



END CHILD FOOD POVERTY – NO CHILD SHOULD BE GOING HUNGRY DEBATE 24 MAY 2021

BRIEFING FOR MPs

In October 2020, a parliamentary [petition](#) set up by Marcus Rashford to 'End Child Food Poverty' gained over 1 million signatures. The petition called for investment in three existing Government schemes, as recommended in Henry Dimbleby's National Food Strategy Part One.

Last year, we argued that an investment in these three schemes would be a well-evidenced way to begin tackling the problem of child food insecurity. We also know that these schemes would have wider benefits - improving the long-term health and resilience of the population, reducing childhood obesity, improving children's academic performance, supporting parents to stay in work during the holidays, and easing the strain on the welfare system. The programs align closely with the Government's commitments to address inequalities and 'level-up' disadvantaged communities, spend £1billion on childcare to support parents, and help the country recover from Covid-19.

In November, the Government announced that it would implement some of the recommendations. We welcomed the announcement, but remain particularly concerned that free school meal entitlement has not yet been extended, meaning that many disadvantaged children are missing out. We know there is still much more to be done if we are to ensure that no child goes hungry.

In January 2021, Marcus Rashford, the Food Foundation, and 40 other key individuals and organisations, [wrote to the Prime Minister](#) asking for a Government Review of School Food Policy, including Free School Meal entitlement. The Government has not yet confirmed its intention to undertake this review.

This briefing sets out the current figures on child food poverty and a summary of what investment is needed in Government food programmes to ensure no child goes hungry.

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CHILD FOOD POVERTY RATES

- Covid-19 has caused a sharp rise in food insecurity. 12% of households with children experienced food insecurity between August 2020 and January 2021. 2.3 million children live in these households.ⁱ
- Over 50% of those using Trussell Trust food banks at the start of the pandemic had never needed one before, and families with children were the hardest hit, accounting for nearly two in five households needing to use a food bank.ⁱⁱ 1 million 8-17 years olds and their families visited a foodbank over December/Januaryⁱⁱⁱ.
- Food poverty is an entrenched, long-term problem. Even before Covid-19, 4.3 million children were living in poverty in the UK – 9 in every classroom of 30.^{iv}

ADDITIONAL ACTION IS STILL NEEDED TO PROVIDE A NUTRITIONAL SAFETY NET

SCHOOL FOOD REVIEW

We are calling on the Government to **conduct an urgent comprehensive review into the School Food policy** across the UK to feed into the next Spending Review. The review should:

1. **Assess the current eligibility thresholds** for Free School Meals across all four nations to eliminate disparities and to explore whether disadvantaged children are being excluded in line with National Food Strategy recommendation. The ongoing eligibility for **children with No Recourse to Public Funds** should be considered explicitly.
2. Urgently **consider how funding for Free School Meals can deliver the biggest nutritional and educational impact**, supporting children's learning and well-being throughout the school day and during the school holidays (including breakfast provision and the School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme). This should include **whether the current allowance for Free School Meals is adequate** and whether funding for national breakfasts adequately covers all who would benefit from access to provision.
3. Explore **how schools can be supported to deliver the best quality school meals** which adhere to school food standards and which ensure the poorest children receive the best possible offer, including by introducing mandatory monitoring and evaluation on an ongoing basis of Free School Meal take-up, the **quality/nutritional adequacy of meals**, and how the financial transparency of the current system can be improved.
4. **Consider what we have learned from Covid-19** and its impact on children in low-income families and the implications of this for school food policy for the next 5 years, as the country recovers.
5. Consider how existing school food programmes (such as Free School Meals, holiday and breakfast provision) can **eliminate experiences of stigma** for the poorest students. Review the impact that Universal Infant Free School Meals has had on stigma, health and education.
6. **Consider the role of family income (wages and benefits)** in enabling families to afford quality food in and outside of school time and during the holidays with choice and dignity.

FREE SCHOOL MEALS

Call in the petition: Expand eligibility for the Free School Meal scheme to include every child (up to the age of 16) from a household where the parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit (or equivalent benefits).

Current situation: This recommendation **has not yet been implemented**.

What needs to happen now: Children experiencing food insecurity continue to miss out on Free School Meals due to the current eligibility threshold. Extending eligibility for Free School Meals remains an essential part of

tackling child food poverty. The temporary extension of Free School Meals to NRPF and low-income migrants during the pandemic should be made permanent.

Why this is important:

- The current Free School Meal threshold is very low (annual income £7,400 or less pre-benefits) - **2 in 5 children living below the poverty line don't qualify for Free School Meals.**
- 21% of children not on Free School Meals would like to receive them.^v
- **41% of households with children on Free School Meals experienced food insecurity between August 2020 and January 2021.**
- Many children from families with No Recourse to Public Funds are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. Free School Meals were extended to NRPF children during Covid but this is temporary.

The impact:

Free School Meals have been shown to result in:

- Improved nutritional value of children's lunchtime meal.^{vi}
- Improved school attendance, concentration and academic performance.^{vii}

The bottom line: Free School Meals provide an essential nutritional safety-net allowing vulnerable children to focus on their studies rather than their meals – more important than ever due to Covid-19.

HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES & FOOD PROGRAMME

Call in the petition: Extend the Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) Programme to all areas in England, so that summer holiday support is available to all children in receipt of Free School Meals.

Current situation: In November, the Government announced that the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme would be made available to all children in England on Free School Meals during the school holidays in 2021.

What needs to happen now: We now need a longer-term, multi-year commitment to ensure children continue to be protected from going hungry during the holidays. Implementation of HAF in 2021 needs to ensure that no disadvantaged children fall through the cracks.

The bottom line: Children at risk of food insecurity during term time are also at risk of food insecurity during the school holidays. Long-term funding for holiday provision is now needed to ensure no child at risk of food insecurity is left to struggle during the holidays.

HEALTHY START:

Call in the petition: Increase the value of Healthy Start vouchers to £4.25 per week, expand the scheme to every pregnant woman and to all households with children under 4 where a parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits, and increase promotion of the scheme.

The current situation: In April, the value of the voucher was increased to £4.25 helping those on the scheme to afford more healthy food. However, eligibility has not yet been expanded.

What needs to happen now: Access to this valuable scheme must now be widened. As the scheme is digitised, there is an opportunity for a large-scale communications campaign led by Government to drive up awareness and uptake.

Why this is important:

- The highest income groups consume about 1.5 portions of fruit and veg more per day than the lowest income groups.^{viii}
- 42% of households with pregnant women and/or children aged 0-3 years old are not aware of the scheme.^{ix} According to NHS data, take-up in England in January 2021 was 56.5% (304,000 beneficiaries) meaning 234,000 eligible beneficiaries were missing out.
- 65% of households with pregnant women and/or children aged 0-3 years old who don't currently receive Healthy Start vouchers say it would make it easier

The impact:

The Healthy Start scheme has been shown to result in:

- Increased intake of fruit and vegetables^{xi}, iron, calcium,

for them to buy more milk, fruit and vegetables for their family every week.^x
31% of those say they have a limited budget for food and struggle to afford the fruit, veg and milk they need.

folate and
vitamin C
amongst
recipients.^{xii}

The bottom line: Reform of the Healthy Start scheme is long overdue, and there is a huge opportunity to make it a flagship part of the Government's levelling-up agenda.

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