

How can we reduce food poverty for under-fives?

Dr Kerris Cooper and Dr Eva Jiménez

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Executive summary

The aim of this report is to understand more about food poverty in the early years and what can be done to effectively address it. We did this through a series of evidence reviews and expert interviews with key organisations whose work focuses on food poverty and/or early years. We considered evidence on the causes and consequences of food poverty for under-fives; the effectiveness of existing national policies, namely the Healthy Start Scheme and free early years meals; examples of local place-based approaches to addressing food poverty; and what we can learn from what other countries are doing.

Children under five face a higher risk of food poverty than older children

The problem of food poverty has moved up the policy agenda following the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis. Whilst the policy debate has tended to focus on school-age children, it is children under five who are at highest risk of food poverty. In January 2024 the Food Foundation estimated that almost a quarter of households with children under four years (24%) were experiencing food poverty – this compares to 19% of households with children age five to 17 years.¹

Food poverty is particularly damaging in the early years

Whilst food poverty is damaging at any age, the first five years of a child's life are a significant period of development and are also important for outcomes in later life. Research has shown that food poverty experienced by young children is associated with worse physical health, including obesity and tooth decay, and less healthy eating habits in early adulthood, as well as obesity in adulthood.

Food poverty can also undermine children's ability to play and learn – when children under five experience food poverty they are more likely to have worse cognitive development, maths and vocabulary skills and are at risk of developmental delay.

Food poverty is associated with worse mental health and behavioural outcomes: Pre-schoolers who experience food poverty are at higher risk of both internalising and externalising behavioural problems and worse mental health, self-control and interpersonal skills.

Parents' mental health can also become strained due to the stress caused by food poverty, negatively influencing the home environment in ways that are detrimental to children's outcomes. It is therefore important to address food poverty for the whole family.

Food poverty is a problem of income poverty

The problem of food poverty is a lack of sufficient income to buy healthy food. The cost of living has increased steeply over the last few years, affecting food prices in particular which has impacted low-income households more. This is because the lowest-cost items increased more steeply than average food prices and food and energy costs make up a larger proportion of spending for low-income households.

¹ Food Foundation, (2024) Food Insecurity Tracking: round 14 <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking#tabs/Round-14>

Real wages have stagnated and there has been an increase in the number of working households living in poverty. Changes made to social security benefits have seen the levels of benefit payments decline, and the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) has been found to cause an increase in food poverty. As well as UC payments not being adequate to afford essentials including healthy food, other changes to benefits have reduced incomes for families with children specifically, including the Two Child Limit and the benefit cap.

The problem of food poverty can be exacerbated by characteristics of local areas, for example 'food deserts' which lack shops providing affordable healthy food. Families having to live in temporary accommodation face additional challenges that compound the problem of food poverty, including lack of cooking facilities or space to store or chill food.

As government-funded hours for early childhood care and education (ECEC) are being expanded more young children will have a significant amount of their daily food in early years settings. The challenges of underfunding and the increased cost of living make it difficult for settings to provide healthy food for all children. Additionally, there are no statutory nutritional guidelines for early years settings.

Policy recommendations to reduce food poverty for under-fives

This report has considered the national policies already in place that can address food poverty for under-fives, as well as local place-based initiatives and examples of how other countries do things differently, to learn what can be done to reduce food poverty for under-fives.

Based on this research we recommend the following:

- **Improve the Healthy Start Scheme –**
 - Increase the value of the Healthy Start Scheme and review every six months to ensure it keeps pace with inflation.
 - Expand eligibility to include children aged four and children from families with no recourse to public funds, and increase the income threshold to include more children in food poverty.
 - Improve the uptake of the scheme by promoting awareness with a national campaign, training professionals that come into contact with families to promote the scheme and ideally moving towards an autoenrollment system.

- **Improve free early years meals (FEYM) –**
 - Remove the restrictive criteria of the child having to attend before and after lunch.
 - Promote awareness of FEYM amongst parents as well as charities and professionals that work with families with young children.
 - Increase the reach by making FEYM available to all low-income children in all ECEC settings that provide funded hours – not just maintained settings - and increase the income threshold to reach more children in food poverty.
 - Work towards universal free meals in early years settings whilst supporting the sector to be able to implement this.

- **Implement a child poverty strategy which includes a focus on under-fives** – The Government has set up a child poverty taskforce and is due to publish a child poverty strategy in Spring 2025. This strategy should include a focus on food poverty and on poverty experienced by families with children under five years. The social security system has been identified as a key problem and potential solution for food poverty. Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) demonstrates that abolishing the Two Child Limit and the benefits cap is the most cost-effective way to reduce child poverty. Claiming Universal Credit (UC) is also a risk factor for experiencing food poverty because payments are too low. Introducing an Essentials Guarantee, as advocated for by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Trussell would ensure that families on social security benefits have sufficient income to meet all basic needs, including protecting incomes from dropping below this threshold when debt repayments are taken or sanctions are applied. Reintroducing child poverty targets, as in Scotland, would signal a strong political commitment to address child poverty and ensure the Government is held accountable for this.
- **Assemble a food poverty taskforce** - Targeting income poverty alone will not fully address the problem of food poverty which is exacerbated by other factors including the availability of affordable healthy food in local areas; having access to housing, including temporary accommodation, that is sufficiently equipped with the facilities needed to safely store and cook fresh food; and supporting early years settings of all kinds to be able to provide healthy food for all children. Food poverty action plans have been used by local areas to address this issue specifically and Scotland provides an example of a food poverty strategy devised at the national level. Having a food poverty strategy would ensure this important issue gets the attention it deserves and policies that focus on reducing food poverty specifically.
- **Support local authorities to provide tailored solutions to food poverty based on local needs** - Local areas need funding as well as flexibility to tailor their food poverty policies to meet local needs (for example, food deserts, challenges specific to rural areas, areas with a high proportion of asylum seekers).

 - We recommend that central government provides regular and sustainable funding for all English local authorities to set up their own Food Poverty Alliances and Food Poverty Plans.
 - We recommend that local authorities work with those affected by food poverty, so identification of problems and solutions are based on the experiences of those experiencing food poverty; facilitate partnerships and collaboration between multiple actors in their area; and build networks across areas to share experiences and learn from other areas.

Introduction

The number of families experiencing food poverty has been rising steeply and whilst all families with children are at higher risk of food poverty compared to families without children, it is families with the youngest children – below five - that face the highest risk.² In January 2024, almost a quarter of families (24per cent) with a child aged 0 to 4 years experienced food poverty.³ The risks faced by younger children are apparent across different measures used - recent analysis by Trussell has found that rates of 'hunger and hardship' (based on the Social Metrics Commission's adjusted poverty measure) affect 24per cent of children aged 0 to 4 years, which is the highest rate of any age group.⁴

Children under five are also at a significant period of development, and so the effects of food poverty can be particularly damaging across a range of different outcomes – including physical and mental health, cognitive development, educational attainment and behavioural outcomes - and affect future trajectories.⁵ Despite the early years being a critical period for intervention and the higher risk of food poverty, under-fives have been largely missing from policies and debate on food poverty, which has often focused on school-age children, free school meals (FSM) and breakfast clubs.⁶

The aim of this report is to shine a spotlight on this issue, understand more about food poverty in the early years and importantly what can be done to effectively address it. The report aims to answer the following questions:

- What is food poverty? How do we define it?
- What is the extent of the problem?
- What are the causes of food poverty?
- What are the consequences of food poverty?
- What national policies are already in place to address food poverty for under-fives in England and how effective are they?
- What local place-based initiatives are already in place to address food poverty in under-fives in England and how effective are they?
- What can we learn from other countries about how to effectively address food poverty in under-fives?
- What can be done to reduce food poverty for under-fives?

To answer these questions a series of evidence reviews were conducted as well as expert interviews with key individuals and organisations whose work focuses on food poverty and/or early years (see Appendix 1 for the list of people and organisations). The evidence reviews are based on literature searches using key words as well as snowballing references from identified relevant research.

² Food Foundation, 'Food Insecurity Tracking: Round 14'.

³ Food Foundation.

⁴ Weekes et al., 'The Cost of Hunger and Hardship'.

⁵ Goudie, 'The Critical Importance of Early Years Nutrition in Prevention of Childhood Obesity | Food Foundation'.

⁶ Academy of Medical Sciences, 'Prioritising Early Childhood to Promote the Nation's Health, Wellbeing and Prosperity'.

Automation tools were also used to identify local place-based initiatives to address food poverty, which involved web scraping and large language models, which are detailed in Appendix 2. Evidence on the causes and consequences of food poverty and on the effectiveness of existing national policies are based on research published in peer-reviewed journals and where relevant supplemented with findings from expert interviews. Where possible systematic reviews and meta-analyses were used to include a greater breadth of evidence. With a minority of exceptions, the evidence described is not causal, which is difficult to achieve in this research area. When talking about causes and consequences of food poverty we are therefore describing associations, for example children experiencing food poverty are *more likely* to be obese.

The expert interviews were tailored to each organisation to contribute to different research questions in the report based on their expertise. These were useful in providing insight into relevant research findings which are not yet published, as well as on-the-ground experiences, for example in the case of asylum-seeking mothers and children in temporary accommodation and how early years settings are managing to feed children in their care.

Section 1: What do we know about food poverty in the early years?

1.1 What is food poverty?

A note on terminology

'Food poverty' and 'food insecurity' are terms that are often used interchangeably to describe hardship experienced in relation to food.⁷ It has been argued by some that it is unhelpful to use the term 'food poverty', because talking about subcategories of poverty as if they are discrete issues implies they can be treated in isolation when in fact they are a symptom of a much bigger problem.⁸ Some argue that all poverty is income poverty, and that to suggest otherwise by labelling certain consequences of poverty as another type of poverty is to distract from the real issue that needs to be addressed - ensuring everyone has adequate income.⁹

However, there is not a complete overlap between income poverty and food poverty.¹⁰ Not all households experiencing income poverty experience food poverty, and so it is a specific issue that requires its own attention. Importantly, the causes of food poverty may not be the same as for other experiences of poverty and therefore it may require different solutions. In order to properly understand the problem of food poverty and how to address it we therefore must engage with it as a distinct issue.

The label used for a problem is also important in framing the policy issue, both to garner public support for more to be done, and to be impactful with government and policymakers. The term 'food poverty' is better placed to do this and more accessible/tangible than the more academic 'food insecurity'. The term 'food insecurity' can also be confused with food insecurity discussed at the national level in terms of agriculture and imports/exports.¹¹

Given these arguments, that food poverty is a distinct issue in itself and that easily understood terminology is preferable, the term 'food poverty' will be used throughout this report.

Defining food poverty

Food poverty is about more than not having enough to eat. The most widely accepted definition of food poverty, and the one adopted for the purpose of this research, is given by Anderson (1990) describing:

'limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways'.¹²

⁷ Francis-Devine, Danechi, and Malik, 'Food Poverty'.

⁸ 'Child Poverty: The Crisis We Can't Keep Ignoring'.

⁹ Patrick, Crossley, and Garthwaite, 'UK Poverty: What's the Problem?'

¹⁰ Allen-Kinross, 'Poverty Is Not the Same as Food Insecurity'.

¹¹ Finlay and Ward, 'Food Security'.

¹² Sosenko et al., 'State of Hunger: A Study of Poverty and Food Insecurity in the UK'.

A similar definition was agreed upon at the 1996 World Food Summit: 'Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.'¹³

Figure 1: Conditions to be free of food poverty



Both definitions imply three conditions to be free of food poverty: 1. having access to a sufficient amount of food; 2. having access to food that provides suitable nutrition; and 3. having access to food in socially acceptable ways. Each of these conditions has implications for how we conceptualise food poverty. Having sufficient food may be measured in terms of calorie intake or avoidance of hunger. Anyone having to skip meals or have smaller meals not through choice but through necessity is experiencing food poverty. Whilst the first condition of sufficiency may be met by filling up on cheap foods that won't perish (a strategy used by some families on low incomes, which meet calorie requirements and stave off hunger), this does not meet the second condition of providing suitable nutrition and so is another example of food poverty. It follows from the third condition that even if a family is managing to access a sufficient amount of food that also provides adequate nutrition, if this has to be via a foodbank for example, then they are still experiencing food poverty. This highlights the importance of choice and dignity when thinking about the issue of food poverty. In this sense some of the immediate responses to food poverty, such as food banks, may address hunger but are not able to address food poverty.

1.2 What is the extent of the problem?

Measuring food poverty in the UK

Food poverty has only recently been tracked in the UK.¹⁴ Whilst statistics on the number of people using food banks have been relied upon in the absence of other sources of data, these do not give a reliable estimate of the extent of food poverty and represent just the 'tip of the iceberg'.¹⁵ The most recent statistics from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) show that just 31 per cent of those experiencing severe food poverty have used a foodbank in the last year.¹⁶

¹³ 'World Food Summit 1996, Rome Declaration and Plan of Action'.

¹⁴ Page and Marshall, 'Briefing: Food Insecurity – What Can Local Government Do?'

¹⁵ Loopstra and Tarasuk, 'Food Bank Usage Is a Poor Indicator of Food Insecurity'.

¹⁶ Department for Work and Pensions, 'Family Resources Survey', 2024.

The main sources of data on food poverty in the UK come from three sets of surveys:

- The Family Resources Survey - these are national statistics used as a UK indicator of Sustainable Development Goals, based on annual nationally representative surveys.¹⁷
- The Food Foundation's Food Insecurity Tracker - based on biannual nationally representative surveys.¹⁸
- The Food and You 2 survey- a biannual official statistics commissioned by the Food Standards Agency.¹⁹

All three sources provide a measure of food poverty based on questions taken from the US Department of Agriculture measure of food insecurity.²⁰ Importantly, all three surveys identify food poverty based on the experiences of an adult within the surveyed household. Based on this it is then possible to identify how many children are living in households that are experiencing food poverty. The Food Foundation additionally provide a measure of food poverty experienced by children directly. This is measured by asking questions such as whether the child(ren) have not had balanced meals because they have run out of food and have been unable to get more.

Table 1 below gives examples of the types of questions used to measure food poverty and summarises the main features of each of the three measures. Note that the measures are not directly comparable as each uses a different subset of questions and asks about food-related experiences within different time frames.

Which measure should we focus on? It is useful to consider the range of measures as each have different advantages. The Food Foundation tracker has the benefit of providing more frequent measures of food poverty than the Family Resources Survey, allowing us to track changes within a year. The Food Foundation tracker is also the only source to provide a direct measure of children's experiences of food poverty (though as is clear from later sections children are likely to be affected by the food poverty experienced by adults in their household even if their own access to food is protected). Importantly, for the purposes of this report the Food Foundation is also the only source to publish the rate of food poverty for younger children (focused on children under the age of four).

The Family Resources Survey collects information on a range of background characteristics which makes it possible to identify risk factors for experiencing food poverty. The Food and You 2 survey has the advantage of taking a longer recall period, which is important because we know that as with income poverty, families can move in and out of the measured threshold and sometimes therefore not be captured in a snapshot measure. This longer recall period perhaps gives a more accurate picture of the extent of the problem of food poverty.

¹⁷ Department for Work and Pensions, 'Family Resources Survey', 2023.

¹⁸ Food Foundation, 'Food Insecurity Tracking'.

¹⁹ Food Standards Agency, 'Food and You 2', 2.

²⁰ United States Department of Agriculture, 'USDA Economic Research Service: Measurement'.

Table 1: UK measures of food poverty

<i>Source</i>	<i>Survey questions</i>	<i>Reference period for questions</i>	<i>Summary measure</i>
Family Resources Survey (Food poverty measured since 2019/20)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more. 2. The food that we bought just didn't last, and we didn't have money to get more. 3. We couldn't afford to eat balanced meals. <p>If respondents answer 'sometimes' or 'often' to any of these statements they are asked further questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Did you or other adults in your household ever skip or cut meals because there wasn't enough money for food? Was that for three days or more? 5. Did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food? 6. Were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food? 7. Did you lose weight because there wasn't enough money for food? 8. Did you or other adults in your household ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food? Was that for three days or more? 	Last 30 days	High (0) Marginal (1-2) Low (3-5) Very low (6-10) food security based on 10 point score.
The Food Foundation Food Insecurity Tracker (Available since March 2020)	<p>Questions about children's experiences</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We have relied on only a few kinds of low-cost food to feed the child(ren) because we have run out of food and have been unable to get more 2. The child(ren) have not had balanced meals because we have run out of food and have been unable to get more 3. The child(ren) have not eaten enough because we have run out of food and have been unable to get more 4. The child(ren) have skipped meals because we have run out of food and have been unable to get more? 	The last month and the last six months	Counted as experiencing food poverty if answer 'yes' to any of the questions.

Source	Survey questions	Reference period for questions	Summary measure
	<p>Questions about the responding adult's experiences</p> <p>Did you/anyone else in your household:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have smaller meals than usual or skip meals because you couldn't afford or get access to food? 2. Ever been hungry but not eaten because you couldn't afford or get access to food? 3. Not eaten for a whole day because you couldn't afford or get access to food? 		
<p>Food and You2 Survey (Available since July-October 2020)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I/we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more 2. The food that we bought just didn't last, and I/we didn't have money to get more 3. I/we couldn't afford to eat balanced meals <p>If answered 'yes' to any of the first three questions then asked the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Did you or any other adult in your household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food? How often? 5. <i>Did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food?</i> 6. <i>Were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food?</i> 7. <i>Did you lose weight because there wasn't enough money for food?</i> 8. <i>Did you or any other adults in your household ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food? How often?</i> 9. <i>Have you, or anyone else in your household, received a free parcel of food from a food bank or other emergency food provider? How often?</i> 10. <i>Have you, or anyone else in your household, used a social supermarket (also known as a food club / hub or community pantry)? How often?</i> 	<p>Last 12 months</p>	<p>High food security (score 0) Marginal (score 1-2) Low ('reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet') Very low ('multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake')</p>

How much food poverty is there in the UK? And how many young children experience food poverty?

As Table 2 shows the number of households experiencing food poverty in the UK is high. Although the three measures provide different estimates (because each is formulated differently, as shown in Table 1) all three consistently show that food poverty is higher in households with children compared to households without children. The Food Foundation also show that extremely high proportions of households reported that their children were directly being impacted by food poverty in terms of both the quality and quantity of food that the children received, including relying on low-cost food and unbalanced meals, as well as children not having enough to eat or skipping meals.²¹

We have just one estimate of the extent of food poverty specifically for under-fives: The Food Foundation find that in January 2024 13 per cent of households without children experienced food poverty in the last month, which rose to 19 per cent of households with school-age children (five to 17 years) and for households with a child under four years it was higher still, at 24 per cent.²² The higher prevalence of food poverty experienced by younger children is consistent with findings from the Food and You 2 survey which includes a breakdown for households with children under six years: they find that food poverty is experienced by 23 per cent of households without children, 34 per cent of households with children and 40 per cent of households with a child under six years.²³

It is important to note that all these measures of food poverty are taken at the household level and therefore the number of children affected by food poverty will be greater, given that many households have multiple children. Families with three or more children are at particularly high risk of food poverty, as well as single parent households.²⁴

Table 2: The extent of food poverty across households with and without children

	Households without children	Households with children	Households with younger children
Family Resources Survey (April 2022-March 23)	13%	25%	
Food Foundation Tracker (January 2024)	13%	19% with children age five to 17	24% with children under four
Food and You 2 (April 2023-July 2023)	23%	34%	40% with children under six

The Food Foundation provides estimates of the proportion of households with children where children themselves experienced food poverty directly (Figure 2). Based on their latest survey they find that around 12 per cent of households with children had to rely on low-cost food for their child(ren); 9 per cent were unable to afford balanced meals for their child(ren); around 4 per cent

²¹ Food Foundation, 'Food Insecurity Tracking'.

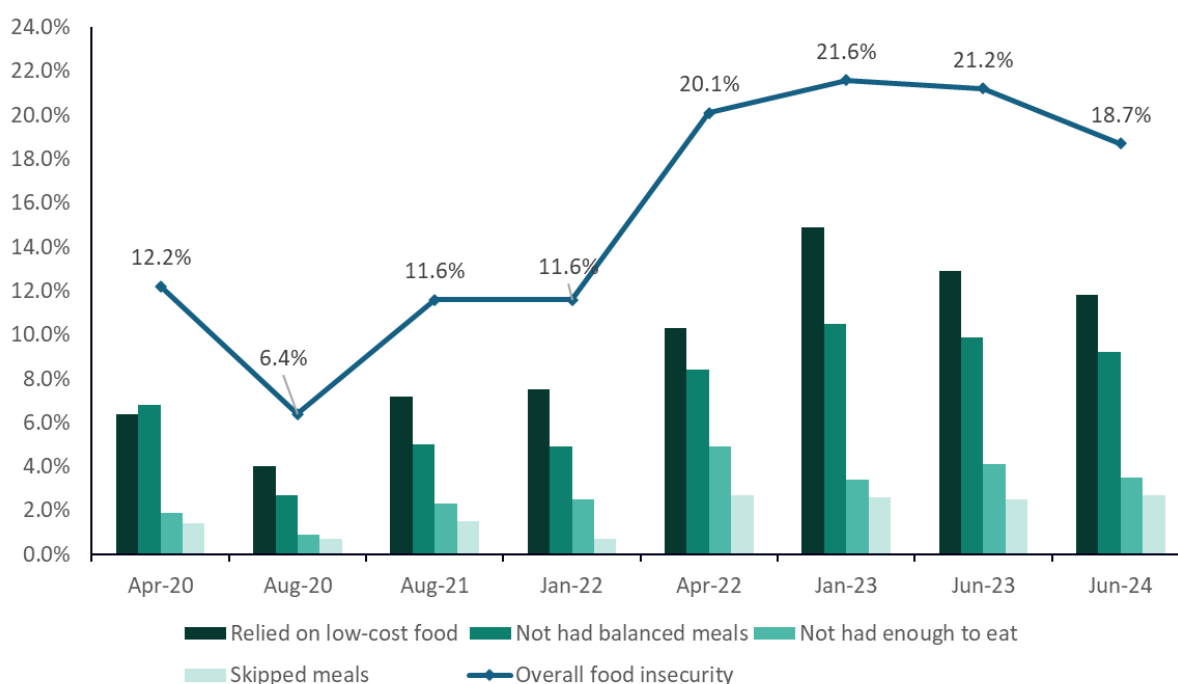
²² Food Foundation, 'Food Insecurity Tracking: Round 14'.

²³ Armstrong et al., 'Food and You 2: Wave 7 Key Findings'.

²⁴ Department for Work and Pensions, 'Household Food Security Data Tables Family Resources Survey: Financial Year 2022 to 2023'.

reported that their children had not had enough to eat; and around 3 per cent said that their children had had to skip meals.²⁵

Figure 2: Food Foundation data on food poverty experienced by children directly



Source: Food Foundation, (June 2024) Food Insecurity Tracker: Round 15. Reproduced with permission.

Other risk factors for food poverty include region of residence within England - with households in the North West and North East of England, Yorkshire and the Humber, West Midlands and London having the highest rates of food poverty and households in the South East of England having the lowest rates.²⁶ Those in social rented housing had the highest rates of food poverty followed by those in private rented housing and households with one or more disabled adult also experienced higher rates. Households from the following ethnic groups: Arab; Black, African, Caribbean and Black British; Bangladeshi; and Pakistani households were also more likely to experience food poverty. Being in receipt of benefits, in particular Universal Credit, is a risk factor.

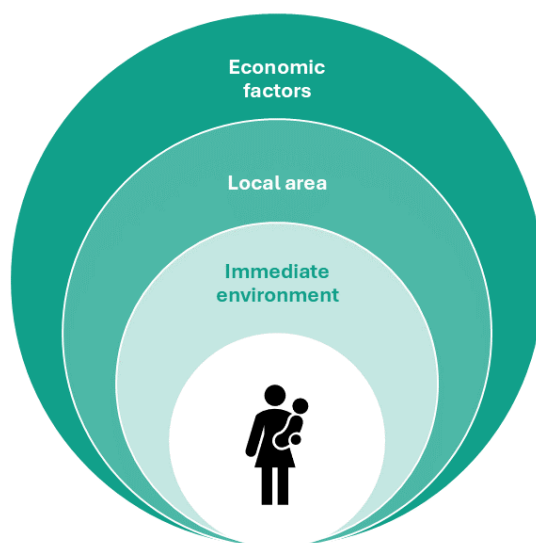
1.3 What are the causes of food poverty?

Here we consider evidence on the causes of food poverty at different levels. Whilst the root cause of food poverty is an economic one - a lack of sufficient income to buy healthy food - additional factors at the level of the local area and the immediate environment (both within the home and in early years settings for under-fives) can compound the problem further.

²⁵ Food Foundation, 'Food Insecurity Tracking: Round 15'.

²⁶ Department for Work and Pensions, 'Household Food Security Data Tables Family Resources Survey: Financial Year 2022 to 2023'.

Figure 3: Causes of food poverty - layers of influence



Causes related to economic factors

In the UK it is lack of sufficient income rather than lack of availability of food that is driving food poverty. Specifically, a combination of wage stagnation, high inflation and real-terms cuts to benefits makes it difficult for low-income families to afford a healthy diet.²⁷

Cost of living

The cost of living has increased steeply over the last few years and food prices in particular have been affected. Food prices have reached their highest levels since 1977: in March 2023 food prices had increased by 19 per cent over the previous 12 months.²⁸ Importantly, average food price increases do not capture the increase in the cost of the lowest-cost items that lower-income families rely on; some of the lowest cost items such as pasta and vegetable oil have increased by much more (60 per cent and upwards).²⁹

Lower-income households who already rely on the cheapest products are not able to cope with rising food costs by switching to cheaper alternatives and therefore have to simply go without instead, and in the case of food that means eating less.³⁰ This is reflected in ONS data which finds that in 2023 61 per cent of the poorest fifth of households report cutting back on food and other essentials (Ibid).

The increased cost in both energy and food also hits lower-income households harder because both these essentials are already a larger proportion of low-income household budgets: the Resolution

²⁷ Local Government Association, 'Debate on Tackling Poverty and the Cost of Food, House of Commons'.

²⁸ Francis-Devine, Danechi, and Malik, 'Food Poverty'.

²⁹ Office for National Statistics, 'Tracking the Price of the Lowest-Cost Grocery Items, UK, Experimental Analysis'.

³⁰ Bell, Smith, and Try, 'Food for Thought: The Role of Food Prices in the Cost of Living Crisis'.

Foundation finds that low-income households are experiencing effective inflation rates more than 3 percentage points higher than higher-income households.³¹

Healthy food also costs more than less healthy alternatives: over twice as much per calorie.³² In their 2023 Broken Plate report, the Food Foundation finds that the poorest fifth of households have to spend 50 per cent of their disposable income on food to achieve a healthy diet in-line with government recommendations.

Lower-income families with very young children are also impacted by the increasing cost of infant formula, which had already begun to rise before the more general food price increase; between March 2021 and April 2023 infant formula costs increased by between 17 and 31 per cent depending on the brand, with the cheapest and only own brand infant formula increasing by 45 per cent.³³ The cost is so high that it is not possible to purchase infant formula using Healthy Start payments (a scheme to help low income women who are pregnant or have a child under four years to buy healthy food), as the amount available with Healthy Start is not large enough to cover the cost. Since the cost of living crisis started there has been an increase in the theft of formula.³⁴ The wide variation in prices belies the fact that all infant formulas have to meet the same nutritional standards, though they may be marketed differently. In 2022 the sales of more expensive infant formulas grew despite the financial pressures households face which has been attributed to parents and carers choosing to purchase what is presented as premium products for their infants which leaves them with less money to spend on other healthy foods.³⁵ The cost of infant formula is also significant because, due to a conservative interpretation of the law related to the selling of infant formula, retailers are restricted from offering discounts or the use of loyalty scheme rewards to purchase infant formula.³⁶ For example, it cannot be included in two-for-one deals, or subsidised with supermarket points.

Levels of income: wages and benefit levels

Affordability of food depends on both the cost of food (as discussed above) and levels of income. Levels of both wages and of social security benefits are therefore important factors for levels of food poverty. Families with the youngest children face the highest risk of income poverty.³⁷ This is partly because families with the youngest children are less likely to have both adults in fulltime work and partly because of the impact of the significant cuts to benefits for families with children (discussed below).³⁸

³¹ Bell, Smith, and Try.

³² Goudie, 'The Broken Plate 2023: The State of the Nation's Food System'.

³³ First Steps Nutrition Trust, 'What the Cost of Living Crisis Means for the Diets of Infants and Young Children and Recommended Actions'.

³⁴ 'Baby Formula Prices: Soaring Costs Devastating Family Finances - Survey'.

³⁵ First Steps Nutrition Trust, 'What the Cost of Living Crisis Means for the Diets of Infants and Young Children and Recommended Actions'.

³⁶ Taylor, 'Did Iceland Do the Right Thing by Reducing the Price of Baby Milk Formula?'

³⁷ Oppenheim and Milton, 'Changing Patterns of Poverty in Early Childhood'; Stewart and Reader, 'The Conservatives' Record on Early Childhood: Policies, Spending and Outcomes from May 2015 to Pre- COVID 2020'.

³⁸ Stewart and Reader, 'The Conservatives' Record on Early Childhood: Policies, Spending and Outcomes from May 2015 to Pre- COVID 2020'.

Real wages have not grown since the 2008 financial crisis³⁹ and there has been an increase in the number of working households living in poverty, which reached a record high before the Covid-19 pandemic: in 2019-20 68 per cent of working-age adults living in working households were in poverty.⁴⁰

Although wages are an important factor for food security, analysis of 21 countries has highlighted that a country's welfare regime affects the extent to which people are protected from food poverty when food prices increase at a greater rate than wages.⁴¹ In the UK there has been significant welfare reform since 2010 and a decline in the generosity of working age benefits over the last 20 years.⁴² The introduction of Universal Credit (UC) in particular has been found to be causally related to increases in food poverty: evidence shows that as UC was gradually rolled out across different areas the number of people accessing foodbanks in those areas significantly increased.⁴³

Recent analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Trussell shows that the UC standard allowance is not enough to cover the cost of basic essentials: for a couple over the age of 25 it falls short by £66 per week.⁴⁴ Their analysis shows that an essentials guarantee would benefit families with children, with around 3.9 million families with children gaining an average of £55 per week. As well as the level of UC payments being inadequate to meet basic needs, almost half of UC claimants also have deductions taken directly from their UC payment which pull the level of support even lower. These deductions are taken to repay loans necessitated by the UC system itself: UC has a minimum five week wait to receive the first payment which leads to 60 per cent of people taking a loan when they first claim. Deductions are also made due to sanctions if people fail to meet the conditions of their UC and due to the benefit cap described below.

The findings that UC payments are too low to allow people to afford essentials including healthy food is reflected in the Department for Work and Pensions' own data: the latest Family Resources Survey found that food poverty and foodbank use was higher for UC claimants.⁴⁵ Only 54 per cent of households claiming UC had high food security (meaning they did not have restricted or uncertain access to food as measured by the questions described in section 1.2) and 16 per cent of households claiming UC had used a foodbank in the last 12 months compared to 3 per cent of all UK households.⁴⁶

In addition to the lower levels of payments under UC for most claimants compared to legacy benefits, benefits have become less generous due to other policies which particularly affect families with children. They include the benefit cap (which limits the amount of benefits a household can

³⁹ Bell and McCurdy, 'Wages Are Flatlining'.

⁴⁰ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 'UK Poverty 2023'.

⁴¹ Reeves, Loopstra, and Stuckler, 'The Growing Disconnect between Food Prices and Wages in Europe: Cross-National Analysis of Food Deprivation and Welfare Regimes in Twenty-One EU Countries, 2004–2012'.

⁴² Department for Work and Pensions, '2010 to 2015 Government Policy: Welfare Reform'; Cooper and Hills, 'The Conservative Governments' Record on Social Security'.

⁴³ Reeves and Loopstra, 'The Continuing Effects of Welfare Reform on Food Bank Use in the UK: The Roll-out of Universal Credit'.

⁴⁴ Bannister et al., 'An Essentials Guarantee: Reforming Universal Credit to Ensure We Can All Afford the Essentials in Hard Times'.

⁴⁵ Department for Work and Pensions, 'Family Resources Survey: Financial Year 2021 to 2022'.

⁴⁶ Department for Work and Pensions, 'Household Food Security Data Tables Family Resources Survey: Financial Year 2021 to 2022'.

receive regardless of household size) and the Two Child Limit (which limits tax credit and UC payments to the first two children a family has).⁴⁷ The difficulties managing on UC are also clear from participatory research with families experiencing food poverty.⁴⁸ The same research has highlighted, that in addition to the levels of benefits, cost of food and bills, the cost of housing is another important financial pressure for many families who are privately renting or in social housing. The latest available government data shows that in 2022 29 per cent of children in the UK were in relative income poverty (after housing costs).⁴⁹ Based on patterns in previous years it is likely that the poverty rate is even higher for children below the age of five years.⁵⁰

Causes related to the local area

Characteristics of local areas can also compound the problem of food poverty. In some areas there is a lack of access to affordable healthy foods due to a lack of supermarkets, leaving residents reliant on smaller shops with a more limited and expensive range of food.⁵¹ Lack of reliable public transport in disadvantaged areas can also restrict people from accessing more affordable foods in larger supermarkets.

As well as 'food deserts' which are lacking in shops which sell healthy and affordable food, 'food swamps' - areas which are inundated with fast food outlets whilst lacking access to healthier options, can also add to the problem.⁵² There is evidence, highlighted in the National Food Strategy, that the most disadvantaged areas tend to have the highest concentration of fast food outlets.⁵³

The Priority Places for Food Index, developed as part of Which's 'Affordable Food For All' campaign, measures seven domains including socioeconomic barriers and opportunities to access food shops.⁵⁴ The most disadvantaged 20 per cent of areas according to this measure - identified as priority areas - fall across a variety of places in England, although they are particularly concentrated in the North East of England.⁵⁵ As described above the North East of England is one of the regions with higher rates of food poverty.

Access to online food shops is also patterned by area; supermarkets do not deliver to all areas. Additionally, some areas have limited or patchy internet connectivity and minimum spends and delivery fees can be prohibitively expensive for households managing on low budgets.⁵⁶ Some areas in England are doubly disadvantaged in lacking both access to physical food shops as well as online food deliveries - this is the case for 23 per cent of the population and disproportionately impacts

⁴⁷ Cooper and Hills, 'The Conservative Governments' Record on Social Security'.

⁴⁸ Pybus, Power, and Pickett, "'We Are Constantly Overdrawn, despite Not Spending Money on Anything Other than Bills and Food'".

⁴⁹ Department for Work and Pensions, 'National Statistics Households Below Average Income: An Analysis of the UK Income Distribution: FYE 1995 to FYE 2022'.

⁵⁰ Stewart and Reader, 'The Conservatives' Record on Early Childhood: Policies, Spending and Outcomes from May 2015 to Pre- COVID 2020'.

⁵¹ Aceves-Martins et al., Child Food Insecurity in the UK.

⁵² Janatabadi, Newing, and Ermagun, 'Social and Spatial Inequalities of Contemporary Food Deserts'.

⁵³ Dimpleby, 'The National Food Strategy - The Plan'.

⁵⁴ Which, 'Affordable Food for All: How Supermarkets Can Help in the Cost of Food Crisis'.

⁵⁵ Consumer Data Research Centre and Which, 'Priority Places for Food Index'.

⁵⁶ Janatabadi, Newing, and Ermagun, 'Social and Spatial Inequalities of Contemporary Food Deserts'.

rural areas.⁵⁷ There is some evidence that early years settings are also impacted by the availability of supermarkets in their area, with research finding that nurseries that are further away from their nearest supermarket are more likely to serve fruit and vegetables infrequently.⁵⁸

Causes related to the immediate environment

The role of housing

Finally, a young child's immediate environment is also important - both at home and within early years settings they attend. In terms of the definition of food poverty we outlined at the start of this report there are many ways in which living in temporary emergency accommodation or inadequate housing can undermine each of the three conditions that need to be met to be free of food poverty.

Families living in emergency accommodation can face difficulty storing food with limited storage space and in some cases lacking access to a fridge and therefore having to rely on food items that won't perish at room temperature, which poses a clear restriction on their diet.⁵⁹ Research has also found that emergency accommodation can be lacking in cooking facilities, with sometimes only a microwave, forcing families to rely on ready meals and takeaways.⁶⁰ For some even a microwave is unavailable: Sue Balmer, Co-Director of the Happy Baby Community (HBC), which supports women who are pregnant or have children up to age three and are seeking asylum, shared some of the experiences of the women in the HBC. Many women are housed in hotels for significant periods of time (years for some), without access to any kitchen equipment apart from a kettle. Although the women receive some money in addition to the meals provided, in their experience this was not enough to adequately supplement the provided meals, and they are not able to access foodbanks or the Healthy Start Scheme (described below). There were also some difficulties with some of the hotel food that is provided, for example not having enough vegetables, incompatibility with culture specific preferences, and difficulties meeting dietary requirements. These findings are echoed in published research focused on under-fives living in temporary accommodation in London as well as evidence from other high-income countries.⁶¹ Additionally, research with families living in hotels has highlighted the safety hazards of trying to manage to make food in the room using a kettle, especially with young children around and the challenge to keep the room clean.⁶²

It has also been found that when meals are provided for in emergency accommodation they are sometimes restrictive in terms of the timing and location of the meals in a way that makes it difficult for families to access them and doesn't meet the needs of children to eat outside of these set times.⁶³ Having to eat in communal spaces – which for some means queueing for a table, having to

⁵⁷ Janatabadi, Newing, and Ermagun.

⁵⁸ Burgoine et al., 'Association between Distance to Nearest Supermarket and Provision of Fruits and Vegetables in English Nurseries'.

⁵⁹ Share and Hennessy, 'Food Access and Nutritional Health among Families in Emergency Homeless Accommodation: Abridged Report'.

⁶⁰ Share and Hennessy.

⁶¹ Rosenthal et al., 'How Does Living in Temporary Accommodation and the COVID-19 Pandemic Impact under 5s' Healthcare Access and Health Outcomes?'; Rosenthal et al., 'Barriers to Optimal Health for Under 5s Experiencing Homelessness and Living In Temporary Accommodation in High-Income Countries'.

⁶² Share and Hennessy, 'Food Access and Nutritional Health among Families in Emergency Homeless Accommodation: Abridged Report'.

⁶³ Share and Hennessy.

all sit in a row or eating under surveillance - and the lack of choice around their food can undermine families' ability to access food in socially acceptable ways.

The challenges of inadequate accommodation can lead to poor diets and worse health outcomes for young children. Families living in temporary emergency accommodation tend to have nutritionally inadequate diets and parents of babies and toddlers have highlighted the difficulty to provide their child(ren) with positive food experiences, as well as compromised weaning practices.⁶⁴ Children in insecure housing have a higher prevalence of gastrointestinal illnesses, dental problems, anaemia and nutritional deficiencies.⁶⁵

All of these challenges associated with temporary and inadequate accommodation can contribute to families not having enough food, not having food that is suitably nutritious and not being able to access food in socially acceptable ways. This has only become more relevant as the number of children living in temporary accommodation has increased steeply since 2011.⁶⁶

Barriers to healthy food in early years settings

Given the rise in food poverty experienced by young children at home, what children eat when at their early year setting is even more important. A large proportion of under-fives (71 per cent in 2022) spend at least some of their time in an early years setting and for some children a considerable proportion of the food they consume will take place in the setting.⁶⁷ With the rollout of additional government-funded hours to encourage more parents into work, food in settings is likely to play an even bigger role in children's overall diets. However, there are currently no statutory nutritional guidelines for early years settings.⁶⁸ There are two sets of voluntary guidelines that are recognised by the sector, one from government and one developed by Action for Children. However, not all early years settings are aware of these guidelines and even fewer use them even if they are aware of them.⁶⁹

Another barrier to providing healthy meals is that settings receive different levels of support for this in terms of training and related resources and as a result there is variation in the levels of knowledge and practices related to providing healthy meals for children across early years settings.⁷⁰

The under-funding of the 'free' 30 hours of childcare (which thereby does not cover the cost of food for these hours) puts pressure on settings to make up the shortfall, which can also undermine their ability to make healthy food accessible to all the children who attend. Some of the strategies settings use to cope with this include raising the price of food (as well as the price of non-funded hours) and for those lacking required kitchen facilities, asking parents to bring in packed lunches.⁷¹ Raising the cost of food potentially excludes children from low-income households from accessing their meals. Asking families to provide food also undermines early years nutrition as packed lunches from home

⁶⁴ Share and Hennessy.

⁶⁵ Rosenthal et al., 'Barriers to Optimal Health for Under 5s Experiencing Homelessness and Living In Temporary Accommodation in High-Income Countries'.

⁶⁶ Weekes et al., 'The Cost of Hunger and Hardship'.

⁶⁷ Department for Education, 'Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents, Reporting Year 2022'.

⁶⁸ Warren et al., 'Knowledge and Use of Voluntary Food and Drink Guidelines in English Nurseries?'

⁶⁹ Warren et al.

⁷⁰ Warren, Williams, and Knai, 'The "Cinderella Sector"'.

⁷¹ Warren, Williams, and Knai.

tend to be less healthy than food provided in settings, and as discussed above families managing with low income are less likely to be able to afford healthy food at home.⁷²

The cost-of-living crisis has also hit early years settings hard. In order to cope with this, settings have reported buying cheaper ingredients, as well as charging families more and cutting portion sizes.⁷³ Again this has a disproportionately detrimental impact on children from lower-income households. In a recent survey of settings more than two thirds reported that they ask families of children only accessing government funded hours to pay top-up fees to cover the cost of food.⁷⁴ The same survey found that settings acknowledged that fees charged for meals can be prohibitively expensive for parents. There is a double disadvantage in poorer areas as settings in these areas struggle the most with financial pressures, but children in poorer areas are also more likely to be experiencing food poverty.⁷⁵ So rather than it being possible for food poverty at home to be offset by provision through early education and care, shortfalls in the current funding system penalise those children who may most benefit from healthy food in settings.

1.4 What are the consequences of food poverty?

Impacts on physical health

Children who experience food poverty are less likely to be consuming adequate nutrients to allow their bodies to develop healthily and thrive. Many of the coping mechanisms used to manage when families cannot afford to purchase the type food that supports their children's development, such as cutting back on food, ignoring use by dates, relying on highly processed foods, and switching off the fridge or freezer, are all risky for young children's health.⁷⁶ Young children in food poverty are likely to have worse quality diets, with more processed foods and fewer vegetables.⁷⁷ For infants specifically the methods sometimes used to manage food poverty - watering down formula, replacing formula with alternative drinks and moving their child onto solid foods too soon - are also unsafe.⁷⁸

There is ample evidence that children who experience food poverty are more likely to report worse health status, worse health indicators and more symptoms than food secure children.⁷⁹ Children who experience persistent food poverty during very early childhood are more likely to be obese at age two to five years compared to children from food secure households.⁸⁰ The latest evidence from

⁷² Nicholas et al., 'Pre-School Food Survey'.

⁷³ London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) Nurseries and Early Years Alliance, 'Research into Food and Nutrition in Early Years Settings'.

⁷⁴ London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) Nurseries and Early Years Alliance.

⁷⁵ Reed and Parish, 'Research on the Nature, Impact and Drivers of Nursery Closures in England'; Benjamin Neelon et al., 'Spatial Analysis of Food Insecurity and Obesity by Area-Level Deprivation in Children in Early Years Settings in England'.

⁷⁶ First Steps Nutrition Trust, 'What the Cost of Living Crisis Means for the Diets of Infants and Young Children and Recommended Actions'.

⁷⁷ Pilgrim et al., 'Does Living in a Food Insecure Household Impact on the Diets and Body Composition of Young Children?'; Yang et al., 'Association of Food Security Status with Overweight and Dietary Intake'.

⁷⁸ First Steps Nutrition Trust, 'What the Cost of Living Crisis Means for the Diets of Infants and Young Children and Recommended Actions'.

⁷⁹ Aceves-Martins et al., Child Food Insecurity in the UK.

⁸⁰ Aceves-Martins et al.

the National Child Measurement Programme shows that children living in the most deprived areas are more than twice as likely to be obese than children living in the least-deprived areas: 12.9 per cent of reception-age children in the most deprived areas are obese, compared to 6 per cent of their peers in the least-disadvantaged areas.⁸¹ There is also a socioeconomic gradient in children's height, with stunting almost twice as high amongst four to five year olds in the most deprived compared to the least deprived areas.⁸² Childhood obesity is a significant risk factor for multiple health conditions including type-2 diabetes, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, and high blood pressure, as well as being related to worse mental health.⁸³

Tooth decay is another potential consequence of food poverty: consuming more highly processed foods is associated with more dental decay and the inequalities in children's outcomes are steep, with 35 per cent of five year olds from the lowest income quintile experiencing dental decay compared with just 14 per cent of five year olds in the most advantaged income quintile.⁸⁴ Dental health is important for children, with tooth decay often causing pain, associated with school absence, and is the lead cause of hospitalisations of children aged five to nine years old.⁸⁵

Access to sufficient nutritious food is important at any age, but it is vital during early childhood. Early childhood is a stage of rapid growth and a critical period of development when inadequate nutrition may cause irreversible changes in development.⁸⁶ What happens in early childhood steers the direction of the health trajectory over the life course, both in terms of behaviours and outcomes. Research following the same individuals over time has found that experiencing food insecurity in early childhood is associated with less healthy eating habits in early adulthood, such as skipping breakfast and eating more sugary and highly processed foods (and this relationship is independent of other background characteristics).⁸⁷ Children who experience food insecurity are also more likely to be obese as adults.⁸⁸

Impacts on other areas of development

There are multiple pathways through which food poverty can impact a range of children's outcomes.⁸⁹ When the quantity and quality of food is compromised children may not get all the nutrients they need and malnourishment, as well as hunger, can affect both physiological and psychological outcomes: adequate nutrition is important for healthy brain development, and can

⁸¹ NHS Digital, 'National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/24 School Year'.

⁸² Orr et al., '1099 An Analysis of Stunting in England Using National Data from the National Child Measurement Programme'.

⁸³ UK Parliament POST, 'Childhood Obesity POSTNOTE'.

⁸⁴ Goudie, 'The Broken Plate 2023: The State of the Nation's Food System'; Cascaes et al., 'Ultra-Processed Food Consumption and Dental Caries in Children and Adolescents'.

⁸⁵ Goudie, 'The Critical Importance of Early Years Nutrition in Prevention of Childhood Obesity | Food Foundation'; Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology, 'Event Summary'.

⁸⁶ Goudie, 'The Critical Importance of Early Years Nutrition in Prevention of Childhood Obesity | Food Foundation'; Emmett and Jones, 'Diet, Growth, and Obesity Development throughout Childhood in the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children'.

⁸⁷ Dubois et al., 'Experiencing Food Insecurity in Childhood'.

⁸⁸ Dubois et al.

⁸⁹ Chen and Yeung, 'How Food Insecurity Affects Children's Behavior Problems in Early Childhood'; Oliveira et al., 'Household Food Insecurity and Early Childhood Development'; Gallegos et al., 'Food Insecurity and Child Development'.

affect children's ability to play and learn.⁹⁰ Experiencing food poverty can also cause children stress and anxiety, which additionally undermines their ability to thrive.⁹¹ Finally, the stress of managing without enough money for healthy food can put a strain on parents'/caregivers' mental health and negatively impact the home environment which thereby can have a negative effect on children's outcomes, as discussed further below.⁹²

When children under five experience food poverty they are more likely to have worse development across multiple domains including cognitive development, maths and vocabulary skills.⁹³ Infants and toddlers who experience food poverty are at risk of developmental delay and are more likely to score lower on cognitive assessments.⁹⁴ Research on food poverty in childhood, including early childhood, shows that food poverty is also related to worse behavioural and mental health outcomes.⁹⁵ Pre-schoolers who experience food poverty are at higher risk of both internalising and externalising behavioural problems and worse mental health, self-control and interpersonal skills.⁹⁶

The more severe the experience of food poverty and the longer the period of exposure the bigger the risk is that it will impact early childhood development.⁹⁷ However, even transient experiences of food poverty are damaging, with research finding that two-year-olds living with temporarily food insecure adults experienced immediate negative impacts on their health and cognitive development.⁹⁸

Impacts on family and the home environment

One of the mechanisms through which food poverty can influence children's outcomes, as discussed above, is through its impact on the home environment. Not being able to afford nutritious food can place a lot of stress on parents/caregivers and have a detrimental impact on their mental health.⁹⁹ Many parents will go without food, also undermining their physical health, in order to prioritise feeding their children.¹⁰⁰ Worse mental health for parents/caregivers can make it more difficult for them to parent in the ways they would like to and we know that parent's/caregiver's mental health and parenting is important for children's outcomes.¹⁰¹ Even very young children can be aware that their family is unable to afford adequate food and experience the stress that permeates the home

⁹⁰ Oliveira et al., 'Household Food Insecurity and Early Childhood Development'.

⁹¹ Gallegos et al., 'Food Insecurity and Child Development'.

⁹² Chen and Yeung, 'How Food Insecurity Affects Children's Behavior Problems in Early Childhood'.

⁹³ Oliveira et al., 'Household Food Insecurity and Early Childhood Development'.

⁹⁴ Shankar, Chung, and Frank, 'Association of Food Insecurity with Children's Behavioral, Emotional, and Academic Outcomes'.

⁹⁵ Aceves-Martins et al., Child Food Insecurity in the UK; Gallegos et al., 'Food Insecurity and Child Development'.

⁹⁶ Shankar, Chung, and Frank, 'Association of Food Insecurity with Children's Behavioral, Emotional, and Academic Outcomes'.

⁹⁷ Oliveira et al., 'Household Food Insecurity and Early Childhood Development'.

⁹⁸ Shankar, Chung, and Frank, 'Association of Food Insecurity with Children's Behavioral, Emotional, and Academic Outcomes'.

⁹⁹ O'CONNELL, LIVING HAND TO MOUTH; Cain et al., 'Association of Food Insecurity with Mental Health Outcomes in Parents and Children'; Power et al., 'Is Food Insecurity Associated with Maternal Health among UK Ethnic Groups?'

¹⁰⁰ O'CONNELL, LIVING HAND TO MOUTH.

¹⁰¹ Cooper and Stewart, 'Does Household Income Affect Children's Outcomes?'

environment.¹⁰² Some research has found that parent/caregiver mental health and parenting practices mediate the relationship between food poverty and toddlers' outcomes: food insecurity was associated with worse parental/caregiver mental health, which was associated with less positive parenting, which in turn was linked to less secure attachment and lower mental proficiency in children aged 24 months.¹⁰³ These pathways are important when thinking about how to create policies that address food poverty for young children as, even if the focus is on children's outcomes food poverty needs to be addressed for the whole family.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Knowles et al., "Do You Wanna Breathe or Eat?"

¹⁰³ Zaslow et al., 'Food Security during Infancy: Implications for Attachment and Mental Proficiency in Toddlerhood'.

¹⁰⁴ Knowles et al., "Do You Wanna Breathe or Eat?"

Section 2: What national policies are already in place to address food poverty for under-fives in England and how effective are they?

The focus of this section is on national policies which aim to alleviate food poverty and improve nutrition for under-fives in England and the evidence of their effectiveness.¹⁰⁵ Social security benefits in general are outside of the scope of this section, although they of course play an important role for income poverty. The two main national policies discussed here are the Healthy Start Scheme (HSS) and free early years meals (FEYM).

The Healthy Start Scheme

About the scheme

The Healthy Start Scheme (HSS) provides money for certain food items, such as fruit, vegetables, pulses, dairy and formula milk, as well as free vitamins.¹⁰⁶ Previously this was provided in vouchers, but since 2022 was switched to pre-paid cards. Women who are more than ten weeks pregnant or have a child under four years are eligible for the scheme if they receive certain benefits.¹⁰⁷ The payments are provided every four weeks and the amounts paid are:

- £4.25 per week during pregnancy
- £8.50 per week for each child from birth to one year
- £4.25 per week for each child from one to four years¹⁰⁸

It is important to note that due to the benefits-related criteria children from families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) have not been eligible for HSS. However, following a legal challenge in 2021 the HSS was temporarily extended to children who are British nationals and from families with NRPF, though recent evidence suggests there is little awareness of this and the application process is particularly difficult to navigate.¹⁰⁹

What is the evidence on its effectiveness?

¹⁰⁵ Policies that support breastfeeding are outside the scope of this review, though there is work by the Food Foundation which is focused on overcoming barriers to breastfeeding – see The Food Foundation (2024) ‘Breaking Down Barriers to Breastfeeding to Support Healthy Weight in Childhood’ at <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/breaking-down-barriers-breastfeeding-support-healthy-weight-childhood> See also Impact on Urban Health (2024) ‘Breastfeeding in focus: Insights from the sector’ <https://urbanhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Impact-Urban-Health-Infant-Feeding-Report-V5-Full-with-2nd-proof-amends-footnotes-diagrams.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ ‘Get Help to Buy Food and Milk (Healthy Start)’.

¹⁰⁷ The qualifying benefits are: income support, income-based jobseeker's allowance, Child Tax Credit without Working Tax Credit if annual income is £16,190 or less, Universal Credit if monthly earned income from employment is £408 or less, Pension Credit. Additionally pregnant women under age 18, parents of a British citizen child under four with no recourse to public funds and earnings under £408 per month are also eligible. See <https://www.turn2us.org.uk/get-support/information-for-your-situation/healthy-start-scheme-england-wales-northern-ireland/am-i-eligible-for-healthy-start-scheme#:~:text=You%20can%20get%20help%20from,income%2Dbased%20Jobseeker's%20Allowance>

¹⁰⁸ See NHS Get Help to Buy Food and Milk (Healthy Start)

¹⁰⁹ Sustain, ‘Survey Findings: Food Insecurity among Families with No Recourse to Public Funds’.

The aim of the scheme is to improve low-income families' access to a healthy diet. Evidence on the effectiveness of the scheme is mixed, with some positive findings that the scheme tends to increase spending on fruit and vegetables, but this is not replicated across all studies.

A study by Griffith and colleagues comparing eligible and non-eligible households before and after the HSS was introduced finds that the HSS is associated with a range of positive changes for the eligible group.¹¹⁰ Those eligible for the HSS increased their monthly spending on fruit and vegetables by an estimated £2.43 which equates to a 15 per cent increase compared to before the scheme was introduced. The authors confirmed this increased spending translated to higher quantities of fruit and vegetables finding an increase of 1.79kg per month of purchased fruit and vegetables. The study also found improvements in the overall nutrient composition of shopping baskets, with increased levels of fibre, vitamin A, zinc, potassium, and iron (with a significant increase in the proportion of households meeting their recommended reference intakes for iron and potassium), and no evidence of an increase in less healthy nutrients such as sugar and fats. As the study identifies eligible households but not those who necessarily take up the HSS these results are likely to be diluted, with the authors suggesting that the impact for those who take up the scheme is likely to be a greater monthly increase in spending on fruit and vegetables of £3.04 or 19.4 per cent.

These positive findings are also echoed in some qualitative studies: research by Lucas and colleagues based on interviews with 107 parents across thirteen different areas in England found that the HSS supported families' diets by enabling families to buy a greater amount and variety of fruit and vegetables and for some was an essential safety net.¹¹¹ Some participants described how the scheme helped them set up healthy eating habits for their children. A multi-method study (including focus groups with health practitioners, an online consultation with other relevant professionals and user and advocacy groups, and participatory workshops with women on low incomes) also found recipients of the HSS reported that the scheme enabled them to purchase more and different types of fruit and vegetables.¹¹² For some it meant they could eat more fruit and vegetables than they otherwise would have and for others it allowed them to manage better financially by subsidising the fruit and vegetables they usually buy. Again, some recipients described how the scheme prompted them to eat a healthier diet and establish good eating habits for the future. However, there was also consensus that the value of the HSS had to keep pace with the cost of food otherwise the potential of the scheme to improve families' diets would be undermined. Notably this research pre-dates the current cost of living crisis.

Other robust research has not found an effect of the HSS on fruit and vegetable consumption. Research by Scantlebury and colleagues compares changes in consumption of fruit and vegetables over time - before and after the HSS was introduced (in 2006) - looking at any differences between families who are eligible for the HSS and families who are not.¹¹³ They find that changes in fruit and vegetable consumption over time were similar across families eligible for the HSS and families not eligible. The authors suggest this could be due to the HSS money being spent on other eligible items such as milk or infant formula and it could also be the case that the scheme helped protect fruit and

¹¹⁰ Griffith, von Hinke, and Smith, 'Getting a Healthy Start'.

¹¹¹ Lucas, Jessiman, and Cameron, 'Healthy Start'.

¹¹² McFadden et al., 'Can Food Vouchers Improve Nutrition and Reduce Health Inequalities in Low-Income Mothers and Young Children'.

¹¹³ Scantlebury et al., 'Has the UK Healthy Start Voucher Scheme Been Associated with an Increased Fruit and Vegetable Intake among Target Families?'

vegetable consumption among low-income households. In this case no evidence of an effect is not the same as evidence of no effect and it is possible that the HSS could contribute to children's health through for example the purchase of other eligible HSS items and through protecting family budgets.

In-line with these findings, later research by Parnham and colleagues comparing those who received the HSS with those who were also eligible but did not participate in HSS found no difference in fruit and vegetable expenditure or quantity, as well as no difference in expenditure on other HS foods or on overall food expenditure.¹¹⁴ The authors explain that for the HSS to make a difference to people's spending on fruit, vegetables and other HS foods it needs to be set at a rate that is higher than the amount low income families are already spending on these items, and highlights the lack of sufficient uprating of the payment amounts to ensure the value of the scheme. They conclude that the scheme still provides financial assistance which may help families' overall budgets. However, the low value of the scheme means 'it is unlikely that the voucher provided enough purchasing power to increase fruit and vegetable expenditure above usual levels in low-income households'.¹¹⁵ Therefore an increase in the value of the scheme might be necessary to improve the effectiveness of the programme.

Evidence on the impact of payment increases

Two pieces of research support the conclusion that an increase in the generosity of the vouchers may increase the effectiveness of the scheme. Research by Thomas and colleagues evaluated the impact of a £2 top up provided through supermarket vouchers and only redeemable against fruit and vegetables on spending habits of HSS recipients.¹¹⁶ They found that although a low rate of the top up vouchers were used (17 per cent), the highest uptake was in supermarkets in the most deprived areas. Overall, they found an increase in spending on fruit and vegetables as well as an increase in the weight of fruit and vegetables in shopping baskets. Another study by Mohtashami Borzadaran and colleagues evaluates the impact of the 30 per cent increase in April 2021 (from £3.10 to £4.25) by analysing shopping and voucher transactions before and after the 30 per cent increase was introduced four months earlier in a supermarket.¹¹⁷ Following the £1.15 increase the authors found a significant 32p increase on spending on fruit and vegetables and 31p increase on all HSS eligible items. The research also found a bigger impact for those on the lowest incomes (identified as those already spending less on food before the increased value of the scheme), where for recipients in the lowest third the £1.15 increase almost fully translated to additional spending on eligible items. There was also a bigger impact in the most disadvantaged areas, with the £1.15 increase translating to approximately an additional 50p of spending on eligible items.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the HSS does have the potential to improve nutrition for young children in low-income households, especially for those in the most disadvantaged areas, though the effectiveness of the scheme could be improved by ensuring the value of the payments is set

¹¹⁴ Parnham et al., 'Is the Healthy Start Scheme Associated with Increased Food Expenditure in Low-Income Families with Young Children in the United Kingdom?'

¹¹⁵ Parnham et al.

¹¹⁶ Thomas et al., 'Supermarket Top-up of Healthy Start Vouchers Increases Fruit and Vegetable Purchases in Low-Income Households'.

¹¹⁷ Mohtashami Borzadaran, Lohse, and Frew, 'A Healthy Start for Healthy Start Vouchers?'

sufficiently high enough to keep pace with the increased cost of food. These findings are in-line with evidence on food subsidy programmes from other countries which suggests that more generous subsidies tend to produce greater impacts.¹¹⁸

Other areas for improvement

A recent rapid qualitative analysis by Barrett and colleagues, involving 112 interviews with parents, health and community professionals, NGOs and retailers, reinforces earlier findings that the HSS is really valued by those who use it and enables parents to protect and improve their children's diet.¹¹⁹ The research also identifies a number of areas for improvement to the scheme, in addition to uprating the payments in-line with food inflation. The scheme excludes children age four, who are caught in a gap without nutritional support as they are not yet at school and eligible for free school meals (FSM). The eligibility criteria was found to be too narrow, with the income threshold remaining below the poverty line and therefore excluding some families experiencing food poverty. The application process was also found to be too long and complicated, with families often needing help to complete it; for those with English as an additional language or low digital literacy the application process is even more challenging. Many families are missing out as uptake of the scheme has historically been low, and those missing out are likely to be the ones most in need; many stakeholders therefore suggested that automatic enrolment should be introduced for the HSS.

Policy Recommendations

Some of the research discussed above has identified possible areas for improvement of the HSS such as increasing the value and improving take up.¹²⁰ Many organisations with an interest in children's health and nutrition have called for specific improvements to be made to make the HSS more effective for improving the nutrition of young children and pregnant women (see for example the Working Group on the Healthy Start Scheme established by Sustain and the Food Foundation).¹²¹ The main suggestions for improvement are:

- *Increase the generosity of the scheme* - The HSS allowance was last increased in April 2021 and has not kept pace with inflation as there has been a steep increase in the cost of food. The amount provided currently does not cover the cost of any first infant formula.¹²² The value of the payments should be increased in line with food price inflation and the amount should be reviewed every six months.¹²³
- *Improve uptake* – Previously NHS uptake data showed low levels of uptake nationally (below 65 per cent) and large variation across areas, despite a government target from September

¹¹⁸ Mansilla, Herrera, and von Uexkull, 'Food Subsidies To Promote Healthy Eating And Reduce Food Prices: A Rapid Literature Review'.

¹¹⁹ Barrett, Spires, and Vogel, 'The Healthy Start Scheme in England "Is a Lifeline for Families but Many Are Missing Out"'

¹²⁰ Parnham et al., 'Is the Healthy Start Scheme Associated with Increased Food Expenditure in Low-Income Families with Young Children in the United Kingdom?'; Mohtashami Borzadaran, Lohse, and Frew, 'A Healthy Start for Healthy Start Vouchers?'

¹²¹ Food Foundation, 'Healthy Start Working Group Policy Positions'.

¹²² First Steps Nutrition Trust, 'What the Cost of Living Crisis Means for the Diets of Infants and Young Children and Recommended Actions'.

¹²³ Food Foundation, 'Healthy Start Working Group Policy Positions'.

2022 to improve uptake to 75 per cent.¹²⁴ This results in an estimated cash shortfall of over £48million in England.¹²⁵ The low level of uptake is due to both lack of awareness as well as difficulties applying.¹²⁶ Suggestions for improving uptake include raising awareness of the scheme through a communications campaign; making the applications process simpler and available in other languages; training professionals such as GPs, health visitors and social workers to be able to help eligible families apply; and introducing auto-enrolment for all eligible families, or at least writing to those who are eligible to invite them to apply.¹²⁷ Additionally, in order to improve uptake we need to have data on uptake – this has been withdrawn from public statistics since March 2024, due to an error with the data since July 2023.¹²⁸ Although this error has since been corrected the corrected data which was briefly made available has since been withdrawn and now only numbers of those on the digital scheme are provided.

- *Expand eligibility to include children up to the age of five* - currently there is a gap in nutritional support for children aged four, who are not included in the HSS but are also not yet in school and able to receive FSM. The eligibility criteria should be expanded to include children up to the age of five.¹²⁹
- *Expand eligibility to include more low-income families* - the HSS is narrowly targeted so that families on Universal Credit are only eligible if their income is £408 or less per month, and there are families experiencing food poverty who are not eligible.¹³⁰ Estimates from the National Food Strategy suggest that if the scheme was extended to families with incomes below £20,000 this would reach 73 per cent of food insecure families.¹³¹ The eligibility criteria should be expanded to include all household on Universal Credit or equivalent benefits.¹³²
- *Expand eligibility to permanently include all children from low-income families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)* – Low-income families with NRPF face high risks of food

¹²⁴ Local Government Association, 'Westminster Hall Debate, The Healthy Start Scheme, 22 May 2024'.

¹²⁵ Sustain, 'Healthy Start Map'.

¹²⁶ Food Foundation, 'Healthy Start Needs Urgent Improvement to Tackle Food Insecurity in the Early Years'; Dimbleby, 'The National Food Strategy - The Plan'; Local Government Association, 'Debate on Tackling Poverty and the Cost of Food, House of Commons'.

¹²⁷ Food Foundation, 'Healthy Start Working Group Policy Positions'; Dimbleby, 'The National Food Strategy - The Plan'; First Steps Nutrition Trust, 'What the Cost of Living Crisis Means for the Diets of Infants and Young Children and Recommended Actions'; Local Government Association, 'Debate on Tackling Poverty and the Cost of Food, House of Commons'.

¹²⁸ House of Commons, 'Healthy Start Uptake Data'.

¹²⁹ Dimbleby, 'The National Food Strategy - The Plan'; First Steps Nutrition Trust, 'What the Cost of Living Crisis Means for the Diets of Infants and Young Children and Recommended Actions'; Food Foundation, 'Healthy Start Working Group Policy Positions'; Local Government Association, 'Debate on Tackling Poverty and the Cost of Food, House of Commons'.

¹³⁰ Food Foundation, 'Healthy Start Working Group Policy Positions'.

¹³¹ Dimbleby, 'The National Food Strategy - The Plan'.

¹³² Food Foundation, 'Healthy Start Working Group Policy Positions'; Local Government Association, 'Debate on Tackling Poverty and the Cost of Food, House of Commons'.

poverty.¹³³ Currently only children with British nationality from families are able to access HSS, despite most families with NRPF having children who do not have British nationality.¹³⁴ Furthermore this is a temporary extension and there are additional barriers as it requires a more onerous application process and there is little awareness of this temporary and partial fix.¹³⁵ All children should be able to access adequate healthy food regardless of their immigration status. For this reason, we recommend permanently extending the eligibility criteria to all children from low-income families with NRPF, regardless of the child's nationality. In addition to raise awareness of HSS amongst families with NRPF (see above suggestions) and to simplify the application process for families with NRPF.

Free Early Years Meals (FEYM)

There is very little publicly available information and research about the free early years meals (FEYM) policy (often referred to as nursery free school meals (FSM) though we use this alternative term which is more accurate). This section therefore heavily draws on the expertise of Dayna Brackley and Abigail Page from Bremner and Co, an independent food policy and practice consultancy who have gained insight into how FEYM are operating in practice and shared this in their expert interview.¹³⁶

What is the official policy and how does it work in practice?

Children who attend standalone state-maintained nursery schools and school-based nurseries (herein referred to as 'maintained nurseries') are entitled to FEYM if their parents receive a qualifying benefit, including Universal Credit if their income is below £7,400, and the child attends the nursery both before and after lunch.¹³⁷

Although the eligibility criteria are the same as for the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) (additional funding provided to early years settings for disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds accessing the 15 hours of government subsidised childcare), it is a separate application.¹³⁸ Unlike in primary and secondary schools where the amount of Pupil Premium schools receive is dependent on the number of pupils registered as FSM, in nurseries allocation of the EYPP is entirely independent from the number of children registered as eligible for FEYM, providing less incentive for early years settings to register children for free meals, compared to schools.

There is also a large difference in the amount nurseries receive through EYPP compared to schools' Pupil Premium. For example, in 2024 nurseries receive £353 per year for each child eligible for EYPP, while primary schools receive £1,455 per year per child who receives FSM or has in the past six years.¹³⁹ Bremner and Co have found from the early years settings and local authorities they have worked with, that there is no set per meal funding rate for FEYM as there is for school FSM. Instead

¹³³ Food Foundation, 'Immigration Policy and Food Insecurity in the UK'.

¹³⁴ Sustain, 'Survey Findings: Food Insecurity among Families with No Recourse to Public Funds'.

¹³⁵ Sustain; Food Foundation, 'Immigration Policy and Food Insecurity in the UK'.

¹³⁶ Brackley et al., 'Food Procurement and Provision in Early Years Settings: A Yorkshire Case Study'; Bremner & Co, 'Shining a Light on Early Years Nutrition: The Role of Councils'.

¹³⁷ Cooper, 'As Food Poverty Is Set to Soar, How Many Free School Meals Reach under-Fives?'

¹³⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/get-extra-early-years-funding>

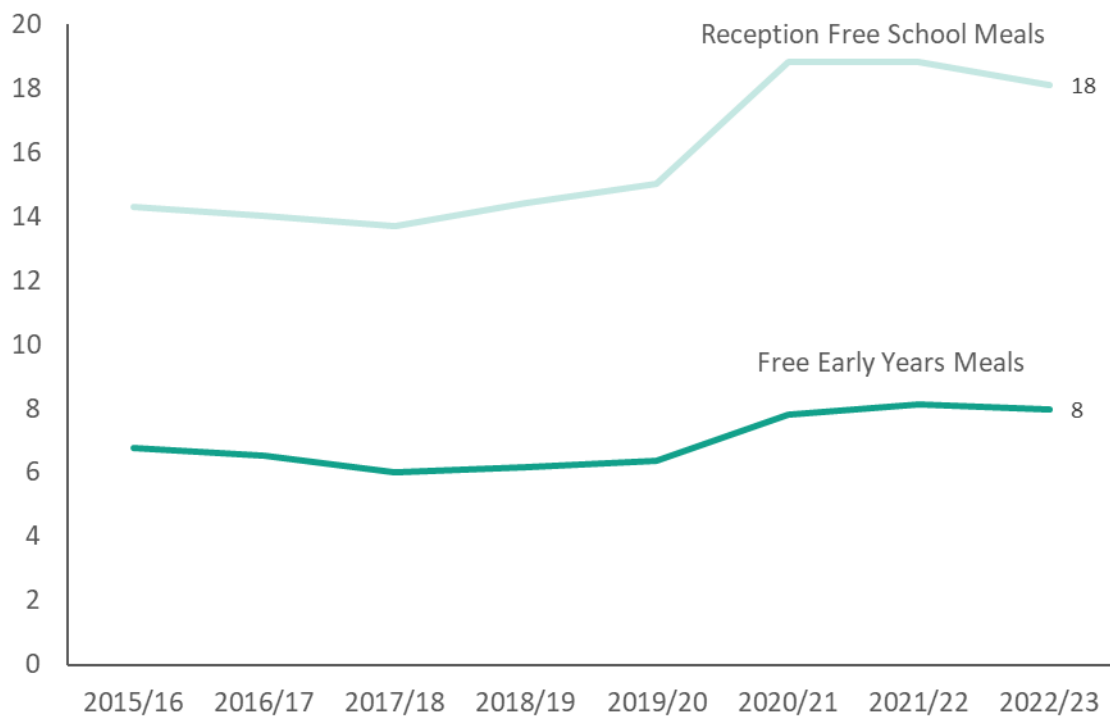
¹³⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium/pupil-premium#funding-rates-for-the-2023-to-2024-financial-year>

there is discretion at the local authority level as to the amount of funding passed onto settings for FEYM and therefore variations in the amount spent on FEYM food in early years settings.

The lack of transparency around funding allocations for food for nursery settings and lack of clarity from the Department for Education’s communications with local authorities contributes to problems with the policy in practice. Therefore, although it is the responsibility of the nurseries to register children who are entitled to FEYM, there is much less incentive to do so compared to schools.

However, in practice, according to research by Bremner and Co, what nurseries do in terms of providing food to children in their care is not necessarily guided by this official policy but by need - some nurseries have shared that they feed children in their care who are hungry, regardless of FEYM status.¹⁴⁰ Nurseries also reported the financial difficulties that are exacerbated by doing this. This is another example of how this policy operates based on discretion, rather than always being available to all children who would benefit from FEYM.

Figure 4: Percentage of children recorded as eligible for free meals in the first year of school and recorded as eligible for free meals in nursery

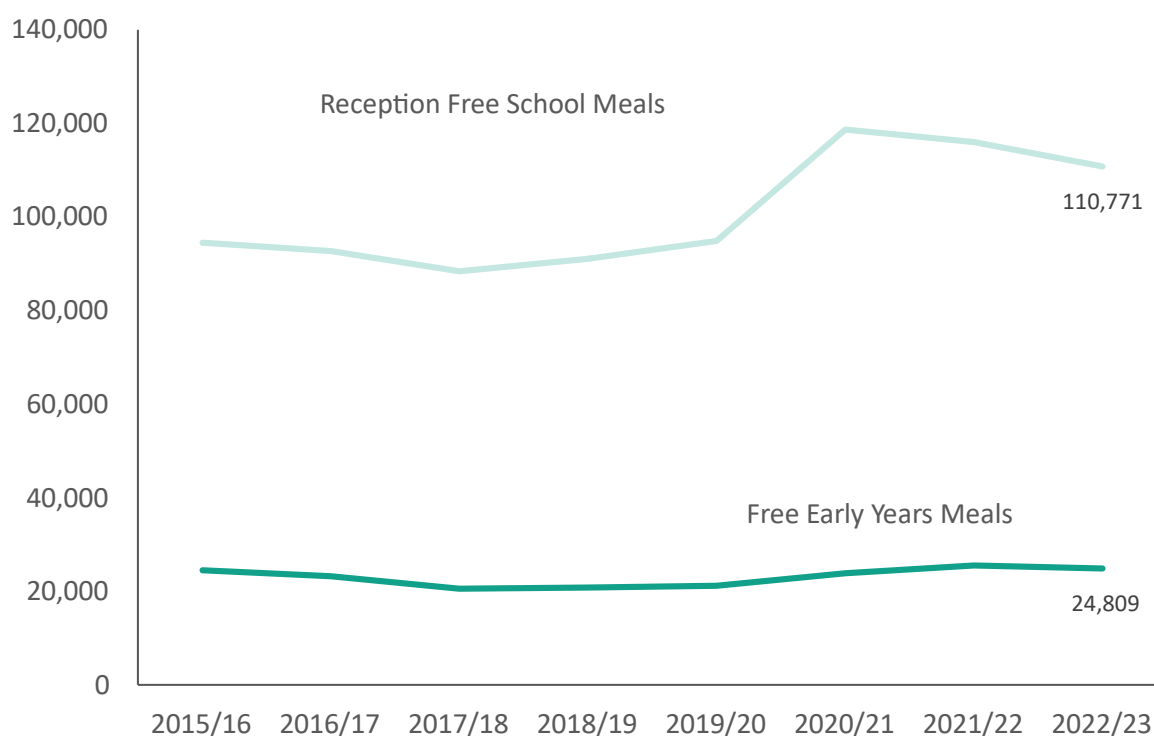


Source: Department for Education, Schools, pupils and their characteristics statistics available at <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/adff94d7-9225-4795-3b60-08dc436de7a7> accessed 13th March 2024

Notes: Free Early Years Meals includes children who were two, three or four during academic year and recorded as eligible for free meals in a standalone maintained nursery or a school-based nursery.

¹⁴⁰ Brackley et al., ‘Food Procurement and Provision in Early Years Settings: A Yorkshire Case Study’.

Figure 5: Number of children recorded as eligible for free meals



Source: Department for Education, Schools, pupils and their characteristics statistics available at <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/adff94d7-9225-4795-3b60-08dc436de7a7> accessed 13th March 2024

Notes: As above Free Early Years Meals includes children who were two, three or four during academic year and recorded as eligible for free meals in a standalone maintained nursery or a school-based nursery.

How many children are recorded as FEYM eligible in nursery? As shown in Figure 4, of all the children in maintained nurseries, 8 per cent were recorded as FEYM eligible in the 2022/23 academic year. This compares to 18 per cent of children in reception recorded as eligible for FSM, highlighting there are likely many more young children who would benefit from FEYM in nursery but do not have access to free meals until they reach reception.

Figure 5 shows the difference in absolute terms as the majority of children attending early years settings do not attend maintained nurseries.¹⁴¹ Many attend preschool early education and care in the private, voluntary, and independent sector, where there is no entitlement to free meals, even in theory.¹⁴²

The gap between FEYM and reception FSM shown in Figure 4 therefore is likely capturing the difference in access to free meals due to for example, lack of awareness and restrictive criteria related to hours attended. The second (larger) gap shown in Figure 5 is also capturing lack of access to free meals due to attending a different type of setting (not maintained) where FEYM are not available despite children meeting the same income and benefits eligibility criteria.

¹⁴¹ Archer and Oppenheim, 'The Role of Early Childhood Education and Care in Shaping Life Chances'.

¹⁴² Brackley et al., 'Food Procurement and Provision in Early Years Settings: A Yorkshire Case Study'.

There are many factors that are likely to contribute to the mismatch between children receiving FEYM at nursery and children receiving FSM in reception:

- *Lack of reach as FEYM are only available in maintained nurseries:* the majority of children in ECEC attend a private, voluntary or independent (PVI) early years setting – 77 per cent of all ECEC places are in PVI or childminder settings.¹⁴³
- *Restrictive eligibility criteria based on attendance before and after lunch:* many maintained nurseries are not open for full days and it is therefore not possible for children to attend before and after lunch and claim their FEYM. Additionally, where nurseries are open all day, parents might rely on spreading their government subsidised childcare hours across multiple days, therefore not able to use them for their child to attend before and after lunch.
- *Lack of awareness* - parents may be less likely to know that FEYM exist and that they are eligible. There is very little publicly available information about FEYM - even the government website on FSM eligibility neglects to mention FEYM and similarly charities that help people understand which benefits they are entitled to tend to focus on FSM for school-age children.¹⁴⁴ Additionally, research (not yet published) has found that there is also a lack of awareness at the local authority level, with one local authority finding that their Early Years Foundation Stage Lead did not think that nursery children were eligible for free meals.¹⁴⁵

Additionally, we know that even if all children who met the income- and benefits-based eligibility criteria were entitled to FEYM there would still be many children in income poverty who are not eligible, due to the low-income threshold.¹⁴⁶

The funding for FEYM lacks clarity, with no set per meal rate as there is for schools and discretion as to how much funding is passed on by local authorities and included in the overall funding rather than ringfenced for free meals.¹⁴⁷ More widely, local authorities have described inadequate funding being a barrier to providing good nutrition in early years settings.¹⁴⁸ It is also important to acknowledge the broader context in which this policy operates - regardless of the underfunding of the FEYM policy, early years settings are struggling financially following years of chronic under-funding, with increasing closures, and difficulties with staffing levels and stability.¹⁴⁹ The workforce crisis impedes

¹⁴³ Archer and Oppenheim, 'The Role of Early Childhood Education and Care in Shaping Life Chances'; Bremner & Co, 'Shining a Light on Early Years Nutrition: The Role of Councils'.

¹⁴⁴ 'Apply for free school meals' <https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals>; turn 2 us 'Free school meals' <https://www.turn2us.org.uk/get-support/information-for-your-situation/free-school-meals>

¹⁴⁵ Forthcoming research with Dr Tammy Campbell from the Nuffield Foundation funded project 'What has 'free school meals' measured and what are the implications' <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/what-has-free-school-meals-measured>

¹⁴⁶ Child Poverty Action Group, 'Free School Meals'.

¹⁴⁷ Bremner and Co expert interview

¹⁴⁸ Brackley et al., 'Food Procurement and Provision in Early Years Settings: A Yorkshire Case Study'.

¹⁴⁹ 'Support for Childcare and the Early Years: Fifth Report of Session 2022-23'; Jarvie et al., 'Childcare Survey 2023'; Reed and Parish, 'Research on the Nature, Impact and Drivers of Nursery Closures in England'.

early years settings' abilities to provide nutritious food, with some settings having to rely on staff who are not trained in nutrition being responsible for preparing the food.¹⁵⁰

Different early years settings also have different resources, with not all having access to adequate cooking facilities.¹⁵¹ This all adds to the challenge of delivering a free meal policy for young children and is important to take into account when considering how the policy is currently operating and how it can be improved. Bremner and Co found that whilst there were examples of early years settings doing what they can to make sure the children in their care are fed, it was also clear that given the many other challenges that settings are facing, improving access to and quality of FEYM is necessarily lower priority for them at present.¹⁵²

What is the evidence on its effectiveness?

There is currently no data on the proportion of eligible children who are not registered for FEYM, though national statistics show that only 55 per cent of children registered for FEYM take up a meal.¹⁵³ There is also no research on the impact of FEYM for children who do receive it. However, there is promising evidence on the effectiveness of FSM for primary-school-age children based on research into universal FSM. In September 2014 Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) were introduced making FSM available for all children in reception to year two. Analysis into the effects of this policy found a number of positive outcomes: UIFSM reduced children's bodyweight in the first year of school, with reductions in obesity and increases in healthy weight; reduced absence rates for children registered for FSM (narrowing inequalities); children who take up the free lunch have better educational outcomes at ages five and seven; and reduced household expenditure for those previously not eligible for FSM by around £20 per month.¹⁵⁴

Further research comparing outcomes of children in London local authorities that introduced universal FSM for all primary schools with other local authorities within and outside of London also found positive impacts: by the end of primary school children had made two weeks additional progress in reading with effects being similar for those who were newly eligible and previously eligible, suggesting one of the mechanisms for this outcome may be peer effects, and potentially less disruptive behaviour.¹⁵⁵

Additionally, universal primary FSM was found to reduce obesity rates (in-line with findings from UIFSM), with the biggest impact for children who received universal FSM throughout their entire primary school years.¹⁵⁶ International evidence on universal FSM corroborates these findings, with a systematic review of 47 studies from across the world finding positive associations between universal FSM and academic performance, as well as food security and diet quality.¹⁵⁷

Given the importance of nutrition in the early years period we might expect similar or even greater benefits of free meals in early years settings. One important qualification to this is that the

¹⁵⁰ Brackley et al., 'Food Procurement and Provision in Early Years Settings: A Yorkshire Case Study'.

¹⁵¹ Warren, Williams, and Knai, 'The "Cinderella Sector"'.

¹⁵² Bremner and Co expert interview

¹⁵³ Brackley et al., 'Food Procurement and Provision in Early Years Settings: A Yorkshire Case Study'.

¹⁵⁴ Holford and Rabe, 'Impact of the Universal Infant Free School Meal Policy'.

¹⁵⁵ Holford and Rabe, 'The Impacts of Universal Free School Meal Schemes in England'.

¹⁵⁶ Holford and Rabe.

¹⁵⁷ Cohen et al., 'Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index'.

researchers suggest that the reductions in obesity are due to the high level of school food standards (and currently food standards are not mandatory in early years settings) and that this requires adequate funding (currently also lacking for early years settings).¹⁵⁸ For FEYM to achieve similar benefits then it would be important to address both the funding and the early years nutritional guidelines, bringing them at least into line with primary provision.

How can FEYM be improved?

There are a number of improvements that should be made to FEYM.

- Remove the restrictive criteria of before and after lunch to increase accessibility for children attending maintained settings.
- Improve awareness of the scheme amongst parents and settings via government and charity websites.
- Create a clear funding stream designated for FEYM specifically with a set per meal rate that is adequate to provide nutritious food.
- Address the staffing and funding crisis in the early years sector to ensure settings are properly staffed and funded to provide the free meals.
- Support settings to implement healthy eating guidelines developed specifically for the early years which should be made mandatory.
- Finally, FEYM should be made available to all children in early years settings, regardless of whether they are maintained, private or voluntary organisations and should be funded by the government, just as the 'free entitlement' hours providing funding across all different types of early years settings. This may be an ambitious ask but is supported by the evidence on the positive impacts of universal FSM in primary school and is being advocated by a number of different organisations.¹⁵⁹ An initial step in the right direction to increase the reach of the policy would be to increase the minimum income threshold for the eligibility criteria so that more children in income poverty can access FEYM.

The Nursery Milk Scheme

The Nursery Milk Scheme was first introduced in the 1940s and remains a statutory obligation of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.¹⁶⁰ The scheme provides 1/3 pint of milk per day for children under five or 1/3 pint of formula for babies under 12 months for free. The eligibility criteria requires that children attend an eligible setting for two hours or more to qualify. Eligible settings include registered childminders, registered day care providers, local authorities which provide daycare and schools which provide daycare for children under five years. Although there is a School and Nursery Milk Alliance which has continued to protect the scheme from proposed changes, there is a lack of data on how many early years settings participate in the scheme and any evaluations of

¹⁵⁸ Holford and Rabe, 'Impact of the Universal Infant Free School Meal Policy'.

¹⁵⁹ Sustain, 'Our Children, Our Future'; La Valle et al., 'Early Education for Disadvantaged Children: How Local Action Can Support Take-up of the 15 Hours Entitlement'; O'Sullivan, 'Should the Early Years Address Food Poverty?'; La Valle et al., 'Early Education for Disadvantaged Children: How Local Action Can Support Take-up of the 15 Hours Entitlement'.

¹⁶⁰ Department for Health and Social Care, 'About the Scheme — The Nursery Milk Scheme'.

the scheme.¹⁶¹ This makes it impossible to evaluate the effectiveness of this policy and understand how significant it is in addressing food poverty in early years. Our initial recommendations in relation to this policy are therefore to collect data on participation in the scheme, as well as provide an evaluation of the scheme and a cost benefit analysis to understand if this is a scheme that ought to be preserved, improved or whether the money spent on it would in fact be better spent on other policies to address food poverty in early years.

¹⁶¹ 'The School & Nursery Milk Alliance'.

Section 3: What local place-based initiatives are already in place to address food poverty for under-fives in England and how effective are they?

In this section we explore local place-based initiatives to reduce food poverty. Given that local place-based initiatives are not always well documented online or in research studies, this section employed a number of additional investigative methods. Expert interviews were particularly informative. Our interview with Isabel Rice from Sustain was important for identifying local initiatives. Isabel Rice is the coordinator of the London Food Poverty Campaign and works very closely with London boroughs to tackle the food poverty in their areas. Our interview with Sue Balmer from the Happy Baby Community gave us detailed insight into how a local initiative supporting asylum-seeking women and their young children operates and the food poverty-related challenges they face. In an additional interview Professor Alice Bradbury at UCL shared her expertise on food banks in early years settings. Finally, we employed literature searches, web scraping and large language models to find other useful examples of local initiatives (see Appendix 2 for more details).

Following Sustain's definition of local place-based policies, we understand these initiatives as:

the act of key local actors coming together to address local issues based on joint understanding of the community in that place.

There are two key parts to this definition. First, it highlights the importance of understanding the needs of the community by bringing in different perspectives, with local people with lived experiences having the most important role in defining the local needs. Second, the definition underscores the need for a joined-up approach of working collaboratively between key local actors, such as council teams, food partnerships or alliances, the voluntary sector, and the NHS/healthcare sector.

In our search for local place-based initiatives, we found that most local partnerships focus on alleviating food poverty for the local population as a whole, which by definition includes under-fives. Additionally, we found that some local initiatives were already implementing actions that we have recommended for national policy and could ideally be carried out at a national level. The extension of free early years meals (FEYM) to all settings and increasing uptake of the HSS are both examples of this.

In the following sections we provide examples of local place-based initiatives focused on reducing food poverty for under-fives, as well as examples of local initiatives that take into account local needs to reduce food poverty for the population as a whole. This is not an exhaustive list and there are many more examples of place-based initiatives. The aim of this section is to provide a selection of valuable examples that we can learn from to inform policy approaches in other areas as well as national policy.

3.1 Local initiatives to reduce food poverty for under-fives

Extending Free Early Years Meals (FEYM)

As discussed in Section 2, the national FEYM scheme is only available to children who attend standalone state-maintained nursery schools and school-based nurseries (before and after lunch) and meet benefits-related eligibility criteria and apply. Both Southwark and Westminster have worked to extend FEYM to reach more children in need.

Southwark council started providing free healthy school meals to all primary pupils in 2013 under their Free Healthy School Meals scheme. Six years later, the programme was extended to all children in state-maintained nursery schools and school-based nurseries regardless of their income level.¹⁶² Children in these settings that are accessing government subsidised hours (herein referred to as 'free entitlements') are eligible, with the amount of funding for meals per child calculated based on their funded hours.¹⁶³ There is still discretion to decide exactly how to spend this food-related funding per child, for example, if a child is not able to attend during lunch the funding can be used for healthy snacks.¹⁶⁴ As well as the additional funding, the programme has a dedicated food team that generates and makes publicly available information on how to serve healthy meals and improve the eating environment. It also provides reminders of existing 'dessert'¹⁶⁵ and 'water only' policies, in an effort to reduce sugar intake. In 2023, the council continued with their ambitious plan to tackle child food poverty and extended the scheme to all secondary pupils whose parents receive Universal Credit.

In 2023, The City of Westminster set an ambitious plan to feed their children aged three to 14.¹⁶⁶ The Mayor of London's city-wide scheme provided extra funding that allowed them to extend the existing free school meal scheme that was already benefitting primary schools to all early years settings that offer free entitlement hours. The Westminster programme therefore goes a step further in including all early year settings where children are accessing their free entitlement rather than restricting to state-maintained nursery schools and school-based nurseries; this therefore extends FEYM to children attending private, voluntary and independent early years settings as well as childminders. The extension of the scheme is due to the strong political commitment to the early years by the council.¹⁶⁷ The council developed a nought-to-five strategic partnership group that has initiated several actions. These include addressing the root causes of issues like the cost-of-living crisis and collecting and analysing early years metrics to monitor performance.

¹⁶² 'Free Healthy Nursery Meals'.

¹⁶³ At the time of writing, the following funding entitlements are in place: 15 hours for disadvantaged two-year-olds, 15 hours for two-year-olds; 15 hours for eligible working parents of two-year-olds; 15 hours for all three- and four-year-olds; 30- hours for three- and four-year-olds with both parents in work. These funding entitlements are being expanded in the near future see Department for Education (2024) 'Free childcare: How we are tackling the cost of childcare' <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2024/04/08/free-childcare-how-we-tackling-the-cost-of-childcare/>

¹⁶⁴ Southwark Council, 'Free Healthy Nursery Meals'.

¹⁶⁵ This includes the provision of low or no sugar items and low salt savoury items, as well as products with a content of at least 50 per cent fruit or vegetables

¹⁶⁶ 'Westminster Starts Expanded Free School Meal Scheme, Feeding 14,000 Children in the City'.

¹⁶⁷ Bremner & Co, 'Shining a Light on Early Years Nutrition: The Role of Councils'.

Promoting uptake of the Healthy Start Scheme

As discussed in Section 2, the Healthy Start Scheme (HSS) is an initiative that assists women who are pregnant and/or have children under four to access healthy food and free vitamins. As discussed in the previous section one of the problems with the HSS is the low uptake and we recommend a number of strategies to improve uptake and thereby increase the impact of the scheme on alleviating food poverty. In our research on place-based initiatives we found examples of many areas that are already implementing strategies to improve uptake in their locality. Many localities are taking effective actions to raise awareness of the scheme among eligible parents. Brighton and Hove, Croydon, Leeds, South Gloucestershire, Cambridge and Southwark delivered a range of activities that included the re-designing of posters, publication of adverts in local magazines, social media, and in public spaces such as market stalls, buses and children's centres. They also facilitated the inclusion of stickers in children's 'red books' to remind health professionals to talk about these schemes and set up a mailbox for carers in need of support or advice. Some areas deliver training sessions for frontline workers and volunteers to increase knowledge of the HSS, and focus groups to understand the experiences of health and non-health professionals when it comes to supporting families to access the scheme.¹⁶⁸ Similar actions have been carried out in Scotland to increase the uptake of a comparable national scheme, Best Start (see Section 4 for more details), with Aberdeen as a successful example in reaching families through wider advertisement campaigns.¹⁶⁹

As well as promoting the take up of the HSS, Cambridge and Leeds went a step further and allowed families to use their vouchers for another scheme in which they can receive a weekly vegetable and fruit box to their doorstep.¹⁷⁰ These initiatives support families in accessing affordable nutritious food and removes the extra stress that low-income parents experience when shopping around with young children for the best deals.

Food banks and food pantries in early years settings

Families experiencing food insecurity often refrain from using food banks due to the stigma associated with it.¹⁷¹ Additionally, foodbanks require a referral from a professional such as a GP which can present another barrier. In their recent research on foodbanks in early years settings, Alice Bradbury and Sharon Vince found that parents were able to access this support more easily and with less stigma.¹⁷² This was often because not only were they not having to access a foodbank but also because they were set up in a more convenient way. Foodbanks and pantries in early years settings were arranged in a way that allowed parents to access the food discretely without having to engage with anyone, with many of the places letting parents choose what they wanted rather than

¹⁶⁸ Food Power, 'Promoting the Healthy Start scheme. Leeds Food Poverty Alliance, Final Report'; Food Power, 'Increasing the Uptake of Healthy Start Vouchers. Croydon Food Poverty Alliance'; Food Power, 'Promoting Healthy Start in South Gloucestershire. South Gloucestershire Food Poverty Alliance'; Food Power, 'Achievements from Our 3-Year Food Poverty Action Plan, and What next? Brighton & Hove Food Partnership'; Food Power, 'Improving Awareness of Healthy Start. Southwark Food Poverty Alliance'.

¹⁶⁹ Food Power, 'Best Start and Smile Pantry. Food Poverty Action Aberdeen'.

¹⁷⁰ Food Power, 'Developing a Food Poverty Action Plan Cambridge. Food Poverty Alliance, Final Report'; Food Power, 'Promoting the Healthy Start scheme. Leeds Food Poverty Alliance, Final Report',.

¹⁷¹ Loopstra and Tarasuk, 'The Relationship between Food Banks and Household Food Insecurity among Low-Income Toronto Families'.

¹⁷² Bradbury and Vince, 'Food Banks in Early Years Settings: The Impact on Children, Families and Staff'.

being given a pre-packed box. Locating the foodbanks and pantries in the nurseries was also convenient for parents as they do not have to travel to other places to get food: they can just pop in as they collect or drop their children off. Parents did not require a referral and there was no limit on the number of times they could access the food within a defined period, as is often the case with foodbanks.

Another advantage of these schemes is the opportunity to strengthen relationships between staff and parents. The informality of the situation boosts the width and the depth of conversations which can lead to better provision for the children and families. For example, getting to know the situation of a family can trigger staff to provide some helpful signposting on the spot. The most common model reported in which food banks were operationalised in early years settings was in collaboration with a partner organisation (such as a food waste distribution service) who deliver the food to the settings every week, and staff would organise a room within the setting to make the products accessible to parents (Ibid). In another less commonly reported model, staff made up food parcels and gave food vouchers to families in need.

Children's centres can also provide an effective location for food banks and pantries and are able to reach some families that do not take their children to a formal educational setting. A particular food bank model that worked well in children's centres was the FOOD Clubs model (Food On Our Doorstep), which was developed by Family Actions in response to growing food poverty during the pandemic.¹⁷³ Currently, there are about 50 FOOD Clubs across the UK that provide regular access to affordable food to young families, which is mostly provided by FareShare, a large national charity. In their model, families wishing to join the club must pay £1 to become a member, and live or work within 15 minutes from a club. Members can purchase a £15-worth parcel of food items every week for £4. The fact that parents must pay a nominal fee to get access to affordable goods further reduces the stigma and preserves dignity for families.

3.2 Actions tailored to local needs

Whilst many of the local initiatives described above could be implemented in other areas or as national policy, a key advantage of local place-based initiatives is the ability to tailor these to the specific needs of each area. As discussed above - meeting locally defined needs is an important part of any place-based initiative along with taking a joined up approach, involving multiple actors.

Taking a 'joined up approach' can be realised in different forms, from local partnerships between two or more organisations to a more encompassing whole systems approach. In this subsection, we present three cases that represent good examples of how local actions are tailored to three particular local needs: food deserts, large populations of asylum seekers, and high food waste. Then, we present the case of Food Power, an initiative created by Sustain that supported the setup of tens of local food poverty alliances across the UK. Following this, we explore the case of Brighton and Hove, a local partnership that took a whole systems approach by incorporating in their plans actions that influence wider systemic drivers of food poverty such as the food environment and the cost-of-living crisis. Their initiatives not only seek to alleviate local hunger, but also to promote healthier lifestyles and reduce waste, amongst other goals.

¹⁷³ Baker and Bakopoulou, 'Children's Centres, Families and Food Insecurity in Times of Crisis'.

Addressing food deserts: the case of the Queen of Greens

Liverpool city region contains approximately half of England's ten most deprived "food deserts". Food deserts are disadvantaged areas where residents lack access to affordable healthy foods. The Queen of Greens initiative is a mobile greengrocer's program in Liverpool that aims to address this issue.¹⁷⁴ The program uses minibuses to bring affordable fresh fruit and vegetables to communities across Liverpool and Knowsley, with the objective to reduce health inequalities and improve nutrition. The stops have been carefully selected after consulting with community and local health partners, to make sure that it reaches the people that would highly benefit from accessing the mobile service. Importantly, the Queen of Greens bus accepts Healthy Start cards and Alexandra Rose vouchers at all stops.¹⁷⁵ This is an advantage for families with young children since it removes the need for them to travel to places where they can redeem their vouchers.

Addressing Hunger and Food Waste Simultaneously: the case of the Felix Project

The Felix Project is a London-based charity that fights hunger and food waste. Their mission is to ensure that no one goes hungry while surplus fresh food is thrown away. Food poverty and food waste are two important local challenges of the UK capital: on one hand, 67 per cent of food waste produced in London is edible, although less than 1 per cent is redistributed; on the other hand, there are high levels of child food poverty in London with one survey estimating about 40 per cent of London's children (age seven to 16) have experienced food poverty in the previous months, compared to a national average of 25 per cent.¹⁷⁶ The Felix Project operates on a model of rescuing surplus food from the food industry and redistributing it to over 1,000 charities, schools, and community groups across London. The initiative also makes use of facilities provided with kitchens and equipment for the preparation of meals. Accessibility to Felix Project food depends on the model of the community organizations that receive their food. However, the estimated impact of the Felix project on children is extensive: about 36 per cent of users are reported to be children or families with children, although the impact might be higher as the project is likely to be reaching more children through other users.¹⁷⁷

Supporting asylum seeker women with young children: the Happy Baby Community

The Happy Baby Community (HBC) is a London-based initiative that supports women who have fled from violence or traffickers and are pregnant or have a child or children three years old or under. This community provides a safe space where these women can receive various forms of support, including antenatal and postnatal care, welfare advice, and food.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ 'The Queen of Greens Project'.

¹⁷⁵ These vouchers are provided by the Alexandra Rose charity through their Vouchers for Fruit and Veg Project, which helps families on low incomes with young children (aged 4 years and under), and pregnant women to buy fresh fruit and vegetables. See Alexander Rose Charity <https://www.alexandrarose.org.uk/rose-vouchers/>

¹⁷⁶ The Felix Project, 'The Felix Project: Impact Report 2023'; The Childhood Trust, "'It's like a Chronic Illness" A Report on Food Insecurity Impacting School Aged Children in London'; ReLondon, 'London's Food Footprint'.

¹⁷⁷ The Felix Project, 'The Felix Project: Impact Report 2023'.

¹⁷⁸ Happy Baby Community, 'Happy Baby Community: Annual Report 2022'.

In the UK, asylum-seeking women are either placed in hotels, where they lack access to a kitchen, or in other restricted accommodations. Those living in shared houses receive £49.18 a week per person in the household to cover all their essentials, including food. In the case of those living in hotels, the food is catered by the hotels; however, there is a concern that they might not provide the necessary nutrients for a healthy diet. Women living in hotels receive £8.86 a week per person to purchase any additional items they need beyond the provided food. Women who are pregnant or have a child up to age three receive additional weekly payments to buy healthy food (£5.25 for pregnant women and children aged one to three and £9.50 for a baby under one year).¹⁷⁹ The experiences of the women in the HBC suggest that the amount of money they get is insufficient to access nutritious food in both cases. Furthermore, asylum-seeker women are not eligible for the HSS. The difficulty accessing healthy food is detrimental to the women's health - in our interview Sue Balmer, co-director of the HBC, described the high prevalence of gestational diabetes and anaemia among the women who access HBC, noting that the current system fails to adequately support these critical health needs.

The HBC currently has four centres in London and one in Surrey, which are strategically located close to the places where the women are placed into accommodation. Although the HBC food model varies slightly by centre, it has three common components that takes place weekly: family-style lunches, the provision of food boxes to take home, and children's food tables. The latter initiative is a module within their Every Child Can Thrive project, and it involves seating children and their mothers at tables with various types of food to sample. The goal is twofold: to expand children's taste preferences and encourage mothers to introduce a more varied menu to their children. HBC relies on organisations like the Felix Project and the City Harvest¹⁸⁰ to obtain food, and FoodCycle¹⁸¹ and small local organizations like a church café to cook the meals they provide. Additionally, they provide extra support to pregnant women with gestational diabetes by giving them supermarket vouchers for additional food and running a special program to improve their eating habits.

In 2022, the HBC reached a total of 2,520 children and babies. Despite the size of the charity's impact, there are still a few challenges identified in the food model. Sue Balmer noted that the food provided by food waste charities often lacks the variety needed for a balanced diet as it depends on what food is available. Additionally, they frequently receive unusual unsold products like 'vegan bacon,' which are unfamiliar to the women. This unfamiliarity can make them hesitant to consume these items or unsure of how to prepare them. Furthermore, since some of the women are living in hotels with only a simple kettle available, they are unable to cook many of the products. These issues highlight the unsuitability of the food the charity is provided with, not to mention the lack of healthy food options. To enhance the diet of these women, the HBC is planning to improve the quality of the food parcels by purchasing vegetables from local green grocers.

Food Poverty Alliances to tackle local food poverty

Food Power is an initiative that started in 2017 by Sustain and Church Action on Poverty, and was funded by the Big Lottery Fund for four years.¹⁸² The initiative's goal was to establish a network of

¹⁷⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get>

¹⁸⁰ [City Harvest](#) is a food rescue charity, similar to Felix Project

¹⁸¹ [Food Cycle](#) utilise surplus food from supermarkets and food banks to prepare vegetarian meals, and then serve them at "free community restaurants".

¹⁸² 'Food Power - Tackling Food Poverty through People-Powered Change | Sustain'.

Food Poverty Alliances (FPAs) across the UK to share learning and provide support to reduce food poverty. FPAs are networks of local organisations that work together to reduce food poverty in their communities. A total of 85 Food Poverty Alliances were formed across the UK, of which 88 per cent developed a food poverty action plan.¹⁸³

The food poverty action plans were designed to have in mind the local needs and aspirations, as well as all the resources that are available locally. For example, FPAs in rural regions considered the additional challenges of living in low density areas. For example the rural Lancashire FPA developed a project to test new ways to help people to open up and share their experiences of food poverty in rural areas; and the Shropshire FPA conducted research to understand the additional challenges in rural areas, leading to recommendations for actions like the exploration of options to improve access to existing services and inexpensive food in these areas.¹⁸⁴ Some FPAs identified the need to fill the gaps in their understanding of the opinions and experiences of people living with food poverty. The York FPA conducted focus groups, which led to the identification of complicated shopping strategies that families with young children use to find the best food deals. The York FPA also carried out a film project that successfully documented the struggles with food and affordability of six parents with young children.¹⁸⁵ Focus on specific groups is common amongst FPAs' actions, with some paying particular attention to infants, children, and young people. The promotion of the HSS was the most popular measure carried out by many FPAs (as described above).

An evaluation report conducted by Cardiff University found that Food Power has successfully contributed to building coordinated networks that have likely produced a positive impact to reduce the levels of food poverty in the UK.¹⁸⁶ However, the exact impact that Food Power has had on reducing levels of food poverty is difficult to evaluate, as the drivers of food poverty are likely to fluctuate, such as food prices. Nonetheless, the report outlines cases that clearly demonstrate how enhanced coordinated local actions generated desirable outcomes. As well as encouraging local initiatives to get organised by creating alliances, the Food Power initiative offered important forms of support that have been recognised by FPAs as having great value, with activities covering the involvement of experts by experience, regional peer networks, peer mentoring, and local evaluation pilots, amongst others. In addition, the participation in Food Power has increased the power and authority of the alliances and put them in a better position to influence and lobby for the change needed to reduce food poverty.

Partnering and coordinated local actions have been key in the success of FPAs' activities to tackle local food poverty. This highlights the fact that individual initiatives have the potential to amplify their impact by working collaboratively with other organizations that share the same goals at the local level. The main learning from FPA initiatives is that bringing a wide range of local actors together can be a powerful tool to solve food poverty. As well as sharing information and resources, the inclusion of people with lived experience of food poverty in the alliances has been critical to enrich the understanding of the problem at a local level with their contextualised insights. The

¹⁸³ Knowles et al., 'Food Power Final Evaluation Report'.

¹⁸⁴ Food Power, 'Food Poverty Action Plan Fairer Moray Forum: Final Report'; Food Power, 'Food Poverty in Rural Lancashire. Feeding Lancashire Together, Interim Report'; Padgett and Fay, 'Addressing Children's Food Poverty in Shropshire'.

¹⁸⁵ Food Power, 'Building Our Alliance. York Food Poverty Alliance, Final Report'.

¹⁸⁶ Knowles et al., 'Food Power Final Evaluation Report'.

consultation of experts by experience contributed to the generation of more realistic understandings of local needs, which represented the first step towards a tailored set of actions.

Whole-system approaches

The problem of food poverty is situated within a large complex context of wider issues related to food systems. To address food poverty alongside other challenges such as high carbon prints, excessive food waste and poor diets, 95 localities have established Sustainable Food Places partnerships and developed a city-wide strategy that considers all the factors and drivers involved. Sustainable Food Places (SFP) is a partnership programme in the UK that brings together food partnerships from various towns, cities, boroughs, districts, and counties to address significant social, economic, and environmental challenges related to food.¹⁸⁷

One SFP partnership, Brighton and Hove, was chosen as the best SFP city in 2022 in developing an ambitious food strategy plan. Their 2018-2023 plan envisioned a city where everyone has access to affordable, nutritious food, and where food production and consumption have minimal negative impact on the environment.¹⁸⁸ Goals included promoting health, reducing food poverty, supporting local food businesses, and minimising food waste. Similarly, as we found in most FPAs, Brighton and Hove sought the engagement of the community, involving residents, schools, and businesses in food-related initiatives. Brighton and Hove implemented proactive measures to specifically address food poverty. The council highlights low wages, unaffordable housing and unemployment as the main drivers of food poverty, and so acting on these was a priority in their plan. To do this, the council ran a campaign to promote the Living Wage, and to prioritise affordable housing for homeless people or people at risk of homelessness, amongst other actions.

3.3. Policy recommendations

These examples of place-based initiatives provide useful learning for areas wanting to address food poverty in their locality, as well as providing examples of how national policies can be improved and extended. Whilst national programmes – namely the HSS and FEYM should be improved on at a national level, as described above different areas face different challenges in relation to food poverty and therefore it is also necessary to address some factors at the local level. Based on these examples we provide recommendations below.

Recommendations for national government to support local actions to reduce food poverty:

- *Create local food poverty alliances in every English local authority and provide them with sustainable regular funding* - the collaboration of different local actors is needed to address the particularities of food insecurity in the area and to better meet local needs. The various FPAs set up thanks to the Food Power initiative reported insecurities around continuing with the initiative due to lack of funding after the initial financial support ran out.¹⁸⁹ Further, despite the important contribution of the Food Power initiative, there are still many localities where local agencies are not coordinated towards addressing local food poverty. Most public Health professionals interviewed from Sustainable Food Cities partnerships

¹⁸⁷ King, 'Making the Case for a Place Based Systems Approach to Healthy and Sustainable Food'.

¹⁸⁸ Food Partnership, 'Brighton and Hove Food Strategy Action Plan 2018-2023'.

¹⁸⁹ Knowles et al., 'Food Power Final Evaluation Report'.

agreed that the partnerships contributed to reducing food poverty in their area.¹⁹⁰ As was demonstrated by the Sure Start early years programme, giving local areas autonomy to address local needs along with sustainable funding can lead to significant impacts for young children and their parents.¹⁹¹

- *Financially support early years settings and children's centres in providing services that offer affordable food for low-income families* - an issue commonly reported by early years settings running a pantry or foodbank was the lack of funding for food, equipment, and energy costs.¹⁹² In particular, children's centres should be properly supported by the government as they can feasibly reach all families in need, including those families that do not have their young children attending nursery or pre-school. The number of children's centres have been declining since 2011, from 3,620 to 2,878 in 2024.¹⁹³ Family hubs can also provide a useful space to access affordable or free food whilst families are already accessing other types of support.

Recommendations for local authorities to address food poverty:

- *Work with those affected by food poverty in the area* - different areas will have different populations with different needs and obstacles to accessing affordable healthy food. To tailor local policies to meet local needs experts by experience need to be engaged to help identify what those needs are.
- *Partnerships and collaboration* - the examples above highlight the benefits of different organisations working to achieve shared goals. Involving multiple actors within the area is likely to increase the effectiveness of efforts to reduce food poverty.
- *Building networks and learning from other areas* - as discussed above there are many examples of initiatives that are already being implemented. The Food Power programme exemplified how building networks and sharing experiences of learning across areas can support other areas that are just beginning to implement initiatives to address food poverty.
- *Taking a whole systems approach* - food poverty is a problem within a wider context of a web of influencing factors as well as other food-related problems, such as food waste and high carbon footprints. The case of Brighton and Hove demonstrates how a whole system approach can be taken to address multiple related problems, as well as tackling root causes of food poverty such as income poverty and unaffordable housing.
- *Evaluate the impact of local initiatives for young children and their families* – Whilst there are many examples of locally tailored initiatives to reduce food poverty, there is less available evidence evaluating the impact of them. This is an important evidence gap to fill, in order to make clear what is making a difference, what can be improved and to effectively target funding.

¹⁹⁰ King, 'Making the Case for a Place Based Systems Approach to Healthy and Sustainable Food'.

¹⁹¹ Eisenstadt, 'Investing in Early Years Family Support'.

¹⁹² Bradbury and Vince, 'Food Banks in Early Years Settings: The Impact on Children, Families and Staff'.

¹⁹³ As per July 2024; get-information-schools.service.gov.uk

Section 4: What can we learn from other countries about how to effectively address food poverty for under-fives?

In this section we consider what we can learn from other countries about how to address food poverty in the early years. Once again we include broader policies that focus on reducing food poverty for the general population (including children under five), as well as interventions aimed specifically at reducing food poverty for under-fives. Throughout, we are interested in policies that prevent food poverty (e.g. addressing income poverty) as well as policies that respond to lessen the impact of food poverty (e.g. vouchers for food).

We start with what we can learn from what other UK nations are doing, before considering examples from other countries. We only include EU or OECD countries that are sufficiently similar to the UK in terms of, for example, economic development. Where important differences remain, such as the type and generosity of the welfare state, we highlight implications where relevant.

4.1. What can we learn from other UK nations?

Other UK nations provide particularly valuable examples for policy learning in England, given their similarities and shared UK laws as well as their devolved powers. Here we discuss Scotland's child poverty strategy and food security policies as well as free meals in early years, the Best Start Foods programme and the Scottish Milk and Healthy Snack Scheme, as well as Northern Ireland's extension of the free school meal to early years. There are fewer differences in Welsh policies; however, we do describe the Welsh Child Poverty Strategy.

Scotland

Scotland's child poverty strategy

It is important to acknowledge the wider policy context in Scotland as well as the specific food-related policies discussed below. Scotland has a child poverty strategy which includes statutory targets to reduce child poverty (across multiple poverty measures) by 2030.¹⁹⁴ To give an example of the scale of the ambition, one of these targets is to reduce relative child poverty (the proportion of children living in households with equivalised incomes below 60 per cent of the median (middle) UK income in the current year) - which was 26 per cent in 2023 - to less than 10 per cent by 2030.¹⁹⁵

Child poverty targets were protected in UK law until 2016 when the statutory targets were removed; in 2017 the Scottish Parliament passed its own Child Poverty Act which reinstated the targets from the original UK Child Poverty Act, signalling a strong political commitment to address child poverty, a root cause of child food poverty, in Scotland.¹⁹⁶ Since the Scottish Child Poverty Act (2017) two child poverty action plans have been published.¹⁹⁷ In terms of protecting incomes the Scottish Government have made a number of different decisions in relation to social security. This includes:

¹⁹⁴ Scottish Government, 'Scottish Government Policies: Poverty and Social Justice'.

¹⁹⁵ 'Child Poverty Summary'. [Child poverty summary \(data.gov.scot\)](https://data.gov.scot)

¹⁹⁶ Stewart and Reader, 'The Conservatives' Record on Early Childhood: Policies, Spending and Outcomes from May 2015 to Pre- COVID 2020', 28.

¹⁹⁷ Scottish Government, 'Every Child, Every Chance'; Scottish Government, 'Best Start, Bright Futures'.

- The Scottish Child Payment which provides £26.70 weekly for every child under sixteen in low-income households that receive certain benefits;
- Best Start Grants which provide one-off grants to low-income families with children to help support the costs of having a child at different stages;
- Discretionary Housing Payments - to mitigate against the effects of the bedroom tax, the benefit cap and other shortfalls in benefit payments

Family incomes are also protected through funded Early Learning and Care as discussed further below.

Scotland's human rights, cash-first approach to addressing food poverty

As well as policies aimed at reducing child poverty, the Scottish Government has focused policy actions on addressing food poverty. In 2023 the Scottish Government published a plan of nine actions to take over the following three years to support people experiencing food poverty.¹⁹⁸

The plan is grounded in a human rights approach to addressing food poverty, conceptualising the right to food as requiring that people can access food that 'meets their dietary, social and cultural needs', in-line with our definition of food poverty outlined in Section 1.¹⁹⁹ The strategy is focused on both prevention of food poverty - by strengthening incomes - and responses to food poverty: acknowledging that foodbanks are not the solution and they are working together with foodbanks towards the goal of no longer needing foodbanks in Scotland.

Maximising dignity is an important part of Scotland's approach to addressing food poverty, and in 2016 they set up an independent working group, including people with personal experience of food poverty to ensure policy solutions protect the dignity of those experiencing it.²⁰⁰

The Scottish Government takes a cash-first approach in their strategy to reduce food poverty. What this means in practice is that emergency cash is made readily available to enable people to buy food (and other essentials) that meets their preferences. Providing advice alongside the emergency cash can help prevent future crises by, for example, securing increased income from benefits by ensuring people are accessing all the support they are entitled to. The long-term goal is to remove any need for foodbanks by preventing food poverty in the first place. Whilst food support is still needed, however, the plan is for this to be 'provided in a way that maximises dignity and choice'.²⁰¹

There is some evidence that these policies are making a difference to food poverty. For example, data from Trussell (the main provider of food banks in Scotland) found that between November 2022 and March 2023, the number of food parcels delivered by Trussell in Scotland increased by less compared to England, Northern Ireland and Wales. In Scotland the increase was 17 per cent compared with 42 per cent in England.²⁰² Trussell have suggested this protection against greater increases in the need for food parcels could be due to the increase in value and extension of the Scottish Child Payment which previously was only paid for each child under six, but has since been extended to include each child under sixteen and made more generous.

¹⁹⁸ Scottish Government, 'Cash-First - towards Ending the Need for Food Banks in Scotland'.

¹⁹⁹ Scottish Government.

²⁰⁰ Scottish Government, 'Dignity: Ending Hunger Together in Scotland'.

²⁰¹ Scottish Government, 'Cash-First - towards Ending the Need for Food Banks in Scotland', 12.

²⁰² Trussell Trust, 'Emergency Food Parcel Distribution in Scotland: April 2022 – March 2023'.

Free meals in early years

Focusing on food poverty in the early years, there are three main policies in Scotland: the extension of free early years meals (FEYM), the Best Start Foods program (in place of the Healthy Start scheme), and the Scottish Milk and Healthy Snack Scheme (SMHSS) (in place of the UK Nursery Milk Scheme).

In Scotland, funded early learning and childcare (ELC) is provided by a diverse array of providers, including nurseries, playgroups, and childminders from the public, private, and third sector.²⁰³ ELC is available to all three and four-year-olds (around 30 hours per week during term time) and to disadvantaged two-year-olds (for the same number of hours). For two-year-olds to be eligible, the parents must either have experience of care or receive certain benefits; for those on Universal Credit, there is a take-home pay threshold of £797 a month or £9,552 a year.²⁰⁴ Local authorities receive funding from the Scottish Government to support funded ELC for all eligible children. Part of this funding is dedicated to free meals: *all children attending funded ELC receive a free meal*, regardless of their family's income level and regardless of the setting they attend, including childminders.²⁰⁵ For childminders and other settings that do not have onsite catering facilities, the corresponding education authority will provide the meals to the setting or will work in partnership with them to find any solutions to the fulfil the free meal commitment.

Unlike the English free meal scheme, the child does not need to attend both before and after lunch sessions to be eligible. To receive a free meal in ELC in Scotland, the child must attend any session that includes funded ELC hours, regardless of whether they are mixed with 'paid for' hours. The free meal consists of a two-course meal in addition to the healthy snack and milk that they receive through the SMHSS (described below).

In 2023, 13 per cent of two-year-olds and 97 per cent of three- and four-year-olds were registered for funded ELC.²⁰⁶ Currently, there are no official statistics that estimate the percentage of children that attend unfunded ELC in Scotland, so we cannot know how many children (in particular those aged two or under) may miss the free meal offer. However, these figures represent a significant improvement in access to free meals compared with England as almost all three- and four-year-olds have access. It is also an improvement on the English FEYM because it includes all early year settings, not just maintained nurseries, does not restrict eligibility to children on very low incomes and does not impose a before and after lunch eligibility rule.²⁰⁷ The scheme therefore reaches many more children in poverty.

The Best Start Foods program

The Best Start Foods program in Scotland went live in August 2019. The scheme has a similar goal to the Healthy Start Scheme (HSS) in England of offering financial support for healthy foods during

²⁰³ 'Funded Early Learning and Childcare'.

²⁰⁴ 'Funded Early Learning and Childcare'.

²⁰⁵ 'Meals, Snacks and Drinks'.

²⁰⁶ 'Summary statistics for schools in Scotland 2023 :Early Learning and Childcare (ELC)'.

²⁰⁷ This is for 3- and 4-years-olds. For 2-year-olds there is eligibility criteria on funded ELC, which affects the access to free meals. Eligibility criteria include being the recipient of certain benefits. See more on [Funded early learning and childcare - mygov.scot](https://mygov.scot)

pregnancy and for children under three years old. However, the Best Start Foods program has some advantages compared to the Healthy Start Scheme.

A key advantage is the generosity of the scheme, providing higher payments compared to the Healthy Start Scheme as detailed in Table 3.²⁰⁸ Increasing the generosity of the payments for Healthy Start was one of our recommendations in Section 2, based on the research evidence.

Table 3: Amounts paid under Healthy Start Programme (England) and Best Start Foods (Scotland)

Amount paid per week:	Healthy Start (England)	Best Start Foods (Scotland)
during pregnancy	£4.25	£5.30
from birth to one year	£8.50	£10.60
from one to three years	-	£5.30
from one to four years	£4.25	-

Another advantage of Best Start Foods is the more inclusive eligibility criteria applied to individuals who cannot access specific benefits due to their immigration status (i.e. families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)). To be eligible for the Healthy Start Scheme in England, a parent with NRPF must have at least one British child under four years old, and the family's monthly earnings after tax must be £408 or less.²⁰⁹ In Scotland, families with NRPF can qualify for Best Start Foods as long as the parent is responsible for at least one child under three who is a British citizen and the family income is £1,763 or less per month after tax for a single adult or £2,086 or less per month after tax for a couple.²¹⁰ The higher income threshold is a clear advantage because more parents are eligible for support in Scotland compared to England. The take up of the Best Start Foods scheme is also currently higher than in England, with a 77 per cent uptake registered in 2022 compared to 69 per cent for England in the same year.²¹¹

However, despite the positive aspects of the Scottish scheme, it's important to note that the Healthy Start Scheme provides support for all children up to four years old, whereas the Scottish scheme only includes children up to three years of age. As explained in Section 2 we recommend that all pre-school children be included in the scheme - including children up to age five - to avoid gaps in support. It is also important to note that as with the English Healthy Start Scheme, Best Start Foods excludes children who are not British citizens. Our recommendation is that all children in England, regardless of their citizenship status should have access to adequate amounts of healthy food.

The Scottish Milk and Healthy Snack Scheme

The Scottish Milk and Healthy Snack Scheme (SMHSS) was set up to promote the health and well-being of young children in Scotland by instilling healthy behaviours from an early age.²¹² The SMHSS replaced the UK Nursery Milk Scheme in Scotland in 2021, which is described in Section 2. Children

²⁰⁸ 'Best Start Foods'.

²⁰⁹ 'Healthy Start Scheme | NRPF'.

²¹⁰ 'Best Start Foods If You Have No Access to Public Funds'.

²¹¹ 'Best Start Foods'; 'Government Set to Miss Target for Increased Uptake of Healthy Start | Food Foundation'.

²¹² 'Milk and Healthy Snack Scheme'.

who spend two hours or more in the care of a registered day care provider or childminder can receive a daily 200ml of plain fresh cow's milk (or a specified alternative) and a healthy snack (such as fresh fruit or vegetables). This is an improvement over the previous scheme, which solely provided milk. Yet, as we discuss in the case of the UK Nursery Milk Scheme, the lack of information about the number of participating settings makes it challenging to assess its reach and impact.

Northern Ireland

Expansion of free school meals

Compared to England, Northern Ireland's free school meal scheme extends to early years and has a more generous eligibility threshold. Under the scheme, children who attend a nursery school or a nursery unit full-time and meet the benefits and income criteria qualify for free meals.²¹³ Notably, the income threshold of £15,000 for those parents in receipt of Universal Credit more than doubles the English threshold (£7,400), which potentially reduces the number of children living in poverty that are left out of the scheme.²¹⁴

An important caveat to access to free nursery meals in Northern Ireland is that the government's early education offer is less generous compared to England - there is no government funded early education and care for children under three, whilst parents of three- and four-year-olds can access 12.5 hours of funded pre-school education per week over a 38-week period.²¹⁵ This means parents get less help with the cost of early education and care which is therefore likely to take more of their income, or potentially be a barrier to work. This also implies, that given the criteria of attending full time to be eligible for free meals (though the exact number of hours is not clear), only children whose parents are paying for additional ECEC hours beyond the 12.5 hours that are funded can access free meals.

In terms of addressing the root causes of food poverty, Northern Ireland did have a child poverty strategy but this concluded in 2022 and has not been extended.²¹⁶

Wales

In Wales eligibility for free early years free (FEYM) is similar to that of England: families have to meet the same benefits and income eligibility criteria and attend for a full day at a nursery provided by a school.²¹⁷ Local authorities have the discretion to provide free meals to children whose parents have no recourse to public funds (NRPF).

In terms of addressing the root causes of food poverty, Wales does currently have a child poverty strategy, also taking a rights-based approach.²¹⁸ The Children and Families (Wales) measure places a duty on Welsh Ministers to set child poverty objectives and to report on progress every three years. Similarly to Scotland, the Welsh Government has sought to engage communities with lived

²¹³ Education Authority, 'Free School Meals / Uniform Grants'; Education Authority, 'Frequently Asked Questions'; Food Foundation, 'Feeding Our Future – State of the Nations NORTHERN IRELAND'.

²¹⁴ Education Authority, 'Free School Meals / Uniform Grants'.

²¹⁵ Trussell Trust, 'Hunger in Northern Ireland'.

²¹⁶ Northern Ireland Audit Office, 'Child Poverty in Northern Ireland: Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General'.

²¹⁷ Welsh Government, 'Free School Meals: Information for Local Authorities and Schools'.

²¹⁸ Welsh Government, 'Child Poverty Strategy for Wales 2024'.

experience of poverty and disadvantage to inform their decision making. The strategy includes plans to maximise families' incomes (for example through helping them claim all the social security benefits they are entitled to) as well as reducing costs. There is a focus on reducing food costs specifically which includes supporting cross-sector food partnerships to provide access to free and low-cost healthy foods for low-income families and taking a whole systems approach to reducing food and health related inequalities.

4.2. What can we learn from other countries outside of the UK?

Addressing the root causes of food poverty in families

Countries' welfare systems can play a crucial role in reducing poverty through several key strategies, such as strengthening social safety nets.²¹⁹ Analyses across multiple countries have found that the relationship between rising food prices, stagnating wages and food poverty is not inevitable and countries with more generous welfare states can mitigate against the impact of these risks to food poverty.²²⁰ Analysis from 142 countries demonstrates that although on average households with children are at higher risk of food poverty compared to households without children, the additional risk for families with children is lower in countries that provide financial support for families, compared to countries with little or no financial support.²²¹ This demonstrates that the strength of the relationship between low-income and food poverty depends on a country's welfare system.

Given the positive impact that financial support has on tackling food poverty in low-income families, we sought to analyse the welfare systems of countries that are economically comparable to England but that also have lower food poverty rates compared to the UK.

Based on this criteria we selected Belgium and Austria.²²² We selected them because, amongst OECD countries, their poverty rates are amongst the lowest and they have some of the lowest rates of food poverty.²²³ As well as social security spending of these two countries, we also examine other policies that target families in other ways, for example, early education and care policies and maternity leave policies. The current analysis is not meant to be a comprehensive review of countries' welfare systems. Instead, we aim to identify some policy characteristics that are useful to consider in relation to improving policies in England.

Social Security benefits

Family benefits are associated with significant reductions in child poverty rates.²²⁴ As we discussed in Section 1, benefits in the UK have become less generous due to policies that particularly impact families with children, such as the benefit cap, which restricts the total amount of benefits a household can receive regardless of its size, and the Two Child Limit, which limits tax credit and

²¹⁹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 'We Can Solve Poverty in the UK'.

²²⁰ Reeves, Loopstra, and Stuckler, 'The Growing Disconnect between Food Prices and Wages in Europe: Cross-National Analysis of Food Deprivation and Welfare Regimes in Twenty-One EU Countries, 2004–2012'.

²²¹ Reeves, Loopstra, and Tarasuk, 'Family Policy and Food Insecurity'.

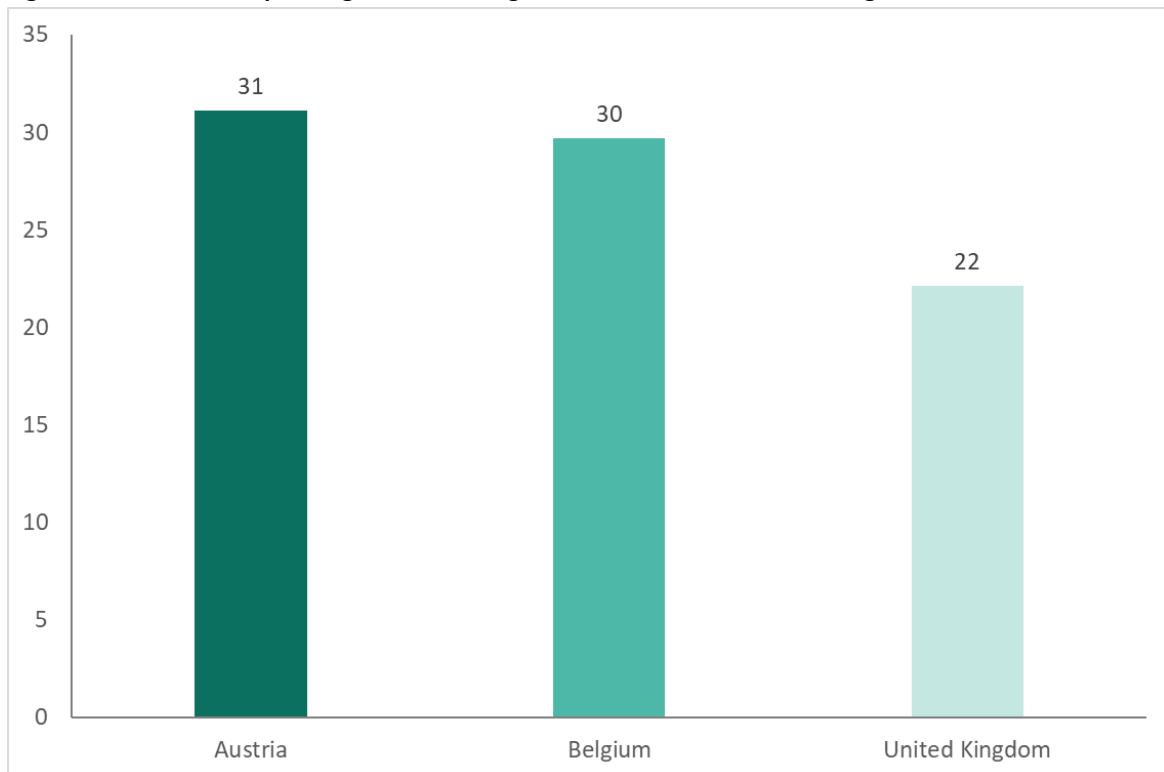
²²² 'Poverty Rate'.; Based on data from OECD in 2021. The poverty rate is the proportion of individuals (within a specific age group) whose income is below the poverty threshold, defined as half of the median household income of the entire population. Belgium showed 7.8 per cent, Austria 9.7 per cent, Canada 10.5 and the UK 11.7 per cent.

²²³ 'Food Insecurity and Food Assistance Programmes across OECD Countries'; 'OECD Temporary Archive'.

²²⁴ Van Lancker and Van Mechelen, 'Universalism under Siege?'

Universal Credit payments to the first two children in a family. Making comparisons of welfare systems across countries is difficult as there are many important factors to consider. However, one useful and widely used measure is public social expenditure as a percentage of GDP. Although this is a crude comparison and does not provide nuances and differences in how the spending is directed to families it does indicate how social security spending is prioritised in each country's budget. As can be seen from Figure 6 both Austria and Belgium have higher social spending as a percentage of GDP compared to the UK. To put this in broader context, Figure 7 shows spending for all OECD countries data is available for in 2021. Austria and Belgium rank in the top five for spending, whilst the UK is closer to the middle, and only just above the OECD average.

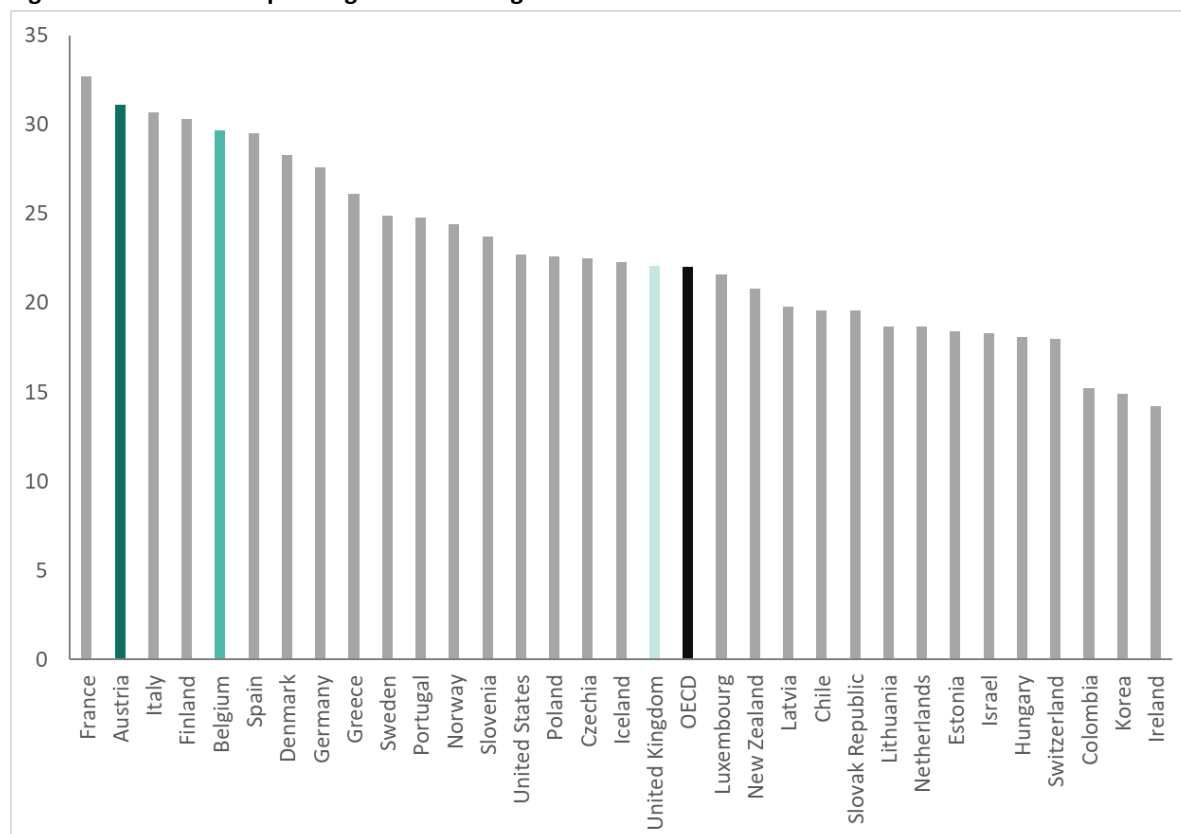
Figure 6: Public Social Spending as a Percentage of GDP in 2021 in Austria, Belgium and the UK



Source: OECD <https://www.compareyourcountry.org/social-expenditure/en/0/547/datatable//AUT+BEL+GBR> accessed 8th November 2024

Note 2021 is the chosen year because results for the United Kingdom are unavailable after this.

Figure 7: Public Social Spending as a Percentage of GDP in 2021 across OECD countries



Source: OECD <https://www.compareyourcountry.org/social-expenditure/en/0/547/datatable/1990-2021> accessed 8th November 2024

Childcare and maternity policies

In terms of protecting incomes to prevent food poverty, the cost of early childhood education and care (ECEC) can be a significant factor - as schemes that make ECEC more affordable have the potential to both reduce pressure on family incomes and enable increased income through work. Amongst European countries, the UK had one of the highest ECEC costs in 2022, with the overall cost representing 25 per cent of a couple's average wage.²²⁵ This figure contrasts with 16 per cent for Belgium and 3 per cent for Austria.

Belgium's childcare daily rate is about €28-32.²²⁶ Belgian families on low incomes can get a significant reduction in the cost of childcare, in some cases paying as little as €5.24 a day including food, in childminders and nurseries that charge income-related rates.

In the case of Austria, childcare benefits depend on the region. For example, the region with the most generous childcare scheme is Vienna, where childcare is free for all children up to 6 years old; in Tyrol, children who are four to six years old can attend part-time daycare at no cost; and in Lower

²²⁵ OECD, 'Net Childcare Costs (Indicator).'

²²⁶ 'Choosing Affordable Childcare | KidsLife'.

and Upper Austria, part-time daycare services are provided free of charge for children aged two and a half to six years old.²²⁷

A large caveat to this is that childcare shortages have been reported to be an ongoing issue in both countries. However, Belgium and Austria are aiming to make ECEC more accessible by increasing the number of places.²²⁸ For example, in Austria, the government incentivizes the two federal states in two German-speaking regions to enhance their childcare systems by co-financing the initial costs of establishing new childcare facilities; in Belgium, the Flemish Government are persuading private childcare facilities to join the means-tested school fee system by offering subsidies.²²⁹

In England an expansion of funded hours for ECEC is currently being rolled out in phases and will mean by September 2025 working parents of children aged 9 months to five years will be entitled to 30 hours a week of funded childcare for 38 weeks a year.²³⁰

The average weekly cost of full-time childcare, including nurseries and childminders, will be £120.93, or £24.19 per day, for a child eligible for 30 hours of free childcare. This calculation assumes the child attends for 50 hours per week, with 20 hours paid and 30 hours provided for free.²³¹ On the other hand, Universal Credit recipients can also benefit from reductions in childcare costs of up to 85 per cent of the fees depending on the household situation. For instance, the average weekly full-time cost of ECEC is about £300 or £60 a day in England, which would mean a reduced fee of £9 a day if the maximum 85 per cent applies.²³²

In terms of the likely impact for low-income households it is important to highlight that firstly, the expansion of funded ECEC hours is for working parents only - for households where the parent(s) are not working they will continue to receive just 15 hours of funded ECEC for disadvantaged two-year-olds and 15 hours for all three and four-year-olds. Secondly, the Institute of Fiscal Studies found that families in the bottom 30 per cent of the income distribution (i.e. the poorest third) will receive almost no direct benefit from this expansion and it is mostly families with incomes above £45,000 a year that will benefit from these reforms.²³³ To make more progress in reducing income poverty and food poverty ECEC funding should be targeted towards children in low-income households.

Additionally, there are some concerns about staffing capacity and whether the number of ECEC places available will be sufficient to meet demand for the expanded ECEC funded hours. The government has estimated that an additional 85,000 places need to be created by September 2025.²³⁴ However, there is significant variation in the shortfall of childcare places across different areas.²³⁵ National statistics show that it is the most disadvantaged areas (with a higher proportion of children living in poverty and therefore likely a higher proportion experiencing food poverty) that tend to have lower levels of access to ECEC and so unless this is addressed as the policy is rolled out

²²⁷ 'How Does the Cost of Childcare in Austria Compare to Other Countries?'; 'Childcare in Austria'.

²²⁸ EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK (ESPN), 'In-Work Poverty in Europe'.

²²⁹ EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK (ESPN).

²³⁰ HM Government, 'Early Years Childcare'.

²³¹ 'Childcare Costs'.

²³² 'Universal Credit Childcare Costs'.

²³³ Drayton and Farquharson, 'Early Years Spending Update: Budget Reforms and Beyond'.

²³⁴ Foster, Kennedy, and Lewis, 'Paying for Childcare in England'.

²³⁵ Department for Education, 'Government Funded Childcare Offer to Kick in from next Week'.

children from more disadvantaged areas will continue to have lower levels of access to ECEC and be less likely to benefit from the expanded ECEC offer.²³⁶

Maternity Leave

The generosity of maternity leave is another policy area relevant to protecting incomes for families with very young children. When it comes to maternity leave, both Austria and Belgium offer particularly supportive policies during the initial postnatal phase, where mothers are required to take leave (see Table 6). Austrian and Belgian mandatory maternity leave is 8 and 9 weeks respectively, with 100 per cent of the salary protected.²³⁷ In addition, they are also entitled to take 8 and 6 to 8 weeks respectively before the due date, also fully paid.²³⁸ In contrast, in England women get paid 90 per cent of their salaries for the first 6 weeks after birth, from which 2 weeks are compulsory to take.²³⁹ They are entitled to start maternity leave before the due date, but this is taken out of their postnatal entitlement, rather than provided in addition to it. This means that, if a woman starts her maternity leave 6 weeks before the due date, she will receive less than half of the National Living Wage by the time the baby arrives.²⁴⁰

The substantial drop in income during maternity leave can cause some families to deplete their savings or accrue debt. The proportion of women expressing significant concerns over financial matters during pregnancy or maternity leave has seen a notable increase, climbing from 64 per cent in 2022 to 73 per cent in 2024.²⁴¹ With rising food prices some pregnant women and new mothers in the UK are increasingly relying on food banks for support or are forced to go back to work earlier to be able to afford food.²⁴² Despite the longer overall duration of paid maternity leave in the UK compared to Belgium and Austria, the minimal basic maternity leave allowance falls short of meeting a family's essential needs. Recent research highlights that statutory maternity pay in the UK is only 43 per cent of the National Living Wage and that 76 per cent of mothers surveyed had to go into some form of debt or take money out of savings to manage on statutory maternity pay.²⁴³ Additionally, Belgium and Austria both have comprehensive universal family benefits as well as affordable childcare which further supports and alleviates the financial struggles of early maternity beyond the statutory maternity allowance.

These comparisons focus solely on statutory maternity leave, overlooking the important role of employer maternity policies which can provide additional pay. However, information on how many people received additional payments from employers and their value was not available for comparison across the countries.

²³⁶ Office for National Statistics, 'Childcare Accessibility by Neighbourhood'.

²³⁷ Jurviste, 'Maternity and Paternity Leave in the EU'.

²³⁸ 'Birth of a Child | Settling in Belgium'; 'Maternity Allowance'.

²³⁹ Women working in a factory must take 4 weeks; 'Maternity Pay and Leave'.

²⁴⁰ This will be for a 35-hour week equivalent, and on rate of £10.44/h (for 21 and over).

²⁴¹ Roscoe, 'Why We're Calling on the next Government to End Pregnancy Poverty'.

²⁴² Maternity Action, 'A Perfect Storm: Pregnancy, New Motherhood and the Cost of Living Crisis'.

²⁴³ Pregnant then Screwed, '4 in 10 Mothers Took Just 12 Weeks or Less Maternity Leave in the UK'.

Table 4 Maternity leave policies in the UK, Austria and Belgium

	UK	Austria	Belgium
Before birth	It can begin 11 weeks before due date, but statutory maternity pay starts counting from that point (see below).	8 weeks before due date: 100% of average pay	6 weeks before due date: 100% of average pay (8 weeks in the case of multiple births)
After birth	First 6 weeks: 90% of average pay Next 33 weeks: £184.03 per week or less	First 8 weeks: 100% of average pay (12 weeks for multiple births, premature births or births by C- section)	First 9 weeks: 100% of average pay

4.3. Policy recommendations

Other countries can provide useful policy learning and a reminder that things can be done differently, both to prevent food poverty by protecting family incomes and to respond to food poverty when it does happen. Examples from other UK nation states demonstrate the possibility of a more generous Healthy Start Scheme (HSS), more universal free nursery meals and the importance of anti-poverty and anti-food poverty strategies. Examples from other countries highlight the importance of the welfare state and the various ways in which governments can protect their citizens from income poverty and food poverty by protecting family incomes through generous social security, help with childcare costs and maternity pay that protects families from falling into low income during their maternity leave.

Based on the examples discussed above we make the following recommendations:

- To implement a child poverty strategy, with statutory targets to reduce child poverty across multiple measures - It is encouraging that the current government has set up a child poverty task force, is reinstating the Child Poverty Unit and will publish a child poverty strategy in Spring 2025.²⁴⁴ As part of this strategy, other countries such as Scotland have provided examples of how social security policies can be modified to protect families with children, such as additional payments to families with children to address shortfalls in benefit income due to regressive UK-wide policies such as the benefit cap.

²⁴⁴ Cabinet Office, 'Tackling Child Poverty'.

- To implement a specific food poverty strategy - as in the Scottish example this strategy should prioritise including people with lived experience of food poverty and make promoting people's dignity a key focus of policies. In addition to the input of experts by lived experience, the Scottish strategy also promotes a cash-first approach to addressing food poverty which allows for choice when accessing food and meets our definition of being food secure outlined in Section 1. Another important feature of the Scottish food poverty strategy is the human rights approach - focusing on the right to food. Taking this approach it should follow that any policies aimed at reducing food poverty should include all children in England, regardless of their citizenship status.
- Increase the value of the Healthy Start Scheme and extend these to include children up to age five years and children whose parents have no recourse to public funds - as recommended in Sections 2 and 3 the evidence from Scotland provides an example of a more generous scheme (though in Scotland the age and citizenship eligibility is also too narrow).
- Extend free early years meals to children in all nursery settings - again Scotland provides an example of free meals for all children accessing government-funded hours in any setting. Northern Ireland also provides an example of a more generous income threshold for eligibility which could be an initial first step to increasing free meal provision for children in low-income households. As suggested in previous sections the eligibility criteria for attending before and after lunch should also be removed.
- Review the generosity of family-related benefits - as mentioned in relation to the child poverty strategy the generosity of social security benefits has the potential to make a significant difference to child poverty rates. Current rates should be reviewed to ensure that all families have incomes adequate to meet their needs, including for food that is healthy and aligned with their cultural and personal preferences.
- Review the cost of ECEC for the lowest income households as the expansion of funded hours is rolled out - help with the cost of ECEC can protect incomes by both reducing pressure on income from high fees and from enabling parents to work to earn more income. The current expansion of funded ECEC that is underway needs to be implemented in such a way that children from the most disadvantaged areas can have access to high quality ECEC.
- Review the generosity of maternity pay - maternity leave can be a period where family finances come under stress with the cost of a new baby and usual levels of income are only protected for the first six weeks. Additionally high ECEC costs can make it difficult to return to work, potentially leaving some women stuck with a large income penalty for having a baby.

Section 5: What can be done to reduce food poverty for under-fives in England?

Summary of evidence

Before outlining more specific policy recommendations it is useful to take stock of some of the main findings and how this relates to existing policies as well as what to bear in mind for future policies. This report has found that families with the youngest children face even higher risks of food poverty than families with older children. Evidence demonstrates that food poverty is detrimental to young children's outcomes during this critical period of development which influences later outcomes and is associated with worse physical health, cognitive development, educational attainment and behavioural outcomes. Food poverty can also be a source of stress for parents, putting pressure on their mental health and negatively influencing parenting and the home environment, in turn undermining children's opportunities to thrive.

These findings highlight the importance of addressing food poverty, given that it relates to so many other outcomes. The negative consequences of food poverty for parents' mental health and the home environment also underline the importance of taking a whole family approach with policies aimed at reducing food poverty for under-fives.

In terms of the causes of food poverty, the root cause is insufficient family income to afford to buy healthy food. Therefore, to reduce food poverty we must increase families' incomes and ensure they are adequate to afford healthy food as well as other essentials.

Other factors both at the local area level and in the home and early years settings can also exacerbate the problem of food poverty. Areas that are 'food deserts' or 'food swamps' restrict families' ability to access affordable healthy food. Inadequate accommodation can create significant barriers to having a healthy diet and accessing food in socially acceptable ways. Additionally, early years settings, where some young children receive a significant proportion of their daily nutrient intake, are facing funding and staffing challenges, along with the cost of living crisis, as well as lacking clear and statutory nutritional guidelines (whilst there are food standards in schools).

This report has considered the national policies already in place, local place-based initiatives and examples of how other countries – both within and outside of the UK – do things differently, to learn what can be done to reduce food poverty for under-fives in particular.

Evidence on free early years meals and the Healthy Start Scheme makes clear a number of improvements that could be made to make the policies more effective at reducing food poverty for under-fives, as discussed below. Evidence from local place-based initiatives highlights the importance of tailoring policies to local area-needs, in consultation with local families impacted by food poverty. Additionally, taking a joined-up approach to coordinating across multiple actors can amplify the effectiveness of initiatives, as well as sharing learning across different areas.

Evidence from other countries, including UK nations, highlights the important role of the welfare state in its potential to protect families and children from food poverty. Importantly addressing income poverty, as the root cause of food poverty, includes reviewing the main factors that affect families' income – including levels of social security benefits, cost of early childhood education and care as well as maternity and paternity leave. Through its child poverty strategy and food poverty strategy Scotland makes a case for the feasibility of doing things differently in England – both to

prevent food poverty (by for example, protecting families with children against some of the more regressive features of the social security system through the Scottish Child Payment) and in responding to food poverty (prioritising dignity and taking a cash first approach).

Policy Recommendations

Here we summarise our main policy recommendations based on these evidence reviews and expert interviews.

1. Improvements to existing national policies:

The few policies already in place that have a specific focus on early years nutrition have been shown to have several areas for improvement that would increase their effectiveness. These recommendations are strengthened by examples from local areas which are already adapting and improving or extending these national policies to make them more effective in their area. Additionally, policy differences in other UK nations, in particular Scotland, reinforce the argument for the desirability of such improvements to these national policies and demonstrate the feasibility of making such improvements.

- **Improvements for the Healthy Start Scheme:** The evidence suggests this scheme does have the potential to make a positive difference to young children's access to healthy food, though the low amounts have not kept pace with inflation which undermines this goal. Furthermore, the restrictive criteria potentially exclude many children experiencing food poverty, including children aged four, children in families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) and children on Universal Credit and low incomes that are above the very low income cutoff. The HSS also has particularly low take up in some areas of England. Based on the existing evidence and in-line with many of the suggestions of the Healthy Start Working Group we recommend:
 - Increasing the value of the HSS payments and reviewing this every six months to ensure it keeps pace with inflation – as inflation rises these payments become even more important.
 - Expanding the eligibility criteria: to include children age four, children from families with NRPF, and increase the income threshold to include more children in food poverty.
 - Improve the uptake of the scheme by promoting awareness with a national campaign, training professionals that come into contact with families to promote the scheme, simplifying the application process and ideally moving towards an autoenrollment system.

- **Improvements to free early years meals (FEYM)** - there is very little published evidence about the take up and implementation of free early years meals. Evidence gathered from expert interviews indicates that in practice there is a lot of discretion with how this policy is applied. Evidence also suggests more children could benefit from FEYM (based on the number of children eligible for free school meals (FSM) when they first start school). A combination of factors undermine accessibility to FEYM – it is currently only available in maintained settings (whilst the majority of children attending early childhood education and care (ECEC) attend other types of settings); the criteria of having to attend the setting before and after lunch is restrictive; there is less awareness of the policy compared to for example school-based FSM; there is little incentive for settings to focus on promoting uptake of FEYM

– partly due to lack of ringfenced funding to support it, lack of incentive from Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) payments which are not linked to FEYM and provide relatively small amounts of funding (in contrast to pupil premium in schools which is set at much more generous rates and is linked to FSM, providing an incentive for schools to promote FSM uptake), and importantly some ECEC staff prioritising need rather than formal eligibility which perhaps highlights the restrictive income threshold as well as a potential lack of awareness. Evidence on the impact of FEYM is also lacking, yet we have strong evidence from research on Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) that free meals can have a significant impact on attendance, reductions in obesity and educational attainment. The UIFSM policy implicitly acknowledges the importance of nutrition for this younger group of pupils – FEYM would be an extension of that and correct the inconsistency of having free meals universally for our youngest school children but not for our pre-school children.

Based on these findings we recommend:

- Remove the restrictive criteria of the child having to attend the setting before and after lunch.
- Promote awareness of FEYM amongst parents as well as charities and professionals who work with families with young children.
- Making FEYM available to all low-income children in all ECEC settings that provide funded hours – not just maintained settings. Ensuring that all children who are technically entitled to free meals can access those meals regardless of which type of setting they attend (which is largely determined by which area they live in) is a matter of social justice. Other early years policies provide a template for operating across all registered settings including childminders – such as the ‘free entitlement’ hours which are currently being expanded or Early Years Pupil Premium.
- Increasing the income threshold (as has been argued for school-based FSM) to reach more children experiencing food poverty.
- Move towards universal FEYM. Although this might seem like an ambitious ask, Universal Infant Free Meals (UIFM) were introduced in 2014 for all children in primary school from reception to year two, in recognition that “teaching healthy habits young, and boosting attainment early, will bring the biggest benefits”.²⁴⁵ There appears to be a contradiction in prioritising the youngest primary school children in recognition that nutrition and food related habits in early years are particularly important, but then the same provision is not made for pre-school children. This is also at odds with the expansion of free entitlement hours which will be available for children from nine months and is designed to help parents get back to work – more children will be receiving a significant proportion of their food in early years settings. Universal FEYM is also being called for by other organisations such as Sustain.²⁴⁶
- Make funding for FEYM clear and ringfenced, with a set per meal rate. Additionally, linking FEYM to more generous payments for the Early Years Pupil Premium (bringing it on par with schools in terms of both the linking to free meals and the more generous payments) can also help incentivise settings to sign up eligible children.

²⁴⁵ Department for Education (2013) ‘Free school lunch for every child in infant school’ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/free-school-lunch-for-every-child-in-infant-school>

²⁴⁶ Sustain, ‘Our Children, Our Future’.

- Food standards in early years settings also need to be addressed – making guidance clearer, compulsory and ensuring staff in early years settings are trained to provide nutritious food. Again, there is an inconsistent approach towards the early years, as this is something which already happens for schools that have compulsory school food standards.
 - Importantly, the above recommendations will not be possible without addressing the wider challenges ECEC settings face in providing healthy food for children. This includes problems of wider underfunding, staffing recruitment and retention, lack of clarity and statutory frameworks supporting nutritional guidance for settings and uneven support in terms of training and resources provided
- 2. Addressing the root causes of food poverty through an ambitious child poverty strategy –** whilst the focus of this report has been on interventions aimed at reducing food poverty for under-fives, evidence on the causes of food poverty, as well as examples from local place-based initiatives taking a whole systems approach, and from other countries, all underline the necessity of reducing child income poverty in order to address food poverty. The Government has set up a child poverty taskforce and is due to publish a child poverty strategy in Spring 2025. This strategy should include a focus on food poverty and on poverty experienced by families with children under five years.
- The social security system has been identified as a key problem and potential solution for addressing income poverty. Some of the problems with the current system are clear: the two-child limit, which since 2017 has restricted child-related benefits to the first two children in each family, has led to an increase in income poverty for larger families; universal credit (UC) payments are insufficient to meet basic needs; and the five-week wait to receive the first UC payment creates debt, reducing low payments even more, by its intentional design.²⁴⁷ The IFS has shown that removing both the two-child limit and the benefit cap is the single most cost-effective way to reduce child poverty.²⁴⁸ Introducing an Essentials Guarantee, as advocated for by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Trussell would ensure that families on social security benefits have sufficient income to meet all basic needs, including protecting incomes from dropping below this threshold when debt repayments are taken or sanctions are applied.²⁴⁹ Reintroducing child poverty targets, as in Scotland, would signal a strong political commitment to address child poverty and ensure the Government is held accountable for this.
- 3. Designing a strategy specific to food poverty –** Targeting income poverty alone will not fully address the problem of food poverty which, as discussed in Section 1, is exacerbated by other factors including the availability of affordable healthy food in local areas; having access to housing, including temporary accommodation, that is sufficiently equipped with the facilities needed to safely store and cook fresh food; and supporting early years settings of all kinds to be able to provide healthy food for all children. As described in Sections 3 and 4, food poverty action plans have been used by local areas to address this issue specifically and

²⁴⁷ Campbell and Cooper, ‘The “Two Child Limit”: Ill-Conceived, Inefficient – and Misunderstood?’; Bannister et al., ‘An Essentials Guarantee: Reforming Universal Credit to Ensure We Can All Afford the Essentials in Hard Times’.

²⁴⁸ Institute for Fiscal Studies, ‘Child Poverty’.

²⁴⁹ Bannister et al., ‘An Essentials Guarantee: Reforming Universal Credit to Ensure We Can All Afford the Essentials in Hard Times’.

Scotland provides an example of a food poverty strategy devised at the national level. Having a food poverty strategy would ensure this important issue gets the attention it deserves and policies that focus on reducing food poverty specifically.

4. **Providing support in the form of funding and flexibility for local authorities to tailor policies to local needs in addressing food poverty for under-fives** – In addition to national policies, local areas need funding as well as flexibility to tailor their food poverty policies to meet local needs (for example food deserts, challenges specific to rural areas, areas with a high proportion of asylum seekers).

We therefore recommend that central government:

- Provides regular and sustainable funding for all English local authorities to set up their own Food Poverty Alliances and Food Poverty Plans

We recommend that local authorities:

- Work with those affected by food poverty in the area, so identification of problems and solutions are based on the experiences of those experiencing food poverty
- Facilitate partnerships and collaboration - Involving multiple actors within the area is likely to increase the effectiveness of efforts to reduce food poverty.
- Build networks and learn from other areas - The Food Power programme exemplified how building networks and sharing experiences of learning across areas can support other areas that are just beginning to implement initiatives to address food poverty.
- Take a whole systems approach - food poverty is a problem within a wider web of influencing factors as well as other food-related problems, such as food waste and high carbon footprints. Taking a whole system approach can work to address multiple related problems, as well as tackling the root causes of food poverty.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives – whilst there are many examples of innovative approaches across different areas to address local food poverty, there is currently a lack of evaluation evidence, which limits the possibility of understanding what works and sharing learning across areas.

Table 5: Table of policy recommendations

Policy	Short-term	Medium-term	Final goal
Healthy Start Scheme	<p>Increase value of the scheme and continue to review and update to keep pace with cost of food</p> <p>Expand eligibility to include all children from low-income backgrounds</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - up to age four - including children from families with NRPF <p>Improve uptake of the scheme by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - promoting awareness via an information campaign and professionals working with families - simplifying the application process 	<p>Increase the income threshold to reach more children in food poverty</p>	<p>Implement an autoenrollment system to improve take up</p>
Free early years meals (FEYM)	<p>Remove criteria requiring children to attend before and after lunch.</p> <p>Improve awareness of the scheme amongst parents</p>	<p>Free meals for all low-income children across all ECEC settings including PVI settings and childminders</p> <p>Increase the income threshold to reach more children experiencing food poverty</p> <p>Create a clear ring-fenced funding stream, with an adequately costed per meal rate</p>	<p>Universal free early years meals</p>

Child poverty strategy	Abolish the two-child limit and benefit cap	<p>In collaboration with experts publish a comprehensive child poverty strategy which includes a focus on children under-five</p> <p>Re-introduce child poverty targets</p>	Introduce an essentials guarantee to ensure benefit income is sufficient to meet basic needs and protected from falling below this threshold
Food poverty strategy	Assemble a food poverty taskforce	<p>Introduce targets for reducing food poverty</p> <p>In collaboration with experts publish a food poverty strategy which includes a focus on children under-five as well as other groups that face higher risks of food poverty</p>	Continue to review and revise based on what works.
Supporting locally tailored policies		Provide stable funding and facilitative support to local authorities to set up Food Poverty Alliances and Food Poverty Action Plans to tailor food poverty policies to address local needs, in collaboration with experts by experience.	

Appendix 1

List of individuals and organisations for expert interviews

Sue Balmer from the Happy Baby Community

Dayna Brackley and Abigail Page from Bremner and Co

Professor Alice Bradbury from University College London

Shona Goudie and Hannah Brinsden from the Food Foundation

Isabel Rice from Sustain

Vicky Sibson and Rachel Childs from First Steps Nutrition Trust

We would also like to acknowledge the following individuals for contributing expertise in meetings:

Selena McGuinness from Local Government Association

Members of the Early Years Nutrition Data and Advocacy group convened by Impact on Urban Health and Bremner and Co

Appendix 2

Use of automation tools to identify local initiatives

Web scraping: We extracted and analysed the content of cash first referral leaflets from about 120 local authorities. The leaflets in PDF format were downloaded from [Cash First Leaflets | IFAN \(foodaidnetwork.org.uk\)](https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk) utilising a specialised R package called {rvest}. After filtering leaflets written in English, we proceeded to extract the content of these leaflets and selected those leaflets that contained certain keywords that could help us identify potential local support services or policies related to children and/or food insecurity. Finally, the language context in which the keywords were embedded was extracted to facilitate this identification process (i.e., the ten preceding and following words).

Large Language Models: We made targeted enquiries in ChatGPT. The aim was to discover local initiatives that focus on early years that might be picked up by large language models since these models are usually trained using publicly available data.

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