

Child of the North APPG Meeting Minutes

Tuesday 8 July 2025

Report Launch - Hungry for Change: Tackling Obesity and Food Insecurity in the North of England

Attendees: Emma Lewell MP, Rachel Masell MP, Kim Johnson MP, The Rt Revd Nick Baines, Ian Byrne MP, Mary Foy MP, Hannah Davies, Health Equity North, Alexis Darby, Health Equity North, Cara Leavey, Health Equity North, Professor Maria Bryant, York University, Rob Oxley, York University, Dr Helen Moore, Teesside University, Andrea Burrows, Teesside University, Professor Nicola Heslehurst, Newcastle University, Lucy Heyderman, Food Foundation, Evette Callender, Food Foundation, Penny Walters, Food Foundation, Keira Forrestee, Food Foundation, Caroline Woollam, Food Foundation, Cassie Ellis, Nutrition Society, Jade Mitchell Nutrition Society, Tracy Bogan, Nutrition Society, Emily Fallon, Public Health lead at Essex County Council, Dr Kay Aaronicks, Head of Education at Anglia Ruskin University, Dayna Brackley, Partner at Bremner & Co.

Emma Lewell MP opened the meeting and thanked everyone for attending and gave an overview of the report.

Professor Maria Bryant, York University, gave an in-depth look at the report and the key findings:

Across the life course, there are higher levels of food insecurity, and this is getting worse in the North compared to the South.

- Higher prevalence of childhood obesity in the North - 25% in North east compared to 19% in the South.
- Strong and persistent link between deprivation and health outcomes.

Obesity is heavily influenced by deprivation. Most deprived areas have high rates. Maternal obesity is highest in the North East, and there is not as much data on food insecurity for maternal health. About 25% families with young babies and children live with food insecurity.

The early years are really important, and things look positive politically. Recent diet and nutrition data across the country shows higher soft drink consumption and sugar consumption in the North.

- Breastfeeding rates lower in the North and dental care worse in the North.
- 1 in 5 children in school experience obesity. When we looked at free school meals, we found that registration rates/eligibility higher in the North.

The North of England is far more exposed to fast food, and there is a higher proportion of fast food advertisements in the North.

Evette Callender from the Food Foundation shared her experience of food insecurity during pregnancy.

I experienced gestational diabetes and needed a specialist diet to avoid spikes in sugar levels. Meeting dietary needs was very challenging as there was no fresh fruit and veg available. Doctors advised me on what to eat, but in order to maintain a healthy pregnancy, I needed to get certain foods, and that wasn't always practical. Sometimes I couldn't afford to travel to the shop where food was available. Sometimes I was too tired from diabetes, so I would eat cheaper fast food from local shops. While food was not always a good option, at least my child was being fed.

Penny Walters from the Food Foundation shared her work regarding food insecurity.

I am a food ambassador from Newcastle from Byker. Growing up it was totally different to how kids grow up now. Food insecurity has been a persistent reality for my family. Support over the years hasn't kept in line with inflation. Costs have risen sharply. Accessing healthy and nutritious food is harder. Hard to access not just nutritious food but food to cook. Healthy start is a well-intentioned scheme but it's not enough, the amount for a pregnant woman doesn't even begin to cover the cost of infant formula. Leaves little or nothing for fruit and veg and other vital food.

Keira Forrestee from the Food Foundation.

I want to be the voice for people who feel too embarrassed. The effect that not having enough food has on people is bigger than people realise – it affects your confidence. Not having food affects school and, ability to pass exams. There is a huge stigma around going to a food bank and reaching out for support. I was on FSM, it wasn't enough. I know we didn't have money to have a full meal at home. I had friends who didn't eat a meal throughout the school day. Not every child can go home and have a hot healthy meal. It needs to be made so that if it is the meal they are getting, it needs to be healthy and a good portion.

General discussion regarding the report

Kim Johnson MP: Today has been the launch of the children's commissioner report which highlighted a similar issue of children growing up in a Dickensian environment and being diagnosed with Victorian diseases. Your work has inputted into the child poverty strategy. I have a question for Maria, how confident change will happen and what more needs to happen?

Professor Maria Bryant: We can talk about food insecurity, but it's all about poverty; that's what it's driven through. We have recommendations based on welfare support. =

We need more support within communities, and example in Bradford of communities who just couldn't access healthy food – they got together with butchers and greengrocers etc to drive round and sell their food. It's not people not desiring but not being able to access it.

Ian Byrne MP: It's all coming together and the voices are saying the same thing. It's about investment. Story today in Liverpool about a mobile greengrocer. In Liverpool we have food vans, but it's tinkering around the edges. Communities are in terrible trouble and it will help some people. We have community kitchens... it's great, but the scale of what we're seeing is that we can't tinker around the edges. It's gone past that point. =

Dayna Brackley, Partner at Bremner & Co: We need to start talking about this as a life course. We have early years, universal credit etc. but universally food isn't looked at. We call it the inconsistency rollercoaster. Stages through life without structure or guidance. MPs should advocate for that. I hope it's in the child poverty strategy – we should be looking at the first 8000 days.

Mary Foy MP: In terms of poverty and hunger that is shocking and down to having money in your pocket. When I worked in Gateshead council we did a project on obesity, and we found that it was the lack of healthy food and the proliferation of fast food takeaways in one area. Birtley for example with 26 takeaways in a mile. There was a price war among takeaways, cheaper than fresh food. If you have busy work, you're going to go for takeaways. Local councils can use supplementary planning document to ensure that you don't allow any fast food takeaways to open up, especially in areas with higher rates of obesity. Did that in Gateshead. Found that it hadn't worked as well as hoped, but due to Covid and rise in takeaways.

Professor Nicola Heslehurst, Newcastle University: There has been a rise in dark kitchens and they don't fall under regulation in the same way. People order outside the exclusion zone. Looking at how do councils respond to that dynamic and that fast moving business enterprise.

Emma Lewell MP: We need to look at how to solve this issue of dark kitchens.

Kim Johnson MP: I would like to thank the speakers and ask Hannah, on the Governments 10 year strategy, , is what is proposed going to impact on these issues?

Hannah Davies, Health Equity North: I was at the launch, the investment in deprived communities will help. Primary care investment is a good thing, especially if going to deprived areas. The digital stuff is key as we risk digital exclusion. Need to make sure people who are the sickest get access. Need to watch how it is implemented and funded.

Emma Lewell MP: If you had to pick a recommendation, which would have the most impact?

Hannah Davies, Health Equity North: The two-child limit, no doubt.

Ian Byrne MP: The two-child limit is causing a lot of heartache. But the hubs are great news, as so many issues in my constituency come from Sure Start being abolished. The 13th September is the Westminster food congress, they have eight evidence sessions on the right to food, which could feed into that.

Emma Lewell MP: I will feed this work into the relevant ministers, and we have the child poverty strategy. Could we have a handy one-sider? Our reports are so well evidenced.

Hannah Davies, Health Equity North: And that flags our successes too, this is a good idea.

Kim Johnson MP: Can we send to chairs of relevant select committees?

Bishop of Leeds: Nick: Nobody in the House of Lords needs convincing. We need a political argument, including where the money is going to come from.

Emma Lewell MP: We had lots of ideas shared in the debate last week. Polling was done, which convinced the Government that it's not a popular policy. It's a sticking point on how this isn't popular with the wider public. If we can get a document together we can share that with the decision makers.

Emma Lewell MP thanked everyone for attending the meeting, and as next steps, Health Equity North will produce a document on the two-child limit.

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