

HEALTH OF THE NEXT GENERATION

Good Food for Children

Healthy eating is vital for children's development and educational attainment and sets the direction for good health and wellbeing throughout the life course.

Access to healthy food forms a solid foundation for future health. Conversely, children who cannot access healthy foods are much more likely to grow up in poor health, which may persist into adulthood.

In 2021/2 nearly 30% of children in the UK were living in poverty, making it much harder to access the healthy food they need and severely impacting their chance for a healthy, productive life.

As a coalition of the UK's leading health bodies we find the current situation to be unacceptable and, having conducted a thorough evidence review, present three key areas of existing policy where there are opportunities to go further and positively impact the life chances of millions of children and their families.

Recommendations for the Free School Meal Programme

1 Adopt universal school meal provision for all primary and secondary school children to improve the diet, health, and educational attainment of our next generation. If a stepped approach is necessary, we recommend introducing universal provision of school meals to all primary school children and then expanding the programme to secondary school children. (Priority recommendation).

2 Implement sufficient monitoring and enforcement to ensure all food provided in schools meets the School Food Standards so the full health benefits of a school meal are realised.

3 Any new programme should be accompanied by a full evaluation of the impact on health, education, and socioeconomic inequality across a child's lifetime.

4 Before enacting universal school lunch provisions, enable the auto-enrolment process for free school meals to ensure eligible children receive what they are entitled to and schools receive the pupil premium payments they need to support children from disadvantaged households.

Costs associated with expanding Free School Meals across all primary and secondary schools in England have been estimated at £2.5 billion per year; put into perspective, obesity currently costs the NHS over £6 billion annually, a number expected to reach £9.7 billion by 2050.

Long-term costs must be considered, and we align with the Recipe For Change campaign and support 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 the government to adopt the National Food Strategy recommendation of a new wholesale salt and sugar levy.



Recommendations for the National School Breakfast Programme (NSBP)

- 5** Long-term funding for the NSBP should be confirmed well before the current programme end date of July 2024 to allow schools and families to plan long-term and remove anxiety for families regarding future planning.
- 6** Monitor and enforce school food standards within the NSBP to ensure good nutritional quality and maximise the programme's benefit.
- 7** Expand the NSBP so that all schools meeting the Department of Education's criteria participate.

Recommendations for Healthy Start scheme

- 8** Remove the variance of value and purchasing power of Healthy Start vouchers/card to provide consistency for parents by extending the £8.50 weekly value to eligible children until age five and increasing the value annually in line with inflation.
- 9** Extend eligibility to all children living in households receiving Universal Credit to support access to fruit and vegetables for children most at risk of eating below the recommended 5-a-day minimum.
- 10** Increase uptake by raising public awareness and ensuring the application process is accessible and straightforward; consider auto-enrolment or an opt-out process to increase uptake.
- 11** Commission further research, particularly looking at the cost-effectiveness of a universal programme and increasing the monetary value of the vouchers/card.
- 12** Ensure the programme is provided to all children seeking asylum in a simple and accessible way that doesn't impact asylum claims.

Good food is essential for children and adolescents to live healthy lives, achieve their potential, and contribute to economic productivity. These recommendations are part of a broader area of work necessary to improve the lives of children and adolescents. Our recommendations align with other policy asks in the 2023 Academy of Medical Royal Colleges report '**Securing Our Healthy Future: Prevention is Better Than Cure**', that includes a call for the Government to appoint a Cabinet-level Minister for Children and Young People.

This would support a '**child health in all policies approach**', and provide coordination on cross-departmental strategies to improve children's health and wellbeing and reduce health inequalities.



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