Briefing: The Root Causes of Child Morning Hunger

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.

Across the UK, child morning hunger remains a persistent and often invisible barrier to educational equity and social mobility. Currently, around 4 million children and young people (27%) are living in poverty – this is the equivalent of 8 pupils in a classroom of 30.



But morning hunger is not inevitable – it is the result of deep-rooted systemic barriers across a matrix of national, local and individual levels. Magic Breakfast's new report, ***The Root Causes of Child Morning Hunger***, examines the complex and interconnected drivers of child morning hunger and outlines the systemic changes needed to break the cycle so that every child can start their day nourished, empowered and able to thrive.

The Government has taken welcome steps to address these challenges including the launch of the new Child Poverty Strategy which brings together a range of measures and interventions designed to lift 550,000 children out of poverty. Similarly, the roll-out of the Free Breakfast Club Programme for all primary-aged pupils in England and the Scottish Government's recent commitment to provide a breakfast club for all primary and special schools will go a long way to alleviating child morning hunger, but we know more work is required to disrupt the root causes at all levels of the system.

Understanding the Root Causes of Child Morning Hunger

As our report shows, child morning hunger is rarely just about a lack of food; it is a complex, cascading effect of structural challenges. By using a macro, meso and micro framework, we can see how policy-driven poverty (at the macro level) creates increased pressures on schools and communities (at the meso level), which in turn presents immediate barriers for the child (at the micro level) such as social stigma, household instability and educational inequality.

The Macro Level: Systemic, economic, and policy frameworks

Key Challenge: 49% of households with children and young people are living below Minimum Income Standards	Examples of the drivers of child morning hunger include:
Poverty and economic insecurity	**72% of children and young people living in poverty are in working families.** Stagnant wages and insecure work opportunities mean employment is no longer a guaranteed route out of financial hardship. This combined with the higher cost of living and increase in

	food prices can mean families feel trapped by a combination of factors.
Housing policy and cost	A shortage of housing and low supply of social housing mean families face high housing costs and some are stuck in temporary accommodation. **A survey of paediatricians found that 96% reported that poor housing conditions affect the health of the children and young people they treat**.
Inadequate social security system	**34% of households receiving Universal Credit are food insecure.** Welfare payments (including housing benefits) are failing to keep up with inflation and the rising cost of living. Delays in Universal Credit payments also contribute to families being unable to keep up with their regular payments, leading to parents and children going hungry.
Childcare costs and policy	The high cost of childcare and the limited availability and financial support for those on the lowest incomes mean **many families struggle to afford childcare, limiting their ability to access work and further straining household income.**
Regulatory and governance structures	Inconsistent School Food Standards compliance and enforcement mean that access to nutritious, high-quality school food varies widely, creating inequalities across schools. **An estimated 60% of secondary schools in England were non-compliant with School Food Standards in 2019.**
Lack of nutritional expertise in education	No nutritional, dietary or school food training is included in Initial Teacher Education, which means **schools can lack the expertise needed to effectively support pupils' nutritional needs and promote healthy eating habits.**



The Meso Level: Institutional, organisational and community barriers

Key Challenge: 69% of UK schools have no school breakfast provision or barriers to access.	**Examples of the drivers of the operational challenges facing schools and communities that lead to child morning hunger include:**
Logistical barriers	**School breakfast provision is reaching just 1 in 4 disadvantaged young people in England.** The morning rush, long distances to travel and other transport issues experienced by some families mean that even when breakfast is offered, children and young people still face challenges in accessing it. This is particularly difficult for pupils in rural areas who rely on public transport and for pupils with SEND who require home-to-school transport.
Institutional and cultural barriers	**17% of girls aged 15 and older report being embarrassed to eat at school.** Stigma, image, and a perception of breakfast clubs as 'charity' mean that children and young people may avoid attending breakfast provision due to this perceived stigma.
Community food environment	**Limited access to healthy food and the prevalence of unhealthy options lead to 'food deserts'**, which means that there are fewer affordable, nutritious options available.

The Micro Level: Individual and household challenges

Key Challenge: 1 in 5 children and young people worry about not having enough food to eat at home.	Examples of the drivers of morning hunger found in children, young people and families' daily lives include:
Household challenges and individual welfare	**40% of children and young people cite 'lack of time' as a reason for not eating breakfast.** Domestic violence, addiction in the household, neglect, caring responsibilities, and adverse life events mean that many pupils arrive at school without having eaten due to a lack of time, capacity or access at home.
Health and wellbeing, including SEND and neurodiversity	Physical and mental health challenges, disabilities, and sensory issues mean that pupils may face physiological and psychological barriers to accessing breakfast. **In 2023, 1 in 5 children and young people had a probable mental health disorder, which can be compounded by food insecurity.**
Attitudes and behaviours among secondary-aged pupils	A lack of education on the importance of breakfast, social and peer pressures, fears of being singled out and weight loss trends mean that adolescents may face complex food-related psycho-social barriers. **Research finds that body image pressures are increasing among secondary-aged young people, with 20% of girls aged 11-14 skipping breakfast due to weight concerns and 30% of boys trying to 'bulk up.'**
Childcare costs and policy	Food allergies, intolerances and dietary restrictions mean that **some pupils cannot access safe or appropriate food options**.

Breaking the Cycle

As our report highlights, systematic challenges at the macro level create institutional and community challenges which are a barrier for local intervention at the meso level. These barriers in turn, create micro-level individual challenges for families, children, and young people causing them to start the day hungry. This is a self-reinforcing cycle – when child morning hunger compromises learning today, it limits a young person's potential tomorrow, feeding directly back into intergenerational poverty.

School breakfast provision plays an important role in helping to alleviate the challenges experienced across all three levels by easing household pressures, reducing institutional barriers and supporting children and young people with a nutritious breakfast.



The Benefits of Breakfast

But the benefits of school breakfast go beyond alleviating child morning hunger. We know that breakfast provision is a simple, cost-effective and proven intervention that – when delivered effectively, sustainably, and in a stigma- and barrier-free way – can deliver cross-cutting outcomes for children and young people to unlock their potential, and their futures. Research shows that:

- Pupils who regularly eat breakfast achieve, on average, at least **2 GCSE grades higher**.

- School breakfast provision results in **26 fewer half-days of absence per year** in a class of 30 and reduced late arrivals.
- 92% of Magic Breakfast partner school parents agree breakfast positively impacts physical health, 88% agree it improves mental health, 86% agree it improves behaviour and **84% agreed it contributes to a better sense of belonging**.
- **Breakfast provision in early years settings can support school readiness**, promote early development and reduce inequalities.
- A typical, balanced breakfast provides one third of a school child's recommended daily food intake, and **those who eat breakfast are more likely to develop positive dietary habits**.
- 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**.
- School breakfast provision could generate long-term benefits to the economy of around £9,200 per child. This means that **for every £1 invested, the return on investment is over £50**.

The benefits of breakfast are far-reaching. Alongside improvements for educational outcomes, school breakfast provision can bring enrichment opportunities, improvements in long-term health and wellbeing, and wider social benefits such as reducing Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) levels through increased attainment and the development of workplace skills. By engendering a sense of belonging and community, breakfast can also contribute towards reducing anti-social behaviour and protecting children from gang violence.

Our report pinpoints three priority areas for action to drive lasting, systemic change:

Introduce a Universal School Breakfast Programme for all children and young people: Build on the work already being delivered by the Free Breakfast Club Programme in primary schools, and the National School Breakfast Programme for secondary pupils, to implement a universal school breakfast offer for every child and young person across all phases of education.



Understand and tackle the complex barriers to access to strengthen school and community delivery: Continue to work with schools and communities to understand the barriers to accessing breakfast to improve the delivery and impact of the Free Breakfast Clubs Programme.

Centre Lived Experience Voices: Centre lived experience voices, particularly the voices of children and young people, to help shape policy solutions to macro (systemic), meso (school and community) and micro (individual and household) challenges.

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