

BRIEFING: NOURISHING THE FUTURE – making healthy food accessible for every child

BARNARDOS

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Briefing | 12 March 2025

Summary

- New research from Barnardo's 'Nourishing the Future – making healthy food accessible for every child' exposes the barriers many children, young people and their parents face in accessing nutritious and healthy food.
- We found that the impact of poor dietary health is greatest on children in poverty, especially those facing structural inequalities, who want to eat healthier diets but often struggle to afford and access healthier foods, which are more expensive, less accessible and less convenient to prepare. This means that they are not getting the nutrition they need for healthy development.
- The support currently available – including from schools, health workers, the community and directly from government – is insufficient to overcome these barriers.

Key findings from Barnardo's research:

YouGov polling from January 2025 found that:

- Every week, nearly one in five UK parents (19%) have to buy unhealthy food for their children because they can't afford healthier options, according to a new survey for Barnardo's.
- **60% of parents** who had to buy unhealthy food options because they couldn't afford healthy ingredients/meals **are worried** about what they feed their child(ren).

Poor diet is having a huge impact on children's physical, oral and mental health in the UK:

- Children from the lowest-income backgrounds are more than twice as likely to experience obesity than children from the highest income backgrounds. Obesity and malnutrition are increasingly linked.¹
- Admissions for malnutrition in children have increased by 76% between 2007 and 2022, accompanied by the persistence of so-called 'Victorian diseases' associated with poor nutrition.²
- Dietary inequalities are contributing to height differences in young children. By age 10, children in the worst-off 10% of households are over 1cm shorter than those in the best-off 10%.³
- Food insecurity has a detrimental impact on children's mental and emotional health in school. More than 1 in 3 schools said hunger and food insecurity was impacting on children's ability to learn, including poor concentration, tiredness and behavioural problems.

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“There are so many people below the poverty line, it's scary. I can't afford to have the heating on and it's either that or don't eat. There are more and more people falling below the poverty line and it's scary.”

Young person supported by Barnardo's

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¹ Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2024) Obesity Profile: November 2024 update - GOV.UK

² NHS (2023) Admissions for scurvy, rickets and malnutrition - NHS England Digital

³ The Food Foundation (2023) The Broken Plate: At A Glance, TFF_At a glance.pdf (foodfoundation.org.uk)

Recommendations



1. Work with children, young people, parents and carers to update nutrition guidance (such as the NHS Eatwell Guide) to make sure it provides relevant advice to all children and families.

2. Increase the value of Healthy Start vouchers given to families with young children living on the lowest budgets, so that all children can eat the minimum nutrients they need.

3. Make school lunches free for all primary school children, with an immediate extension to all families receiving Universal Credit and automatic enrolment.

4. Strengthen the rules on the quality of foods schools can provide (School Food Standards) and make sure that all breakfast clubs and school lunches meet them.

5. Support communities to develop local solutions to accessing nutritious food, through funding Local Food Partnerships.

6. Support and fund health workers to refer children and families needing help with their diet so they can access non-clinical services such as to community kitchens and food pantries.

7. Use the proceeds of any future taxes on sugar or salt in foods to reduce food insecurity and health inequalities, by funding this report's recommendations.

8. Fund family centres in all communities to be a 'one stop shop' for family-friendly food advice and support.

9. Develop a Children and Young People's Food Strategy, co-produced with children and young people, to fully address the scale of the challenges facing young people's diet.

Actions you can take

Support amendments to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that will improve access to nutritious food:

- [NC1](#) which would provide automatic enrolment for free school meals for eligible children.
- [NC6](#) which would establish a national school food monitoring scheme, to ensure that the breakfast club provision along with all other school food, follows school food standards.
- [NC7](#) which would expand free school meals entitlement to all children whose household income is less than £20,000 per year.

Table an oral question to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care for the Oral Health Question session on 25 March. The deadline for tabling is 12:30pm on Wednesday 19 March.

Consider holding a Westminster Hall Debate to highlight the challenges facing children in poverty from accessing nutritious food (we can support with preparation).

Support Peter Lamb MP's Private Members Bill on Auto-enrolment for Free School Meals on 14th March.

Meet with Barnardo's to discuss our work and the Nourishing the Future report.

Submit a written parliamentary question, suggestions below:

- To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, further to Barnardo's latest report 'Nourishing the Future', whether his department will commit to developing a Children and Young People's Food Strategy, co-produced with children and young people, to fully address the challenges facing young people's diet?
- To ask the Secretary of State for Education, further to Barnardo's latest report 'Nourishing the Future', whether her department are engaging with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure the Child Poverty Strategy mitigates the impact of poverty on child nutrition and health?
- To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, further to Barnardo's latest report 'Nourishing the Future' what assessment he has made of the potential merits of increasing the value of Healthy Start vouchers so that all children can access healthy and nutritious food?
- To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the benefits of family centres providing family friendly food advice and support to parents and carers?