

Policy Brief

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Accessing healthy food in Whitley Reading: The Voice of the Community



The Challenge

Improving access to healthy food is key to building a healthier future for the UK. Between 2021 and 2024, as part of the UKRI FoodSEqual project, over 500 individuals from Whitley in Reading were involved in questionnaires, activities, workshops, and 'fun with food' events.

Many idealised homecooked meals, plenty of fresh fruit and veg, and food enjoyed in good company. The reality, however, is very different, and 72% of people in a snap survey were not entirely happy with their current diet.

- The food environment pushes people down paths of convenience, processed foods, and separated lifestyles in which everyone is doing their own thing:
"You stick something in the microwave, ping, and you've only got a fork to wash up. Life has moved on."
- Community Researcher comment on modern eating
- Lack of money after paying the monthly bills pushes people into buying cheap calories rather than fruit and veg, and avoiding perishable foods or any purchase that may end up wasted. These measures limit variety in the diet.
- Physically accessing healthy food is another problem, especially for the many without cars, for those with mobility problems, or for those who have children in tow.
- Keeping children happy is very important to parents. Many children struggle with eating veg, and parents will cater to their tastes to ensure they eat enough.
- High calorie snacks and takeaways are important to people as affordable treats and stress busters.

Key Findings

Based on the FoodSEqual research in Whitley, the community's most wanted policy changes in the food system include:

- More support for community centres, that offer face to face services, activities and social connections.
- Reduce fruit and veg packaging so you are not forced to buy more than you can use before it perishes.
- Expand the healthy food offer and culture in schools. Improve school-parent dialogue over this and extend free school food entitlement.
- Clearer labelling of foods with unhealthy ingredients, additives and chemicals. e.g. extend the traffic light system.
- Subsidise / support local farms and community food growing.
- Restrict advertising on unhealthy food.
- Extend the provision of cards topped up for buying milk, fruit and veg.
- Tax unhealthy additives so that manufacturers put less of these in their food products.

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Life and Food in Whitley: the impact on health and wellbeing

Diet and nutrition particularly among low-income groups is a key public health concern in the UK (see [UK Parliament POST, 2022](#)). FoodSEqual-Health research with Whitley residents revealed that:

- In the past 24 hours prior to the questionnaire, 39% did not consume a single portion of vegetables, and 44% did not consume a single portion of fruit. (In equivalent UK wide surveys, 6.3% did not consume vegetables and 10.7% did not consume fruit).
- 80% of adults had excess weight (compared to 63% nationally), and 27% of adult had high blood glucose (compared to 9.5% nationally).

Wellbeing is also affected. Recorded quotes from FoodSEqual workshops and interviews showed that:

- Struggling to make ends meet allows for few treats or variety to brighten life. It pushes people into disadvantageous buying choices and less healthy food options. It adds to family friction and the feeling you are letting your dependents down. It all adds to mental anxiety.
- Many endure a sense of stigma or shame for their survival strategies. Healthy eating advice comes across as patronizing – people know what is needed but circumstances force their choices. They do not feel heard or able to access fair options, and many do not know where to turn when in need.
- Many parents struggle to provide meals their children will eat, especially if their children have additional needs. They often cook different meals for different children each day to cater for their individual tastes and needs.
- Many do not currently access available services and support because (1) they lack information and connection, (2) they resent the implication that they are unable to manage their own affairs, and (3) they distrust authorities and fear that connecting with the system will result in their affairs being monitored and controlled.

Policy recommendations

During FoodSEqual research into the challenge of accessing healthy food, the top policy priorities identified by the Whitley community were (1) Develop trusted community spaces that offer social connections as well as access to healthy, affordable foods. (2) Ensure perishable foods like fruit and veg can be bought in small quantities so that there is no waste. (3) Create healthier school food environments.

Other high priority changes related to (a) the labelling, advertising and formulation of processed foods, (b) subsidies for local food growing and (c) extending the provision of top-up cards for buying fruit and veg (see Key Findings).

Most people eat what they eat because circumstances force their choices. Change is going to require an altered food environment that enables people to afford and access healthier foods, and in which fruit and veg, healthy cooking, and eating together are a familiar and easy-to-manage part of an everyday life. Normalising a new food environment involves the whole community and requires connections between members through which they can give and receive food support and ideas, also experimenting with less familiar foods without risking money. The environment needs to be trusted and respectful so that residents willingly access services and support.

Strengthening connections via community food hubs and schools provides a good starting point to building trust and supporting resident-led change.

Supporting the development of local, trusted spaces that provide access to affordable fruit and veg

'Food' provides an important point of connection between people – a natural community hub ([Blake, 2019](#)). Moreover, well-developed community hubs are places where residents can find support. They also provide opportunities for people to *contribute* to and *influence* their social and food environment ([Davies and Reid, 2024](#); [Blake, 2019](#)) This capacity to self-organise and cooperate is an essential feature of resilience ([Lindsey, 2012](#), [Lee et al., 2024](#))

Residents of Whitley want:

- To access affordable, healthy foods of their choice and in the quantities they choose.
- Opportunity to connect with one another over shared food-related experiences. E.g. eating, cooking, and growing food together. Engaging in child friendly and hands-on activities.
- Places where they feel they belong, where they know they will be heard and where they are not stigmatized in any way.
- Spaces that provide help in accessing health and wellbeing services, including support for those with special dietary needs.

Policy implications

- Develop a Local Asset Strategy that identifies and supports local organisations, both voluntary and statutory.
- Recognize who are the trusted people within these organisations, having connections into their communities. Find out what their pressure points are and how to make things easier for them.
- Invest in physical spaces, so that people can gather somewhere local and familiar. Ensure these spaces are accessible and affordable to resident-led organisations.
- Use community centres as points of communication, building trust between residents and statutory bodies.
- Empower resident-led organisations (particularly those in less-affluent neighbourhoods) to speak on their own behalf, and finance actions that are important to them.
- Facilitate communication and healthy links between organizations so that signposting, trust, and support between organisations can be improved, and so that best practice and learning can be shared.

Enabling Healthier School Environments

A Whole School Food Approach is needed to support schools in providing healthy, tasty meals as well as teaching life skills that favour healthy eating and lifestyle.

Residents of Whitley want:

- Fresh fruit and veg available to children throughout the day, as main meals and as snacks
- More flexibility over portion sizes
- Individualized help for 'tricky eaters' or those with special dietary needs
- Healthy, tasty meals, with enough time for children to eat them together with their friends
- Life skills taught to their children including fun, educative sessions for children to explore new foods.

Although parents look to schools for help, schools cannot change the food environment alone – it needs to be a collaboration between schools and parents. Something like 40% of parents eligible for free school meals in one Whitley primary school were not even taking them up. Stigma concerns were mentioned, along with concerns that children will not get enough of the foods they will eat. Parents worry to see their children coming out of school so hungry. Many other parents do not find school meals affordable.

Policy implications:

It is necessary to build dialogue, trust, and common agendas between parents and schools, working out and enabling a healthier food environment both in schools and at home. This involves:

- Procurement policies that enable schools to offer fruit and veg to children throughout the day
- A change in curriculum to support life skills in line with the whole school food approach
- An extension of eligibility for free school meals
- Funding for the recruitment of more pastoral staff to connect with parents
- A participative approach towards organising and developing parent-school dialogue
- Resources and organizational flexibility to carry out agreed actions.