



EARLY YEARS FOOD
AND NUTRITION:

Summary of policy recommendations

Foreword

What and how we feed our children is a minefield, and one of the most emotive topics a parent encounters. When parenting whilst facing food insecurity, trying to feed a child a healthy, well-balanced diet can seem daunting at best and, at worst, impossible. For me, it was the thing that nearly broke me, entirely.

We had fallen into a grey area of the Government's benefit system—my husband worked full-time, earning slightly above minimum wage, which put us above the 'cut-off' point for Free School Meals, Healthy Start and other grants which would have made all the difference to my life, my children's lives, and the food they were able to consume.

Access to nutritious food became a daily struggle. I found myself walking around Portsmouth in search for the cheapest food that wasn't another dish of 20p spaghetti, a tin of Value tomatoes, and a pinch of mixed herbs.

Raising four children was a joyful experience. But I often spent evenings crying because of the overwhelming sense of failure I felt. My shoes had holes in them, I lived in fear of the week one child or another would need new clothes...It was exhausting, even then, trying to navigate a benefit system that's now so out of touch we've come to see food banks as normal.

Early years nutrition is foundational to how we see food. From the very start, it's crucial to prevent unhealthy diets to ensure every child is born to healthy parents. The barriers to breastfeeding are many, but with support it's possible for more women to breastfeed their children for longer and give their child the healthiest start in life.

I was heartbroken when I was unable to breastfeed, and I relied on Milk Tokens (as they used to be) to 'buy' two tins of formula a week. If I had to find the money from my own pocket, bottle-feeding my children would have been close to impossible, because I couldn't have afforded to buy their formula. Those tokens kept my children fed when I was unable to, which is why it's so important to invest more into the Healthy Start scheme; the Government has the power to ensure all children have access to a nutritious diet and ensure no parent is priced out of feeding their child, or forced to stop breastfeeding before they're ready.

The nutrition playing field needs to be levelled, so all children are born to healthy parents, after healthy pregnancies, where healthy diets can, and should, be the norm. Food shouldn't be a source of fear; not in 21st Century Britain.

This Government has made commitments to raise the healthiest generation of children ever, and to give all children the best start in life. They have a real opportunity to change the tide on our country's obesity rates, our children's relationships with food, and how our nutritional building blocks are formed. I hope they read and heed the recommendations within this report and take urgent action to ensure healthier, brighter futures for our children.

“The Government has the power to ensure all children have access to a nutritious diet and ensure no parent is priced out of feeding their child, or forced to stop breastfeeding before they're ready.”



**Mother and grandmother,
Food Ambassador
Kathleen Kerridge,
from Portsmouth**

What needs to happen to improve diet and health in the early years?

A considerable amount of the focus on children's food policy is placed on school-aged children. However, we know that in the UK by the time children start primary school, more than one in five children are living with overweight or obesity, many have dental decay and there are wide health and diet inequalities between the richest and poorest families.¹

As early as conception, a mother's diet can influence the future health of their child. What and how babies are fed in the first year is known to be critical in determining a child's long term obesity risk and establishing eating habits that affect health outcomes in adolescence and even adulthood.

It is too late to wait until children start school before introducing effective interventions to improve children's health – preventative measures are needed much earlier.

This briefing provides a roadmap for action on early years nutrition, summarising the policy recommendations made across three reports published as part of The Food Foundation's *Early Years Food and Nutrition Study*. The reports work through the first years of a child's life, starting with pre-conception and pregnancy,² then infant feeding and breastfeeding,³ before focusing on early years nutrition.⁴

For more information on the Early Years Food and Nutrition Series:

<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/boosting-early-years-nutrition-support-healthy-childhood>



RECOMMENDATION 1:

Improve the affordability of healthy diets and strengthen nutritional safety nets

With more healthy foods being over twice as expensive per calorie as less healthy foods, a healthy diet is simply out of reach for many low-income families in the UK.⁵ Caregivers face the additional challenges of inadequate parental pay, high childcare costs and time pressures. Nutritional safety-nets, including the Healthy Start scheme and Free Early Years Meals (FEYM), have the potential to support families on low-incomes to afford a healthy diet.

THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

- Improve parental pay and leave to support families with babies, which will in turn support breastfeeding. As a first step, the Government should increase maternity pay to, at a minimum, align with the national living wage.
- Increase wages and benefits to ensure everyone can afford a healthy diet.
- Ensure that Free Early Years Meals (FEYM) reach all low-income families who need them by:
 - Making FEYM available in all types of early years settings beyond just state-maintained settings.
 - Removing the requirement that children attend before and after lunch to qualify for a free meal.
 - Expanding entitlement to ensure all children in poverty who use childcare can access FEYM.
- Strengthen the Healthy Start scheme by:
 - Increasing the value of the Healthy Start allowance in line with inflation and ensuring the value continues to be index-linked.
 - Expanding eligibility to include all families on Universal Credit, families with children up to the age of five years old and permanently extending the scheme to all eligible families with no recourse to public funds.
 - Supporting the scheme to meet its nutrition objectives by giving beneficiaries information, support and guidance on healthy eating and breastfeeding in pregnancy and the early years.
 - Making the multivitamin supplement component of the scheme universal and not means tested.



RECOMMENDATION 2:

Improve standards on the composition and marketing of commercial baby milk and foods

Government plays a crucial role in the regulation of the food industry, to protect families from misinformation and undue influence of inappropriate marketing and health claims on infant formula and baby foods, so parents can make informed decisions about how and what to feed their children.

THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

- Enhance protections against high prices and inappropriate marketing of breastmilk substitutes in line with the WHO Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. This includes (as recommended by the CMA):
 - Strengthening the UK advertising and labelling rules, including prohibiting non-verifiable health claims and extending advertising restrictions to include follow-on formula and toddler/growing up milks.
 - Removing the influence of formula brands in healthcare settings by ensuring there is clear information that all first infant formula products meet a baby's nutritional needs regardless of brand or price; and introducing standardised formula labelling.
 - Ensuring that retail settings clearly convey information on how all first infant formula meets a baby's needs regardless of brand or price and separating first infant formula products from other formula on retail shelves.
 - Monitoring and enforcing compliance with the regulations of marketing of formula milks.
- Strengthen standards on the nutritional composition and marketing of commercial baby foods including:
 - Revising and strengthening the UK regulations governing commercial baby and toddler foods by introducing new mandatory guidance in line with WHO Europe's Nutrient and Promotion Profile Model (NPPM) and UK public health recommendations.
 - Monitoring and enforcing compliance with the regulations of marketing of commercial baby foods.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:**

Support early years settings to deliver nutritious food for all young children

It is essential that early years settings provide a healthy food environment, establishing positive dietary patterns and food preferences. To achieve this, providers need to be given adequate funding, resources and guidance to ensure good food is a priority and reaches all children regardless of their circumstances.

THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

- Ensure funding for food is covered as part of funded hours to support settings with the costs of providing nutritious, sustainable and culturally appropriate food, alongside wider measures to address the funding and staffing pressures in early years settings.
- Support settings with the implementation of the updated Early Years Foundation Stage nutrition guidance (launching Sept 2025) with a clear roadmap; including funding, training, and practical support for settings .
- Establish a standardised monitoring process to check compliance against standards.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:**

Invest in local services and legislation to help protect families and provide them with the support they need

The Government needs to invest in local services and healthcare provision so that expectant and new parents are informed about nutrition and get the support they need to access a healthy diet. This should also include dedicated investment in improving breastfeeding support and protecting breastfeeding mothers.

THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

- Invest in the midwifery and health visitor workforce by:
 - Increasing the number of practitioners and providing training on how to provide non-stigmatising nutrition and diet advice and effective breastfeeding support.
 - Funding more frequent and longer support for families.
- Increase local authority funding for community and local support for nutrition and breastfeeding, e.g. through Sure Start centres and Family Hubs.
- Invest in dedicated support to protect and promote breastfeeding by:
 - Increasing the number of gold *Baby Friendly Initiative* accredited facilities, including hospitals, health visitor and community services, as well as universities.
 - Strengthening the law on breastfeeding in public to protect women.
 - Introducing statutory guidance and requirements for workplaces to support breastfeeding mothers and families on their return to work.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:**

Shift the incentives across the whole food system, to help deliver nutrition for all ages

We need a food system that works in the interests of public health rather than profit, so that when young children start to eat the same food as their family, they are getting access to a nutritious diet that will continue to support their health throughout childhood.

THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

- Implement a tax on food manufacturers based on the amount of salt and sugar in their products to incentivise healthier products and a reduction in sugar and salt, as well as sweetness and saltiness.
- Invest any revenue raised from a tax back into children's health, with a particular focus on lower income families.
- Introduce mandatory reporting by businesses of their healthy food sales, to monitor progress and identify where further interventions are needed to improve food for the whole family.
- Identify opportunities to bring the out of home sector in line with retail and manufacturing, particularly through expansion of reformulation programmes and labelling requirements.



Conclusion

The Food Foundations' Early Years Food and Nutrition series has brought together evidence that highlights the need for the Government to introduce policies promoting healthy diets which take a life course approach, from the specific needs during pregnancy and when breastfeeding, as well as with feeding children under 5.

By investing in good nutrition in the early years, this Government will be setting younger generations up for lifelong learning and good health, in turn boosting the economy and reducing pressure on the NHS. Moreover, these policies have the potential to break the intergenerational cycle of health inequalities, as poor health stemming from inadequate access to nutritious food is passed from parents to children, and continues to develop throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Improving diets in the early years is integral to creating a fairer food system where healthy, nutritious and tasty food is affordable and accessible to all.

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With thanks to the
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Scan the QR
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more information
on the Early
Years Nutrition

¹ NHS Digital, National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/4 School Year, <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2023-24-school-year>

² https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-02/Early%20Years%20report_A4_NEW_0.pdf

³ https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/TFF_Nourishing%20children%20early%20years_DIGITAL.pdf

⁴ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/boosting-early-years-nutrition-support-healthy-childhood>

⁵ Ibid



ABOUT THE FOOD FOUNDATION

The Food Foundation is an independent charity working to address challenges in the food system in the interests of the UK public. Working at the interface between academia and policymakers (parliamentarians, civil servants, local authorities, business leaders), we use a wide range of approaches to make change happen including events, publications, media stories, social media campaigns and multistakeholder partnerships. We also work directly with citizens to ensure their lived experience is reflected in our policy proposals. We work with many partners on a range of different thematic areas, working closely with academics to generate evidence and campaigners who can drive change. We are independent of all political parties and businesses, and we are not limited by a single issue or special interest. **Visit: foodfoundation.org.uk**

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ABOUT THE FUNDER

The Waterloo Foundation is an independent grant-making charity based in Cardiff, supporting projects in the UK and globally. Its key areas include the Environment, World Development, Child Development, and Wales. Nutrition is a cross-cutting theme, with a particular focus on micronutrients and the developing brain.

The Food Foundation

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