Briefing: More Than Breakfast

The importance of school breakfast for secondary-aged pupils

Magic Breakfast is the UK's leading school breakfast charity and makes a difference to over 300,000 children and young people every day by providing breakfasts and expert advice to tackle morning hunger in schools across England and Scotland. Alongside support in schools, Magic Breakfast drives long-term change through research, advocacy, and campaigning; working with policy-makers to create a future where every child is nourished, empowered, and able to thrive.

Breakfast Provision in Secondary Schools

A new report published by Magic Breakfast on school breakfast provision for secondary-aged pupils highlights the critical role it plays in supporting pupils' health and wellbeing, social belonging and crime prevention, life chances, and broader social and economic benefits – enabling pupils to thrive in school and beyond[1].



While 900 secondary schools currently receive support through the National School Breakfast Programme, this provision is limited to subsidised breakfast food and delivery to schools and is due to end in July 2026. From the start of the academic year 26/27, participating secondary schools will continue to receive the equivalent value of financial support for a further year but beyond that, there are no plans for provision.

As outlined in our report, school breakfast provision is associated with improved:

- **Health and Wellbeing**: Adolescents who eat breakfast report being happier and less anxious and depressed, and research finds that a typical, balanced breakfast provides one third of a pupil's recommended daily food intake.
- **Social Belonging and Crime Prevention**: Increased feelings of inclusivity, cohesion and participation, with evidence showing that nutritional interventions reduce offending (82%), anti-social behaviour (52%) and aggression (38%). A key recommendation from a recent report by the Police and Crime Committee at the London Assembly recommends secondary school breakfast provision as a means of reducing knife crime and protecting young people from gang violence.
- **Life Chances**: Pupils who regularly eat breakfast achieve, on average, 2 GCSE grades higher, suggesting the potential for school breakfast provision to support improved attainment, enrichment opportunities, skills development and employment outcomes.
- **Social and Economic Benefits**: Evidence from primary schools shows breakfast provision can generate around £9,200 per pupil, equating to a return of £50 for every £1 invested. Breakfast provision in secondary schools builds on this investment. Given its association with improved attainment, secondary school breakfast provision can increase lifetime earnings, aligning with the Department for Education's (DfE) finding that a one-grade improvement at GCSE level is associated with an average earnings increase of £8,500.

[1] Magic Breakfast commissioned Rocket Science to conduct an evidence review that examines hunger among secondary-aged pupils and its implications on health and wellbeing, social belonging and crime, life chances, and social and economic benefits. The research draws on multiple evidence sources, including a literature review, workshops with engagement partners, interviews with sector stakeholders, and a focus group and short survey with secondary-aged pupils. It also included visits to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) schools.

The Impact of Breakfast on Health and Wellbeing

Adolescence is a critical stage of physical, cognitive and emotional development. Unfortunately, it is also the stage at which diet quality deteriorates most, and breakfast consumption is at its lowest.

School breakfast provision can play a key role in supporting adolescents' health and wellbeing, promoting healthy diets, supporting mental health and improving self-confidence and social cohesion. **Evidence in our report suggests possible savings for health and social care services, highlighting the wider societal and economic value of secondary-aged breakfast provision.** By providing a safe and welcoming space for pupils to socialise, build friendships and practice social skills, school breakfast provision can also foster social development, inclusion and a greater sense of belonging.

Nutrition

Nutrition in adolescence plays a key role in physical growth, brain development, and puberty, all of which have implications for lifelong health, learning and employment outcomes. As highlighted in our report, skipping breakfast can undermine both immediate nutritional needs and long-term outcomes, whereas regular breakfast consumption supports healthy development and cognitive function.

This is particularly concerning given the wider challenges facing school food provision. While School Food Standards set requirements for the quality of food provided in schools, an estimated 60% of secondary schools in England were not compliant with these in 2019. As these standards are not monitored, the current level of compliance is unknown.

Breakfast consumption provides adolescents with a range of nutritional benefits, including stronger overall diet quality and higher intake of key vitamins and minerals (including A, B, C, iron, calcium, iodine, magnesium, potassium and zinc) which support healthy growth and development.

Breakfast provision can serve as a practical mechanism to help address food insecurity while building healthy dietary habits among young people. **However, poor diet patterns established in adolescence can contribute to long-term health challenges, which place pressure on health and social care services including the NHS.**

Impact of poor nutrition in adolescence	
Short-Term	**Long-Term**
Lower overall diet quality	Risk of poor diet patterns and habits continued into adulthood
Greater risk of nutrient deficiencies	Problems with adult height, weight and skeletal mass
Development of metabolic conditions	Impacts on brain development and increased risk of diabetes, stroke and heart disease

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Breakfast plays an important role in supporting mental health and emotional wellbeing. Evidence shows that skipping breakfast is linked to higher levels of anxiety, depression and stress. But in contrast, breakfast consumption is associated with higher levels of positive wellbeing and happiness, including greater self-confidence, stronger social cohesion, and a sense of security and companionship.

Insights from Magic Breakfast Engagement Partners and a special school in North East England demonstrate several ways in which school breakfast provision supports emotional wellbeing:

Case Study: Benefits of breakfast provision on emotional wellbeing and development

- **Calm start to the day:** Breakfast provision helps pupils settle in for the school day, creating a calmer environment and reducing anxieties and disruptions.
- **Supporting vulnerable pupils:** Can serve as a 'referral touchpoint,' providing an opportunity to check in and offer mental health and wellbeing support.
- **Building confidence and increasing engagement:** Involvement in breakfast set-up and delivery gives pupils ownership and motivation to attend, boosting participation and self-confidence.
- **Social connection and belonging:** Provides a safe social space for pupils to get to know other students, build friendships, increase confidence and feel part of the school community.
- **Development of life skills:** Offers a 'low stakes' environment for young people to practice and prepare for future independence and responsibilities.

Similarly to the long-term physical health risks of skipping breakfast, such habits can also increase the risk of mental health challenges, which could place additional pressures on services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Over time, these challenges can affect young people's ability to participate in education, training and employment, with wider implications for welfare and social support systems.

School Breakfasts, Social Belonging and Reducing Crime

Poor diets and skipping breakfast have been linked to violence (fighting and aggression), low-level offences (shoplifting), and contact with the Criminal Justice System. Amid the ongoing cost of living pressures, young people have been reported to shoplift food due to food insecurity and financial strain at home. As feelings of social belonging decline in adolescence, secondary-aged pupils may turn to gangs to fulfil the need for community, support and belonging. Food insecurity can exacerbate this vulnerability, with free fast food being a known recruitment tactic used by criminal networks.

Evidence highlights the positive impact and the potential for school breakfast provision to foster improved feelings of social belonging among adolescents. Food programmes such as the London Violence Reduction Unit's Holiday Hope and the Department for Education's Holiday and Food Programme (HAF), have been shown to help reduce the risk of child criminal exploitation. Moreover, the Youth Endowment Fund estimates the impact of nutritional interventions on violent crime to be 'high' and that as a result of these interventions, there is an; **82% reduction in offending, a 52% reduction in anti-social behaviour and a 38% reduction in aggression.**

Breakfast provision in secondary schools can play an integral role in supporting the ambitions and delivery of pilot programmes and strategic initiatives being rolled out at the regional and local levels, including the Government's National Youth Strategy (NYS). **By expanding school breakfast provision to secondary-aged pupils, the Government can support young people with increased access to safe spaces and trusted adults, and strengthen social connection, and community cohesion and participation**.

Consistent access to free, nutritious food in schools can help mitigate behavioural and exploitation-related risk factors, serving as both a protective and a preventative intervention. **Secondary school breakfast provision has also been recommended by the Police and Crime Committee at the London Assembly as a means of reducing knife crime and protecting young people from gang violence.**

School Breakfast and Improving Life Chances



School breakfast provision can provide a space for social and extra-curricular activities, supporting enrichment and wider learning opportunities. This can strengthen learning, engagement and participation in school, improving secondary-aged pupils' life chances. **Magic Breakfast partner schools have integrated breakfast provision with a wide variety of enrichment activities, including skills development, student leadership, volunteering, sports activities, art, music and reading.**

Insights from partner schools demonstrate how school breakfast provision can support improvements in concentration, skills development, and attendance. These outcomes contribute to long-term educational attainment, including improved academic grades. **Breakfast provision also provides opportunities for young people to take on leadership roles and develop key skills such as teamwork, communication and problem-solving.**

Evidence from the Department for Education's Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF) highlights additional benefits of combining food provision with enrichment activities:

- **Increased confidence:** 77% of attendees reported feeling more confident.
- **Increased physical activity:** Attendees were more likely to engage in at least 30 minutes or more of daily activity than those who did not attend.
- **Experiencing new activities:** Attendees were encouraged to try new activities they may not otherwise access, including drama and playing a musical instrument.

School breakfast provision offers an opportunity to combine nourishing food provision with enrichment activities, supporting learning and wider skills development among secondary-aged pupils. This could help to **reduce the risk of young people becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET) and improve longer-term educational and employment outcomes**.

The Social and Economic Benefits of School Breakfast

As outlined in our report, investing in school breakfast provision for secondary-aged pupils has the potential to generate significant long-term social and economic benefits.

NEET Rates and Lifetime Earnings



Improved lifetime earnings are associated with consistent breakfast provision throughout childhood and adolescence. **Evidence from a Swedish study revealed increased lifetime earnings resulting from 9 years of free school food provision from ages 7 to 16. Young people from lower socio-economic areas saw a 5.8% increase in lifetime earnings.**

Evidence on behaviour, educational outcomes and lifetime earnings indicates a link between regular breakfast consumption and improved long-term outcomes. Higher educational attainment and strong skills development can lead to improved employment prospects and greater economic contribution later in life – thereby reducing **the risk of being not in education, employment or training (NEET)**.

But as our report highlights, more longitudinal research is needed to fully understand the long-term impact of school breakfast provision on NEET rates.

Economic Benefits

Investing in breakfast provision for secondary-aged pupils delivers substantial social, educational and economic returns. **Evidence from primary schools indicates that school breakfast provision can generate long-term economic benefits of around £9,200 per pupil, meaning that for every £1 invested, the return on investment is over £50.**

Research from the Department for Education found that a one-grade improvement in GCSE attainment is associated with an average increase of £8,500 in lifetime earnings. As pupils who regularly eat breakfast achieve, on average, 2 GCSE grades higher, this suggests that breakfast provision has the potential to support increased lifetime earnings, alongside wider social and economic benefits.

Recommendations for the Government

Our report highlights the potential for school breakfast provision to improve outcomes for secondary-aged pupils across health and wellbeing, social belonging and crime reduction, life chances and social and economic benefits. To maximise these benefits, the Government should build on existing programmes, strengthen delivery and adopt a test and learn approach to identify what works best in secondary schools.

1. Expand and evaluate existing provision

The National School Breakfast Programme (NSBP) currently subsidises breakfast food and delivery for around 900 secondary schools in areas of high deprivation. With the funding for participating schools set to end in 2027, there is a critical opportunity for the Government to evaluate the wider benefits of school breakfast for young people participating in this scheme and apply these learnings towards establishing a long-term evidence-based programme.

The UK Government must take the opportunity to better understand the impact of breakfast provision on young people's health and wellbeing, social belonging and crime reduction, life chances and the long term social and economic benefits of different delivery models. By embedding learning, evaluation and evidence into the approach to school breakfast, the Government can ensure that future decisions on secondary breakfast provision are informed by robust evidence and evaluation.

2. Recognise the wider impacts of school breakfast provision across multiple policy areas

School breakfast provision for secondary-aged pupils has benefits that extend far beyond reducing child morning hunger. The Government should recognise school breakfast provision as a cross-cutting, low-cost, and effective intervention that can support health and wellbeing, social belonging and crime reduction, future opportunities, and social and economic benefits. Viewing breakfast provision across multiple policy areas recognises it as a long-term human capital investment with wider associated benefits for society as a whole.

The planned extension of the National School Breakfast Programme provides a practical opportunity to foster cross-departmental collaboration and deliver on cross-cutting outcomes spanning across education, health, welfare, work and pensions, the economy and justice.

3. Ensure school food is nutritious, accessible and monitored

Government standards on school food should embed a right to accessible food that is both nutritious and inclusive, with regard for dietary needs, allergies and neurodiversity. **To ensure these standards are consistently met, the Government should establish regular school food monitoring processes in schools, with transparent reporting on compliance and quality.** By doing so, the Government can ensure *all* children and young people benefit from high-quality school food.

For more information about our work, please do get in touch at advocacy@magicbreakfast.com.