

2017

# Food Poverty

*Royal Borough of Greenwich*

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## Background

In the light of increasing national and London-level evidence of rising levels of food poverty, the Good Food in Greenwich Food Poverty Subgroup took the decision to evaluate the local situation in 2015, to have a firm basis from which to develop further strategic action to address this problem. A needs assessment was therefore undertaken. This involved:

- Identifying data to provide insight into potential levels of food poverty.
- Creating maps and conducting observational fieldwork to identify areas of the borough where there is poor access to affordable healthy food.
- Conducting interviews with five Greenwich residents with experience of food poverty and thirty key workers in organisations and services supporting vulnerable Greenwich residents to gain insight into factors affecting food poverty.

**‘... 10.1% of people aged 15 or over in the UK reported experiencing a struggle to get enough food to eat...’**

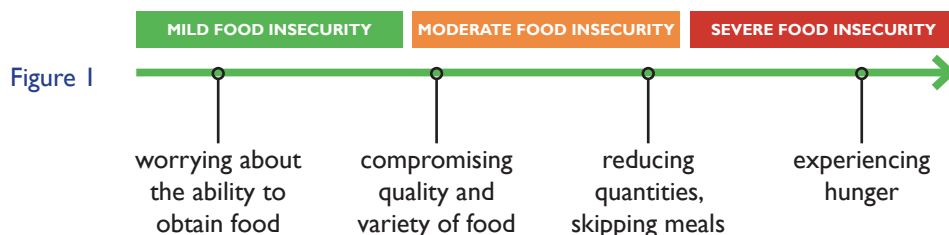
## Defining food poverty

Through the work of the Good Food in Greenwich partnership, food poverty has been defined as: the inability for individuals to afford, or to have access to, foods that make up a healthy diet in ways that are socially acceptable to them. This could include:

- Having limited money for food after paying for other household expenses;
- Living in areas where food choice is restricted by local availability and lack of transport;
- Lacking knowledge, skills, cooking equipment or space necessary to prepare healthy meals.

This definition includes both crisis level food poverty and mild to moderate longer-term food poverty. Figure 1 presents the different levels of food poverty, ranging from mild through to severe food insecurity. The terms food poverty and food insecurity are used interchangeably throughout this report.

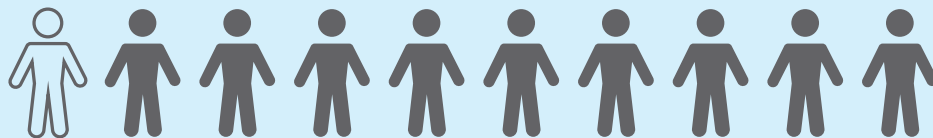
## WHAT IS FOOD INSECURITY?



## What is the level of food poverty in Greenwich?

Levels of food poverty in the UK are not known, as there is currently no national measure for food poverty. In a recent international survey, 10.1% of people aged 15 or over in the UK reported experiencing a struggle to get enough food to eat and 4.5% experienced a severe level of food insecurity (see Figure 1), typically having experienced a time when they had gone a whole day without eating because they could not afford enough food<sup>1</sup>. Although nationally representative, this survey involved only a small sample of 1000 people, and therefore should be interpreted with caution, but if applied to Greenwich it can be estimated that 22,375 people aged over 15 will experience food poverty in the borough in 2017<sup>2</sup> (see Figure 2 over page).

Figure 2 - Estimated people experiencing food poverty



**Approximately 1 in 10 people aged over 15 in the UK report experiencing a struggle to get enough food to eat. Using GLA population figures, this would equate to 22,375 people in Greenwich in 2017**

In the absence of a direct measure for food poverty, we looked at other local data to provide insight into possible levels of food poverty in the borough. Foodbanks provide food parcels to people experiencing severe food insecurity Greenwich Foodbank data are available from April 2012 (when the Foodbank was established in Thamesmead) through to 2016. Table 1 presents the number of food vouchers used alongside the change in vouchers used compared to the previous year<sup>3</sup>. The data show a significant six-fold increase in Foodbank use between the years 2012-13 and 2013-14, as the Foodbank became more established within the borough. Foodbank use appears to stabilise after this time.

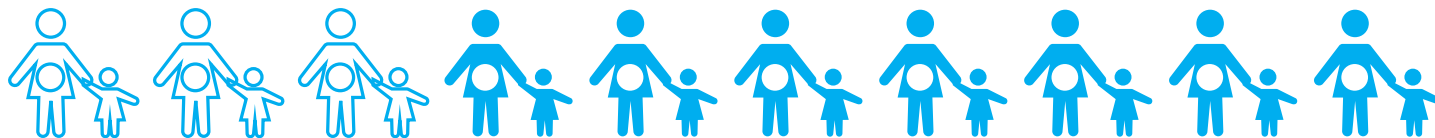
Table 1 - Numbers of Foodbank vouchers used:

Year	No. vouchers (% change from previous year)
2012-2013	415
2013-2014	2513 (506%)
2014-2015	2741 (9.1%)
2015-2016	2732 (-0.3%)

Foodbank voucher data do not represent the numbers of individuals using Foodbanks, as individuals may visit on more than one occasion and up to three vouchers can be issued to an individual. However, the data show an increase in demand for the Foodbank that suggests an increase in food poverty in Greenwich.

It must be emphasised that data on Foodbank use only represent the tip of the iceberg when considering food poverty. We therefore sought other local data to provide insight into numbers of people who may be experiencing food insecurity. Data presented in Figures 3-8 show the large numbers of low-income households and families in the borough potentially at risk. When interpreting these data, it is important to remember that many people on low incomes have effective budgeting, shopping and cooking skills that enable them to manage their limited resources effectively and avoid food poverty. However, although these data cannot tell us how many people are experiencing food poverty in Greenwich, they suggest that large numbers of adults and children living in the borough are likely to be at risk of food insecurity at some point on the scale shown in Figure 1.

Figure 3 - Healthy Start

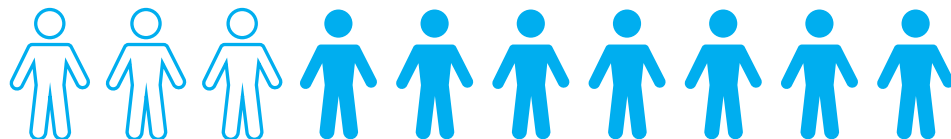


**More than 3 in 10 (1,033) Greenwich children (0-4 years) and pregnant women eligible for Healthy Start are not accessing this essential support<sup>5</sup>.**

Figure 4 - Free school meals



Figure 5 - Children affected by income deprivation



**Almost 3 in 10 Greenwich children are affected by income deprivation<sup>7</sup> (16,585 children in 2017<sup>2</sup>).**

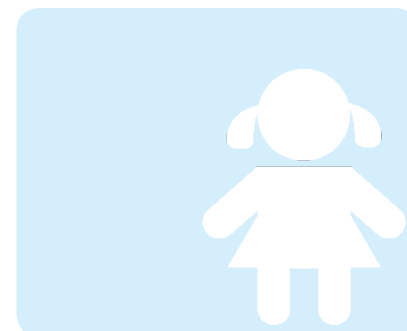


Figure 6 – Low income households

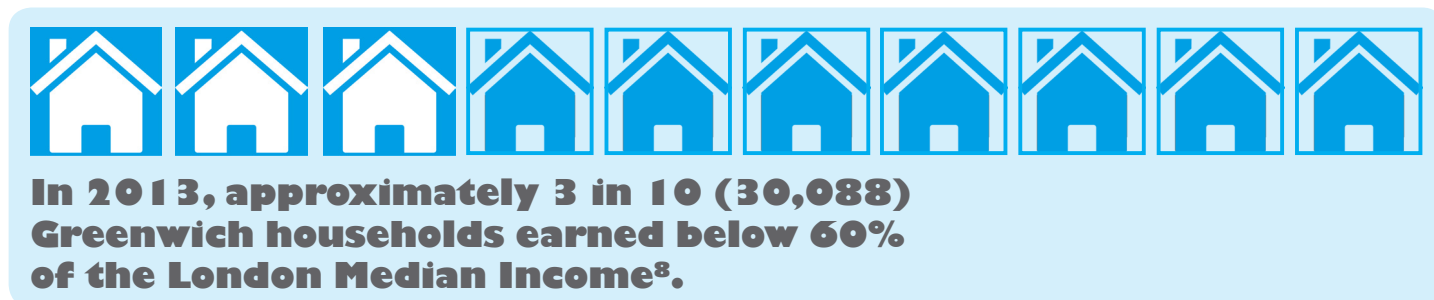
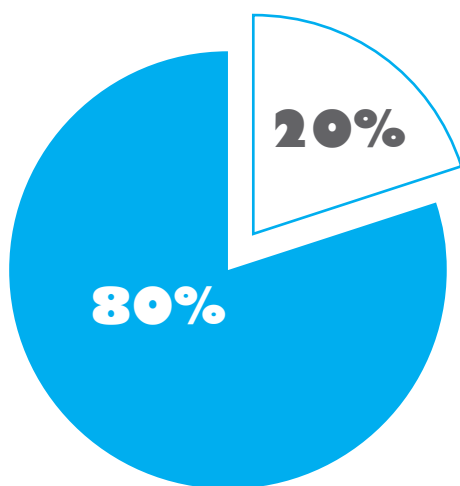


Figure 7 – Low paid jobs



**In 2014, approximately 1 in 5 employees living in Greenwich were in low paid jobs<sup>9</sup>.**

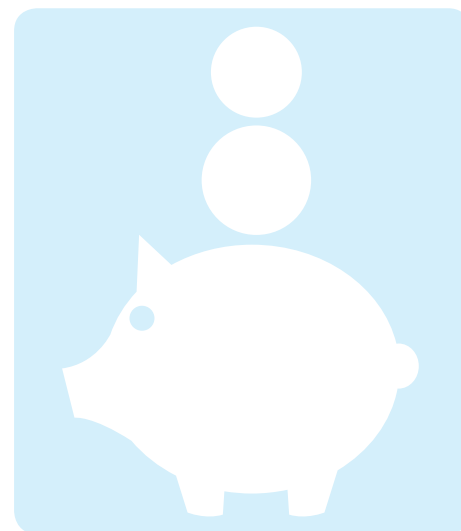
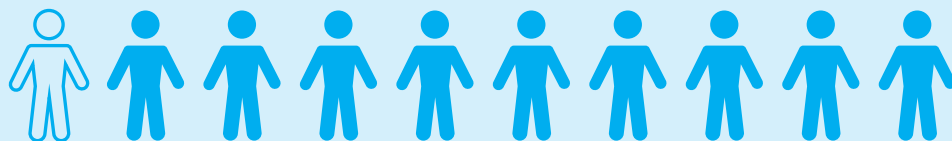
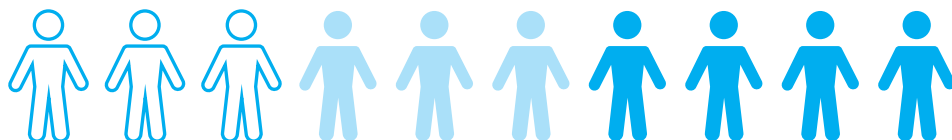


Figure 8 – Out-of-work benefits



**In 2014, more than 1 in 10 working age residents in Greenwich were in receipt of out-of-work benefits<sup>10</sup>.**



**...of these, approximately 6 in 10 (11,140) were in receipt of Emergency Support Allowance and Incapacity Benefits ...and of these, more than 50% suffer from mental health problems and behavioural disorders. People with long term health problems and poor mental health have been identified as being at higher risk of food poverty. These statistics therefore suggest a large number of vulnerable out-of-work adults<sup>10</sup>.**

## What causes food poverty in Greenwich?

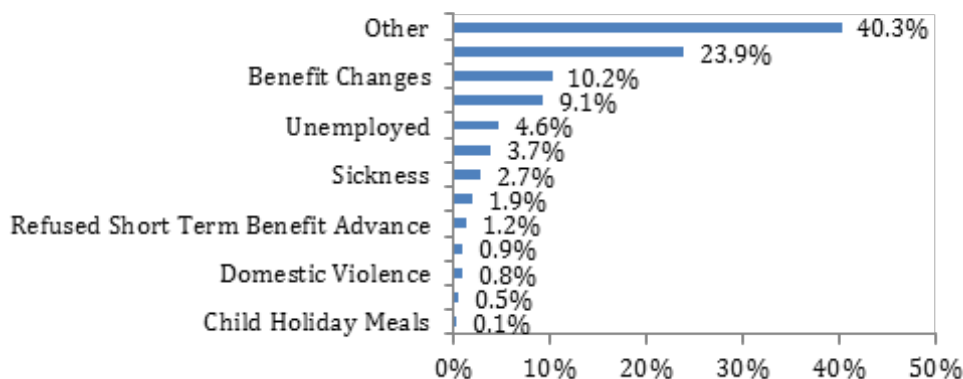
During our interviews people talked about a wide range of factors that cause food poverty. The picture presented is complex. Many of these factors are interrelated and people were generally considered to experience multiple factors. When combined, these make eating a healthy diet increasingly unattainable.

### Financial reasons



Everybody we interviewed talked about financial reasons for food poverty, reflecting the increasingly precarious financial situations that many people find themselves in. Problems with benefits were most frequently cited, by 77% of key workers. Benefit sanctions were reported to be causing significant financial problems, by 53% of key workers, and were often cited as the thing that pushes people from a situation of long-term food insecurity into that of crisis level food poverty. There is a large amount of national evidence showing these negative impacts of benefits sanctions and delays or a sudden loss or reduction in employment. Low-waged employment was identified as causing food poverty by 40% of the key workers we interviewed. Figure 9 shows that many Greenwich Foodbank referrals were made because of problems with benefits and low income<sup>11</sup>.

Figure 9 - Reasons for using a Foodbank in Greenwich 2013-14





*"In the three years since the introduction of welfare reforms we've seen it (food poverty) more and more, foodbank use has definitely gone up. It will get worse because of further reductions; the benefit cap in autumn will take it down £57 for a family. It's a massive amount. An estimated three hundred extra families will be affected in Greenwich."* Finance/benefits adviser



*"Once they are sanctioned that's it, they're for the food bank."*

Children & families service provider

*"We've got other people who need food bank vouchers who are working, both working, on low incomes, the rent is really, really expensive. The last couple I spoke to, they'd been homeless before. So they'd paid their rent and had no money left at the end of the month for food."* Finance/benefits adviser

Most key workers talked about clients on low incomes having to manage conflicting demands on the limited money they had available. Basic household expenses including rent, bills and fuel were reported by 67% of respondents. Some key workers also referred to debts such as rent arrears and credit card bills putting household budgets under pressure.



Fuel poverty was highlighted as a significant issue, mentioned by 50% of respondents. The people with experience of food poverty we interviewed talked about all these problems.

*"I'm not working and he's signed off sick (ESA) and we're a bit behind on rent and council tax and that so we have to pay a bit extra to top that up. Then there's the gas and electric and then travel. When we had the car it was always a tight budget. We haven't got the car at the moment so that's saving on petrol and he's stopped smoking so that's saving some money there."* Young mum, 3 children

*"They're having to choose between what to eat and having to put money on their electric card."* Children & families service provider

## Lack of knowledge and skills

Low income does not necessarily equate with food poverty. Those with a good knowledge of what constitutes a healthy diet and effective shopping and cooking skills can manage to achieve a healthy diet and there is evidence that many people on low incomes manage their limited food budgets effectively. Several key workers we interviewed talked about a lack of budgeting skills, however the people with experience of food poverty all talked about budgeting carefully for food and other expenses.

*"See we have our set budget and we work out what we can get... I get a pen and paper and in the corner I put the days I've got to budget for and then I just put food down like sausage and mash. Then I work out how much money I've got left (after bills, gas/electric) and that's what I've got for shopping. You never get everything you want, always got to cut stuff down... I always do a shopping list and I've got loads of books at home that's got each payment in and what gets spent and working out how much you've got for shopping."* Young mum, 3 children

*"You know, you get something there, something there, depending on the prices. You can save a fiver like that on your shopping."* Breakfast club user (male)

On the other hand, there is much evidence that food-related knowledge and skills are being eroded and for many the inability to budget, shop and cook will add to limited income to compromise food choices. Key workers considered lack of knowledge and skills to be the second most significant cause of food poverty in Greenwich. Most key workers talked about people's inability to shop for and prepare healthy meals on a budget and described service users as experiencing long-term food insecurity characterised by a dependence on cheap food with poor nutritional quality.

*“For a lot of clients the concept of going out and shopping for fresh ingredients for a meal or budgeting for good food is a bit foreign.”* Community worker

*“It frightened the life out of me what they were feeding their kids (parents at a school cookery club). Chicken and chips, Iceland four for £2. It's full of sugar, salt and fat, which is why you see our kids getting chubbier and chubbier. We see it when they bring lunch at the summer scheme; triple decker sandwiches with sausages or burgers plus this sweet, that sweet, this chocolate biscuit, three bags of crisps. It's really cheap stuff. In Iceland you can get a pack of ham for £1 and it does six to eight rounds of sandwiches, so that does a week and a loaf of white bread for 59p. Scotch eggs and stuff like that, the kids have loads of them.”*

Community worker

## Poor housing & kitchen facilities

Further limitations to achieving a healthy diet are poor domestic facilities, experienced by many low-income households. These can make it difficult or impossible to prepare home cooked meals.

*“Multiple-occupancy housing is a major issue, when you've got eight families in one house. Cooking and keeping food safe from others is a problem. Instant noodles can be prepared in room.”*

Children & families service provider

## Poor physical access to healthy, affordable food

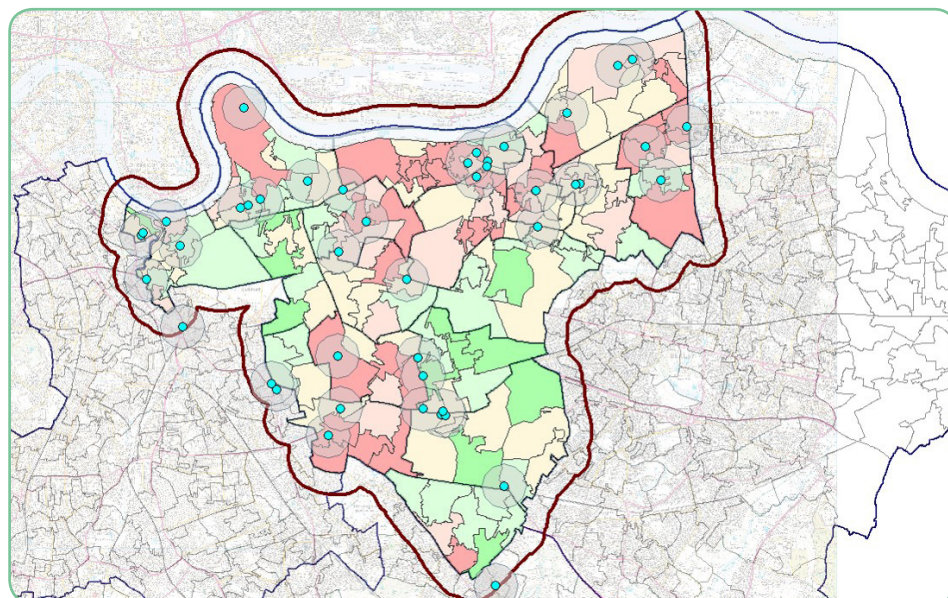
**70%**  
**of key workers interviewed mentioned factors limiting physical access to affordable, healthier food.**

Low-income households are more likely to live in deprived areas where studies have shown there to be a limited availability of healthy foods in local shops and often higher food prices. Only three street markets serve the borough, in Deptford, Woolwich and Central Greenwich. However, the latter is more a source of takeaway food and does not have fruit and vegetable stalls. Street markets are a particularly good source of reasonably priced fruit and vegetables and residents of the borough, particularly in the south, have poor access to this opportunity. 70% of key workers interviewed mentioned factors limiting physical access to affordable, healthier food.

*“People don't have access to some of the big shops where they can get more for their money.”* Community food worker

This problem can be seen in Figure 10, on the next page. This shows the distribution of supermarkets (offering a wide range of affordable healthy food) in Greenwich, with 400m buffer zones indicating walking distance. The maps also show Greenwich deprivation data (IMD) for 2015 at Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) level, with most deprived areas highlighted in darker red.

Figure 10 - Supermarkets in Greenwich & LSOA IMD Greenwich quintiles



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## Key

### Food premises

● Supermarkets

### Markings

— Greenwich boundary including 400m buffer

— Greenwich Ward boundaries

— Greenwich LSOA boundaries

● Food premises 400m buffer

### IMD Greenwich quantities

■ 1 (most deprived)

■ 2

■ 3

■ 4

■ 5 (least deprived)

Several areas within more deprived LSOAs are seen to fall outside walking distance of supermarkets. The following areas, were investigated further:

- Thamesmead Moorings and areas of West Thamesmead
- Small areas of Abbeywood
- Glyndon/Barnfield/Herbert Road/Woolwich Common
- Woolwich Dockyard
- Some areas of Charlton
- West Eltham
- Horn Park, Middle Park, Coldharbour and Averyhill estates

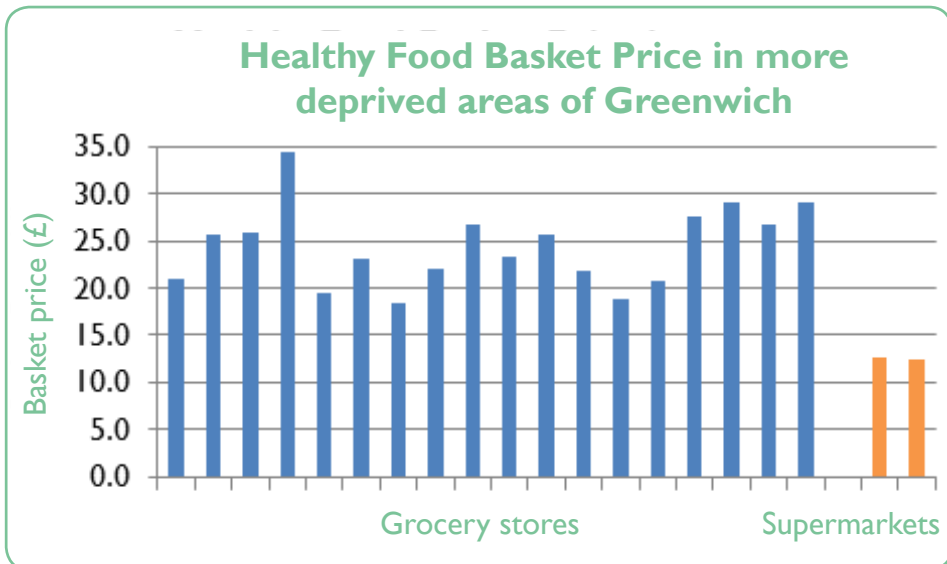
Outreach was conducted in these areas and a healthy shopping basket survey conducted in the small grocery stores that serve them. Figure 11 on the next page shows that although availability of the items in our healthy food basket is not limited in all the grocery stores, many do not stock a number of healthy food items. Figure 12 shows the price of our healthy food basket in a sample of these shops and clearly demonstrates that food prices are much higher than in supermarkets. For the same basket, prices range from £18.40 to £34.50, with an average of £24.40. The same basket cost £12.60 and £12.50 in two supermarkets in Woolwich.



Figure 11 - Percentage availability of the 22 food items in different shops.



Figure 12 - Prices of the healthy food basket in 18 shops in deprived areas with predicted poor access to healthy food (blue) and in 2 supermarkets (orange).



Whilst the priority areas are well served by bus routes that connected with local town centres where larger supermarkets are located, in some larger estates those with limited mobility may struggle, as bus stops located on main roads are often a long walk from some residential areas. People with no money for a bus pass or Oyster card top-up may also be restricted to using these local shops with limited availability of affordable healthy food.

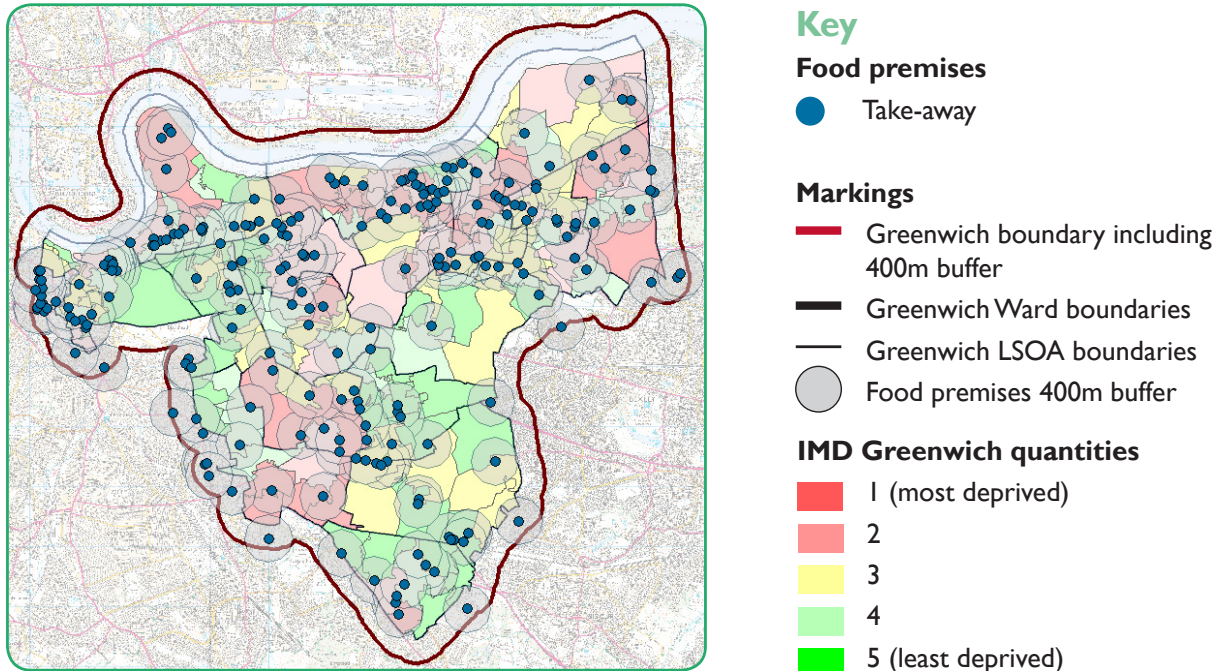


## Access to cheap, unhealthy foods

Whilst availability and access to healthy food may be restricted in deprived areas, there is growing evidence that, with the rise in numbers of takeaways, unhealthy food is becoming increasingly available. Mapping demonstrates that there is easy access to unhealthy foods from takeaways and stores selling foods such as confectionery, crisps and sugary drinks in most areas of the borough. Figure 13 shows the distribution of takeaways in the borough, with 400m buffer zones indicating walking distance. Greenwich deprivation data (IMD) for 2015 at Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) level is also shown, with most deprived areas highlighted in darker red. The large number of takeaway outlets is evident and few areas fall outside the 400m walking zones, particularly most deprived residential areas. Closer inspection of the map reveals that many areas outside the 400m zones are parks and green spaces rather than residential areas.



Figure 13 - Take-away premises in Greenwich & LSOA IMD Greenwich quintiles



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30% of key workers were concerned about the proliferation of fast food outlets offering unhealthy foods at low prices. Figure 14 shows Greenwich takeaways offering low-priced meal deals. When cooking skills, facilities, and often time, are limited and takeaways offer increasingly cheap meal deals, it becomes easy for those with low incomes living in deprived areas to choose these unhealthy options.

“Like if you want to get a meal you have to go to the Co-op. There’s no other place you can go and that’s really expensive. But if you wanted to get junk food then there’s shops everywhere for that. So it’s like, in my eyes they’re promoting too much junk food to the healthy food. Because you step out there, there’s takeaways left-right-and-centre and there are tiny little shops that sell everything but normal food. It’s hard to say no when you’ve got the money and you don’t know what else to buy.”

Teenage mum

“We’ve got a chippy, a Chinese and an Indian. Then there’s the hot food bar in the shop, where you can get a sandwich for £1. Then there’s a café around the corner. You’ve got a sweet shop over there, you know, I just think it’s all too much. And an ice cream van sitting out there summer and winter.”

Community worker

“We see vulnerable groups on a daily basis, including disabled, elderly, people with young children. All of them will need some basic amount of nutrition to see them through and unfortunately if they are on a low income or in receipt of benefits it’s extremely difficult to accommodate for all the essential expenditure and have a good, constant budget for food.”

Finance/benefits adviser

Figure 14 - Cheap takeaway options in Greenwich



## Vulnerable Groups

Although some of those we interviewed felt that food poverty can be experienced fairly indiscriminately, most identified certain groups who are particularly susceptible to food poverty. These groups are more likely to experience the causal factors described above. Several additional social issues relating to food poverty are also experienced by these groups, including homelessness, social isolation and a poor support network. These factors are not generally exclusive and were reported to combine to produce highly complex and stressful situations that are hard to manage or resolve.

The groups identified as being particularly vulnerable to food poverty are: low income families with young children; young adults, particularly the homeless or those leaving care; older people; recently arrived migrants; the homeless; people living in poor quality housing; people with long term health conditions or disabilities and those with drug and alcohol dependencies.

## 4. What are the impacts of food poverty in Greenwich?

We observed that people in Greenwich are experiencing all levels of food insecurity (Figure 1). All five people with experience of food poverty who we interviewed said they sometimes or often worry that they will run out of food because of a lack of money.

*"We do worry but that's why we try and make it last."* Teenage mum

Reliance on cheap, energy-dense foods was reported frequently in our interviews with key workers, by just over half of respondents. This was often described as high fat, salt and sugar convenience foods and takeaways but several respondents also referred to biscuits or toast replacing a proper meal.

*"...filling up on starchy carbs with very little nutritional quality, like pot noodles."*

Children and families service provider

*"Their priority is to fill their bellies rather than have something healthy."*

Migrant support worker

*"They're feeding the children but living on toast."* Children and families service provider

Those with experience of food poverty talked about shopping for filling foods, prioritising those that will meet their energy requirements, and not being able to afford foods of higher nutritional value such as fruit and vegetables.

# 13%

**of key workers talked about people relying on starchy foods for meals, as they were unable to afford the other ingredients to make a balanced meal.**

*"We'll get the stuff that we know will fill us up. Like sausage rolls should fill you up because of the pastry and that so you've got those kinds of foods that take away the hunger for a while."* Teenage mum

*"So like we'll get stuff for sandwiches and sausage rolls and that. We'll get the stuff that we know will fill us up... I want to make changes but it all turns down to what you've got and making it last cos when the kids are hungry, fruit doesn't last as long as a pack of biscuits... I can get a few packs of biscuits (5 packs for £2 in Iceland), which could last probably the week, and then spend the same amount on the grapes that could last 2 days."* Young mum, 3 children

A lack of cooking skills, combined with financial limitations, severely restricted interviewees' diets. All five people with experience of food poverty talked about the monotony of relying on the same meals but being unable to see a way out of this situation.



*"That's where the same meals come in again cos you sit there trying to work out what to get for shopping. See we have our set budget and we work out what we can get. We have our set foods so I wouldn't know where to start (to change)."*

Young mum, 3 children

*"You can always get by with some mismatch of food you've got indoors. What bits and pieces I've got, like a tin of carrots and something I can easily make a meal. It's a bit of a mess sitting there on the plate but just emptying a tin into a pan and warming it up."*

Breakfast club user (female)

When money becomes too short, restrictions extend from the quality of food to the quantity. 47% of key workers talked about their clients missing meals because there was insufficient food and 23%, mainly those working with families, reported that parents will miss meals so that their children can eat. Those working in schools and children's centres also mentioned children missing meals.

*"Between eight to ten children in each classroom are coming in without breakfast and their learning is suffering. By 10am to 10.30am, during literacy or maths, they are flagging, if not earlier."*

Children & families service provider

*"Then you come across other families where there is food poverty but they say, 'Oh it's not that bad, as long as the kids eat' and the mum's not eating every day. Or people say, 'It's all right weekdays, cos the kids can have a school dinner'. Weekend is the biggest struggle because you've got all the kids at home and they all need feeding. And the school holidays as well."* Finance/benefits adviser

**In response to the question, 'Are there days when you miss a main meal because of a lack of money?' two of the five people experiencing food poverty who we interviewed responded positively.**

**"All the time - or let's say sometimes, because when the friends give us money, we have food. If they don't give us money, we don't have."**

Migrant Hub user

**"I'll go without and then I sleep. Take all my worries away."**

Breakfast club user (female)



Among the three respondents with children, two reported prioritising food for children before themselves.

*"It all depends on money I've got. Sometimes if it's a really small amount it's a bit tight... So you'd go without but you make sure kids have something. Try to make sure they're eating all right."* Young mum, 3 children

Of the two people who did report missing meals, one interviewee answered positively to the question 'Are you ever hungry because of a lack of food?' in relation to both her and her children.

## Health consequences of food poverty

These imbalances of certain food and nutrient intakes contribute to poor health for those in lower income groups. A poor diet is associated with a range of ill health, including overweight and obesity and associated conditions such as heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes, poor oral health and poor mental health. People from lower income groups experience higher rates of many of these conditions<sup>12</sup>.

## Social consequences of food poverty

Those experiencing food poverty report a range of negative emotional and social consequences including fear, stress, shame and social exclusion<sup>13</sup>. For example, when there is no money for food it is not possible to go out to eat with friends, neither is it possible to invite them for a meal at home..

*"Our clients (frail elderly) are at home all day, alone with only TV for company. Food is something that should be shared. It has cultural significance but it's become something very solitary."* Older people's service provider



## 5. What support is available for people experiencing food poverty in Greenwich?

Several sources of help and support for people experiencing food poverty were reported. The most frequently cited source of support was Greenwich Foodbank, mentioned by 63% of respondents. Some respondents (37%) mentioned the stigma attached to using the Foodbank and felt that this may put some people off; however, several respondents (23%) talked about an increasing social acceptance of the Foodbank.

**‘37% mentioned a stigma attached to using foodbank...’**

*“A few are concerned about stigma but not generally. I don’t think they like doing it but they’ve all accepted it and used it. I think they’re kind of accepting that that’s the way of life now, isn’t it, there’s no choice.”* Children & families service provider

In addition to Greenwich Foodbank, several key workers reported providing food parcels to their service users, including a church, two of the community centres and two children’s centres. It can be assumed that there is also a considerable amount of informal and ad hoc foodbank provision in the borough.

*“...I said, come on, let’s have a look in here (store cupboard) and she went away with 2 carrier bags of stuff.”* Community worker

Free financial assistance was the second most frequently mentioned source of support. Half of key workers referred to this, mentioning a range of services and organisations providing financial support and advice that provide a valuable way to help people on low income maximise their income. Organisations and services mentioned include the Citizens Advice Bureau, the Emergency Support Scheme, Welfare Rights, Age UK advice line, Advocacy for Older People and Money House training for young people leaving care.

*“A lot of people are not getting what they are entitled to, particularly people on disability benefits.”*

Finance/benefits adviser

Half of key workers reported clients relying on free food. This included meals provided by organisations, such as free school meals, breakfast and lunch clubs and community cookery clubs, and food from family and friends.

*“Even if it’s only beans on toast for dinner, I know the kids have had a full dinner at school so it’s not going to harm them.”* Young mum, 3 children

Two users of the church breakfast club we interviewed and the user of the Migrant Hub highlighted the importance of community meals such as lunch and breakfast clubs.

**“This place has been a diamond; I’ve only been coming for a few months. If it hadn’t been for these ladies and their help and support, I don’t know where I’d be.”**

Breakfast club user  
(female)

## 6. Recommendations for further action to reduce food poverty

The findings of the needs assessment indicate that, whilst a wide range of activities are taking place to address food poverty in Greenwich, there is still a great deal more to be done. A full set of recommendations for action are presented on pages 83-85 of the RBG Food Poverty Needs Assessment report and include:

- Reviewing and updating the existing Good Food in Greenwich Food Poverty Action Plan
- Annual monitoring of food poverty levels in Greenwich
- Maximising opportunities for low income households to improve their financial situation and manage conflicting demands on income
- Building on and strengthening work to improve access to affordable, healthy food in deprived neighbourhoods as part of wider social regeneration and community development in the borough

- Supporting community meals provision to vulnerable groups
- Maximising services that support the development of food-related knowledge and practical life skills
- Ensuring that advice and support services for people experiencing food poverty are widely publicised and available to those with greatest needs.

An electronic copy of the full report can be obtained online here: <https://greenwichfairnesscommission.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/rbg-food-poverty-needs-assessment-report-public-health.pdf> or contact Nicola Nzuzza for more information: [nicola.nzuzza@royalgreenwich.gov.uk](mailto:nicola.nzuzza@royalgreenwich.gov.uk)

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