

PROJECT SUMMARY

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NOURISHING OUR FUTURE INTRODUCTION

Funded by Essex County Council (ECC) Public Health and researched by a team of early years and nutrition experts at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), Nourishing Our Future (NOF) is an exploratory research project aimed at understanding healthy eating practices in early years settings across Essex. By engaging with over 200 early years providers and parents, we've gathered valuable insights into current food provision, education, challenges, and opportunities.

NOF PROJECT OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE

ECC Public Health are implementing the recently published Essex Healthy Weight Strategy, whereby early years are a key target setting. We are working in partnership to understand the current food consumption within early years (EY) settings in Essex, and to identify realistic and effective local opportunities for improvement, where required. This research will inform future practice and support and empower EY settings in Essex across five key areas:

- Food access and equity
- Food provision and nutrition
- Food environment
- Food education
- Challenges and opportunities



#NOFessexEY

NOF IMPACT SNAPSHOT

90%

of a child's daily energy and nutrient intake is consumed in an EY setting (if full time) (Early Start, 2024).

55%

of children bring at least one meal from home to their setting.

194

voices of practitioners, on behalf of 219 settings in Essex captured through the NOF project.



EARLY YEARS SETTINGS IN ESSEX

606,300

Children registered in early years settings in Essex (DfE, 2024).

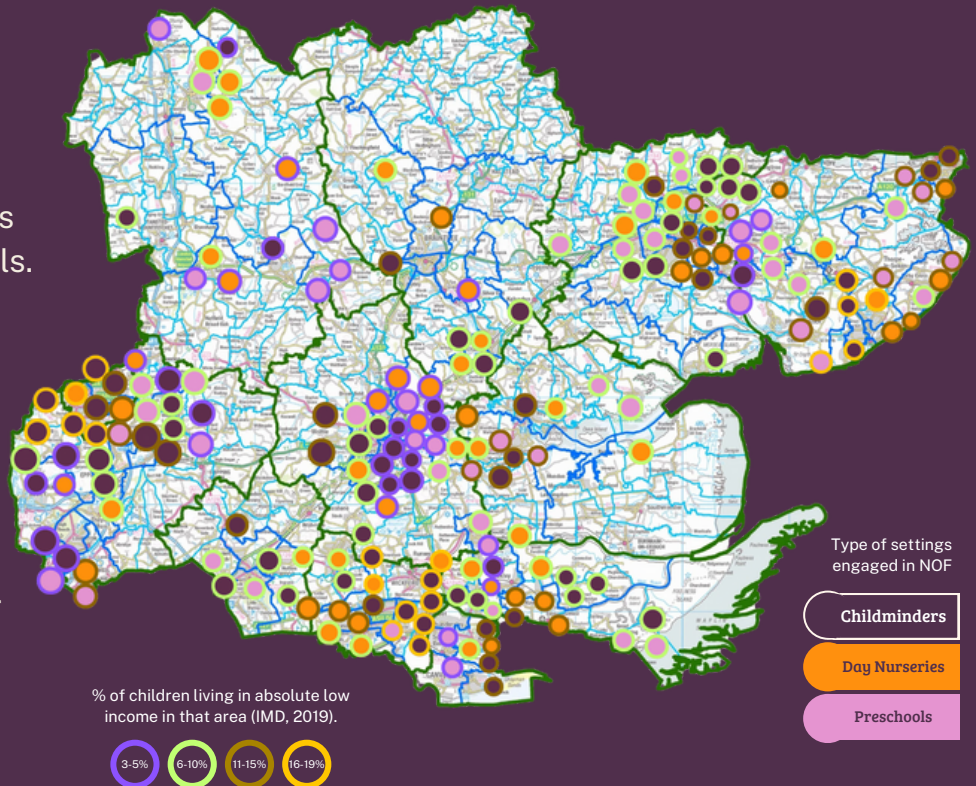
NOF Early Years Settings:

65% Would like recipe ideas and meal planning tools.

46% Would like financial support.

45% Would like access to nutritionist expertise.

42% Would like training for staff.



SETTING SURVEY

PRACTITIONER WORKSHOPS

PHOTO CAPTURE

MENU ANALYSIS

PARENT INTERVIEWS

Over 200 early years settings in Essex completed the online survey, sharing insights into what food provision and consumption, the food environment, and food education, looks like in their settings.

88 practitioners engaged across a series of seven workshops, to discuss; nutrition, cost, food education and health, work with parents and families, changing behaviours and relationships with food, training and support needs, and put forward their recommendations and suggestions.

50 settings shared over 650 photos capturing what children are eating in a 'Typical Day on Our Plate' activity (including lunchboxes) and captured examples to showcase food activities and education across settings.

48% of settings have a menu in place. A sample of setting menus and photos are being reviewed by NOF against the National Voluntary Eat Better Start Better guidelines for nutrition and portion size across the age groups of 1-4 years old.

Next step: parents of children in the settings involved in the project are invited to share their views and experiences of healthy eating via interview.

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We have a lot of low-income families and don't want them to feel ashamed if they can't provide certain food groups for whatever reason

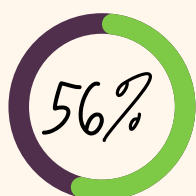
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INTERIM FINDINGS

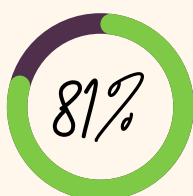
A core strength of the early years sector lies in its diversity, encompassing a wide range of settings that operate within the same regulatory framework, while adopting distinctive approaches to food provision and education.

Early Years settings who took part in this research:

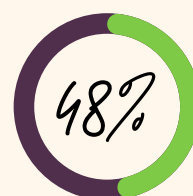
● Day Nursery	58
○ Childminder	94
● Pre-school	67



of children in early years settings in Essex, bring in their own food from home for one or more meals.



of settings have a food policy in place.



of settings have written menus in place.

INDICATIVE THEMES:



DIVERSITY, COMPLEXITY & EQUITY

There exists a tension between a need for conformity and regulation in the provision of healthy food for children, alongside space for innovation and individuality, to address the real-world complexities of different settings.



FOOD EDUCATION & TRAINING

Food education is key to fostering a healthy relationship with food. NOF showcases innovative practice across settings and with specialist organisations. There is a need for knowledge exchange and support in areas such as nutrition, portion size, recipes, allergies, sustainability and policy.



FOOD PROVISION & RESPONSIBILITY

In Essex, there is significant difference in provision and views on responsibility for children's healthy eating and drinking across settings, parents and practitioners. Large portions of packaged food indicates the need for support to create consistent expectations and shared values.



FOOD CULTURE & ENVIRONMENT

Practitioners and parents navigate a complex food landscape, encompassing challenge and opportunity in food purchasing, access to quality food, and the diverse food environments within early years settings. Greater support, recognition, and policies that advocate for a positive food culture and environment are essential.

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

- 58% children's food preferences.
- 48% Cost of healthy food.
- 39% Allergies and intolerances.
- 30% Preparation time.
- Promoting healthy lunchboxes.
- Increasing culture of grazing.
- Cultivating healthy relationships with food.
- Support for food in relation to SEND.
- Developing shared values with parents.
- Staff training and knowledge.
- External pressures and marketing influences.
- Positive approach to food education.

NOF GALLERY

The NOF gallery offers a glimpse into the diverse practices and food experiences captured through the research. Using a photo capture approach settings documented the meals children are consuming and the environments and educational opportunities shaping their early food habits.

