

Accessing healthy food in Whitley Reading: The Voice of the Community

Improving access to healthy food is key to building a healthier future for the UK. Between 2021 and 2024, as part of the UKRI FoodSEqual project, over 500 individuals from Whitley in

Diet and nutrition particularly among low-income groups is a key public health concern in the UK (see [UK Parliament POST, 2022](#)). FoodSEqual-Health research with Whitley residents revealed that:

During FoodSEqual research into the challenge of accessing healthy food, the top policy priorities identified by the Whitley community were (1) Develop trusted community spaces that offer social connections as well as access to healthy, affordable foods. (2) Ensure perishable foods like fruit and veg can be bought in small quantities so that there is no waste. (3) Create healthier school food environments.

Other high priority changes related to (a) the labelling, advertising and formulation of processed foods, (b) subsidies for local food growing and (c) extending the provision of top-up cards for buying fruit and veg (see Key Findings).

Most people eat what they eat because circumstances force their choices. Change is going to require an altered food environment that enables people to afford and access healthier foods, and in which fruit and veg, healthy cooking, and eating together are a familiar and easy-to-manage part of an everyday life. Normalising a new food environment involves the whole community and requires connections between members through which they can give and receive food support and ideas, also experimenting with less familiar foods without risking money. The environment needs to be trusted and respectful so that residents willingly access services and support.

Strengthening connections via community food hubs and schools provides a good starting point to building trust and supporting positive change.

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'Food' provides an important point of connection between people – a natural community hub ([Blake, 2019](#)). Moreover, well-developed community hubs are places where residents can find support. They also provide opportunities for people to to and their social and food environment ([Davies and Reid, 2024](#); [Blake, 2019](#)) This capacity to self-organise and cooperate is an essential feature of resilience ([Lindsey, 2012](#), [Lee et al., 2024](#))

Residents of Whitley want:

- To access affordable, healthy foods of their choice and in the quantities they choose.
- Opportunity to connect with one another over shared food-related experiences. E.g. eating, cooking, and growing food together. Engaging in child friendly and hands-on activities.
- Places where they feel they belong, where they know they will be heard and where they are not stigmatized in any way.
- Spaces that provide help in accessing health and wellbeing services, including support for those with special dietary needs.

Policy implications

- Develop a Local Asset Strategy that identifies and supports local organisations, both voluntary and statutory.
- Recognize who are the trusted people within these organisations, having connections into their communities. Find out what their pressure points are and how to make things easier for them.
- Invest in physical spaces, so that people can gather somewhere local and familiar. Ensure these spaces are accessible and affordable to resident-led organisations.
- Use community centres as points of communication