

PROTECTING VULNERABLE CHILDREN'S DIETS

October 2020

No-one wants to see children going hungry. The economic climate is tough but tackling the growing problem of child food insecurity must be a priority for the Government. While the virus itself has mostly spared young children, the economic crisis has not, and further action is needed to make sure that all children at all times are getting a sufficient, healthy diet. Having lost so many months of education, we now need to give our children the best chance they can get to get back on track – children who eat better achieve more.

This briefing paper sets out the current statistics on food insecurity amongst families and children and suggests that a careful and very targeted investment in three existing schemes (as recommended in the recent National Food Strategy commissioned by the Government, and as promoted by Marcus Rashford and his Child Food Poverty Task Force) would be a quick and well-evidenced way to begin tackling the problem. These schemes would also have other 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.

The coalition of civil society organisations and charities behind this briefing have come together to campaign for spending to be allocated by the Government to these three policies. Together these policies would improve the lives of more than 2 million additional disadvantaged children and their families.



CHILD FOOD POVERTY RATES

- Covid-19 has caused a sharp rise in food insecurity. 14% of parents/guardians experienced food insecurity between March and August. 4 million people including 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 2 in 5 households needing to use a food bank.ⁱⁱ Food bank usage is expected to be 61% higher this winter than last.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Despite the recent escalation, food poverty is an entrenched, long-term problem. Even before Covid-19, 4.2 million children were living in poverty in the UK – 9 in every classroom of 30.^{iv}

FALLING WAGES AND RISING UNEMPLOYMENT – KEY DRIVERS OF FOOD INSECURITY

- 32% of households with children have experienced a drop in income due to Covid-19. 15% have had to take out a loan or borrow money in August 2020.^v
- Without the furlough scheme many more families would have struggled. An additional 332,000-664,000 working-age adults would have experienced food insecurity in early May without the furlough scheme to protect them (assumes 50-100% of furloughed employees would have been made unemployed without the scheme to protect them).^{vi}
- People who have become unemployed since the start of the pandemic are 2.5 times more likely to be food insecure than people who have kept their jobs.^{vii}
- As the country faces its second wave of Covid-19 and support schemes introduced at the start of the pandemic are gradually phased out, there is a risk that levels of food insecurity will once again escalate.

IMMEDIATE INVESTMENT IS NEEDED TO PROVIDE A NUTRITIONAL SAFETY NET

<p>FREE SCHOOL MEALS: £670 million/year</p> <p>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). An additional 1.5 million 7-16-year-olds would benefit, taking the total number of children receiving free school meals to 2.6 million. The temporary extension of Free School Meals to NRPF and low-income migrants during the pandemic should be made permanent.</p>	
<p>Why this is important:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The current Free School Meal threshold is very low (annual income £7,400 or less pre-benefits) - many children living below the poverty line don't qualify. ▪ 5.5% of parents whose children aren't on Free School Meals are worried their children will have lower quantity or quality of food because they cannot afford school meals or packed lunches.^{viii} ▪ 8% of all 8-17-year-olds (600,000 children) are worried about not having enough food for lunch at school this term.^{ix} ▪ 21% of children not on Free School Meals would like to receive them.^x ▪ NRPF and low-income migrants are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. This Government recognised this by extending Free School Meals to children in these groups during Covid-19. This measure is temporary, but the effects of the crisis will be felt for years to come. 	<p>The impact:</p> <p>Free School Meals have been shown to result in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Improved nutritional value of children's lunchtime meal.^{xi} ▪ Improved school attendance, concentration and academic performance.^{xii}
<p>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.</p>	

HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES & FOOD PROGRAMME: £200 million/year

Extend the Holiday Activities 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.

In summer 2020, HAF aimed to reach just 50,000 children in 17 local areas. Under this recommendation, an additional 1.1-2.0 million children across the whole country would benefit.

Why this is important:

- 18% of 8-17 year olds (1.4 million children) reported experiencing food insecurity over the summer holidays.^{xiii}
- 11% of 8-17 year olds (850,000 children) reported that either they or their family had visited a food bank in the summer holidays to get food.^{xiv} This was over 60% higher in non-white British ethnic groups.
- The October half-term and Christmas holidays are rapidly approaching. 6.3% of 8-17 year olds (490,000) are worried about going hungry this half-term.^{xv}
- 31% of parents with children on Free School Meals said they received no form of help with providing food for their children over the summer holidays (despite the Government's national voucher scheme).^{xvi}

The impact:

Holiday clubs have been shown to result in:

- Reduced holiday food insecurity,^{xvii} and improved diets on days children attend.^{xviii}
- Additional benefits including: a safe space to play, childcare provision to enable parents to enter work or stay in work during the holidays,^{xix} enhance learning experiences and preparedness for returning to school.^{xx}
- Children being supported in not falling behind over the holidays (educational attainment gap by socio-economic status can be up to three months by the end of the summer break^{xxi}).

The bottom line: Children at risk of food insecurity during term time are also at risk of food insecurity during the school holidays. The Government's summer holidays voucher scheme was a sticking plaster. A nationwide Holiday Activities and Food programme would be a long-term fix.

HEALTHY START: £115 million/year

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.

An additional 290,000 pregnant women and children under the age of 4 would benefit, taking the total number of beneficiaries to 540,000.

Why this is important:

- The monetary value of Healthy Start vouchers has not changed for over a decade (since 2009).
- The highest income groups consume about 1.5 portions of fruit and veg more per day than the lowest income groups.^{xxii}
- 42% of households with pregnant women and/or children aged 0-3 years old are not aware of the scheme.^{xxiii} According to NHS data, take-up in England in August 2020 was 48.6% (259,413 beneficiaries) meaning 273,885 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 for them to buy more milk, fruit and vegetables for their family every week.^{xxiv} 31% of those say they have a limited budget for food and struggle to afford the fruit, veg and milk they need.

The impact:

The Healthy Start scheme has been shown to result in:

- Increased intake of fruit and vegetables^{xxv}, iron, calcium, folate and vitamin C amongst recipients.^{xxvi}

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.

WHAT MPS CAN DO TO SUPPORT

- Speak in the upcoming Opposition day debate on Free School Meals (21st October) and Robert Halfon's backbench debate on child food poverty, voicing your support for the three recommendations as well as wider action to reduce child food poverty
- Sign [Marcus Rashford's public parliamentary petition](#), and share your support for the petition on social media #EndChildFoodPoverty
- Sign [Early Day Motion 972](#), tabled by Education Committee Chair Robert Halfon MP
- Raise PQs on these issues with the Department for Education (Free School Meals and holiday provision), and the Department for Health and Social Care (Healthy Start)
- Discuss your support for these asks with frontbench colleagues and party leadership

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- ^{vi} Figures are from an analysis conducted by Dr Rachel Loopstra from King's College London and colleagues from the University of Oxford and the University of Sheffield. The analysis uses YouGov polling data collected over early May and early July 2020 commissioned by the Food Foundation. The full analysis and report can be found here: https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/BriefReport_Unemployment_v5.pdf
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