

Written Evidence submitted by Small Steps Big Changes Partnership (FSC0032)

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1. Introduction of Small Steps Big Changes

[Small Steps Big Changes \(SSBC\)](#) is funded through The National Lottery Community Fund's – '[A Better Start](#)' ten-year Programme (2015-2025), supporting the improvement of social and emotional development, communication and language, and nutrition outcomes amongst 0–4-year-olds in four ethnically diverse wards in Nottingham City. SSBC is a partnership programme, which includes parents, health providers, early years, early help, academics, and community and voluntary sector providers.

SSBC is well-placed to share evidence around the issue of affordable and healthy food due to its own programme focus on nutrition outcomes for babies and very young children, as well as its connection to local partners who are working to improve nutrition outcomes in Nottingham. This submission was developed in collaboration with Nigel Adams, Founder and Ambassador of [Hope Nottingham](#), which runs foodbanks which are part of The Trussell Trust's nationwide network of foodbanks, as well as Nottingham CityCare colleagues who deliver the SSBC-commissioned [Healthy Lifestyles Pathway](#). The Healthy Lifestyles Pathway supports families that have been referred by their GP or Health Visitor because their baby or toddler is gaining weight too quickly.

2. How successfully are supermarkets promoting affordable and healthy eating in the current high food inflation environment and what steps could they take to increase the take-up and affordability of healthy options? How are promotions, such as multi-buy offers, supporting healthy eating including for those on low incomes, and also affecting levels of food waste?

2.1 The NHS Healthy Start Scheme helps to encourage a healthy diet for all pregnant women aged under 18, and for pregnant women, babies, and young children under four from low-income households. With the Healthy Start card, families can spend their benefit on infant formula milk, cow's milk, fruit, vegetables, and pulses.

2.2 The value of this benefit has not kept up with inflation. The Healthy Start benefit does not cover the cost of any first infant formula milk available in supermarkets in the UK.¹

2.3 Many eligible families are missing out on the Healthy Start benefit and stringent eligibility criteria exclude many families living in poverty and facing food insecurity.

2.4 Despite SSBC's local efforts, including promotion and workforce training around the Healthy Start Scheme, uptake remains low. Uptake had started to increase, however since 2020 the number of families eligible has also increased, highlighting the complex challenges around the scheme.

2.5 Locally, Nottingham has made Healthy Start Scheme uptake a priority as part of the delivery of the Eating and Moving for Good Health Strategy² and aims that that by 2027, 90% of those eligible will be claiming healthy start vouchers.

2.6 The government needs to address the current issues around the Healthy Start Scheme, including an increase in its value and expansion of the eligibility criteria so that more families

facing poverty and food insecurity can benefit, alongside improved promotion of and accessibility to the Scheme.

2.7 Supermarkets can also play an important role in the promotion and augmentation of the Healthy Start Scheme.

2.8 Since the Covid pandemic, Sainsbury's has completed multiple runs of a campaign that augment the Healthy Start Scheme, with families receiving a £2 coupon very week when they use a Healthy Start card.

2.9 The supermarket claims customers redeeming a coupon purchased 13 more portions of fruit and vegetables per basket compared to those that did not receive the coupon.³ This shows that supermarkets can successfully promote the Scheme and support their customers to access a healthy diet.

3. What challenges do low-income households face, in both urban and rural areas, in terms of accessing affordable and healthy food from a choice of retailers?

3.1 [The Food Foundation](#) has been commissioning a series of nationally representative surveys since the outbreak of the Covid pandemic in March 2020, to assess the impact of household food insecurity across the UK. Their most recent online survey conducted by YouGov in early 2023 shows that more than one in five households with children are experiencing food insecurity, which indicated a doubling of food insecure families since the year before.⁴ Certain characteristics make families more vulnerable to food insecurity, such as having; an ethnic minority background, a disability, and claiming Universal Credit.⁵

3.2 The [Priority Places for Food Index](#) is a composite index formed of data compiled across seven different dimensions relating to food insecurity for England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. It is a useful tool to identify the neighbourhoods that are most vulnerable to increases in the cost of living and which have a lack of accessibility to cheap, healthy, and sustainable sources of food.

3.3 The dimensions used for the Priority Places for Food Index are based on some of the main factors that make it challenging for households to access affordable and healthy food from retailers, such as proximity and accessibility to supermarket retail facilities, proximity to non-supermarket food provision, access to online deliveries, lack of car access, and fuel poverty.

3.4 Through partnership working, including Nottingham City Council, the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Integrated Care Board and Community and Voluntary Sector organisations, Nottingham will see the delivery of the Eating and Moving for Good Health Strategy.¹ As part of this strategy, Nottingham will create a local environment that promotes healthy food choices, including limiting the 'density' of takeaway food outlets in Nottingham City to promote a more diverse food offer to Nottingham residents.

4. What measures could be taken by central and local government, and others, to enhance cooking skills to reduce reliance on processed food and improve access to self-grown food, in particular for lower income households? What challenges do such ambitions face given the pressures of modern living?
 - 4.1 SSBC runs Cook and Play sessions in each of the SSBC wards in Nottingham. The free sessions involve parents cooking a healthy meal from scratch while there are play activities available for children.
 - 4.2 External evaluation of Cook and Play by Nottingham Trent University explored the impact of this intervention on parent' confidence and knowledge in relation to cooking healthy meals according to staff's perceptions.⁶ Findings showed that some parents improved their cooking skills and as a result cooked healthier meals at home. The social aspect of Cook and Play was important for both parents and children. It helped parents build friendships and reduce isolation, while positive peer influence encouraged children to try new foods.
 - 4.3 Lessons can also be learned from the previous Make, Munch and Move Clubs (MMMCs). The Tesco National Charity Partnership (NCP), which facilitated the multi-party partnership between Tesco, Diabetes UK and the British Heart Foundation, delivering programmes across the UK that supported people to live healthier lifestyles. The NCP chose to target their prevention activities towards mothers aged 25–40 years who lived in areas of high deprivation, with a secondary audience of children and other family members. MMCs were delivered as part of the prevention strategy. In Nottingham, MMCs were delivered by Nottingham CityCare Partnership, a social enterprise that provides community health services, including services for the NHS.
 - 4.4 MMCs in Nottingham proved to be an effective intervention. Evaluation showed positive health behaviour changes in people living in areas of deprivation. Improved eating habits, with small but significant decreases to the frequency of cooking pre-prepared foods and using ready meals, as well as increased levels of physical activity, particularly amongst the inactive, were achieved through simple messages delivered in a style that empowers individuals to make small but significant lifestyle changes. Relationships were identified as one of the key success factors for MMCs in Nottingham, with staff and families building trust and rapport with each other and sharing activities where they could learn and laugh together.⁷
 - 4.5 In order to support healthy choices in pregnancy and helping children and adults achieve and maintain a healthy weight, Nottingham will take the learning from these activities and offer health promotion activities such as cooking skills sessions as part of their delivery of the Eating and Moving for Good Health Strategy.¹
 - 4.6 It is important to stress that the social connections in such cooking activities are a key success factor. This is reflected in the experience of Hope Nottingham, which runs foodbanks in Nottingham. In many cases, people know how to cook, but they lack the energy or motivation. This is particularly true of single people. The same people became more motivated when there were shared opportunities to cook and eat together. Many

people that come to Hope Nottingham for crisis help for food are often socially isolated, but engagement with a welcoming, supportive community where they can also contribute, repeatedly results in positive transformation.

- 4.7 Indeed, the 2021 consumer poll about healthy and sustainable diets showed that most participants (75%) know what a healthy diet consists of.⁸ However, currently only 0.1% of the population is meeting all of the recommendations set out in the Eatwell Guide.⁹ The Institute of Grocery Distribution found that 37% of people perceived healthy, sustainable eating to be more expensive, making it the number one barrier to change.¹⁰
- 4.8 This perception of increased costs of healthier is reflected in actual costs. In 2018, The Food Foundation published an assessment of the UK's Eatwell Guide. It showed that around half of households were spending less on food and non-alcoholic drink per week than the estimated Eatwell guide cost based on their household composition. Households with lone adults – with or without children – and those with three or more children were least likely to have enough food budget to meet the Eatwell Guide costs.¹¹
- 4.9 The cost-of-living crisis has further worsened healthy diet affordability. As proposed by The Trussell Trust: “The UK Government should introduce a commitment in the social security system that benefit rates will always be enough to protect people from destitution.”¹²
- 4.10 In sum, free activities can play a role in improving families' knowledge and skills to cook from scratch and reduce their reliance on processed foods. Social connection is a key success factor to engage people in these activities and drive sustainable diet behaviour changes. However, for many families their food budgets do not allow for the increase in spending needed for diets that adhere to the government's recommendations.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 Nottingham's Eating and Moving for Good Health Strategy illustrates that working together across sectors at a local level can help to provide structure to address barriers to accessing affordable and healthy, non-processed food diets.
- 5.2 Free cooking skills activities can play a role in improving families' knowledge and skills to cook from scratch and reduce their reliance on processed foods, with social connection as a key success factor to engage people in these activities and drive sustainable diet behaviour changes.
- 5.3 However, for many families their food budgets do not allow for the increase in spending needed for diets that adhere to the government's recommendations. The government needs to protect people from destitution and needs to address the current issues around the Healthy Start Scheme.
- 5.4 Supermarkets can play an important role in supporting the Healthy Start Scheme, through promotion of the Scheme to their customers and value-added offers.

References

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