



SHEFS

Birmingham

Our Food Story

Photovoice case study



Photovoice: seen and heard



Sustainable and Healthy Food Systems (SHEFS) is a global research programme using novel techniques to generate and synthesise evidence, and to help decision-makers create policies that deliver nutritious and healthy diets in an environmentally sustainable and socially equitable manner.

What we eat in the UK is damaging our health. Twenty percent of 11-year-olds are obese, 3.1 million people are registered with diabetes (up from 2.4 million in 2010), 16% of adults report skipping meals because of a lack of money, and 3.1 million children are living in households for whom a healthy diet, as defined by the government, is unaffordable.¹ Not only are we struggling to eat in a way that supports our health, we live in a food environment that significantly limits access to good food for those on low incomes^{2,3}. Most urgently, we must increase our fruit and vegetable consumption (low intake and the diet-related disease this drives was

highlighted in the recent Lancet Global Burden of Disease study⁴), but fresh produce is often less affordable than unhealthy food, and it can be harder to access, particularly in deprived areas.

Photovoice is a tool which empowers those whose voices often go unheard in society to share their opinions through the medium of photography. The Food Foundation (as part of the SHEFS programme's wider work) carried out a Photovoice project to understand food system challenges and policy solutions to fruit and vegetable consumption from the perspective of low-income mothers in Birmingham.



**BY CONDUCTING
A PARTICIPATORY
PHOTO-LED
METHOD OF
COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT,
WE AIMED TO:**

- Understand community views on food system policy challenges, and opportunities around fruit and vegetable consumption.
- Identify what people are eating and their views on the opportunities and challenges in their food provisioning environments which influence what they eat.
- Organise a photography exhibition to enable community members to share their views on fruit and vegetable consumption with policy makers and within their own community.

¹ Food Foundation: The Broken Plate (2018) <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-Broken-Plate.pdf>

² Maguire ER, Monsivais P. Socio-economic dietary inequalities in UK adults: an updated picture of key food groups and nutrients from national surveillance data. *Br J Nutr.* 2014;113(1):181–189.

³ Food Foundation. Veg Facts: A briefing by the Food Foundation (2016) <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/FF-Veg-Doc-V5.pdf>.

⁴ Afshin, Ashkan et al (2019). Health effects of dietary risks in 195 countries, 1990–2017: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2017. *The Lancet.* <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2819%2930041-8>.



The project

In late 2018, we spent several weeks with a group of young mothers in one of Birmingham's poorest neighbourhoods. We partnered with the local children's centre, St Paul's Community Development Trust in Balsall Heath, Birmingham, to recruit mothers who had completed the healthy eating programme, HENRY⁵, in the previous eighteen months. All women recruited had at least one child under the age of four. A total of five women attended the Photovoice sessions to explore barriers to fruit and vegetable consumption in their local community. All women were Muslim and belonged to a Pakistani community.

We asked the women to take photos of the food in their community using their mobile phones. The first session focused on exploring photography and expression, with the remaining three sessions focusing on discussing the photos, what they represented and the narrative around them. The final session was a process of outlining the stories told by the women and captioning the selected photos in preparation for exhibiting the photos and discussing them with local decision makers.

All women attending the sessions explained that they have a leading role in family life and are expected to take care of the home, their children and food. The Photovoice project created a space for the women to come together and discuss life in their community and their food culture. We organised a creche for each session so that the women could focus on the activities and not have to worry about their children.



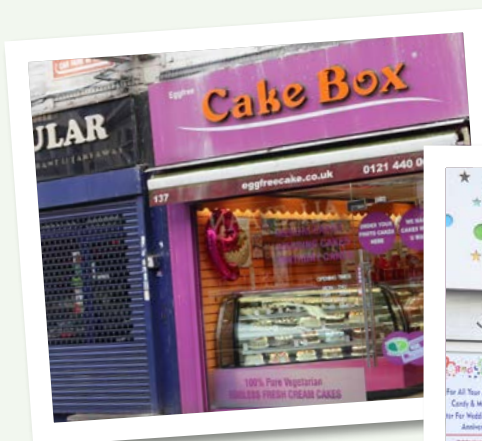
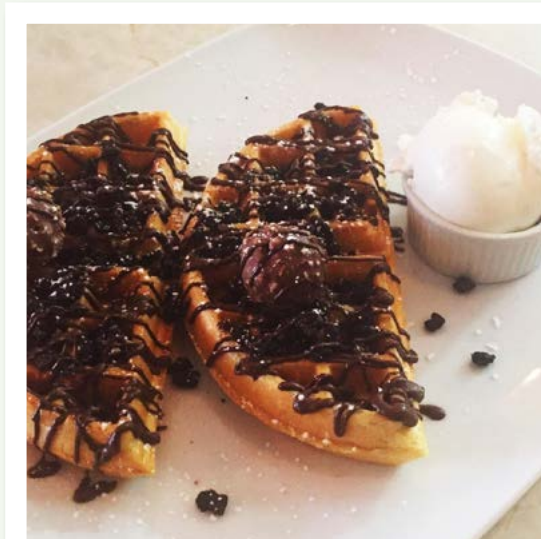
During the first session, on a walk down a local street, we asked the women to take three photos. The first, one of their children's favourite food; the second, something they relied on for food; and lastly, an aspect of their diet in the community that worries them.

⁵ <https://www.henry.org.uk/>



Photowalk

The results of the photowalk signified a growing problem in Balsall Health, and indeed across Birmingham City, with unhealthy food. The main high street, Ladypool Road, is populated with takeaways and dessert shops. The area is famous for the Balti Triangle, which is thought to contain Birmingham's highest concentration of Balti restaurants, and is known for its takeaways. In the last few years dessert shops have also gained popularity and they are now as equally prevalent as takeaway shops. The women took photos of their children's favourite foods, and waffles, ice cream and doughnuts featured prominently, matching the food environment surrounding them.



“Dessert shops are prolific here, and you wonder why people are obese”



Supermarkets

Lidl was a retailer on which some of the women relied for food; a supermarket they trusted within the boundaries of their community. In answering the third question, on an aspect of their diet in the community that worries them, food safety was an issue which concerned the women. All participants agreed that they preferred the larger, discount supermarkets as they trusted them more than the available alternatives. They described food appearing cleaner if packaged in plastic and less likely to be dirty or have been dropped on the floor and placed back on the shelf.



A mother picked up an apple from one of the local fruit and vegetable shops which display goods in bowls outside the shop, near the road. The produce looked inviting. However, on picking up the apple the mother revealed a layer of dirt and pollution on the fruit's skin.

“Would you eat this?”



Food standards

One picture taken on the photowalk was of two white vans with no signage moving food into shops. One participant questioned where the food came from and raised the issue of unhygienic businesses on the main street being closed by the Food Standards Agency one day and reopening the next day under a new name. The women rarely shop outside of their community boundaries, so this perceived lack of control over food safety and quality is a real issue: they are dependent on what is available locally.





Family meals

During the second and third sessions, we discussed recipes and home-cooking. While discussing food in the home, intergenerational differences became clear. All the participants were the main cook in the house and cited how burdensome this can be. Rice is central to all homecooked dishes. Despite the availability of Western food, the mothers themselves prefer the more traditional rice-based dishes. One of the participants noted that her teenage daughter prefers 'British-style' meals.





Cost

Throughout discussions, price emerged as a clear barrier to healthy eating. The women discussed the lack of affordable healthy options available. When eating out, the cost of a salad equates to the same amount as a 'big meal', and therefore the perception of value is negative.

"Healthy food is always expensive. It is a problem."

"Fruit and veg are the last thing. You buy the important things first. Whatever you got left, you put it towards fruit and veg. My food shopping budget is £30 per week. You buy the essentials first, you pay your bills, then you get the essential milk, eggs, flour, chicken, then you buy fruit and veg. Fruit and veg are not a priority, I know it should be but it's not."

Advertising and marketing of unhealthy food was also raised as an issue in the second session. With adverts on the TV, they noted that the kids were always asking for the latest junk food. One mother noted ***"fruit is never on TV, no one telling you – make sure you have your five a day. It's always the new biscuit or new crisps."***

"Lidl have plenty of fruit and vegetables. You have to go and find food. Whereas the chocolate, you see it as you walk in. There's characters on chocolate, nothing on fruit and veg."

The Healthy Start Voucher Scheme is used within the community. The women noted that they used the vouchers for infant formula. The women noted that not everyone can have vouchers, which is another problem.



“My teenage daughter has got hold of Uber and likes to get McDonalds delivered. What a waste of money?! Delivery is £3. She doesn't think about the money. She has her own money, and uses it on food. Her generation likes having food delivered to the door – Papa Johns and McDonalds.”



Engaging with decision makers

On Saturday 16th March 2019, the Our Food Story Photovoice exhibition took place at Balsall Heath Library, Birmingham, right in the heart of the community. The exhibition was formed of three parts: 'Food at Home', 'Eating Out' and 'Healthy is Hard'. It highlighted the core message of the women who created the exhibition: that they want to eat well and feed their children healthy foods but price is one of many crucial factors.

Two local decision makers attended the exhibition; Councillor Nicky Brennan (Councillor for Balsall Heath) and Councillor Paulette Hamilton (Cabinet Minister for Health and Social Care in Birmingham). The councillors met one of the women who took part in the Photovoice project and discussed the barriers to fruit and vegetable consumption for the local

population, especially those on low income. The numerous takeaways which line the main streets of the community are a challenge not only in Balsall Heath but across Birmingham.

Volunteers attending the exhibition came dressed as peas, and the ITV Veg Power #EatThemToDefeatThem advert, which aims to inspire children to eat more vegetables, played on loop throughout the day. Healthy eating craft workshops for children and families were provided by St Pauls' Development Trust. These lent the exhibition a hands-on, interactive element, as well as encouraging families to discuss their food experiences and the photographs on display. Healthy eating books were also available to borrow from a dedicated library stall.



LEGACY

Our partnering organisation, St Paul's Trust Development Centre, is now hoping to "tour the exhibition" in several libraries across Birmingham and is keen to train the staff in Photovoice methodology so that it can be a new tool for the children's centres to engage with communities where language can be a barrier.



Conclusion

KEY THEMES:

- Participants knew healthy food is good for health. However in practice, price meant prioritisation of fruit and vegetables was out of reach.
- **Pollution and food safety risks were real concerns which led the women to shop at larger retailers based within the community, preferring packaged food products. The women also questioned where their food came from, because on our photowalk we witnessed food being delivered to local shops in white vans with no signage.**
- Intergenerational shifts in food preferences within migrant families were perceived, with the older generation preferring more traditional dishes and the younger generation choosing western-style foods.
- **Birmingham is famous for takeaways, but dessert shops are now just as prolific on the high street. The women noted that their children are often tempted by these shops on the way home.**
- All mothers had concerns about junk food marketing and its impact on their children in purchasing behaviour and brand awareness.
- **The decision makers we spoke to are aware of the two main barriers to consumption of fruit and vegetables – price and availability.**

