

National Food Strategy¹

Childhood Nutrition: Recommendations and Evidence

Part One of the National Food Strategy contains three recommendations designed to ensure that the children of this country do not go hungry, whether they are below school age, enjoying their school holidays, or at school. Each recommendation suggests providing forms of small, in-kind support for children whose families receive Universal Credit (UC) or equivalent benefits.

This group is diverse, as are its circumstances and needs, but the recommendations are founded on three insights:

1. The problem of food poverty is real, serious and it is likely to get worse as a result of COVID.
2. “In-kind” support, directly providing nutritious food to children, is much more effective at improving children’s diets than increases in the overall financial value of a family’s benefits by the same, small amount. This is shown in the data and reinforced by the lived experience of people who have had to fall back on these benefits.
3. Universal Credit, the Government’s flagship welfare programme, is the right proxy to identify families living below or on a minimum viable wage. UC does not, as is sometimes suggested, include large numbers of “more affluent” people on whom additional in-kind nutritional support would be wasted.

Evidence for these three insights and each recommendation is set out below.

The problem of childhood food poverty in this country is real, serious, and immediate

A recent survey² of more than 2,300 people found that one in seven UK families (14%) – equating to four million people across England, including children – have experienced food insecurity (i.e. had smaller meals, skipped meals, been hungry but not eaten, or have gone a whole day without eating) since the start of lockdown in March. This is a direct result of not being able to afford sufficient food. The survey responses suggest that a million children were eating lower cost, less healthy foodstuffs - 900,000 were not having balanced meals, 400,000 had not eaten enough because they had run out of food and another 400,000 were skipping whole meals.

¹ <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/>

² <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/new-food-foundation-data-sept-2020/>

Data from the Food Standards Agency³ paints an even bleaker picture. Their survey data, collected between April and July 2020, shows that 17% of the population had to cut down on meal sizes or skip meals altogether due to lack of money. Younger people are disproportionately affected, with 30% of 16-24 year-olds reporting that they had experienced food insecurity over this period as a result of not having enough money.

The problem will get worse for the foreseeable future

The Bank of England projects⁴ that unemployment will rise in the last quarter of 2020 to 7.5%, and remain above the current level for two years. This equates to 2.5 million jobless by the end of the year, up from 1.3 million at the start of this year. This is one of the more optimistic forecasts. The OECD expect a range of 9.7% (3 million) to 14.3% (4.4 million) by the end of the year⁵. The Office for Budget Responsibility is in broad agreement with this projection⁶, forecasting peak unemployment of between 9.7% and 13.2% (4 million).

Hundreds of thousands of the newly unemployed will not have a personal safety net in place. Before COVID-19 hit, 17 million working age people only had £100 of savings to fall back on⁷. The loss of their jobs and the resulting change in their financial circumstances have hit these people completely out of the blue, and for many, their fixed costs will be well in excess of the benefits to which they are entitled.

The impact of hunger on children is serious and long lasting

Hunger damages educational prospects and therefore exacerbates inequality. There is a wealth of scientific research that demonstrates its many adverse impacts: a review of 45 studies⁸ showed that eating breakfast improved cognitive performance, attention, and memory in schoolchildren. Hunger impairs thinking but it does more than that: behavioural, emotional and academic problems as well as truancy are all more prevalent among hungry children⁹. These are not small effects, either: a 2012 study¹⁰ showed that hungry children performed at best half as well on six measures of cognitive function as those who had eaten breakfast.

Less well known is that hunger alters body structure and function irreversibly: this is known as “nutritional programming”. The 2011 Early Life Nutrition Report published by the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition¹¹ shows a clear link between malnutrition during

³ <https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/covid-19-wave-1-4-report-final-mc.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/-/media/boe/files/monetary-policy-report/2020/august/monetary-policy-report-august-2020>

⁵ <https://data.oecd.org/unemp/unemployment-rate-forecast.htm>

⁶ <https://obr.uk/coronavirus-analysis/>

⁷ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201617/ldselect/ldfinexcl/132/13206.htm>

⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4863264/>

⁹ http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/School_Food_Plan_2013.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0195666312002541>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sacn-early-life-nutrition-report>

pregnancy and early childhood and chronic disease in adulthood (e.g. higher BMI, type 2 diabetes, some cancers). Height is a good measure of child health and development, and shows the extent of the problem: the 10% of White British children living in the most deprived communities are more than 1 cm shorter on average than children in the most wealthy communities by the time they reach age 11¹².

This is both an acute and a long-term issue: food insecurity undermines any efforts to improve social equality.

Recommendations

Increase the value of Healthy Start vouchers to £4.25 per week, and expand the scheme to pregnant women and households with children under four where the pregnant woman or a parent or guardian in the household is in receipt of Universal Credit or an equivalent benefit.

What is it?

- Healthy Start supports the nutrition of children living in low-income families before they are of school age by providing coupons for vitamins and vouchers which can be used to buy fruit and vegetables and milk.
- It is means-tested for pregnant women and families with children under the age of four, but a universal entitlement for mothers under 18 years of age.
- The voucher is currently worth £3.10 per child per week, or double that for babies under 12 months. This value has not changed since 2009.
- We estimate the extension of eligibility and a targeted communications campaign would result in an additional 290,000 pregnant women and children taking up the benefit, for a total of 540,000 individuals. The additional annual cost would be £100 million (plus a one-off £5 million communication campaign).
- Many national supermarket and conveniences store chains have expressed their support for the scheme and indicated that they would follow Iceland in supplementing the vouchers with additional free fruit and vegetables.

What is the evidence?

- A systemic review of food subsidy programmes similar to Healthy Start (mostly in the USA) found that participants increased their consumption of the targeted foods or nutrients by 10 to 20%¹³.

¹² <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/the-broken-plate-2020-report/>

¹³ <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-12-1099>

- Healthy Start is more effective than its predecessor, the Welfare Food Scheme (WFS), which only provided tokens for milk, formula and vitamins, not for fruit and vegetables. 15% of the women using Healthy Start meet the ‘five-a-day’ recommendation, compared to 2% of women on the WFS¹⁴.
- Unsurprisingly, the majority of women on the programme reported that the vouchers enabled them to buy better quality and a greater variety of fruit and vegetables.

Why should the eligibility be expanded to those on Universal Credit?

- It is sometimes suggested that some people on Universal Credit are “relatively affluent” and therefore any support provided to them would be misplaced. This is not the case.
- According to the latest statistics published by the Department for Work and Pensions, over half of working age adults on Universal Credit and of children living in households on UC live in poverty, 59% and 56%, respectively (i.e. on a household income less than 60% of the median after housing costs, adjusted for family size).
- The charity Turn2Us’s analysis suggests that even the top 10% of the income distribution of those in receipt of Universal Credit are far from financially stable. Almost all (99%) have children, and they receive, on average, just £27 a week more than that which The Joseph Rowntree Foundation defines as the minimum socially acceptable standard of living for a family with two children (this was just £7 before the government increase Universal Credit payments in response to COVID). A shock, such as the loss of a child’s bag with gym kit in it or a lost pair of shoes, can mean the food budget takes a hit in these families.
- There might be a small number of people on Universal Credit who do not need the additional support, but it is just that: a small number. It would be a missed opportunity to let that stop us from helping those who do need help. The overwhelming majority of families in receipt of UC are struggling to make ends meet.

Extend the Holiday Activity and Food Programme to all areas in England, so that summer holiday support is available to all children in receipt of free school meals.

What is it?

- The Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) Programme is a pilot launched by this Government to provide free school meal children with activities, social contact, nutritious food and, often, education during the longest school holiday.

¹⁴ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/9AD4D221543D00E33BDE56DF00A7EC31/S0007114508135899a.pdf/div-class-title-effect-of-the-introduction-of-healthy-start-on-dietary-behaviour-during-and-after-pregnancy-early-results-from-the-before-and-after-sheffield-study-div.pdf>

- The scheme provides at least one nutritious meal a day and activities to help children develop new skills and knowledge and get plenty of exercise over the summer holidays. The programme also provides nutritional and practical cooking advice for families and carers.
- Last year the programme was run in 17 Local Authorities (LAs), at a cost of £9 million.
- By rolling out the programme in every LA across England and extending eligibility to all families in receipt of UC, we estimate an additional 1.1 million children would be able to participate (compared to 50,000 in 2019). This is estimated to cost an additional £200 million a year.

What is the evidence?

- The summer school holiday is a particularly hard time for households living with food insecurity¹⁵. For an extended period, families cannot rely on free school meals, but their household income remains unchanged. Unsurprisingly, the number of children who experience food insecurity is higher over the summer holiday than during term time. According to data released by the Food Standards Agency¹⁶, the proportion of people accessing food banks increased from 7% in May to 9% in July, with a disproportionate effect on younger age groups: 23% of 16-24 year-olds reported using a food bank in July.
- Food banks typically experience a surge in demand during this period, but this year the situation has been further exacerbated by the economic fallout from COVID-19.
- A comprehensive assessment of the English Holiday Activity and Food Programme is yet to be published. But the results of a similar pilot in Wales (the Food and Fun School Holiday Enrichment Programme) found “evidence of multiple positive impacts on children’s activity levels, diet and attitudes to eating more healthily, social isolation, and opportunities for learning and engagement with school”.
- The additional educational opportunity provided by the Programme would also give children from less privileged families a chance to catch up on the learning they lost during lockdown.

Expand eligibility for the Free School Meal scheme to include every child (up to the age of 16) from a household where a parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits.

What is it?

- Free School Meals provide nutritious food to children from low-income households while they are at school.

¹⁵ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2019/07/16/uk-food-banks-fear-busiest-summer-ever-ahead/>

¹⁶ <https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/covid-19-wave-1-4-report-final-mc.pdf>

- We estimate that an additional 1.5 million 7 to 16 year-olds would benefit from free school meals, taking this to a total of 2.6 million children (around 30% of those in school). This is estimated to cost an additional £670 million a year.

What is the evidence?

- The negative effects of poor nutrition on school performance are well established. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger reaffirmed in its report that children who are hungry at school struggle to concentrate, perform poorly academically, and have worse attendance records¹⁷.
- There is a significant number of insufficiently nourished 7-16 year olds at school who are not currently in receipt of Free School Meals.
- Currently, only children from very low-income households are eligible for free school meals (those with an annual income of £7,400, or less, before benefits).
- Analysis conducted by the Children’s Society shows that there are 700,000 children of school age who are not eligible for free school meals, but whose family income, after housing costs, is less than £10 per head per day¹⁸. Clearly, paying for school lunch would take up a substantial proportion of this.



- Analysis done for the government commissioned School Food Plan¹⁹ (see chart above²⁰) showed that of the children whose households are just above the income cut-off for free school meal eligibility, only 20% buy food at school and spend significantly less than richer children (meaning they might be getting by on a snack). The best-case scenario for those that don’t buy a school lunch is that they are bringing in a packed lunch. We know that only 1% of those meet the nutritional

¹⁷ <https://feedingbritain.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/hungry-holidays.pdf>

¹⁸ www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/fsm-poverty-trap-tcs-cpag.pdf

¹⁹ schoolfoodplan.com

²⁰ The x-axis shows these on free school meals on the left and then groups of postcodes by affluence showing the percentage of children in the D or E socio-economic classification in each postcode. The bars on the chart show the percent take up of school meals and above that the average amount spent on free school meals is shown.

standards set for school meals²¹. The reality is that some children are not eating lunch at all.

- Extending free school meal eligibility is a universally popular policy. Research conducted in July 2020 by Children’s Food Campaign and Food Active²² shows over 90% of parents think the Government should extend eligibility for Free School Meals to all children living in very low-income and food-insecure families. In fact, in a recent Netmums survey²³, 62% of over 2,000 respondents supported providing free school meals to all children, regardless of household income. This is already the case in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 students, under the Universal Infant Free School Meals scheme.

²¹ <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/10/1/e029688>

²² https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/covid19_childrens_food/

²³ https://www.sustainweb.org/childrensfoodcampaign/free_school_meals/