecting a child's educational potential and their risk of future diet-related ill health.

Strategies that improve nutritional outcomes in infants during the first 1,000 days include ensuring that women are well-nourished during pregnancy, early initiation of breast feeding, weaning onto semi-solid foods at an optimal time, and introduction of adequate solid food diet. A key recommendation from the Oxfordshire County Council²², is to prioritise nutrition for children aged 0-3 years and new parents.

The Healthy Start scheme helps eligible families to buy healthy foods such as milk and fruit and vegetables, as well as free vitamins throughout pregnancy and until the child is 4 years old. In Oxfordshire, not all eligible families are claiming Healthy Start and are missing out on its benefits.

Healthy Start data



In Oxfordshire, eligible families that are not claiming Healthy Start are missing out on an estimated total across the County of **£387,631.92** (per year households not claiming £5.03 x 52 weeks).

Source: 'Healthy Start Uptake for Oxfordshire', Oxfordshire County Council, 2023²³.

Local actions – improving uptake of Healthy Start vouchers in Oxfordshire can be achieved by:

- Targeted Healthy Start scheme awareness programmes directed at healthcare providers, communities and food outlets in Oxfordshire.
- Targeting new parents in priority areas, leveraging the support of grassroots organisations working within these communities to improve uptake amongst those most in need.
- An important finding from the roundtable through discussions of lived experience with emergency food providers in food banks, related to the need for affordable infant formula feeds: mothers living in poverty are not always able to breast feed and formula feeds are very expensive. Local food banks are finding mothers watering down the formula feeds, which will impact infant nutrition and hunger. We must ensure that local mothers have access to affordable formula feeds through the local Healthy Start scheme.
- These actions must happen in conjunction with nutrition education for new parents (which might be achieved through existing grassroots programmes), and lobbying of local supermarkets and other food outlets to provide affordable, nutritious food during the early years.

Aligning with national priorities – the role of supermarkets in tackling food insecurity

The Food Foundation has set out actions supermarkets should have in place as a minimum to effectively tackle rising levels of food insecurity and ensure adequate nutrition for children. These actions are informed by consumers and align with existing areas of focus for food retailers. Local supermarkets must be supported and encouraged to implement the Healthy Start scheme in line with the 'Kids Food Guarantee'. This entails providing fruit and vegetables, staples such as wholegrain or 50:50 wholewheat bread, affordable infant formula feeds (for those parents in need), and ensuring that the cheapest options are also those with the best health profiles.

Actions on prevention

Early Years

- Early Years Food and Nutrition survey to understand opportunities and needs in early years and childcare settings for food provision and healthy eating.
- Healthy Start working group formed including Public Health, Community Dental Health, BOB ICS, Health Visiting, Oxford City Council and Good Food Oxfordshire. Together we have:
 - Developed training and awareness raising tools.
 - Targeted promotion in settings such as food retailers (including markets), libraries and at registration of births.

"The Healthy Start card is great. My son has three meals a day so this helps me buy, fruit, veg and milk. £30.00 a month goes a long way. The new Mastercard is easier and less embarrassing. I didn't know about it until my friends told me. You can apply for it from 11 weeks pregnant."

Oxfordshire Resident



Source: Oxfordshire County Council, 2023²⁴.

Recommendation 2: Taking foundational steps towards universal free school meals for primary school children in Oxfordshire.

Ensuring nutritional equity for all children

Equity of access to sustainable, affordable, nutritious food is key to improving childhood nutrition²⁵. Universal free school meals (FSM) can be used as a means of helping to achieve nutritional equity through careful implementation of school food standards. Supporting childhood nutrition at school is an intervention for poverty alleviation. There is considerable evidence to support the role of free school meals in improving a child's food security and diet quality, as well as their lifetime earnings in the future²⁶. This translates into long term cost-savings and benefits for local authorities and national government by improving employment and reducing healthcare expenditure.

School Food: Why is this difficult and what could work

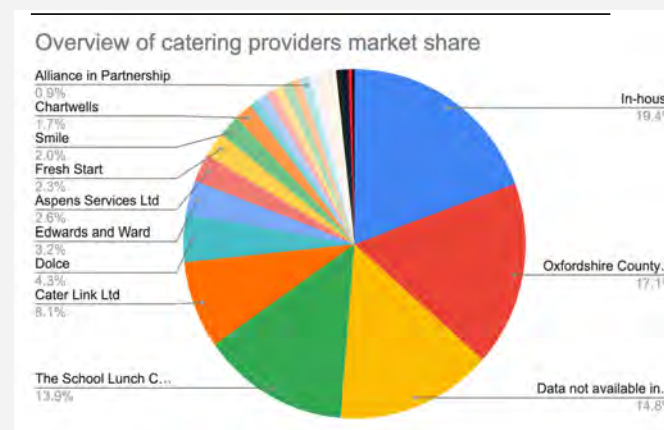
The barriers:

- Capacity and resources
- Contracts
- Uptake of school meals
 - Cost
 - Preferences
 - Quality

Oxfordshire schools:

- 241 State Primary Schools (including nursery)
- 41 State Secondary Schools
- 17 State Other needs
- 51 Independent
- > 30 catering providers

Estimates based on publicly available information Dec 2021



Source: Good Food Oxfordshire, 2023²⁷.

Expanding the Free School Meals programme

Currently, families on universal income are only eligible for FSM if their after-tax income is less than £7,400 per year²⁸. Nationally, 1.7 million children from families receiving universal credit (69%) are missing out on FSM²⁹. This means that some families can benefit from turning down four hours of paid employment at the National Living Wage in order to fulfil FSM eligibility³⁰.

Eight out of ten people in England (80%) now support the government providing FSM for children in households receiving Universal Credit³¹. Although extending FSM to all of those receiving universal credit is a logical next step, it does not address the stigma associated with mean-tested FSM, nor does it tackle the nutritional standards of school meals. Furthermore, means-testing comes at a cost to the UK government.

Expanding the FSM programme to universal provision for all primary school children in Oxfordshire would have two major advantages: it boosts uptake and reduces stigma. Furthermore, it may improve incentives for families to move into paid employment and earn more, thereby addressing poverty in line with other cash-first, dignity-based approaches.

There is potential to use universal FSM as a window to optimise childhood nutrition by implementation of school food standards. Eating and sharing nutritious food in a healthy school environment has the added benefit of improving socialisation and cultural awareness of pupils from different backgrounds. Universal FSM have already been introduced on a national basis for the first years of primary school (reception, year 1 and year 2), and this could be built upon for the remaining years.

Local Actions:

- Encourage dignity-based approaches to ensure that children currently receiving FSM are not stigmatised at school during mealtimes.
- Convene key stakeholder meeting with budget planners to discuss what is feasible to deliver in Oxfordshire with regards to universal FSM.
- Learn from local case studies of universal FSM to identify novel models of funding.
- Involve local economy partnerships, businesses with corporate social responsibility projects which might link with schools, education and healthcare-related funding bodies in discussions about FSM.
- Engage with Department for Education and key stakeholders to discuss staggered roll-out of universal FSM to all primary school children in state schools in Oxfordshire.
- Implementation and embedding of the government's school food standards into the school environment.

Recommendation 3: Create healthy food environments for children of all ages.

The roundtable highlighted that children spend the majority of their time within two food environments: home and school. Optimising these environments and the journeys between them through the creation of healthy neighbourhoods and a whole-systems approach is key to improving childhood nutrition in Oxfordshire.



Source: Oxfordshire County Council, 2022³².

Ensuring Government Food Standards in Schools

The Oxfordshire Food Strategy identified that a priority area for action was to work with schools, caterers, and children to better understand the challenges of providing food in schools and to collaboratively develop solutions that have a high impact but are achievable in order to improve the quality and sustainability of school food.

Oxfordshire County Council Catering signed up to the 'Food for Life Served Here' accreditation scheme in June 2023, to ensure catering in schools in Oxfordshire delivers on providing healthy and sustainable food. Menus are currently being assessed at the benchmarking stage, to identify good practice and where adaptation/improvement is needed.

Oxfordshire County Council's Public Health has developed and committed to funding a new Strategic School Food and Physical Activity Advisor role to manage a suite of work for a 'whole school approach' to improve child health and food. This is a pilot initially for two years to test and learn what works in priority neighbourhood schools.

Creating healthy food environments at home and during school holidays by empowering new parents with cooking skills and nutrition education

Research that informed the Oxfordshire Food Strategy highlighted challenges that families face to ensure healthy food at home. Barriers include working multiple jobs, juggling blended families and the cost of healthy food.

As part of the food strategy implementation, Good Food Oxfordshire is working with parents to understand the barriers to healthy eating and co-designing solutions that work for families, communities and places, embracing the Dignity Principles from Nourish Scotland so that solutions have genuine community ownership.

The school Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme in Oxfordshire has reached a considerable proportion of eligible children, thereby ensuring access to healthy food during the school holidays. The local 'Play-full' approach to HAF has also ensured that holiday programmes are culturally-and contextually relevant to the communities in Oxfordshire and are offered to all school children regardless of their eligibility for FSM.

Critically, the universality of the HAF programme not only presents opportunities for further nutrition education and cooking skills training for children and families, but also minimises learning inequalities that develop over the school holidays between those children from high- and low-income households. The programme also enables parents to stay in employment during the holidays, thereby improving household income generation. Oxfordshire's tendering process for HAF providers weights healthy food provision as a priority and has resulted in a strong healthy food offer in some settings although disparities remain. Research also showed that programmes run by community-based groups were more effective in providing activities in a familiar setting and continuity of support, beyond the school holidays for the most vulnerable children.

Local Actions:

- Provide access to spaces where people can come together to learn, grow, cook, share and enjoy food.
- Fund evidence-based interventions that build confidence and skills in cooking and healthy eating.
- Extend the eligibility of the HAF programme beyond FSM status and support more community-led groups to become HAF providers.
- Further emphasis to be placed on high quality food offerings within HAF settings – thereby ensuring high food standards across the board in Oxfordshire.

Creating healthy food environments in the community

When talking about convenience stores people expressed that they felt "completely overpowered by the sweets and snacks section". In May 2023, Oxfordshire County Council launched the Good Food Retail pilot project in Oxfordshire, working with Rice Marketing, who will link with convenience stores, food wholesalers and schools. The aim is to improve accessibility of healthier food options (including long shelf life and fresh fruit and veg) in target areas.

A previous pilot 'Putting health at the heart of convenience' worked with 35 convenience stores in South London resulting in increased purchasing of healthier products from wholesalers and stockage of healthier versions of product lines³³.

Environment: creating healthy places and environments

Residents described the constant exposure to less healthy foods (neighbourhoods, commutes; work and school, social media and from advertising) and the temptation of promotions as making it easy for less healthy dietary habits to develop.

"Jakes takeaway is always full - especially with college students - 24/7 always see someone in there"

"Anyone with ADHD/neurodiversity tends to lean towards impulse. Then if faced with clever marketing.. It's so difficult they come out and see.. they buy all that stuff they didn't need"



"It's too accessible. You can have anything delivered in about 20 minutes"

Areas with higher deprivation have a higher concentration of fast-food outlets and cluster around schools.

Recommendations:

1. Reduce exposure to less healthy food
 - use levers in planning policy, licensing, evidence-based incentive schemes
 - restrict advertising of high fat/sugar foods
 - ensure catering in public sector facilities adheres to Government Buying Standard-based criteria
2. Increase access to healthier foods
 - collaborate with local convenience stores in key locations for example frequented by young people and families
 - input into the planned assessment of the healthiness of the food offer from community food services.

Source: Recommendations from 'Oxfordshire Health Needs Assessment for promoting healthy weight', Oxfordshire County Council, 2023' ³⁴.

The need for healthier food advertising in Oxfordshire

Advertising for unhealthy foods and drinks has long been associated with poor public health, in particular, child obesity and health inequalities. The Healthier Food Advertising Policy toolkit from Sustain is a local authority guide for restricting unhealthy food advertising³⁵.

Local actions:

- Use available levers to restrict advertising of less healthy food in public sector spaces and externally-owned spaces across Oxfordshire, targeting areas where audits identify high levels of advertising space – as recommended in Oxfordshire’s Health Needs Assessment for promoting healthy weight³⁶.
- Convene key partners to explore local opportunities and levers, while learning from the positive working examples from around the country, including Barnsley, Bristol and Tower Hamlets who have successfully implemented Healthy Food Advertising Policies.
- Align local projects with the national Bite Back campaign – a youth-led movement, with whom we have been in discussions with about the roundtable.

Transferable learning

There are several learnings from this roundtable that may be transferable to other settings seeking to engage a range of stakeholders to combat issues surrounding child nutrition. Firstly, pre-arranged seating around tables with allocated places allowed for networking and meaningful connection between stakeholders from different sectors and districts. Secondly, giving existing grassroots organisations time to share their successes and challenges to date allowed for collective acknowledgement of accomplishments and collaborative problem-solving. Finally, one of the most valuable take-aways for all participants was the new connections they made within the field meaning allocating ample time for group discussion and networking is a crucial consideration in designing a roundtable agenda.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the case study of multistakeholder engagement in Oxfordshire highlights the pressing need to address child food poverty not just in economically disadvantaged areas, but also in seemingly prosperous regions facing hidden disparities. By bringing together diverse stakeholders and prioritising local needs, this collaborative approach offers valuable insights and potential solutions for tackling this escalating issue. The learnings from this roundtable can serve as a blueprint for others seeking to engage stakeholders and create meaningful change in child nutrition. Together, we can make a collective impact and strive towards a future where all children have access to healthy and affordable food.

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