



# Tackling childhood food poverty in the UK

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Actions are needed from national government and local authorities to reduce reliance on emergency food provision, improve take-up of eligible financial support, and develop sustainable food system resilience in diverse communities. Reducing childhood poverty brings life-long benefits to health and wellbeing with economic benefits to society.

## Overview

- A panel of experts was convened to examine current efforts aimed at mitigating childhood food poverty.
- Childhood food poverty leads to poor health and educational outcomes. Families and the wider social context early in childhood must be considered.
- Cost-benefit analyses show positive economic and social benefits to early years interventions and reducing childhood and adolescent hunger.
- Implementation of the recommendations from the National Food Strategy to expand

eligibility for free school meals including breakfast will narrow inequalities in health and educational attainment.

- Local authorities need to increase access to high quality, affordable food alongside offering programmes that empower families in diverse communities to live independently with dignity.

## Policy context

In 2019 an estimated 30%, or 4.2 million, of children in the UK were living in poverty<sup>1</sup>. This number has increased steadily over the last 10 years alongside a rise in childhood obesity. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a quadrupling of food insecurity in families, increasing applications for free school meals and the use of foodbanks and food charities.



The National Food Strategy, released in July 2020, made several recommendations to mitigate childhood food poverty<sup>2</sup>. With the footballer Marcus Rashford championing this issue, the Government's COVID Winter Grant Scheme and decisions to increase Healthy Start payments and extend the Holiday Activities and Food programme through 2021 are very welcome. However, longer-term strategies and bold actions are now required both nationally and by local authorities to reduce reliance on emergency food provision and develop sustainable food system resilience in the UK.

## Identifying priorities for action

This policy brief was informed by a webinar and expert panel discussion held during the launch of the N8 AgriFood Food Systems Policy Hub in November 2020. The purpose of the discussion was to identify policy actions to tackle childhood food poverty at local and national levels.

Convened by Dr's Bernadette Moore and Charlotte Evans from the School of Food Science and Nutrition, University of Leeds, a panel of experts examined current community efforts aimed at mitigating childhood food poverty and deliberated priorities for policy action. Speakers included Denise Bentley (Chief Executive, First Love Foundation), Kim Roberts (Chief Executive, HENRY), Prof Louise Dye (University of Leeds), Dr Megan Blake (University of Sheffield), Prof Jonathan Rushton (University of Liverpool) and Dr Maria Bryant (University of York). The event was attended by more than 300 participants from local authorities, businesses, charities, schools and universities.

Discussions highlighted that childhood food poverty negatively impacts development, educational attainment, mental health, and physical wellbeing. Schools provide an ideal environment to intervene and reduce inequalities, but parents/carers, families and the wider social context must also be considered. Investment is needed in order for local authorities to reduce reliance on emergency food provision and develop sustainable food system resilience. Communities need increased access to high quality food supermarkets as well as programmes that offer families clear information on affordable housing, benefits and universal credit to empower them to live independently with dignity. Related complex issues such as mental illness and behavioural issues also require timely and adequate support.

## Childhood hunger has social and economic consequences

Poverty and poor diets are inextricably linked and lead to poor health outcomes such as obesity and nutrition-related chronic diseases<sup>1</sup>. The prevalence of malnutrition, which includes overweight and obesity as well as underweight and stunting in children, and poor dental health are worse in children living in poorer households. Rates of obesity amongst 4-5-year olds in the most deprived areas are double those in the least deprived areas. Poor diets low in food variety are more likely to be low in essential micronutrients necessary for growth and development, and are associated with children missing meals<sup>3</sup>.

The rationale for focussing on maternal and early childhood is clear. Healthy, well-nourished mothers are at lower risk

of having lower birthweight babies. Lower birthweights predispose infants to increased risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases in their future. Moreover, undernutrition in early life can slow brain growth and can lead to delays in physical and emotional development. The first 1000 days of life critically sets the foundation for children's health, wellbeing and development.

Healthy start vouchers assist with affordability of nutritious food for young impoverished families. Barriers to access should be reduced and eligibility expanded. Digital cards reduce stigma and should be automatically provided to pregnant woman and households with children under four on any benefit.

Unhealthy food behaviours and food-based coping skills formed in the context of childhood hunger endure into later life. Irregular or insufficient food availability in childhood often leads to over-eating later in life. Conversely, healthy eating behaviours such as family meals are associated with a range of positive health behaviours and outcomes in older children and adolescents. These include increased consumption of fruit and vegetables, and decreased prevalence of smoking, drug taking and teenage pregnancy.

## Early intervention is needed

Early intervention programmes to improve family eating and lifestyle behaviours (including cooking skills) while children are young can build confidence in parenting skills<sup>4</sup>. Families can then make and sustain lifestyle changes such as eating together and healthy family routines that include adequate sleep and physical activity. Life-long health outcomes depend on ensuring that children have good nutrition and a healthy start in life. Both parents/carers and the state have important roles to play.

The social consequences of childhood poverty, such as higher unemployment rates or lower earnings, come at significant economic cost. The knock-on economic and fiscal costs of child poverty to the Treasury were estimated at £6 billion in 2015, with an additional £9 billion lost to individuals considered as a reduction in GDP<sup>5</sup>. An additional £29 billion per year is spent on health care treating the diseases more commonly associated with poverty (obesity, nutrition-related chronic diseases, dental caries, impaired mental health)<sup>5</sup>. Cost-benefit analyses have demonstrated that the benefits of early years programmes to educational attainment, reduced involvement in crime, life-long health and social, emotional and economic wellbeing, far outweigh their costs<sup>6</sup>.

Cost-benefit evaluations of early intervention programmes that facilitate healthy food and lifestyle behaviours in vulnerable families show life-long returns to society that far outweigh the cost of resources invested. Local authorities should invest in community-based programs that target low-income families.

## Adequate nutrition is essential to educational attainment

Childhood food poverty negatively impacts cognitive development, mental health and physical wellbeing, all of which affect educational attainment. Schools in areas of higher deprivation have lower progression to higher education and their pupils have limited future attainment.

Children eligible for free school meals in 2014 were twice as likely not to meet expected standards for reading, writing and maths at age eleven. The universal provision and take up of free school meals has been shown to increase consumption of nutritious foods and improve attainment for primary school pupils, with the largest gains seen for disadvantaged children.

Extensive research has shown benefits to children from breakfast consumption<sup>7</sup>. Key stage 1 pupils in schools with a universal, free school breakfast provision made an additional 2 months academic progress with positive effects on growth and cognitive performance. Children who eat breakfast regularly achieve an average of 2 GCSE grades higher than children who rarely ate breakfast, with notable improvements in maths performance in particular<sup>8</sup>. Parents/carers support the provision of free school breakfasts as well as lunches. While both offer good value for money, questions around dependency need to be considered. Programmes targeting families to reduce reliance on free food need to exist alongside free school breakfast programmes.

## Current support is inadequate for families in poverty

While the Government's temporary increase of £20 a week to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits in the context of COVID have insulated some families from falling into poverty, the reality is that 22% of UK families lived in poverty prior to the pandemic.

The cost of holiday meals and lifting the income caps for eligibility for free school meals would cost the country an extra £500 million/year<sup>9</sup>. However, this is a relatively small amount compared with the £14.5 billion removed from the social security budget since 2010<sup>10</sup>. Lone parent/carer households have experienced reductions of £2380 per year as a result of austerity measures and universal credit cuts. Widening eligibility for free school meals would represent an increase in benefits of £200 per year per child and is small in comparison<sup>10</sup>.

The Government should widen eligibility for the Free School Meal scheme, extend the National School Breakfast Programme, and permanently extend the Holiday Activities and Food programme.

## Broader community actions needed

While schools provide an ideal environment to intervene and reduce childhood food hunger, the wider social context must also be considered. Emergency food provision (foodbanks) and the provision of free school meals is not enough to lift those in poverty.

The principles of social justice were considered in the context of local authorities developing sustainable food system resilience and reducing community reliance on emergency food provision. Communities need increased access to high quality and affordable housing and opportunities for secure employment. Programmes are needed that support families and offer clear information on eligible benefits and full entitlements, particularly for those working part time. These will help empower households and allow people to live independently and with dignity. Childcare as a barrier for parents/carers who want to return to work must also be addressed.

Prevention of family food poverty will come from the cumulative effect of food system interventions that improve food access and community food assets.

The panel highlighted the many ways in which communities approached the problems surrounding poverty. Speakers observed that reliance on charities and volunteers made the system less resilient to change. Resilience was raised as an important factor that can be addressed and improved at a local level<sup>11,12</sup>.

The lack of national policies regulating the density of fast-food outlets or food retail access more generally, was highlighted as leading to both a glut of unhealthy options and food deserts existing side by side in deprived communities<sup>13</sup>. More than a million UK people live in food deserts. Neighbourhoods where there is poverty, poor public transport and a lack of high-quality supermarkets have severely limited community access to affordable fresh fruit and vegetables. Action is needed from national government as well as local authorities in order to meet the needs of diverse communities. Additional stakeholders such as food industry and retailers are also important.

Local authorities should commit to measuring and reporting indicators of food insecurity and food access to enable development and assessment of policies tailored to local food access issues.



## Recommendations

### National

- Implementation of all the recommendations from the National Food Strategy
- More financial support for local authorities for measuring food insecurity, improving food access, and increasing food resilience and sustainability
- Increase in family-centred support focussed on increasing household income to empower families to live independently

### Local authorities

- Prioritise early start interventions that foster healthy pregnancies and healthy food and lifestyle behaviours in young families
- Increase access to high quality & affordable housing
- Increase access to campaigns offering clear information on rules surrounding housing and benefits eligibility and empower people back to work
- Target funding to primary and secondary schools for schemes such as free school breakfasts, or those that imbed sustainable solutions such as redistributing surplus food to Schools

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## Further information

A recording of the N8 AgriFood panel discussion that informed this brief is available at: <https://policyhub.n8agrifood.ac.uk/launch-week/childhood-food-poverty/>

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