

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

BRIEFING NOTE – No. 01/2021

Date: November 2021

Briefing paper to: All Members of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Purpose: To provide the Members of the Committee with information relating to underweight children in Medway.

UNDERWEIGHT CHILDREN IN MEDWAY

1. Overview

Children whose BMI is within the bottom 2% of the UK90 growth reference for their age and sex are classified as underweight.⁹

Prevalence of underweight in Medway and England is lower than that seen in the British 1990 reference population. Public Health England therefore state that it is not currently a public health concern.⁵

Underweight in a child may reflect undernutrition (a form of malnutrition) but may also reflect a small build.⁴ A child of any weight status (underweight, healthy weight, overweight or obese) may suffer from undernutrition if a diet is lacking the nutrients required for healthy growth.⁴

In the UK, malnutrition in children is often caused by long-term health conditions.⁶ Malnutrition caused by a poor diet is rare in the UK, but it can happen if a child is neglected, living in poverty, or being abused.⁶

2. Child underweight classification

The National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) measures the height and weight of children in Reception class (aged 4 to 5 years) and Year 6 (aged 10 to 11 years) to assess overweight and obesity levels in children within primary schools in England.¹

Heights and weights are measured and used to calculate a Body Mass Index (BMI).¹ For children, this BMI is then compared to a reference sample of measurements gathered in 1990, called the British 1990 growth reference (UK90). This reference takes age and sex into account.¹

Children whose BMI is within the bottom 2% of the UK90 growth reference for their age and sex are classified as underweight (i.e., BMI less than or equal to the second centile).⁹

3. Underweight data for Medway

NCMP data for 2019/20 shows that the number of underweight children in Medway in Reception class (aged 4 to 5 years) was 10 out of 2,550 measured (0.4%)² and the number of children in Year 6 (aged 10 to 11 years) was 30 out of 3,360 measured (0.9%).³ Numbers have been rounded to the nearest 5.

In Medway in 2019/20, the underweight prevalence in both Reception class (0.4%) and Year 6 (0.9%) were significantly lower (i.e., better) than the England averages (0.9% and 1.4% respectively).^{2,3}

In recent years, the prevalence of underweight in Reception class and Year 6 children in Medway has been similar to the England average and this is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 below. However, in 2019/20 the prevalence in both school year groups decreased so that they both became significantly lower (i.e., better) than the England average.^{2, 3}

In the most recent [NCMP trends report](#), Public Health England state that “prevalence of underweight, in children measured in the NCMP, is lower than that seen in the British 1990 reference population and is therefore not currently a public health concern.”⁵

Data quality note: The 2019/20 NCMP data collection stopped in March 2020 when schools were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In a usual NCMP collection year, national participation rates are around 95% of all eligible children, however in 2019/20 the number of children measured was around 75% of previous years. Despite the lower than usual number of measurements, analysis by NHS Digital indicates that figures at national and regional level are directly comparable to previous years, for all breakdowns.^{2, 3} In Medway, both school years had a coverage greater than 75% in 2019/20 and therefore the measured data is considered reliable and comparable to previous years.¹⁰

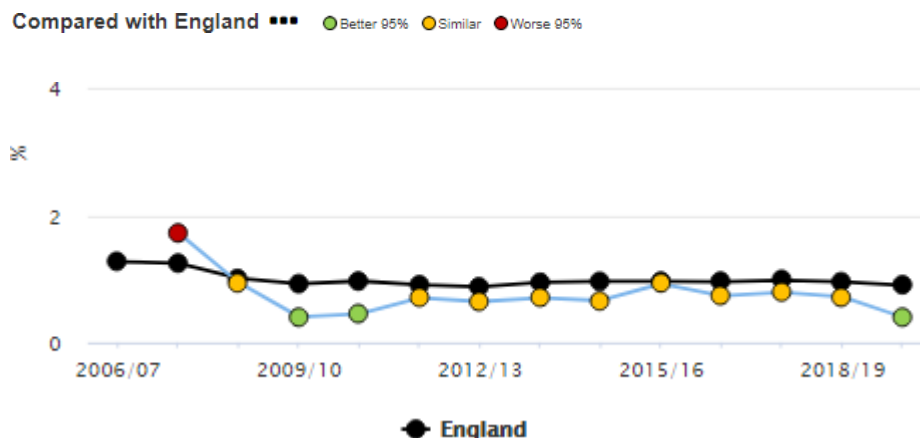


Figure 1: Prevalence of underweight among children in Reception class (age 4-5 years) for Medway.²

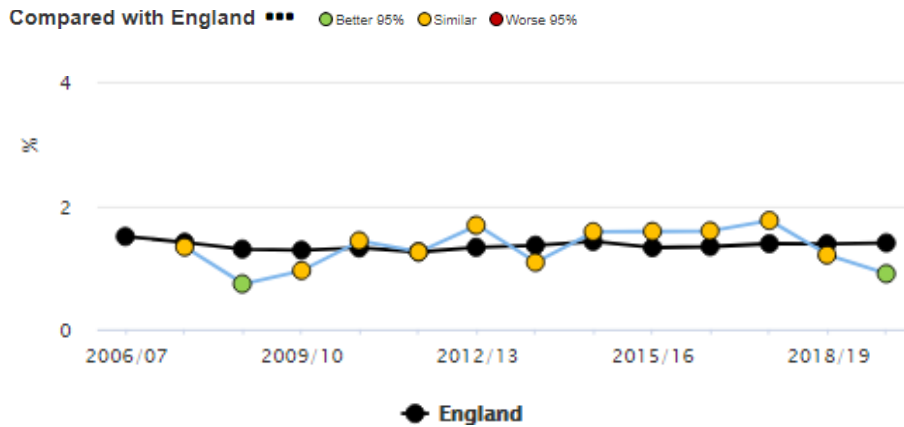


Figure 2: Prevalence of underweight among children in Year 6 (age 10-11 years) for Medway.³

4. Underweight and malnutrition

Malnutrition is a serious condition that happens when your diet does not contain the right amount of nutrients.⁶ It means 'poor nutrition' and can refer to:

- **Undernutrition:** not getting enough nutrients
- **Overnutrition:** getting more nutrients than needed⁶

Underweight may reflect undernutrition in a child but may also reflect a small build.⁴

A child of any weight status (underweight, healthy weight, overweight or obese) may suffer from undernutrition if a diet is lacking the nutrients required for healthy growth.

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Undernutrition can hold children back from reaching their physical and cognitive potential, as well as making children much more vulnerable to disease and death.⁷

There are broad sub-forms of undernutrition:⁷

- **Wasting:** Low weight-for-height. Usually indicates recent and severe weight loss, because a person has not had enough food to eat and/or they have had an infectious disease, such as diarrhoea, which has caused them to lose weight.⁷
- **Stunting:** Low height-for-age. The result of chronic or recurrent undernutrition, usually associated with poor socioeconomic conditions, poor maternal health and nutrition, frequent illness, and/or inappropriate infant and young child feeding and care in early life.⁷
- **Underweight:** Low weight-for-age. A child who is underweight may be stunted, wasted, or both.⁷

4.1. Causes of malnutrition in children in the UK

In the UK, malnutrition in children is often caused by long-term health conditions, such as childhood cancers, congenital heart disease, cystic fibrosis, and cerebral palsy.⁶

Some children may become malnourished because of an eating disorder or a behavioural or psychological condition that means they avoid or refuse food.⁶

Malnutrition caused by a poor diet is rare in the UK, but it can happen if a child is neglected, living in poverty, or being abused.⁶

4.2. Estimates of undernutrition in children in the UK

Data on the prevalence of stunting in the UK is not currently available, but the Office for National Statistics is working to include it in the NCMP.⁸

NCMP currently have a subcategory for underweight called 'very thin', which includes children on or below the 0.4th BMI centile.⁹ Children classed as 'very thin' may indicate undernutrition and are likely to require specialist healthcare support.⁹ Data for this child weight category is not publicly available.

In Medway, if a child is classed as 'very thin' with the NCMP, a letter is sent to the parents, as well as the GP, so that this child can be proactively followed up to ensure they are offered appropriate support and care.

5. References

- [1] NHS Digital. (2021). [National Child Measurement Programme](#).
- [2] Public Health England. Fingertips. Obesity Profile. [Reception: Prevalence of underweight](#). Indicator ID: 90316.
- [3] Public Health England. Fingertips. Obesity Profile. [Year 6: Prevalence of underweight](#). Indicator ID: 90320.
- [4] UK Parliament. (2020). [Malnutrition: Children](#).
- [5] Public Health England. (2021). [NCMP trends in children's BMI between 2006 to 2007 and 2019 to 2020](#).
- [6] NHS. (2020). [Malnutrition](#).
- [7] World Health Organization. (2021). [Malnutrition](#).
- [8] House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee. (2019). [Sustainable Development Goals in the UK follow up: Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity in the UK. Thirteenth Report of Session 2017–19](#).
- [9] Public Health England. (2020). [National Child Measurement Programme. Operational guidance 2020](#).
- [10] Public Health England. (2020). [Data quality report. Reliability and data quality flags in the Obesity Profile. National Child Measurement Programme 2019/20](#).