

Food experiences of people seeking asylum in London: areas for local action

12 March 2024

Background

In October 2023 Sustain launched a new project to explore food experiences of people seeking asylum in London, in response to concerns that this population faces high levels of food insecurity, leading to serious negative health outcomes.

The project sought to raise the voices of people with lived experience of the asylum system to highlight the issues they face around food, promote any positive food environments they have engaged with, and identify actions they would like to see locally. The project also aimed to learn from staff and volunteers in frontline support organisations, healthcare providers, and local authorities which have started taking action on improving food for people seeking asylum in their borough, and used these learnings to form recommendations for local action.

Sustain worked with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) UK and Life Seekers Aid to conduct the research which included three focus groups with people with lived experience of the asylum system, ten interviews with local authorities, healthcare providers and voluntary and community sector organisations (VCSOs), and a workshop with local authorities to identify key areas for local action. Case studies of good practice were also compiled based on local action from councils, and community food projects that support food access for people seeking asylum.

Findings

Our findings demonstrate that basic needs are not being met for people seeking asylum in London, resulting in food insecurity, poor physical and mental health, and malnutrition, particularly in children.

29 people with a range of backgrounds and experiences attended our focus groups and shared their experiences with food during the asylum process. Between them, participants had experience of hotels and hostels, dispersal self-catered asylum accommodation, and destitution.

Key findings from focus groups

"[They should] treat people like humans not animals."

- Participants reported finding it very difficult or impossible to meet their nutritional needs and those of their children in all accommodation contexts. Several were reliant on charitable food aid.
- The lack of agency around eating was highlighted as a problem in all groups.
- All groups highlighted the need for access to kitchen space, money, and ingredients to prepare their own meals, and where cooked meals were provided these should be freshly prepared and culturally appropriate.
- Inadequate food access was having a negative impact on physical health, linked to the inability to manage health conditions and in some cases development of nutrition-related diseases and hospitalisation.
- Experiences of food in the asylum system were broadly experienced as degrading and dehumanising, which had a negative impact on mental health, particularly for mothers who were unable to properly feed their children.
- People without immigration status may not feel safe approaching the council or support services for help.
- For people in catered accommodation, there were strong indications of a variety of health and safety deficiencies in food provision, which had resulted in illness. There were no effective or transparent complaints mechanisms, or accountability for food standards. In some cases, abusive and racist behaviour from staff was reported.
- The limited financial support available, restrictions to seeking paid employment and inability to make cash withdrawals from ASPEN cards limits the amount, quality and appropriateness of food choices.

Key findings from interviews

"We are supplementing children with nutritional supplements and vitamins because we know that people aren't getting enough."

- Mothers received no additional food during pregnancy or breastfeeding, had no equipment to sterilise bottles or store milk, and food provided was not appropriate for children, who were losing weight in some cases. Catered accommodation is not suitable for housing families and should not be used for more than a few weeks.
- LGBTQIA+ people seeking asylum may face additional barriers when accessing charitable food aid, which is a key source of food.

- The immediate health implications of not having access to a good diet are visible to healthcare providers; people suffered from vitamin deficiencies, weight gain, development of pre-diabetes and diabetes, and concerns around long-term health outcomes such as cancer.
- Healthcare providers are prescribing medications to people seeking asylum for issues which could be treated with appropriate food, are referring people to food banks when they should be receiving adequate meals from their accommodation provider and are concerned about malnutrition in children.
- When people have their claim granted, they can be made homeless and destitute if they are evicted from asylum accommodation without time to set up their housing support and benefits.

Key findings from local authority workshop

Local authorities were concerned about food insecurity and malnutrition among refugees and people seeking asylum in the borough, but were challenged by limited and precarious funding, and a lack of joined up working both inside the council and with other organisations in the local area.

Areas for local action identified included:

- Prioritising a joined up approach bringing together a network of local stakeholders to work collaboratively on food and other issues faced by people seeking asylum. This includes relevant council departments, particularly Public Health and Environmental Health teams.
- Urgently reviewing safety of infant feeding in asylum accommodation.
- Working with Environmental Health teams to inspect asylum accommodation for food hygiene issues and promptly address these.
- Working with hotels to ensure there are effective and accessible feedback mechanisms related to food provision, including an anonymous feedback option.
- Working with accommodation contractors and the Home Office to continue a regular dialogue and identify local issues.
- Including food access for people seeking asylum in food strategies and action plans.
- Supporting and signposting to community food projects that provide access to food and positive food environments, especially with community kitchen space.
- Establishing a space to share resources and good practice between London boroughs.
- Working with local healthcare providers to gather evidence of malnutrition to support making the case for changes at a local and national level.

Recommendations

These recommendations are based on people's lived experiences of food in the asylum system, and key areas for local action identified by people working in frontline organisations and local authorities. We recognise that resources and capacity are often overstretched, and local authorities are operating within a challenging and rapidly changing national policy context.

While this research has focussed on London, several of the good practice examples and recommendations are applicable in other places. Additionally, while the research focusses primarily on recommendations for local action to improve food access for people seeking asylum and refugees, the national policy context greatly impacts on the extent to which local actors can improve access to healthy food. Therefore, we also identify recommendations for national action.

Recommendations for local action

We recommend The Greater London Authority to:

- Support opportunities for local authorities and other key local actors to convene and share good practices around food access and health.

To develop collaboration, we recommend councils to:

- Bring together local stakeholders, including relevant council departments (e.g. public health, environmental health, children's services and homelessness teams), VCS organisations, and public health bodies for joined up work on improving food access and health for people seeking asylum in the borough, and include work on food support in council plans and strategies.
- Convene regular meetings with accommodation contractors and the Home Office regarding local issues, to enable collaborative working.
- Work with local healthcare providers on nutritional health audits of patients that are seeking asylum to inform nutrition standard monitoring and evidence areas of concern. Care should be taken that audits are de-identified and do not involve personal data.
- Consider applying to become a Borough of Sanctuary via City of Sanctuary UK, and ensure that food and nutrition is included in Borough of Sanctuary action plans.

To improve provision of food in catered asylum accommodation and ensure robust accountability we recommend councils to:

- Work with their Public Health team to urgently review safety of infant feeding, complete an infant feeding checklist with each hotel every 6-9 months and provide supporting guidance and resources to hotels.

- Work with the Environmental Health team to carry out health and safety inspections, and work with hotel managers to replace any providers which are not meeting food hygiene standards, and ensure hotels have systems in place for reporting food-related illness.
- Support hotel managers with the setup of effective feedback mechanisms around food, including anonymous mechanisms and focus group spaces.

To ensure precarious immigration status is not a barrier to accessing healthy and nutritious food we recommend councils to:

- Widen the eligibility criteria for existing financial support programmes to include residents without recourse to public funds.
- Widen the eligibility for council-funded community food so that they are accessible to residents without access to public funds. This should include breakfast clubs, holiday provision, and food aid.
- Work with schools to ensure they are aware of free school meal eligibility for people without recourse to public funds, measure uptake and support registration.
- Provide targeted financial and/or in-kind assistance for people without recourse to public funds, which enable people to access food meeting cultural preferences and dietary requirements.
- Ensure commissioned VCS organisations can negotiate contracts that preserve their independence and protect the confidentiality of their service users.
- Ensure robust data protection policies, and clear communication to people seeking support how their data will be used.

To increase provision of food we recommend councils to:

- Fund and support projects and organisations supplying food, particularly those providing access to kitchen space and home cooked meals. Develop a directory of these projects in the borough which can be shared in asylum accommodation and with frontline services.
- Support emergency food aid providers and/or community food projects to include foods from a variety of cuisines which are appropriate to diverse cultures, and work to ensure food aid is accessible to people seeking asylum.
- Consider introducing vouchers schemes such as Rose Vouchers to improve access to fruit and vegetables, which can be redeemed in a variety of shops and markets.
- Create targeted support for food insecure families with infant children, including people seeking asylum, as outlined by [UNICEF UK in their guidance to local authorities](#). This should include support to access infant formula.

We recommend food partnerships and alliances to:

- Invite local actors working with people seeking asylum to contribute to partnership work, and to include food support for people seeking asylum in plans and strategies.

We recommend contracted accommodation providers to:

- Ensure hotels have a regular dialogue with residents using at least two types of feedback: anonymous and regular small focus groups. Focus groups should bring together people with common social and cultural needs.
- Collaborate with the council and other local stakeholders by attending regular meetings to address issues.

Recommendations for national action

We recommend the Home Office to:

- Address the root causes driving food insecurity and malnutrition by increasing asylum support rates, allowing people seeking asylum to work, and expanding Healthy Start to people without recourse to public funds. Ensure people refused asylum can access support, including by empowering local authorities to support to them.
- Work with contracted accommodation providers to urgently instate processes to assess whether food meets Home Office standards of hygiene and nutrition particularly during infancy, childhood, pregnancy and for breastfeeding mothers, and for people with medical dietary requirements.
- Raise catered food standards to meet the school food standards.
- Reduce the amount of time people spend in hotels and hostels, particularly families with children. People seeking asylum should be housed in accommodation with kitchen facilities and integrated in local communities.
- Allow people with Section 4 support to withdraw cash from their ASPEN cards to allow wider food choices.
- Address the precarity of funding for local authorities by providing funding on at least a 2-year cycle to enable effective allocation of funding and increase overall amount of funding.
- Improve forward planning so that asylum accommodations are not closed without adequate warning to local authorities and residents.
- To remove barriers to people with precarious immigration status accessing nutritional and financial support, end data-sharing between public bodies and other organisations, and the Home Office for immigration purposes.

We recommend the Department of Education to:

- Help drive uptake of free school meals among people without recourse to public funds by implementing a data-sharing firewall to prevent local data on free school meals eligibility from being shared with the Home Office and invest in a communications campaign for schools and local authorities.

Acknowledgements

This briefing was written by Isabel Rice, London Food Poverty Campaign coordinator at Sustain, with input from Dr Sophie Cartwright and Danning He from Jesuit Refugee Service UK, and Kenan Albeirakdar from Life Seekers Aid.

We are grateful to everyone that contributed to this report, in particular to everyone that shared their lived experience with us. We thank the councils, VCS organisations, healthcare providers and the Greater London Authority that contributed their expertise. This project was co-delivered with the Jesuit Refugee Service UK and Life Seekers Aid, we are grateful for their time and expertise. We are particularly grateful to Trust for London for funding this piece of work.

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) supports refugees and forcibly displaced people in 50 countries worldwide. JRS in the UK works with people who have been made destitute by the asylum process, and typically have experience of a range of different types of asylum support; and with people in immigration detention. They also conduct research on the asylum system and immigration detention. Their centre is based in Wapping, East London.

Life Seekers Aid is a new organisation, run by people with experience of seeking asylum and refugees. They work for the welfare and rights of people seeking asylum housed in camps, hostels and hotels during their asylum claims and cooperates with local and national charities, legal and medical organisations, and official bodies.

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Sustain is a powerful alliance of organisations and communities working together for a better system of food, farming, and fishing, and cultivating the movement for change. The London Food Poverty Campaign works collaboratively local authorities, food networks and food justice organisations to promote policy and practice that tackles the root causes of food poverty, with our Beyond the Food Bank approach. Their work is funded by Trust for London. www.sustainweb.org