

## **The impossible challenge: Affording healthy food for low income families with children**

The Labour Party's first 100 days in power presents a pivotal opportunity to implement new policies to nourish our nation. Last month, we published a [report](#) highlighting the worrying deterioration in children's health in recent years, both from excess calories and insufficient nutrients. As emphasised in that report, this trajectory is reversible if policymakers recognise their responsibility to address the problem and take bold action. Critically, people's ability to afford healthy food is a major determinant in the nutritional quality of their diets and a key reason for the large differences in dietary health between the most well off in the population and the least. Therefore, policies to ensure healthy diets are more affordable are an essential cornerstone to improving the health of our children and it is crucially important that Labour prioritise the actions needed to address the crisis.

### **Among the poorest fifth of the population, the households with children would need to spend 70% of their disposable income on food to meet the cost of the Government-recommended healthy diet.**

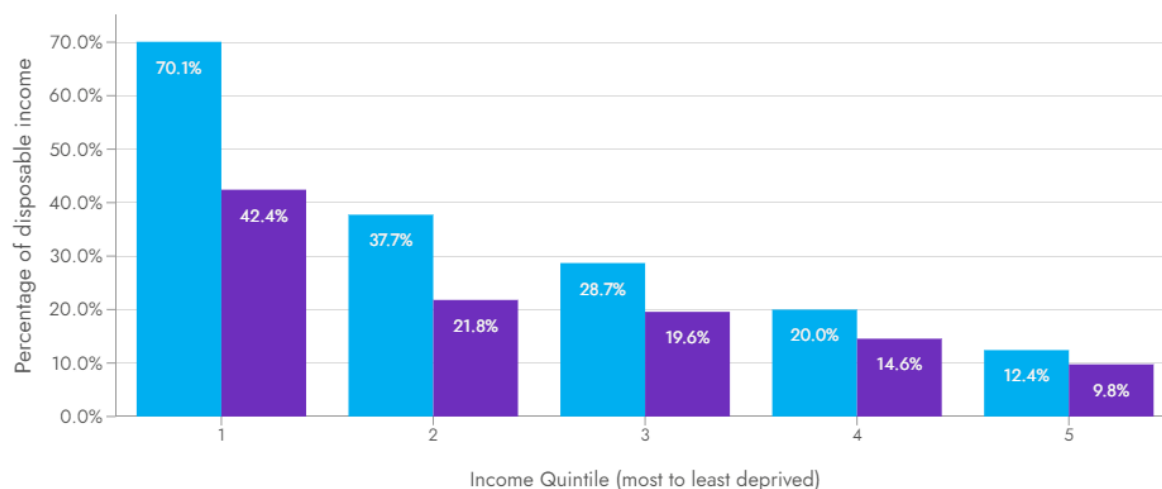
New Food Foundation analysis published today, reveals just how difficult it is for low income households to afford a healthy diet, particularly those with children: among the poorest fifth of the population, the households with children would have to spend 70% of their disposable income on food to afford a diet in line with the Eatwell Guide, the government recommended healthy diet. This is clearly not a realistic proportion of disposable income to expect families to spend on food.

In comparison, the households without children in the poorest fifth of the population would need to spend 42% of their disposable income on food to afford a healthy diet. While this is still unfeasibly high, it highlights the barriers to affording a healthy diet are substantially greater for families with children.

The inequalities across income groups are even more stark. Among the most well off fifth of the population, the households with children would have to spend just 12% of their income to afford a healthy diet. Shockingly, this means that households with children in the poorest fifth of the population would have to spend over five times as much of their disposable income compared with the richest fifth.

## Percentage of disposable income required to afford the Eatwell Guide by income quintile

■ Households with children ■ Households without children



The cost of the Eatwell Guide was calculated in May 2022 (FoodDB, Oxford University) and adjusted to April 2024 using CPI inflation data (Office for National Statistics).  
Income quintiles were calculated from the Family Resources Survey / Households Below Average Income 2022/23 (Department of Work and Pensions)



Given these findings, it is hardly surprising that there are such high levels of food insecurity in the UK, with millions of people simply unable to afford sufficient food, and millions more relying on food of limited nutritional value.

Data from the Food Foundation's Food Insecurity Tracker shows that families with children have been at persistently higher risk of food insecurity than households without children. Our most recent survey carried out in January found that almost 1 in 5 households with children were food insecure - 54% more than those without children.

### What have Labour committed to do to improve this situation?

This data illustrates the scale of the challenge that Labour faces and makes clear that they will need take substantial action to support the lowest income families to be able to afford to feed their children well given that, for too many, a healthy diet is completely out of reach.

Two key areas where policy action is needed are: firstly, ensuring all families have sufficient income to afford a healthy diet and, secondly, strengthening nutritional safety net schemes that specifically support low income children.

In June, all the political parties published their manifestos setting out their policy priorities if they were successful in the election. So, now that Labour are in power, what commitments did they make and do they go far enough?

*Increasing incomes for low income families*

Increasing incomes through benefits and wages is essential if families are to cover the cost of a healthy diet. Currently, neither benefits nor the national living wage are calculated based on the cost of the basic essentials, leaving many low income families without sufficient money to afford the food they need. (For more see our briefing [here](#))

Welcome commitments were made in Labour's manifesto to set out an 'ambitious strategy to reduce child poverty' as well as having a bold ambition to 'end mass dependence on emergency food parcels' and review Universal Credit so it 'makes work pay and tackles poverty'. However, in both cases, there is no concrete evidence of how this will be achieved now that they have come to power.

Although Labour did not commit to directly raising the living wage for the majority of workers, they did commit to removing the discriminatory age bands, and changing the remit of the independent Low Pay Commission so it will take account of the cost of living for the first time.

Labour also have committed to enact the socio-economic duty in the Equality Act which would have wide a wide-ranging impact by requiring public bodies to address inequalities in social class or background, including inequalities in health, education and housing.

Our Nourishing the Nation Manifesto recommends that the cost of healthy and sustainable diets be taken into account when setting benefits levels and the minimum wage and we urge Labour to go further than their current commitments and act on this recommendation. This will be critical to helping them achieve their ambition to reduce child poverty, end dependence on food banks and have the healthiest ever generation of children.

### *Strengthening nutritional safety nets for children in low income families*

Nutritional safety net schemes, such as Free School Meals and the Healthy Start scheme, can complement policies to improve incomes by directly helping low income children to access healthy foods. (For more see our briefings [here](#) and [here](#)).

The Labour Party manifesto only committed to free breakfast clubs for primary school children. They made no mention at all of free school meals, despite universal primary free school meals being a major achievement of the Labour Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, and the Labour government in Wales.

In comparison, other political parties made much stronger commitments in this area. The Green Party made the strongest commitment on Free Schools Meals: to ensure universal provision to primary school and secondary school students. The Greens were also the only party to talk about the quality of those meals, with a commitment that meals would be 'made from nutritious ingredients and based on local and organic or sustainable produce'. Additionally, the Green Party also committed to free breakfast clubs for primary school children. The Liberal Democrats manifesto committed to expand provision to all primary school children living in poverty, with the eventual aim of universal free school meal provision across primary schools.

The Labour party's reasons for not expanding free school meals will likely be one of cost, but if we are to improve the health and wellbeing of our children, it is vital that such interventions are seen as a long term investment in our children's future.

Disappointingly, the Healthy Start was not mentioned in any of the party manifestos and we urge Labour to look urgently at improving this scheme to ensure it is able to fulfil its purpose of helping children from low income families secure healthy food. This includes expanding to the scheme to all children on Universal Credit as well as increasing the value of the payments which have not changed since before the cost of living crisis.

We look forward to working with the new government to address the urgent challenges facing the country regarding the worrying decline in the health of our children. We urge them to recognise the scale of the problem that is being faced and see what more can be done.

For more on the policy commitments needed to ensure that everyone can afford and access a healthy and sustainable diet, see our [Nourish the Nation Manifesto](#).

## **Methods**

Analysis conducted by Genevieve Hadida, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

The 2022/23 HBAI (households below average income) dataset was used in conjunction with an estimate of the daily cost of adhering to the Eatwell Guide to calculate the average proportion of unequivalised household disposable income (after housing costs) that would be used up by the estimated household Eatwell Guide cost, by income quintile.

The cost of the Eatwell Guide was estimated using a methodology based on modelling published by Scarborough et al., 2016. The updated methodology uses a more comprehensive database of food items and prices (13,912 food and drink items for the 2022 analysis vs. 7,575 items which were used in the 2016 modelling). The cost of the Eatwell Guide was estimated to be £7.48 per adult per day, based on food price data for 18,441 products from May 2022. To take food inflation into account, the £7.48 figure was adjusted based on the headline CPI inflation figure for 'food and non-alcoholic beverages' inflation from May 2022 to April 2024, taking the Eatwell Guide cost to £9.00.

A secondary analysis of the Family Resources Survey was then conducted, in which the estimated cost of an 'Eatwell' diet was considered in relation to UK household disposable income from 2022/23, building on the methodology set out in The Food Foundation's 2018 report, 'The Affordability of the Eatwell Guide'. Weekly Eatwell cost per household was determined based on household composition. To consider different dietary intakes of children under 19 years, as well as economies of scale that would likely affect the overall Eatwell cost for a household, the McClement's equivalence scale was used to adjust the per-person cost. Although a crude method, the McClement's scale was chosen over alternative equivalisation scales (e.g. OECD) because it better captures age group differences. This approach was also chosen over adjusting the adult cost based on recommended energy requirements (EAR) by age group/sex because it considers economies of scale with increasing numbers of household members, which an EAR approach would not. Disposable income was defined as the amount of money available for spending and saving after direct taxes (such as income tax, national insurance and council tax) and after housing costs (AHC) are removed. It includes income from earnings and employment, private pensions and investments, and cash benefits provided by the state. Disposable income in the HBAI also includes the value of Free School Meals. Housing costs removed from disposable income included: rent; water rates, community water charges and council water charges; mortgage interest payments; structural insurance premiums; and ground rent and service charges.

To analyse the cost of adhering to the Eatwell Guide for each income quintile at the population level, we examined the average proportion of disposable income that would be allocated by households to the Eatwell Guide costs across different quintiles. Within these population-level income quintiles, we further broke down the analysis to compare households with children to those without children, providing a nuanced view of how the cost burden varies depending on household composition.