

# Tackling poverty and the cost of food

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Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> March 2023

## Key points

- Greater food insecurity could affect people's physical health and mental wellbeing, and create unmanageable pressure on already stretched NHS services.
- Food insecurity is defined as being unable to reliably access sufficient, affordable and nutritious food.
- It is estimated that malnutrition costs the NHS £19.6 billion a year.
- One in four households with children experienced 'food insecurity' in September 2022 – a 9.6 percentage point increase from January last/that year.
- Food price inflation reached 16.8% by January 2023, making it one of the largest drivers of inflation.
- Given the scale of increases in the cost of healthy food choices, if current circumstances continue we will see devastating and long-lasting impacts on people's health and wellbeing.
- Integrated care partnerships (ICPs) present an opportunity to develop strategies to tackle food insecurity and take collaborative action at system, place and neighbourhood level. This will reduce health inequalities and provide a return on investment by decreasing the demand that food insecurity places on the healthcare system.

## Impact of food insecurity on health

- Unhealthy diets increase the risk of chronic illnesses such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, certain cancers and the likelihood of obesity.
- Going hungry, even just a few times, is linked to decreased immunity and poorer mental and physical health, and can cause malnutrition, heart disease and fatigue.
- Almost half of participants in a survey from The Money and Mental Health Policy Institute had reduced the number of meals they ate in a day and cut spending on essentials like food – and food price inflation has increased by 4 per cent since then. Respondents with recent experience of mental health problems also reported feelings of anxiety, depression and hopelessness as a result of the rising cost of living.
- Over 40 per cent of households in receipt of Universal Credit are food insecure and over 60 per cent of people who referred to food banks in August 2022 had a disability or long-term health condition, which is around three times the rate of the general population.
- It is estimated that malnutrition costs the NHS £19.6 billion a year.

## Case studies

Our members are committed to supporting their staff and communities to cope with the increased cost of living. Below are some examples of how NHS Confederation members are supporting their staff and communities with the rising cost of food:

- **#OneSlough** - to support patients and communities, [#OneSlough](#), a partnership comprising stakeholders and partners including Frimley ICS, Slough Borough Council and the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, is developing programmes to alleviate food insecurity in the borough. A number of community pantries are opening across the area in the coming months.
- **Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust** - provides care packages on discharge to patients who require an extra level of support. Ward staff assess whether the patient might not have food in at home due to food insecurity, a lack of nearby relatives, or because of a long stay on the ward. The patient is sent home with a care package so that they are not discharged to empty food cupboards. This care package is charged to the ward's budget and costs are kept low thanks to partnerships with the food suppliers. The trust's catering team is also in the process of developing a set of low-cost, nutritious, simple recipes to give to patients on discharge, because of the mental and physical health benefits of home cooking.
- **Nottingham and Nottinghamshire ICS** - approach is to ensure that NHS providers and local authority teams in the system makes every contact count by enquiring about access to food and heating, and their place-based partnerships are supporting access to food banks and other support offers through partnerships with the VCSE sector. Primary care networks in the area identify and support vulnerable households through proactive signposting, and work with the VCSE and local authority public health teams to provide support mechanisms where available, supported by the integrated care board (ICB) and place-based partnerships.
- **Southwark Council** – is tackling food security through a co-ordinated borough-wide approach with key partners. The focus is on prevention, resilience and tackling wider determinants of food insecurity, assessing need and service provision through its three-tier response: solving structural and policy issues that cause food insecurity (access to affordable, healthy food); building resilience (empowering and upskilling people); and crisis provision (emergency food aid).
- **Royal Orthopaedic Hospital NHS Foundation Trust** - has an on-site food bank where colleagues can access food in a discreet area of the hospital. The trust provides carrier bags so that staff can fill up a bag and no one needs to be aware. There is also signposting to the local food bank and services for individuals and families, which are near the hospital. Staff are encouraged to contact them, as further ongoing support can be offered.
- **Newcastle Upon Tyne NHS Foundation Trust** - offers discreet meal cards for staff who may be unable to prioritise funds, to enable them to eat and drink while at work. Chaplains and the catering team can issue the credit-card-sized card, which is titled 'staff loyalty card.' Cards are returned at the end of use and can be exchanged, and further support sought. This is funded by the Newcastle Hospitals Charity

## Calls to government

- **Expanding the eligibility for free school meals to all children** was recommended in 2020's independent [National Food Strategy](#) (costed at an additional £670 million per year). The [government's response](#) promised to keep eligibility for free school meals under review. The rollout of universal free school meals began this year for primary school children in Wales and the Mayor of London has recently announced it will be rolled out for all primary school children for academic year 2023-4.
- Given that one in four UK households with children (4 million children) experienced food insecurity in September 2022, and in Scotland, [child admissions](#) to hospital

for malnutrition doubled in the last year, the NHS Confederation urges the government to expand the eligibility of free school meals and breakfast clubs to all households with low incomes in the UK. This intervention aims to reduce stigma, save families around £400 per child annually, and give all children the best chance to eat a healthy diet. In turn, this will reduce pressure on the NHS.

- **Ensure that benefits rise in line with inflation at the Spring Statement** - it is necessary to provide targeted support for those most at risk of food insecurity, to ensure household incomes do not fall below a liveable threshold. The lowest income households face an inflation rate around seven per cent higher than the most well-off households.
- **Adopt a health-in-all-policies approach to policymaking** - the drivers and impacts of food insecurity sit within a range of Whitehall departments and so this issue requires a cross-government approach that considers the social, political, economic and commercial determinants. National action should form part of the strategic programme of work undertaken by parliament's Food Security Inquiry and aim to tackle not only the causes of food insecurity, but also wider health inequalities such as obesity that if left unaddressed will continue to divide the health of the nation.

## Suggested interventions

- It is estimated that malnutrition costs the NHS £19.6 billion a year. Does the Minister recognise the impact of this issue on other policy areas, can she tell us what discussions she has had with her ministerial counterparts and will she encourage the Prime Minister to adopt a cross-government approach to this issue, as called for by the NHS Confederation?
- The NHS Confederation has pointed out that the rising cost of food and resulting food insecurity will drive more pressure on the health service. In order to mitigate this, they are calling for benefits to rise in line with inflation at the Spring Statement. Will the Minister feed their call back to the Chancellor?
- The NHS Confederation has warned that the increased cost of food will have devastating and long-lasting impacts on people's health and wellbeing. Can the Minister tell us if they have undertaken an impact assessment on the rising cost of food and what it means for public services?

*If you would like to discuss the issues raised in this briefing, or would like some suggested alternative questions to raise, please don't hesitate to be in touch via [caitlin.plunkett-reilly@nhsconfed.org](mailto:caitlin.plunkett-reilly@nhsconfed.org).*

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## About the NHS Confederation

The NHS Confederation is the membership organisation that brings together, supports and speaks for the whole healthcare system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The members we represent employ 1.5 million staff, care for more than 1 million patients a day and control £150 billion of public expenditure. We promote collaboration and partnership working as the key to improving population health, delivering high-quality care and reducing health inequalities.