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13 March 2026: free breakfast clubs: summary business case

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Applies to England

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Executive summary

In April 2025, the Department for Education (DfE) launched the early adopter (EA) test-and-learn scheme for the free breakfast clubs (FBC) programme. The government has committed to create a new mandatory free breakfast club duty for all state-funded schools with primary aged pupils on roll.

The scheme tests how schools can effectively deliver the minimum requirements, with findings being used to inform national rollout. The EA scheme launched with 750 schools and, at the point of writing, this business case had one term's worth of learning.

This business case outlines our plans for the first year of national rollout, from April 2026 to March 2027.

This is to include plans for approximately 2,000 more schools through the financial year.

Programme objectives

Through funding schools to deliver free breakfast clubs, in line with future

legislation, the objectives of the policy are to:

- ensure children are ready to learn at the start of the school day, improving their ability to achieve by giving children a soft start to the school day through a club and breakfast
- increase household incomes by reducing the amount families spend on groceries and before-school childcare and contributing to an increase in parents' and carers' ability to work more hours

Establishing a free breakfast club in every primary school was a manifesto commitment. It supports the government's opportunity and growth missions, specifically the every child achieving and thriving pillar.

Strategic case

School absence significantly increased following the pandemic. While it is falling, it still has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. At the same time, rising food insecurity and childcare costs are placing financial pressure on families. In the 2022 to 2023 financial year, 17% of children in England lived in food-insecure households, increasing from 12% the previous year^{[\[footnote 1\]](#)}.

While many primary schools offer some form of breakfast provision, including the national school breakfast programme (NSBP), they do not all include before-school childcare, or childcare and food is only available for a limited number of pupils – in most cases, paid for by parents and carers. This means children and families miss out on the wider social, educational and economic benefits of free breakfast clubs.

The wraparound childcare programme aims to improve the availability of before-school (as well as after-school) childcare, but accessibility and affordability challenges remain. This limits parental employment opportunities and household income.

To bring consistency across England, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will place a duty on state-funded schools with primary-aged children to offer a free breakfast club open to all pupils on roll in reception to year 6 at their school.

Economic case

The programme will support all schools with primary-aged children in England to deliver free breakfast clubs open to all pupils in reception to year 6. This will:

- reduce the number of primary school pupils starting the school day hungry, enabling more children to start the school day ready to learn

- increase household incomes by:
 - reducing the amount families spend on food and before-school childcare
 - increasing the availability of before-school childcare, enabling more parents and carers to work

The programme was appraised against a range of options. The preferred approach was a phased national rollout starting in the 2026 to 2027 financial year ('year 1'), balancing:

- affordability
- deliverability
- long-term benefits

If free breakfast clubs deliver on their ambition, the economic benefits would be that they:

- deliver a benefit-cost ratio (BCR) of 2.43 in year 1 (rising over time as attainment benefits accrue)
- improve educational outcomes for key stage 1 pupils, including both free school meals (FSM) and non-FSM groups
- provide household financial savings and labour-market benefits
- reduce inequalities in access to nutritious food

Additional benefits include:

- improved pupil health
- reduced attainment gaps
- enhanced parental workforce participation

Shortlist of options

The shortlist included the following lead options:

- **do minimum** – continue funding 750 EA schools and continue the NSBP programme
- **option 1 (preferred)** – start national rollout in year 1 by funding EA schools, NSBP schools and a new cohort, with future cohorts staggered
- **option 3** – a full national rollout, with all schools delivering free breakfast clubs in September 2026

Type of economic appraisal used

DfE used a cost-benefit analysis to appraise the options. This approach quantified both costs and monetised benefits, including attainment and labour-market impacts. It discounted for optimism bias and risk cost.

Costs, benefits, and risks of shortlisted options

The preferred option (option 1) has a BCR of 2.43 in year 1, increasing over time as attainment benefits accrue.

Sensitivity analysis halving attainment benefits still returns a positive BCR of 1.19.

Risks include:

- lower value for money compared to 'do minimum' in year 1, due to the shorter funding period
- delivery risks around staffing and food costs, mitigated through EA insights and support funding
- uncertainty in labour market benefits, addressed through conservative assumptions

The preferred option also has a lower BCR in the short term because it brings new schools into the programme immediately, meaning costs are incurred upfront while attainment benefits only materialise after at least one year. By contrast, the 'do minimum' option retains schools already receiving breakfast club provision, who therefore begin to accrue attainment benefits sooner.

Over time, as new cohorts begin to realise benefits, the BCR for the preferred option is expected to converge with the 'do minimum' option, with greater reach and scale.

Rationale for the choice of preferred option

Option 1 was chosen because it:

- aligns with strategic objectives to reduce hunger and improve attainment
- balances affordability and deliverability while enabling early benefits
- scores highest against critical success factors such as:
 - strategic fit
 - value for money over the medium term
 - ability to scale nationally

Commercial case

The commercial case for free breakfast clubs focuses on how to deliver support and food provision effectively during year 1 of national rollout. The chosen approach is a hybrid internal or external delivery model, combining in-house capability with contracted specialist support to assist onboarding of around 2,000 schools over 2 cohorts.

Schools will be recruited in the following cohorts.

Cohort 1 will begin delivery in April 2026. This group will consist of approximately 500 schools, focusing on those with high levels of disadvantage (FSM rates). Schools with 40% or more FSM 'Ever 6' pupils will be eligible to apply for a place.

Cohort 2 will begin delivery in September 2026. All schools with primary-aged pupils currently participating in the NSBP would be guaranteed a place to ensure they do not have a gap in provision after the closure of the NSBP in July 2026.

There are more than 1,700 schools in the NSBP programme that will be invited to take part in the programme, including a mix of:

- mainstream primary schools
- special and alternative provision schools
- all through schools

For year 1 of national rollout, we propose to continue the funding approach used with EA schools – that is, funding schools directly through section 14 grants.

In addition, we undertook an options analysis to consider a support package for schools from April 2026. The outcome of this project concluded that we would develop a customer relationship management system internally, working towards a minimum-viable product from November 2025. This is before we launch the expression of interest for the roughly 500 schools joining in April 2026.

This will streamline how schools access self-service support materials and how they can engage with the department for 'first line' support, improving the process for schools and reducing resource cost for DfE.

To support schools with more complex delivery challenges, we launched a procurement process to increase the number of advisers supporting schools through the educational and children's social care framework, along with continuing contracts of technical estate advisers to test what schools can do to mitigate any space constraints.

We will also start commercial processes to begin a call-centre pilot to support data collection. As part of wider decisions on the role of local authorities in supporting schools, we will fund local authorities to support schools and the wider system to effectively deliver free breakfast clubs.

Financial case

The recommended option for this next year of delivery is to continue funding the 750 EA schools for the full year, and fund additional cohorts of:

- 500 new schools from April 2026 for the full year
- 1750 schools from September 2026

A deep-dive review explored how schools on the EA scheme are using their funding and what it actually costs to run breakfast provision. Schools delivering their offer in-house, keeping food costs low, and staffing broadly in line with standard ratios were generally able to operate within the funding available.

By bringing together insights from this qualitative work and our analytical modelling, we are proposing a simplified funding approach for national rollout that offers more predictable and equitable support across schools.

Funding for future years will be agreed separately through business cases.

Learning from the EA scheme showed that a simplified and fairer funding model should be developed for national rollout. The agreed funding model for year 1 of the national rollout retains:

- a £1,000 start-up grant to cover one-off costs
- funds based on take-up, with a set daily amount of £25 to fund fixed costs, plus £1 for every child that attends, regardless of characteristics or pupil need

We have forecast for up to 2,250 schools in year 1 (500 in April 2026 and 1,750 in September 2026) and staggered take-up assumptions. This is affordable within our current portion of the Best Start in Life budget.

The funding model used for the EA scheme included a fixed upfront set-up grant and other fixed and variable amounts, depending on the:

- attendance of the club
- disadvantage levels (mainstream only)
- location of the school

While this was decided to be reflective of the costs schools would incur, the variation by disadvantage levels was deemed to be complicated for mainstream schools, resulting in confusion.

Therefore, the agreed mainstream funding model for year 1 has been simplified, with a view to being easier to understand and fairer for schools. This should ease the burden and potentially increase willingness to engage and join the programme.

The mainstream funding rate is:

- £1,000 start-up grant
- daily amount of £25
- £1 for every child who attends each day

Other than increasing the start-up grant amount, the funding rate at special schools is remaining the same from the EA scheme to year 1.

At special schools, the funding rate is:

- £1,000 start-up grant
- daily amount of £18.95
- £3.23 for every child who attends each day

Across all settings, we apply an area cost adjustment to the funding to account for variations in the labour market. We have used the same area cost adjustments as the schools national funding formula for 2025 to 2026. This is published in the [area cost adjustment for national funding formula 2025 to 2026: technical note](#).

Key assumptions

Based on intelligence from the EA scheme and other breakfast club programmes, we have made a series of assumptions to calculate the predicted costs of running a free breakfast club. These assumptions are evidence-based, but there will always be a level of uncertainty at an individual school level and on a day-to-day basis.

The costing approach assumes a gradual increase in school participation, supported by typical staffing patterns for mainstream, special education needs and disabilities (SEND) and specialist settings. Free breakfast clubs are expected to run with 30 minutes of supervised provision, alongside additional time allocated for preparation and clearing away.

Staffing levels are estimated and rounded where necessary to ensure national projections remain robust. Food provided must be in line with school food standards. Schools are provided with initial funding to cover essential equipment, training and systems.

It is anticipated that most schools on the NSBP will transfer to the FBC programme in September 2026.

Management case

The free breakfast clubs programme is a major project tracked in the Government Major Projects Portfolio. We continue to work closely with major projects and [National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority](#) colleagues to ensure the successful delivery of the programme.

The programme supports the government's fifth mission: to break down the barriers to opportunity for every child, specifically the 'every child achieving and thriving' pillar.

Programme governance is multi-layered, with primary oversight at the senior responsible officer (SRO) led 'free breakfast clubs project board,' which reports into the 'every child achieving and thriving pillar board'.

The programme's success depends on several factors. These include:

- timely approval and budget confirmation from HM Treasury
- effective collaboration with the sector partners
- alignment with other government programmes
- the availability of skilled staff and resources, in both DfE and the education sector

[An accounting officer assessment for the project](#) has been completed.

Risk and issue management

We have an overall cautious approach to risk. Our approach to different risk types is based on our judgment of:

- the circumstances and potential impact on us, DfE and learners
- value for money for taxpayers

We are willing to tolerate a degree of risk in selecting which activities to undertake to achieve our objectives, where we have identified scope to innovate, transform and achieve effective results.

Risks and issues are reviewed regularly, with challenges escalated as appropriate to the SRO and project directors through the monthly project board.

A comprehensive RAID log, maintained by the project management office, captures risks, issues and dependencies on an ongoing basis. Formal monthly review meetings with policy leads are held to proactively manage challenges in their areas.

In addition, the project management office engages regularly with risk and issue owners throughout the month to:

- monitor developments

- track changes
- identify emerging risks

Any risks or issues that cannot be resolved or mitigated at the SRO or project director level will be escalated through established governance. The project management office ensure any escalations are handled by the appropriate body through to the point of completion or de-escalation.

Evaluation plan

The evaluation strategy is designed to be proportionate, robust and flexible. It builds on lessons learnt from the EA scheme test-and-learn phase of the programme and iterates based on findings from the first cohorts of the national rollout.

Given the scale and complexity of the programme, the evaluation will adopt an iterative, mixed-methods approach, combining:

- administrative data analysis
- large-scale surveys
- qualitative interviews
- observational research

This approach will allow for a robust and nuanced understanding of:

- how the programme is delivered in practice
- how it is experienced by pupils, parents and carers, and schools
- what outcomes it achieves

The evaluation will be independently commissioned and run from 2026 to 2028, with interim and final reporting to inform ongoing policy development and delivery.

Evaluation plan implementation and process evaluation objectives

Assess programme delivery

Evaluate how the breakfast club programme is implemented across different schools and regions, including compliance levels and variations in models of delivery.

Measure pupil participation

Track uptake and identify factors influencing attendance, including parental demand and school-level engagement.

Identify challenges and barriers

Investigate logistical, resource and accessibility challenges that impact effective programme delivery and pupil uptake.

Understand resource needs

Assess the staffing, funding and infrastructure required for successful and sustainable programme implementation.

Explore parent and school perspectives

Gather insights from school leaders, parents and carers on their experiences, satisfaction and perceived benefits of the programme.

Glossary

Free breakfast clubs (FBC): Before-school provision in state-funded schools with primary-aged pupils, accessible to all pupils. It consists of food provision and at least 30 minutes of supervised childcare before the start of the school day.

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill: Legislation that includes placing a duty on state-funded schools to offer a breakfast club. The bill aims to make provision about the safeguarding and welfare of children.

Early adopter (EA) scheme: The test-and-learn phase of the programme that began in 2025, targeting 750 schools.

Benefit-cost ratio (BCR): BCR compares the monetised benefits of a programme with its costs. A BCR above 1 means the benefits outweigh the costs and the intervention represents value for money. A BCR below 1 indicates that the programme costs more than the benefits it delivers. Higher BCRs are generally considered better, as they signal stronger value for money.

Education and children's social care framework: Commercial framework used to procure delivery support advisers.

Free school meals 'Ever 6' (FSM6): FSM eligibility indicator, used to prioritise disadvantaged schools. Information on pupils who are known to have been eligible for FSM at any time during the previous 6 years, including by ethnicity and national curriculum year group.

Government Major Projects Portfolio: Government Major Projects Portfolio tracking complex programmes.

National school breakfast programme (NSBP): Existing programme that supports schools in England to provide children with a healthy breakfast at the start of the school day. The programme will end in July 2026. Participating schools are invited to join the FBC programme, starting in September 2026.

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1. [Households below average income: an analysis of the UK income distribution: FYE 1995 to FYE 2023](#) (Accessed: 11 February 2026) ↵

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