

Food and poverty in schools

Many families in the UK today are unable to access or afford sufficient food to make up a healthy diet. Faced with a range of barriers, these families face a daily struggle against food poverty and hunger.

Schools have an important role to play in ensuring that no child starts the day or spends any part of it distracted by hunger or poor nutrition. All schools can use the [Food for Life School Award framework](#) to promote a good food culture within the school, supporting pupils from lower income households to eat better and learn better. By building social capital and engaging local communities, schools can also contribute towards longer-term solutions, changing the landscape of food and poverty in their local area.

Food poverty proofing the school day

Schools will be aware that food poverty may be an issue that affects children in their care. In this instance, schools can take immediate action to alleviate the potential effects, which include hunger. The following actions will support schools to tackle inequalities in health and attainment, and will support progress towards a Food for Life School Award.

Eliminating stigma through a whole school approach

Nationally, over 30% of secondary school pupils eligible for free school meals choose not to eat them for reasons including fear of stigma and social exclusion. By adopting a whole school approach to food, schools can normalise the decision to eat school meals among all pupils, making this choice easier in turn for those vulnerable to the effects of food poverty.

- Take practical steps to make lunchtime a positive experience for all pupils: give lunchtime a clear priority in the school day, try to minimise timetabling clashes, and engage cooks and lunchtime supervisor on a par with key members of staff in consultation on school food issues.
- Anonymise the process: children should not know if one of their peers receives free school meals; for example, you may introduce a cashless catering system.
- Take steps to ensure that all eligible children are registered for free school meals. Check whether your local authority is using the [free school meals eligibility checking system](#) (ECS). The ECS enables local authorities to check very quickly and determine whether a parent can claim free school meals by linking benefits information from the Department for Work and Pensions, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Home Office.
- Raise awareness of entitlement to free school meals among parents, and make sure it is easy to apply; addressing under-registration for free school meals should be a priority for the school's leadership and governing body.

SETTING UP A BREAKFAST CLUB

Many children arrive at school too hungry to learn. Breakfast clubs can support improved health outcomes and can help bridge the attainment gap.

- Schools are not funded specifically to provide breakfast clubs, but they can choose to use funds from the pupil premium to support this provision or they can look for charity or local business support to cover start-up costs, training and support. [Magic Breakfast](#) is one such charity; there may be others in your area.
- Schools will need to explore different financing models to achieve self-sustainability, depending on the pupil premium or charitable support available. Be aware that charging for attendance at breakfast clubs can create a barrier for lower income families; ideally breakfast clubs should be free for all pupils at the school.
- Get in touch with your local authority to see if the Public Health or Learning and Education teams have any budget to support your provision; Blackpool Council fund a successful free school breakfast programme. Your local authority may also be able to put you in touch with established clubs for tips and advice.
- Support and empower your cook or caterer: they are an integral part of a whole school approach and are well placed to order the food for breakfast clubs due to economies of scale when ordering school food. Remember as well that the mandatory School Food Standards and the Food for Life Award Criteria apply throughout the school day, including at breakfast time.
- Signposting to further advice and resources is available on the [Shake Up Your Wake Up website](#).

MAKING THE MOST OF COOKING, GROWING AND FARM VISITS

Re-engaging children with where their food comes from and equipping them with the skills they need to cook and grow their own food has been demonstrated to increase their fruit and veg consumption and can support resilience in the face of poverty. Schools should ensure that farm visits and cooking and growing activities may be equally accessed by all pupils.

- Cooking and nutrition have been included in the National Curriculum at KS1-3. Schools should aim to provide 12 hours of cooking lessons each year for all pupils up to the age of 14. Academies and free schools should embed the programme of study into their curriculum.
- The cost to families of ingredients for cooking lessons can be prohibitive. All schools should provide ingredients for all pupils for all cooking lessons. Where possible the cooking teacher should look to buy these ingredients from the school kitchen, where economies of scale mean they may be purchased for best value. Schools should also be aware that some families may not have a well-equipped kitchen: where possible, teach recipes that do not depend on garlic crushers, cheese graters, and other non-basic pieces of equipment.
- Farm visits are a fantastic opportunity to re-engage children with where their food comes from: when taking pupils on a farm visit, make sure those eligible to receive free school meals are provided with a suitable lunch; for example, for a one off, all pupils on the visit could be provided with lunch on this day.

FILLING THE HOLIDAY GAP

For many families who normally receive free school meals, providing additional meals during school holidays can be a struggle. The All Party Parliamentary Group for School Food has produced a framework entitled [Filling the Holiday Gap](#) to support the provision of holiday meals. Get in touch with your local public health team to see how your school can support local implementation.

You may also have emergency food providers, such as food banks, in your area. These organisations do not provide long-term solutions to food poverty, but can provide a response to short-term crises, for example by providing food parcels and signposting to other organisations. Find out the referral process for your nearest organisation.

Contributing towards longer-term solutions

As well as tackling the immediate effects of food poverty, schools can help shift the landscape of poverty and food, building resilient communities and supporting local food economies.

ENGAGING FAMILIES AND THE COMMUNITY

Involving parents and the wider community in Food for Life activities can help to build healthy food cultures and resourceful, resilient communities.

- Pupil Premium monies can be used to provide after-school cooking activities. By periodically inviting parents and carers to attend with their children, you can help ensure that cooking skills are transferred home. Try preparing a simple salad or soup, and then provide every attendee with a recipe and a bag full of ingredients. See the Food for Life website for [resources and advice on cooking](#).
- Learning how to grow your own food can be empowering. Invite parents and carers to join the school growing club and engage them in simple growing exercises after school: provide compost, pots and seeds, and enable each family to take home a salad plant. See the Food for Life website for [resources and advice on growing](#).
- School Farmers Markets can take a lot of organisation but can effectively support all families to engage with and access good food, and learn about the food available locally. Look up the [School Farmers Market resources](#) on the Food for Life website and identify how your school might set up a market.

CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE OF POVERTY AND FOOD

Food poverty is a complex issue requiring a broad range of socioeconomic solutions and changes made across our food system. Schools can contribute towards these longer-term solutions by working towards a Food for Life School Award, thereby supporting local food economies and building healthier food cultures.

- Independent evaluation of Food for Life menus found a Social Return on Investment of £3 for every £1 spent, mostly in the form of increased business opportunities and the creation of new jobs. Procuring food according to Food for Life standards can revitalise local and independent food enterprise sectors, which in turn have the potential to influence local economies.
- The Marmot Review into health inequalities recommended approaches that are “universal, but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage.” Food for Life is improving population-wide access to healthy and nutritious foods in thousands of schools, while being active in areas of disadvantage. As a Food for Life school you are helping to transform the UK’s food culture and are helping to tackle diet inequalities across the population.