

# The Great Weight Debate

A London conversation  
on childhood obesity

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Barnet's conversations on childhood obesity

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## BARNET'S CONVERSATIONS ON CHILDHOOD OBESITY

### Introduction

#### *What is the Great Weight Debate?*

The **Great Weight Debate** is a multi-stage conversation to engage and involve Londoners in the health of their children, and to galvanise social action and support to tackle childhood obesity.

Coordinated by Healthy London Partnership, The Great Weight Debate aims to raise the awareness of outcomes of London's childhood obesity epidemic and gather ideas from Londoners about what we can all do to halt this growing epidemic.

#### *How did Barnet approach this conversation?*

Events took place throughout the London boroughs with residents to discuss how children and families can be better supported to lead healthier lifestyles.

Childhood obesity is one of the biggest public health challenges facing London and this is also a priority area at the local level in Barnet. The Great Weight Debate provided a great opportunity for London Borough of Barnet to hold conversations with the residents about the scale of childhood obesity and discuss ideas for change, whilst updating everyone on what interventions are already in place to tackle childhood obesity in the borough.

Harrow and Barnet's Public Health Team and Barnet's Children's Services coordinated focus groups and discussions in schools and children's centres. Parents were targeted for the Barnet focus groups, especially those with children under 5. This was advertised throughout the borough in schools, children's centres, libraries and health clinics alongside the Great Weight Debate survey. The GWD survey was also sent out to all schools, children's centres and newsletters throughout Barnet's Children's Services, Health and Education departments.



## Key Summary of Ideas from the Focus Groups

- **Key moments are being missed if we only focus on health settings to deliver health promotion advice.**
- **There is a great need for the wider workforce to be included in the health outcomes of the public from a variety of departments.**
- **Classifications of obesity should be revised to accommodate for the varying body structures, especially during the NCMP when children from various backgrounds are measured and compared against each other.**
- **Need to improve access to school sports for children, especially for children with multiple needs. It was believed that PE and sports had a heavy focus on competition but not enough on the basics and fun of physical activity.**
- **Important need to ensure services are improving parent's knowledge and cooking skills. This provides parents with the empowering skills to make informed lifestyle and food choices. The ability to read and utilise nutritional food labels was highlighted as key.**

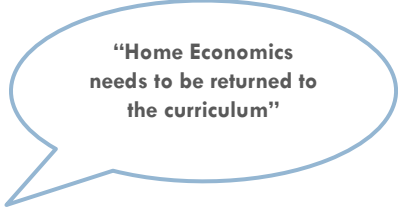


**“The word ‘obesity’  
is over used...”**



**“Children do not learn  
the basics of sports; it's  
too heavily focused on  
competition in schools”**

Parents in the focus groups were presented with facts from the Great Weight Debate presentation and statistics about the scale of childhood obesity at a local level in Barnet. Below are some of the areas highlighted during the presentation and discussions as to what we could do to halt the increasing childhood obesity epidemic.



“Home Economics needs to be returned to the curriculum”

## Ideas for Change

### ***Improved access to sports and physical activities in schools***

The need for the structure school sports to emphasise the importance of fun. This would allow children to learn the basics of various sports before the element of competition impacts their level of participation. Especially when considering the participation of children with SEND.

### ***Cooking Skills and Classes***

Empowering parents to independently provide healthy meals would reduce the inequalities faced by families from disadvantaged backgrounds. A number of children are disconnected from where their food comes from or how it is grown. This highlights the importance of continued cooking classes to improve the cooking skills of children and parents, especially in early years settings, through primary schools and into secondary.

### ***Policy***

Policies and legislations need to be in place and enforced in order for schools and other settings to take action (e.g. Lunch box policies, food used to celebrate birthdays and special occasions). This would also help schools understand their responsibility of impacting children's health and teaching them important life-long skills. 31% of the survey respondents believed that there should be limits on the number of fast foods.

### ***Children with SEND***

Ensuring that opportunities for health improvement (physical activity, healthy eating workshops or cooking sessions) are tailored to be inclusive of children with multiple needs. For example, visual aids and healthy eating information should be interchangeable for those with food allergies.

### ***Physical Activity***

The need for physical activity and sports with children to have emphasis on fun and exploration. Ensuring that the need for competitive sports does not overshadow those children who are not able to compete competitively. This was reported to be especially important to parents in the early years as it was suggested that the availability of equipment reduces as children get older. This

would therefore be a perfect opportunity to teach parents about the importance of physical literacy in early years. The GWD survey asked the residents's views on factors inhibiting healthy life styles

### ***Use of Outdoor learning***

A question was raised regarding the number of parks, open spaces and outdoor gyms near schools and whether these are being utilised by schools and community groups enough. Problems were raised linked to the cost of maintaining outdoor equipment for physical activity in open spaces, as well as the general health and safety of outdoor open spaces for children.

### ***Psychological Aspect of Eating***

Help children and parents understand the emotional association of food and eating. Also help parents understand the love aspect of feeding children. The parents identified that encouraging children to constantly snack throughout the day, reduces children's abilities to understand the signals when they are hungry.

### ***Family Approach to Prevention***

The need to encourage a change amongst the whole family was a key suggestion. This included family cooking and family physical activity. This would allow children to learn and understand the importance of fresh foods as well as the need to be physically active together with improving the health outcomes for the whole family.



### ***Food Labelling***

There is a need to improve the public's knowledge of food labelling. Having all food manufacturers using a consistent method of labelling such as traffic light labelling.

### ***Health information***

Review the amount of information parents are given during antenatal stage and in the first few years about nutrition and physical activity. It was suggested that this information then ceases until they "receive a letter through the door from the nurse saying that your child is overweight."



# Information from the Survey Responses

In the GWD survey respondents were asked to name the three factors that they felt inhibited healthy lifestyles amongst children the most. As figure 1 demonstrates, more than 2/3rds of people from Barnet felt that “too many cheap unhealthy food and drink options” (63%) was a main factor contributing to unhealthy lifestyles. This is slightly higher than the average response across all London boroughs (median 59%), however, it reflects the capital as a whole. The availability of cheap unhealthy food was the primary concern across all London boroughs.

Secondary concerns for respondents from Barnet was that the quantity of fast food shops, food advertising, and the time and skills required for healthy food preparation.

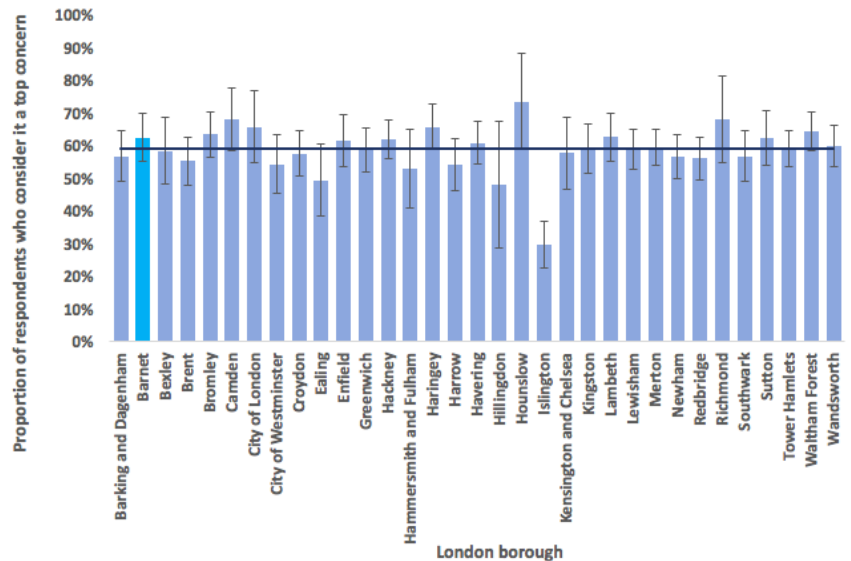
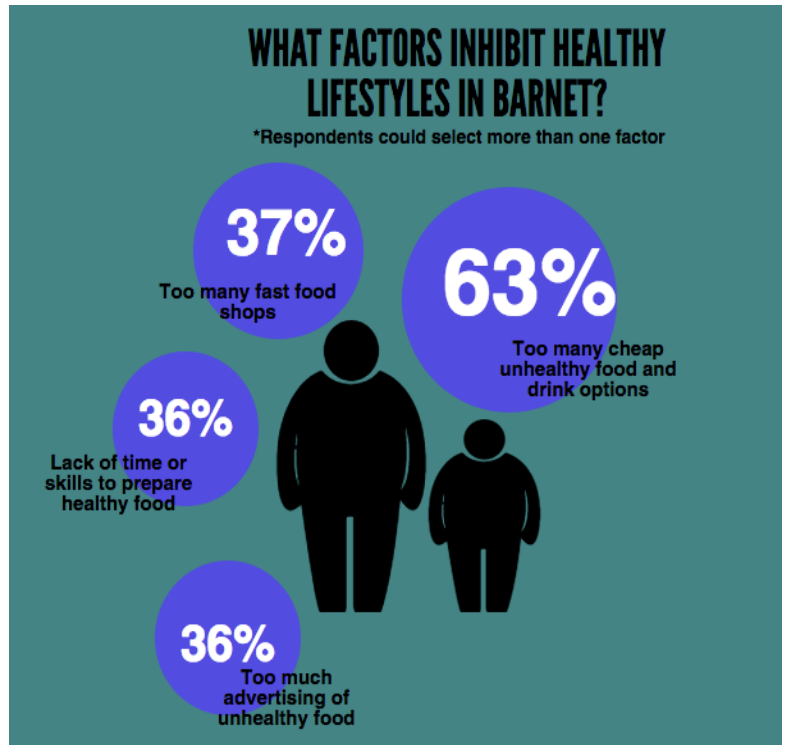
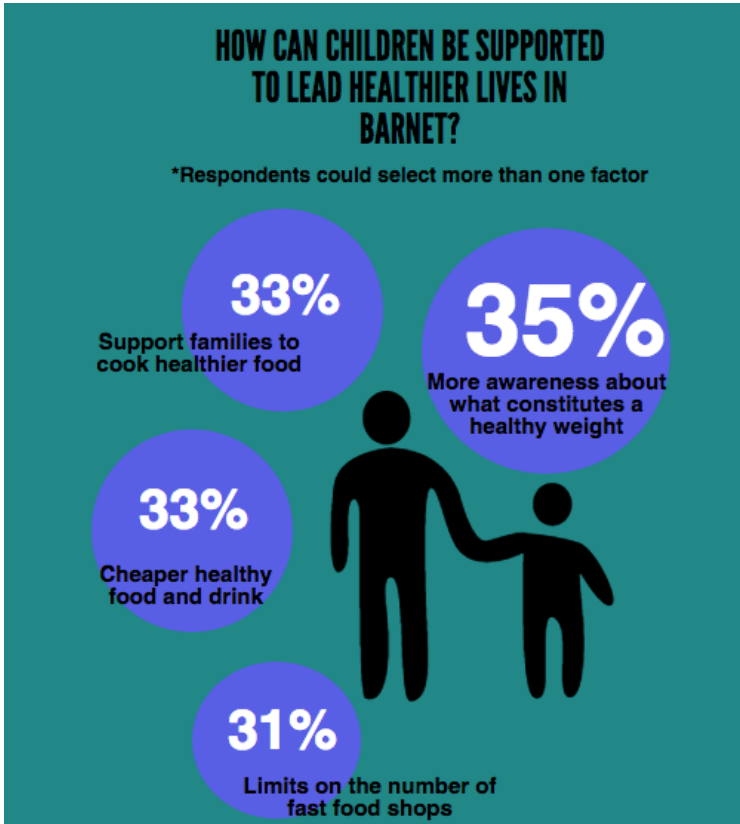


Figure1: Proportion of respondents who selected, “too many cheap unhealthy food and drink options” as factor inhibiting healthy lifestyles, by London borough

Concern for the accessibility and affordability of unhealthy food and drink was reiterated in the written response section of the survey too. Some Barnet respondents felt that the ease with which unhealthy food could be found and purchased was a contributing factor to unhealthy lifestyles.



The GWD survey also examined which interventions people felt would be most effective in improving lifestyles. Although 65% of Barnet participants felt that the availability of cheap unhealthy food and drink was a main contributing factor to unhealthy lifestyles, only 31% believed that placing limits on the number of fast food shops would be effective. Reasons for this inconsistency can be understood in greater detail by examining some of the written responses. As the below

quotes illustrates, respondents from Barnet felt that a more effective intervention would target the availability of unhealthy food & drinks overall, rather than in fast-food shops alone. However, as one of the quotes indicates, targeting the availability of fast food shops was still considered important.



Across London, the intervention identified as having the largest potential of being effective was “Cheaper unhealthy food and drink options” (38%, CI +/- 1.3) (see figure 2). By comparison, the proportion of Barnet respondents who believed this to be effective was 32% (CI +/- 7), which was not significantly different from the London average. However, as figure 8 illustrates, Barnet was the only borough which had a significantly higher proportion of people (35%, CI +/- 7.4) who felt that healthy-weight education would be an effective intervention, compared to London as a whole.

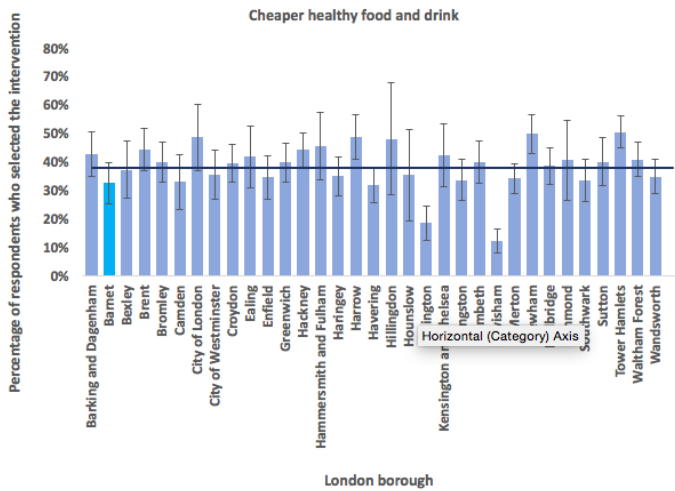


Figure 2: Figure 7: Proportion of respondents who selected, “cheaper healthy food and drink” as an effective intervention to improve lifestyles, by London borough

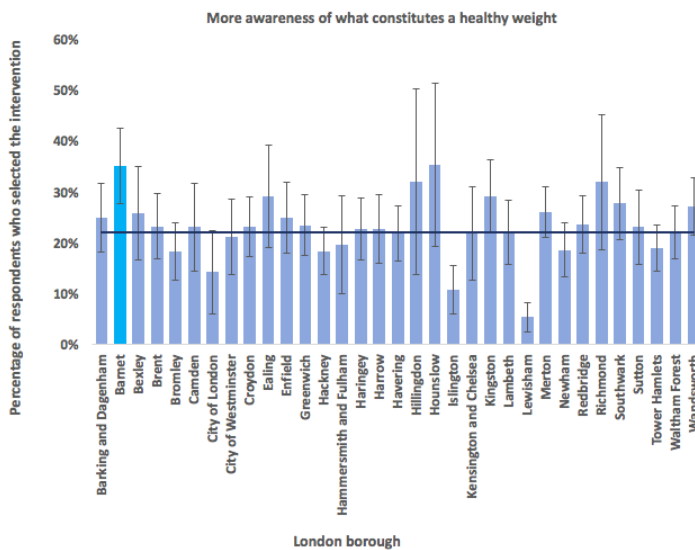


Figure 3: Proportion of respondents who selected, “more awareness of what constitutes a healthy weight” as an effective intervention to improve lifestyles, by London borough.

Compared to healthy eating concerns, participants across London felt that there were already interventions in place to help children be physically active. Only 12% of Barnet respondents were unaware of opportunities in their area, an insignificant difference from the London average. The most common services people considered opportunities for physical activity were parks, leisure centres, and local sports and youth clubs. However, Barnet has a slightly larger



number of parents concerned about the safety of parks (87%, CI +/- 5), compared with London as a whole (82% CI +/-, 0.9).

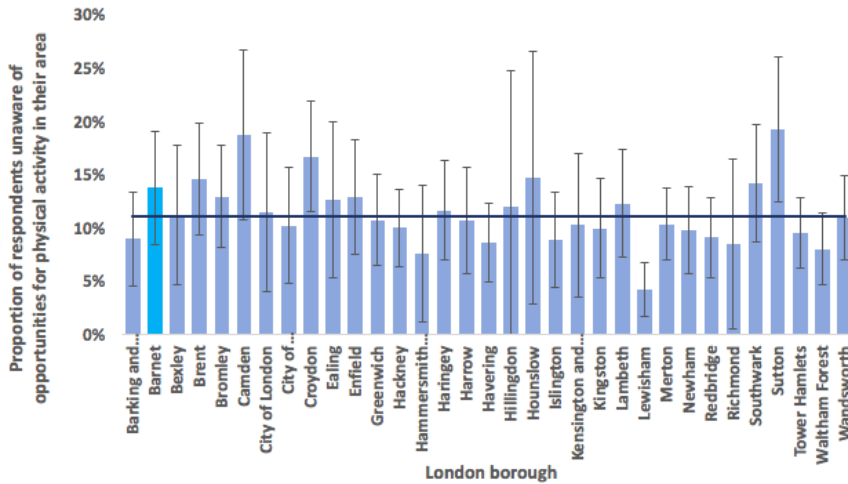
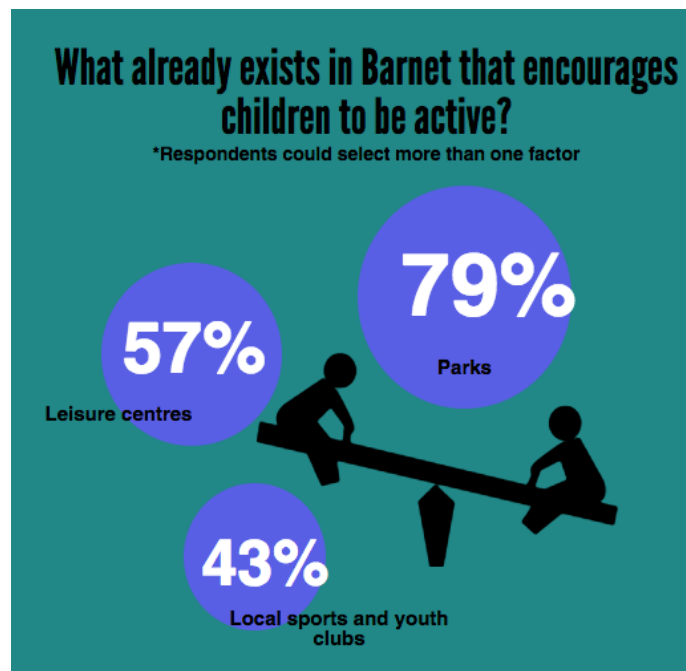


Figure 4: Proportion of respondents who were unaware of opportunities for children to be physically active in their area, by London borough

The following image summarises the most frequent responses to the question, "How are Barnet children already supported to lead healthy lives?" from Barnet residents.




Whilst Barnet participants responded positively to opportunities to be physically active, in the open feedback section of the survey, the majority of Barnet residents expressed concerns about the affordability and accessibility of these services.



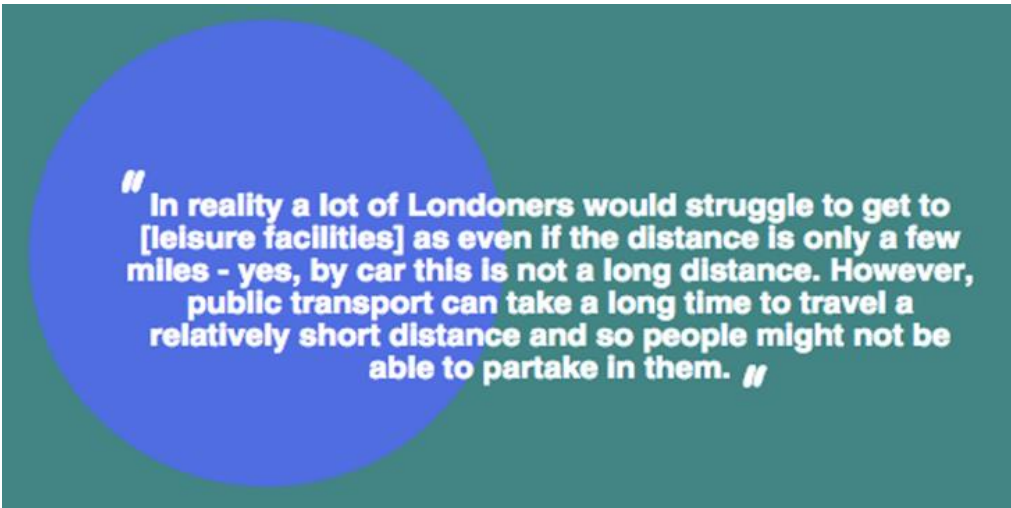
**“ More affordable sports activities on weekends and school holidays and more information about child activities in local area ”**



**“ Improve public transport to get to already existing opportunities to be active and healthy. ”**



**“ There's a lot on offer however you need to pay so wouldn't help low income families. The parks and playgrounds are great though. ”**



**“ In reality a lot of Londoners would struggle to get to [leisure facilities] as even if the distance is only a few miles - yes, by car this is not a long distance. However, public transport can take a long time to travel a relatively short distance and so people might not be able to partake in them. ”**

***How this information will be used?***

Information gathered from this debate and debates across other boroughs in London will provide a picture of Londoners opinions on how to best shape interventions on tackling the obesity epidemic. The views and ideas put forward will be used to inform the next stage of the debate with Healthy London Partnership which will work towards making tangible changes at a community and London-wide level.

In addition the information gathered will help the Barnet Public Health team to develop a strategy to meet the obesity related needs of children and young people living in Barnet.