

DIGITAL DIGEST



IMPROVING CHILD FOOD INSECURITY IN LONDON WITH THE CHILDREN'S #RIGHT2FOOD CHARTER AND THE CHILDREN'S FOOD WATCHDOG

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Prior to joining the Foundation, Courtney was a PhD student and Research Fellow at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. She previously worked on nutrition policy advocacy in the US for Public Health Advocates, focusing on sugary drink policies, and international non-communicable disease advocacy in Brussels for the International Diabetes Federation and the NCD Alliance.

We face a grave situation with children's food which is in urgent need of leadership and action from government at all levels in London and in the United Kingdom. In a society that believes in compassion and justice, it is unacceptable that children's development is being restricted by the effects of poverty. The number of children experiencing symptoms of food insecurity, or whose family income is evidently insufficient to afford a healthy diet amounts to between 2.5 and 4 million; between 20% and 30% of all children in the UK. We cannot allow this to continue.

400,000 children living in London are experiencing food insecurity. This means that there are times when their household does not have enough money to acquire enough food, or they cannot buy the full variety of foods needed for a healthy diet. Hunger is an extremely debilitating experience. It damages physical health. It is a cause of great personal distress. It is a social harm. Food insecurity brings profound anxiety and stress into family life which can trigger depression, aggressive behaviour in children, a sense of hopelessness, and overwhelming stress for parents struggling to give their children the best start. It affects children's school attendance, achievement and attainment: children who are hungry in class cannot concentrate or may be disruptive. In addition, the long summer holidays are estimated to result in weeks of learning loss for some children through a combination of social isolation, low levels of stimulation and activity, and poor diets. Food insecurity also affects the quality of children's diets, which brings increased risks of obesity and poor child growth.

The vast majority of parents want to feed their children well, and this generation of parents and children is more aware than previous generations of the importance of healthy eating.

But the odds are stacked against low income households: for many, a healthy diet is not affordable, and less healthy food is available everywhere and heavily marketed to parents and children alike.

Other costs of living have increased, and incomes have stagnated or declined. As a result, we are seeing more children and young people growing up in food insecure households where they can't rely on having enough to eat each day, with serious consequences for their quality of life, and for the mental and physical health of the next generation. Moreover, children living in poverty are eligible for vastly different levels of food provision and services depending on where they live. This is a postcode lottery with devastating, life-long consequences. Minimum standards are urgently needed.

The Children's #Right2Food Campaign is a nationwide initiative to ensure every child in the UK can access and afford good food and was shaped by the findings of the Children's Future Food Inquiry. Led by Young Food Ambassadors from across the UK and coordinated by the Food Foundation, the campaign calls for government action on children's food insecurity in accordance with the Children's #Right2Food Charter. The Inquiry (launched in 2018) marked the first attempt to speak directly and systematically to children, young people and those who live and work with them about children's experiences of food and how it affects their lives

The #Right2Food Charter recommends that an independent watchdog for children's food be established immediately to provide energetic and committed leadership to deliver quick results on simultaneously tackling hunger and disproportionately high obesity rates in deprived areas.

Children and young people need to be involved in its leadership. The Watchdog must be appointed by government with a mandated role, and the young Food Ambassadors who helped lead the Inquiry need to be involved in its leadership, along with other children and young people. It should be networked across nations (with devolved elements in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and include an independent board reporting to parliaments and informing the Children's Commissioners in all four nations. In the first instance, the Watchdog must consider conducting a full economic costing of a series of actions which would even out provision across the UK and expand it where necessary. Through this mechanism, we hope to ensure that 2020 marks a true turning point for children's food across the UK.

Establishing the Watchdog is necessary to galvanise action at the national level, but the Mayor of London and London's Local Authorities must also take action now to help alleviate food insecurity in



London. They should work towards adopting the London Children's #Right2Food Charter, which builds on the national Charter and proposes actions from young people that are locally actionable.

This includes funding to sustain and strengthen the Healthy Early Years London and Healthy Schools London award schemes, campaigning for Universal Free School Meals and supporting local authorities and schools to provide Free School Meals for children with NRPF, renaming Free School Meals as the 'School Meal Allowance,' and working with schools to carry over the Free School Meal allowance when it is not all spent in one day.

What we feed our children is a defining factor of our nation's values. There is incredible leadership being shown in all corners of the British Isles, which demonstrates that food can build communities and underpin health and wellbeing. But millions of children are missing out on the opportunity to lay the foundations of a better future. This must change and London can lead the way.