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Childhood Malnutrition From Grassroots to Policy Action – A Case Study

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the economy, livelihoods, and food security of families in the UK. Inability to access affordable, healthy foods during times of economic instability has further highlighted the impact of social inequalities on nutrition and health. It is the most vulnerable in society – children, women, and the poorest – who are most affected. Between August 2020 and January 2021, 2.3 million children in the UK experienced food insecurity.¹

Taking a whole systems approach to address the double burden of both underweight and overweight childhood malnutrition, involves recognition of the important overlap between the food system, education system and health system. These three systems interact within a broader food ‘environment’. Factors contributing to a healthy food environment include the affordability, availability and desirability of healthy food. Our local surroundings and food environment have a big impact on our health. With these concepts in mind, in November 2021, we held a roundtable meeting entitled: “*Childhood Malnutrition: From Grassroots to Policy Action*”, in Oxfordshire.² Our model of stakeholder engagement and multidisciplinary dialogue brought together grassroots community groups and religious organisations working within the local food system:

- school and holiday activity clubs working within the education system,
- public health and the local authority representatives within the local healthcare system,
- housing associations,
- council members and politicians,
- academics working within the broader food environment.

In this article, we outline our intersectoral partnership approach, considering the roles of public health, grassroots organisations and academia (Figure 1). We present the key learnings from our roundtable, with the aim that this might be replicated in other contexts.

Background: a whole systems approach – the roles of public health and local food organisations

The whole systems approach (WSA) to healthy weight began in Oxfordshire in 2019.³ As part of this process, ‘building the local picture’, involved mapping existing activity and data relating to healthy weight, social and environmental factors in the county. This led to the development of a visual data tool – *Healthy Weight Story Map* – of the local food system, and a child healthy weight toolkit and pathway.^{4,5} Access to healthy food and prevention of food poverty were identified as key areas for local action, and subgroups for Food Sustainability and Health, Children’s Healthy Weight, and Low Income Families and Healthy Start were created to tackle these issues.

Alongside the work of the local authority and public health, Good Food Oxfordshire, a local food partnership of 150 organisations committed to a healthier and more sustainable food system for Oxfordshire, has taken the lead in developing a food strategy for Oxfordshire. The strategy involves not only

emergency food response to ensure access to good food, but also the need for creating food system resilience by supporting families through confidence-building, knowledge and skills around good nutrition. The further need for prevention of food poverty through addressing the root causes, and supporting a circular economy and community wealth building to ensure that everyone – especially the most vulnerable children in Oxfordshire, can eat well, every day. This has been achieved, in part, through advocacy for fair wages and livelihoods, and campaigns and initiatives in schools and early years settings. But also be nurturing intersectoral partnership-working across the local food system, to include farmers, local businesses, community groups and policy makers.⁶⁻¹¹

Figure 1: Whole systems approaches for childhood malnutrition: intersectoral working



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The importance of shared narratives from the community

In addition to hearing about county-wide initiatives around childhood malnutrition, grassroots community groups including representatives from foodbanks, local religious organisations, housing associations and school holiday activity programmes, shared their experiences of working on the ground with families impacted by the pandemic, in a series of short presentations. These powerful narratives fostered empathy, trust and accountability among the roundtable stakeholders, and have directly influenced the local food strategy for Oxfordshire, as well as highlighted the importance of community voices in setting research and policy agendas which have local implications.

The role of academia

The roundtable was the first time many community organisations had interacted with academics, and this helped to identify areas for future collaboration and intersectoral working. Both local and global academics working in the field of nutrition education, complex interventions and systems-thinking were able to share their research programmes and present methodologies which might impact upon the design, evaluation and sustainability of complex nutrition interventions within the community. This provided community groups and local authorities with the ideas and research infrastructure for building an evidence-base of local initiatives. This, in turn, might help ensure future scalability and funding of local grassroots initiatives.

Key learnings from the roundtable

Whole systems approaches to childhood malnutrition require breaking down the artificial silos we have created between different sectors and sections of our society. The roundtable meeting highlighted the value of the local expertise of grassroots organisations and the need to trust their ability to understand the needs and priorities of the community. In our experience, narratives were extremely powerful in shaping conversations between key stakeholders, and contributed to a shared understanding of the challenges faced by people on the ground. We also learned that there is real value in using people's own words and reflecting this language back when developing a local food strategy

to make it accessible, understandable and relevant to the community. Finally, community engagement is increasingly an important priority for academic institutions. By bringing together various stakeholders around the shared goal of reducing childhood malnutrition, we feel that we have created opportunities for mutual learning, which can both involve and improve the health of local populations, and which has resulted in subsequent collaborations and policy actions.

Blueprint for future work

Building upon the key learnings from the roundtable on childhood malnutrition, we developed a theory of change (Figure 2) to reflect the local priorities and intersectoral partnerships identified at the roundtable.¹² The long-term objective to ensure every child goes to bed having eaten a nutritious meal and has the ability to thrive in their daily lives, will only be achieved through a series of smaller projects, each with its necessary resources, activities, indicators of impact and responsible partners. At each stage, key underlying assumptions will be identified. Our theory of change is a 'living' document that will develop through repeated iterations.

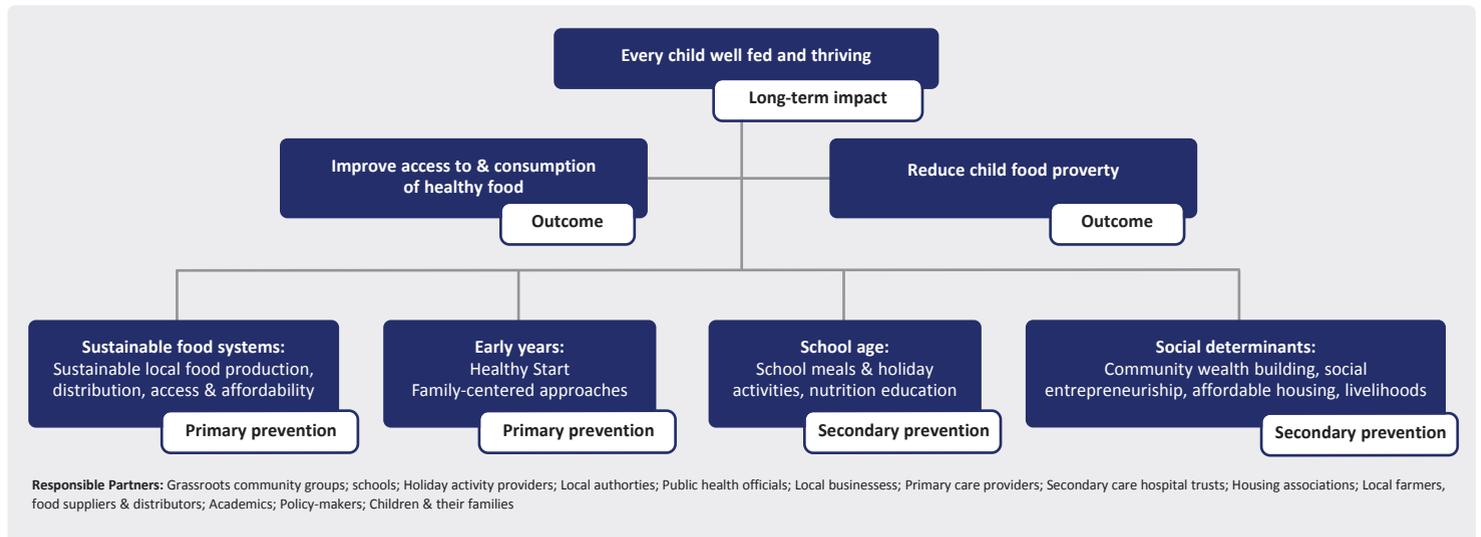
Final thoughts

Bringing multiple stakeholders together and encouraging sharing of narratives in a psychologically safe environment where people felt heard and understood, enabled empathy to be embedded into the design of the local food strategy and subsequent policy actions. Narratives were powerful in promoting collaborative working between the voluntary sector, schools, academia and policy makers. We feel that this model of addressing systemic issues around childhood malnutrition has been powerful in contributing to sustainable local change and one that might be replicated in a variety of contexts.

Funding and support

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Figure 2: Theory of change for achieving a whole systems approach to childhood malnutrition



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Key Strategic Partnerships – Specialist Organisations: • Education and Research in medical Nutrition Network (ERimNN) - <https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/erimn> • British Dietetic Association (BDA) - www.bda.uk.com • British Medical Journal (BMJ) - www.bmj.com • Laboratory of the Government Chemist (LGC) - www.lgcgroup.com • Lord Rana Foundation Charitable Trust - <http://lrftc.net> • Modality NHS Partnership - www.modalitypartnership.nhs.uk • Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior - www.sneb.org • Swiss Re Institute - www.swissre.com/institute • Quadrum Institute - <https://quadram.ac.uk> Academic Institutions: • University of Cambridge - www.cam.ac.uk • Imperial College London - www.imperial.ac.uk • Monash University - www.monash.edu • University of Parma - <https://en.unipr.it> • Ulster University - www.ulster.ac.uk • University of Wollongong - www.uow.edu.au