

# Dinnertime Matters: The Benefits of Shared Family Mealtimes





# Introduction from Dave Dunsagh

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**Over the last 18 months, most of us have done less of the things we'd usually do.**

We've taken fewer trips, missed out on live music and sport, and in many cases spent less time physically in our places of work, missed seeing our friends and extended families. But there's one thing many of us have done more of – and that's sharing mealtimes.

Over the course of the pandemic, I've enjoyed countless meals with my wife and children, in our native Canada and more recently in our new adoptive home of the UK. Over all manner of dishes and cuisines, we've discussed work and school, talked about friends and family near and far, and valued the time this has given us to share what's been on our minds.

At Mars Food we have an inspiring Purpose to deliver Better Food Today. A Better World Tomorrow. It's a great recipe for a bright future as we look to build a post-pandemic world that is happier, healthier and more sustainable. In particular, we are passionate about the power of dinnertimes to help us build the world we want tomorrow.

We've been running our Dinnertime Matters initiative for three years, as part of our wider vision to bring our Purpose to life. When we started out on this journey, we knew that shared mealtimes were important, but not everyone was able to experience them. That's why an important first step was talking to charities, like our partner the Trussell Trust, about how to better enable them.

What we've learnt since then has brought home just how beneficial sitting around a table with family, friends, colleagues or even strangers can be to physical health, mental health and wider wellbeing. To quote one contributor to this report, 'food brings people together', whether it's haute cuisine or something simple cooked at home.

Equally, it's clear significant barriers are getting in the way of this, from poverty and isolation to lack of cooking skills and equipment or simply conflicting schedules.



As we learnt, ‘sometimes poverty means that there simply isn’t enough food to go around, so eating together is just not possible.’ That’s the reality facing families across Britain – meaning far too many people are missing out on the positives of sharing a meal. We believe everyone should have the right to a healthy dinnertime, meaning having healthy nutritious food, that’s good for the planet, and eaten with other people. It shouldn’t be a privilege.

Overcoming these barriers to enjoying shared dinnertimes will be far from simple. However, given the many benefits, we’re standing up for sitting down. It’s up to businesses, charities, third sector groups and government to come together and find ways to make shared mealtimes a weekly routine for everyone. The recommendations we make in this report, including for more research to identify the correlations and causations of the benefits of shared mealtimes, and more action to alleviate poverty as a barrier, could help achieve real change. Likewise, in line with the National Food Strategy, we recognise the value that could come from better education around cooking skills, meal prep and food nutrition – and there are many ways to share a healthy meal that don’t require high levels of skill, time or resources.

For our part, at Mars Food we’re proud to be doing what we can to make sure we provide healthy meals to families across the UK, including supporting those in underserved communities via our charity partnerships, as well as helping support our Associates to Switch Off For Dinner with the people who matter most to them.

If I could have anything for dinner tonight, I would be enjoying my mother’s home cooking and sitting down with my parents, who I went more than a year without seeing. Because I know that a shared mealtime is about so much more than what’s on the plate, it’s about people coming together.

At Mars Food we believe that everyone should be able to enjoy shared dinnertimes and we are committed to enabling that. We hope this report starts a much-needed conversation – over a shared meal, of course.





# Section 1: The context

## What do we mean by shared mealtimes?

**In this report, we will be exploring the benefits of and barriers to shared mealtimes, often referred to as shared family mealtimes. The word “family” or “household” does not refer solely to a nuclear household – we want to celebrate that “families” come in all shapes and sizes, and that no one shared dinnertime is the same.**



There is no single definition of shared mealtimes that we have subscribed to. We will be referring to family, household and any other communal mealtimes where people come together to prepare, cook and enjoy a meal in a shared space, interchangeably throughout the report. We have intended to keep the definition loose, as we know that families and households can mean different things to different people, and that there are varying degrees of access to shared mealtimes. We want to better understand the issue from a broad, inclusive sense rather than it being narrowly defined to one group. Our ambition is to understand the benefits of people sharing meals with the people who matter most to them, whoever they are.

## Why is Mars Food exploring this?

Mars Food UK has been exploring the benefits of and barriers to shared mealtimes as part of its wider Dinnertime Matters campaign since 2018. As a food company, Mars Food recognises the power of dinnertimes and understands that mealtimes are about more than just what is on our plates. We know that what we eat, where it comes from and who we share it with are important. Creating better food today for a better world tomorrow has never been more important, as we respond to global challenges that affect every one of us.

Across the business we are keen to understand what more can and should be

done to ensure that everyone who wants to is able to access shared mealtimes and affordable, healthy food to eat with their family, those they live with, or others in their wider community. Cooking and eating with others offers enormous positives, from bringing generations together, to the mental health benefits of taking the time to talk about our days – and we are committed to encouraging and enabling these positive moments. However, we are also aware that ready meals and supermarket dinner products are not accessible for everyone, and for those living in poverty they are unaffordable. That’s why as a business we are also committed to working with food banks like the Trussell Trust, FareShare and HisFood to enable them to provide emergency food packages for those most in need.

To understand more about these issues, in October 2020, we hosted a roundtable in partnership with the Trussell Trust, convening leading voices in this space, including charities, businesses and academics to discuss the benefits of, and barriers to, shared mealtimes.

This was a wide-ranging conversation, with attendees acknowledging many benefits of sitting down to share dinner with other people, including for family or community cohesion, mental and physical health, and wellbeing and social development. However, a significant number of barriers were also identified.

These ranged from financial burdens and pressures on mental health, to the impact

of irregular or unreliable work, and lack of cooking facilities, necessary skills or even the equipment to prepare food with. This report aims to delve further into these discussions. It has been developed via a series of in-depth stakeholder interviews and a broader review of evidence on this subject. A full bibliography is included at the end of the report. We are grateful to everyone who has participated and contributed to furthering the understanding of this important topic.

While we have been exploring this issue for several years, it has been particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. For some families, coming together to sit down and cook and share a meal has been much easier thanks to working from home and the end of the daily commute. However, many people have not been able to work remotely, or have felt the pressure of squeezed household budgets. For them, putting healthy meals on the table has been more difficult than ever – let alone all sitting together to enjoy them.

Mars Food recognises that there is a role for businesses to play in supporting families, households or communities to share meals. However, as this report explores, facilitating these points of contact clearly requires a collaborative effort across government, academia, civil society and the third sector to allow all those who want to, to enjoy shared mealtimes.

## The benefits of shared mealtimes are recognised – even if hard to achieve in practice

As outlined by FareShare, the UK’s national network for charitable food distributors, ‘food brings people together. Eating together with your own household is important for family bonding.’

In the course of developing this report, the benefits of shared family mealtimes have been repeatedly stated, for a wide variety of reasons, including the positive impact on mental and physical health, family and community cohesion, and individual development – especially of children.

According to a YouGov survey commissioned by Mars Food,<sup>1</sup> 58 per cent of people surveyed said that sharing mealtimes resulted in a greater connection with others, and 48 per cent confirmed that it helped with the family budget as it was cheaper to cook for multiple people at once.

Despite this, polling has demonstrated that many people find it hard to come together to share mealtimes, with the same survey highlighting that prior to the pandemic only 26 per cent of people shared a meal three times a week or more. Again, numerous factors were attributed to this during both the roundtable discussions and our investigations for this report, with time poverty, uneven or unreliable

work schedules, and pressures on mental health being called out as specific reasons.

Other businesses have also looked into this. McCain’s 2020 ‘Nation’s Conversations’ report found that ‘just one third [of families] will eat as a family every night’, with 40 per cent confessing ‘they rarely make the effort to get everyone around the table.’<sup>2</sup> This was corroborated by data collected by Sainsbury’s in 2020, who found ‘only 28 per cent of UK families are sharing the same meal each evening’, with only 12 per cent sharing breakfast.<sup>3</sup>

## Shared mealtimes are arguably more important than ever

It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has had mixed effects. For some, household mealtimes have been easier to come by as family members have been working or attending school from home. But, for many others it has been a period characterised by extreme pressure across all aspects of life, and made producing and sharing, healthy meals a much more challenging endeavour. For those living alone, repeated lockdowns have imposed further barriers to shared mealtimes.

What’s clear is that the pandemic has exacerbated some social issues, not least food poverty, with the last year having witnessed a drastic increase in the numbers of people facing this.

The Trussell Trust reported a 33 per cent increase in the number of food parcels distributed,<sup>4</sup> between April 2020 and March 2021 on the previous year, while there have been further reports about the UK’s ‘newly hungry’<sup>5</sup> – in other words, those forced to use foodbanks and rely on benefits for the first time as a result of job insecurity and disruption during the pandemic.

Equally, the impact of the pandemic and continuous lockdowns on individual mental health means that sitting down to share a meal and have a moment of interaction with others has arguably never been so important as we see loneliness rates soaring. As outlined later in the report, mental health can have a significant impact on the ability and desire to produce and ultimately share meals with others.

Never has there been a more important time to explore what the barriers are to shared family mealtimes and how we can overcome them. As detailed in the report, a number of barriers exist, but there are steps that can be taken to tackle and overcome them.

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# Section 2: The benefits of shared mealtimes – in the past and post-pandemic

**There are significant benefits to shared mealtimes that emerge when the subject is explored, relating to health and mental health, social and family cohesion, and much more. As a spokesperson from the Trussell Trust says from a personal perspective, ‘it’s often the only time we can sit down and have a chat together’.**



What becomes clear is that a shared meal is more than just a meal. As Professor Greta Defeyter, founder and the Director of the ‘Healthy Living’ Lab at Northumbria University and a spokesperson for the British Psychological Society, explains, the experience of eating alone differs to that of eating with others because ‘perceptions and feelings are affected by interactions with companions, friends and family’.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, at FoodCycle, a national charity that builds communities through surplus food, volunteers and spare kitchen spaces, the focus is not just about people eating or using up waste food, but about eating together in a structured way. The

ceremony and ritual of food – for example laying the table – is seen as key.

‘We train our volunteers to lay the tables out beautifully, to put table clothes down, put flowers on the table, to put cutlery on the table,’ said a representative of the charity. ‘Quite often in soup kitchens we just think the act of handing someone some soup is a job done. We don’t believe that at all. That is not a job done, that’s just a transaction.’

For the children who come to eat at FoodCycle, eating communally means ‘they see the importance of sitting down at that table, having the experience of cutlery being

put out, not necessarily having their dinner in front of the television and maybe making friends with other people’.

It is important to note that correlation is not causation. ‘There are, of course, a lot of correlations between shared family meals and health and wellbeing benefits,’ says Dr Carol Anne Hartwick-Pflaum PhD, a respected food industry professional who works for Mars (including a previous role at Mars Food as innovation and consumer lead), and has also held roles at Danone. However, she points out we don’t know whether families experience these benefits because of a shared meal, or because of factors that enable and encourage them to have a shared meal in the first place. In her research, she says what she has found is that ‘the family meal is much more complex

than we think, and for parents – or for families – it’s a lot more than just sitting down to a meal, there’s so much that goes before and after and during’; those ‘elements impact the outcomes of it in the end’.

## Educational outcomes

Research indicates correlations between educational performance and addressing hunger. For example, Magic Breakfast, which provides health school breakfasts to children at risk of hunger in disadvantaged areas, note independent research found that in a study of Year Two pupils, providing a free, nutritious ‘magic’ breakfast in schools boosted their reading, writing and maths by an average of 2 month’s progress per year, compared to pupils in schools lacking this breakfast provision. The charity’s 2019 survey of headteachers, school business managers and breakfast club coordinators, found overwhelming evidence of the positive impact of breakfast provisions on schoolchildren, including reported increases in attendance, punctuality, concentration, energy levels, readiness to learn, and improved general behaviour, physical health, and social skills.<sup>7</sup>

The research focused on breakfast in a communal environment, and it is important to note that some of these benefits may be felt for any child who is well fed before school. As Magic Breakfast say, what ‘teachers tell us a lot is that children are ready to engage in learning because they’ve chatted to their friends in breakfast club. They’ve been able to talk about



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what their dreams were last night and get themselves ready for the day and think about their mornings and kind of prepared for learning, [meaning they are] better engaged for learning and educational outcomes.’

It is clear that breakfast clubs are about more than food, and it is reasonable to assume that eating together as a family or in a group at other times will add value too. Magic Breakfast told us that from a breakfast perspective, it helps you ‘settle into the day’ either at home or school. According to the charity, these clubs are ‘probably going to have a benefit on the child rather than throwing them out the door with a piece of toast in their hand so that they arrive at the classroom ready for learning and they’re calm and ready to start the day and they’ve had time.’

Not only that, eating communally can enhance a child’s skills outside of the classroom. For younger children, this may be skills like using cutlery or pouring milk; for older teens this may be conversation and interacting with adults. Shared meals in

school environments, say Magic Breakfast, can be particularly important for pupils whose first language isn’t English and who don’t have many opportunities to ‘increase [their] conversation skills’.

This also extends to food skills. As Family Action, which works to tackle some of the most complex and difficult issues faced by families today, explain, ‘shared mealtimes are an opportunity to teach our children through example to eat well and to enjoy a healthy diet. For younger children this may be modelling the use of a knife and fork and for children of all ages, encouraging them to try new foods.’

## A time to chat and to connect

Sharing a meal also plays a role in bringing members of a household or family together, helping people of different ages bond, and boosting wellbeing. While there are other factors at play, Professor Defeyter explains that ‘in a fast paced world shared mealtimes help support children and youth in learning cultural values, social learning, social skills, promoting family attachments and thus reducing social isolation’. As FareShare put it, ‘Food brings people together. Eating together with your own household is important for family bonding.’

Family Action explain this in more detail: ‘It can be a time to chat, connect, to share news and events that have happened during the



day, potentially with limited other distractions. Through regular conversations, families can discover and address issues and problems together, coming up with solutions. Mealtimes can also enable more difficult topics to be brought up naturally in a neutral setting, as it is not a specific meeting/discussion that has been arranged for that purpose. Trying to cook and eat new foods, or sharing an old favourite, can also encourage bonding and create happy memories of family time all together that are beneficial for wellbeing.' As stated by the Mental Health Foundation, shared mealtimes give us 'a chance to reflect on the day and feel connected to others'.<sup>8</sup>

FoodCycle's communal meals enable guests to 'open up', with those who attend welcomed 'as if they are family'. With at least a quarter of their service users dealing with mental health issues and a third unable to work due to a disability or a long-term illness, a shared meal is an opportunity to connect. 'When you actually share food with other people you're also able to share conversations, share experiences, talk about the food itself, actually engage in food, and gain more nourishment from the food because it's not just the pure energy or other nutrients that you're getting. You're also getting a sense of wellbeing and good health, and a nice time,' they say. 'Conversations over mealtimes take you into all sorts of different directions: you can talk about the day that has been, or the day that might be ahead of you; it gives you an opportunity to share the challenges we may face in life.'

Although the full picture around drivers of mental health is complex, as Dr Hartwick-Pflaum points out, 'there's also a broader wellbeing element, in the sense that parents ask their kids "how was your day", "what did you do"' conversations between adults face-to-face, without distraction, are similarly important. Dinners are also a 'planning session' for many families, to discuss, say, holidays. The main benefits, therefore, 'are around the nutrition and the psychological side of creating a good memory of the eating experience... but also the mental social wellbeing side'.

## Improved nutritional outcomes

A key benefit of eating communally is linked to healthy living. With obesity levels high amongst both adults and children in the UK, this is an important consideration and there is research suggesting children who eat with family have better nutritional outcomes.

The exact correlation is unclear, given the broader socio-economic factors at play. As Dr Hartwick-Pflaum notes, education levels, access to healthy foods and ingredients, or even a table to eat around, may also be driving healthier eating, rather than the shared meal itself.

**"Shared mealtimes give us a chance to reflect on the day and feel connected to others"**







But she says there are impacts related to ‘what is eaten: people are eating healthier when they’re eating together’, and ‘on the nutrition – let’s say, the quantity and quality of the food – I think there’s quite a lot to be said’.

There have been numerous studies into this effect, albeit largely in the US. A University of Illinois study<sup>9</sup> looking at the ‘frequency of shared family mealtimes in relation to nutritional health in children and adolescents’ – including 182,836 children and adolescents from ages 2.8 to 17.3– found a ‘significant’ relationship between the two, with those sharing family meals three or more times a week more likely to be in a normal weight

range, exhibiting healthier dietary patterns, and being less prone to disordered eating. Another study, this time by the University of Pittsburgh, determined that the ‘odds of low fruit and vegetable intake were greater for pre-schoolers who shared less than three evening family meals per week’ than pre-schoolers who shared the evening meal with family every night.<sup>10</sup> A third study, from 2014 and published in *Advances on Nutrition*, noted a number of nutritional benefits to family mealtimes, including improved nutrient intakes, greater intake of dietary components related to improved health’ (e.g. fruits, vegetables, calcium-rich foods), and lower

intakes of low nutrient density foods and beverages’ (e.g. lower soft drink, fried food, saturated fat and trans fat consumption).<sup>11</sup>

This is backed up by the organisations consulted for this report, who highlighted that children eating with others may well be exposed to new foods, discouraging fussiness and ensuring they eat a balanced diet. And it is not just children. At FoodCycle, attendees get a three course meal containing five portions of fruit and vegetables; perhaps a healthier option that many people would have solo. As they explain, when eating alone, ‘you don’t necessarily put the same effort into your food: you don’t think about yourself so much, it’s just a quick meal, over and done with.’

It is also worth noting that those we spoke to were clear that poverty and poor diet have a close association. Facilitating a shared meal outside the home, whether at a FoodCycle event or a shared breakfast in school, can be crucial to improving diet because otherwise children and indeed adults would go without. ‘Many of the children we assist have very difficult nutritional profiles, who eat poorly outside of breakfast (e.g. over the weekend, during holidays etc.)’ say Magic Breakfast. ‘You get to the school holidays, and we are looking at how to best provide school holiday support to children, but then over the summer, [there are] 7 weeks where they aren’t getting school lunches and dinner,’ citing research from Northumbria University which has shown the food security challenges facing families during the school holidays.<sup>12</sup>

“Children eating with others may well be exposed to new foods, discouraging fussiness and ensuring they eat a balanced diet”

## Supporting good mental health outcomes

As with nutrition, the links between eating together and positive mental health outcomes are not simple and suggesting direct causation may ignore broader factors. But the Mental Health Foundation observes that shared mealtimes are good for your mental health by providing a ‘sense of rhythm and regularity’ in our lives.<sup>13</sup> Structure and routine can be helpful to young people, for example. As Magic Breakfast point out, ‘having something at the start of the day’ that children are used to helps relieve anxiety.

By the same token, the childcare provider Bright Horizons argues that shared mealtimes bring ‘enormous benefits to everyone’s well-being’, among them creating time providing an opportunity for families to communicate and share their experiences, whilst providing routine and security.<sup>14</sup>

Academic research reinforces this. Researchers at the University of Auckland looked into the relationship between family meals and adolescent mental health and concluded that a greater frequency of family



meals was associated with fewer depressive symptoms', 'fewer emotional difficulties' 'and better emotional well-being'. They noted that frequent family meals 'may have a protective effect on the mental health of adolescents, particularly for depressive symptoms in girls.'<sup>15</sup>

Other studies have drawn similar conclusions, with a 2014 review noting a number of psychological benefits associated with shared mealtimes, including improving perceptions of family relationships and providing an opportunity to increase family connectedness, to bond, communicate, relax and converse. The study suggested that they may also help teens to perceive they have 'more positive life assets' such as family support, adult role models or self-esteem.<sup>16</sup>

## To tackle loneliness

Linked to this is the role that shared mealtimes can play in combating loneliness, especially among those who live alone or do not have a strong connection with other members of their household. According to the Offices for National Statistics (ONS), levels of loneliness have increased since spring 2020 and the start of the pandemic, with 7.2 per cent of the adult population (about 3.7 million people) 'always' or 'often feeling lonely, up from 5 per cent in spring 2020.<sup>17</sup> A report by the British Red Cross,<sup>18</sup> found that this is not limited to older people, but includes young mums,

people with mobility or health issues, people who have recently divorced, separated or become bereaved, and those whose children have left home.

Shared meals, whether hosted at home, or in a setting like that provided by FoodCycle, can help combat this. 'Some people are absolutely delighted they're having another conversation with an adult' explain FoodCycle. 'Those little connector conversations that we have, all those little everyday conversations, are again very important for our mental wellbeing and our sense of purpose, and our sense of belonging.' They point out that GPs sometimes socially prescribe people who are lonely to come to their communal dinners.

According to the Trussell Trust, single people are massively over-represented in the foodbank population, and often they are struggling with multiple issues such as mental health. Living alone, they point out, may mean they 'miss out on certain bits of support... family, friends and institutions'. Communal eating cannot address all the underlying causes of loneliness, but few would disagree that it has a role to play.

**“Levels of loneliness have increased since the start of the pandemic”**

## Social development

Another key benefit is social learning or social development for children – for example practicing skills around using cutlery, but also providing the context in which to share or disclose feelings, activities or aspirations. It provides what Magic Breakfast describe as a 'touchpoint' for children; what Liberal Democrat peer Baroness Northover has noted as 'a natural training ground'<sup>19</sup> and what the then-Children's Minister Nadhim Zahawi described as great opportunities 'for learning to talk, behave, take turns, be polite and share.'<sup>20</sup>

As Professor Defeyter explains, children 'often model behaviours through observation; watching parents or siblings eat can give children an understanding of cultural and social expectations that help children to "fit into" the society in which they live'. She adds

that this may be particularly important in a multi-cultural society, for example where family practices may differ to those commonly encountered in external institutions.

Further, she states that 'such social learning and skills help children develop autonomy and are important to develop. In addition to social learning, eating together enables all members to share plans, objectives and gain mutual respect and understanding. In other words, it may help parents and children to develop secure attachments. However, it is not a magic bullet and needs to be understood as one part of the wider environment.'

It can also have a knock-on effect. As Magic Breakfast explain, teachers 'often tell us that children take home the learning that have in school and show it to their parents', who may then replicate in the home.





# Section 3: The existing and future barriers to shared mealtimes

**As recognised throughout our desk research and interviews with stakeholders, poverty plays a significant role – perhaps the most significant role - in hindering the ability of families or households to sit down together to share meals.**

## Poverty as a barrier

As Magic Breakfast highlight, ‘there’s just so much wrapped up into the poverty aspect that really creates barriers for people’. In the second part of Henry Dimbleby’s National Food Strategy, he highlighted the numerous challenges that poverty can bring; ‘poverty causes high levels of stress, sleeplessness and cognitive overload. Numerous studies have shown how scarcity of money, food or time affects cognitive processes, in effect narrowing mental “bandwidth”. This can result in people making decisions that go against their long-term interests. People from the poorest households are much less likely to adopt healthy behaviours – such as planning and cooking meals from scratch – because all their energy is taken up with coping in the short-term.’<sup>21</sup>

According to research by the UK Parliament’s Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, ‘1.7 million children live in households that experience food insecurity’,<sup>22</sup> demonstrating the extent to which this is a barrier for so many families. Studies suggest the number of workers living in poverty has increased dramatically in the last 20 years,<sup>23</sup> with unemployment even more prevalent during the pandemic. Despite interventions such as the furlough scheme, which has now ended, the UK unemployment rate currently stands at 4.5 per cent,<sup>24</sup> compared with a rate of 4% prior to the pandemic.<sup>25</sup>

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Even some of those who have been in work, whether full time or in a hybrid way, have struggled. Between February and May 2020, 7.4 per cent of people who remained in employment were food insecure, with the rate even higher among the self-employed (14.7 per cent) and those furloughed (10.2 per cent).<sup>26</sup>

There is clearly a relationship between the availability of work and the ability to sit down to shared family mealtimes. As the Trussell Trust sets out, ‘only about 10 per cent of households referred to Trussell Trust foodbanks have any kind of work’.

The Trussell Trust has spent years campaigning on these exact issues, highlighting that ‘food poverty is a symptom of a wider issue which is poverty... the vast majority of households referred meet definitions of food security where it is severe enough that they have gone a day or more without eating’. Furthermore, according to the Trussell Trust, the reduction in the Universal Credit standard allowance by £1,000 per year from October 2021, means that ‘large numbers of parents would need to go without food themselves in order to feed their children, were their universal credit to be

capped as planned’. Analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggested this change will pull half a million more people into poverty, including 200,000 children.<sup>27</sup>

Magic Breakfast have seen the prevalence of parents avoiding family mealtimes to hide the fact they cannot afford to eat themselves. They highlight how research continually indicates that ‘parents will just give up everything in order to feed their children’, which does not facilitate sitting down for a family meal, as this would create an opportunity for children to ask why their parents are not eating as well. When speaking to Magic Breakfast, they stated that this is a ‘really difficult environment and a lot of parents try to shield their children from their hunger and the impacts of food insecurity by not having family mealtimes’.

As Family Action outlined, ‘sometimes poverty means that there simply isn’t enough food to go around, so eating together is just not possible. Parents may go without to ensure children can eat. Some parents may disguise this to their children and say that they will be eating later.’

“a lot of parents try to shield their children from their hunger and the impacts of food insecurity by not having family mealtimes”



## Resource poverty

At the most basic level, a lack of resources can obviously seriously impact a family or a household’s ability to sit down for shared mealtime. As outlined by Family Action, ‘some families may not have the space to sit down as family. Many homes do not have room for a dining table and chairs, or the family may not have been able to afford the furniture required – they may have had to prioritise their available money on other things, like food and bills. Other families may struggle with having the equipment to cook. Pots, pans, measuring scales, it all adds up.’ This

is where products that provide the basis (or entirety) of a meal that can be produced with little resource, e.g. only a microwave, are clearly important in helping people come together to share a meal.

Furthermore, they explain that ‘fuel poverty may also have an impact on family mealtimes. Some families may have to choose to cook things quickly in microwave, as it may be cheaper than having the oven on; or eat cold food – as it is cheaper to prepare; or pop to a takeaway to get hot food as they don’t have a working oven or microwave.’ While a takeaway or a ready meal can be the basis for



a shared mealtime, food decisions driven by lack of resources can undoubtedly inhibit a family or household sitting down together.

Dr Rebecca O’Connell, Reader in the Sociology of Food and Families at University College London (UCL), reiterated this, highlighting how ‘managing food and eating on a low income is hard work. It can involve living hand to mouth, shopping little and often and shopping around for bargains – for example food on special offer at the end of the day. All of these can mean there is less energy or time for preparing and eating foods and that food cannot be wasted so there is less room for experimentation. Furthermore, some families lack cooking facilities, including fuel, whilst others have little space at home to eat together.’<sup>28</sup>

People who are living in temporary or shared accommodation will face challenges to cook and sit down together, potentially having no access to an oven, only to a microwave. The Trussell Trust cites anecdotal evidence of those who only have a kettle. There are also issues of food storage – as the Trust point out, not having a fridge can be a significant challenge. According to Magic Breakfast, there are 550,000 children living in temporary accommodation, which often does not provide a fridge, freezer or cooking facilities, significantly impacting the ability of families to share meals.

This was corroborated by the National Food Strategy too, which outlined that ‘cooking requires technology, even at the most basic level. There are currently an estimated 1.9 million people in the UK living without a cooker, 2.8 million people without a freezer, and 900,000 people without a fridge. Some households have the relevant white goods in place, but not enough money to run them’. This further highlighted the complexities to this issue, the multiple barriers in place to shared mealtimes, and the need to create products which can form the basis of a nutritious meal without requiring onerous amounts of skill or equipment which can act as a significant barriers to sharing a meal.

## Poverty and mental health

The pressure of poverty can also impact people’s mental health, which in turn impacts on their ability and willingness to provide meals, let alone sit down as a family or household unit. According to the Trussell Trust spokesperson we spoke to, ‘not being able to afford dinner is something that will impact on people’s mental health. The majority of people referred to our foodbanks have mental health issues and talk about how their financial situation exacerbates their problems and prevents them from being able to get better’.

## Food deserts and the cost of fresh ingredients

Family Action highlighted how ‘access to fresh food is also a factor and more likely to impact families living in deprived areas. Some families may not have easy access to large, budget friendly supermarkets and therefore live in “food deserts”, where there are limited options for fresh food.’

A 2018 study from the Social Market Foundation (SMF) identified a number of key economic barriers to eating healthily.<sup>29</sup> A quarter of people said they felt that healthy and nutritious food in the UK is unaffordable. Furthermore, the SMF found that about 8 per cent of deprived areas in England and Wales are ‘food deserts’, representing about 10.2 million people.

“There are currently an estimated 1.9 million people in the UK living without a cooker, 2.8 million people without a freezer, and 900,000 people without a fridge. Some households have the relevant white goods in place, but not enough money to run them”

As also outlined in the National Food Strategy, ‘junk food is everywhere but fresh ingredients are harder to find. Roughly 3.3 million people cannot reach any food stores selling raw ingredients within 15 minutes by public transport, and 40 per cent of the lowest income households lack access to a car – almost twice as many as the national average. Without a local shop selling fresh ingredients, or a car to get you to the supermarket, or a fridge to keep perishables in, cooking from scratch becomes dauntingly difficult.’

These statistics demonstrate the extent to which geography has an impact on the ability to source the ingredients to cook a healthy, fresh meal. Suitable ingredients are key components of a beneficial shared family mealtime and barriers to accessing them discourage people from sitting down as a family to share meals.





## What are the other barriers?

While poverty is clearly a significant barrier to shared mealtimes, our research makes clear that there are other factors which may further increase the barriers or pose completely different questions.

### Different preferences, tastes or needs

For some, the major challenge may be the difficulty of needing to cater to different food preferences and needs. For example, Family Action highlighted that ‘children that have had a free school meal may only need a light dinner, whereas parents that have been at work may need a hot meal.’

On a more basic level, different tastes, diets or allergies may mean that households cannot eat the same things. According to 2021 data collected by Sainsbury’s, ‘nearly a third of families cited fussy eating as a top reason they don’t eat the same meal’; while a further one in five said they regularly cook their kids something entirely different ‘in order to avoid a frowning faces’. Furthermore, ‘differing diets were found to be another big barrier, with 36 per cent of people say they regularly buy both meat and their plant-based equivalents’ to suit vegetarian and meat-eater diets.<sup>30</sup>

### Family dynamics

Difficulties in the family dynamic, and large disparities between the ages of children may also form a barrier to families sitting down together. As Family Action note, ‘older children may be reluctant to eat with the family, preferring their own company or that of their friends.’ Younger children may already be in bed.

‘Children will also have differing schedules,’ note Family Action. ‘Younger children may want to eat dinner soon after school, with older children perhaps going to an after-school activity. Teenagers may like to sleep in at the weekend, meaning a family breakfast time is impractical.’ As demonstrated by research carried out by the University of Illinois, child behavioural issues can also cause tension around the dinner table. The research identified that the ‘leading barrier to eating together as a family centred on difficult children’, namely ‘problematic behaviour, developmental challenges, and picky eaters’.<sup>31</sup>

“the most common reason families don’t dine together are busy schedule[s], with 55 per cent admitting to struggling to find the time to eat together”

However, we also know that sadly, the COVID-19 pandemic saw an increase in domestic violence.<sup>32</sup> We must remember that for some households, shared mealtimes can be a trigger for escalation of these issues. Whilst the root causes of these issues sit outside of this report and the research we carried out, we support the need to find ways to prevent domestic violence and want to acknowledge – as we set out throughout the report – that shared mealtimes do not bring benefits for everyone.

### Time poverty

Another significant challenge identified throughout our research and interviews was the role of time poverty in putting up barriers to shared family mealtimes. ‘Many families live extraordinarily busy lives’ was one of the justifications from our interviewees; 2021 data collected by Sainsbury’s indicates that the most common reason families don’t dine together are busy schedule[s], with 55 per cent admitting to struggling to find the time to eat together. For Dr Hartwick-Pflaum, one of the main barriers seems to be the ‘prioritisation of the time’. This is slightly dependent according to different cultures, but there is a lot of pressure ‘to do a lot of things’ in families, especially those with kids (for example extracurricular activities or homework), and it’s ‘easy for food to become a thing you have to do’. It can become ‘squeezed in’, rather than being ‘prioritised to the same extent’ as other activities. She

emphasises that ‘the time to actually sit together and share a meal is a lot more difficult for families to prioritise’.

The time pressure placed on children from their schools can also contribute to the lack of time families are able to spend together. Family Action highlighted how homework from schools and home working can reduce the time that parents and children may spend on family mealtimes.

Furthermore, while for some families the pandemic has meant that shared family mealtimes are easier to facilitate, COVID-19 has also ‘encroached’ on people’s home lives, with work and school blurring into home life in a way it has never done before for most people. Family Action outline this as being one potential benefit of life returning somewhat to normal – ‘people may benefit from the separation that a return to “normality” may bring’.

### Work schedules

As outlined previously, another significant barrier to families sharing mealtimes is the difficulties posed by irregular or contradictory work, school schedules, and the blur between home and work life, which has been particularly felt during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to a 2017 report from the Food Marketing Institute Foundation, 55 per cent of over 350 US adults surveyed found that differing schedules posed the main





barriers to shared dinners. The report also highlighted how shared breakfasts and lunches are often ‘forgone’ due to ‘fast morning priorities’ and out-of-home work and schooling respectively.

Family Action were clear that ‘work can get in the way. Parents may, for instance, work shifts, meaning that they are simply not around for breakfast or dinner; or if they are around, their differing schedules may mean that mealtimes do not happen at the same time for everyone. With increased use of technology and working from home, it can be harder to create boundaries around when we are working vs when we are sharing family time – for example, work phones make it easy to end up reading emails rather than being fully ‘present’ at mealtimes.’

### **Irregular or unreliable work**

An important contributing factor to this is unreliable or shift-based work, where it is hard to coordinate schedules. As Family Action note, ‘shift work is common in the lower paid’ and ‘it can be particularly difficult to schedule family time together when shifts are very changeable, for instance for people on zero-hours contracts. Both parents may be working on this basis and may never be home at the same time.’

Dr O’Connell was also clear that irregular and low-paid work can cause significant issues, because unpredictable hours and low salaries

‘not only contribute to stress in terms of juggling limited financial resources, but also make the coordination of work and family life – including eating together – difficult.’

While this clearly impacts on the time families have to eat together, it also impacts the financial situation families find themselves in. As Magic Breakfast highlight, those in better or more reliable working conditions do also experience atypical working hours, but ‘it’s much easier to overcome those barriers’, because you can pick up food from a local shop or order in takeaways, ‘which isn’t really accessible to a lot of people’ living in poverty’.

### **Pressure to deliver meals**

Time poverty may also impact the quality and types of food families are able to share. As Dr Hartwick-Pflaum points out, there’s a ‘lot of other things that happen in the evening hours that just trump the family meal time.’

Clearly, it is vital that people are eating healthy balanced meals, whether together or apart. But by the same token, those we spoke to warned that pressure to deliver this can actually inhibit shared mealtimes, especially in the context of busy family lives with competing demands.

Family Action highlight how ‘families may eat microwave meals or other convenience foods in order to free up time for other things.’ Meanwhile, for Dr Hartwick-Pflaum, the desire to make meals for children that are as healthy as possible can pose a barrier – ‘I think



“Family Action note that ‘food technology lessons at school have varied over the years and in many cases been cut back, so there is a lack of basic knowledge among many people. Many people lack practical skills related to cookery, and have little knowledge around a nutritious diet.’”

there’s a lot more pressure on nutrition: they’re thinking more about “what can I give that’s healthy”, than they are about ‘what can we offer our family [in] this moment to connect’.

However, Family Action are also conscious that some families’ confidence needs to be bolstered in the kitchen – and whilst ‘healthy, home cooked food is promoted, parents should not be criticised, or fear the “healthy eating police” telling them off, for enjoying the occasional take away or high fat meal’. It is important that ‘support is provided for families to access enough food as well, so that they can enjoy treats and feel “normal”.’

The implication is that while healthy eating must be encouraged, families do also need support to offer healthy meal options that do not require significant preparation. In Moal et al, a research paper Mars Food sponsored, they highlight that ‘many discourses of family members point to aspirations that are similar to [the] representation of a family meal as a positive experience and a necessity. The way the meal is discussed refers more or less directly to an idealised and normative version of family life, that has the ability to make



parents feel like they are not doing things correctly if they are not done according to this ideal’.<sup>33</sup>

The pressure to deliver the ‘perfect’ mealtime, whether through the meal prepared or the environment in which it’s shared should not act as a barrier to families or households coming together to share one.

## Cooking skills and confidence

A meal that requires some preparation may act as an incentive to sharing, whether this is completely from scratch or with the help of some pre-packed ingredients, like rice or sauces. The act of bringing different ingredients together to create a meal in the home can attract people to the dinner table.

According to the National Food Strategy, ‘Culinary skills and knowledge have diminished across every social class since convenience food became widely available, and they are still diminishing as one generation after another grows up without seeing or trying cookery at home<sup>34</sup>.’ Having the skills, knowledge or confidence to cook is obviously critical if you are to produce a scratch-cooked meal, but to what extent it influences whether shared mealtimes take place divided our interviewees.

For Family Action, ‘confidence is a big factor’ as many people are ‘unsure where to start when it comes to cooking from scratch’. Furthermore, there is almost ‘too much information out there from celebrities, supermarkets or social media, which can



propagate the myth of domestic perfection' and have a knock-on effect on cooking confidence.

What is evident is that many do lack the basic skills needed, and therefore have never had the opportunity to develop their confidence in the kitchen. Family Action note that 'food technology lessons at school have varied over the years and in many cases been cut back, so there is a lack of basic knowledge among many people. Many people lack practical skills related to cookery, and have little knowledge around a nutritious diet.'

There has been some limited political recognition of the need for education around cooking skills, as well as broader focus on nutrition and meal planning. In a July 2011 debate on 'School Food', Dame Diana Johnson MP (Lab, Kingston upon Hull North) argued that 'we should recognise in particular that being able to cook a nutritionally balanced meal is a basic life skill that everyone should have', adding that school 'and education should instil such basic life skills in young people, as much as the ability to read, write and add up. Basic skills such as cooking should be on the curriculum.'<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, in a July 2015 debate on 'Health: Children and Young People', Baroness Walmsley (LD) argued that she would 'like to see compulsory cooking lessons in schools and good-quality health education, through which children are taught how to eat well'.<sup>36</sup>

Compulsory cooking lessons were added to the curriculum in 2008 under the former Labour Government,<sup>37</sup> and remain part of the current Government's curriculum, as highlighted recently by former Schools Minister Nick Gibb MP<sup>38</sup> who said 'cooking is an important life skill that will help children to feed themselves and others healthy and affordable food'. However, critics say schools don't always have facilities to teach cooking lessons, and the teaching is not properly embedded in the curriculum.

Furthermore, education isn't only an important factor for young people. Family Action also suggest that 'adult education courses may also be beneficial to ensure that parents are skilled-up to prepare healthier meals'. They note that 'parents may also lack financial skills around budgeting, shopping economically and meal planning' and that there could be space for wider education around meal planning and how to cook on a budget to support shared family mealtimes.

Despite some stakeholders viewing this as a barrier to shared family mealtimes, for many, including FoodCycle, a lack of cooking knowledge and skills is not considered 'the root of the problem'. FareShare agree this is a broader issue, noting that this likely isn't 'linked directly to eating together, but rather accessing the 'right' nutrition' as this has a 'huge impact on a population's health.'

For the Trussell Trust, it is not the ability to cook that is impacted by levels of income,

but 'the sorts of food people can afford to cook with'. They warn that where people can't afford fresh food, then cheaper calories are often used to fill people up.

Furthermore, Dr O'Connell from UCL argues that it is difficult to define "cooking skills" and that, realistically, most of us are 'deskilled', but 'some of us can afford to buy our way out'. She points out that 'healthier pre-prepared foods are more expensive than less healthy ones' – further demonstrating the extent to which the financial and nutritional barriers to shared family mealtimes are broadly linked<sup>39</sup>.

## The second shift?

One consideration that was raised was the dynamics of the family home. Whereas historically in a two-parent family, one parent was typically in charge of domestic life, including meal preparation, these days most households involve dual earners, while domestic responsibilities may be shared. According to the ONS, in April to June 2019 (pre-pandemic), 75.1 per cent of mothers with dependent children were in work, as were 92.6 per cent of fathers with dependent children.<sup>40</sup> This change is by no means negative, but it inevitably has implications for the ability of families to cook and share meals.

The discussion needs to shift to focus on how to support and enable shared mealtimes within this context of dual-career families. Indeed, there was some caution around the promotion of family mealtimes and the

impact this can have on women in particular. According to Dr O'Connell, 'families, especially mothers, have enough to do, be responsible for and feel guilty about'. Dr O'Connell suggested that it wasn't wise to 'promote "family meals" as some kind of silver bullet or panacea', recognising that, for women in particular, cooking and preparing meals is part of 'the second shift', after they do paid work as well.

Similarly, research carried out by the University of Illinois highlighted how imbalances between parents when it came to cooking and preparing meals impacted the family dynamic and in turn sharing family meals. Women noted 'frustration with husbands and their role during family mealtimes', namely that 'husbands do not know how to cook', that they were 'inadequate at cleaning', and, generally, that 'husbands do not realise how much work goes into shared family mealtime and are seldom available to assist'.<sup>41</sup>

**“Being able to cook a nutritionally balanced meal is a basic life skill that everyone should have”**



# Section 4: Overcoming the barriers

**In 2017, the US-based Food Marketing Institute Foundation published a report into ‘Shared Meals at Home’, noting a number of steps that parents were making to have more shared dinners with their children.**



These included serving meals that they know their children will enjoy (47 per cent of respondents cited this); making sure everyone is home to eat together; sticking to a set dinnertime; serving meals that require no or less preparation; and coming home from work earlier.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, the Mental Health Foundation recommends a series of actions to make ‘the most of mealtimes’, including cooking ‘hassle-free meals’ so the tradition ‘continues and doesn’t become a chore’ and getting all members of the family ‘involved in preparing the meal’, be it through setting the table, buying the ingredients, or cooking the meal.<sup>43</sup>

For some parents, and indeed for some households, those steps are feasible. But the evidence suggests that many of the barriers are not so easily surmountable. Those consulted in the course of this study set out steps that could be taken from a policy, societal and business perspective.

## Think about how we are eating, not just what we are eating.

Professor Defeyter argues that to enable shared mealtimes, ‘there also needs to be a change in cultural norms and values in terms of eating and time to enjoy the sharing of food’.

Political focus is currently directed towards addressing childhood obesity levels, which

is important, but diet and nutrition is not the whole story. As Dr Hartwick-Pflaum explains, ‘everything that happens around the dinner plate is as important as what is on the dinner plate’ and ‘the five food groups, the five-a-day’, is just one side of the story. The other half of the story is – ‘how are we eating, are we paying attention to what we’re eating, are we taking a moment of break to eat, are we spending time with another person or family. I think all of these things are extremely important.’

## Address poverty

This is perhaps the most critical barrier. From Family Action’s perspective, ‘any policy that drives towards a reduction in poverty would help. Families who are not stressed about how to pay the bills are much more likely to be able to get things sorted to eat together. They would be more likely to be able to afford good quality ingredients and a home that allows for a good space for family dining.’

Most of the organisations we spoke to raised concern about the cut to universal credit. Others noted there could be expansion in the Healthy Starts vouchers scheme to meet need. The Trussell Trust is campaigning on a number of policy levers, including calling for a permanent uplift to the basic rate of universal credit. As they point out, ‘people are in poverty, people can’t afford to eat, but they also can’t afford their heating, their lighting, household emergencies’.



As Magic Breakfast make clear, institutions like soup kitchens and food banks are only a ‘plaster’ over the greater issue of people lacking access to ingredients and the facilities to cook, for financial reasons. They note that the main reason for children not being able to eat breakfasts is a lack of resources at home.

## Action on cost of energy

Linked to this, many of the charities mentioned fuel costs and particularly steps to keep premiums low on ‘key/card’ based or pay as you go provision. When fuel costs go up, point out Family Action, ‘this will impact many families living in poverty and make them more reluctant to use the oven, or stove.’

## Action on suitable housing

Families without space to eat together – whether that is space for a table, or those living in unsuitable accommodation such as hostels – are disadvantaged when it comes to shared mealtimes, meaning they cannot always enjoy the benefits these bring. As Family Action put it, ‘Families need to be housed in suitably-sized properties so they can have the space for a dining table in the home. Families spending prolonged periods in temporary accommodation have a particularly hard time – it’s very hard for people in a hotel room or B&B with the whole family to even begin to think about nutritious family mealtimes sat around a table.’

## Boost cooking skills

Those who lack the knowledge and confidence to cook may find it harder to eat together. While not every shared meal requires scratch cooking, a meal that requires some preparation may act as an incentive to people sharing it. Charities including Family Action would like to see consideration in the school curriculum on how schools provide cooking skills, nutrition information, and budgetary skills. They point out that not all schools have the facilities to provide cooking classes, so investment in facilities also has a role to play.

Another suggestion was to engage more people in the cooking process, and particularly to encourage fathers – and young people – to do more of the food work at home. As Family Action point out, this is not just about school; adult education and services specifically aimed at families could have a big impact. Initiatives such as celebrity chef Tom Kerridge and footballer Marcus Rashford teaming up to launch their ‘Full

“Chef Tom Kerridge and footballer Marcus Rashford teaming up is a great example of how we can take a holistic approach to tackling these barriers”

Time’ meals campaign,<sup>44</sup> which ultimately aims to end child poverty by creating budget and time friendly meal resources for both kids and parents to do, are a great example of how we can take a holistic approach to tackling these barriers.

## Legislative change

Magic Breakfast is calling for school breakfast legislation so that all types of schools will have some kind of breakfast provision available for pupils. This, they say, would increase ‘nutritional outcomes, educational outcomes, social benefits’ and more. In some cases, these would take the form of ‘family breakfasts’ where schools allow children to eat with their families, showing them ‘the benefits of that shared mealtime environment’.

A recent return-on-investment report by Magic Breakfast showed 34p was spent per head on breakfasts, a relatively low cost for the potential educational, nutritional and emotional benefits for said child and their family.

## Community infrastructure investment

While many people enjoy shared meals in their homes, not everyone can. FareShare point out that a key priority should be to ensure the community infrastructure is there so people can meet outside – whether that is public BBQ spaces and picnic benches, village halls equipped with kitchens that are

bookable, or beyond. They say that ‘the UK lacks public infrastructure like this, which you see in other parts in the world.’ FoodCycle are calling for a policy framework around community dining and would like local authorities to be encouraged to support this, given the importance of local-level provision.

In talking about shared mealtimes, Magic Breakfast highlighted the need to place a greater emphasis on the option for children to eat outside the home, given that some home environments are never going to be appropriate for them to experience shared mealtimes. Provisions should be made available for them to have shared mealtimes elsewhere. For them, ‘it’s the dream for every child to be able to sit down with their family but the reality is that that’s just never going to be a possibility.’





## Better work / life balance

Many of those consulted for this report agree there is a need for more flexible working patterns so that families have the time and space to be able to sit down together. Professor Defeyter stresses that ‘to enable shared mealtimes, there needs to be a shift in policies around working, especially in terms of late evening work.’

Working Families, the UK’s ‘work-life balance charity’, aims to remove the barriers that people with caring responsibilities face in the workplace, including collaborating with employers to build flexible and family-friendly cultures, and influencing government policy.<sup>45</sup>

Dr O’Connell would like to see businesses promote work life policies that protect family time. As Magic Breakfast say, on ‘the micro-scale’ businesses should provide the means where feasible to ‘allow families to eat from home once a week. Research suggests that even if you have a meal together twice a week that’s still really beneficial so there are ways around working hours and supporting families to be able to do that.’

“Employers need to be more flexible to employees with children, ensuring that they have a good wage but also enough hours at home”

Flexibility is perhaps most relevant when it comes to employees who also face other barriers to shared mealtimes, for example living in poverty or having caring responsibilities. As the Trussell Trust state, employers need to be more flexible to employees with children, ensuring that they have a good wage but also enough hours at home.

## Collaboration between Government, business and civil society

Given the contribution shared mealtimes can make to health, wellbeing, community cohesion and more, it is clear there is value in facilitating this, and identifying the drivers and influencers that can do so. When it comes to tackling poverty, the Trussell Trust say that ‘all sections of society have a part to play in fixing this’, including civil society, business, government.

Dr Hartwick-Pflaum reiterated this, saying ‘a dual “top-down bottom-up approach” needs to be in place: top-down government policy combined with bottom-up expertise and research. It needs to ‘involve roundtable discussions with all the right voices at the table’.

## What could businesses do to facilitate shared family mealtimes?

In addition to promoting work-life balance and enabling flexibility for people, those consulted in this study identified a variety of steps that could be taken by businesses, especially by retailers and others in the food sector, to enable shared mealtimes.

For manufacturers and retailers, the suggestion from Dr O’Connell was to provide low-cost healthy pre-prepared meals, and support healthy takeaways that provide easy, local family meal options. They wanted to see the promotion of simple, cheap and nutritious meal ideas that use few ingredients and are easy to prepare with limited resources/kitchen facilities. The Food Marketing Institute Foundation found that parents felt that they would be encouraged to share family meals by retailers displaying foods together that can be combined for an easy meal, providing more child-friendly recipes in store or online, or offering in-store cooking classes for children.<sup>46</sup>

Another key point is affordability. Magic Breakfast say that within the home environment, businesses could make available cheaper, healthier food alternatives, and more businesses could accept the Government’s ‘Healthy Starts’ vouchers.

Businesses can also support shared mealtimes by encouraging employees to enable them elsewhere. For example, FoodCycle suggest giving employees the opportunity to volunteer or even help with hosting, local communal dining through fundraising, or marketing tools.

Another role businesses can play, according to Dr Hartwick-Pflaum, is to communicate public health messages and the value of shared meals. This includes being realistic about the situation that parents face at dinnertime or at mealtime, and ensuring a nuanced message that doesn’t place undue pressure on families who already have multiple pressures. ‘We shouldn’t pressure families to create some “idealistic” shared meal moment: we need to be more ‘realistic in our communication, but nudging them towards that good behaviour’. Businesses should promote ‘having a true representation that’s not going to be guilt-provoking in our branding, and encouraging positive behaviours’

This can take the form of marketing strategies aimed at families. For example, in the US the Kraft Heinz Company ran an internal campaign ‘encouraging employees to make healthier food choices and engage in more family meals’, namely through a competition requiring employees to submit a photo of their family eating together.<sup>47</sup> It is also important for companies to adopt flexible working practices that support their employees to have a strong work-life balance.



## Will changed ways of working brought about by the pandemic better enable shared family mealtimes?

Mars Foods's 2020 research made clear that many families have welcomed the shared mealtimes they have experienced during lockdown and are keen to retain the benefits of these. Yet a quarter said the main obstacle to shared mealtimes is conflicting schedules, and one in ten said they have considered changing jobs due to wanting something more flexible.

It is too soon to understand what the long-term impacts will be, but as Dr O'Connell points out, 'it is likely to have changed the ways we procure, prepare and consume foods, including meals at home. I would be interested to know whether the division of domestic food work has changed or not and whether any changes will continue.'

Certainly, home working and home schooling will have increased the number of children engaged in home cooking and the number of families eating together, says Professor Defeyter. While positive, this may also have come at a cost of increased stress, and indeed Dr Hartwick-Pflaum points out that with families sharing more meals, 'there's a fatigue

around preparing meals at the moment', due to the considerable rise in the number of meals people have been forced to make from home.

Yet once lockdowns are behind us and normality ensues, the expectation is that jobs will incorporate a greater degree of flexibility than in the past. According to a survey by Deloitte,<sup>48</sup> only 28 per cent of workers plan to be purely office-based post-lockdown (down from half a year earlier), while 42 per cent hope to work remotely twice a week or more.

Given the challenge around having time to cook and eat shared meals, particularly for young families, it is likely that improved schedules for some will enable increased shared mealtimes. However, it is worth noting that not all jobs can be done flexibly, such as shift work or some roles in the gig economy. Given that flexibility is associated with higher earning roles, there may be challenges ahead around an increasing gap between those with flexible, home-based jobs – who can enjoy shared meals – and the disadvantaged who continue to struggle to facilitate these.







# Conclusions and recommendations

**What is clear is that shared mealtimes have huge potential for individuals, families, businesses and society more broadly, but there are a number of obstacles in place that must be overcome to fully take advantage of this.**

**In the process of developing this report, we have identified a series of key themes and conclusions. We have also suggested a series of recommendations that Mars Food supports being taken forward, to raise awareness of the benefits, and ultimately help overcome the barriers to shared family mealtimes.**



## Conclusions

### Shared mealtimes can pay dividends in the long-term

The benefits of shared mealtimes are numerous and can have a positive impact on physical and mental health, community and family cohesion and social development. While work arguably still needs to be done to understand and then raise awareness of the benefits of shared mealtimes, they can have an overwhelmingly positive impact, in both the short-term and long-term on the health and wellbeing of society.

### More research is needed to understand the full benefits of shared family mealtimes

Anecdotally, all those we spoke to highlighted the positive associations of shared mealtimes, but also agreed that there is a lack of clear data identifying this correlation. There was a recognition of the need for research, in particular across the social sciences, but also as a multidisciplinary approach, as well as through increased funding and general awareness raising to help us understand the issue and benefits better. By conducting additional research, it will be easier to make the case for shared family mealtimes and their benefits.

### Education is important – and it should be broad

There is a role for education, but it should go broader than just cooking lessons and teaching people practical skills, and include how to meal plan and prepare, educating people on the right nutrition and the benefits of eating together, and how to balance eating healthily on a budget.

### Poverty is clearly an essential barrier to tackle

Poverty in all its forms, including lack of resources, fuel poverty and time poverty is clearly a crucial issue that needs to be tackled in order to overcome the barriers to shared family mealtimes. As demonstrated throughout the report, increasing funding in certain areas where the return on investment has been shown to be significant, may be one element of tackling these barriers.

### There are a number of additional pressures that must be overcome

That came across in our interviews was that families can often feel pressure to have the ‘perfect’ shared mealtime and lose sight of the importance of just sitting down together. More needs to be done to educate families around the benefits of shared family mealtimes, and their importance, to ensure shared family mealtimes are collaborative and can be enjoyed by the whole family without placing too much of a burden on one member.

The structures that make shared mealtimes available elsewhere should be supported when home shared meals aren’t possible. For some interviewees, the need to focus on the benefits of shared family mealtimes outside the home is just as important as the benefits inside the home and can go some way towards ensuring that the benefits are felt more widely. This can be incredibly beneficial for numerous reasons, including tackling loneliness and community cohesion.





## Recommendations

- Mars Food supports the need for more research to identify the correlations and causations of the benefits, to ensure these can be widely communicated.
- Once this research is carried out, further education and public information is then needed to raise awareness of the benefits of shared family mealtimes.
- Businesses, charities, third sector groups and Government are just some of the actors needed to come together to overcome the barriers to shared family mealtimes. Mars Food supports cross-sector action to tackle this.
- We support the need for broad education around cooking skills, meal prep and food nutrition. However, there should not be continual pressure on the need to cook from scratch, and people should be educated about the role that some products can play in making meal preparation easier, whilst still providing nutritious, healthy meals.
- Businesses should continue to take action to promote family-friendly and flexible working practices, including supporting their employees to switch off for dinner.
- Building on from this, we also call on the food industry to join us in innovating affordable, accessible, and nutritious options for people who don't necessarily have the skills or resources to cook a meal from scratch, every night. Clearly, poverty is a significant barrier to shared mealtimes and more must be done to alleviate those pressures.

## Thanks

Mars Food are incredibly grateful to all stakeholders who took part and contributed to this study including:

- Dr Carol Hartwick-Pflaum, Mars
- Dr Rebecca O'Connell, UCL
- Family Action
- FareShare
- FoodCycle
- Magic Breakfast
- Professor Greta Defeyter, British Psychological Society
- Trussell Trust

Additional thanks goes to Isobel Gill and Jennifer Lipman of Lexington for supporting the facilitation and preparation of the report.

## Bibliography

The bibliography sets out a list of all those we interviewed or spoke to for the report and the date of our interviews.

- Dr Carol Hartwick-Pflaum, interviewed 16 April 2021;
- Dr Rebecca O'Connell, UCL interviewed 30 March 2021;
- Family Action, interviewed 5 March 2021;
- FareShare, interviewed 26 March 2021;
- FoodCycle, interviewed 7 April 2021;
- Magic Breakfast, interviewed 15 April 2021;
- Professor Greta Defeyter, British Psychological Society, interviewed 12 April 2021; and
- Trussell Trust, interviewed 12 March 2021.



## Interviews

This report has benefitted from the expertise of a number of stakeholders who very kindly agreed to be interviewed on the topics raised. A list of individuals and organisations who either provided comments or agreed to be interviewed is below:

- FareShare [Interview] (26 March 2021).
- Defeyter, P. G., 2021. British Psychological Society [Interview] (12 April 2021).
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