

Covid-19 Food Study

Policy Briefing: Families with School-aged Children



During Covid-19 national lockdowns, school closures mean many parents are tasked with feeding, caring for and home-schooling their children whilst also working from home. Free school meal replacements include a national voucher scheme or food parcels delivered via schools. These schemes continued during the summer and Christmas holidays in 2020. We interviewed households and organisations about food and eating in the East of England during the Covid-19 pandemic. This policy briefing summarises the findings from interviews with families with school-aged children, some of whom are eligible for free school meals.

Recommendations for Policy:

Some families have improved their diets during the pandemic. However, others are deprioritising diet and health in favour of more immediate concerns due to increasing food prices or reduced income.

We recommend:



Food parcels and free school meal vouchers restrict families' capacity to make the best choices for them. Families would benefit more from a cash payment via a top-up in their child benefit or Universal Credit payments.



More support is needed to help families navigate the benefits system, especially for those newly unemployed and those who have never had to access the benefit system prior to the pandemic. This is likely to be an ongoing problem given the longer term economic impact of Covid-19.



Low-income families require more support due to food price rises and loss of income. Local authorities and schools must continue to reach out to those at risk of food poverty and ensure those eligible for free school meals are able to receive/apply for them, particularly as unemployment is expected to rise.

Food and Eating Challenges for Families with Children:

- Parents, predominantly mothers, say they are spending more time preparing and cooking food than before the pandemic. This is particularly difficult for those who are working from home and have younger children, who cannot prepare food themselves.
- Some parents report an improvement in their children's diet because as parents they have more control over what they are eating than before. However, others say their family are not eating as healthily or have gained weight due to the negative impact of the pandemic on their own and/or their child's mental wellbeing.
- Larger families and/or those shopping for other households struggle to purchase enough food when supermarket restrictions are in place, limiting the number of food items. This often means going to great lengths and/or spending more time than usual on planning and purchasing their food shopping.

- Due to food shortages and fewer offers/discounts, it is mostly more expensive branded items that are available in supermarkets, meaning families either buy less or their shopping has become more expensive. This is particularly difficult for larger and low-income families who resort to eating less healthily or eating less food altogether. Others use food banks or community schemes providing emergency food.

“...there was plenty of stuff in the shops but unfortunately it was the expensive branded stuff. So I was getting like half the amount of food shop a week for nearly twice the money... Well we struggled a little bit. Julie [the community scheme worker] was a great help, she sent us... towards the beginning, with like Nando's and stuff, they give food donations to the various groups and what have you.” - Lindsey; low-income family not eligible for free school meals

Challenges Identified by Support Services for Families with Children:

- Organisations say that diet and health are deprioritised by low-income families, in favour of more immediate concerns such as paying utility bills, housing costs and other necessary bills.
- Food banks are experiencing an increase in the number of referrals, including families who have never used food banks before and those who do not know how to access statutory benefits or community support. Job losses or reduced income mean that families are having to engage with the benefit system for the first time.
- Free school meal eligibility and applications are also increasing during the pandemic and the relevant support services say they are expecting this to increase further. Some local authorities are making considerable efforts to reach out to families who are newly eligible for free school meals.
- There have been administrative issues with the supply of free school meal vouchers. Schools are spending an extraordinary amount of administrative time procuring, processing and distributing vouchers to families. The delays are having a significant impact on low-income families' abilities to access enough food for their children.

Case Study: Lucy

Lucy is a mother of three children and is a full-time carer for her 10 year old daughter, who has learning difficulties. Her teenaged son, older daughter and grand-daughter also live with her. Her husband is not working and has had to self-isolate due to ill health. She says that the pandemic has been 'quite a challenge' due to the health needs of her family and their low income. Two children are eligible for free school meals and they receive supermarkets vouchers in lieu of receiving meals at school. However, Lucy is unable to use these vouchers online, which means it is difficult to make use of them. Lucy has also found it difficult to obtain enough food to feed her family due to an increase in food prices and food shortages in the shops she visits. She has had to rely on community support to feed her family including food from a local charity and a summer 'brunch club'.

The Impact of Coronavirus on Food and Eating in the East of England:

The information presented here is based on the findings from a study on the impact of Covid-19 on food and eating in the East of England. Since May 2020, we have been interviewing East of England residents, community stakeholders, and professionals about how people in the region are managing with their food and how they are being supported locally. The interim report can be found here: <https://doi.org/10.18745/pb.23113>

More information about the study can be found [here](#). This research is funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) East of England. Please visit our website to find out more about our work [here](#). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.