Briefing: Food insecurity – what can local government do?

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Key points

- Good food is a fundamental building block of health. Everyone should be able to access and afford enough nutritious food to lead a healthy life. However, more than 1 in 6 households in the UK reported that they had experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in January 2023 – for example, eating less or skipping meals even when hungry – because they could not afford or access food.

- Levels of food insecurity have risen in the UK over recent years. Food insecurity is a complex problem with many interrelated causes. Creating a population in which everyone can access and afford sufficient, nutritious food will require action across multiple determinants, many of which operate at national and global levels. In this briefing, we explore what local government can do to address food insecurity in their local communities.

- There are actions that local government can take to support residents experiencing or at risk of food insecurity. These include:

  - Continue to support residents experiencing and at risk of poverty, and monitor and evaluate this action to understand the impact on food security.

  - Help eligible residents to access existing nationally funded support, including free school meals and healthy start vouchers.

  - Consider implementing evidence-based actions to reduce food insecurity – these include universal (or extended) access to free school meals, school holiday provision and meals-on-wheels services.

  - Identify groups or households at risk of food insecurity using local intelligence and understanding about risk factors, and target support and preventive action.

  - Connect people affected by food insecurity with services that can help address underlying drivers of poverty and income, as well as provide support to improve mental and physical health.

  - Consider opportunities for a much wider systems approach to food access and availability that could bring co-benefits to the local economy, the environment and health.

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- Learn from action and share knowledge, including seeking to influence national government to improve food security and enable effective local action on this.
- Local government has an important role to play in increasing food security in their local populations. But to enable this, national government must provide sufficient and sustainable funding to enable long-term planning of preventive approaches. National government action is also needed across relevant departments and with the food industry to create a food system that provides affordable and accessible nutritious food for everyone in the UK, while also benefitting the economy and environment.
- To inform effective action at national and local level, there is a need to build the evidence base about what works in practice, both to prevent food insecurity by acting across the breadth of its determinants and to support those affected.

Introduction

Good food is a fundamental building block of health. Everyone should be able to access and afford enough good food to live a healthy life. But this is not currently the case in the UK, where levels of food insecurity have risen over recent years. More than 1 in 6 households in the UK experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in January 2023, reporting in a large, nationally representative survey that they had eaten less or skipped meals, even when hungry, because they could not afford or access food. 1 in 16 households surveyed – an estimated 3.2 million adults – reported they had not eaten for a whole day for this reason.[1]

Food security is defined by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization as meaning that 'all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life.'[2] This relies on the availability of food, as well as people's ability to access, afford and use it (including preparation and storage).[3]

Food insecurity can be considered at a global, national, local, household and individual level.[4,5,6] Given the food system operates at a global scale, and that poverty is a key driver,[7] many of the actions needed to increase access to and affordability of food are at national government or even international level. This is recognised in the plan produced by the National Food Strategy Independent Review in 2021,[8] which makes recommendations designed to intervene at multiple levels of the system.

There are, however, actions that local government can take to increase food security in their populations, both through taking steps to prevent people at risk from experiencing food insecurity, and through targeted support for those who need it.

This briefing is part of a series looking at actions local government can take on the wider determinants of health. Here, we focus on evidence-based actions that local government can take to increase household food security for those in their local populations.

Food insecurity in the UK

Food insecurity has only recently begun to be routinely monitored in the UK,[9] meaning there is not a consistent, long-term source of data to understand how this has changed over time. An important and regular source comes from The Food Foundation, which began to track and report experiences of food insecurity through a series of nationally representative surveys in March 2020.[10] At the time, lockdown-related food shortages and school closures had raised concerns about access to food, particularly for families on low incomes.[11]

These concerns were well founded. 16% of UK households reported experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity in the first 2 weeks of the national lockdown. Although there are no comparable statistics from before the pandemic, this level of food insecurity was temporary, falling month by month as the pandemic went on to around 7% in August 2020. It remained at this level until late 2021, when living costs began rising rapidly in the UK. Levels of food insecurity increased over the next year, peaking at 18% in September 2022 and have remained high since. These rises have been especially marked in households with children, with around a quarter of these households experiencing food insecurity in September 2022 and January 2023.[1]

Since 2019/20, the government has also reported measures of food insecurity through the Department for Work and Pensions' Family Resources Survey (FRS). The FRS is a continuous household survey that reports annually on the living standards and circumstances of people living in the UK. Inclusion of food insecurity measures alongside the survey's other measures allows examination of risk factors for being food insecure. However, data are not released for a year after survey fieldwork has completed,[12,13] meaning this is less useful for monitoring and responding to changes in food insecurity. These data are included in the UK Food Security Report, produced by Government at least every three-years as a duty under the Agriculture Act 2020. This report includes a broad range of data relating to different dimensions of food security in the UK. In addition to household food security, these include global food availability, UK food supply sources, resilience of the supply chain, and food safety and consumer confidence. The next report will be produced in 2024.[14]

Prior to these recent surveys, food bank use was used as a proxy source of information for monitoring food insecurity in the UK.[15] Not all people who are food insecure – even severely – will use a food bank,[12] so this is a crude indicator, but increases in food bank use were seen in the decade from 2010. The Trussell Trust, which supports a network of food banks in the UK, had around 35 food banks in the network in 2010/11, growing in response to rising need to 650 in 2013/14 and to almost 1,300 in 2019/20. The number of food parcels distributed by food banks has similarly increased, from 61,000 in 2010/11 to over 1.9 million in 2019/20, and almost 3 million in 2022/23.[16]

The impact of food insecurity

Given limited data, there is little evidence on the impact of food insecurity on health outcomes in the UK. Food insecurity has likely been rising in the UK during the 2010s, based on the increased numbers of people using food banks.[16] However, the pandemic drew closer attention to the problem, while the cost-of-living crisis has put it firmly in the spotlight.

Diet-related ill health is a leading cause of preventable illness in the UK, and a significant driver of health inequalities.[17] Healthy, nutritious food is now almost three times more expensive per calorie than unhealthy products.[18] And between 2021 and 2022, healthier foods saw greater price inflation, increasing in price by 5% on average, compared with 2.5% increases seen for the least healthy foods.[18] It is therefore not surprising that households experiencing food insecurity are more likely to be cutting back on buying healthier foods, including fruit, vegetables and fish,[19] resulting in poorer quality diets that increase risk of diet-related ill health. This is not a new phenomenon, but poor-quality diets in childhood in particular may have a long-term impact on health including by shaping eating habits and preferences.[20]

Food insecurity is also detrimental to mental health, being a cause of significant stress and anxiety in affected households. More than three-quarters of food insecure households (compared with less than half of food secure ones) worry about the inability to afford sufficient food affecting their children's physical and mental health, and about the impact of the cost of living on their children's friendships, social development, education and general wellbeing. More than half (compared with less than a third of secure households) worry about the impact of their child's current diet on their weight and health.[21] Pilots of universal free school meals found improved educational attainment, with the greatest improvement in children from the least affluent backgrounds.[22]

When considering the impact on health, it is also important to think about what else households go without when budgets are insufficient. This includes the trade-offs made between buying food and heating and other bills, hygiene products and participating in social activities.[19,23,24]

What are the causes of food insecurity?

Household food insecurity is caused by many interrelated drivers operating at global, national, local, household and individual levels.[4,5,6] Poverty is a key driver,[7] and some groups are at greater risk of falling into poverty than others.[25] Currently in the UK, the rising costs of food and other costs relative to incomes has been underlying the recent increases seen in household food insecurity in the UK.[1]

There are stark inequalities between households in their risk of experiencing food insecurity. For example, households with children are more likely to be food insecure than those without. The table below, showing inequalities in food insecurity, reveal other factors that increase risk of a household being food insecure.[1]

Table 1: Factors that increase the risk of household food insecurity
Percentage of households reporting moderate or severe food insecurity over the
preceding month

Universal Credit	
In receipt of Universal Credit	49%
Not in receipt of Universal Credit	15%
Employment sector	
Food sector	26%
Health and social care sector	25%
Education sector	21%
Average	18%
Disability	
Adult limited a lot by disability	42%
Adult limited a little by disability	24%
No adults limited by disability	13%
Ethnic group	
Asian/Asian British	28%
Black/African/Caribbean	27%
Mixed/Multiple	26%
White	18%

Source: The Food Foundation. Food Insecurity Tracking. *The Food Foundation*; 2023 (https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking).

These findings are broadly reflected in the results of the FRS.[12] This found that households with lower income, those in receipt of Universal Credit and those in the social rented sector were more likely to be food insecure. This was also the case for households headed by someone who is younger or with low educational attainment.[12] Additionally, surveys have also found that unemployment[26] is also associated with an increased likelihood of being food insecure.

Reasons for referral or 'triggers' for using a food bank can also point to some of the drivers of food insecurity. Predictors of food bank use at an individual level include low income, ill health, adverse life experiences (eg a household separation, domestic abuse, homelessness, addiction) and lack of informal support (such as family and friends) and formal support such as from charities. Exhaustion of informal support is one reason people subsequently

turn to food banks.[7] Those who report loneliness also had much higher odds of being food insecure. These underlying risk factors might also help point towards some of the factors that might increase resilience in becoming food insecure for example, increasing access to formal support. Predictors of food bank use in an area include the proportion of the population who were unemployed or receiving out-of-work benefits.[7]

What can local government do to tackle food insecurity?

Addressing poverty must be central to preventing food insecurity. However, there are limits to the steps that local government can take without national government action. Local government can and do support people experiencing poverty in the form of emergency cash payments and other support for people in crisis, as well as providing support in the form of debt advice and support with welfare entitlement and claims.[27] There is limited evidence about the impact of these actions on food insecurity, as this has not been a specific subject of research. Taking a broad perspective to future evaluations of these approaches to include food insecurity would build better understanding.

In this briefing, we focus on what local government can do to tackle food insecurity in their local populations, both to prevent this and to support households experiencing food insecurity. Actions to reduce poverty overall are out of scope of this briefing.

Identifying households at risk and in need

Through its deep understanding and rich data about local residents, local government is ideally placed to identify those who may be at risk of food insecurity and in need of support, to target preventive and/or supportive action.

The 'Food Insecurity Risk Index,[28] developed by researchers in Southampton, can be used by local authorities to identify small areas and neighbourhoods (Lower Super Output Areas, or LSOAs) at the highest risk of food insecurity. The index ranks LSOAs, rather than showing an absolute level of risk of food insecurity. The index can be used – together with local authorities' own intelligence about their populations, and the evidence on the key drivers and risk factors for food insecurity – to identify small areas and target action.

The factors included in this index are:

- the proportion of individuals in an LSOA receiving any welfare benefits

- household composition, including the percentage of lone pensioners, or low-income households with lone individuals or with dependent children

- the proportion of individuals without any educational qualifications

- a measure of mental health at the LSOA level

- local area structural factors, including distance to larger food stores, travel time to employment centres, bus stop density and local internet speeds.

But having identified households and areas at risk, what can local government do to prevent food insecurity and support people?

Implementing evidence-based interventions

A review of the published literature about local government measures to reduce food insecurity identified a limited number of evidence-based, effective interventions, including free school meals, the Holiday Activities and Food Programme and meals on wheels. There is also evidence about increasing uptake of national support by eligible residents, including existing free school meal provision and healthy start vouchers. This is not to say, however, that these are the only effective actions local government can take, highlighting once again that more research and evaluation in this area is needed.

The LGA has published case studies detailing action by local government on food insecurity, food poverty and the cost-of-living crisis.[29] These case studies include an example of a broad food system strategy, examples of support for community food hubs, community food kitchens and community fridges, social supermarkets, and the allocation of the household support fund. There are also further case studies that highlight wider actions to address the cost-of living crisis more broadly, including debt advice and employment support.[27] Many of these relate to supporting people already experiencing food insecurity, but there is recognition of the role of local authorities in longer term prevention of food insecurity.

The evidence base for effective interventions to tackle food insecurity is just emerging in the UK. While research interest in this area has been long-standing in other high-income countries, such as the US and Canada, this has not been the case in the UK until relatively recently, and follows the rise in food bank use since 2010.[16,30] The interventions identified from the published literature focus on children and older people, and on individual interventions to directly provide food to households. They do not address food insecurity experienced by young adults, for example.

There is a lack of evidence on the impact on food insecurity of interventions such as local debt advice or structural interventions, such as improved transport in an area. Evaluations of such interventions in the future could helpfully capture food insecurity as an outcome.

Universal Free School Meals
Free school meals have been associated with a wide range of health, education, economic and social benefits, including improved dietary quality, reduced obesity, improved mental wellbeing and improved academic attainment. Across the four nations of the UK, there are different ages at which Universal Free School Meals (UFSMs) are provided and different income thresholds at which children qualify for free school meals.[31] Some children reporting food insecurity are not eligible for free school meals due to their household incomes being above these thresholds, suggesting eligibility thresholds are too low.[32] The National Food Strategy included a recommendation to extend free school meals to all children in households earning less than £20,000 before benefits, estimated to ensure that 82% of children in households with very low food security (as defined by the government) would be eligible for free school meals, as would 70% of those with low food security.[33]

In England, universal free school meals are provided for children in reception to year 2. A small number of local authorities in London have extended this to all children in primary school since the early 2010s. Evaluation of the impact of UFSMs in these local authorities, published in 2022, found a reduction in the prevalence of obesity in primary school children and reduced household expenditure on food suggesting reduced pressure on family finances.[31] The reduction of obesity prevalence was found to be particularly significant given the challenge of influencing children's healthy weight.[34] In February 2023, the Mayor of London announced that every primary school child in London would receive free school meals in the 2023–24 academic year.[35] In addition, Tower Hamlets, which has been providing UFSMs to primary school children since 2014, announced that it would extend this offer to secondary aged children up to year 11 for the 2023–24 academic year.[36]

Evidence on the benefits of free school meals in secondary school children is currently emerging with evaluations underway.[37] An evidence pack produced by Sustain includes a cost-benefit analysis conducted by Impact on Urban Health. This found that every £1 invested in UFSMs now could deliver a return of £1.71 over 20 years as a result of improved educational attainment, health and wellbeing, and wider economic benefits.[31]

It is estimated that 11% of children in England eligible for free school meals are not currently benefitting, equivalent to approximately 215,000 children.[38] Actions to increase uptake in eligible families will support some of those most in need. One example comes from Sheffield City Council, which introduced automatic enrolment to free school meals, on an 'opt out' basis, using housing benefit and council tax reduction data held by the council.[29]

Holiday Activities and Food programme

The Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme is funded by national government to support children eligible for free school meals to access nutritious food and additional activities during the school holidays.[39] Continued funding of these by national government was included as a recommendation in the National Food Strategy.[33] There are opportunities through the programme for local authorities to support the families by facilitating activities such as cooking classes and signposting to other services, for example employment support.[39] Evidence on successful implementation of the programme identifies ensuring HAF coordinators in local authorities build strong relationships with providers and address barriers faced by parents, eg limited public transport.[40] Further information for local authorities on implementing the programme can be found in the government's guidance.[39]

Meals on wheels

A meals on wheels service supports people who may have difficulty shopping or cooking for themselves, for example due to disability or dementia. A small study of people receiving meals and the staff delivering them found that the service was viewed as essential by the recipients, who would otherwise be unable to prepare food themselves, but also because it can increase opportunities for welfare checks and reduced social isolation and loneliness.[41] Further information about improving food accessibility for older adults can be found in a comprehensive resource from Sustain.[42]

Increasing access to other forms of national support

The Healthy Start scheme is a means-tested benefit available for low-income pregnant women and children younger than 4 years old. It provides vitamins and a pre-paid card that can be used for foods, including fruit and vegetables, milk and formula milk.[43,44] It has been described as a vital 'nutritional safety net' by The Food Foundation[45] with some evidence of improved dietary quality for women on a low income.[46] There are effective ways local government can raise awareness and support uptake of Healthy Start. Examples can include targeted communications to low-income families, videos on social media and engaging health professionals, as employed by Blackpool to increase uptake of the scheme by 10% in the past year.[47]

Providing emergency support

Alongside action to prevent food insecurity, local government, together with local partners, have a role in supporting people experiencing food insecurity. For people in need of emergency food aid, food banks can alleviate food insecurity and hunger in the short term.[48] However, concerns have been raised with the food bank model, including the stigma experienced by those accessing food banks,[49] not being accessed by most people who are food insecure,[50] concerns around the nutritional quality of food parcels,[51] the reliance on donations from members of the public currently experiencing a cost-of-living crisis[52] and the entrenching of charitable food aid into the welfare safety net.[53]

Organisations such as the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) and the Trussell Trust have been supporting local authorities to move increasingly toward a 'cash first' approach to those experiencing financial hardship and who would struggle to afford food.[54,55] 'Cash first' refers to giving cash directly to people rather than in-kind support such as food parcels or vouchers, enabling people to make their own decisions to meet their own needs. IFAN has produced leaflets for those worried about money which signpost to local support their councils and local voluntary organisations provide. This could include discretionary grants, local advice services or support targeted toward people such as asylum seekers and refugees or those with no recourse to public funds.[56] It has been argued that cash first approaches offer more choice and dignity to those experiencing food insecurity.[54] In June 2023, the Scottish government set out its 'cash-first' plan to end the need for food banks in Scotland.[57]

Taking a systems approach

It is also important to implement comprehensive and sustainable action that seeks to prevent food insecurity by addressing its key drivers. There is a paucity of evidence in published literature looking at wider interventions with food insecurity as an outcome. It would be useful to include food insecurity as an outcome in evaluations or research on wider interventions, such as local employment or debt interventions, to increase our understanding of the food insecurity impact of action undertaken as part of addressing poverty and the cost-of-living crisis.

Food insecurity is a complex and multidimensional problem, and a comprehensive approach must address multiple contributors and impacts of the problem, using the levers that local government and their partners hold, recognising where national action is needed. The National Food Strategy recommended that all local authorities be required to develop and put in place a local food strategy, in partnership with their communities, citing evidence that more than 50 places were already doing this, with positive impact.[33]

Some local authorities are already working with a broad range of local partners to co-develop food strategies that take a wide approach, considering co-benefits of action to health, the climate, and local economies – though these are generally in their early stages. Examples include Birmingham City Council's 8-year food system strategy,[58] working with a range of local partners, local communities and an academic consortium[59] to transform the local food system. Also, broad and diverse partnership approaches are developing in many London boroughs, including many of the evidenced approaches alongside action on food trade, poverty and co-benefits to the environment and economy.[60]

As part of integrated care systems councils can also work in partnership with NHS providers, such as primary care networks, to identify those at risk of food insecurity and ensure proactive signposting to local support – an approach taken in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire integrated care system. Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust has also been working in partnership with food suppliers to ensure that patients who may be food insecure are not discharged to empty food cupboards.[61] There is a need to learn from these – and many other innovative approaches emerging across the country – and to share this learning.

Three local authority-led partnerships are developing system-wide approaches to food insecurity in their local communities, as part of the Health Foundation's Shaping Places for Healthier Lives award programme with the Local Government Association.[62] All three areas have worked with local partners and communities to understand their complex local food systems from a broad range of perspectives, involving partners and communities. This has helped to form and strengthen new partnerships and approaches in their local areas, and led to new actions and joining up of existing work.

The London Borough of Newham is focusing on secondary school age children, working with young people and local partners to understand food insecurity in this population, and co-develop interventions both in and out of schools. They plan to trial free school meals in secondary schools, work with schools to develop whole school approaches to food, and work with voluntary organisations and after school clubs to think beyond school opening hours.[62]

Shropshire Council is tackling rural food insecurity, which brings particular challenges, including the greater costs of food in rural areas and access to services. They are working with their local communities to understand these challenges and develop actions, including connecting residents accessing food banks with broader support including from primary care and citizens advice services. They also have a focus on the volunteers who support people experiencing food insecurity, including mental health training and sessions on the importance of debriefing.[62]

Bristol City, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Councils – working jointly – have identified communities in need in five areas across the three local authorities. They are working with the broad range of local voluntary, community and social enterprise sector organisations active in the areas to reduce food insecurity, joining up action and identifying gaps and synergies. The Shaping Places for Healthier Lives programme is being comprehensively evaluated and we will publish learning from these three areas.[62]

Summary and recommendations

Food insecurity is a complex, multidimensional problem that requires action at all levels of government and society. Since poverty is a key driver, national action is needed to address the root causes of poverty and to ensure our food system provides affordable nutritious food that is available to all. While the evidence base is limited, there are actions that local government can take now to increase food security in their local communities.

Local government should:

- Continue to provide cost-of-living and poverty support, as well as longer term support to incomes through employment support or other interventions, but should extend monitoring and evaluation of these to include impacts on food insecurity.

- Support access to existing nationally funded measures among eligible residents, including free school meals and healthy start vouchers.

- Consider implementing evidence-based interventions for reducing food insecurity. This evidence needs to be further developed, but effective interventions include universal – or extended – access to free school meals, school holiday provision and meals on wheels.

- Use the Food Security Risk Index together with wider local intelligence to identify at risk groups or households and target support to these, including emergency support where needed and connection to services supporting access to and advice about welfare and debt.

- Take action to mitigate health and other negative impacts of food insecurity among those experiencing it, taking a systems approach to understand the breadth of impacts and the services that may support with these; for example, providing access to mental health professionals at food banks.

- Consider opportunities for a much wider systems approach to food access and availability that could bring co-benefits to the local economy, the environment and health. Communicating in effective ways about the wider determinants of health and inequalities will be key to building understanding and support for these approaches among potential partners, as well as communities.[63]

- Learn from action and share knowledge, including seeking to influence national government action to improve food security and enable effective local action on this.

Actions are also needed by others to enable local government to act in these ways:

• National government needs to provide sufficient and sustainable funding for local government and play their part in improving national food security and ensuring everyone can afford and access nutritious food.

• Research funders and academics need to build and disseminate the evidence base about what works to reduce food insecurity in practice. This includes partnering with local authorities and other organisations to determine effective interventions and approaches that could be part of broader efforts to address poverty and improve local food systems.

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Acknowledgements

We are an independent charitable
organisation working to build a
healthier UK.