The Young Foundation

A BOLDER HEALTHIER BIRMINGHAM

Birmingham City Council

Our food system: community research exploring access to healthy food in East Birmingham

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We involve

Actively involving people in research and innovation, we strengthen the relationships between communities and the organisations that influence their wellbeing.

We innovate

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Introduction

Access to healthy food is a key part of wellbeing. Access to healthy food is also increasingly being understood as a social justice issue (Hilmers et al. 2012, Swan 2020, Horst et al. 2017).

Recent crises affecting the UK have brought the food system into greater focus: supply chain shocks resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, and Britain leaving the EU (Brexit) have highlighted the vulnerability of basic forms of infrastructure that bring food into people's homes. The cost-of-living crisis has also made access to healthy food a more pressing issue, as food price inflation has now overtaken energy bill inflation as the primary source of stress on British households (Bell et al., 2023). According to data collected by The Food Foundation, 37% of UK households say the cost-of-living crisis means they cannot afford healthy food, with the number rising to 53% among lower income households (The Food Foundation, 2023).

Within this context, it is critical for local authorities to consider the needs and concerns of their residents . This research contributes to the Birmingham City Council's (BCC) ambitious Food System Strategy by investigating the barriers to, and opportunities for, businesses in East Birmingham to provide healthy food. It leads on from the Childhood Obesity Trailblazer programme , a council-led project in England, which was coordinated and funded by the Local Government Association to tackle childhood obesity at a local level, with a focus on inequalities.

This research supports these initiatives, gaining a unique depth of insight via a peer research approach to investigating the food system in East Birmingham. Drawing on local residents' lived experiences, this report offers policy recommendations and ideas for future research into creating healthy food systems.

Objectives of the research

This research aims to enhance understanding of the food system in East Birmingham, with a specific focus on food businesses and the role they play in providing healthy food to their communities. The research aims to improve understanding in key areas:

- The barriers to provision of healthy affordable food that businesses experience, including cost, supply, how decisions are made, and perceptions and beliefs about food.

- The food system workforce, including where people are recruited from and what skills, knowledge, and training they have and receive.

- Potential gaps in skills and knowledge among food system workers in East Birmingham and how these might be filled.

- Key actions that can be co-produced to support food businesses to provide healthy, affordable food.

Alongside these research objectives, our aim was to upskill community members and empower them to carry out the research, and also to contribute detailed information on how peer research was conducted in order to support BCC to continue to use peer research as a method in future research.
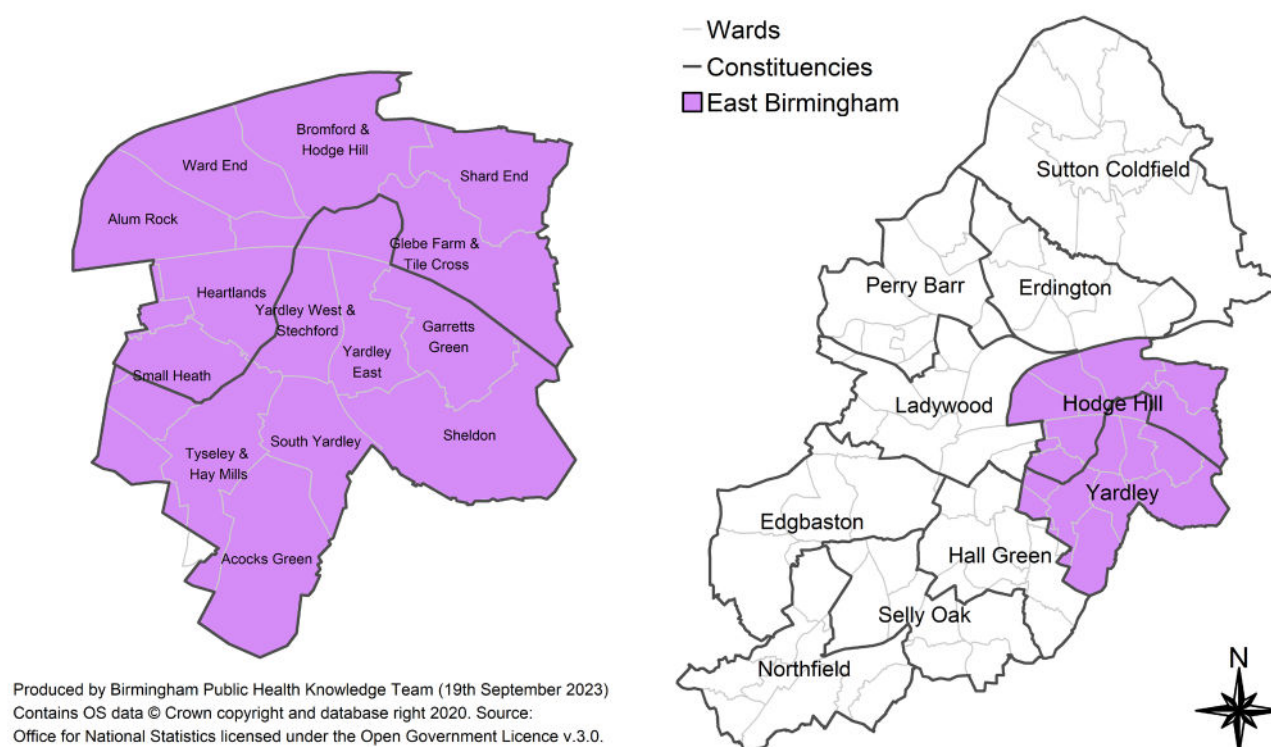
Food systems in East Birmingham

Produced by Birmingham Public Health Knowledge Team (19th September 2023)
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Figure 1 - Areas of East Birmingham targeted in the research

The research focused on East Birmingham and specifically the areas of:

• Alum Rock
• Bordesley Green
• Garretts Green
• Hodge Hill
• Lea Hall
• Shard End
• Sheldon
• Small Heath
• Stechford
• Washwood Heath
• Yardley

East Birmingham faces significant health challenges and forms of deprivation. Life expectancy in East Birmingham is lower than both the city overall, and England-wide averages (BCC 2022).

East Birmingham was also particularly hard hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, with the highest number of Covid-19 deaths nationwide (BCC 2022). Further, 38.8% of children in East Birmingham live in absolute poverty; the highest level of deprivation in the city (BCC 2022).

Data from the 2021 census reports that 65.4% of the population of East Birmingham is from a minority ethnic background (BCC 2021), a higher percentage than in the city as a whole. Some 37.6 percent of East Birmingham residents are of Asian ethnicity, making this the largest minority ethnic group in the area (BCC 2022). A much lower percentage - 6.9% - of residents identify as Black, just 4.1% as 'mixed or multiple' ethnicities, and 1.7% as 'other' ethnicity (BCC 2022).

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Through a mapping exercise, we found many takeaway and fast-food businesses within East Birmingham, covering a vast array of cuisines, some of which reflect the ethnic and religious diversity of East Birmingham, while others offer 'standard' options such as pizzas, fried chicken, burgers, etc.

The most common types of food on offer were pizzas, chicken, and Asian cuisine, with dessert locations also popular. There were also some takeaways, and mobile caterers, who offered a variety of cuisines rather than specialising.
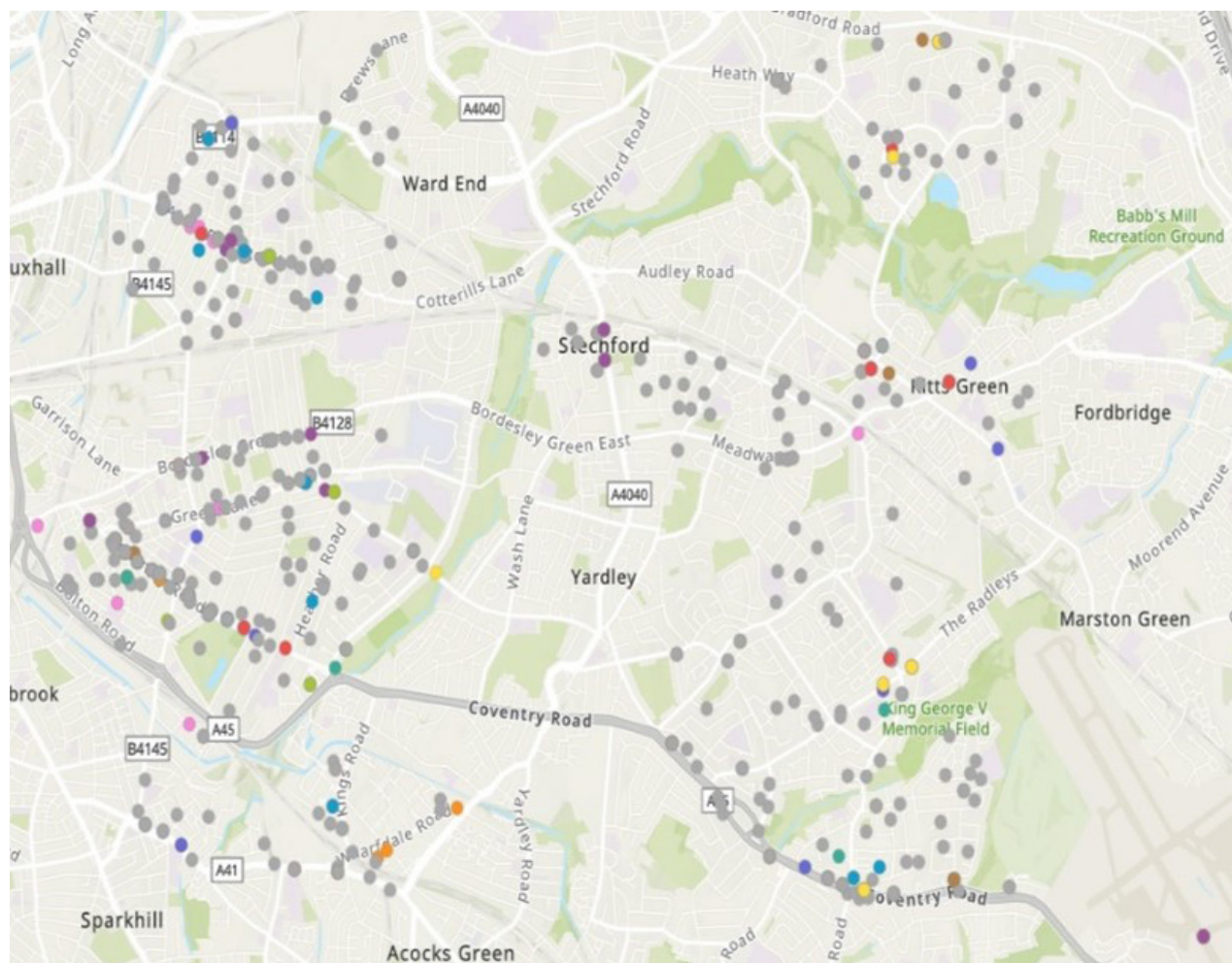

Legend:
- Pizza
- Desserts and ice cream
- Asian - Indian, curry house
- Chicken shop
- Cafe/coffee shop
- Fish and chips
- Burgers
- Asian - Chinese, Japanese
- Other
- Grill
- Other

Figure 2 – Assorted food shops in East Birmingham.

Methodology and approach

The research used a mixed qualitative methodology, drawing on interviews and observations to investigate the food system in East Birmingham. The research process was conducted by residents of East Birmingham, who were trained in peer research methods, and who carried out the fieldwork.

Peer Researchers: recruitment and training

In this project, 12 Peer Researchers (PRs) were recruited and trained, and seven were active throughout the research. PRs were selected through an interview process and needed to live in or have strong ties to one of the designated areas of East Birmingham (see fig 1). Once recruited, PRs were trained in research methods by The Young Foundation. For the first cohort of PRs, this training took place in person, while the second cohort was trained online. The training covered a range of areas:

- Introduction to the principles of peer research
- Briefing on the research objectives and topics
- Understanding and mitigating bias in peer research
- Ethics, confidentiality and consent
- Interviewing and observation skills
- Data management and technology
- Active listening activities

Alongside this training, PRs completed online modules in safeguarding and data management. To support training, each PR was required to conduct a practice interview with a friend or family member, and then received individual feedback from staff at The Young Foundation before commencing fieldwork. As part of the training process, and in collaboration with The Young Foundation's staff, PRs co-produced the topic guide used for interviews. They were also provided with an observation grid and encouraged to adapt it as needed. The topic guide and observation grid are included in the appendix.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork for the research was carried out between January and April 2023. The research process was iterative and adapted in response to the research context. The details of how the research process developed are outlined below.

A *purposive sampling* approach was used to recruit participants for the research, meaning that interviewees had to meet specific criteria (as opposed to being randomly selected). For this research, the key criteria was working in a food-related business in East Birmingham. Specifically, the PRs aimed to include representatives of specific types of businesses:

- Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)
- Independent businesses
- A diverse range of culturally-specific food offers
- Fast food and hot food takeaway shops (including Indian, Chinese, pizza, fish and chips, fried chicken, and burger takeaways)
- Food retail, including local independent and franchise convenience stores, markets (if existing in location), large supermarkets, and cultural food retailers
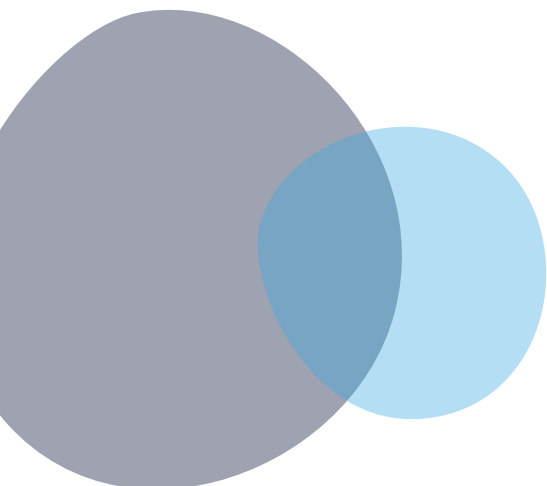
Limitations

As the PRs began recruitment, it became apparent that a particular challenge was that, while they were residents of East Birmingham, they did not work in the food industry or have personal contacts within the industry. At times, this made it difficult for them to build the rapport needed for participant recruitment.

For a variety of reasons, discussed on pages 21-22, food workers were often reluctant to participate in the research. In order to manage this, we were flexible with our research methods, we listened carefully to the experiences of PRs and adapted methods wherever possible. For instance, we had originally planned to run focus groups with food workers, but the PRs suggested these were unlikely to be suitable for the research context. PRs told us that focus groups were challenging to organise because they would require workers to leave their place of work and travel to a different physical location. Because of this insight, individual interviews were the primary tool used in the research, rather than focus groups.

As fieldwork began, PR's reported that, at times, interviews also presented specific challenges, as some business owners and employees were reluctant to have their words recorded. With this in mind, we worked with PRs to develop a range of creative methods for collecting data alongside interviews, including ethnographic observations of businesses; taking photos of the exterior, interior and menus of different food businesses; conducting interviews while taking notes taken by hand; and recording phone calls with participants' consent, rather than relying on digital or face-to-face interviews. While the observations helped inform the PRs' general reflections, the findings presented in this research are primarily drawn from the interviews conducted.

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Participants

In total the PRs conducted 28 interviews and 71 observations. A breakdown is given below of the kinds of businesses and employees interviewed:

Employee	Number interviewed
Owners	4
Managers	10
Employees	9
Delivery drivers	2
Unspecified role	3

Business	Number interviewed
Indian	1
Café or bakery	3
Butchers	2
Sandwich	2
Chicken	2
Fish and chips	2
Caribbean	3
Other 'fast food'	4
Convenience/corner shop	6
Hotel restaurant	1
Delivery company	2

Analysis

Once data collection was complete, PRs attended an analysis workshop, which was run by The Young Foundation and based on the principles of framework analysis. PRs were asked to reflect on their experiences carrying out the research, and to think about the insights they had developed around both the barriers to providing healthy food, and the skills and background of the workforce in the food industry. Their answers to these reflective exercises provided themes or 'frames', which The Young Foundation's team then used to purposefully analyse the data with Discover.ai, a tool for in-depth analysis of qualitative material. The preliminary findings were shared with the PRs, who were invited to comment on the analysis and clarify any points that may have been misunderstood. The findings shared in the following section are based on the data PRs collected, as well as their reflections and overall impressions.

The research process was supported by weekly check-ins with The Young Foundation's staff, which ensured that PRs' questions could be addressed and data quality maintained. Check-ins allowed the team to be adaptive to the needs of the research and any challenges that arose. The PRs were also given the opportunity to meet with Birmingham City Council in February 2023 to discuss the research progress, and consult on how the methodological approach had changed since research inception.

The Peer Researchers

Valerie Paragon

I was born in Northampton to Windrush-generation immigrants. My parents and I were joined by my two older siblings from Jamaica before our family moved to Birmingham 1965, settling in Small Heath, where I have remained. After completing secondary education, I held a series of jobs from Public House Cook to Registered Residential Care Service Manager, all requiring good observational and communication skills. Outside of my work life, my time is spent raising awareness of health and social care issues impacting the community in which I live - for example Breast Cancer, Stroke, Dementia, etc.

My interest was piqued when I learned of the Birmingham food system strategy and the fact that the study area was to be in my neck of the woods, East Birmingham. Much of the time, the area appears to have been forgotten, yet I was also suspicious of there potentially being a hidden agenda. It was evident, in my early attempts to secure interviews, that I was not alone in thinking this way.

The project has really opened my eyes to how richly diverse the East Birmingham area is. People network within their own communities and have often been beacons of hope in times of desperation, feeding homeless, running a slate for people awaiting financial support, opening all hours to compete with the big chains. I would like to thank each and every interviewee.

N.Khan

Having worked with children within the Birmingham area, I am always keen to explore the opportunities available to improve the lives of children. I've worked closely with University of Birmingham initiatives to educate children and parents and caregivers in healthy lifestyles.

I've also trained in and conducted research studies to support the NHS to improve infant mortality rates amongst the most vulnerable communities of Birmingham. Working with food suppliers in East Birmingham to discover what healthy food provision is available, I discovered that although there aren't big brand supermarkets around, East Birmingham does have smaller independent continental supermarket chains which service multicultural communities. Additionally, the fast food providers, especially the independent ones, offered low-calorie or adapted menus. Discussions about consumer demand led me to conclude that more needs to be done to educate children and young people, in particular on making healthy lifestyle choices.

Iram Tahir

I am a mum of three children. I am a cultural mediator of Italian language and a social worker as well. I have shifted to the UK from Italy about three years ago. I am very keen about healthy lifestyle and nutritious food. Italian food is famous all over the world for its nutritional value and quality, so I found a big difference of food and lifestyle in UK as compared to Italy. I observed a trend of fried chicken shops and convenience shops loaded with unhealthy snacks that weren't on trend in Italy. When I came to know about the project of The Young Foundation regarding food system research, it attracted me to join as it was relevant to my interests. I enjoyed the project and research into food systems in my city. It gave me an ample opportunity to explore the food system in the city and people's lifestyle towards eating habits. I have investigated and observed different aspects of food supply and consumption. I have enjoyed being a part of the project.

Yasser

My name is Yasser. I have lived in East Birmingham all my life, and do community work within this area. I was interested in this role as I want to better understand how to help my community.

Zain

My name is Zain. I live in Birmingham and brought with me experience of working as a waiter in the food industry. I was interested in this role as I want to improve my research skills, expand my knowledge, and make some valuable connections for my future career.

Neelam Heera-Shergill

I am an activist, TEDx speaker, and Founder of Cysters, a charity centering marginalised groups and lived experiences, after I faced challenged getting diagnosis and care for various health conditions. I also work as an educator, facilitator, and community researcher within gender-based violence, anti-racism, and health inequalities. I am passionate about ensuring the inclusion of marginalised groups who are often left out of conversations that concern them, not reflected in research, and rarely invited 'to the table' to co-develop solutions.

My work has been recognised by the Pride of Britain and Point of Light awards from the Prime Minister, and was named in Birmingham's 30 under 30.

Summary of findings

This section highlights and briefly explains the main findings of the research. Peer Researchers highlighted five themes during analysis:

1. **There is no single definition of 'healthy food'.** Understandings of what constitutes a healthy meal are culturally specific and can include a wide variety of ingredients and cooking methods. Workers from different businesses offered different definitions of what they considered to be 'healthy'. It is important for discussions around healthy food to take this diversity into account, and consider how different types of meals might be made healthier, rather than prescribing a single type of cuisine.

2. **Businesses are primarily concerned about cost** when providing healthy food. This is related to the cost of purchasing and storing items such as fruit and vegetables, which might require refrigeration, as well as uncertainty around customer preferences. The cost-of-living crisis had a major impact on how food businesses make decisions.

3. **Businesses are risk-averse when changing their stock and food offerings, and face numerous spatial and physical constraints.** Businesses are reluctant to change their stock if they lack clarity as to whether 'healthier' choices would be appealing to customers. Some are also limited by the space within their shops, or agreements with external vendors.

4. **Hiring and training practices in the food industry do not emphasise health or dietary considerations** and there is not much consistency across businesses. Training for food workers tends to focus primarily on customer service, basic hygiene, and food preparation.

5. **Food businesses are distrustful of external parties and thus reluctant to engage in research.** This applies to owners and managers, who are concerned about being penalised by the council financially for serving 'unhealthy' food; and to employees, who are often working in precarious, low-income jobs and are reluctant to participate in research. Making both management and employees feel secure and comfortable is key to undertaking research on food businesses.

The 'Findings' section expands on themes 1 through 4, drawing on the interviews conducted by PRs. These themes speak directly to the research objectives previously outlined; they highlight the barriers to providing healthy food in East Birmingham, as well as discussing hiring and training practices.

In the following section, *The barriers to researching healthy food in East Birmingham: Peer Researchers' experiences*, we elaborate on point 5. Here, we turn to a detailed discussion of the research process and its challenges, and share some thoughts from Neelam Heera-Shergill, one of the PRs. We offer some recommendations for how the council can support food businesses, as well as recommendations for future research into the food system.

Findings

This section delves deeper into the main findings of the research, building upon themes 1 – 4 discussed above and developed in analysis with the PRs. It will explain definitions of healthy food; barriers to providing healthy food encountered by businesses, including cost and changing of stock; and finally, the hiring and training practices of businesses.
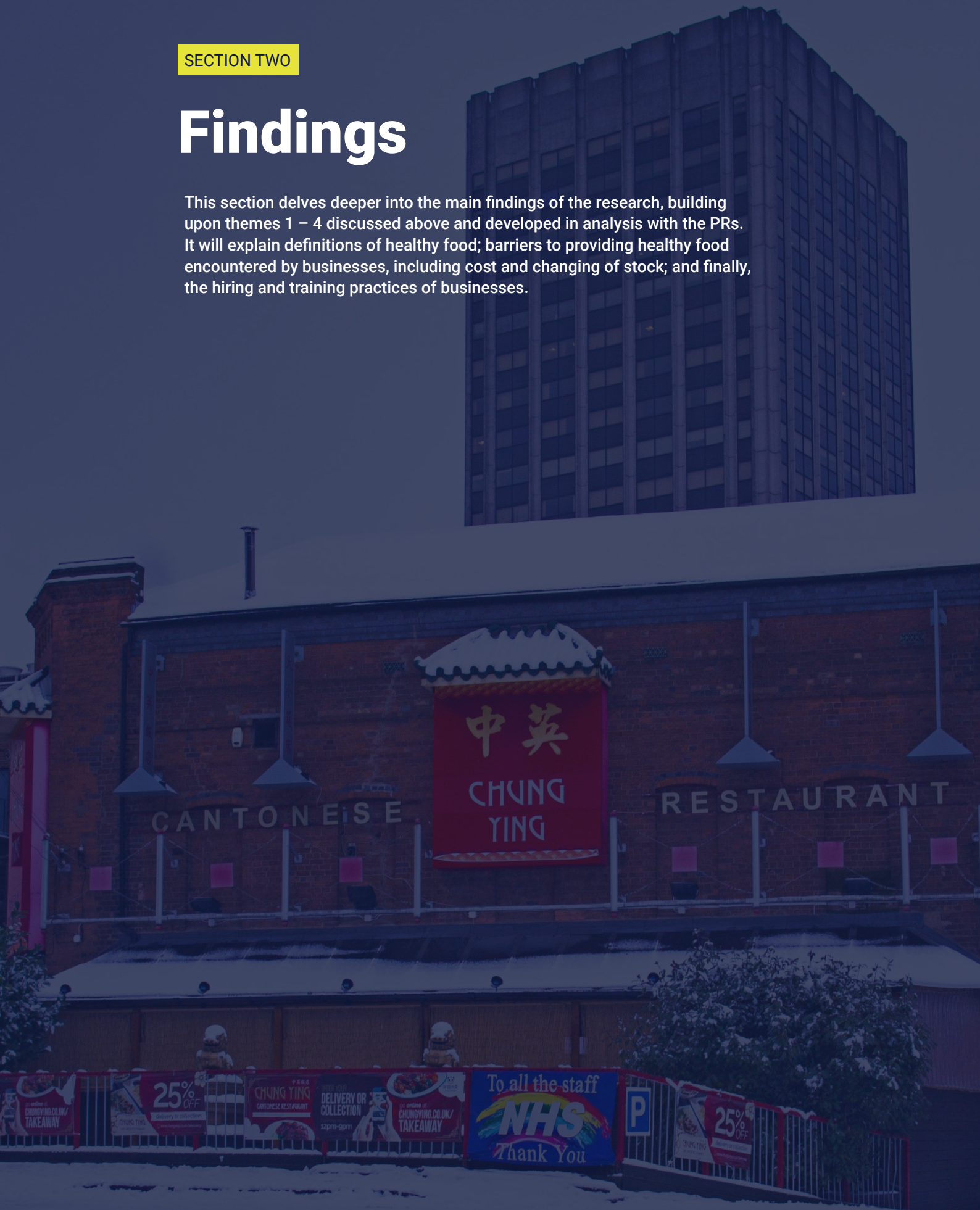
Defining 'healthy food'

There are many definitions of healthy food. During training, PRs were invited to reflect on their own experiences of food and share about their families' lifestyles and preferences. What emerged from these conversations was a range of attitudes towards food, as well as a strong level of concern about the degree to which younger generations seem to gravitate towards 'fast food' and take-aways.

For the purposes of this research, the phrase 'fast food' refers to shops serving items such as fried chicken, burgers, pizza, or fish and chips in a casual environment with low prices and informal seating. Where relevant, PRs identified the specific type of fast food in labelling their research participants (eg, chicken shop); in other cases, the phrase 'fast food' is used to designate a more general business offering a range of items.

In training, PRs and The Young Foundation's staff agreed that it was important to approach this work with a non-judgmental attitude to what is considered healthy or unhealthy. Rather than assuming a specific, singular definition of 'healthy food,' PRs were encouraged to start interviews by asking respondents what they considered to be healthy food. Because business owners and employees are unlikely to state openly if they judge the food they serve to be 'unhealthy,' it was more productive to evaluate how people defined the idea of 'healthy' and to consider whether businesses serve healthy food based on that definition. Some of the responses gathered are given here.

> "
> Definition of healthy food in my opinion, anything that's not cooked in saturated fat, oil, fish, vegetables, rolls, pasta, stuff like that ... as long as it's in moderation, chips, because that's what everyone has when they come in here.

Fish and chips, Employee

> "
> Healthy food is, I would say it's food which is, if you're going to be eating chicken or fries, you have some salad with it as well.

Chicken shop, Employee

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"

Vegetables ... and fresh meat are healthy food.

Fish and chips, Employee

"

Healthy food is like no grease, you have your steamed veg ... You can do your steamed Irish potato, your steamed sweet potato, your broccoli, your cauliflower, and all those stuff.

Caribbean restaurant, Employee

As evidenced by these quotes, healthy food can be defined in many different ways. In asking research participants what they consider to be healthy food, it was clear that some defined 'healthy' in a way closely aligned with their shops (eg, the butcher listing meat), whereas others indicated a definition of 'healthy' that clashed with the food they serve.

Cost

When considering the addition of healthy food to menus, many establishments reported that they had to consider the cost to both the business itself and to the customer. As a result, there were a variety of concerns related to cost. To begin with, the price of ingredients has recently increased, with 'healthy' produce prices rising significantly. Businesses are having to counteract the cost of produce by increasing menu prices. One business stated:

"

The prices of products are continuously rising and we can't raise the price of the menu every second or third day.

Fast food, Manager

Businesses reported that including greater choices on a menu, such as allergy-friendly items, again increases the overall costs, which is then reflected in the cost of the menu items:

"

We can offer, but that will ... be an extra cost.

Fast food, Owner

Food businesses identified that it can be difficult to predict whether the addition of healthy items will reap benefits. It can be quite costly for the business to first purchase these items, and with no guarantee of a sale from customers, it poses a risk:

"

It is always risky to try new products as we order in bulk, and cannot be sure they will sell ... We tried to introduce fruit to sell but it was unpopular, so we stopped purchasing it.

Shop, Owner

The cost-of-living crisis is heavily impacting businesses as well as consumers. Some food businesses said they are becoming concerned that purchasing produce for their businesses will become too expensive, and that customers will soon be turned away because of increasing item prices. One business stated:

"

According to my opinion, local shops, fast food, takeaways and small businesses will shut down in the future because we can't meet the cost of living.

Fast food, Owner

To help with this, and the addition of healthy food options, one business suggested support from the council would help:

"

We can add some healthy options if we have some financial support from the council.

Fast food, Manager

Customer demand

Businesses reported their concerns about the types of food that customers want, and whether healthy food fits into this category. Many businesses worry the demographics they serve will not be interested in healthy options:

"

A lot of our customers are factory workers and want quick and high-energy snacks, not healthy options on their breaks.

Shop, Manager

Many businesses said they plan their menus specifically around the demands of their customers, and for many these items are unhealthy:

> Whichever items seem to be in demand, this is informed by customers – it is mostly snacks, chocolates, crisps and biscuits and flapjacks.

Shop, Manager

> We have a demand for fried food in our area.

Fast food, Manager

> Vegetables can be a healthy option, but most of the customers like junk and fast food.

Uber Eats/Deliveroo, Delivery driver

However, some businesses acknowledged that, even if it may not be a customer demand, healthy food is still something that they should offer. For example, some fast-food businesses provide salads with their meals to make them healthier, but acknowledge they:

"

... don't know if people actually eat it.

Chicken shop, Employee

For some businesses, the incentive to provide healthier food and greater option is linked to the increase of specific diets, such as veganism:

"

They provide a lot of healthy options because a lot of people – there's a lot of people in there that don't eat meat, and are vegan, so they have salads daily.

Hotel restaurant, Employee

Some businesses also described providing smaller portions for kids, who make up a substantial portion of their customers.

"

And we offer kids meals because meal deals are too big for them to finish.

Fast food, Unspecified role

Ultimately, businesses reported that decisions were made based on what benefits the business overall. Food establishments emphasized that they must be constantly aware of the customer demand, and as evidenced above, demand may not always translate into healthy options. Businesses are understandably reluctant to alter or reduce popular menu items, or to intervene too heavily in customers' dietary decisions. One worker said:

"

It all depends on the customer's personal choice.

Convenience store, Owner

Physical and spatial constraints

Several businesses listed other factors that impacted their ability to provide healthy food, specifically around the physical and spatial constraints both inside and outside of their shops. For smaller businesses, the space available to store, prepare and display food can be limited. For many, this means they must limit stock:

> If you ain't got the space for it, you got to – if you've got good sellers and you want to try something, but you ain't got the space for it, you won't know … If you had more space, you'd have more stock, so that's more options for the customers.

Convenience store, Unspecified role

For some businesses, the layout of their store and placement of items are also quite important. One business stated that they:

> … store the nicer, more valuable stuff nearer to the counter.

Shop, Manager

The peer research suggested that if a business is struggling with limited space, they will prioritise the items and products they know sell best. They will also use this limited space to advertise the products they know sell best:

> Most of the time we put offers for large family deals because they sell a lot because of the amount of food for the price.

Fast food, Unspecified role

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This is because it allows customers to see these items before checking out, but also because they believe it will help deter theft, which is a concern for some businesses. Others are expected to lay out their stores in a specific way due to deals with vendors of specific products:

> We have stands given to us by suppliers who ask that we keep their products in our stock … For example, the Lucozade fridge or the Nestle chocolate bar stand or a Walls freezer … They ask that we keep a certain percentage of the shelves limited to their product list. We agree these with the company reps who come out to our shop to sell their products and to check on their unit.

Shop, Manager

Finally, multiple businesses mentioned traffic and roadworks in their area disrupting business, including by making delivery of hot food from the business to customers more difficult.

While some of these factors may appear separate from the question of what food is prepared or sold and whether or not it is 'healthy,' physical and spatial constraints play a role in determining a shop's ability to provide healthy food. As evidenced above, shop layouts can be determined by vendors who sell specific types of food and can apply pressure to shop owners to display items in particular ways, regardless of whether food is healthy. Because healthy food items are often understood as risky to sell, and customers are frequently assumed to prefer more familiar options, additional factors such as storage space and traffic disruptions may add pressure to businesses who are already risk-averse and make them less likely to stock new food items that are not proven to sell.

Hiring practices

24 of the 28 businesses interviewed by PRs were small independent businesses, where hiring practices were often idiosyncratic and informal. Rather than advertising online, many would advertise through:

"

... recommendations by friends or even ads or posters on shop front.

Fast food, Owner

Some of the respondents said they were hired simply through asking in the shop:

"

I literally just asked if there were any jobs and luckily, they were looking for someone and they hired me.

Fish and chips, Employee

Some respondents were specifically sought out due to their past work experience, and the skills this would bring to the business:

"

I was recruited because I was doing hospitality management.

Hotel restaurant, Employee

The rate of recruitment varied in different businesses and was dependent on specific factors. One respondent, who worked for a larger chain, said their boss recruited at quite a frequent rate:

"

He recruits about two trainees a year, in the sense that he likes people who, like school leavers, maybe don't have a job yet, just want a bit of experience.

Chicken shop, Employee

In some cases, the current financial climate and the cost of running a business had an impact on hiring new employees. For some, the workload was also not justifiable:

"

We do not recruit as we cannot afford to, there is not enough work to justify employing somebody.

Shop, Manager

When businesses do recruit, the peer research found specific desired traits in potential employees, including customer service skills, trustworthiness and punctuality, over any specific skills or knowledge base. However, some businesses stated they would keep an eye out for high-level skills, such as language ability:

"

Obviously within [this area] there's a lot of people from the Asian district, so my father, he speaks Urdu, Punjabi, so do a lot of my cousins, so I think that's quite a good skill set.

Chicken shop, Employee

No evidence was found that hiring decisions were based on knowledge of a healthy diet. The hiring practices documented suggest that most employees would require additional training in dietary health once in post.

Training provided

All research participants who were shop employees discussed the training they received when they started their role, and many described how they had also trained new starters. The depth and breadth of training varied considerably. For some, it was delivered purely through "training guides" (Uber, Delivery driver). Whereas, for others, the training would be quite intensive:

> There's an initial 12-week training [period], and then the manager reviews it every couple of weeks.

Bakery, Employee

The training described to PRs typically covered skills related to customer service, such as how to talk to customers, or to do with the practical side of working in a food business (eg, taking orders, food preparation, or equipment use). This type of training was usually the most in-depth.

> Somebody was showing us what to do, what people order, how to pack it, hygiene, and to clean your hands and wear gloves, hygiene stuff.

Chicken shop, Employee

> We receive training for the safety part.

Fast food, Unspecified role

No specific evidence was found of food workers receiving training regarding health or dietary considerations, apart from those directly related to food safety (eg, allergens). When participants were asked about the type of training they would like to receive in future to build their skillsets, the responses were mostly the same, focusing on a desire for more training about the safety of food production. However, some expressed a desire to learn about how to make food healthier for customers:

> I think if you can give us training as to how we can help the community, that would be great … I think to give us more information about this, more training as to how we can make it healthier because in this conversation, I didn't know how to make food healthier.

Chicken shop, Employee

Barriers to researching healthy food in East Birmingham: Peer Researchers' experiences

The PRs described numerous challenges when carrying out this research. Specifically, in recruiting participants, where they often faced issues related logistics and communication (language barriers, lack of time, inability to leave the shop floor and attend an interview, unwillingness to exchange contact details) and participants' discomfort with being recorded.

At the analysis workshop, PRs shared the challenges they faced throughout the research. They suggested that the main issues were the following:

Incentive

Though we offered an incentive of £30 to all who participated in an interview, for many this was not considered enough when compared to the risk they saw in talking to the PRs. Some PRs also reported that some participants would decline to share their contact information to receive the payments, which further suggested they viewed taking part as a risk. Finally, PRs found that although floor workers were happy to take part and receive the £30 payment, managers would often want more for their time.

Workplace roles and lack of time

PRs found that many floor workers were concerned that they were not allowed to take part in the interview and discuss the topics being addressed. This often correlated with statements such as 'the Manager is not in', and the more aggressive, 'get out, I have no time for you!'.

Distrust and fear

Most of the reactions connected to a general distrust and fear that many workers have of the council. Concerns about future repercussions meant many felt uncomfortable talking to the PRs, and many had unfavourable opinions of the councils' involvement: "The Council always make trouble".

Language barriers

Finally, the PRs also highlighted that language barriers played a role in their struggles to find willing participants. Workers would often decline to part in an interview because of their ability to speak English. Statements such as "my son is the owner, he is in Poland, I don't speak English" were reported to be common occurrences.

In the following section, Neelam Heera-Shergill, one of the PRs, reflects on her learning:

Road works and parking

Most takeaways had no parking and were situated on busy roads, with delivery drivers and cars pulling up onto the pavement, risking themselves and other road-users. Some takeaways also had physical barriers nearby, such as road works. Most delivery drivers approached for this research did not want to participate but were happy to comment 'off the record'. They said they feel pressured by food companies to not fall below their KPIs for deliveries. They explained that road works have been a barrier, causing complaints about delivery times and an increase in demand for compensation from customers.

Community settings

Takeaways and food businesses have become 'community hubs' for those who do not drink alcohol. None of the establishments involved in this research sold alcohol, and they were predominantly in Muslim areas, close to places of worship.

Several customers explained they do not drink alcohol for religious reasons, and they do not go clubbing or to bars. Therefore, these places have become locations for them to hang out with friends during the late evening. Some commented that one of the areas involved in the research, Sheldon, does not have much for younger people to do in the evenings.

A number of international students who frequent these establishments explained they lived predominantly in HMOs without access to adequate kitchen space, so they would come to takeaway shops that had food from their home countries.

Communication

Most of the people that took part in interviews spoke English as their second language. However, for some businesses, it was vital that staff were able to speak another language to take orders from the public. This is not something mentioned during the hiring process, however.

It is worth noting that, during this project, there were some language barriers for PRs who do not speak the languages that participants do and are therefore not representative of the wider community.

Additionally, attitudes to social media differed between interviewees. Where some businesses did not engage at all, others are trying to capitalise on social media to drive more traffic and footfall into their shops. PRs felt that some businesses are being 'left behind' in the new age of social media.

Trust

In general, there was a distrust of the council. People often stated they found it disingenuous that the council couldn't make visits like the ones PRs did for this research to ask these questions directly. People working in several establishments worried this research would lead to harsh penalties on them, or that the PRs were acting as spies for the tax office or council.

When speaking to staff about the research and engagement with the council, it was clear most were unsure whether they could participate themselves, fearing they would lose their jobs and wanting to remain anonymous. Some felt their immigration status was too precarious to be involved in research, and felt they would be deported if they said anything negative.

Several people said they were hit hard by Covid-19 and didn't feel the council helped them. Alongside the cost-of-living crisis, the pandemic made it difficult for businesses to stay afloat, with some having to change hands, or even shut down without support.

People said they would like the time, confidentiality, space and freedom to discuss these issues without fear. However, most said they believe nothing will be done about their worries.

During Ramadan, there were some racial tensions across Birmingham, which resulted in physical violence in some areas of East Birmingham. People felt the council and other institutions were slow to condemn these acts, and that there had been no civic engagement from anyone in the council. The impact on the research was noticeable, with most people feeling let down, and not fully understanding why we were researching attitudes to food when there were bigger issues within the area. This impacted the delicate trust PRs had built with businesses.

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Relationship-building

PRs had a variety of methods of recruitment. Some reached out to places of worship, local faith community groups, and online spaces, such as Facebook. All the people who reached out via social media were from an ethnic minority background.

Some PRs attended the same food outlets more than once in an effort to build relationships with staff and owners. It was noted that the owners were often busy. However, on most occasions, staff and owners still declined the interviews.

Businesses usually opened later in the day, becoming busy from 6pm on, and did not often offer breakfast or lunch menus. In the evening, the clientele would change from young families to older adult males who were meeting friends. The opening times, lack of seating, and prominence of older males made it difficult to conduct research due to the lack of privacy and ability to explain the research in detail.

Another aspect of this research was that it mostly took place during the month of Ramadan. It felt disingenuous to speak to staff members, who were observing the holiday and were practicing long periods of abstinence. It also made it difficult as those practicing the holiday would not want to receive payment during this time, or would want assurance that the money would go to charity instead.

Waste

Both litter and food waste were highlighted as problems during the research. Litter was a visible problem, with a high number of shops on the same street dealing with it. Staff commented that the council should help deal with this problem to increase pride in the local areas. This could be through more public bins and litter-pickers.

Establishments don't have the daily demand to supply fresh and healthy food, nor do they have the disposable income to get fridges to hold the food. Salad is provided at most establishments as an addition to mostly fried foods, but this is usually the only salad provided.

Next steps – community journey

Those who we did speak to wished to remain informed about outcomes, and were curious to see the council's actions moving forward. Keeping participants 'in the loop' throughout the project helps the communities feel part of the entire journey, rather than like we are doing research 'to' them. Community engagement is key, and needs to be acknowledged as a large part of tackling childhood obesity in East Birmingham.

Recommendations and avenues for future research

This research has yielded numerous insights into the food system in East Birmingham. Our recommendations are split into two distinct areas: firstly, recommendations for how BCC can support food businesses in East Birmingham; and secondly, recommendations for future research.

1 Recommendations for how BCC can support food businesses in East Birmingham to provide healthier food options

Building trust with food businesses. PRs' findings and reflections highlight the lack of trust between many food businesses and the council. Lack of familiarity with the council's Food System Strategy, and a fear of being penalised by the council, made many businesses suspicious of participating in the research.

To ensure buy-in from businesses in their Food Systems Strategy, the council could consider:

- conducting more regular visits to businesses and creating informal opportunities for discussion in East Birmingham. This will help build the impression that the council is interested in helping rather than penalising business owners;
- liaising with elected councillors from East Birmingham to collect feedback from businesses and disseminate more information about the Food Systems Strategy.

Helping with the cost of living. Our findings demonstrate that the cost-of-living crisis is not only impacting consumers, but also plays a significant role in how businesses make decisions about what items to stock and sell. The council should consider what financial incentives it might be possible to offer businesses who agree to provide healthier food. Subsidies and in-kind support might also be considered. This may prove challenging for the council to implement, and will necessitate further discussions.

Supporting actionable research into customer preferences. Businesses indicated a lack of certainty around customer preferences and perceived providing healthy food as 'risky' if their customer base generally gravitated towards less healthy food. The council could consider supporting community research, focused on the habits of specific demographics shopping and eating at East Birmingham businesses, and then share this back with businesses. This research could focus on understanding which specific types of healthy foods are most appealing to customers.

Tailored training and support for food workers. The council could consider offering standardised training relevant to the Food System Strategy. Most food workers have training in hygiene, sanitation and customer service, but may lack knowledge of how to prepare healthy food.

2 Recommendations for future research into food systems in East Birmingham

In addition, this research has highlighted several productive avenues for future research. The peer research approach has been shown to be highly effective for involving community members in discussions around building healthy food systems in East Birmingham and beyond. Future work can build on the insights uncovered by this approach:

To increase understanding of how food businesses operate, **PRs trained and engaged to deliver future research should be food workers or business owners.** This would likely necessitate a lengthy recruitment process based on extensive consultation with food businesses to explain the purpose of the research and ensure that employees can act as PRs without suffering negative consequences at work.

Building on the above, future research should **differentiate clearly between food business owners and their employees,** and be designed to **capture the specific experiences of these different groups.** As noted by PRs, food workers face specific barriers to participating in research and may perceive their roles as unstable. This makes them less confident about sharing their experiences.

There is a great deal of interest from community members on the topic of healthy food and food consumption. **Future research might focus on some of the topics identified in this research,** but which fell outside the research scope, such as:

- young people's food consumption habits
- the extent of food waste produced by businesses and how this waste is managed
- the links between concepts of healthy food, ethnicity and race and how different ethnic communities in East Birmingham define 'healthy'

Finally, further research might **explore how networks outside the council or Chamber of Commerce, both digital and in-person, operate amongst food businesses in East Birmingham**.

Conclusion

Access to healthy food is a pressing issue in Birmingham and across the UK. Creating more equitable and just food systems is a particularly urgent task – especially considering the cost-of-living crisis, which is having pronounced effects on household budgets. It is clear that food businesses can play a vital role in supplying healthy food to customers, but our research findings highlight the barriers many businesses face, including cost, risk, uncertainty, and lack of space. The findings also point to the diverse definitions of what constitutes 'healthy food' and draw attention to the gaps in food workers' training.

This research provides a useful starting point for understanding the food system in East Birmingham, as well as insight into how community research can be mobilised for future work in this area. The PRs' reflections on the research illuminate not just the findings, but also the reasons people were reluctant to participate. This is a unique body of insight, typically unavailable in traditional research approaches. It is essential that communities are involved in decisions about how to build more just and equitable food systems, and this research highlights routes for accomplishing this in East Birmingham.

Appendix

Semi-structured interview guide - East Birmingham Food Systems Project

Opening and intros (5-10 minutes)

[Welcome your interviewee and invite them to get settled. Ask how they are doing. Once settled, you can begin.]

Hi, my name is _____ and I am a community researcher with The Young Foundation. We'd like to speak to you about your views and experiences of working in the food industry. The purpose of this work is to get a better understanding of the way people access food in East Birmingham.

We're aiming to understand what barriers businesses in East Birmingham face to providing healthy, affordable food and what sorts of knowledge and skills people who work in food have. Your thoughts and opinions will be used to inform the Council's Childhood Obesity Trailblazer programme.

I need to make you aware of several things before starting:

- This research has no known risks, and your participation in the project is confidential. This means that only you and the research team will know that you took part and we will change details to keep your identity protected. However, if you tell us anything that suggests you or someone else is at immediate risk of harm, I will need to report this to The Young Foundation's Safeguarding Officer.

- We would like to record the focus group. The audio recording will stored securely on our server. This will then be transcribed, with transcriptions and any notes anonymised and stored securely. Notes, transcripts and audio files will be permanently deleted after three years.

- Your contact details may be shared or used for relevant purposes, such as arranging the focus group, sharing the report if interested, and further research.

- You will receive a £30 incentive for your time and contribution to the research. We will use your full name and email address to process this on a platform called Ayda. This may take up to seven days after the completion of this discussion to process.

- Finally, your participation is voluntary. You can withdraw your consent during the focus group and up to a week after the group has taken place by emailing research@youngfoundation.org. You can also skip a question, or stop the discussion altogether, and there will be no consequences.

Do you have any questions about any of that?

Please could you say now if you do not consent to taking part on this basis.

If you're happy, we'll begin the recording?

[Start recording]

1. We'll begin by asking you to say your name, what part of East Birmingham you work in, and what business you work for. (Ensure this is clear to help with transcription).

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Skills and training (20 minutes)

We're going to start by asking some basic questions about your history and time working in the food industry in Birmingham, as well as about your skills and the training you receive or give in your business.

1. How long have you worked in the food industry?
2. What is your role at the business where you work, and can you walk us through a typical working day?

[For interviews with management]

1. Where do you recruit from and what kinds of people apply for or are offered roles in your business?
2. What skills are essential for the jobs you hire for?
3. Do you offer regular training for this job? What does this entail?
4. Name one thing that would make your job easier, and one thing that currently makes it difficult?

[For interviews with employees]

1. How were you recruited to your current job?
2. What skills are essential for the job you do?
3. Did you receive training for this role? What does this entail?
4. Is there any kind of additional training you would like? If so, what would it entail?
5. Are you able to express concerns and grievances in the workplace? Share ideas for changes or new approaches?
6. Name one thing that would make your job easier, and one thing that currently makes it difficult?

Decision-making, supply and logistics (15 minutes)

We'll now ask a bit more about how decisions are made in your business, where you get your stock and equipment.

1. Who decides where products are placed?
2. Who develops the menu in your establishment?
3. Who is responsible for setting menu prices or store prices?
4. Can you walk us through your delivery and supply processes?
5. What kind of equipment does your store or business have?

Healthy food – access and barriers to providing it (25 minutes)

Now we'll ask you to think about healthy food – how you define it, and how you believe your business might contribute to providing healthy food in East Birmingham.

1. What is your definition of healthy food? Do you feel that your business provides this?
2. If you feel that your business does not sell healthy food, is there anything that stops you from promoting or selling healthy food?
3. What would make it possible to enhance the health benefits of the food sold at your establishment, if you don't consider them healthy?
4. If there were no barriers, what would you add to your existing menu as a healthy option? What stops you from offering this now?
5. If a customer came in asking for a healthy meal or item, what would you recommend to them?
6. Are you able to adapt meals depending on people's needs - eg, gluten-free, diabetes, low-fat, etc?
7. To what extent do prices influence your ability to provide healthy food? Please explain how.

What are the challenges businesses face? (15 minutes)

Finally, we'd like to ask about any specific challenges you feel your businesses are facing, and what you believe can be done to address these.

1. Are there any specific challenges food businesses face in East Birmingham in your opinion?
2. Are you part of any networks in the city (eg, Chamber of Commerce, etc)? Why or why not? If not, what barriers have stopped you from joining?
3. What, if anything, could the council do to help support your business to provide healthy food, as you've defined it?

[Close and thank participants for their time.]

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