

Child of the North All Party Parliamentary Group: Food Insecurity and Obesity Evidence Session
29 January 2025

Attendees: Emma Lewell-Buck MP (Chair), Kim Johnson MP, Sharon Hodgson MP, Ian Lavery MP, Ian Byrne MP, Liz Twist MP, Penny Walters, Professor Maria Bryant, University of York, Evette Callender, Dr Rachel Loopstra, University of Liverpool, Professor David Taylor-Robinson, Becky Plummer, Office of the Bishop of Newcastle, Ciaran Dowling Office of Emma Lewell-Buck, Hannah Davies CEO of NHTA, Alexis Darby Head of Public Affairs NHTA.

Meeting Notes

Emma Lewell-Buck MP introduced all attendees to the meeting.

The first speaker, Penny Walters, spoke about her lived experience of food insecurity. Her story dates back 13 years when she couldn't afford food for her family – this was despite working a 70hr week.

- Root causes of food insecurity, Penny believes, is a lack of money in local authorities and inadequate provision in schools.
- Penny stated that she thought every child should be entitled to at least one free school meal per day as it is often the only time that a child will receive a nutritious meal.
- Discussing childhood obesity, Penny said that there is not enough consideration of mitigating circumstances for children who can't exercise. (These circumstances could include health conditions, Penny stated). She argued that the childhood obesity crisis was exacerbated by lack of access to decent food.

Professor Maria Bryant from the University of York discussed the disproportionately high levels of child poverty in the North of England compared to the South.

- Professor Bryant said that both food insecurity and childhood obesity are higher in the North than the South.
- Levels of childhood obesity in deprived areas is double that of more affluent areas.
- In these deprived areas, there is an abundance of high-energy, low-nutrition food options. There is also a lack of access to fresh, high-quality food.
- Professor Bryant outlined how her research had demonstrated that food insecurity is no longer marginal.
- Environmental data shows that between 2016-24, there has been a huge increase in the number of fast-food outlets and there are now twice as many in the North of England than the South.

Evette Callender spoke of her experience of food insecurity during pregnancy.

- Evette was diagnosed with a form of diabetes during pregnancy.
- She lives in Walker, a deprived ward where access to unhealthy fast-food outlets is easier than accessing markets and supermarkets for fresh produce.

Dr Rachel Loopstra, from the University of Liverpool discussed the Healthy Start scheme.

- Dr Loopstra said that children in the North are much more likely to be experiencing food insecurity and were less likely to be able to access free school meals.
- Lack of nutritious meals would hamper childhood development.

Professor Bryant then spoke for a second time. This presentation was about Schools and their importance for children experiencing food insecurity.

- Professor Bryant said that 30-50% of what children eat in a day is at school.
- She underlined the importance of improving the quality of food on offer in schools and also ensuring that there was adequate monitoring in place to keep these standards high.
- Food in Early Years settings are even more inadequate than in schools.
- 32% of families experiencing food insecurity do not qualify for free school meals
- Some children's school meals contain doubled their recommended sugar allowance but only 40% of their recommended fibre intake.

A young person gave a pre-recorded interview about being a young person with experience of food insecurity.

- Spoke of how she felt her Mum had made sacrifices to support her and to ensure that she was adequately fed.
- Her college provide a free breakfast service, but students were expected to pay for lunches unless they qualified for free school meals.

Professor David Taylor-Robinson, University of Liverpool, spoke of how there had been increasing inequality gaps in food security since the pandemic

- Professor Taylor-Robinson said that the cuts to children centre spending had caused an increase in childhood poverty.
- He called for a return of focus to previous CoTN recommendations about tackling childhood poverty.

There were several questions from attending MPs.

- Ian Lavery MP thanked the speakers commented that the North East has the highest child poverty and highest food insecurity and there is a lack of opportunity and made the case for free school meals for all children.
- Sharon Hodgson MP thanked the speakers and spoke about food deserts and lack of healthy food at small local shops and highlighted the 'broken plate report' by the Food Foundation.
- Ian Byrne MP thanked the speakers and spoke about the need for Sure Start Centres and can we look at the cost that scrapping sure start centres has had on the economy?

Emma Lewell-Buck MP thanked attendees and there was a group picture taken.

ENDS