



# **CAMBRIDGE FOOD POVERTY ALLIANCE**

Food Deserts and Food Swamps in Cambridge

Sept 2019

# Foreword

More than a million people in the UK live in food deserts, where a lack of money, transport and appropriate food outlets hamper their ability to buy fresh fruit and vegetables. As part of a growing awareness of food poverty in Cambridge and with the publication of the report 'Towards a Collaborative Action Plan: a report on food poverty in Cambridge' and the subsequent 'Food Poverty Action Plan for Cambridge 2020 - 2023', Cambridge Food Poverty Alliance set out to find out whether there are food deserts or food swamps in the city.

# History

New housing estates built in the 1930s enabled families in poor housing to move into better accommodation, but did not include neighbourhood shops or food markets. Out of town shopping centres, the first of which was built in 1976, also presented challenges for people who were unable to access them, and contributed to a decline in High Street shops. Both of these changes may have contributed to the rise of food deserts.

# What is a food desert?

A 'food desert' is an area that is poorly served by food shops, where people without adequate transport or with limited mobility may struggle to access a good range of healthy, affordable food items.

There is no clear international consensus on what constitutes a food desert, or even what is meant by healthy and nutritious food. However, some popular and accepted definitions are:

- In neighbourhoods of between 5000 - 15,000 people there might be two or fewer big supermarkets in a food desert.
- Shoppers should not have to walk further than 500 metres to an outlet that sells healthy food.
- An area with several small food outlets offering a limited range of food items may also be defined as a food desert: small shops have been found to be less likely to offer fresh food.
- Food may also be more expensive in smaller shops: in one recent study Tesco Metro was 7% more expensive than the supermarket and Sainsbury's Local was 5% more costly than Sainsbury's.

# ***Food deserts, inequality and health***

Government reports have acknowledged that food deserts could potentially damage public health by reducing the availability and affordability of foods that are vital for good health.

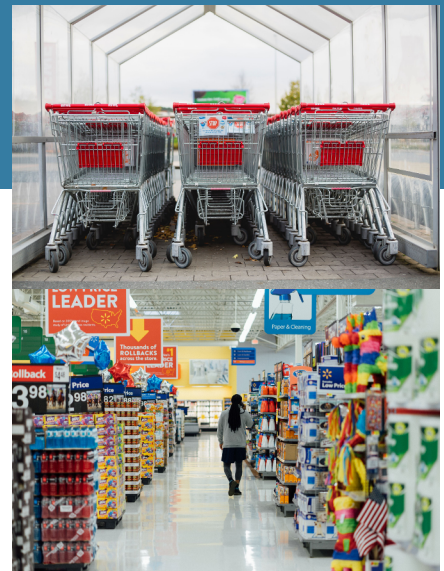
The percentage of sick, disabled, elderly people and unpaid carers of those with poor access to fresh food is high. One shopper we spoke to in our study, with mobility issues, said, 'I usually go to a supermarket but I have to take a taxi.'

In Cambridge, a household with two parents over 25 years with two children under 5 and a rental income in the private sector of £1010 (2-bed), the estimated Universal Credit and benefit payment is £21,000 per year. Given that £12,120 is accounted for in rent, this would leave a family of 4 reliant on £806 per calendar month to cover everything else. The Government's blueprint for a healthy and balanced diet, the Eatwell Plate, would cost £405 a month for this family. This means that 50% of the household's Income after rent would be spent on food.

Given many households have tight budgets, it becomes apparent that the availability of good food, both geographically and in terms of quality and variety, becomes a matter of healthy or unhealthy diets, especially as not all supermarkets or smaller branch shops are able to offer value lines or inexpensive fruit and veg.

***The Social Market Foundation's 2018 report 'What are the barriers to eating healthily?' found a strong correlation between food deserts and economic deprivation.***

***In total, 16% of the people interviewed said that either not having access to a car or not being near a supermarket offering healthy and affordable food was a barrier to eating healthily.***



# Does Cambridge have food deserts?

## Methodology

The following areas for investigation were chosen:

- Abbey/North-East Barnwell
- East Chesterton
- Trumpington
- Kings Hedges/Arbury

According to the 2019 Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) Abbey/ Barnwell and Kings Hedges are among the 20% most deprived areas in the country, East Chesterton falls within the 30% most deprived areas and we chose to consider Trumpington, an area with a lot of new development in Cambridge that has the third highest benefit claimant population in the city.

Consideration was given to the farthest distance a resident would have to travel to reach a food outlet. Visits were made to each shop and we spoke to residents in the areas.

## Findings

### Abbey/ Barnwell

The area bordered by Newmarket Road, Ditton Lane and Fison Road lacks shops selling fresh food. The nearest food outlet selling fresh fruit and veg is the **Spar** on Barnwell Road. In May 2019 there was a small range of vegetables and fruit, including asparagus (£2.95) and peaches (50p each), which are not low cost foods.

The **Tesco Superstore** on Cheddars Lane sells a wide range of all kinds of food, but is nearly five times the recommended maximum distance from Fison Road.

There is a bus service to Cherry Hinton and Fulbourn, where there are further food outlets.

*'I usually go to a supermarket but have to take a taxi which of course costs money which I would have spent on food.'*

**Housing Association resident, Cambridge.**



## ***Trumpington***

In 2017 areas of Trumpington south of Long Rd, east of Shelford Rd and west of the guided busway were identified as having the third highest benefit claimant population in Cambridge. IMD data 2019 reports that Trumpington also has 18.5% of under 16's living in low income families. This compares to 11% for the rest of Cambridgeshire.

**Waitrose** on Hauxton Rd sells a wide range of upmarket food including fresh fruit and veg. The distance from Chalkwells Way is 1448m.

A small off licence on Shelford Road, **Trumpington Food and Wine**, sells sandwiches, bread and milk but no fresh fruit and vegetables.

Further shops are planned for the area but have yet to arrive.

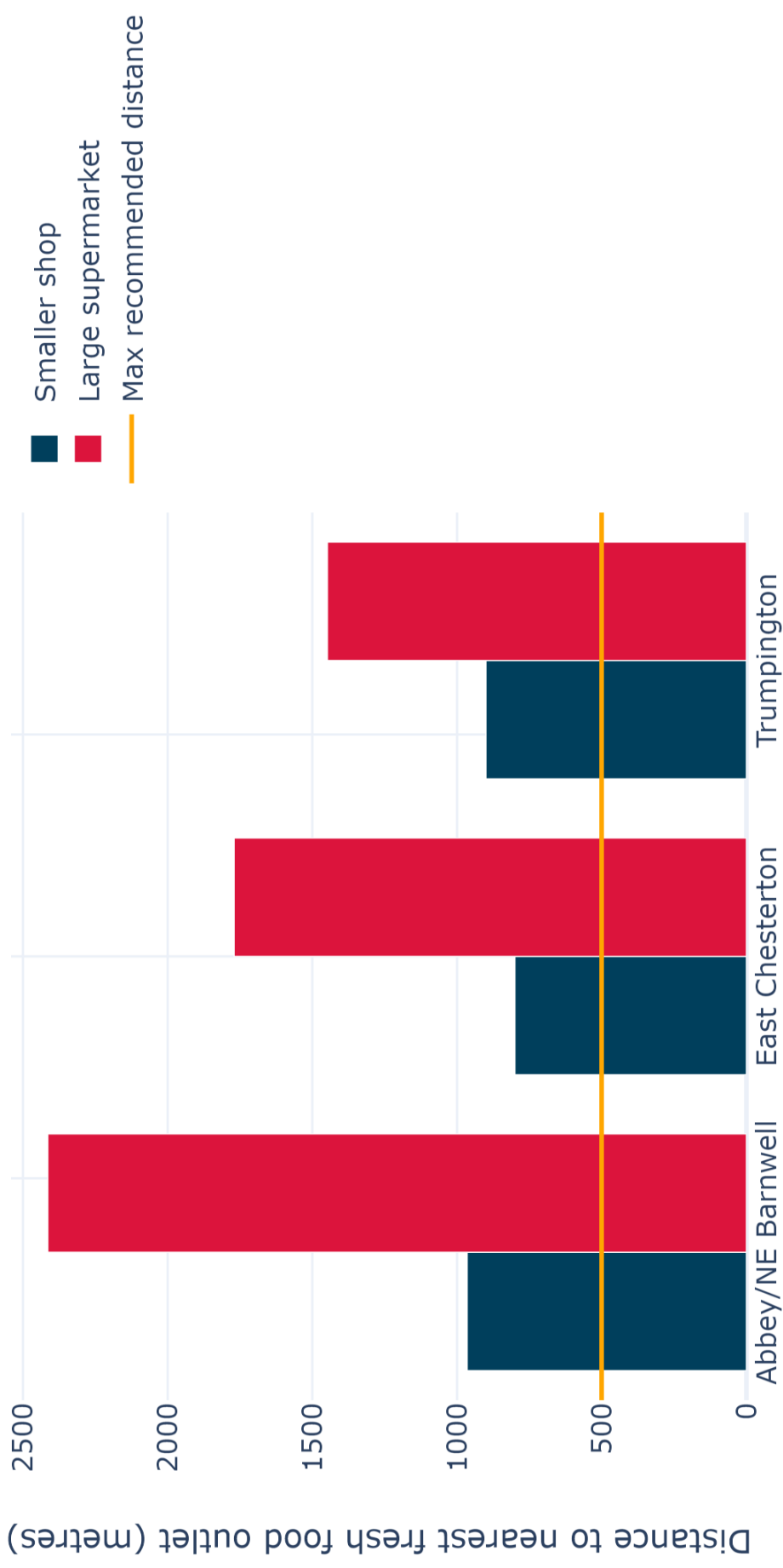
## ***East Chesterton***

The area bordered by Milton Road, Kendal Way and the A14 offers the **Coop** on Green End Road, which sells a good range of fruit and veg for mid-range prices. The shop is 800 metres from residents living on Cam Causeway. The distance from Cam Causeway to **Tesco Superstore** is 1770m.

The area has good cycle paths that could make access to shops easier for some locals.

*The term ' Food Desert' came into use through the Nutrition Task Force's Low Income Project Team in 1996.*

# Chart to Show distance in metres walked to a shop selling fresh produce



This chart shows the distance some local residents in areas of Abbey, East Chesterton and Trumpington wards need to travel to access fresh fruit and vegetables.

# ***Conclusions***

There appear to be food deserts in both Abbey and East Chesterton although Kings Hedges, another area within the top 20% most deprived wards in the country, is well served, with residents being able to access fresh produce. Food outlets in Abbey and East Chesterton are significantly farther than the recommended 500m walking distance from many homes and even then do not all offer a good range of fresh, affordable food.

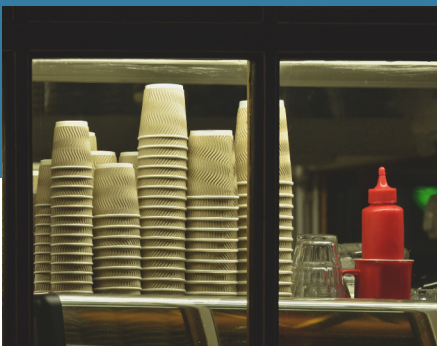
Trumpington, a new development of over 4000 homes, has little opportunity for people to buy healthy and fresh produce at affordable prices. Future planners should consider access to fresh, affordable food as a key issue for a healthy city.

## ***What is a Food Swamp?***

Food swamps can be described as areas with a high density of food outlets selling high-calorie fast food and food with poor nutritional status, in particular hot takeaway meals. Since 2014 there has been an increase of around 29% in the amount of food eaten outside the home.

The number of takeaway food outlets has grown over the past 20 years; fast food and other unhealthy food outlets are more common in deprived areas in the UK and food swamps may be a stronger predictor than food deserts of obesity rates.

***Most of us still are not eating enough fruit and vegetables. They should make up over a third of the food we eat each day. NHS website.***



## ***Food swamps and health***

People with the greatest exposure to takeaways are almost twice as likely to be obese as those who are least exposed to such food outlets, according to a study conducted by CEDAR. The reverse was also found to be true - children who lived in closer proximity to healthier food outlets were less likely to be overweight.

The foods we eat away from home tend to be less healthy than the meals we prepare ourselves, so it is important to consider how exposure to food outlets selling these high calorie foods in our day-to-day environments might be influencing consumption (P Monsivais, CEDAR).

A study conducted in 21 UK cities looking at the density of a number of different food outlets, including takeaways, within 1km of the home found that participants were exposed to an average of 32 takeaway food outlets and up to 165 outlets as they moved between their home, work and commuting environments. People who lived closest to the densest clusters of fast food outlets had an 11% higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes than people living in a street more than 1km away.



# ***Does Cambridge have food swamps?***

There are around 460 takeaways in Cambridgeshire, which account for 22.7% of food outlets. *The Guardian* newspaper published a report in 2017 showing that there are 1.18 takeaways per 1,000 residents in Cambridge, which is slightly higher than the national average. However, the rise of easily accessible takeaway delivery companies, such as Deliveroo, make it difficult to get a true picture of the demographic of takeaway buyers.

What we have found in the areas we did explore was a lack of all types of food outlets. Where they were in existence, such as the McDonalds on Barnwell roundabout, the influence on purchasing was perceived to be pervasive and influential by community leaders.

Whilst figures published by the National Child Measurement Programme 2018 for overweight children for 2017/18 show that overall Cambridge is below the average for year 6 and reception children, Abbey and Kings Hedges have the highest rates in the City.

***'Unhealthy neighbourhoods might make it more difficult to make healthy food choices. Our findings suggest that it might be time for local authorities to think hard about restrictions on the number and location of outlets in a given area, particularly deprived areas.'***

**Pablo Monsivais,  
researcher with CEDAR.**

# ***Recommendations***

Food swamps and deserts are particular to the areas in which they are found, so local authorities are better placed than central government departments to identify and deliver local solutions in conjunction with communities, organisations and food providers.

- Whilst it appears Cambridge does not have an issue with food swamps in areas of multiple deprivation it does appear that where they exist, takeaways hold a large sway over food purchasing decisions. The Takeaways Toolkit published by Greater London Authority, November 2012, provides tools, interventions and case studies to help local authorities develop a response to the health impacts of fast food takeaways.
- Appropriate planning policy for new hot food takeaways could be formulated through the local Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, mapping exercises, research studies, surveys and qualitative information, as well as public consultation.
- Rather than offering incentives to supermarkets to open a large outlet in a food desert, small, local-level activities, together with food education projects, may be more effective in addressing the challenges of food deserts, and crucially, increasing the consumption of healthy, nutrient-rich food and improving health outcomes for local people.
- The planning system can support access to healthier food by protecting and promoting markets, allotments and community food growing spaces. Some local authorities have sought to promote healthier food choices in public buildings, for example leisure centres and vending machines.

# ***Community-based interventions***

- Work with local suppliers, organisations and businesses to improve access to free, or low cost, fruit and vegetables to young families with children under four.
- Establish community fridges and surplus redistribution networks.
- Vegetable and fruit pop-up stalls, such as food stands outside community centres and schools, Farmers Markets and mobile fruit and veg providers.
- Encourage growing spaces, allotments etc. particularly in new-build areas.
- Seek to build capacity with community leaders by training them as Neighbourhood Food Advocates, who would advocate for better access to healthy food on both a neighbourhood and strategic level.
- Incorporate and offer assistance for those less familiar with using online ordering systems to understand how to make food purchases online. Consider shared ordering for those that cannot afford the minimum payment required by supermarkets.