

Committee(s): Health and Wellbeing Board – For Information	Date: 26 April 2019
Subject: Review of Food Desert Research in Portsoken (2007)	Public
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Summary

In 2007, exploratory work was conducted by the Department of Community & Children’s Services (DCCS) and Tower Hamlets Co-operative Development Agency (CDA) into the existence of a “Food Desert” in the Portsoken neighbourhood – the research concluded that residents in this area struggled to access healthy and affordable food. This work has been recently reviewed and refreshed, to see if the issue persists. Our review found that due to the major redevelopment in the area over the last 12 years, access to a wider range of healthy and affordable food has improved. This looks likely to improve further with continuing and planned regeneration of the immediate area.

Recommendation

Members are asked to:

- Note the report.

Main Report

Background

1. Exploratory work was conducted in 2007 by DCCS and Tower Hamlets CDA into the existence of a “Food Desert” in the Portsoken neighbourhood, whose residents experienced – and still experience – the highest levels of deprivation in the City of London. This research aimed to understand the access and consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables in the Portsoken ward.
2. The 2007 report stated that “the eastern part of the City (Portsoken ward), centred on the Mansell Street and Middlesex Street Estates could be regarded as a Food Desert”. It found that people living in the Portsoken area struggled to access fresh fruit and vegetables within walking distance of their homes. Barriers included poor transport links, the high cost of travel, and low incomes within the community. A lack of quality outlets, high pricing targeted towards City workers

and also difficulties experienced by residents in transporting larger – and better value – quantities that could be purchased at out-of-borough markets and larger supermarkets were also identified. The report also recommended delivering healthy cooking classes to residents to increase their knowledge and skills relating to the preparation and consumption of healthier food.

3. There is no standard definition of “Food Deserts”; the Social Market Foundation (SMF) describes them as “areas that are poorly serviced by food stores. In these areas, individuals without a car or with disabilities that hinder mobility may find it difficult to easily access a wide range of healthy, affordable food products...the negative impacts of living in a food desert are likely to be greater in deprived areas, in terms of having limited convenient access to food stores.” The SMF states that a Food Desert is “an area containing two or fewer supermarkets or convenience stores”, compared with regular areas that contain “between three and seven supermarkets or convenience stores”.¹ The 2007 report and subsequent review used a widely-agreed 500-metre radius as a measure of reasonable physical access to a shop².
4. According to Public Health England’s “Local Health” dataset, Portsoken scored 26 against an England average of 21.8 in the 2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation³. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has identified unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and tobacco use as the three most common modifiable risk factors responsible for chronic disease and states that chronic diseases and poverty are interconnected in a vicious cycle⁴; those with lower socioeconomic status more likely to experience health inequalities. Research has shown how residents of deprived areas frequently experience poor access to affordable healthy food⁵, thus, further increasing their already elevated risk of developing chronic disease.
5. The UK Government advises that the population follows a healthy, balanced diet with controlled calorie consumption, in order to reduce obesity and the economic and social burden of its consequences. The recommended diet follows the Eatwell Guide and includes at least five portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables per day, as well as oily fish and fibre and the limiting of HFSS (high in fat, salt and sugar) food and drink⁶. According to ONS data from 2017, however, only 18% of 5 to 15 year-olds and 29% of adults meet these recommendations for daily fruit and vegetable consumption⁷.
6. Addressing health inequalities, particularly relating to behaviours around food and drink consumption and tackling overweight and obesity, is increasingly on the agenda of local and national government. 2018 saw the introduction of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (the “Sugar Tax”) and the publication of the Mayor of London’s Food Strategy, for example. The City Corporation signed the Local Government Declaration on Sugar Reduction and Healthier Food in 2018,

¹ <http://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/What-are-the-barriers-to-eating-healthy-in-the-UK.pdf>

² http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/489/7/Shopping_for_Food.pdf

³ <http://www.localhealth.org.uk>

⁴ https://www.who.int/chp/chronic_disease_report/part2_ch2/en/

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3482049/>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/phe-publishes-latest-data-on-nations-diet>

⁷ <https://files.digital.nhs.uk/5B/B1297D/HSE%20report%20summary.pdf>

committing to pledges around improving the food and drink environment locally and making healthier choices easier for the Square Mile's workers, residents, students and visitors.

7. Most of Portsoken's residents are aged between 25 and 64 and the ward has a significantly higher number of BME residents compared with the England average.

Current Position

8. A review of the 2007 report was conducted to understand whether the Portsoken ward can still be viewed as a Food Desert. It looked at several aspects:
 - The number of shops within a 500-metre radius of Middlesex Street and Mansell Street Estates
 - The availability and cost of food items listed on the HEISB (Healthy Eating Indicator Shopping Basket) tool within those shops, including fresh, frozen and tinned fruit and vegetables.
 - Whether the introduction of the Hopper Fare (unlimited bus journeys within one hour at a capped fare of £1.50) and the spread of online grocery shopping since 2007 has had an impact on access
 - Capturing qualitative information on shopping habits and access to healthy food, through discussions with the Middlesex Street Estate Manager and members of Mansell Street Women's Group.
9. The review found that due to the extensive regeneration of the Portsoken area since 2007, the accessibility and availability of healthy food has significantly improved. There are, for example, nearly twice as many stores selling fresh fruit and vegetables within a 500-metre radius as there was in 2007. There are now ten retailers selling fresh fruit and vegetables within walking distance of the two estates. While none of these are large supermarkets, they are perceived by residents to sell a high quality and largely affordable range of healthy items.
10. Plans to further develop Portsoken's landscape through the construction of new buildings including retail space, is likely to further enhance this offering.
11. Qualitative data found that residents who are less physically able to do their own food shopping, or who are housebound, rely on carers, neighbours or family members to do their shopping for them (either near to the Portsoken area, or further afield).
12. In addition, since 2007, the City of London Corporation's DCCS has commissioned free healthy cookery classes for adults, children and young people who live in the City of London, where they can learn to make healthy meals on a budget. This service was recommissioned by the Public Health team in late 2018.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

13. The review of Food Desert research in Portsoken conducted in 2007 supports a range of corporate and strategic objectives, including:

- Corporate Plan 2018-23: Contribute to a flourishing society (objectives 2,3 and 4)
- The Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2017-20: Priorities 2, 4 and 5

Conclusion

14. Access to and availability of healthier food – particularly fruit and vegetables – by those living in and around the Mansell and Middlesex Street Estates has significantly improved, largely as a result of the regeneration of the area.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Local retailers map (September 18)

Background Papers

- “Food Deserts” report, presented to Policy and Resources Committee – 18 October 2007
- Health and Wellbeing Board update report, 23 November 2018 - “Local Government Declaration on Sugar Reduction and Healthier Food”

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