

Report on the Healthwatch Wandsworth Consultation on key health issues in Early Years

Background

The health and development of children in their early years has far-reaching consequences into adolescence and adulthood, for both physical and mental health and wellbeing. A considerable proportion of London's children have health problems which may impact on their current and future wellbeing. Babies born in London are more likely to be of low birthweight than in England as a whole. Almost 1 in 4 children in their reception year are overweight or obese and 9 in 10 children aged 2-4 years old do not meet recommended levels of physical activity. Immunisation uptake rates are consistently lower in London than the rest of England, and 12-14 per cent of children are not reaching expected goals for social and emotional development. Perinatal mental health problems are common and affect up to 20 per cent of women, while post-natal depression has been linked with depression in fathers and high rates of family breakdown.

The London Assembly Health Committee has undertaken a consultation on health and wellbeing for children under the age of five in London, as part of a wider investigation that will influence the London Mayor's draft Health Inequalities Strategy. Healthwatch Wandsworth wanted to hear from local people about the early years of local children because of the affect that these key years will have on their health and wellbeing. We also hope that the findings will help inform local strategies for early years support services.

Our Consultation Survey

We based our survey on the consultation of the London Assembly Health Committee but adapted it to explore issues that might be particularly important for local people. The survey was devised to collect information from parents and anyone else with an interest in this topic.

The survey was open from 16th January until to 1st February 2018. We advertised it on our website and social media and circulated it to our local contacts and at our regular outreach events. We also ensured we received feedback from people who would have experiences to contribute by taking our survey to Chesterton Primary School baby clinic, an antenatal ward at St. George's Hospital in Tooting and to a Family Saturday event at Battersea Arts Centre.

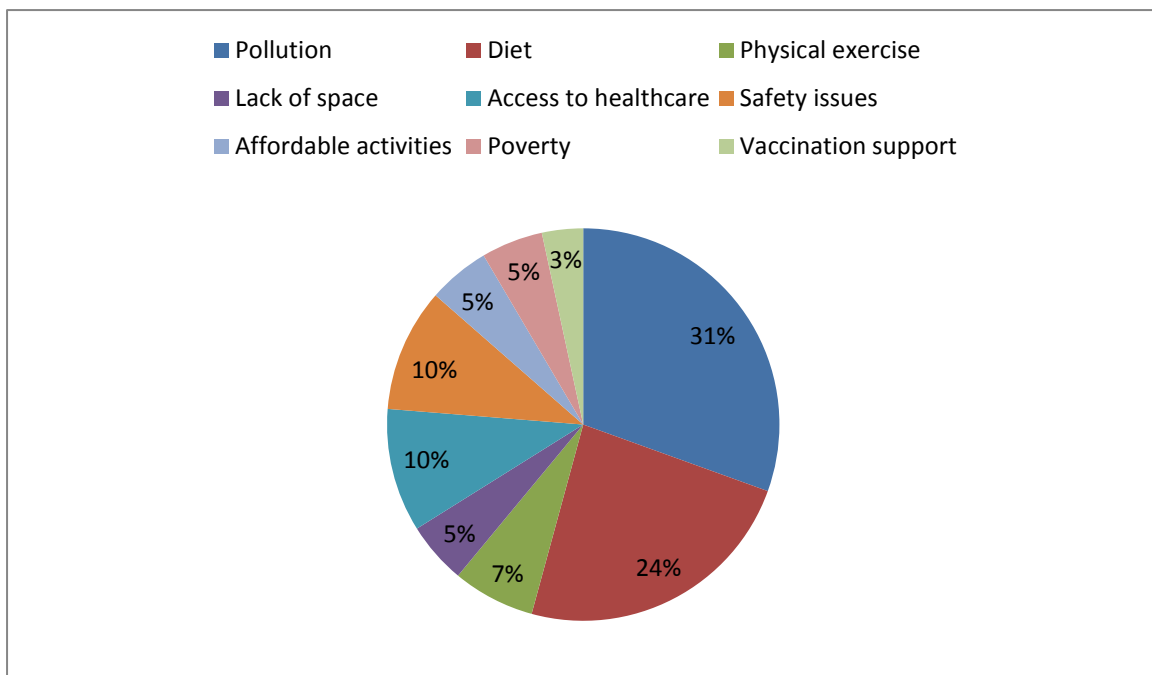
Findings

We received a total of 50 responses to our survey.

Question one: What do you think are the key health challenges for children under 5 in London?

To get a general understanding of the types of challenges facing parents and childcare providers, we asked an open ended question, ‘What do you think are the key health challenges for children under 5 in London?’

The most mentioned health challenge was pollution and diet.



“Not getting enough fresh air. Quality of food. Not getting time away from the TV.”

“[There needs to be] more resources and funding for the deprived areas for children to have better access to health services.”

Question two: What support are you aware of that is available locally?

We wanted to understand the needs of parents/carers and their understanding of the support available to them. The main sources of support identified by respondents were:

- GP surgeries
- Children’s centres
- Health visitors

Respondents found these services to be very helpful, and important sources of information for new parents regarding other support groups, free and accessible services and activities for children.

Several respondents also cited community centres and leisure centres as sources of support, but there were concerns that these facilities were too expensive or not well advertised, particularly in deprived areas.

Question three: How does parental mental health affect the health of their babies and young children?

We wanted to understand parental mental health needs and the level of understanding of its impact on babies and young children.

For the majority of respondents, there was a strong understanding of the ways in which parental mental health affects the health of babies and young children.

Several responses suggested that poor parental mental health has a big impact on the health of the family, as it can create a stressful and unstable environment. A couple of respondents highlighted how this affects a child's emotional wellbeing and levels of confidence.

“Being mentally strong is as important as physical health for parents. Everyone needs someone to speak to, to share thoughts with. It is important to realise you are not alone.”

“Massively. I think children pick up a lot on your state of mind and stress.”

“They sense everything around them so it is important to provide a stable environment.”

“It is the biggest threat for a baby at the beginning. If mums are not fit mentally it can really affect development. From my experience all parents experience moments of this.”

Question four: What role do health visitors play in supporting early year's health?

We wanted to understand the support needs of people with babies and assess whether health visitors provide an appropriate service.

The majority of respondents spoke positively about health visitors and suggested they play a vital role in supporting mothers after birth. A couple of responses suggested that health visitors need more training. One parent/carer highlighted the importance of health visitors but said that they would have appreciated more support.

“They provide important information and signposting. Unfortunately, their input is limited to a couple of visits at an early stage of the baby's life.”

Question five: What could the Mayor do to make London a more baby-friendly city?

We wanted to find out what challenges people with babies and young children face living in London and how they might be addressed. The main suggestions for improvement were:

- Reduce pollution and traffic, especially in pedestrianised areas
- Improve public transport and pavements for buggies, as well as more lifts in tube and train stations
- More affordable public transport and parking
- More baby changing and breastfeeding spaces
- Increased investment in services and baby-friendly activities

Question six: What do you think are the key factors that help families maintain a healthy weight?

We wanted to get a general understanding of what families understand about healthy eating and exercise, and what challenges they may face in maintaining a healthy weight.

Challenges:

- Affordable quality food
- Affordable exercise opportunities
- Lack of time to cook healthy meals
- Lack of understanding/knowledge of healthy eating options

Ways to help:

- Schemes to promote active lifestyle
- More outdoor gyms, as well as more indoor activities
- Support and incentives for low-income families
- More affordable healthy food and help with budgeting
- Better promotion of healthy eating, e.g. for new parents

Availability of resources and their affordability were also viewed as important.

“Income [is a key factor] - because healthy eating is expensive (especially with big families).”

“Better promotion of classes or places parents can go if they need support or advice. Offer more home visits. Healthy eating activities at schools.”

Question seven: What do you think that the Mayor can do to further support the health and wellbeing of children under the age of five in London?

We wanted to understand what additional needs parents/carers face in terms of the health and wellbeing of children under the age of five in London.

The key areas were as follows:

- More indoor play areas for children and increased funding for existing services
- Childcare provision for children under five and increased nursery places
- Improved quality of food in nurseries and schools
- Better promotion of existing services and facilities

Conclusions and Recommendations:

A central theme to emerge from the survey responses was the levels of pollution and traffic in London, and the impact this has on children under five in London. The poor quality of air and traffic congestion also appeared to link to health and safety concerns about allowing children to play outside. In this respect, parents and carers repeatedly highlighted the lack of indoor and outdoor activities for children, and suggested that better promotion of services could raise awareness of pre-existing facilities.

The survey responses also raised concerns about the affordability of healthy food, and the impact that income has on maintaining a healthy diet and exercising. Respondents suggested that more support and resources are needed, particularly in low socio-economic areas, to better educate people on healthy eating and to provide affordable and free exercise options for families.

“The cost of food. If healthy food cost the same as bad food, maybe people would choose the good food.”

“[It is important to] teach healthy eating and the importance of exercise. The children's centre is a good place for this”

The feedback highlighted the need for more accessible and affordable public transport, including additional lifts and buggy space at tube and train stations, as well as the increased provision of baby friendly changing spaces across the city.

Finally, the findings suggest that parents and carers of children under five often go to their GP or children's centre for health concerns but are not always aware of other existing services. Better promotion and communication of the wide range of services available could perhaps better support the health needs of families.

“Existing services must not close down, the reason often given is lack of use. In reality this is only due to lack of information that services exist - so many just don't know / have not been told. Free services must continue to exist for support and advice.”