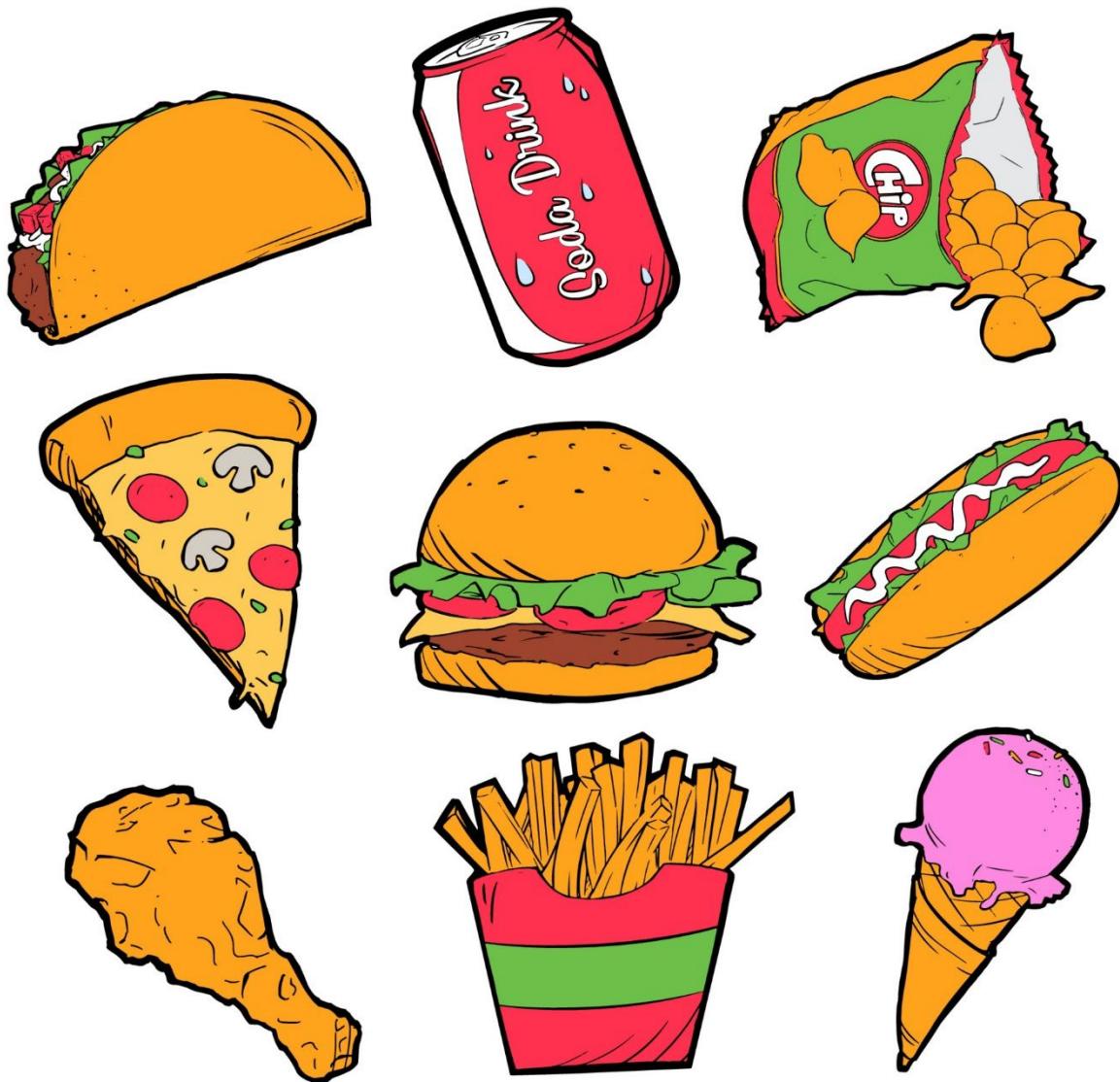


# Blackburn East Child Obesity Report

August 2025



**healthwatch**  
Blackburn with Darwen

# **Background to the Project**

There were concerns raised at Blackburn East PCN about the level of childhood obesity in this area of the borough. Healthwatch Blackburn with Darwen and Blackburn with Darwen Food Alliance developed an approach for engagement with young people, focusing on young people in Year 6 and above, to understand what being healthy meant to them and the barriers they experience to being healthy. Understanding that weight stigma is an issue for young people, conversations were designed following BDA Association of UK dieticians' guidance on having conversations with young people about their weight.

## **Methodology**

We delivered a series of focus groups with young people across the Blackburn East PCN geography and also delivered two 6-week cooking programmes with families. The cooking programmes provided the opportunity to build relationships and trust with the groups to explore incentives and barriers to maintaining a healthy weight.

The groups we engaged with were:-

Audley Juniors Year 6 (4 classes of 30 young people)

Longshaw Juniors Year 6 (3 classes of 30 young people)

Shadsworth Juniors Year 6 (2 classes of 30 young people)

IMO Senior Girls Session in Whitebirk (5 young people from Audley and Whitebirk)

IMO Juniors Session in Audley (4 young people)

Newground Shadsworth Hub Senior Club (6 young people)

Blackburn Youth Zone Youth Group (7 young people)

Higher Croft Family Fun Day (25 young people and 10 adults)

Eden High School open day (3 young people and 4 adults)

We unfortunately did not receive responses from two secondary schools therefore we conducted additional engagement at Witton Park Family

Fitness Festival to reach further groups of families. (32 adults and 5 young people).

The cooking programme at Eden High School engaged 5 pairs of parents and children and the programme at Newground Shadsworth Hub engaged 3 parents/carers and 6 young people.

Total young people engaged – 336

Total adults engaged – 54

## **The Food Environment in Blackburn East**

Blackburn East has only four Recipe 4 Health registered restaurants/takeaways, with none in the Highercroft area. Froggy's Bites in Shadsworth is only open between 7am and 2pm on weekdays and Licence to Grill in Whitebirk is only open between 8am and 2pm each day. Fareeds in Audley and Cheung Wing Fish & Chip and Chinese Takeaway are both 6 day a week takeaways.

The only large supermarket in the area is Tesco in Whitebirk, with the majority of the area being supplied by smaller supermarkets such as Heron Foods, One Stop, Go Local and Best One, which tend to provide smaller ranges of fresh food and at higher prices.

## **Access to Physical Activity in Blackburn East**

There is now a map detailing local physical activity provision across the borough on the Refresh website - <https://refreshbwd.com/get-active-near-you/>. However, the only provision noted as being on offer in Blackburn East are:-

- Ladies Only Chair Based session in Audley
- Family Hub in Shadsworth
- Newground Hub Monday morning short strolls
- Higher Croft Children's Centre
- Roman Road Library
- Blackburn Birth Centre low level exercise for pregnant women

None of these cater for young people. However, we know from discussions with young people and families that the following sessions are available:-

- Kickboxing at Newground hub charged at £15 for one child per month, £25 for two siblings or £37.50 for three siblings.
- Majorettes at Newground hub (pricing requested)
- Blackburn Allstars Majorettes at Accrington Road Community Centre (pricing requested)

- Newground Hub free junior and youth sessions (including some sports) and new American Football sessions
- BwD Gymnastics Club in Shadsworth costing from £32.50 for a 5 week session
- IMO free juniors and senior sessions in Audley (including some sports)
- Some youth provision at Audley Centre

Therefore it appears for dedicated sports provision, the costs for young people are similar to the adult pricing for membership with BwD Leisure Centres.

# Themes of Feedback from Focus Groups



## **What Makes Us Healthy?**

Feedback from young people was consistent across the different groups, with young people listing exercise, sleep, healthy diet, drinking water, eating fruit and vegetables as key to being healthy. Brushing teeth was only raised by one group as important to their health. Some young people also highlighted the importance of good mental health, "do meditation" and "having balance in your life".

## **What does being healthy mean to you?**

Most young people associated being healthy with being fit, strong, a healthy heart and not getting ill. They also thought that it helped them to be able to do everything they want to do and achieve in school. Year 6 children also associated being healthy with being happy.

Teenage young people focused on how it made them feel about themselves, "happy mind, you feel better in yourself" and "you get a sense of release from exercise." They also referred to their own bad habits, "working out not just sitting around on the sofa."

## **Is it important to be healthy?**

The majority of young people felt that it was important to be healthy to be able to live longer, avoid heart problems and other illnesses and be stronger. Some of the younger children who said that it was not important could not actually give a reason but older boys who stated that it was not important focused more on living in the moment and would rather just enjoy living as they are right now, with no thought for their future health.

## **Is it easy to be healthy? What barriers do you face to being healthy?**

The majority of young people felt that it was not easy to be healthy, with some groups being split in their responses. Those who thought it was easy felt this because they were active. The older ones stated that they go to the gym and were not keen on takeaways and younger children who found it easy enjoyed playing out, doing sports in school and going to the park as a family.

**Motivation** was raised as a barrier to being healthy amongst several of the groups we engaged with.

“You need to be motivated to be healthy, it takes effort.”

“It’s hard to maintain a healthy routine.”

“Being healthy needs commitment.”

The accessibility and low cost of **unhealthy food** including fast food and takeaways was raised in all groups as a barrier to being healthy. There were several comments relating to unhealthy food “tasting too good” and “they make it look too tasty”. Some felt even more strongly about fast food, reporting ‘craving’ sweets and fast food, with one boy stating that he was “addicted to them” and another stating “you get addicted to things like chocolate and crisps.”

One young person stated that adverts and bright colours used by fast food outlets and dessert bars were directly aimed at young people.

Young people already recognised the fact that processed food is cheaper than eating fresh food from scratch.

Even in Year 6, children recognised the fact that unhealthy meals are quicker and easier to make. “It’s easy and less stressful.” Many stated that they make their own meal when they get home – pot noodles, packet pasta, chicken nuggets and chips in the air fryer and microwave meals.

There were several young people across all of the groups who stated that they did not like healthy food. “It’s hard to find healthy food I like.”

Older young people acknowledged that they ate a lot less at home, particularly when going to the Youth Zone in the evening and just ate at takeaways in the centre of town instead.

**Screen time** was also raised as a barrier to being healthy and active.

“Gaming means I’m sat around a lot.”

“Phones stop you from sleeping properly.”

One teenage girl stated that her aim was to reduce her phone screen time to 7 hours a day because it was currently far higher than that.

**Time** for exercise was also raised as barrier to being healthy. Several young people also stated that they were too tired to do exercise when they got home from school.

**Family** was reported as sometimes being a negative influence on how healthy the children are.

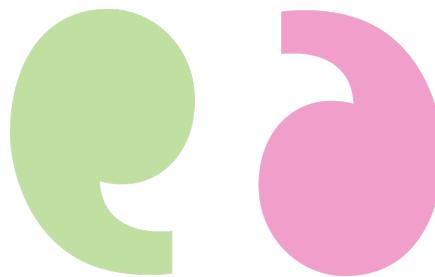
“Family eating unhealthy food around me is a temptation.”

“Having younger siblings stops me from being able to go out.”

“My parents can’t take me out after school.”

“Adults don’t encourage young people to eat healthily.”

“It’s an effort to eat healthily and we don’t have any healthy food in the house very often, mum doesn’t really cook.”



### **Adult feedback**

Feedback from adults was that they faced particular barriers around **time and money**. Finance for gym memberships and the cost of healthy food were both raised as concerns, with one person stating that free food that is given out in the borough is often unhealthy. Issues around time were particularly around balancing work and family commitments and varying priorities before having time for exercise. Night shifts were noted as a negative impact on people’s health. **Lack of energy** was also raised by some mothers of young children. **Lack of motivation, emotional eating and mental health issues** impacting on their ability to engage in positive activities were also raised as barriers to being healthy.

“I feel I am too far gone to start.”

“I don’t sleep well, just overthinking.”

“Anxiety stops me trying new things and socialising.”

One parent raised the concern that schools too often reward children with sweets. Whilst one grandparent stated, “we tell kids sweets aren’t good but look at the rubbish we are eating.”

**Lack of education** on how to cook at home was raised as an issue.

“I wasn’t taught how to cook by my parents and didn’t do much in school, so I went through my life thinking I was rubbish at cooking, but I’ve made sure my kids learn to cook – I effectively learnt with them.”



### **Participating in physical activity**

Most of the Year 6 children we engaged with felt that they did about an hour a day, with just a few in each of the groups stating that they did not. Several felt that they did not do as much at the weekend.

Sports the Year 6 children enjoyed included a range of activities including swimming, gym, football, dance, tennis, majorettes, dodgeball, riding a bike and simply playing out with friends. Some did physical activity as a family including walks and going to the park, however the majority of the groups tended to partake in physical activity with their friends, siblings or at school. However, some did express the desire to do more as a family. Some stated that parents were a barrier to taking part in physical activity, “not letting you go and play out or go for a walk” and “mum and dad just stay in”.

The cost of exercise classes was raised as an issue by some young people. One girl stopped going to gymnastics because it was £8 per session compared with £3 for swimming.

Queens Park and Witton Park were most popular parks to visit.

Barriers to participation in physical activity amongst the Year 6 age group included tiredness, being lazy, wanting to play on gaming devices or

phone. Timing of Madrassah lessons was raised by some children at Audley Juniors and homework.

Older young people we engaged with reported lower levels of participation in physical activity, with many just reaching an hour a day by walking to school or into town. Girls in particular did not participate in sports outside of school and also declared more of a dislike for sports in school. Feedback included "I give up on exercise after 5 minutes" and "I find reasons to get out of PE". They would rather participate in more alternative sports at school such as dodgeball and bench ball than traditional sports. Boys also felt that time on the football pitch at school was very limited.

Parks were seen as just for younger children by teenagers, and they hardly use the leisure centres – "only to mess about in the swimming pool with my mates". They felt that there was a lack of youth facilities in the borough where they could take part in sports other than the Youth Zone.

Screen time was raised as the largest barrier to participating in physical activity, with some on their phones up to 8-12 hours a day. Most used apps included TikTok and Snapchat for chatting with friends.



### **Impact of the food environment**

All of the groups stated that they pass a number of corner shops, small supermarkets, chippy's and takeaways on their journey to and from school. Most young people we engaged with stated that they stopped off at these places to buy sweets, crisps, fizzy drinks, chips and energy drinks. A few said that they bought flavoured water.

"I need energy drinks to keep me awake in the first lesson".

Older young people talked about the blatant sale of vapes and energy drinks in corner shops to underage children (guideline only for energy drinks). One stated that he gets energy drinks at 60p from Spar because his cousin manages the shop.

When asked their favourite places to eat outside of home, these were all takeaways with burgers, chips, kebabs and pizza being the most popular foods alongside dessert bars.

One boy stated that his family did not need to order home deliveries because they have 3-4 takeaways within easy walking distance of his home.

### **Influences on food choices**

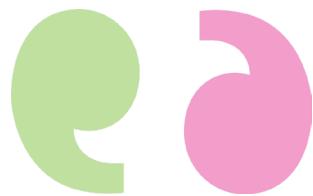
Even in Year 6, many of the children are making their own choices about what they eat, with many making their own food when they get home including chicken nuggets and chips in the air fryer, frozen pizzas and microwave meals or pot noodles. Adverts on social media, TV and YouTube were an influence on their food choices, and they all felt that friends were generally a bad influence on their choices. When shown a BiteBack video about marketing by the food industry and adverts by McDonalds and other fast-food outlets, all of the young people recognised the issue of false advertising but would still buy these products because they prefer them to healthy food. The majority of the young people we spoke with had takeaways and deliveries to home with some having them more than once a week. They recognised that this costs more than cooking from scratch but were already drawn into the convenience of home delivery.

Some of the older young people stated that Blackburn town centre takeaways advertise free meal deals on Tik Tok and these were a significant influencing factor on what they eat.

When told that Blackburn had more takeaways per head than many other places in England, there were mixed responses as to whether this was a positive, one boy stating, "that's sick that!" whilst some girls felt that a lot of the takeaways had "all the same stuff in them".

Hardly any of the groups recognised the Recipe 4 Health logo and young people did not see this as either appealing or as something that would influence them to eat healthier options in school, takeaways or restaurants.





## **Who or what would influence young people to be healthier**

Many of the young people we engaged with stated that they would turn to their parents first if they wanted to be healthier. They felt that if as a family they all ate healthier that would make it easier for them, particularly if parents did not buy as much frozen food. They felt that parents get used to buying unhealthy foods and fizzy drinks because they are cheaper therefore having cheaper healthy food on offer and healthier shops in the local area would positively influence their choices. Some young people commented on the healthier food that their parents make which they enjoy e.g. omelettes, rice, chicken and pasta dishes.

Some suggested that if influencers on YouTube and social media promoted more healthy food, this might influence the food and drink choices of young people. Fewer adverts on TV for unhealthy food were also suggested as a way of helping people make healthier choices.

School meals were often mentioned as an area for improvement. Healthy options often only included sandwiches which they got bored of and minimal alternative healthy options. Increasing awareness of healthy living and eating in PSHE lesson was raised as a recommendation. Increased number of PE lessons was also suggested as a way of helping young people be healthier, with some currently only having them twice a week.

None of the Year 6 groups knew the outcome of being weighed and measured earlier in the year and the majority did not know the role of the school nurse. This team could take more of a whole school approach to supporting young people's health and wellbeing.

Having affordable local sports clubs would encourage more young people to partake in physical activity outside of school. Doing exercise with friends was also suggested as a good way of being healthier and making parks feel safer to access was suggested by some young people.

Imposed screen time restrictions and sleep schedules from parents were recommended as ways that young people could be healthier.

Older young people stated that they would be interested in weight loss programmes but not in school. They felt that the Youth Zone could offer this with the combination of sports and health and wellbeing staff as well as an

accessible kitchen space. The teenage girls felt that girls only sports sessions would be beneficial and that schools opening up their gym after school hours would be something they would access. They stated that the Beez card was helpful when it was in place for free swimming and discounted leisure centre access. Improved facilities for teenage young people in parks were also noted as a recommendation with the suggestion of outdoor gyms.

### **Who or what would influence parents to be healthier**

Adults who had accessed the BwD Council Refresh team's 12-week programme found this beneficial but then found the cost of joining a gym afterwards too expensive therefore affordable leisure options would be helpful to families. Weight referral programmes were recognised as a means to becoming healthier.

Being motivated and a buddy or personal trainer to do exercise with were suggestions as to how adults could participate more in physical activity. Two mothers stated that the primary schools their children attend offer free 9-10am fitness activities for mothers which they find beneficial. Community free events like Park Run and Active BwD season were also noted as a social way of being more active.

Flexible working and flexible hours of fitness programmes would help more working parents access physical activity during the week.

One grandmother suggested that supermarkets should have aisles dedicated to healthier options. Cheaper healthy food was also noted by parents as an incentive to eat more healthily as a family. Cooking classes for families was suggested as a way of learning to eat more healthily on a budget as a family.

One mother commented that schools should stop rewarding children with sweets. She as a parent tries not to give her child sweets very often but feels this good practice is undermined by school.





## Feedback from the 6-week cooking programmes

We delivered two six-week cooking programmes, one based in Eden School with young people from the Blackburn East area and the second in a community setting at Newground Shadsworth Hub. We aimed to engage teenagers in these programmes as a means of helping them to gain the skills and knowledge to be able to cook from scratch and healthily on a budget as they transition towards adulthood. These were both family focused sessions with Eden School kindly providing transport for parents who might not otherwise be able to afford to travel to the school during the day.

We recognised early on in the sessions that knowledge and interest in cooking was low amongst participants so although we incorporated healthy dishes in the programme, we focused more on what they would be interested in cooking to help them gain confidence to cook from scratch and build a habit for life. At the end of both six-week cooking programmes we provided the participants with a recipe book of what they had made across the programme.

We found that the sessions provided the perfect setting for families to experiment and try new food without it being at a cost to them, whilst developing both new skills and a wider interest in food so that they might try new food more at home.



## Eden School session reflections

### Initial thoughts around cooking and healthy eating



There was a clear lack of confidence amongst parents at the start of the programme, with one mum stating “I burn everything, even beans on toast!” She has four children and struggles to cook regularly, especially when working evening shifts. They will have takeaways twice a week even though she knows it is more expensive. She told us that she was never taught how to cook growing up and now struggles with it – she would love to learn how to cook properly as would her 14-year-old daughter. They do some baking together at home. She can make shepherd’s pie, spaghetti Bolognese and a “mean Sunday roast” but stated that they tend to eat a lot of pizzas and frozen food.

One boy stated that his mum can’t cook and just makes pot noodles for herself and beige food for his 4-year-old younger brother. He loves scrambled eggs which he makes himself in the microwave or pizza. He ate anything that just needs putting in the microwave for a few minutes at home. However, his dad who attended the majority of the sessions loved cooking, particularly Italian food.

One mum had recently had a gastric bypass so could not eat much and despite having loved cooking when her older children were growing up, admitted that she did not cook as much anymore because of balancing priorities amongst her children’s out of school commitments. As a result, she mainly made food in the air fryer and had takeaways although she recognised that these were expensive. However, she was keen for her son to start cooking for himself because he is coming up to 16, although her son felt that he was not really allowed to cook at home. He enjoyed coming into school once a week to make himself some food.

There was one mum who was confident in cooking at home and getting her two daughters involved in it and she found cooking from scratch cheaper than buying takeaways and processed food. However, she felt that was not as confident in trying new recipes and alternatives to the South Asian food they eat at home.

We had one mother and son join us for one session, but he found the session too triggering because he was worried about his mum being coeliac and checked all of the ingredients. He only eats beige food (chicken nuggets and chips quite a lot). He has multivitamins every day to make up for it. However, after chatting a bit, he said that he does actually like beetroot, sweetcorn, carrots and honey roast parsnips. Mum told us that they are very much a cooking family but what she makes depends a lot on the amount of time she has available. Cost is a significant factor for her as to what she cooks too – she would spend £500 a month on a healthy food shop but £200 if she bought less healthy food.

### **Engagement in physical activity**

There were mixed responses to being involved in regular physical activity amongst the group.

One girl was very active doing football, cricket and swimming. Her mum said that they try to do a lot as a family, getting involved in events going on in town and going to places like Flip Out.

One boy told us that he does not do much physical activity anymore, his mum commented that he used to do a lot. He now prefers to sit at home playing GTA on his Xbox. Mum said that she found it hard balancing having a 5-year-old son alongside doing things as a family involving a teenager. They went to Flip Out a couple of weeks ago, but mum found that hard after having children!

One of the other boys stated that he is pretty active doing training for boxing and playing football. His mum at first thought she did not do much exercise but on reflection commented that she is out everyday walking to work and other places and they try to go out for a walk at the weekend as a family.



## **Reflections on the journey they took across the 6-week programme.**

### **Week 1**

Everyone loved the session, and the parents loved spending that time cooking with their children. All really proud of the tasty garlic flatbreads they had made and how easy it was to do using just flour, Greek yoghurt, and baking powder. They were all really pleased to be able to take the ingredients home and to give them a go at home.

### **Week 2**

The group made three types of curries – peach and chickpea, halloumi and spinach and chicken korma. They were all really pleased with what they had done and would make it for themselves. There was a great atmosphere in the room with everyone checking in with each other and it proved to be a lovely bonding time between parents and children.

### **Week 3**

Family dynamics impacted slightly on this week's session. One mum was late to the session due to a dentist's appointment, which affected her son's mood and engagement in the cooking. Another mum was critical of her son's chopping which again impacted his mood – this may have been as a result of her gaining more confidence in cooking but did not allow for him to experiment.

However, they all really enjoyed the burgers and said they were better than McDonalds. One mum loved making the beanburgers and mixing up spices to go in them, likening them to making kebabs at home. Other group members who initially refused to make beanburgers tried her and her daughter's beanburgers which were a little spicy, but many enjoyed them. One dad enjoyed making them and despite feeling a little 'OCD' when he first began making the beanburgers, really enjoyed them and said he would definitely make them again.

### **Week 4**

This week saw a huge leap in confidence amongst members of the group making jam roly poly and custard from scratch. None of the mums had made custard from scratch before but loved it and would not buy shop

bought custard again. One of the mum's confidence in cooking has grown significantly since week 1 when she felt she burnt everything and just bought takeaways or microwave meals. She was keen to have the recipes from the sessions to be able to make them again. She told us that for her once she has made something she then has the confidence to do it again – particularly learning in a supportive setting like this.

One of the boys said to his mum during the session that the sessions make him feel like he is part of a 'proper family' – probably reflecting on the fact that they are doing things together and not all having separate meals.

One of the girls' confidence grew a great deal during this session and her bond with her mum was lovely to see. She loved rolling out the pastry and proud that she could split the egg yolks from the whites. She was really keen for teachers to try her jam roly poly and custard.

## **Week 5**

One of the mums told us that she had made the halloumi and spinach curry but substituted the halloumi with chicken and really enjoyed it so is gaining the confidence to try new things at home and the dad stated that he had made the beanburgers again at home. He was late to the session but despite this, his son joined in from the start and worked with the teachers and then having stated that he did not like cake absolutely loved what he had made (10 out of 10"). Their cake ended up being a double decker version of Victoria Sponge having used loaf tins but both he and his dad loved it with his dad saying, "a more rustic cake is the best." The group also chatted about the fact that these being made from scratch without additives and a lot of extra sugar made them taste better. They all took well to the challenge of extra science in the cake making, calculating all of their ingredients based on the weight of the eggs.

One girl's mum had to go out for a while during the session to chat with teachers but again she just continued making her cake calmly. There was also a healthy competition between one mum and son as to whose cake was the best and she was really proud of her cake and shared photos with friends.



## Week 6

In week 6 we made quesadillas, with the following feedback the group,

“That’s banging!”

“I’ve never seen you so happy!”

“It’s actually quite easy, I’m excited about this.”

“It’s absolutely amazing. I’m proud of myself. Gordon Ramsey who?!”

“I’m definitely making myself that at home.”

“I usually put loads of spices in everything, but this has made me think about cooking a bit differently today.”

Feedback from one of the teachers – “When these lot have gone back into class all of the other students are really jealous of what they have been doing.” Another student walked into the room and said, “It smells amazing in here!”

We asked for feedback on the programme as a whole from members of the group, as detailed below.

“I’ve learnt to cook, and the best bit has been eating everything! I can definitely do things for myself at home. The only bad bit has been getting up out of bed early.”

“It’s been really good, I just wish we could have had more sessions than 6. I’m really looking forward to getting the recipes later. All week he has been saying he can’t wait to get the recipes and that’s not like him. He doesn’t get excited about anything. It’s been good to have that time for just the two of us because we don’t get that at home and it’s good to get him out of his room. I’m cooking more at home now too. Thank you.”

“I’ve enjoyed cooking. I’ve learnt new skills and new dishes, and I’ve loved doing it with mum.”

“It’s been great. She doesn’t normally like cooking, so it’s been great to see her getting stuck in. It’s been good for us to have that time together on our own. I’ve learnt stuff myself. It’s taken me out of my comfort zone. I’ve been

going on YouTube since starting these sessions looking for recipes to try out.”

“I’m gutted it’s finishing! I’ve absolutely loved it, and it’s really helped him focus and he’s loved doing it. It’s given me way more confidence, and it’s definitely changed my thinking about cooking at home. I would have loved it we could have gone on longer.”

### **Who or What Could Help Families Be Healthier?**

We asked the group what would help families like them eat and be healthier. An immediate response was to reduce the number of takeaways. The ability to be able to stop thinking about food all day and the motivation to go and do exercise were noted as barriers to staying healthy. They felt that GPs are now helping by providing weight loss jabs but did not know about the adult Tier 2 support available. They felt that subsidised leisure facilities and access to personal trainers would help a lot of people. One dad said that he pays £27.50 a month for Blackburn Leisure Centre but has range to a lot of facilities for that price whereas one of the mums told us that she was paying £32 and mainly just using the gym for Splash Aerobics because if she did any weights she would be in danger of having hernias because of her gastric bypass. She admitted that she doesn’t go as often as she should. One of the teachers stated that she loves CrossFit but simply cannot afford £80 per month.

They felt that running courses like this one in Family Hubs and Children’s Centres across the borough would be hugely beneficial to families to gain the confidence to do more and engage in cooking together as families because they all have good cooking facilities.





## **Newground Shadsworth Hub session reflections**

There was more varied attendance at the sessions at the Hub than at school, providing learning for us about running these sessions after school hours with families and relying on another organisation to remind families on the timing of the sessions. There was also a different dynamic compared with working with teachers in school who had a vested interest in supporting the young people to experiment and learn from the sessions. The member of staff was supportive but keen on participants using equipment 'properly', which slightly changed the dynamic from just experimenting and the staff member also had existing relationships with the adults attending the sessions which detracted from the conversations focusing on the cooking.

### **Initial thoughts around cooking and healthy eating**

One mum stated that she is just getting back into cooking again and has months where she lacks motivation. Fresh food tends to run out 2 weeks before pay day so they will end up having things like nuggets and chips. She does a fresh food shop once a month and the shopping costs £300, however she had to pay for a washing machine repair the previous month, so they just lived off what was in the freezer. She struggles with fresh food going out of date so she ends up binning it and has to make sure that she makes food that her daughters would like to avoid wastage. She stated that she has not bought fresh ingredients in a long while but wants to start doing so again.

One mum stated that they have takeaways every day. Her son is very fussy, so she just finds it easier to have takeaways or frozen food like chicken nuggets that he likes so that she is not wasting food or money. There was also the security of buying from Just Eat as they can get their money back or a replacement if it isn't good. She recognizes that eating takeaways so often is expensive though. His favourite takeaway is Subway, which they eat almost every day, but he does not have any salad on it. Broccoli and carrots are the only vegetables he will eat. Mum told us that she can make spaghetti Bolognese, pasta bake and shepherd's pie but not much else because she did not really learn how to cook growing up. She would like to have things like stir fries but would not make them just for herself. They only

attended half of the sessions, probably due to her son's refusal to try new things, however she is also struggling with home schooling him.

Two teenage girls attended the sessions. One lives with her mum who cooks from scratch the majority of the week, with frozen meals 2-3 days a week. The other lives with her foster carers who cook from scratch every day. However, they both felt that it is more expensive to cook from scratch.

One grandad brought his granddaughter along to the sessions together with another young boy who lives close to them, whose mum struggles to look after all five children at home. The grandad had lost his wife a year ago and had lost motivation for cooking and his granddaughter, who used to enjoy cooking with her gran now predominantly eats beige food (chicken nuggets and chips) and will only drink milkshakes. The young boy ate processed food at home but did tell us that he liked apples and salad.

### **Engagement in physical activity**

One boy felt that he did at least an hour a day because he enjoys riding his bike and likes playing dodgeball at the Hub. One girl told us that she does Majorettes every week and practices football a lot at home. They both occasionally go to Funtasia with their families and go to the park.

Another of the girls goes on walks with the walking group at Newground Hub but does not do as much other than that because she is home schooled. She and her sister walk a lot however because their mum does not have a car.

Another of the girls loves playing football and likes going to the park.

Concerns from the group were that the Arran Trail is closed at the moment so families cannot go for a walk there and there are issues with boys on e-bikes putting people off walking there too.



## **Reflections on the journey they took across the 6-week programme.**

### **Weeks 1 and 2**

Everyone loved making flatbreads and found it really straightforward and tasty. They were keen to try out different versions of them at home. In week 2 we made a peach and chickpea curry which surprised members of the group about how cheap and tasty it was. One of the mums who was not confident about cooking told us "It actually tastes alright!" and ate a bowlful which she did not think she would even try at the start of the session.

### **Week 3**

In the session it was good to see one young boy encouraging one of the girls to put a range of herbs and spices in the burger mix and he was keen to try out new things. Sadly, she refused to eat the burger because it had onions in it, however this was reinforced by her grandad saying three times in front of her "she probably won't try it because it's got onions in." It appeared from both his behaviour and that of another mum that they almost enable fussy eating rather than encouraging children to try new things. One of the boys who usually eats Subway every day did not like the texture of the homemade burger compared to either frozen burgers or those from McDonalds. However, three of the children all loved theirs and a mum who previously lacked confidence in cooking thought it was "banging." The grandad thought his was really lovely but needed to add salt to it. One of the mums was critical of her burger and was critical of her daughters' chopping techniques during the session, possibly on a journey of gaining confidence in her cooking but this was not helpful for the girls.

We discussed as a group how easy it is to be healthy. The grandad found that it is not easy at all because sometimes you are financially restricted, time can be an issue as well as catering for different tastes in the household.

He admitted that he often bought "chicken nuggets from Heron because it's just easiest because I know my granddaughter will eat chicken nuggets and fries in the air fryer. She's been fussy all her life. I don't get her to try new things so I'm probably not helping. She's been through a lot, so I am

soft on her when it comes to eating." When asked how she gets vitamins, he responded that she drinks a lot of milkshakes, she does not drink water and does not like fruit. He stated that he sees recipes on social media but does not make them because of who he has to cook for. One of the mums stated that she sees recipes on social media but does not make them because her son is fussy, although they did try toast and Nutella in the air fryer.

### **Week 4**

We made cookies in this session which everyone enjoyed making with the children rating them 10/10 and one of the girls who is home schooled took the recipe home to be able to include it as part of her home-schooling programme with mum.

### **Week 5**

We made quesadillas in this session. One of the girls was really thriving in the session and got stuck in trying out different spices. Her sister also tried different things in her mix too. Their mum sadly did not engage as much in the session, choosing to chat with a staff member instead. The grandad told us that he did not normally like wraps but loved the toasted quesadillas. His granddaughter loved making it and mixing in a range of spices and actually tried a bit of mince and quesadilla. She said that she liked the mince – one food added to her list of ok foods!

### **Week 6**

In week 6 we made cupcakes as a celebration.

We asked for feedback on the programme as a whole from members of the group, as detailed below.

"It's been good. I've really enjoyed cooking and trying to mix all sorts of herbs and spices in food. It's been like experimenting!"

"It's been good I've loved doing the cooking. I tried mince for the first time and liked and I'm going to try to eat eggs at home tonight." (She also drank water during the session which previously she has not liked).

"It's very been very good. It would have been great to have another 5 or so sessions! It's helped build up my skills and confidence to get back into cooking which I know I love."

"I've enjoyed cooking and coming to the sessions. I'm a lot more confident in cooking and have got new skills."

"It's been really good. I've got more confident in cooking. I've liked being able to do it by myself. I loved the cookies!"

"The sessions have been a good bit of bonding time for me and the girls. I've enjoyed it, it's been good to get us all out of the house."





## Recommendations

1. A family approach to living more healthily came through strongly in feedback from young people. It would be beneficial to review the effectiveness, reach and promotion of the Family Hubs programmes around healthy eating – Eat Well for Less, Fussy Eating, Henry Right from the Start and Henry Healthy Families Growing Up. These could also promote to parents the importance of limited screen time and healthy sleep schedules.
2. Adult Learning Cook Healthy Cook Cheap runs for only 4 weeks, whereas feedback from those on our programmes would have loved the sessions to have lasted beyond the 6 weeks. These sessions only take place at Bank Top Learning Centre therefore it would be good to understand whether these could be offered at different locations across the borough to allow easier access to the courses and offering these at different times would be more accessible for working parents.
3. The PASTA programme funded through BwD Public Health presents a great opportunity for young people to learn about healthy cooking with their families. From our experience, particularly at Eden School, extending this programme with Year 9/10 students would allow teenagers to gain the skills and knowledge they need as they transition towards adulthood to eat healthily on a budget. Feedback from several parents was that they did not have this growing up and are not confident to cook as a result.
4. Young people showed interest in a weight management programme but showed preference for this to be offered not in school or a clinical setting. A location such as Blackburn Youth Zone might be a good location for this with access to sports, cooking facilities and wellbeing provision alongside a clinical offer.
5. School nurses could offer a holistic whole school approach to reducing childhood obesity by promoting healthy eating and physical activity as part of the mandated healthy child programme.

6. Stricter regulation of licensing of new fast food outlets and dessert bars would help manage the local food environment and stop expansion of takeaways on the high street.
7. BwD Council actioning a healthier food advertising policy would help reduce children's exposure to unhealthy food and drinks.
8. BwD Leisure to review subsidised leisure offer for young people and Re:fresh could review with smaller local providers their ability to support young people into exercise through more affordable exercise sessions. BwD Leisure could also explore the possibility of providing outdoor gyms in parks across the borough to allow free access to physical activity to all ages.
9. Increasing parent motivation to take part in physical activity would positively impact on their engagement as a family. The examples of free fitness sessions in schools for parents should be promoted to other schools and inspire them to offer something similar. Re:fresh could also explore promotion of "buddying" approaches to supporting residents to taking part in physical activity together.
10. Actions for schools would be to review their school food provision to ensure this has a good range of healthy options; cease rewarding young people with sweets and fast food and consider allowing young people to access sports facilities during their lunchtime or before or after school. Greater awareness raising of the importance of healthy eating and physical activity could also be achieved in PSHE lessons.