



## NEWHAM 'WE ARE FOOD SECURE 11-19' PROJECT

Young people's perspectives on food  
and food security

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Newham *We Are Food Secure 11-19* project was set up to shine a spotlight on young people and food security. Our work took a whole system approach and from the outset young people's perspectives were central. We spoke to over 100 young people in Newham from different settings. Their feedback highlights how good food is important to them. Their perspectives on how food works in schools and the youth sector demonstrates how these are settings which are fundamental to food security for young people.

Young people understand the impacts that a lack of food can have on them and their health in the short and long term, from reduced concentration and ability to revise to impacts on their development during puberty and their mental health. In our conversations they stressed the importance of:

- sufficient, affordable, quality food
- diverse, culturally appropriate and healthy food
- involving young people in shaping the food offer in schools and youth centres
- providing more opportunities for young people to learn about food including preparation and nutrition

- sufficient funding for youth centres and for spaces in schools where young people eat
- providing opportunities for young people to learn and lead in food spaces

The systems in schools and youth centres also have an impact, in some cases making it harder for young people to eat, which can lead to young people accessing less healthy and more expensive options. On the other hand school structures support regular eating habits for young people. Schools and youth centres have the potential to involve young people and their families in food in a different way because of the different relationship that young people have with these two types of locations.

Overall, the young people we spoke to in Newham were thoughtful and reflective about the food system around them and the way in which it affected their choices and their health. They were invested in 'fairness', wanted the system to address this, and recognised the role of healthy food in supporting their ability to lead their lives. They provided a range of suggestions for improving the food offer for their age group and they want to be involved in making these changes happen moving forward.

## INTRODUCTION

Accessing sufficient, nutritious food is key to young people's health, wellbeing and development. Food provision in schools, particularly for younger children, has been a focus of policy for some time but how food works for secondary school aged young people is a much more neglected topic. The Newham *We Are Food Secure 11-19* project was set up to shine a spotlight on this age group in order to improve

understanding of their experiences and to design tailored, developmentally appropriate interventions. From the outset young people's perspectives have been central to the project. This report summarises the key messages we heard from young people from the engagement events we ran in schools and youth settings.

*“ They should cook for us the same way they would cook for their kids. ”*

Young Person

## ABOUT THE YOUNG PEOPLE WE SPOKE TO

In our early engagement at the project planning stage we spoke to six young people from year six at a Newham primary school and 27 young people and parents at a community event. We also carried out some supplementary interviews with parents. These sessions took place in Spring 2021.

Our main engagement with young people included two subsequent phases of work with schools and youth centres. We spoke to 35 young people from three Newham secondary schools during afterschool activities and planned sessions within school hours. The sessions took place from January – July 2023 and included students from Year 7 through to Year 12 (age 11 to 17 years). We held a session in a girls' school, a boys' school and a co-educational school, and spoke to 15 young women and 20 young men in total.

We then held sessions in two Newham youth zones and one youth community project, all generally providing services for 9 -19 year olds (and up to 25 in the case of young people with special educational needs and disabilities). In addition we ran an online survey for young people from youth spaces to share their views. We spoke to approximately 75 young people across these three events which took place from November 2023 – February 2024. We had 50 responses to the online survey – approximately 30 of these responses were from young people not involved in the face to face sessions and connected with alternative young people's services in the borough.

## METHODS

We used a range of methods to support meaningful and safe conversations with young people about food and food security. Our early engagement work focused on understanding how cooking and eating worked in young people's families, their food preferences and how the ways in which they ate changed in the week versus the weekends.

Sessions in schools started with a conversation about food security using hypothesized profiles of young people the project team had created based on our earlier work with young people. These were an important part of depersonalising the conversation about these issues and key to making the sessions safe. We then used a simplified system mapping approach to set out how food worked in the school. This formed the basis of the workshops which also included a more general discussion about young people's views on free school meals in secondary schools.

In the youth zones and community youth spaces we developed a different approach since these were not workshops but flexible conversations taking place at the heart of the youth space. We developed two simple questions which we asked young people to respond to using post it notes or, if they preferred, by completing a paper or online survey. The online survey was also circulated to other youth spaces in the borough allowing a wider range of young people to share their perspectives. In these sessions we either provided food or funded the food already being prepared. This provided young people with an incentive but also an opportunity to try new foods.

In all settings, with the support of teaching staff and youth workers, we were able to have broad and open conversations which considered young people's perspectives from their own experience and for friends in their peer group.

# YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCE AND UNDERSTANDING OF FOOD SECURITY

Our initial work with children, young people and families was very broad and helped us to shape and focus the project. For children at the top end of primary school it was clear that food choice and consumption were dominated by their parent or carer at home and school. There were limited opportunities for them to lead their food choices. We identified issues including young people skipping breakfast and preferences for cultural food as well as fast food. We asked young people about where they ate at home and this varied from eating with friends to eating whilst having screen time.

These early conversations led us to focus more on secondary school children where there had been less focus on school food in the past and where there was an opportunity to investigate food choice and food systems in more detail. We created three profiles of young people from this work that we used to depersonalise the conversation about food security. Although they did not represent any real or identifiable people, they reflected both young people's views and key areas of focus for the project.

During our next phase of engagement with young people in secondary schools we tested the validity of

the profiles with two groups of young people, which in itself generated interesting insights. Young people in the groups found the profiles interesting and realistic, commenting for example, *"I've heard that said loads of times"* (Young person in school).

Their conversations about the profiles highlighted their understanding of the impacts that a lack of food can have on young people and their health including short term impacts such as reduced concentration and ability to revise and long term impacts on development during puberty and mental health:

**" Might be lonely...not eating could affect his mental health. "**

Young person in school

Having conversations about food security with young people is important and there is potential to use these profiles or others developed for other local areas to support safe conversations with young people about these issues.

**DAVID**  
My name is David and I am 16 years old.

- I live in Plaistow with my family – we are originally from Somalia.
- I've got three younger brothers and I share a bedroom with the oldest one who is closest to me.
- My mother has often been out in the evening.
- I would like to do something new.

**At home, mornings:** Before school I have a rice cake as I'm often running late and I can take it with me on the bus – sometimes I take another one for a snack later. I could go to the breakfast club but I feel a bit embarrassed.

**At school:** I don't really eat and school food isn't the kind of food I like. A few times I have saved my money to buy chicken and after school. I know my mum gets stressed not feeding us properly. We've not had a proper breakfast or a good hot meal for a long time. I do worry about my mum sometimes buying food from the list.

**At school:** Free schools meals and vouchers in the holidays have been really important for us. I prefer the vouchers because the food parcels don't include food that I actually like. Now I'm at secondary, I like to hang out round the shops after school and sometimes get something to snack on for the way home – like the others do.

**At home, evenings:** In the evening my mum cooks and sometimes I help – she makes good soup so we have that when we can. We eat in the living room. There is no table in our kitchen.

**Weekends:** Food on a normal weekend would generally be Cheerios for breakfast, no lunch if I'm hanging out with friends, and then for dinner, I would have sausage, mash and peas. Mum would cook it and we eat usually in front of the TV. If I'm out with my friends, sometimes they buy things but I don't have much money.

**Out and about:** Food does affect my energy – I might get McDonalds when I'm out at football with my friends but I feel hungry later on. Sometimes I avoid hanging out with friends when I know they will be buying food – it's embarrassing if you can't afford it.

**IBRAHIM**  
My name is Ibrahim and I am 14 years old.

- I live in Canning Town with my mum, dad and two sisters and we're an Asian British family.
- My father used to work for London Transport but is now unable to work because of a long-term health condition.
- My mother cares for my father and looks after the family.
- I have my own room but my older sisters share.

**At home, mornings:** I often wake up late so I might have a nan bread for breakfast but if it's late then I probably won't have lunch. Mum's lamb curry with plain rice and chana is a meal I love. Food from my culture is really important to me. But sometimes we have to get cheaper food which I also love but then I know it's not as good for me.

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**SARAH**  
My name is Sarah and I am 12 years old.

- I live in Green Street with my mum and brother.
- Mum works part-time but she's around at home when I'm back from school.
- We live in a flat and I share a room with my brother.
- There's a small playground downstairs at the back of the estate but I only go there if one of my friends is around to hang out with.

**At home, mornings:** On school days I generally skip breakfast then I get a hot meal at school. I often get there a bit late as I help out with my brother too so I can't really get to the breakfast club.

**At school:** Free schools meals and vouchers in the holidays have been really important for us. I prefer the vouchers because the food parcels don't include food that I actually like. Now I'm at secondary, I like to hang out round the shops after school and sometimes get something to snack on for the way home – like the others do.

**At home, evenings:** In the evening my mum cooks and sometimes I help – she makes good soup so we have that when we can. We eat in the living room. There is no table in our kitchen.

**Weekends:** Food on a normal weekend would generally be Cheerios for breakfast, no lunch if I'm hanging out with friends, and then for dinner, I would have sausage, mash and peas. Mum would cook it and we eat usually in front of the TV. If I'm out with my friends, sometimes they buy things but I don't have much money.

**Out and about:** Food does affect my energy – I might get McDonalds when I'm out at football with my friends but I feel hungry later on. Sometimes I avoid hanging out with friends when I know they will be buying food – it's embarrassing if you can't afford it.

# YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES ON FOOD IN SCHOOL

Following our discussions about food security and young people linked to the profiles we spent the rest of the sessions in schools mapping out with young people how getting food in school works and how might it be different – and better.

Feedback from the young people we spoke to highlighted the key themes below, including the type of food on offer, the spaces and systems in schools around food and how involved they feel in shaping the school food offer.

## The importance of affordable, basic, quality food

Overall young people didn't have unrealistic expectations. They wanted good quality affordable food – the kind of food that they eat at home, not takeaways. The availability of food at both break and lunchtime was important for young people - with the school day starting early they are often hungry by break time. They commented on the fact that cold food cost the same as hot food and generally on the cost of school food being a barrier for some young people:

*“ A lot of people don't bother eating at school rather saving money for later or to eat/cook at home. Mostly due to prices, lines or poor food quality. ”*

Young person in school

## The variety of foods offered and the importance of culturally appropriate food

A critical message from young people was that there is a need for more culturally appropriate food in school and that, whilst this was attempted in some schools, it was not always perceived as genuine. Without halal food options, for example, Muslims are forced to go with a vegetarian option. Other issues such as food allergies were also mentioned. Some young people said the school menu had changed for the worse after an Ofsted inspection with a reduction of options available.

*“ When they make cultural food it isn't even cultural food. ”*

Young person in school

## How systems to queue for food affect young people

Queuing systems for school food significantly impact young people. In the schools we visited there was a rotation system for year groups. If their year group was at the back of the queue, young people said that food could run out before everyone got a chance to eat. Some payment systems for school food can add to delays with some young people talking about the fingerprint recognition system not always working.

These issues could lead to young people rushing and running to get into the queue earlier or just giving up because it's not worth waiting. Having two totally separate lunchtimes was a solution some young people suggested.

*“ Long lines ... not worth the wait. ”*

Young person in school

## The importance of the spaces young people have to eat their food at school

Where young people eat their school lunch as well as where they stand in the queue are key to young people's experiences of school food. Some young people spoke about having to stand outside to queue even if it is raining. Overall young people highlighted a lack of focus and investment in the spaces they eat their food in school and the need for more space:

*“ Spaces to eat food are really important as well as food...being indoors when it rains etc. ”*

Young person in school

## The importance of involving young people in shaping the school food offer

Generally young people thought it was a good idea for students to have an input on menus and other aspects of food in school. They also felt having teachers at lunch was important. They can support students getting to the lunch space “prevent running!” and ensure better behaviour in the lunch space itself. The potential for good student and staff engagement around school food to support positive change was clear. Young people suggested that schools should:

“ Consult students on changing menus. ”

Young person in school

During the discussion we introduced the potential for free school meals at secondary schools, asking the young people what they thought about the idea and how it might work.

Young people were taken aback by the idea that school lunch could be free for all of their age group. They were worried about who would pay for the food and the

impact this would have on school finances. They were also concerned about free school food leading to a drop in quality, running out of food and/or food waste.

Given that most of these young people would have had free meals at primary school in Newham (through Newham’s Eat for Free universal primary school meals scheme), it is interesting that this proposal provoked this reaction, reflecting perhaps the sense of competition for food in secondary schools and how much students are aware of the financial challenges their schools face.

However, in discussion and feedback young people also identified why free school meals might be a good idea and how the scheme could support some young people and their families. They also started to think about how it might work, for example, limiting the amount of food each young person could have so that there would be enough for everyone.

“ A very good idea but there should be a limit on how much food you are allowed to get. ”

Young person in school



## YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ON FOOD IN YOUTH SETTINGS

Youth zones and other youth settings are an important provider of food for young people and having “*food is an important part of being at youth zone*” (Young person in Youth Centre).

Our conversations with young people in youth organisations were centred on two key questions: what did young people think about how food ‘worked’ in the youth sector in Newham, and how could we make sure young people have enough good food in the future?

Some key themes arose about the ways in which food works in the different youth zones, centres and community organisations in Newham:

### Ensuring young people have enough food

This was clearly considered to be a main role of the youth centres. Young people spoke about this being important for feeling full able to play games and run around.

“*Food gives us energy and is nice and warm.*”

Young person in Youth Centre

In one centre a chef provided a regular meal to the young people. Young people from the centre shared how they felt cared for and part of one big family. They really appreciated the effort that goes into the food that the chef prepares.

“*Food at [youth centre] is well seasoned, delicious, healthy and they give us a variety of dishes.*”

Young person in Youth Centre

It was also clear that young people felt it was important that their voice and opinions about food were heard, and the fact that the chef takes the young people’s ideas for recipes into account when choosing menus was appreciated. It was very evident during the visit that food is a huge part of this community centre and the added social value and health impacts of the mealtime felt positive and impactful.

“*Since I have been blessed and fed by ..... my mental health has improved.*”

Young person in Youth Centre

In terms of broader issues, like the young people in schools we spoke to, young people in youth settings were aware of equity and waste, and wanted fair distribution of food. As well as recognising the young people who needed food and facilitating access to food in general, supporting access to food banks and free food was also important.

### Food provided in youth spaces compliments and shapes how young people consume food

Young people spoke about the way in which food provided at their youth space compliments and to some extent shapes the food they consume in other circumstances. This includes choosing not to get fast food after school if they know a meal is being provided at the youth space.

“*If not coming to youth zone probably get chicken and chips.*”

Young person in Youth Centre

“*You can get really bored and hungry after school but [...] youth club lets us be safe and have fun.*”

Young person in Youth Centre

There are also clear links between availability of food at the youth zone and consumption of food at home – something which was not highlighted by young people in school settings. This was sometimes linked to accessing foodbank resources or indeed a meal at the youth centre meaning a meal was not required at home.

“*Youth zone gives us a lot of food and resources ... it really helps out especially when my mum hasn't been able to get a lot of shopping because of inflation.*”

Young person in Youth Centre

For the future, young people spoke about offering food in more places where young people can access it, including youth zones, but also at tuck shops, food stalls and other places to extend the reach to young people.

### The importance of diverse, culturally appropriate, healthy and affordable food

Similar to young people who we spoke to in schools, the need for diverse foods and a culturally appropriate offering was really important to those in the youth centres. Alongside this, young people in youth centres highlighted the importance of offering young people healthy food that is affordable e.g. fruit, healthy drinks, organic produce.

The experience of providing food to young people during the sessions also highlighted the opportunity for young people to experiment with new foods and tastes in a safe space and with trusted adults. Young people we worked with tried new foods for the first time and ate the range of options we provided – vegetarian and meat options in a more adventurous way than their youth workers had expected. This suggests the potential in these spaces for young people to try new foods.

Key messages from young people for the future included ensuring a range of tastes, flavours and choices, including culturally specific options, are available potentially via hiring good cooks – a model already used in one centre that we visited.

### Funding youth centres properly

Young people highlighted the importance of youth services as providers of food and spoke about the importance of funding the youth centres properly – for some this was about opening on additional nights and for others this was a more general comment.

*“ The council needs to make sure they're funding youth centres. ”*

Young person in Youth Centre

Young people responding to the survey highlighted some key barriers to accessing youth sector provision including money, parents/family, transport and age barriers. Extending the age range for youth settings and having more youth clubs that are open more often would make things better alongside work to let more young people know more consistently about the youth offer.

### Providing opportunities for young people to learn and lead in food spaces

Similar to the messages we heard from young people in schools, young people shared the potential role of youth centres in supporting young people to learn more about food and nutrition and how to prepare and cook food. In addition opportunities for young people to lead in food spaces would be appreciated.

*“ Why can't children run breakfast club? ”*

Young person in Youth Centre

During our sessions at youth centres young people shared food together. In one centre this was around a big table and in others there were less formal groups of young people eating together at tables or standing up in groups. The ways in which youth spaces and eating with friends could support young people's food security would be useful to explore with young people further.

## CONCLUSION

The perspectives of young people have been at the heart of our work on food security for 11-19 year olds in Newham. Taking a systems approach it is important to remember that young people themselves are at the centre of the system. Having spoken to over 100 young people in different settings it is clear that good food is important to them and their perspectives on how food works in schools and youth settings have provided us with important guidance as we have developed the project.

In both schools and youth settings young people clearly understood and/or had experience of food insecurity and reflected back to us the importance of a focus on this issue.

“ *Food is important its long day and sometimes don't have money or anything to eat.* ”

Young person in Youth Centre

“ *Take in consideration that school may be the only place students are able to eat.* ”

Young Person in school

There are some clear similarities in the messages from schools and youth centres – good food that is fairly distributed is key. Young people are really active, physically and academically, and they need food for development, concentration and to take part in activities. The diversity and culturally appropriate nature of food is equally important and in both settings young people want more opportunities to learn about nutrition and to lead food initiatives and choices.

Both schools and youth centres are part of a wider food choice system, so that what happens inside both schools and youth spaces are related, and both of these are related to the food offer in local area – in particular the local streets around each school or youth space.

The systems in schools and youth centres also have an impact, in some cases making it harder for young people to eat. In schools the spaces available to young people to eat in and the systems for paying and queuing for food have a big impact on whether and how young people access sufficient food. Indeed they can lead to young people waiting until after school for their food when the offer is likely to be less nutritious.

However, young people also noted the opportunity that school structure provides for young people's nutritional intake – in comparison to weekends where there is no structure for when you eat and don't eat – and the opportunity of free school meals for all if managed well was one that young people were supportive of.

Youth spaces also clearly play a key role for some young people in relation to accessing sufficient food, and the potential for food in these spaces to shape food consumption after school and at home was clear. Young people highlighted a need for more investment in youth spaces with a focus on increasing access and expanding reach.

Overall, the young people we spoke to in Newham were thoughtful and reflective about the food system around them and the way in which it affected their choices and their health. They were invested in 'fairness', wanted the system to address this, and recognised the role of healthy food in supporting their ability to lead their day-to-day lives. They provided a range of suggestions for helping schools and youth spaces to improve the food offer for their age group, both in terms of its sufficiency but also its attractiveness and nutritional value.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## MORE INFORMATION

The Association for Young People's Health works to understand and meet the particular health and wellbeing needs of 10-25 year olds.

For more information email [info@ayph.org.uk](mailto:info@ayph.org.uk)

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