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Research and analysis

Free breakfast club early adopters: executive summary of qualitative findings

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Applies to England

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Background

As part of the early adopters scheme, Ipsos conducted qualitative research to understand how free breakfast clubs operate in practice and how families experience them.

The research aimed to explore school delivery approaches, pupil engagement, parent perceptions and experiences, and to generate insights to inform national roll-out.

These qualitative findings are based on 8 free breakfast club observations across a diverse sample of primary schools (mainstream and special, urban and rural, school size, varying free school meal eligibility), as well as on speaking with 43 parent participants through 26 in-depth interviews and 4 focus groups.

The parent sample comprised 29 breakfast club users and 14 non-users, with varied employment circumstances, including parents of children with special education needs and disabilities (SEND).

What schools are delivering in practice

Across the visited schools, provision was observed to be practical, calm and well established.

Schools used a range of spaces, including halls, canteens, gyms and, in some cases, separate quieter areas.

Most offered a mix of breakfast items, such as cereal, toast and fruit, and paired food with simple child-led activities including colouring, block building, games and

active play.

Staffing models varied by school size and need, but clubs operated with clear routines and light-touch supervision.

Attendance-tracking systems varied, with some schools requiring weekly pre-booking and others allowing flexible drop-in attendance. Even where booking systems were in place, parents and staff reported that children were not turned away if they had not been pre-booked.

Schools used a range of approaches to support children with SEND, from quieter spaces and sensory rooms to one-to-one support in specialist settings.

How pupils are engaging

Observed pupil engagement was positive. Many children arrived eagerly, quickly joined familiar routines and moved confidently between food and activities.

Staff intervention was generally limited because routines and expectations appeared to be well understood and adhered to by pupils.

Children were typically given genuine choice over what to eat and how to spend their time, which appeared to support both independence and enjoyment.

“Learning how to choose things [is good], because in your everyday life as a child, you don’t choose very much.” User parent

Engagement was not limited to eating breakfast. Some children used the time mainly to socialise or take part in activities – particularly older pupils and those who had already eaten at home and did not eat at the free breakfast club.

Social interaction tended to be flexible rather than forced, with children able to join groups or spend time quietly on their own. The combination of calm, established routine and genuine pupil choice seemed to provide a ‘soft start’ to the school day.

Attendance appeared reasonably stable overall, although schools reported some variation by booking system, day of the week and season.

More flexible drop-in models created less predictable numbers, while Fridays and winter periods were reported by staff to be quieter.

Parent experience and perceived impacts

Parents who use free breakfast clubs are highly positive about the offer. They tend to value the provision because it:

- offers a calm, social start to the day
- helps with childcare and work
- gives children a reliable breakfast

For many families, the club is seen as an important part of how the household functions in the morning.

“It feels a lot more relaxed because we’re not rushing out the door.” User parent

The evidence also suggests that breakfast clubs are delivering broader benefits than food alone. Parents often emphasised the role of the club in helping children:

- settle into school
- build friendships
- start the day in a more relaxed frame of mind

Children’s positive experiences and enjoyment of breakfast club activities were key to continued engagement – parents shared that, after initial attendance, children often actively requested to attend.

In special-school and SEND contexts, the calmer and smaller-scale morning environment was especially valued because it could help children regulate before lessons began.

Parents reported benefits for their children that included:

- increased confidence

- wider friendship groups
- improved routines, punctuality and independence

Several parents described breakfast club as helping children feel ready for the school day. Families valued the reliability and flexibility of the offer because it made planning easier and created confidence that support would be there when needed.

“She’s getting more one-to-one time with other pupils and can socialise a little bit easier.” User parent of child with SEND

“It’s giving room for more development. It’s educational. It’s helping the kids create better bonds with each other because they’re in a relaxed, open environment.” User parent

“The bigger aspect [of the breakfast club] is the social activity and having the time, and less about the food.” User parent

Parents’ strongest accounts of impact related to the household. Breakfast clubs were described as:

- enabling work patterns
- reducing childcare and food costs
- easing time pressure in the morning

Parents also said the provision made everyday routines feel calmer and more manageable, especially where families were juggling work, multiple children or health issues.

“I wouldn’t have been able to work without it. The shifts wouldn’t have worked, so it’s quite fundamental.” User parent

Why some families are not using the offer

Non-users did not usually express negative views of the breakfast club. Instead, feedback was more often linked to a perceived lack of fit based on their needs.

Some parents said they did not need the provision because their children already ate at home or because morning childcare was not required. Others felt that adding breakfast club, particularly alongside after-school provision, would make the school day too long for younger children. This was a worry that some user parents also shared.

“They eat at home anyway, so it’s not really something we need.” Non-user parent

There were also practical barriers. Some non-users had limited awareness of how the offer worked and were unclear that it was available to all children.

Advance booking requirements, narrow drop-off windows, transport constraints and the complexity of managing different family routines were also noted as challenges. For parents of children with SEND, uncertainty about noise, structure and whether the setting would meet their child’s needs could also deter participation.

“I thought it was only for kids who were also eligible for free school meals, not for everybody.” Non-user parent

Patterns of non-use varied by family circumstance. Younger children’s parents were more likely to worry about the length of the school day. Working parents more often highlighted timing misalignment. Rural or transport-dependent families sometimes found the offer difficult to fit around existing travel arrangements.

Recommendations for maximising

engagement

While breakfast club users express high satisfaction, some barriers limit more frequent attendance among current users and prevent initial engagement among non-users.

To address barriers and maximise engagement across all families, schools should consider the following recommendations.

Enhanced communication

Provide explicit, repeated messaging that breakfast clubs are open to all children, not just those eligible for free school meals or requiring childcare support. This should appear regularly in a variety of school communications throughout the school year.

Once breakfast clubs are running, provide regular, clear updates to parents about daily activities and food consumed, potentially through apps or brief weekly summaries.

Offer periodic parent visits or 'open mornings' to help address concerns about supervision and give parents confidence about the provision their children receive.

Highlight potential benefits for parents and carers (free breakfast and childcare provision, reduced morning stress) and for pupils (an opportunity to socialise, make active choices and have a 'soft start' to the day).

Maintain flexibility

Continue to accommodate those who have not pre-booked alongside using a pre-booking system where possible. Families highly value the ability to use the service based on daily needs rather than rigid schedules.

Flexibility is particularly important for families managing variable work patterns or unexpected morning changes and would enable non-users to try the provision on an ad hoc basis without commitment.

Offer routine and variety

Establish simple, child-led routines to support a 'soft start' to the day.

Offer variety and pupil choice in both food options and activities to help ensure the breakfast club remains appealing over time and supports children's ongoing enthusiasm for attendance.

SEND-specific support and reassurance

Continue providing quiet spaces, appropriate staff ratios, and facilities for children requiring personal care or medical support. These accommodations support all children to benefit and feel comfortable attending regularly.

Actively communicate available accommodations to all families, as uncertainty about whether the environment can meet specific needs prevents some SEND families from engaging. Sharing information about routines, activities and available support helps build confidence among hesitant parents.

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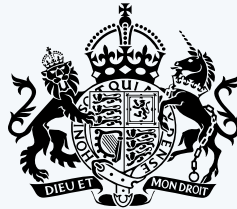
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