



# Food at the Heart of Lambeth Annual Public Health Report 2025

A place we can  
all call home

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## About this document

Title: Food At The Heart Of Lambeth: Annual Public Health Report 2025

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# Foreword

Food is more than fuel – it is health, culture, and community. In Lambeth, we imagine a borough where everyone can access food that nourishes their body, reflects their culture, and strengthens their wellbeing.

Yet today, many residents face barriers to affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food. Food insecurity is high, affecting people across all ages and communities. It is not just a lack of food, but a lack of access to food that supports health, dignity, and belonging.

Public health can make a difference through supporting breastfeeding, promoting nutrition education, improving school meals, and helping communities grow their own food. But real change requires transforming the entire food system and tackling the wider social and economic factors that shape what people can put on their plates.

This report sets out our vision for food justice in Lambeth and the steps we are taking with partners to make it a reality. Together, we can build a food system where everyone can eat well, thrive, and be nourished physically, socially, and mentally.



**Ruth Hutt,**  
Director of Public Health



# What Food Justice Means To Us

## Our Vision for Food in Lambeth

Lambeth Council and our partners are on a mission to tackle the root causes of food insecurity and systemic injustice. To achieve this, we have set out our vision:



To work in partnership to build a fairer, healthier, and more sustainable food system in Lambeth, guided by the principles of food justice – where everyone can eat well, access affordable, nourishing, and culturally appropriate food, support their own health, strengthen our communities, and care for the environment.

## Working for 'Food Justice'

Food justice recognises **food as a right**. Everyone has a right to nutritious, affordable, reliably accessible, sustainable and culturally appropriate food.<sup>1</sup>

Securing everyone's right to food requires transformation across the **food system** – the way that food is produced, distributed, marketed, sold and consumed.

It also requires action on wider social, economic and environmental factors, including housing affordability, income inequality, education, land ownership and climate change.

Communities are central in shaping the food system – making it fair, healthy, sustainable and resilient. Lambeth's legacy of community action lays the groundwork for a powerful borough-wide food justice movement.

## The Food System

The food system is the interconnected set of activities, processes and people involved in taking food from "farm to fork to flush". This includes the entire chain of activities involved in feeding a population, from production, processing and transportation through to distribution, consumption and disposal.

It also includes the economic, social, political and environmental drivers that shape – and are shaped by – this chain, ranging widely from local land ownership patterns and income inequality through to global trade policies and climate change.

These factors influence what ends up on our plates and drive inequalities in who has access to affordable, nutritious food.

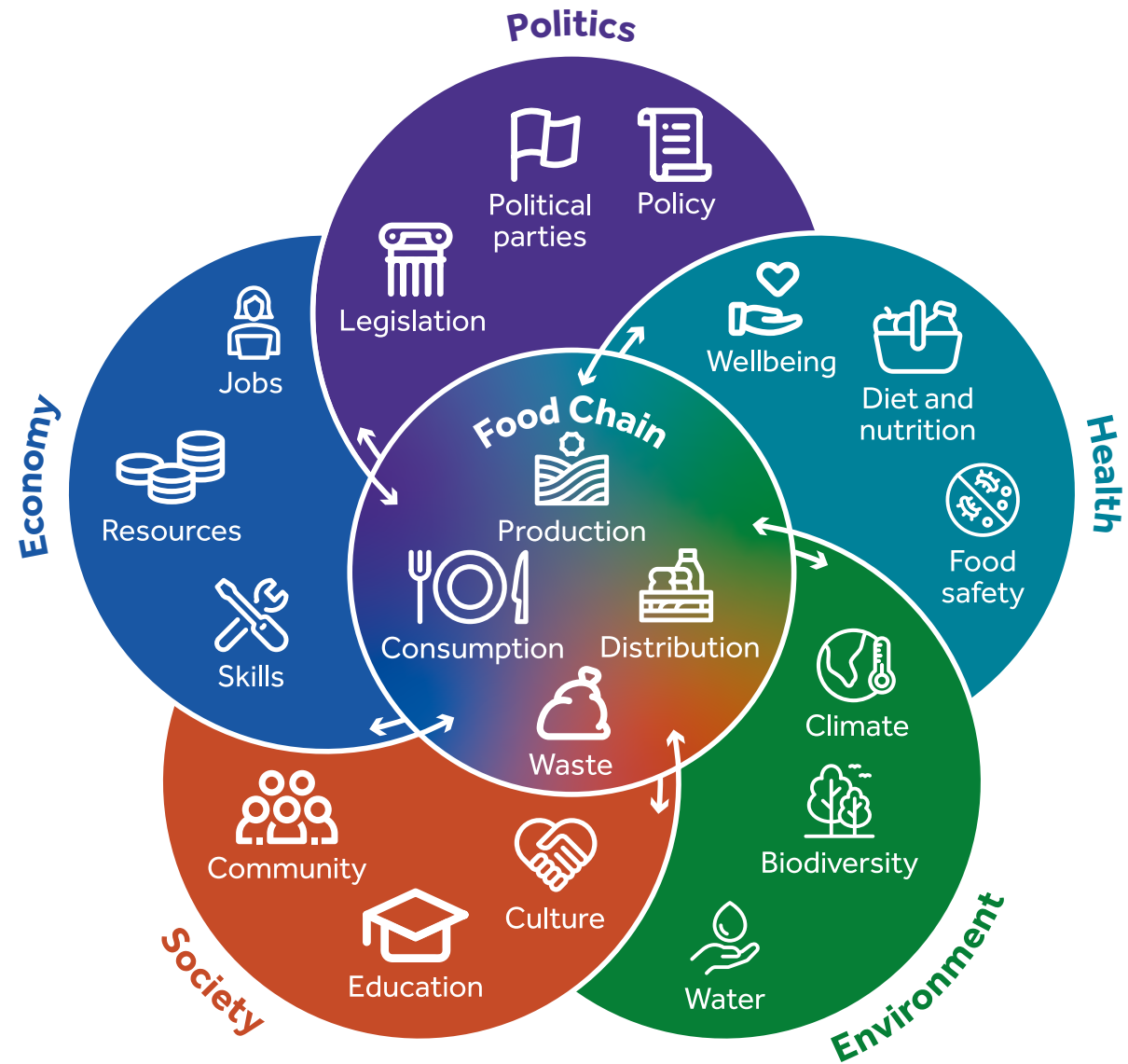
**96%**

of respondents felt access to healthy and affordable food should be a human right

From a 2024 survey of Lambeth residents



## The Food System<sup>2</sup>



Adapted from Parsons K, Hawkes C, Wells R. Brief 2. What is the food system? A food policy perspective. London: Centre for Food Policy; 2019.

## Taking Action Across the System

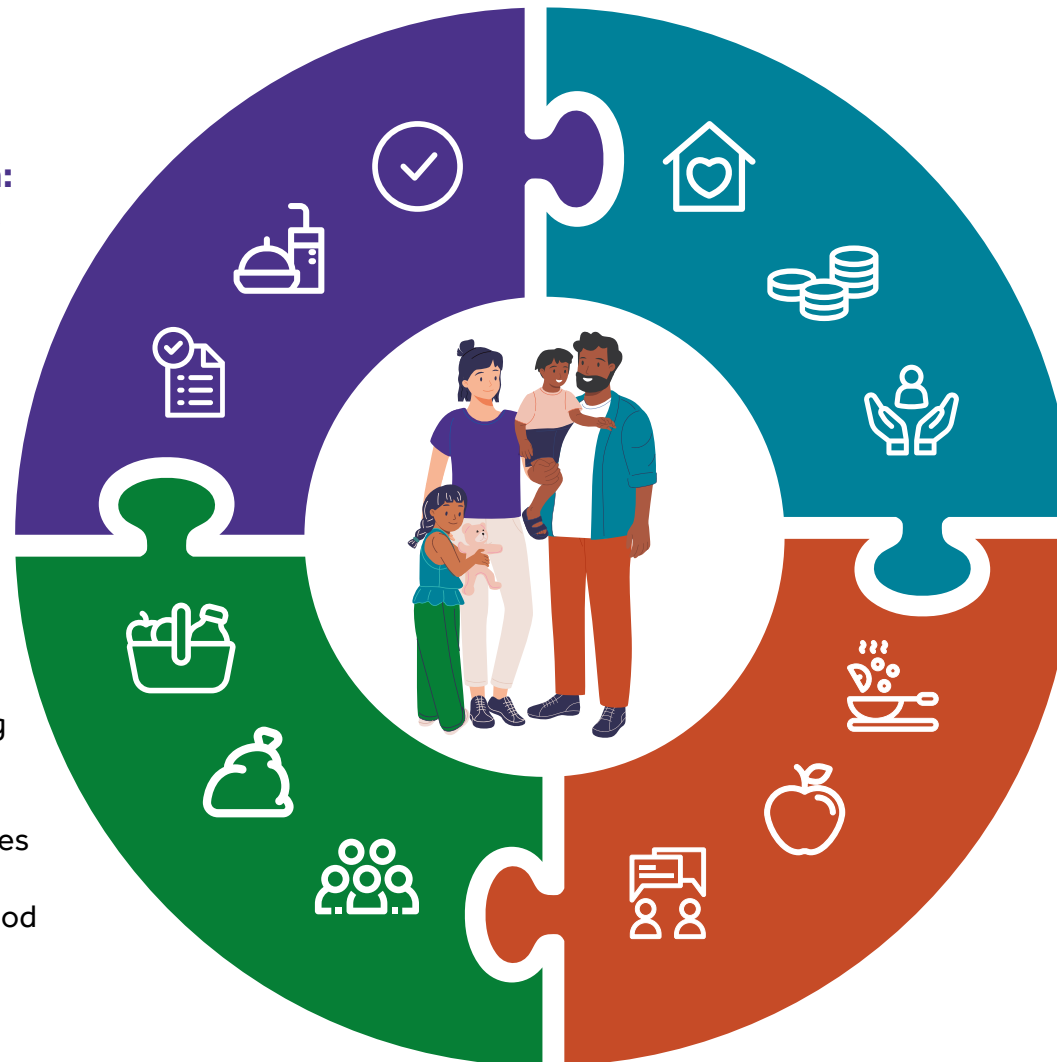
Because the different elements of the food system are interconnected, transforming the system requires coordinated action across a range of areas. The diagram below shows some examples of what multi-level action within a local borough can look like.

### Policy and Regulation:

- Healthier advertisement
- Healthier food outlet licencing
- Local strategies and action plans

### The Food Chain:

- Supporting food growing and local suppliers
- Reducing food waste
- Working with communities to increase access to healthy and affordable food



### Socio-Economic Factors:

- Affordable housing
- Income and employment support
- Access to wraparound support and services
- Free school meals

### Individuals and Communities:

- Building cooking skills
- Healthy eating education
- Local healthy eating campaigns
- Enabling community leadership

# The Need For Action On Food Justice

## The Current Picture of Food Justice in Lambeth

### Food Insecurity

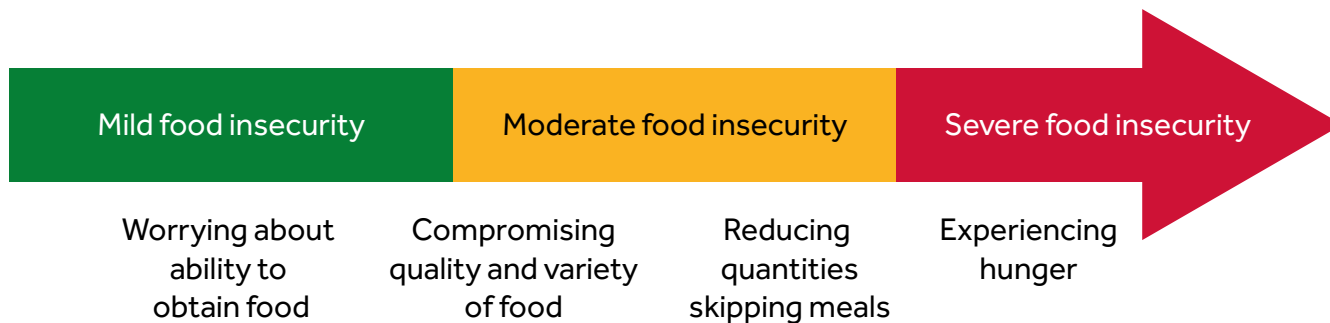
Under the theme of Food Justice, food insecurity can be understood not only as a lack of food, but also as a lack of access to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food that supports health and dignity.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation developed the Food Insecurity Experience Scale to highlight that food security exists on a spectrum, ranging from mild to severe insecurity.<sup>3</sup>

## Food Insecurity in Lambeth: The Lambeth Food Poverty Insight Survey<sup>4</sup>

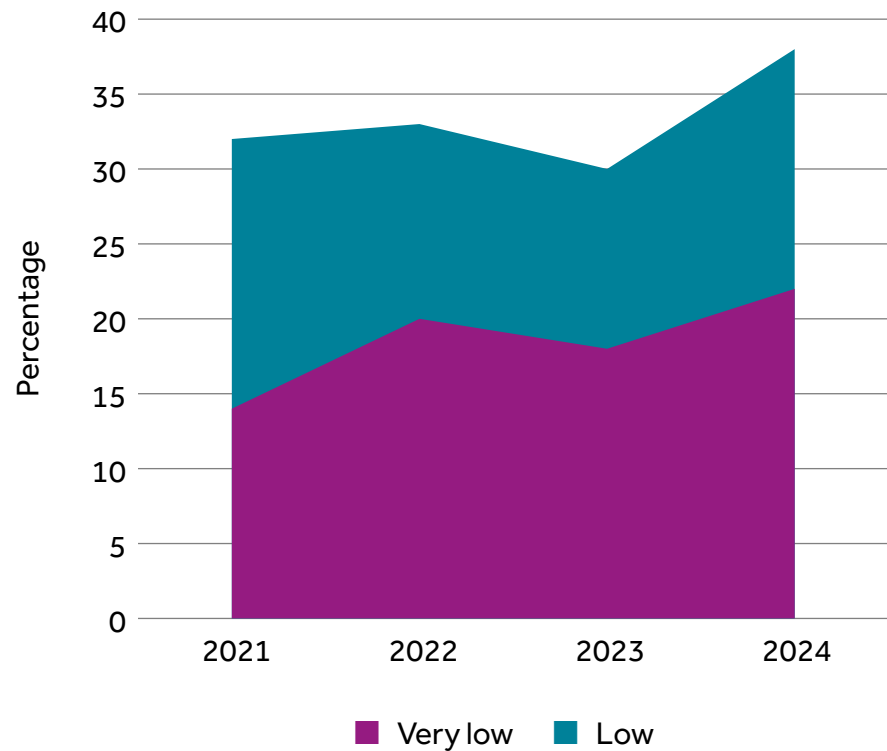
The Lambeth Food Poverty Insight Survey has been conducted by community outreach teams, and over the past four years, has heard from over 2,200 Lambeth residents and 200 individuals who work, study or visit the borough.

Findings for 2024 recorded high levels of food insecurity to date, with a growing proportion experiencing very low food security.



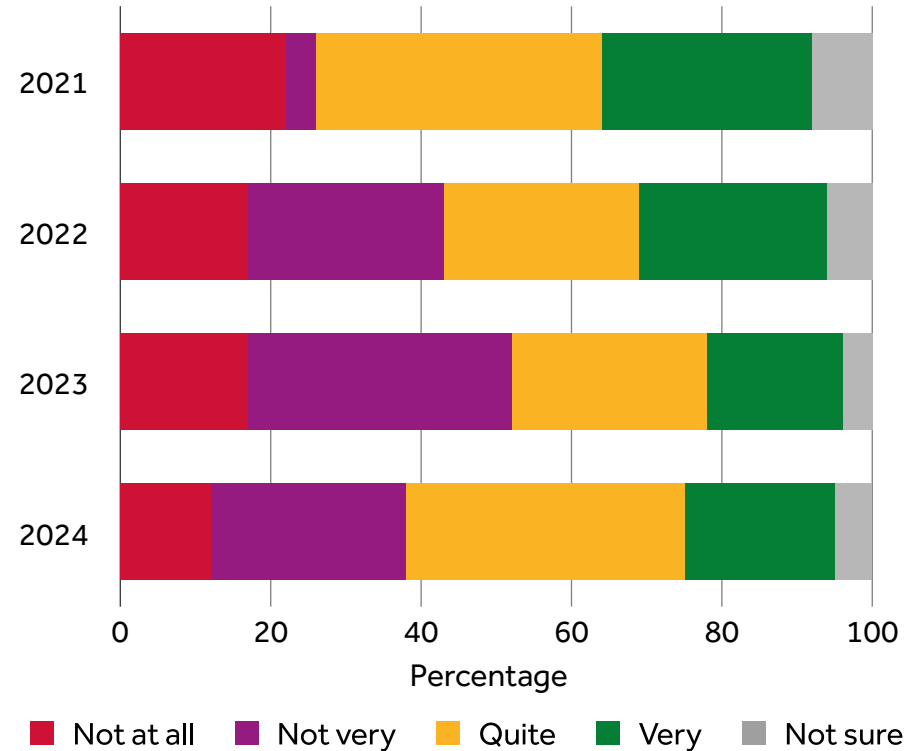
### Food Security Levels Are Persistently Low

Proportions of people experiencing low or very low food security



### Many People Struggle To Access Good Food

How easy is it to access affordable, healthy and culturally appropriate food?



The Lambeth Food Poverty Insight Survey found a range of social and economic inequalities putting people at risk of food insecurity.

Which groups are more likely to experience food insecurity in Lambeth?



People with a **disability** are **2 times** more likely as those without a disability



People in **social housing** are **7 times** more likely than those who are not



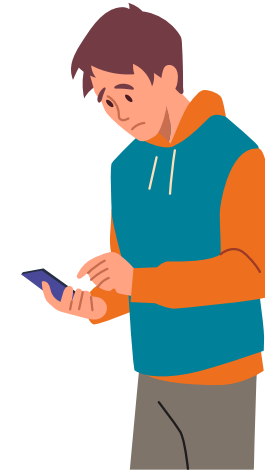
People **not in employment** are **5 times** more likely than people in employment



People with **children** are more likely than those without children

### Access to support schemes

- ▶ 20% of respondents said they had received food support or assistance in the past year, such as from a food bank or food distribution service.
- ▶ Of those who had not received any food assistance, 18% said it would have helped.
- ▶ 64% were not aware of support schemes such as the national Healthy Start Scheme.



I have to go places for free hot meals and can't afford the travel for bus"



We travel to the food bank with neighbours and friends to swap groceries"

### Residents are experiencing rising costs

- ▶ Over 50% mentioned concerns about bills, including utility costs, heating, and general living expenses.
- ▶ Nearly 25% worried about rising rent and mortgage rates, with some struggling to find affordable housing.
- ▶ 20% were concerned about rising food prices.



“

It's a very big issue because I cannot afford top up my gas or electric and buy the right food I need”



“

[I am a ] single parent and prices going up. Providing for family is concerning.”



“

As a refugee with low fixed income and impacted rights to work, I feel the cost of living has worsened. We're already dealing with traumas”

### Many face barriers to getting a healthy diet

- ▶ 30% said it was sometimes or often true that they couldn't afford to eat balanced meals – a slight increase from previous years.
- ▶ 13% felt their diet negatively impacted their health.
- ▶ 37% said it is not at all or not very easy for them to get affordable, healthy and culturally appropriate food in their local area.

“

I'm always worrying about food and paying my bills. Food has become very expensive and is affecting my health”

“

It's not the best. It can be difficult to eat healthy as I work and study.”

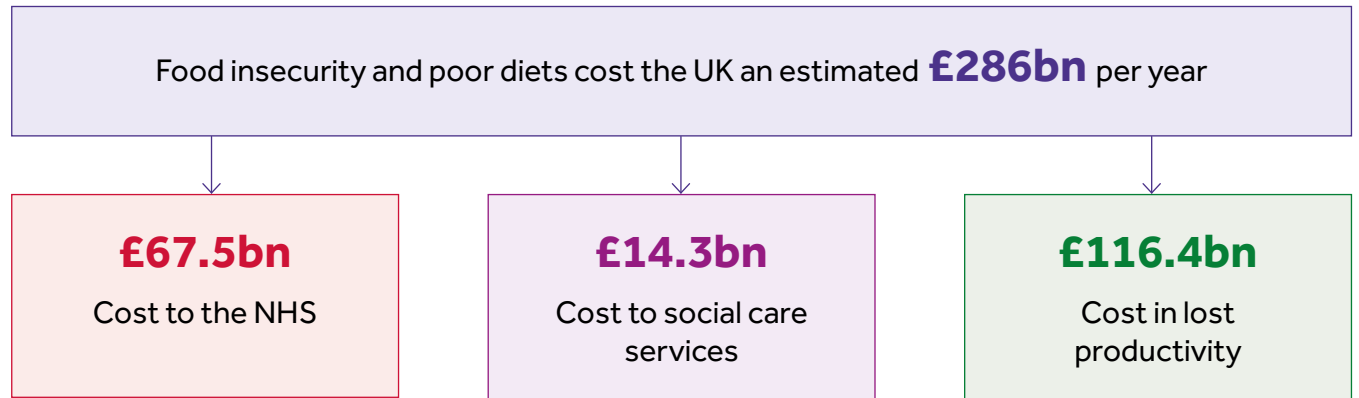


“

Sometimes it's more positive, but recently it's been more negative due to stress and feeling overwhelmed so I don't want to cook”

### An Unjust Food System is a Cost to Society<sup>5</sup>

The impact of food insecurity and poor diets on our health and wellbeing puts pressure and financial strain on public services. Alongside this, economic growth is hampered by sickness absence, lower educational attainment and reduced productivity.<sup>6</sup>



**Up to 287%**  
Recent estimate of the return on investment of food security interventions

## Poor Nutrition Impacts Health Throughout Our Lives<sup>7</sup>

	Pregnancy	Infancy	Childhood	Adulthood	Old age
Frailty					<p>Limitations in activities of daily living</p> <p>Muscle loss, increased falls risk and disability</p>
Sickness				<p>Reduced productivity, increased sick leave, employment limitations</p>	<p>Increased GP and hospital visits</p>
General Health	<p>Higher rates of gestational diabetes and hypertension</p>	<p>Poorer neonatal outcomes (prematurity, neonatal admissions, structural abnormalities, lower birth weight, mortality)</p>	<p>Impaired glucose tolerance and risk of type 2 diabetes</p> <p>Higher rates of dental decay</p> <p>Chronic illness</p> <p>Compromised immunity, higher infections</p>	<p>Higher rates of disability and chronic conditions</p> <p>Risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and hypertension</p> <p>Increased risk of metabolic dysfunction-associated liver disease</p>	<p>Chronic conditions</p> <p>Risk of osteoporosis and other bone health issues</p>
Mental health	<p>Higher rates of stress, anxiety and depression during pregnancy</p>	<p>Slower infant development</p>	<p>Higher rates of mental health, behavioral and academic difficulties</p>	<p>Higher rates of depression, anxiety, chronic stress, sleep disturbances and poorer global cognition</p>	<p>Higher rates of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, increased cognitive decline</p>
Nutrition and weight	<p>Higher rates of gestational obesity</p>	<p>Lower breastfeeding rates</p>	<p>Reduced growth, risk of malnutrition and unhealthy weight</p>	<p>Higher rates of unhealthy weight (overweight/obesity or underweight)</p> <p>Risk of malnutrition and nutritional deficiencies</p>	<p>Higher vulnerability to effects of malnutrition</p>

\*Please note all references for the information in this table are grouped under endnote 7

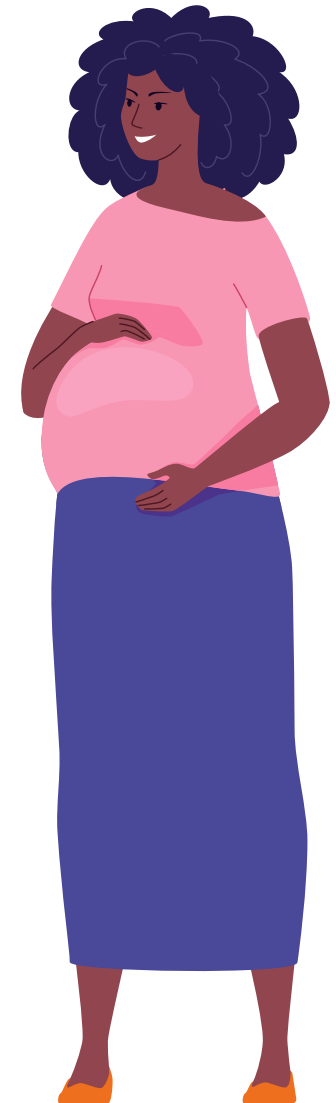
## Negative Impacts of Poor Nutrition on Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

Pregnant women who struggle to afford or access food are up to **four times more likely to have poor mental health** and are at **greater risk of gestational obesity, diabetes and hypertension**.<sup>8,9</sup> Food insecurity during this life stage is also associated with poorer neonatal outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

In infancy, breastfeeding gives babies the best start in life — reducing health inequalities and benefiting children, mothers and wider society.<sup>11</sup> A just food system should support every mother with the option to breastfeed.

In Lambeth, inequalities in access to **breastfeeding support mirror the inequalities in breastfeeding uptake and continuation rates**.<sup>12</sup> Parents in more deprived areas are more likely to express intention to use artificial milk or mixed feeding. Infants in **most deprived areas are significantly less likely to be totally breastfed** (55% in most deprived decile compared with 77% in least deprived decile). They are also **less likely to receive any breastmilk** compared to their counterparts in less deprived areas.<sup>13</sup>

Impacts during one life stage can have long-term effects later in life and can deepen existing inequalities. This highlights the cumulative and intergenerational nature of food insecurity among families and the need for early and sustained interventions.



## EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN LIVING WITH A TIGHT FOOD BUDGET DURING AND AFTER PREGNANCY

### COST OF LIVING

We are borderline, not in a very low income but not high enough to manage with the high cost of food and bills.

I'm not getting anything extra since having him, sometimes the wages doesn't quite cover the cost of living.

2 CHILD BENEFIT CAP

WAGES

NURSERY FEES

BILLS

BILLS

BILLS

BILLS

### AFFORDING HEALTHY FOOD ?

When pregnant you have to eat healthier, more vegetables, fruit, fish than usual; however they are more expensive than junk food.

MEGA MULTIPACK CRISPS X 20 PACKS

WATERMELON

DONUT

Calculator

### POOR DIET AND BREAST FEEDING

You can't do anything, baby needs milk, so I buy less fruit and veg for me.

I felt like she wasn't getting the right milk supply from me, due to not having the income to get the fruit or the vegetable when I needed it.

FORMULA

££££££££

### MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH

I feel sad, guilty, I don't sleep through the night, sometimes thinking what will I cook tomorrow?

MEAL PLAN

MON						
TUES						
WED						
THURS						
FRI						
SAT						
SUN						

### ACCESSING SUPPORT

Alexandra Rose Vouchers, we can use in the market so that's helpful.

Voucher

Voucher

Voucher

If I volunteer and help her collect the food from the shop, I have one or two bags of whatever we collect.

Thank you!

### CO-ORDINATED CARE

Just talking and asking okay, what challenges are you facing?

CHILDREN'S CENTRE

FOOD BANK

RED BOOK

CO-ORDINATED CARE

GP

MIDWIFE

HEALTH VISITOR

VITAMIN D

My doctors organised food, and when they knocked, I just burst into tears.

## Harmful Effects of Poor Nutrition on Child Health

Infancy and childhood nutrition shape lifelong health outcomes. Food insecurity in childhood increases the risk of chronic illness, poorer job opportunities and greater reliance on public services later in life.<sup>15,16</sup>

**Half of Lambeth households experience at least one form of deprivation.**<sup>17</sup> Around 1 in 3 (39%) of the borough's children in 2023/24 are growing up in poverty after accounting for housing costs.<sup>18</sup>

In 2023/24, **17% of 5-year-olds** in Lambeth had dental decay, which is better than the national average of 22.4%, but hospital

admissions for dental cavities in under-5s were **higher than average**.<sup>19</sup>

Lambeth's 2023/24 **childhood obesity rates are above national level** amongst both 4/5-year-olds (11.1 % vs 9.6% nationally) and 10/11-year-olds (27.3 % vs 22.1% nationally).<sup>20</sup>

School children have easy access to fast food in the borough, which is often promoted and affordable. Whilst local guidance restricts the licensing of new fast food outlets near schools it is not possible to remove those already there. These also tend to be situated in the more deprived parts of the borough. This is an important part of the food environment children grow up in, where options for nutritious and sustainable food may be less appealing or affordable.

## Harmful Effects of Poor Nutrition on Adult Health

Diets are a leading cause of ill-health and preventable death in the UK. Healthier food costs twice as much per calorie as less healthy food on average. To afford the government recommended healthy diet, the most deprived fifth of people would need to spend 45% of

their disposable income on food.<sup>21</sup> Poor diets are driving up rates of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease.<sup>22</sup>

In Lambeth, **9.4% of deaths** in 2019 were linked to high BMI.<sup>23</sup> In 2023/24, **one in two adults were classified as overweight or obese**.<sup>24</sup> In Lambeth's most deprived areas, adults were **nearly twice as likely to be obese** as those in the least deprived.<sup>25</sup> Hypertension, diabetes, and obesity are also concentrated in **more deprived wards**.

Adults facing food insecurity are more likely to experience poor physical and mental health, impacting their ability to work and escape food insecurity. Poor diet in older age increases the risks of frailty, falls and hospital admissions, with reduced life expectancy.<sup>26</sup>

**39%**

of the borough's children in 2023/24 are growing up in poverty

**17%**

of 5-year-olds in Lambeth in 2023/24 had dental decay

**9.4%**

of deaths in Lambeth in 2019 were linked to high BMI In 2023/24

**1 in 2**

adults in Lambeth were classified as overweight or obese in 2023/24

# Actions Taken to Promote a Healthy and Sustainable Food System in Lambeth

## Timeline of Key Commitments and Achievements

**2010** Joining the Healthier Commitment Scheme. This scheme aims to help food businesses to offer healthier options.

**2016** First Sustain assessment of action by London boroughs on Good Food and Food Poverty. Lambeth has ranked in the top three every year since.

**2021** Developing and implementing a three year Food Poverty and Insecurity Action Plan, focusing on preventative measures, crisis management and addressing the underlying factors impacting on food insecurity. The Plan was cited as example of good practice in Marmot's Structural Racism, Ethnicity and Health Inequalities report.

**2023** One of the first London boroughs to sign the Food Purchasing Commitment, aimed at improving the health and environmental impacts of the food we serve.

**2023** First London borough to endorse the Plant-Based Treaty, aiming to promote sustainable diets and environmental restoration.

**2024** Receiving a Sustain Leadership Award on actions taken to improve food in the borough.

**2012** Developing and implementing a comprehensive and evidence-based Healthy Weight Care Pathway – supporting nutrition education, prevention, and weight management programmes and cited as example of national good practice.

**2012** Lambeth Food Partnership established, the first of its kind in London.

**2018** First London borough to sign the Local Authority Declaration on Healthier Food & Sugar Reduction.

**2018** Lambeth supports "Eat them to Defeat them" Veg Power campaign running nationally to encourage children to eat more fruit and vegetables.

**2022** Launch of UK's first 'Fruit and Vegetable on Prescription' programme.

**2023** Successfully joining a Europe-wide food team focusing on peer learning, knowledge sharing, and replication of best practices to develop healthier and more sustainable food systems. The priority areas are nutrition, climate, circularity and innovation.

**2023** First borough to top both league tables in Sustain assessments of action on Food Poverty and Good Food.

**2025** Hosting, sharing learning and showcasing Lambeth Food System with European teams from Portugal, Vienna, Italy and Brussels.

## Working Together with Our Partners

The food system is complex and is shaped by a wide range of economic, social, political and environmental factors. Transforming the system to bring about greater food justice requires many different partners across the borough working together in a collaborative and coordinated way. This includes voluntary, community and faith organisations, businesses, individuals and public sector bodies like Lambeth Council and the NHS.

It is only through partnership working that truly transformative action will be possible, reaching all of Lambeth's diverse communities and addressing the wide range of factors that shape the food system.

Lambeth has a strong history of partnership working that has contributed to inspiring and innovative action to tackle food insecurity and improve the local food system. Building on this foundation, Lambeth Council is currently developing a new Food Justice Action Plan for 2025-2030 to set out a shared set of priorities and actions that it will take alongside partners across the borough.

## The Lambeth Food Partnership

The Lambeth Food Partnership (LFP) is open to community groups, food businesses, local charities, schools and health services, as well as council departments covering areas such as climate change, planning, environment and public health.



The vision is for members of the LFP to work together to create a food system where everybody in

Lambeth can eat well and make food choices that nourish themselves, their community and their environment. It has a constitution in place reflecting principles of food justice, equity, diversity and inclusion.



Our visit to Brixton, hosted by the London Borough of Lambeth in the framework of the Cleverfood project, was truly inspiring. It was remarkable to witness how Lambeth, in close collaboration with the community, is leading the way in promoting healthy diets among vulnerable groups. From vibrant community centres and communal gardens to schools where gardening and outdoor learning are integral to the curriculum, Lambeth's innovative approach demonstrates the power of partnership—between local government, residents, and businesses—to create healthier, more resilient communities. Their commitment to making nutritious food accessible and engaging for all is a model we can all learn from, and a fantastic example to what can be achieved when we work together for the well-being of our communities."

Eurocities Food Project Director



### Healthy Food in Schools

Lambeth Council works with local schools on a range of food programmes. For example:

- ▶ Participating in the London Healthy Schools programme supported by the Mayor of London focusing on areas such as healthy eating, physical and emotional health and relationship education.
- ▶ Addressing nutrition and healthy eating through the Lambeth Healthy Weight Programme.
- ▶ Supporting schools with food growing activities.
- ▶ Joining national healthy eating campaigns such as the Veg Power alliance to support children to eat more vegetables.
- ▶ Working with local convenience stores and food retailers near schools to increase the range and sales of affordable healthy food to children and their families.



### Community Support

Supporting eligible communities by working to improve the uptake of national and local support schemes.

**Healthy Start Scheme:** Healthy Start provides low-income pregnant women, pregnant women under 18 years old, and families with young children on benefits with weekly vouchers that can be spent on milk, infant formula, fresh and frozen fruit and vegetables, as well as free Healthy Start vitamins.

**Free School Meals auto-award process:** Since 2023, Lambeth Council has utilised its datasets to identify eligible households who are not claiming free school meals and has automatically enrolled them, reducing barriers to access support. Through this process, over 1,500 children have been auto-enrolled access to free school meals. The auto-award process has now been embedded to ensure as many families as possible receive their entitlement each year.

### Supporting Local Food Growing

Lambeth has a strong and vibrant food growing culture with local communities growing vegetables, fruit and herbs in more than 200 spaces across the borough. The council has taken a range of steps to support and nurture this food growing culture in the borough.



### Healthy Eating Recipe Book for Black Communities

Evidence suggests that people from Black backgrounds are at greater risk of some diet-related health issues such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Lambeth Council has produced a resource setting out information and advice about healthy eating in the prevention and management of these conditions, alongside practical ways of preparing healthier versions of popular cultural foods. The recipe books have been distributed free across Lambeth and have also been purchased by other London boroughs.



## What More Can We Do?

Lambeth is committed to working with our local community to better understand and jointly address food insecurity and the structural barriers that perpetuate health inequalities in our borough.

Achieving food justice for all residents requires an **evidence-based whole system approach** that takes action across three interconnected areas: **prevention** of food insecurity before it occurs, transformation of **systemic and environmental structures** that create barriers to healthy food access, and provision of **crisis support** for those experiencing immediate food hardship.

We recognise that food justice does not exist in isolation, and delivering on it cannot be done by the council alone. We are committed to being

a borough of partnership, where institutions, businesses, residents, community groups and organisations work together to solve the biggest challenges facing the borough with a particular focus on health inequalities. The recommendations we make below are directed at different stakeholders, including residents themselves, and have been developed after hearing residents' views and working with council teams and stakeholders across the borough. Our recommendations are grounded in good practice guidance and the existing evidence base. Carrying out this report's recommendations will require a collective effort to address the complex, interconnected issues associated with food insecurity. As part of our commitment to tackling food injustice in the borough we are developing a full **Food Justice Action Plan** to support these recommendations.



## Areas for Action

### Preventative Actions

#### 1 Strengthen holistic support and healthy food access across the life course:

**Statutory and non-statutory organisations** should deliver dignified and holistic support for residents in financial need, including signposting to available wrap-around support such as advice on debt, benefit eligibility and employment. **The council** should work with partners to support the promotion of healthier food policies borough-wide through family hubs and continue using planning policy to limit new takeaway outlets near schools. **Health providers and community organisations** should promote awareness of the national Healthy Start scheme to improve local uptake, allowing eligible residents choice and agency to access fresh food and essential vitamins. These organisations should also promote breastfeeding in the borough, identifying barriers and needs in under-served communities.

#### 2 Increase access to nutritious food for children, young people and vulnerable adults:

**Schools** should work to support increasing the uptake of free school meals, ensuring they are aware of eligibility for children without recourse to public funds. Schools can also share knowledge of healthy cooking and eating through existing national school schemes. **Health and social care providers** should strengthen multi-disciplinary referral pathways into food support services to increase opportunities for the provision of nutritious meals for vulnerable older residents and those with disabilities.



## Provision of Immediate Support for Crisis Situations

### 3 Ensure dignified and nutritious emergency food provision with wraparound support:

**Emergency food providers** supporting vulnerable communities should prioritise nutritional value and sustainably manage waste. **Statutory and non-statutory organisations** should seek to identify those who are at risk early and signpost to emergency food aid and services which provide wraparound support, while promoting multi-sector working to support this aim.

## Addressing Wider Systemic and Environmental Structures

### 4 Transforming the food environment to improve access to healthy, sustainable food:

**The council** should continue partnership with community organisations to support opportunities in the borough to grow food in all eligible spaces and should strengthen consideration of food systems in the upcoming Local Plan Review. The council should also support policy implementation with easy reference guides for procuring, serving and waste disposal of nutritious food. **The council and its community partners** should promote and prioritise healthy, climate-friendly food served across council settings, putting policy into practice. The council and community partners should improve access to good food in the borough, building on existing programmes working with convenience stores, mapping culturally appropriate healthy food retailers, and engaging with community programmes for vulnerable communities.

### 5 Address poverty and build economic opportunity as drivers of food justice:

**The council** should work with **partners** to provide support to overcome barriers to employment and encourage employers to adopt the London Living Wage. **The council and community partners** should strengthen partnership working to support programmes that increase young people's skills and employability in the food and other sectors.



# Endnotes

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