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Media contact: Shelley Hughes via shelley.hughes@york.ac.uk or 07384238992

Report reveals barriers to providing nutritious food in early years childcare settings

Some nurseries are struggling to source healthy local food due to lack of funding and a workforce crisis, with some resorting to going to the local corner shop to buy lunches for children, according to the authors of a new report.

The authors of the report are calling for more resources and support for nurseries and childminders so they can provide nutritious and locally produced food.

The report, by researchers at the University of York, food policy consultancy Bremner and Co and the charity The Food Foundation, looked at the provision of food in 16 early years childcare settings across Yorkshire.

Based on interviews with childcare workers and public authority employees, the findings paint a mixed picture, with many settings struggling to procure local nutritious food and employ staff to prepare it. One childcare setting reported relying on food donations from a charity to be able to provide healthy meals.

The settings provided fruit and vegetables, but in several there was also evidence of sugary desserts, chocolates and heavy puddings. For example, one setting offered sugary mousse, chocolate cupcakes and rocky roads as desserts for three days across a two-week cycle.

The researchers found that larger settings affiliated with schools tended to be able to provide healthier meals and be more aligned with School Food Standards.

The report also highlights that Yorkshire has the second highest number of children under 16 living in absolute poverty (21.5%), yet only 5% of early years Yorkshire children were registered as eligible for free school meals (FSM) in childcare settings, compared with a national figure of 8%.

Participants interviewed for the report outlined how many settings feed children who are in obvious need, despite not falling within the eligibility criteria. One headteacher at a state-maintained nursery said: "For our FSM children, we'll make a jacket potato or a healthy sandwich. And then with those families who are struggling, we will make the food for them".

Children aged four years-old and under can get up to 90% of their total daily calories from their childcare setting and tooth decay and obesity rates show a pressing need to address diets in preschool aged children, the researchers say.

In England, 21% of children are living with obesity by the time they start school, and in Yorkshire, this rises to 23%. Yorkshire also has the second highest incidence of dental caries in the UK and there is a considerable increase in tooth decay between three and five years of age. In Sheffield, dental caries rise from 0.9% at age three years to 41% at age five years.

The researchers say there is an urgent need for increased investment and to review the nutrition guidance in early years settings.

Co-author of the report, Professor Maria Bryant from the FixOurFood research group and the Hull York Medical School at the University of York, said: "Poor diets in preschoolers can contribute to obesity, which affects one in five children before school age, and dental issues, which are the leading cause of hospitalisation for children under five.

"Early years childcare offers a powerful opportunity to instil healthy eating habits and develop a life-long positive relationship with food as a shared social experience. Our report calls for a united cross-party action to provide better support and resources for early years childcare and align food standards with those in schools, and for more research and resources to ensure proper nutrition at this critical age for children's growth and development."

Hannah Brinsden, Head of Policy at The Food Foundation said: "Good nutrition in the early years of life is essential for the healthy development and long-term well-being of our children. It is imperative that all political parties commit to taking strong action to ensure our youngest children have access to nutritious foods including through supporting childcare settings to provide healthy food and through regulating the high volume of salt and sugar currently found in foods marketed for babies and toddlers"

Dayna Brackley, Partner, Bremner & Co added: "The early years sector is already grappling with a workforce and funding crisis, facing significant challenges in providing adequate nutrition to children under five. We need more political focus on early years nutrition, especially in light of childcare reform and a reported 33% rise in the number of hours a 2 year old will spend in childcare by 2028.

"Early years settings provide an ideal environment for encouraging healthy eating habits in young children. We should be supporting the sector to achieve this. This research highlights many of the barriers - funding, training, procurement and a lack of monitoring."

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Food procurement and provision in early years settings is published at the following [link](#).

Notes to editors:

For guidelines on reporting on obesity and a gallery of free images, see <https://easo.org/media-portal/>

Notes (not for inclusion in the release)

“There has to be more investment and uniform standards for nursery food – aligned with SFS at the very least

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Needs to be cross-party agreement to take united action on this issue.

Early years childcare settings present a unique opportunity to form good behaviours and habits and expose children to a wide variety of foods. It is also about the shared social experience of eating together with other children and adults and

Notes from Maria:

Small private settings end up going to the corner shop for food – the smaller settings are more vulnerable because they can't buy at scale and use larger procurement processes which help to reduce costs. When buying food is less cost effective there are less opportunities to provide a healthy diet. When nurseries are affiliated with schools there tends to be more alignment with school food standards.

The system is not in place to support early years settings to provide nutritious food. One nursery manager interviewed for the report said they rely on food donations from a charity.

"Crikey, if you think school food is bad".

Yorkshire is really diverse – some very affluent areas like Ilkley and Harrogate, some very deprived such as Hull and Bradford. So findings are generalisable to a degree.

There is also a lot of farming and food production.

Hard to do this kind of research – food doesn't tend to be high on list of priorities for early years settings.

Key things for Maria:

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Portion size is a focus of the Eat Better Start Better guidelines, but it was not mentioned within any of the menus we analysed. There was some evidence of wholegrain-starchy foods being served, but these tended to be in the form of pasta, pizza, rice and breads. Most settings seemed to meet the guidelines in terms of the provision of vegetables, and many offered fruits, such as snacks, seasonal fruits and crudités. The importance of fruits and vegetables was evident across the menus. There was also evidence of sugary desserts, chocolates and heavy puddings. For example, one setting offered Angel Delight, chocolate cupcakes and rocky roads

as desserts for three days across a two-week cycle. The provision of desserts was raised as an area of concern by several interviewees.

You know, there's a bit too much cake and custard. (Headteacher - State-Maintained Setting)

Best practice

Two out of the 15 PVI chain settings whose menus were analysed exemplified best practice. One referenced their suppliers, had a dedicated catering team and was accredited by Startwell, an NHS nutrition scheme led by the local authority.

It did not offer a dessert if there was a starter and the dessert often consisted of fruits. It offered vegetarian meals two days a week, used free-range eggs and followed the Marine Conservation Society 'fish to avoid' list.

The other setting reported using on-site chefs with experience in nutrition, food hygiene and menu planning, and offered varied menus reflecting different cultures. It focused on children having a healthy relationship with food, where a meal is a shared social experience. Some of its settings also had their own allotments, where the children could help grow produce, and some took the children on trips to local stores to buy food.

The supply chain differs considerably between settings. However, for many local authorities, if the setting is attached to a school, it followed a school food provision route. There is opportunity here, therefore, to influence via school food procurement routes. For many nurseries, shopping at local supermarkets was a normal procurement process.

A challenge raised is that the voluntary standards aren't fit for purpose and are often not used. While self-accreditation is a well-used intervention, there have been reservations about its efficacy and monitoring effectiveness.

The stakeholders were clear that cost, workforce crisis and underfunding were the main barriers

preventing them from following a more locally sourced procurement. Some settings had negative

experiences with local procurement, including issues around minimum order expectations, ease of purchase and cost.

The EY sector is struggling to cope with existing conditions and, while increasing the use of local food was

seen as a worthy goal, it felt unreachable. There are also perceived societal barriers such as children's food

preferences and parental support.

The research identified consistent systemic and policy barriers to good nutrition and procurement of Yorkshire food in EYS:

- EY nutrition was lower on the agenda than school food, which meant local authorities and governments did not prioritise nutrition in this phase of childhood.
- Eligibility stipulations limited access to nursery FSM and potentially widened health inequalities.
- An EY workforce crisis meant that settings were unable to recruit sufficient staff which impacted the staffing available for food provision. It also made focusing on nutrition difficult in settings with competing demands.
- Insufficient government funding for settings, alongside food inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, made procurement of nutritious food difficult.

Tooth decay and obesity rates show a pressing need to address diets in the EY

What we do know is that Yorkshire had higher than average rates of children living with obesity or overweight (22.5% vs. England 21.3%).²⁰ Yorkshire also had the second highest incidence of dental caries in the UK.

There was a considerable increase in dental caries between 3 and 5 years of age. In Sheffield, dental caries increased from 0.9% at age 3 years to 41% at age 5 years, and from 2.8% to 26.7% in Calderdale in 2020 (Figure 3).²¹

In addition to health outcomes, it is also important to consider regional inequity within the Yorkshire child food and health system. Yorkshire had the second highest number of children under 16 living in absolute poverty (21.5%),²⁹ yet only 5% of EY Yorkshire children were registered as eligible for FSM in EY settings (versus a national figure of 8%).³⁰ Only children in state-maintained settings (28% of the registered places) were eligible, and entitlement criteria stipulated that children must attend before and after lunch.

This may have a greater impact on families living in disadvantage, whose children might be unable to stay

in nurseries for that length of time.³¹ Also, some settings only offered morning or afternoon sessions. In

addition to a low eligibility rate, take-up of nursery FSM was only 55%, Nationally.

Across Yorkshire, the data

was incomplete, but the rate varied from 30% in North Yorkshire, 54% in Kingston upon Hull, to 100% in

York.²²

Some of the local authorities said that close to 100% of their settings were PVI, meaning none of

the children in that authority would have access to FSM, even if they were living in poverty. However,

interviewees outlined how settings would feed children who were in obvious need, despite not falling within

the eligibility criteria.

For our FSM children, we'll make a jacket potato or a healthy sandwich. And then with those families

who are struggling, we will make the food for them. (Headteacher – State-maintained nursery)

In some cases charities are stepping in to fund healthy food We're lucky that we have NGO support (£150 worth of food every week).

If we didn't have that, I think we would struggle because food is such

an expense. I don't think we'd be able to do the level of menu and the

nutritional value that we do without that subsidy. (PVI Nursery Manager)