



About Bite Back:

Bite Back 2030 is a youth-led movement that wants healthy food to be an option for EVERY family.

We are working to ensure every child has equal access to a good diet; at home, on the high street and at school. Because it matters to their health.

We believe convening and working collaboratively with a coalition of young people, parents, industry and policy makers will enable us to achieve our vision.

We are committed to feeding Britain better; learning lessons from Covid19 and using them to re-design a food system that works fairly for every child.

About Guys & St Thomas Charity:

[Guy's and St Thomas' Charity](#) are an urban health foundation based in South London. We use our work in the London boroughs of Lambeth and Southwark to influence global change and redesign cities for health. As part of this work, we have a [ten-year programme to tackle childhood obesity](#).

The focus of the programme is to confront inequality and make nutritious food accessible and affordable to all young people no matter where they live. We seek to understand how the spaces in which children and families spend their time shape eating habits, and work in partnership to redesign these spaces to make sure that food options are as healthy as possible.

About Livity:

[Livity](#) is a future consultancy and youth studio that exists to make the world a better place, *with and for*, young people.

Over the last 19 years we have worked to solve some of the biggest problems facing young people. We do this by standing side by side with them, combining their audacity with our expertise, gaining unique insights that will challenge the way things need to be done.

We are on the Bite Back 2030 mission to ensure every child has access to a good diet and work with them to make sure young people's voices are heard every step of the way.

Section 1 -

Hungry for Change - giving children a food system that works for them.

COVID-19 has caused extraordinary upheaval to both the food system and everyday life.

Whether individuals have coped or struggled during lockdown, the experience has undoubtedly prompted a period of reflection - especially from young people. They are now better able to recognise how the food system is failing them. In particular, it has brought into sharp focus the way children's health - mental, physical and nutritional - has been negatively impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. It has also highlighted the inequalities that blight the food system, including the struggle that children, particularly those living in lower income areas face.

These inequalities have long existed as children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have consistently come up against greater barriers in accessing healthy food. However, the impact of COVID-19 has exacerbated this gap. The research shows those from lower income households are far more likely to eat less healthily due to a lack of routine, lack access to healthier food and drink options and are also less likely to have more home cooked meals while living in lockdown when compared to those from more financially stable backgrounds.

The pause COVID-19 has created has allowed us to see, more clearly than ever before, the extent to which the food system needs a reset. It has driven a renewed interest in food, as demonstrated by the successful campaign Marcus Rashford supported for the provision of free school meals. Crucially, young people have been woken up to these challenges and are now actively seeking out change. They want to see a better food system that works for all children, especially those from lower income backgrounds.

This has created a moment in time that needs to be acted upon.

Young people are **Hungry for Change**.

In the wreckage of a global pandemic, we need to look at what can be done to make the food system work harder to prioritise health and we need to start with children, ensuring they all have equal opportunities to be healthy, no matter where they live, what their backgrounds or their level of financial security.

Hungry for Change outlines the opportunities and learnings from lockdown that can be seized on to effect positive change including:

- More young people are cooking for themselves, eating with their families, drinking more water and enjoying it, unlocking positive wellbeing
- But they're snacking more than ever and struggling with the lack of structure in their day creating a negative impact on their physical and mental health
- Young people are missing safe social spaces - like their favourite food restaurants, parks, community groups - where they could spend time with friends locally
- Young people living in lower income households are more likely to be experiencing the negative aspects of lockdown, and less likely to be benefiting from its positive impacts
- Young people across the board now have a greater awareness of the injustices within the food system thanks to being exposed to issues like food shortages
- This has driven a powerful appetite for change amongst some young people who do not want to see a return to life as it was before lockdown
- This change is especially important for those from lower income backgrounds

We also outline the changes young people want to see in a post-lockdown world and the clear commitments needed to achieve this:

1. Ensure no child goes without a decent meal, no matter where they live
2. Make healthy foods cheaper than unhealthy foods
3. Put healthy options centre stage, and takes the spotlight off junk food
4. Make it easier to access drinking water, wherever children are
5. Redesign the high street to include healthy, safe spaces to hang out

This is what young people want. It is what they deserve.

Ultimately, **Hungry for Change** seeks to help you understand the opportunity for change that COVID-19 has presented and the impact it can have on children's health.

Section 2 - Methodology.

Hungry for Change seeks to document - and better understand - the experiences of young people while in lockdown with a focus on their relationship with food and drink. All research was conducted throughout May and June 2020, while strict social distancing was still in place. This period is referred to as lockdown throughout the report.

1,000 young people, aged 14-19, were surveyed across England ensuring we heard from a range of backgrounds - locations, genders, ethnicities and social groups.

A week-long digital immersion into the lives of 30 young people, aged 14-19 was conducted granting us direct access into their homes to see exactly what they were eating and drinking. This included video diaries to bring to life how their days in lockdown have changed, as well as, 24 hour food diaries with a period of reflection to understand consumption shifts.

Finally a series of digital visioning workshops with 12 additional young people, aged 14-19 took place, specifically exploring what solutions and changes to the food system they want to see once lockdown has ended.

Throughout the report when exploring the socioeconomic status of young people and its impact on their relationship with food and drink, we use the NRS social grade system, referring to those from higher income backgrounds as from ABC1 groups and those from lower income backgrounds as from C2DE groups. Data has also been rounded up or down to the nearest whole percentage.

Section 3 -

The impact of COVID-19 on children's health.

Children have clearly felt the consequences of COVID-19. Significantly, reports are increasingly emerging that outline how the pandemic has led to a general erosion of our diets which understandably is putting children at higher risk of poor health. In particular, new research from Northumbria University¹ has demonstrated how COVID-19 has driven a sharp decrease in the fruit and vegetable intake of children in receipt of Free School Meals, hitting those from lower income households hardest.

"A dietary pattern which promotes good health includes a variety of foods from across the different food groups, including fruit and vegetables, wholemeal carbohydrates, lean protein, dairy (or fortified alternatives) and healthy fats. Replacing nutritious meals with foods which are energy-dense but nutrient-poor, for a prolonged period of time, puts young people at risk of not getting the nutrients they require for healthy growth and development."

- Jenny Rosborough, Nutritionist

By speaking to young people from a range of ethnicities, locations and social groups, it is clear that living in lockdown has led children across the board to form new food and drink habits as they try to come to terms with a lack of school, limited socialising, restricted time outdoors and a global situation full of uncertainty.

It is also clear that where they live and the level of their household income fundamentally shapes children's relationships with food and drink during lockdown. Those from C2DE groups and urban areas have less access to healthy food and drink options. Inequality has always existed within the food system and COVID-19 has made this abundantly clear.

Let's take some time to look at the specific ways lockdown has impacted children's health.

1 - Can't stop, won't stop snacking.

By far the biggest negative consequence of COVID-19 is the amount children are snacking.






¹ <http://newsroom.northumbria.ac.uk/pressreleases/massive-decrease-in-fruit-and-vegetable-intake-reported-by-children-receiving-free-school-meals-following-lockdown-3005719>

"Some days I don't eat a lot at all as I'm not hungry but others I snack more often on things like chocolate which I didn't do as much before."

- 16, Female, Rural, DE, White

Rather than sticking with three clear meals a day, children are either turning to less healthy options on a regular basis - with crisps and chocolate being incredibly popular - or missing meals entirely.

14, Female, DE, Suburban, White

Time	What you ate / drank	
12.00	White toast with spreadable butter and honey Mini peperami x1 Pork pie x1 Glass of blackcurrant juice	
13.10	Instant hot chocolate with semi skimmed milk Fudge bar x1	
16.30	Tuc biscuits x6 dipped in Philadelphia	
18.20	Family sized bag of cheese flavoured Doritos	
22.30	Pot Noodle	

16, Male, DE, Urban, Black British

Time **What you ate / drank**

12.10 Chicken wrap x2
Mini peperami x1



15.20 Oven cook potato wedges
Beef taco
Glass of diet coke



17.10 Strawberry Cornetto
Glass of orange juice



20.15 Pizza pocket
Apple cookie
Packet crisps
Chocolate bite
Can of fanta

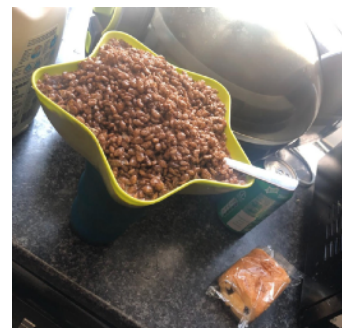


22.25 Bowl cereal
Lucozade sports drink



17, Male, C2, Suburban, Black British

Time	What you ate / drank
14.35	Large bowl of Coco Pops Hot chocolate Can of Sprite Packaged pan au chocolate



The increased levels of snacking is not only a clear indication that children’s health has been negatively impacted by COVID-19. It also brings to life the inequalities that exist based on household income. Children from C2DE groups are more likely to snack, less likely to eat fresh fruit and vegetables and more likely to feel they are eating unhealthily across the board when compared to those from ABC1 groups.

What types of food and drinks, if any, are you consuming more of since lockdown?

	Snacks	Junk food	Takeaways	Fresh fruit and vegetables
ABC1	57%	22%	19%	40%
C2DE	63%	34%	25%	33%

Young people appear to recognise that this increased snacking is largely due to their days in lockdown lacking structure. Before lockdown their lives were largely dictated by school or college which provided a very clear structure. Their days were timetabled out, including when and where they ate. With lockdown this has gone leaving many children struggling to know what to do with their days.

“I have more freedom to eat now because before at school we could only eat at lunch or break time, so we could only eat at certain times and eat certain things. Whereas I can eat whatever I want, whenever I want to.”

- 15, Female, AB, Rural, Asian British

This is particularly true for those from C2DE groups compared to ABC1, as well as those from urban areas especially when compared to those from suburban areas, suggesting that those in more populated, lower income areas feel the restrictions more greatly.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

I'm experiencing a lack of routine which is making me feel less healthy

	ABC1	C2DE	Rural	Urban	Suburban
Strongly agree	15%	21%	18%	20%	15%

Many children we spoke to talked about a negative shift in their sleep routines with them going to bed later, sleeping in all morning and feeling no need to prioritise a good night's sleep as there is nothing to get up for. Many also referenced the lack of structure leaving them feeling bored as they struggle to find ways to occupy themselves when they would normally be at school with things clearly planned.

"I'm spending too much time in bed, and am tired all the time. I struggle to get to sleep every night... I know I don't have to get up for school."

- 15, Male, Urban, C2, White

"I'm so bored. When I had school I had something to do. My day feels different as if there is nothing else to do anymore. It makes me feel really lazy. I am just sitting around all day."

- 15, Male, Urban, DE, Black British

"Each day goes by and before you know it it's the weekend again and it's just a never ending cycle as there aren't really indicators of what day it is."

- 19, Female, Rural, C1 White

Although there is extensive research into the negative impact of screen time on children's health², the lack of structure in lockdown explains why so many young people feel online gaming (41%), TV (44%) and phones, iPads, laptops (54%) largely have a positive influence on their health and wellbeing. They offer something to do and importantly, a way to connect with others. However, it is clear that the lack of routine is leaving many young

² <https://time.com/5514539/screen-time-children-brain/>

people with poor mental wellbeing and they are using snacking as a form of comfort and distraction.

"I don't enjoy food as much as I did before. Eating food fills time while I am bored during lockdown."

- 17, Male, AB, Rural, Mixed

"Since isolation I have realised that I am very emotionally turning to food for comfort. So in the middle of night if I'm really anxious or I'm just bored I'll just go and make a sandwich for myself, or cook some pasta. I am always looking to food for this kind of comfort."

- 18, Female, AB, Urban, Asian British

"I eat more when I am bored. So now I'm sat at home on my bed doing nothing, bored, I feel like I need to eat something. But after lockdown when I am out and about with my friends I am not going to be bored so I won't feel the need to eat."

- 15, Male, C2, Suburban, White

2 - No access, limited socialising.

COVID-19 and lockdown have restricted access across the board. Restaurants have closed their doors. Supermarkets have struggled with limited stock and high demand. You can no longer pop into a shop if you fancy grabbing something because there are simply less opportunities to be outside. For young people these restrictions are one of the biggest impacts lockdown has had on their lives.

Those from urban areas struggle with this restriction more than young people from more rural areas suggesting those from more populated areas have greater access day to day. In particular, those from urban areas are more likely to reference fast food chains as their favourite brands and places to eat. This was also true for those from C2DE groups with McDonalds and Nandos being particular favourites. As young people from populated areas pointed out, this is largely due to their high streets being flooded with cheap fast food outlets limiting their options and the social spaces they have to hang out in.

"I'm excited to go and eat out again at McDonald's, KFC, TGI Fridays and Nando's."

- 16, Female, DE, Urban, Black British

"I miss my favourite takeaways like Mcdonalds."

- 15, Male, C2 Urban, White

Although this may appear to be a positive when it comes to children's health as they are less able to eat fast food, or to grab a chocolate bar or can of fizzy drink on their way home from school, this lack of access is a problem. The research shows young people are struggling with a lack of access as it is deeply intertwined with their ability to socialise, fuelling the boredom brought on by a lack of routine while in lockdown. This is especially true of those from urban areas and C2DE groups and is negatively impacting their mental wellbeing driving them to form bad habits as they turn to unhealthy snacks, especially crisps and chocolate for comfort.

For young people, it is not just about what they are able to access when it comes to food and drink, but what the access enables them to do, most notably spending time in safe social spaces with their friends. It appears that pre-lockdown what young people ate and drank, went hand in hand with where they spent their time socially which supports existing Guys and St Thomas' Charity research into young people's food habits in Southwark³.

"Before isolation, if you wanted to hangout with friends and you wouldn't have anything to do you would be like 'do you want to go and get something to eat,' 'do you want to go and get something to drink"

- 18, Female, DE, Urban, Black British

"I would say, food plays quite a social role because I used to go out and eat with my friends and it's made me realise how much I took that for granted. I feel like isolation has taken that away. You eat because you're bored or you just have to."

- 16, Female, DE, Rural, White

"I used to go to Greggs and Subway with my mates at weekends but not since lock down. We used to go to Mcdonalds and Dominos at least once a month but that has stopped. A couple of times a week I would meet my mates in the evening and I would get a meal deal from a Tesco garage shop but I haven't done that."

- 16, Male, AB, Rural, Mixed

Lockdown has prevented young people from not just eating in their favourite places but also seeing their friends with 77% stating that they miss hanging out with their friends in their usual social spaces. Young people appear to have missed this physical connection more than food indicating that their relationships with the places they miss to eat are deeply intertwined with their social relationships with friends.

³ <https://www.gsttcharity.org.uk/get-involved/news-and-opinion/views/learning-london%E2%80%99s-foodscape>

	Yes	No
Do you miss hanging out with friends in usual social spaces	77%	16%
Do you miss food in your usual social spaces	66%	22%

For young people, eating together provides a way to connect and build relationships with others and restaurants, especially fast food chains, provide a convenient, affordable and familiar space to do this. It is the food moments with others that matter more to young people than what they are consuming and it is this connection which often creates an environment that drives unhealthy habits amongst children.

“But I have learnt that, I go to McDonalds quite a bit, and I don’t need to, to have all these takeaways and stuff just to be social. I can meet up and have a snack rather than go to McDonalds because it becomes a habit. Everyday you go and it becomes more normal so you do it more.”

- 19, Female, C1, Rural, White

3 - Pleasure in home cooking

Although limited access clearly has a negative impact on children’s health, there are ways in which it has forced them to create more positive behaviours around food and drink, most notably, eating more home cooked meals.

32% reported eating more home cooked meals and referenced how they were using, and actively enjoying, the extra time they found on their hands to give food preparation a go and learn how to cook. We know they are struggling to find ways to fill their days and participating in cooking is one way they get to feel like they are doing something productive.

“Before isolation my sister or my mum would do the cooking but now I am much more involved and even do more cooking for myself.”

- 16, Female, DE, Urban, Black British

“I often get my own breakfast now which I never did before. I have learnt to cook different egg things. I have made a cake a couple of times.”

- 16, Male, AB, Rural, Mixed

"I'm now very involved. I would rarely cook for myself before but I like doing it now. It almost gives me a sense of achievement."

- 18, Female, AB, Urban, Asian British

Young people have enjoyed this step change so much that they have a clear desire to continue once isolation has ended. This suggests that cooking encourages positive relationships between young people and food and they see it as something worth doing.

"I think I am going to carry on trying to make food for dinner for me, my mum and my step-dad because one it's fun and two I can choose what we all eat and it's a break for them having to cook every night for all of us."

- 15, Male, C2, Suburban, White

"I've now been given more of a chance to make more things. I have more time to cook and before it was mostly my mum and my sister. And cooking is actually something I enjoy now."

- 16, Female, DE, Urban, Black British

It is not just young people who are making the most of having more time on their hands. Due to furlough, remote working and restrictions on non-essential travel, families have found themselves at home with more time than usual. This appears to have driven an increase in home cooked meals as there is more time to consider what to make and to experiment. Significantly, it has meant that there is much more time to eat together with 33% reporting that they ate more as a family through lockdown.

"Because my mum was at work a lot of the time she found it hard to make food that took longer so we would just have things that didn't take long to make. Now that we are at home and have a lot of time she is making different things as she has the time to."

- 17, Male, DE, Suburban, Asian British

"I would buy chicken and chips twice a month after school, I would buy food at the canteen daily. Now I am getting freshly cooked meals at home prepared by my parents."

- 15, Male, DE, Urban, Black British

This is something that young people have also really enjoyed and many talk about how they would like to continue doing.

"I think I want to continue to eat together with my family, really make an effort of that as we didn't really normally do that and it's be nice to sit together and eat, so I want to try and sustain that"

- 18, Female, DE, Urban, Black British

"Food during this period allowed me to reconnect with members of my family, we have been cooking together and enjoying meals together. I'd love to continue doing it."

- 19, Female, AB, Urban, Mixed

However, it is clear that those from C2DE social groups are once again losing out. Those from ABC1 groups are much more likely to have tried home cooked meals. They are also much more likely to say they are eating more as a family through lockdown. Reviewing the backgrounds of the young people we spoke to, it became clear that those in C2DE groups are more likely to have family members as key workers, which may account for this as there is less opportunity to spend time together as a family. This is supported with wider evidence around the health impact of COVID-19 and it's disproportionate impact on those from less financially secure households.

	ABC1	C2DE
Able to try more home cooked meals in lockdown	37%	28%
Eating much more as a family through lockdown	22%	15%

This was echoed in the fact that young people from C2DE backgrounds, especially those from single parent households or with keyworker relatives, referenced how they are involved in preparing food because they felt an added responsibility and want to actively help out more.

"When I have nothing to do I usually prepare myself food if I'm hungry. Since my parents are key workers, I feel like I should help out more with cooking."

- 17, Male, C2, Urban, Black British

This once again highlights the inequality that exists around children's health and their ability to access the same experiences when it comes to food and drink. COVID-19, although in

many ways unifying, has also unquestionably demonstrated how children's experiences with food and drink are affected by their household income.

4 - A taste for water

Restricted access to particular drinks has also encouraged young people to drink more water while in lockdown with over 50% of reporting increased consumption.

This increase was especially evident when reviewing the food diaries. Across the board water has been young people's main drink while in lockdown and when asked why this was it's clear that the home environment is better set up to allow young people to drink water on a regular basis. They have less ability to get hold of alternatives and being home all day, everyday means they can easily fill up from the kitchen taps.

"I am definitely drinking more water. It's basically the only thing that I drink now."

- 17, Male, C2, Urban, Black British

"I feel I am drinking more water than I was before lockdown. I guess it's the only thing I can really drink right now easily."

- 15, Female, AB, Rural, Asian British

The increased consumption of water also appears to be driven by what young people have access to, or don't have access to at home based on what is purchased in the food shop. Young people have less freedom when it comes to this as purchasing decisions are often made by other family members. They simply have less control and therefore have had to make do with what is readily available - water.

"I have less control as I am not buying my own food and drink when I am out with my mates as I am not going out."

- 16, Male, AB, Rural, Mixed

"If I didn't like the meals that were provided, I could grab something from a nearby takeaway or cook with my friends. Now, I have some say over what we eat but it's limited to what we have in the cupboards."

- 18, Female, AB, Suburban, Mixed

For those from C2DE backgrounds there appears to be an element of greater restriction when compared to those from ABC1 groups. They feel less able to get their hands on anything other than water due to greater difficulties in sourcing their food and drink. It is

clear there are great constraints when it comes to accessing food and drink for those from lower income backgrounds.

“Although food may be very snack focused, I recognise that the biggest positive has been drinking much more water and less fizzy drinks compared to before isolation. This is mainly because when shopping we have to prioritise water over drinks and we can’t really do double trips or go together.”

- 18, Female, DE, Urban, Black British

“Before we could get our food quite easily as they were simple quick stuff however due to isolation we are going to the local shops a lot more to get the essentials like water or milk. Also it’s sometimes quite hard to get meat, so whenever we go on a big shop we sometimes have to travel far to get it.”

- 17, Male, DE, Suburban, Asian British

“My mum hasn’t been working due to COVID-19 so she has been having to use money she has saved up to buy food and other essentials. This has impacted on what I have been eating and drinking as we have been having to focus more on buying food to make meals out of more than just bits of food and drink that you can pick at.”

- 14, Female, DE, Suburban, White

Significantly, this increase in water consumption by young people is something that they would like to continue post lockdown. This is especially true for those from urban areas where pre-isolation they had a larger range of options available due to their increased proximity to shops and restaurants. This suggests living in lockdown has created a positive shift in their behaviours when it comes to water consumption.

How much more or less water, if any, would you like to continue drinking after isolation?

	Urban	Suburban	Rural
Much more	26%	17%	21%

It is clear that COVID-19 has impacted children's health negatively with increased snacking, reduced social interactions and less access to healthy options. This is especially true for those from less financially secure backgrounds demonstrating the deep rooted inequality that exists within the food system.

It is also clear that the lack of access created by COVID-19 has forced young people to engage with food and drink in a different way which has resulted in new and positive experiences.

All of this means that young people have a greater awareness of the role food and drink plays in their lives which has unlocked a clear appetite for change.

Section 4 - Why now is the time for change.

Young people now have a greater awareness of the inequalities at play within the food system. Through first-hand experiences and increased media reporting they have been more greatly exposed to issues such as food shortages, free school meals, a lack of resources etc. This is even more true for young people from C2DE groups (49%) when compared to those from ABC1 (45%).

This has created a recognition from some that they don't need as much food and drink as they previously thought and many talked about being more grateful and respectful for what they do have. COVID-19 has clearly driven a greater awareness of supply and demand around food and drink.

"Although food is essential to keep us healthy, we maybe don't need as much as we think we need as long as we're getting the right nutrients in the food we are consuming. I've also learnt not to waste food, because there are some people right now who are struggling to get any food and I could be wasting what they could potentially be eating."

- 14, Female, DE, Suburban, White

"I've learnt to respect it more because of the fact when the shortage happened everyone was stockpiling, supermarkets were empty."

- 18, Male, C2, Suburban, Asian British

This increased awareness has driven a clear worry amongst young people with 40% reporting they feel more concerned about the injustices that exist now than they did before lockdown. In particular, due to the negative impact of COVID-19 on their access to food and drink, those from C2DE groups are more concerned than those from ABC1 groups as they have experienced the inequality that exists first hand.

"It has made me realise the issue of how many children rely on school meals as their meals and the prime minister needs to think about that."

- 16, Female, DE, Rural, White

"Access to food in general is really unequal, and schools should provide food for everyone and how accessible free lunches should be and there is a very real disparity in people's access to food."

- 19, Female, C2, Urban, Black British

In truth, these inequalities are nothing new and have been recognised long before COVID-19. If ignored these problems will continue to grow, deepening the inequalities that exist and putting children's health under deeper threat. This is especially true as even though C2DE groups now have a greater awareness and increased concern for the injustices that exist in the food system, they are less likely to want to see changes post lockdown.

Once isolation has ended, do you want things to go back to the way they were in relation to the food and drink options you had available before?

	ABC1	C2DE
<i>I want to keep all changes from isolation in relation to the food and drink options I had available before</i>	19%	13%
<i>I want to keep some changes from isolation in relation to the food and drink options I had available before</i>	48%	42%
TOTAL	67%	55%

Despite this, a powerful appetite for change has arisen from COVID-19 amongst young people.

We must share in young people's optimism in order to rethink and redesign our food system so that it works for all children, especially those experiencing food inequality first hand.

Now is clearly a time for action.

Section 5 -

The changes children want and deserve to see.

It is not enough to explore the impact of COVID-19 on children's relationship with food and drink. If we are to truly understand what children need we must actively work with them to co-create solutions that will drive the desired changes.

This is exactly what we did. Working with a group of young people we asked them to tell us what comes next with regards to food and drink access post-lockdown. Combining these ideas with the insights captured through the digital ethnography and nationwide survey, five clear commitments emerged that together we need to work towards:

1. Ensure no child goes without a decent meal, no matter where they live
2. Make healthy foods cheaper than unhealthy foods
3. Put healthy options centre stage, and takes the spotlight off junk food
4. Make it easier to access drinking water, wherever they are
5. Redesign the high street to include healthy, safe spaces to hang out

These commitments are born from young people's experiences and the ways they have been woken up to the inequalities that exist in the food system. Importantly, they are grounded in ensuring that the health of all children, especially those from lower income households is prioritised unlocking equal access to healthy food.

Young people articulated this clearly through a co-created manifesto outlining their post-lockdown demands when it comes to food and drink:

We all deserve a healthy life.

With the right to a fair choice and the ability to pick the healthy option.

Right now things are out of balance.

*Healthy is expensive.
Healthy is premium.
Healthy is inaccessible.
Healthy is for a few.*

Unhealthy is none of these.

This needs to be reset.

*We all deserve to understand what healthy is and why it matters.
We all deserve to feel like healthy works for us.*

Let's spend some time looking in more detail at the suggestions young people have in order to achieve this manifesto.

1 - Make healthy food options cheaper

Young people don't have a lot of their own money to spend so too often the cheaper option wins when it comes to what they eat and drink, even when they know it is less healthy.

"For a pound you can get wings and chips but you couldn't get any healthy options, you'd have to spend more. At the end of the day you are thinking what is going to taste nice and what is going to fill me up."

- 17, Female, C2, Urban, Black British

"I've always thought healthy food is a lot more expensive. If you go to the shop you can get a pot of mango for £2 but a chocolate bar for £1 and it's the same at schools and restaurants - you're paying £13 for a salad when it's £10 for a pizza."

- 16, Female, DE, Suburban, White British

Rather than increasing the cost of unhealthy food through taxes etc, young people are clear they want healthier options to feel more affordable, not just for them but for those in charge of household shopping who face the same constraints, especially when it comes to financial security. In order for healthy food to feel affordable and convenient, not just for children but for their families, retailers and manufacturers need to think about more than profits as they look to prioritise health and access too.

2 - The food industry must take responsibility

Young people are clear, the food industry as a whole - from fast food, to supermarkets, to restaurants, to schools, to government - all have a role to play in ensuring children have access to healthy options. However, fast food restaurants are seen as being the ones with a bigger role to play because they are actively creating environments that allow them to profit from children eating unhealthily.

"Places like McDonalds, KFC, Burger King, they're making money off people's health."

- 19, Male, C2, Urban, Asian British

"They have the labels but I don't really understand what half of it means."

- 15, Female, C1, Suburban, Black British

This doesn't mean that young people want fast food restaurants or unhealthy brands to be penalised. Instead, they want businesses, as well as the government, to think about how they shine more of a light on healthier options rather than leaving the spotlight on unhealthy offerings. They want healthy to take the centre stage, in a way that makes sense, so they have greater balance when it comes to what is available to them.

"I feel like after isolation young people will be looking at food brands or businesses to provide healthy options and healthy alternatives to things like pizzas, and burgers and fries."

- 18, AB, Female, Urban, Asian British

Potential solutions include fast food brands reinvesting x amount of money into health and fitness programmes every time they spend y amount on media. Or designing their menus in a way where healthy options aren't explicitly sign posted because when you go to a fast food place you won't actively be looking for healthy. Or brands developing an incentivised app which provides young people with discounts on clothes or activities based on picking healthier menu options.

3 - Advertise healthy, like we advertise unhealthy

Young people are acutely aware of the role advertising plays in the decisions they make when it comes to food and drink. Even though they recognise that what they are shown on their screens often doesn't match what they actually get to eat, advertising, done well, does the job of making them crave something.

"When I see ads from places like McDonalds it does make me want one, so yeh, if I didn't see them then I would probably want them less."

- 14, Male, DE, Rural, White British

"Knowing how they do the ads, with the ways to make it look really tasty, doesn't really make a difference. If I want it, I want it."

- 18, Female, C2, Urban, Mixed

Young people feel that healthy needs to start thinking more like unhealthy in the way that it is advertised as right now it is failing to meet their expectations. In particular, thinking about who from youth culture to work with appears to be key in building the right connections and making young people feel healthy is as much for them as for anyone else.

"Fast food feels like it is aimed at young people but healthy stuff feels like it is aimed at older people who have the money to spend."

- 15, Female, C2, Rural, White British

"Don't feel like healthy hits the right audience with what young people actually want to eat and want to see. Big Zoo has his own cooking show and that's good. They should think more about things like that."

- 18, Female, C2, Urban, Mixed

4 - Make water accessible all day, everyday

This was particularly important for young people from more populated areas where there was a sense that although day to day there are more options when it comes to food and drink, access to water is not prioritised. We know young people want to continue drinking more post-lockdown so are keen for local councils to be thinking more actively about what access is provided in community spaces like parks and for local businesses to be thinking more about how they are able to ensure water is on offer. For example, rather than expecting young people to buy it as part of a meal deal, water should be freely available, just as it is at home.

Also, outside of lockdown young people spend most of their time in school where they don't want to make use of existing water stations for various reasons - ranging from sanitary concerns through to urban legends. Ideas to combat this included gifting each school aged child with a reusable water bottle, setting up specific water stations for set age groups or staggering break times to allow for easier and more sanitary access.

"You only have so many water fountains, but you have so many pupils and if they're all using it, it just doesn't feel clean especially if you think about now with COVID-19."

- 16, Female, DE, Suburban, White British

"We have loads of rumours about where the water comes from, that it's rain water captured from the roof so it just puts you off."

- 18, Female, C2, Rural, White British

5 - Support community spaces to allow for healthy socialising

The research clearly demonstrates young people's relationship between food and socialising. The two often go hand in hand. Even before lockdown young people felt they had little freedom in where they could hang out with friends locally and often defaulted to a fast food restaurant. Options feel limited especially with funding to youth clubs constantly being cut and other spaces not feeling relevant. This is especially true for those from urban areas where space is even more restricted and the high streets are dominated by unhealthy food options.

"The options on the high street just aren't healthy, so don't really have much choice. It'd be nice to invest in helping smaller, healthier businesses find space so they could compete with other businesses."

- 15, Female, C1, Suburban, Black British

Young people want to see government, brands and businesses working together to invest in existing community spaces so they offer a more inviting, interesting place to be. They want urban spaces redesigned in a way that means socialising doesn't have to come at the expense of a healthy diet. Solutions ranged from making offerings feel more healthy, to dedicating set time and space to young people on an ongoing basis, to brand partnerships to drive deeper education through participation in set activities, to supporting healthier businesses to make their presence known.

“There are already youth clubs, but they always have tuck shops that are pretty unhealthy so might be able thinking about what they offer”

- 14, Male, DE, Rural, White British

“They could do things like ensuring there are always times where young people can book out the courts in Brockwell Park and use them for free”

- 19, Male, C2, Urban, Asian British

Young people are clearly thinking about what comes next. COVID-19 and living in lockdown has forced them to reflect more on the role food and drink plays in their lives and the ways they interact with it day to day. They know the current food system is not working for them, and they know it's certainly not working as it should for children from lower income backgrounds. Although they have started to think about what the future should look like, they need our help in making the necessary changes.

That is where the five commitments come in.

They act as a clear stake in the ground for the action needed and the areas that must be readdressed. We strongly believe that together we can make them a reality.

Section 6 -

Hopefully we've reached a point where you can now see the impact of COVID-19 on children's health more clearly, and can see the areas we need to collectively focus on in order to rejuvenate the food system so it works for all children, especially those from lower income households.

The positive trends that have emerged give us a strong foundation to build from. Young people are cooking more, drinking more water and eating more often as a family. This has supported their wellbeing in lockdown. Young people are also more aware of the injustices that exist within the food system, unlocking a desire for change and an understanding of why it's needed, especially for those from less financially stable backgrounds.

COVID-19 has demonstrated just how vulnerable the food system is and the inequalities at play and we're determined to ensure we don't just simply revert back to the way things were with lockdown ending. It wasn't working for children and more importantly, it's not what they want.

Bite Back 2030 and Guys and St Thomas' Charity are committed to making this happen but in order to really affect change we need to work together with you and young people.

So let's re-emerge and commit to doing it together. It's a moment unlike any before, and we're looking forward to turning the five commitments into actions.

We could talk about these things all day, but it's change which will make the difference, to the prospects of children's health and to challenging the injustices that exist in the food system.

Let's step up to the challenge, work together and help children thrive.