



## **Eastbourne Food Partnership Children's Food Policy Briefing - updated 11/09/2023**

### **The case for an inquiry into school food:**

Based on our experiences working with schools and organisations supporting young people, we believe that free school meals should be about more than just providing a nutritional safety net and thus advocate for **free school meals for all**: school meals are an opportunity for education that can benefit all children by providing the nutritional benefits of a healthy meal as well as the social benefits of communal eating. A [cost-benefit analysis](#) by Impact on Urban Health has indicated that extending free school meals to every child in state education would generate a benefit worth £41.3bn in the period 2025-2045 with **every £1 invested generating an estimated £1.71 in core benefits**.

Even accounting for confounding factors like family affluence, **children with a healthy weight are 13% more likely to perform well at school** (OECD, 2019). **With 32.3% of children in Eastbourne being overweight/obese at year 6** ([source](#)) the value of providing a healthy school meal to all children cannot be overstated as an investment in the potential of young people, as well as saving the public purse in the long run through reducing the costs associated with obesity and dietary related conditions (according to the OECD **the UK currently spends ~ £18bn/year on the direct medical costs of conditions related to being overweight or obese**). A [2022 study](#) showed that school meals provide significantly less ultra-processed foods than packed lunches, a factor that increases for lower income families, showing how school meals are not only healthier but can also be an equaliser.

However, the same study showed that, despite being nutritionally preferable to packed lunches, **two thirds of calories from school meals came from ultra-processed foods**, which raises serious questions about school food standards which do not restrict ultra-processed foods. Furthermore, despite the welcome inclusion of school food into OFSTED inspections, we have found that governors/trustees responsible for ensuring that standards are met are not receiving adequate training to carry out this role satisfactorily.

Finally, increasing school meal uptake could be an exciting opportunity for the local economy by developing procurement partnerships with local producers. **For example, by investing in local supply chains for public procurement, Plymouth and Nottingham have seen £0.85 and £1.19 of further local economic activity generated respectively per £1 of spending**, not to mention a Social Return on Investment of £3.04 and £3.11 respectively.

*EFP are currently working on a pilot 'school food beyond the canteen' with Shinewater school in partnership with Shinewater Family Hub, to pioneer a whole school approach to food including sensory education around food and using food to explore the curriculum, as well as providing access to healthy produce for families in a low-income area of Eastbourne. However, alongside this work we need national action to support change. Concerns raised by our partners around school food vary from canteen spaces being poorly adapted, to insufficient veg provisions, to food design tech that is not fit for purpose. Potential opportunities identified range from the economic benefits of local procurement, to developing child confidence and social skills through growing and cooking skills.*

*Given the complex, multifaceted nature of this issue, we are convinced that the time is ripe for an Education Select Committee inquiry into school food, to include free school meals and school food standards as well as food education.*

### **Free School Meal eligibility:**

As a nutritional safety net for disadvantaged pupils, Free School Meals are currently falling short in the context of the cost of living crisis. Across the country, **2 in 5 children living in poverty are missing out due to the low eligibility threshold ([source](#))**, which chimes with the experiences of schools and food support organisations we work with, for example, of parents falling into debt because of inability to pay for school meals as they do not currently qualify for the FSM threshold. It is unacceptable that schools are facing a choice between feeding a child and allowing their parents to take on debt.

[Research](#) commissioned by the School Food Review working group and conducted by Public First has found that 71% of voters think that the income threshold to qualify for FSM is too low or shouldn't exist at all, including 64% of prospective Conservative voters. There is thus significant evidence that voters would welcome pledges to increase eligibility for FSM.

*As an interim measure we therefore recommend an increase in eligibility of FSM for all households in receipt of universal credit, as well as auto-enrolment to relieve families, local authorities and schools of administrative burden associated with the current sign-up process.*

### **HAF:**

Child poverty costs the UK at least £29bn per year (CPAG, 2021), and, according to the DfE, **FSM-eligible children lag 3 terms behind** more affluent peers in terms of educational attainment, with holiday food insecurity being a key contributor to this. **There has been an increase amongst 7-17 year olds experiencing food insecurity in the school holidays from 20% in 2020 to 25% in 2022 (Childwise)**. In this context, HAF is a transformational policy for supporting happier healthier children. Studies have shown that HAF has the benefits of attenuating learning loss, improving parental and child wellbeing and supporting connected communities (summary of research available [here](#)). A recent economic evaluation of HAF in Birmingham (see attached) has shown a **social return on investment of £89,209,280** based on returns associated with obesity, antisocial behaviour and associated crime and wellbeing, self-confidence and learning opportunities.

*EFP are interested in addressing the current challenges faced by HAF at a local level, including variability of food offer and food education offer, uptake, as well as the huge opportunities offered by HAF in terms of local economic development through local procurement. To maximise the impact of HAF, we need your support by arguing for continued HAF funding in the Conservative manifesto, as well as an increase in eligibility for HAF to cover children from families in receipt of universal credit.*

### **Healthy Start:**

Children in the most deprived decile are on average 1.3cm shorter than those in the least deprived decile, and **children in the most deprived fifth of the population are twice as likely to be living with obesity as those in the least deprived fifth by their first year of school. In Eastbourne, almost a fifth of reception age children are obese**. Healthy Start could be an essential tool for decreasing these health inequalities and giving all children the opportunity to grow up in good health.

Eastbourne Food Partnership are working hard as part of an East Sussex coalition to increase uptake (up 3 percentage points this calendar year), including training sessions and communications toolkits to raise awareness amongst different sectors likely to come into contact with eligible women and families, as well as co-developing and funding a project with TechResort a local tech inclusion CIC to use community food projects as places where people can find out about, register and use their healthy start allowance, making their money go further. We are also working with local award winning food retailer JCS Meat and Provisions to provide a "Healthy Start" box in line with the amount of Healthy Start. This scheme has a huge potential in Eastbourne, but we need your help:

***Uptake: In Eastbourne, the uptake in August uptake was at 69%. This has increased from 66% in Jan 2023, in no small part due to awareness raising in the community and health sector. However Eastbourne remains one of the 531 constituencies failing to meet the govt. target of 75%. The Healthy Start Scheme (Take-Up) bill proposed by Kate Green and then by Emma Lewell-Buck would make the scheme opt-out, which***

could potentially reach hundreds of families in Eastbourne. 40 MPs, including Conservative MP Dan Poulter, have written to the Health Secretary in support of the bill, and we urge you to add your voice.

Allowance: The Healthy Start allowance is simply not keeping up with the rising cost of living, having been excluded from the benefits that were uprated with inflation. As a case in point, **the cost of EVERY available first infant formula milk exceeds the value of the NHS Healthy Start allowance** ([link to research](#)). We recommend that Healthy Start be uprated at least in line with inflation.

Eligibility: We recommend that the Government increase the impact of Healthy Start, and expand eligibility to all families on Universal Credit and equivalent benefits, and expand to include children aged 4 whose families are in receipt of these benefits.

This document was prepared by Nancy Wilson on behalf of Eastbourne Food Partnership

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