



Budget 2025: Representation

Submitted by the Food Foundation

About The Food Foundation

We are a young, dynamic, and impactful charity with a mission to change food policy and business practice to ensure everyone, across the UK, can afford and access a healthy diet supplied by a sustainable food system. We are independent of all political parties and business. We work with others who believe there is a problem with the system and want to change it. Visit our website for more information: www.foodfoundation.org.uk

Summary

Measures to improve children's diets are urgently needed if this Government is to achieve its aims of raising the healthiest generation of children ever, halving the gap in healthy life expectancy between the richest and poorest regions in England, breaking down barriers to opportunity and giving all children the best start in life. Existing nutritional safety-nets including the Healthy Start scheme and Free School Meals are vital for protecting children's health and educational attainment, but are currently failing to reach their potential. Below we recommend critical improvements to strengthen these measures so that they protect children and help them reach their full potential (recommendations 1 and 2).

Further measures are needed to support all individuals in the UK to access and afford healthy food, no matter what their circumstances. Rising food prices and food environments where the affordability, availability and appeal of unhealthy foods surpass healthy food, are negatively affecting physical and mental health, with knock on impacts on the economy. Our policy recommendations (3 and 4) create a fairer food system that protects everyone's basic right to nourishing food, as well as supporting people unable to work due to food-related ill-health back into work and reducing pressure on the NHS.

Policy recommendations:

- 1. Healthy Start:** expand eligibility, introduce auto-enrolment and increase the weekly value of the payments.
- 2. Free School Meals:** auto-enrol all entitled children, supporting local authorities to automate registration in the interim, and introduce a national monitoring system of school food quality.
- 3. Benefits and Wages:** review current levels to ensure they cover the cost of a healthy and sustainable diet, and remove the two-child limit on Universal Credit.

4. **Expand the Soft Drinks Industry Levy:** to include pre-packaged milk-based drinks and plant-based alternatives with added sugar, and invest the revenue raised into policies that support children's health and wellbeing, such as the above listed policies.

Why action is urgently needed to increase access to healthy and affordable food:

Bold actions to reduce food insecurity and ensure that everyone can afford and access a healthy diet, no matter what their income or background, will need to be taken to achieve many of Labour's commitments to the public, and reverse the impact of diet-related ill health.

Food insecurity levels are high, especially amongst households with children: The Food Foundation Food Insecurity tracker found that 14.9% of households with children reported experiencing food insecurity in June 2025, compared to 10.1% of households without children¹.

A healthy diet is unaffordable for many families on a low-income, resulting in health inequalities between the most and least deprived families. On average, healthier foods are more than twice as expensive per calorie as less healthy foods². To afford the government recommended healthy diet, the most deprived fifth of the population would need to spend 45% of their disposable income on food, rising to 70% for those households with children³. The affordability of a healthy diet is one of the factors contributing to health inequalities, including unequal access to nutritious food: the children from the most deprived income quintile consume 20% less fruit and vegetables than the least deprived income quintile (2.1 portions/day compared to 2.6 portions/day respectively, based on adult portion sizes of 80g)⁴.

Inaction on health inequalities is putting pressure on health services: As part of its mission to 'build an NHS fit for the future,' this Government has stated that it will take a greater focus on prevention to support people to live longer and healthier lives. Food-related health concerns such as obesity and dental decay are largely preventable, but currently these health outcomes are getting worse, not better, and in turn are putting pressure on health services – dentistry and the NHS – that this Government seeks to strengthen. Almost a quarter (24%) of 5-year-olds have dental decay, with 2.5 times as many children in the most deprived fifth affected compared with the least deprived fifth⁵. The prevalence of obesity is over twice as high amongst children living in the most deprived areas in England (12.9%) compared with those living in the least deprived areas (6.0%)⁶. Diabetes-related lower-limb amputations have increased by 68% since 2009⁷.

¹ The Food Foundation, 2025. *Food Insecurity Tracker Round 17*, June 2025, available: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking>

² The Food Foundation, 2025. *The Broken Plate 2025*, [TFF_The Broken Plate 2005 FINAL DIGITAL.pdf](#)

³ Ibid.

⁴ The Food Foundation, 2023. *Broken Plate 2023*, [TFF_The Broken Plate 2023_Digital_FINAL..pdf](#)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ NHS England, November 2024. *National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/24 School Year*,: [National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/24 School Year - NHS England Digital](#)

⁷ The Food Foundation, June 2024. *A Neglected Generation: Reversing the decline in children's health*: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/neglected-generation-reversing-decline-childrens-health>

Recommendation 1: The Healthy Start Scheme

Relevant department: Department of Health and Social Care

The Healthy Start scheme provides weekly payments to pregnant teenagers and low-income pregnant women or families with children under four, to purchase healthy foods including fruit, vegetables and pulses, as well as milk and infant formula. It also gives access to free vitamins and minerals.^[4]

The Healthy Start scheme is a vital nutritional safety net that has the potential to tackle health inequalities and give every child the best start in life. This is critical at a time when diet-related health inequalities are being embedded from children's earliest years. Poor nutrition in the early years can have [life-long health consequences](#)⁸.

Policy recommendations:

- **Expand eligibility to all families on Universal Credit and equivalent benefits to bring in line with FSM (costing approximately £244m per year including those currently entitled) and to include children who are 4 years old (costing £175m per year including coverage of those currently entitled)⁹.**
 - o The current thresholds mean that many families experiencing food insecurity do not benefit (only those with a household income of £408 per month or less excluding benefits are currently eligible), and the scheme is currently only available to families with children under 4 years old, leaving a gap between Healthy Start ending and Free School Meals starting.
- **Introduce auto-enrolment for Healthy Start to ensure all eligible beneficiaries are benefitting from the scheme**
 - o Although current uptake data of the Healthy Start scheme is unknown, the most recent figures suggest this was around 60%¹⁰. This is much lower than take-up of Best Start – the equivalent scheme in Scotland, which is around 84%¹¹, reflecting a

⁸ See further Obesity Health Alliance 2024. Healthy Early Years Diets: Achieving the Best Start in Life: <https://obesityhealthalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Early-Years-Position-Statement-for-Government.pdf>

⁹ All costings have been calculated by The Food Foundation. To estimate the cost if eligibility of Healthy Start was expanded to all children in households that receive Universal Credit (UC), we used the most recent data from the Household Below Average Income survey (downloaded from UK Data Service). We calculated the number of children aged 0-3 years who are in households who receive UC but not on other benefits that make them entitled to Healthy Start. The total population for each country (England and Wales) was estimated using survey weights and averaged between 2019-20 and 21-22. This was combined with most recent data on entitlement to Healthy Start from the NHS to estimate the total cost. Calculations were based on the current value of the Healthy Start weekly payments of £4.25 /£8.50.

¹⁰ NHS Business Services Authority, FOI-01811: *Data on Prescribed Items Related to Infant Formula and Specialist Infant Formula*, NHSBSA Open Data Portal <https://opendata.nhsbsa.net/dataset/foi-01811>

¹¹ Scottish Government, *Evaluation: Five Family Payments*, September 2025 <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/research-and-analysis/2025/09/evaluation-five-family-payments/documents/evaluation-five-family-payments/evaluation-five-family-payments/govscot%3Adocument/evaluation-five-family-payments.pdf>

failure of the Healthy Start scheme to reach all those who need it. Currently, families with eligible children must apply for the scheme to receive payments but various factors (such as lack of awareness, not knowing if they are entitled and the administrative burden of applying) mean many people who meet the entitlement are not signed up. An opt-out rather than opt-in approach would ensure that all families who want access to the scheme are able to. As this is a statutory scheme, funding should already be available. This approach requires data-sharing between the Department for Work and Pensions (who hold data that identifies children who are eligible for this scheme), Department of Health and Social Care and NHS BSA.

- **Increase the value of Healthy Start payments in line with inflation**

- The value of Healthy Start payments have not kept pace with recent food price inflation. This issue was partially acknowledged in a recent commitment to increase the payment to £4.65 per week from April 2026 - a modest 40p increase. While the uplift is welcome, it falls far short of what is required to keep pace with inflation. Had the payments increased in line with food and drink inflation since April 2021, it would have been worth £5.78 at the time of the announcement - a difference of £1.53.

Recommendation 2: Free School Meals

Relevant department: Department for Education

The Government's pledge to expand Free School Meal eligibility to all families receiving Universal Credit from September 2026 represents a major step towards a fairer, healthier society for all children. Removing financial barriers to school meals creates the conditions for many more children to reach their full potential. The evidence is clear: children who receive regular, healthy meals show better concentration, improved attendance, and even higher future earnings¹². This expansion has the potential to significantly improve children's health, wellbeing, and educational outcomes by providing a free, nutritious meal every school day

To ensure that the benefits of this policy are fully realised, effective implementation will be critical. Currently, families must actively apply for Free School Meals, but many eligible children miss out due to lack of awareness, confusion over eligibility, or the administrative burden of applying. Although the Government has made improvements to the eligibility checking system, this still leaves an unnecessary burden for parents and doesn't guarantee all children are reached. An "opt-out" rather than "opt-in" approach would ensure that all families who want access to scheme are easily able to. Many local authorities have set up more automated processes at the local level but there has been varying success due to resource and data use barriers. The most effective solution

¹² <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/superpowers-free-school-meals-2025-new-evidence-shows-economic-and-health-benefits>

would be to introduce automatic enrolment at the national level. As this is a statutory scheme, it should not require new funding commitments.

Policy recommendations:

- **Introduce national auto-enrolment of Free School Meals, with an “opt-out” rather than “opt-in” system to ensure all those who are entitled are registered to receive them**
 - This would require overcoming data sharing issues between the Department for Work and Pensions (which holds benefit and income data) and the Department for Education (which administers the scheme)
- **While national processes are being developed actively support local authorities to introduce more automated processes.**
 - As immediate steps toward national automation, the Government should write to all families on Universal Credit to encourage them to apply, add the option to grant permission to check Free School Meal eligibility to the Universal Credit Application form, and improve data access for local authorities to support local efforts.
- **Introduce a national monitoring system of school food:**
 - Building on the pilot carried out by the Food Standards Agency, supported by Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, funding should be set aside to introduce nationwide monitoring for school food, and establishing a process for supporting schools where there is non-compliance.

Recommendation 3: Benefits and Wages

Relevant department: Department for Work and Pensions

Policy recommendations

- **Ensure benefits and minimum wages are set at an appropriate level for people to be able to afford a healthy diet along with the other essentials**
 - Currently, neither benefit levels nor the National Living Wage are based on the cost of essential goods, which limits many households' ability to afford a healthy diet.
 - Food insecurity is especially prevalent among households receiving benefits. A third (34%) of households on Universal Credit are experiencing food insecurity, compared with 9% of those not receiving it, raising important questions about the adequacy of social security for people unable to work full-time, such as disabled people or single parents.¹³
 - Furthermore, employment alone does not always protect against food insecurity. According to the Food Insecurity Tracker¹⁴, 12% of respondents in full-time work

¹³ The Food Foundation, Food Insecurity Tracker <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking>

¹⁴ The Food Foundation, Food Insecurity Tracker <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking>

experienced household food insecurity in June 2025 underscoring the need for wage levels to reflect the actual cost of living. The Real Living Wage, as recommended by the Living Wage Foundation is £13.85 in London and £12.60 elsewhere¹⁵.

- **Remove the two-child limit on Universal Credit, to lift more children out of poverty and protect larger families from food insecurity**
 - o The two-child limit leaves families with more than two children without an adequate safety net, with current losses of £3,514 per year for each additional child. It is the main driver of rising child poverty.¹⁶
 - o Households with three or more children are more likely to be food insecure: food insecurity among households with 3 children was 17% and for 4 children 21% compared to 10% for households without children in June 2025.¹⁷
 - o Removing the limit is the most cost-effective ways of reducing child poverty, lifting an estimated 300,000 children out of poverty and cost £2.8billion.¹⁸

Recommendation 4: Expand the Soft Drinks Industry Levy

Relevant department: Department of Health and Social Care, Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, HMRC

The Recipe for Change Coalition, of which The Food Foundation is a member, is calling on HM Treasury to use the Autumn Budget 2025 to build on the proven success of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) and accelerate progress towards a healthier food system.

Policy recommendations:

- **Strengthen and expand the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL)** to include pre-packaged milk-based drinks and plant-based alternatives with added sugar.
- **Investigate where and how fiscal measures/levies can play a role in driving food reformulation and enable implementation of the Healthy Food Standard (HFS) and faster impact.**
- **Use revenues from the SDIL and any future levies to invest in children's health and access to good food**, such as free school meals, Healthy Start, and community food programmes.

¹⁵ Living Wage Foundation, 2025. *What is the real Living Wage?*, [What is the real Living Wage? | Living Wage Foundation](#)

¹⁶ CPAG, 2025. The two-child limit: our position, available: <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-research/our-position/two-child-limit-our-position#:~:text=It%20would%20lift%20350%2C000%20children%20out%20of%20poverty,third%20and%20subsequent%20children%20worth%20%C2%A33%2C514%20a%20year>.

¹⁷ The Food Foundation, 2025. Food Insecurity Tracker: Round 17, available: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking>

¹⁸ JRF, 2025. Two policies to boost family living standards and reduce child poverty, available: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/child-poverty/two-policies-to-boost-family-living-standards-and-reduce-child-poverty>

For further details we refer you to the Recipe for Change submission.

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