



Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
Westminster
London
SW1A 2AA

1st February 2023

Dear Prime Minister,

We are pleased to see you leading efforts to create a strong and thriving economy in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and current cost-of-living crisis, but without a healthy population we cannot have a productive economy.

We write as the UK's public health leaders to urge you to support the health and development of our children by expanding access to Free School Meals, the National School Breakfast Programme, and the Healthy Start scheme.

In September 2022 over a quarter (25.8%) of households with children experienced food insecurity¹, and the current cost-of-living crisis will increase this number. Childhood food insecurity contributes to increased anxiety, poor mental health, poor social and emotional development, and a reduced level of achievement in school.^{2 3 4} This is a serious public health issue that requires a coordinated and sustainable response. We are proposing action in three key areas:

- 1. Expanded access to Free School Meals for all children in households receiving Universal Credit, removing the £7,400 income cap.** In October 2022, there were an estimated 800,000 children living in poverty who did not have access to Free School Meals – this is unacceptable. Access is currently a 'postcode lottery' for children, with eligibility dependent on where a child lives rather than need. All primary school students in Scotland and Wales will be provided with Free School Meals by the end of 2024. Yet in

¹<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking>

² K. H. D. de Oliveira et al., "Household food insecurity and early childhood development: Systematic review and meta-analysis," *Matern Child Nutr* 16, no. 3 (Jul 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1111/mcn.12967>, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/32052571>.

³ S. Lu et al., "The Relationship between Food Insecurity and Symptoms of Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in Children: A Summary of the Literature," *Nutrients* 11, no. 3 (Mar 19 2019), <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu11030659>, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30893802>.

⁴ P. Shankar, R. Chung, and D. Frank, "Association of Food Insecurity with Children's Behavioral, Emotional, and Academic Outcomes- A Systematic Review," *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics* 38, no. 2 (2017).

England, above year 2, statutory provision of Free School Meals remains limited to children in households earning £7,400 or below.

We know that children who eat nutritious school lunches develop and learn better than those who don't.⁵ Providing a child with access to Free School Meals reduces the risk and impact of food insecurity on that child and on their family. It is imperative that the government acts now to give children in all families eligible for Universal Credit access to Free School Meals.

2. **Increase funding to the National School Breakfast Programme to expand delivery initially from 2,500 schools to 5,000, with a long-term plan to provide coverage to a higher percentage of disadvantaged pupils.** Children who eat a nutritious breakfast experience better health and wellbeing, as well as higher levels of cognitive performance and academic achievement.⁶ The National Breakfast Programme currently supports provision of healthy breakfasts to 2,500 schools that have been determined to have the highest degree of need. However, current Department for Education (DfE) funding only reaches at best, a quarter of children and young people in the most deprived schools in England.⁷ The Programme therefore urgently needs expansion to cover a higher proportion of these disadvantaged pupils, with a long-term plan to cover all disadvantaged pupils in schools.
3. **Promote access to the Healthy Start scheme, and expand access to all families with young children who receive Universal Credit.** The Healthy Start scheme currently provides some people who are pregnant, or have parental responsibility for at least one child under the age of 4, with support to buy healthy food. As recommended in the National Food Strategy Review, we call for Government to commit to a £5 million promotional campaign to increase uptake amongst families who are eligible for universal credit. We also call on Government to provide access to all families on Universal Credit with a child aged under the age of 5, removing the £408 'take-home-pay' threshold and expanding access to more families who desperately need this support.

To deliver on these asks, we recommend the creation of new targeted levies on unhealthy food and drink, such as an expansion of the proven and effective Sugar Drinks Industry Levy, or for government to adopt the National Food Strategy recommendation of a new salt and sugar levy.⁸ These new levies would be paid directly by manufacturers of unhealthy food. As well as providing revenue to support the long-term viability of expanded Free School Meal provision, the National School Breakfast Programme and the Healthy Start scheme, these levies would bolster the health of families across the UK through reformulation leading to reduced sugar and salt intake, saving the NHS billions of pounds and supporting a healthy workforce. This is a solution that would generate revenue and improve children's diets and physical health now and into the future.

⁵ Cohen JFW, Hecht AA, McLoughlin GM, Turner L, Schwartz MB. Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients*. 2021;13(3).

⁶ Lundqvist M, Vogel NE, Levin LA. Effects of eating breakfast on children and adolescents: A systematic review of potentially relevant outcomes in economic evaluations. *Food Nutr Res*. 2019;63.

⁷ Magic Breakfast. Hidden Hunger: The State of UK Breakfast Provision in 2022. Magic Breakfast (2022).

⁸<https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/National-Food-Strategy-Recommendations-in-Full.pdf>

As the UK's public health leaders, we understand the clear link between good food and a healthy, productive population. Enacting our recommendations would support the health of our nation for current and future generations.

We look forward to your response and reply.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Kevin Fenton CBE, President, Faculty of Public Health

Professor Jim McManus, President, Association of Directors of Public Health

William Roberts, CEO, Royal Society for Public Health

Sharon White OBE, Chief Executive Officer, School and Public Health Nurses Association

Supported by:

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Alison Morton, CEO, Institute of Health Visiting
Alison Oliver MBE, CEO, Youth Sport Trust
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Lord Mike Watson
Lord Philip Hunt OBE
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Mark Game, CEO, The Bread and Butter Thing
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Professor Chris Pascal, Centre for Research in Early Childhood
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Ross Walker, Founder, TeachSport
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Rt Rev. the Lord Bishop of Durham Paul Butler
Rt Rev. the Lord Bishop of Gloucester Rachel Treweek
Siobhain McDonagh MP
Sir George Howarth MP
Sir Stephen Timms MP
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