
Secondary School Breakfast Research

A Rocket Science report for Magic Breakfast

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Prepared for:

**magic
breakfast**
fuel for learning

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1. Introduction

Nutrition is key to children and young people's development as they enter adolescence, impacting health outcomes into their adult lives. Morning hunger can make it harder for young people to get the nutrients they need and has a negative impact on their health, wellbeing, social and educational outcomes.

Secondary school aged children and young people (aged 11-18) have the worst diet quality of any age group, with their nutritional intake deteriorating compared to younger childhood. Older children and adolescents are also more likely to skip breakfast. This is important as breakfast can be understood from both a nutritional and experiential perspective, recognising that eating healthy and nutritious food *and* dedicating the time and space for breakfast are both likely to be beneficial for children and young people. Magic Breakfast is a children's food and education charity which provides breakfast directly to schools and pushes for long-term change to address child morning hunger. However, attendance of breakfast provision in secondary schools is lower than in primary schools. This means that secondary school aged children and young people, who perhaps experience greater challenges around diet and breakfast skipping, miss out on the benefits of having a regular, healthy breakfast. There is a gap in evidence as to why this is.

Magic Breakfast commissioned Rocket Science to investigate this gap. Rocket Science is a research, evaluation and fund specialist organisation working towards a future where everyone can live healthy, happy, and fulfilling lives.

This report details our methodology, findings and recommendations for improving the uptake, impact and promotion of breakfast in secondary schools. We explore the short- and long-term impacts of having and not having breakfast, barriers to breakfast for young people and for schools and broader challenges and barriers around food.

Please note, throughout, unless otherwise stated, 'secondary school aged children' refers to 11-18 year olds. 'Older children' refers to 14-18 year olds.

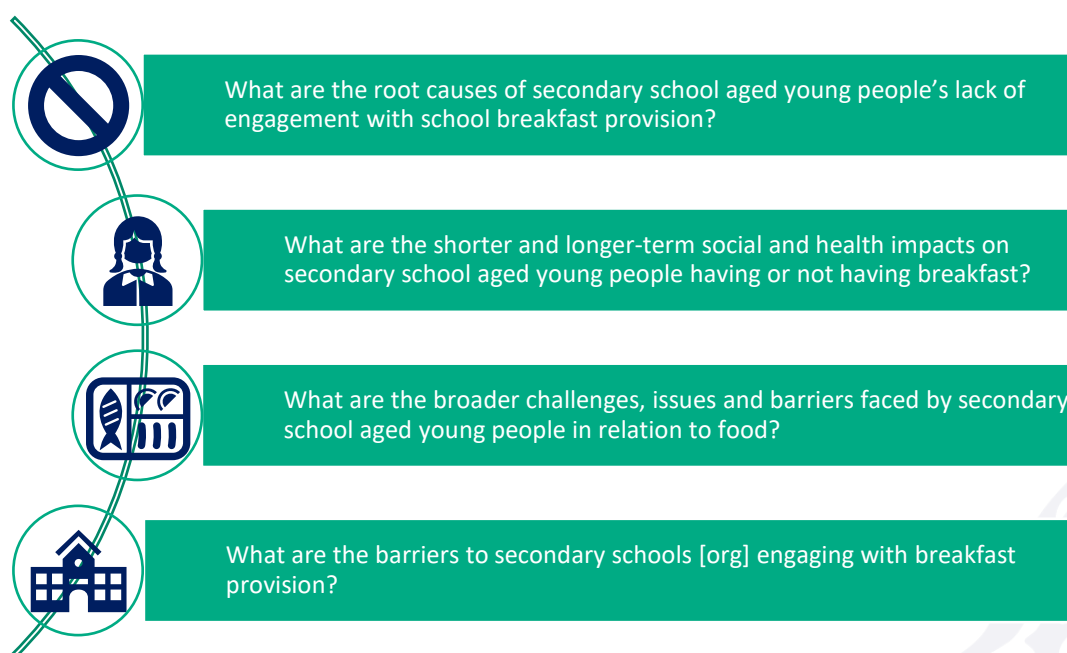
2. Methodology

This research was produced by using two methods:

- A review of evidence, from grey and academic literature
- Engagement with key stakeholders
- In-person engagement with young people at a SEND school in the North East of England. Rocket Science observed a morning breakfast club which took place before the start of the school day. Later, we observed breakfast delivery in a classroom during form-time at the same school.

2.1 Research questions

Rocket Science developed four core research questions in collaboration with Magic Breakfast to guide this research.



In this report, we define breakfast from both a nutritional and experiential perspective, recognising that eating healthy and nutritious food and dedicating the time and space for breakfast are both likely to be beneficial for children and young people.

1. What are the root causes of secondary school aged young people's lack of engagement with breakfast provision?
 - a. What are the behavioural/intrinsic challenges, i.e. appetite/circadian rhythms, (perceptions of) stigma, preferences for other activities, understandings of breakfast and nutrition, dietary requirements, etc.?
 - b. What are the structural/extrinsic challenges, i.e. poverty, travel restrictions, precarious home lives, caring responsibilities?

- How does this differ across different types of secondary school (Local Authority vs academies, SEND/ASN, PRU and alternative settings, size of school, type of catering contract, type of cohort, geographical location, etc.)?
2. What are the shorter and longer-term social and health impacts on secondary school aged young people having or not having breakfast?
 - a. What are the potential negative short-term impacts of not having breakfast in areas such as behaviour, concentration, attendance, attention and attainment?
 - b. What are the potential positive short-term impacts of having breakfast in these areas?
 - What are the potential negative long-term impacts in areas such as criminal activity, educational attainment, not in employment, education or training (NEET) status, higher education, mental health, physical health and wellbeing?
 - c. What are the potential long-term positive impacts of having breakfast in these areas?
 - d. Are there potential cost savings for public services, such as the NHS as a result of alleviating these issues?
 3. What are the broader challenges, issues and barriers faced by secondary school aged young people in relation to food?
 - a. What are the structural/extrinsic challenges, i.e. poverty, travel restrictions, precarious home lives, caring responsibilities?
 - b. What are the behavioural/intrinsic challenges, i.e. understandings of food, hunger and eating; relationship between health and food (considering eating disorders), criminal activity, sense of belonging, home life pressures, exam stress, bullying, stigma?
 - c. How are perceptions formed around food, considering role of parental and adult influences, peer networks, and social media?
 4. What are the barriers to secondary schools, as organisations, for engaging with breakfast provision?
 - a. What are the political, economic, social, technology, legal, environmental barriers to engagement?
 - b. What are the cultural/ knowledge barriers to engagement?
 - How does this differ across different types of secondary school (Local Authority vs academies, SEND/ASN, PRU and alternative settings, size of school, type of catering contract, type of cohort, geographical location, etc.)?

2.2 Evidence review

We reviewed existing Magic Breakfast reports and sources identified through online searches. To identify eligible evidence, we used key search terms from the research questions and focused on evidence published within the last five years. The table below details the numbers of sources engaged with.

Table 1 Grey and Academic sources reviewed.

Source type	Number of sources
Grey	95
Academic	56
Total	151

As the evidence was collected, we entered it into an analysis framework based on the research questions. This allowed us to analyse evidence and identify gaps as they emerged during the gathering of evidence.

Towards the end of the evidence collection phase, we held a sense-checking session with Magic Breakfast staff, presenting our findings and gathering their responses. This informed the final phase of the evidence review.

2.3 Stakeholder engagement

We engaged a variety of stakeholders in semi-structured interviews and two group discussions. Stakeholder engagement supported the research by providing us with information on the latest academic research and insights from practitioners working directly with schools and children and young people.

Stakeholders engaged included:

- 15 Magic Breakfast Engagement Partners engaged across two interactive workshops. The Engagement Partners build relationships with Magic Breakfast partner schools and work with them to support children and young people to access a free, nutritious breakfast.
- Eight external stakeholders engaged in one-to-one interviews. Stakeholders included 3 leading academic researchers; 4 people working with young people, schools and food provision; a representative from the London Violence Reduction Unit.

2.4 Challenges and limitations

The main limitation of this evidence review is that it was conducted over a short period of time, three months. This limited the approach, meaning a systematic review was not possible. It is therefore possible that there is relevant evidence that has not been included.

Additionally, there was certain areas of interest where insufficient evidence was found to develop insights. These gaps are further discussed in Section 7, but the key areas include:

- Impacts on young people not in employment, education or training (NEET): by definition, these people are not engaged in school and are a typically difficult group to research. Given research on secondary school children and breakfast provision is already relatively scarce, it is

not surprising that there is limited research on this group. Nonetheless, many of the findings can be translated to consider potential impacts on NEET young people.

- Social Return on Investment (SROI): it had been hoped that previous research would have sought to calculate potential value for money and wider social return on investment, but again, in the secondary school setting, this was not available. This could be an important priority for research moving forward.
- Evidence regarding the type of school: the literature rarely referred to type of school provision (i.e., academies, comprehensive, colleges, pupil referral, or specialist SEND/ASN provision). Again, this reflects the emergent status of the literature but should be a research priority moving forward. Rocket Science ensured to focus engagement on a specialist SEND-provision school in order to develop some evidence in this area.



3. The short and long-term health and social impacts of having and not having breakfast

3.1 Section summary

Missing breakfast directly negatively impacts children and young people's health, wellbeing and social outcomes.

In the short-term young people may experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, nutrient deficiencies, lower attendance and engagement at school, greater risk of exploitation and more physical fights, antisocial behaviour and offending. In the long term, these can impact life outcomes including healthy neurodevelopment and physical development.

A regular nutritious breakfast reduces these negative outcomes and increases happiness, quality of life and attainment in GCSEs. Evidence from Sweden suggests that consistent meal provision throughout primary and secondary school can increase lifetime earnings for young people from lower socio-economic areas.

In order to improve young people's lives, breakfast must be nutritious and regular and is best supported by wider healthy dietary habits.



Figure 1: Overview of impacts of having and not having breakfast



3.2 Mental health, wellbeing and socialisation

Table 2: Key findings - mental health, wellbeing and socialisation

Short-term	Long term
Mental health and wellbeing	While there is insufficient evidence of the relationship between breakfast and long-term mental health and wellbeing, significant evidence in psychology highlights the protective effects of social connection (Holt-Lunstad, 2024), self-esteem and resilience (Liu et al., 2021).
Emotional distress	
Self-confidence	
Social benefits	
Rate of victimisation through bullying	

Skipping breakfast is a risk factor for poorer mental health and wellbeing, **while** having breakfast is linked to higher reported levels of positive and lower scores in negative wellbeing indicators (Burnell et al., 2025; Lundqvist et al., 2019; Naumoska et al., 2025). Teenage breakfast eaters have reported being happier and having a higher quality of life while being less anxious and depressed.

The quality of breakfast has also been linked to wellbeing indicators. One Spanish study rated breakfast quality from ‘very poor quality’ to ‘good quality’ breakfast based on consumption of grain-based products, dairy and commercially baked goods. Those with high quality breakfast experienced lower levels of stress and depression. (Ferrer-Cascales et al., 2018).

Young people who eat more fruit and vegetables, and three meals a day, report they are happier, according to a study of university students (Lesani et al., 2016). Some breakfast interventions use this time as an engagement opportunity to support young people struggling with their mental health:



“One of our schools has paired with mental health and is working with pathfinders who support young people with areas of high levels of need. Senior Leadership Team (SLT) staff are on a rota who do a check in with young people supporting wellbeing and mental health alongside having nutritious breakfast.”

- Magic Breakfast Engagement Partner

While breakfast skipping is associated with emotional distress, there is evidence that this relationship may be influenced by other factors or possibly be bi-directional (Richards & Smith, 2016).

The social benefits of breakfast provision at primary schools have been widely reported, including (Harvey-Goulding 2017; Department for Education 2025):

- The development of new friendships;
- Increased self-confidence, feelings of closeness, security and companionship;
- Improved social cohesion and reduced social conflict and victimisation through bullying;
- Opportunities for enrichment alongside breakfast.

There are potential benefits for parents too. Parents may experience less stress in association with morning routines (Harvey-Goulding, 2017). Parents also have a significant influence over young people's perceptions of breakfast (Defeyter, Harvey-Golding and Forsey, 2025). Communication with parents is key to preventing negative parent responses to provision. Successful parental engagement is therefore key to ensuring that children and young people and families benefit from provision.

There is little existing research available to confirm that social benefits continue for secondary school aged children. The social benefits of breakfast provision at secondary schools is an important gap in the research that should be explored. Rocket Science's engagement with Magic Breakfast's Engagement Partners, and with children and teachers at a SEND school in North East England, highlighted some potential avenues to explore.

Engagement Partners noted the following examples of where breakfast provision led to social and wellbeing benefits

- Models where children and young people are involved in breakfast set up and delivery give them more ownership and motivation to attend. This presents a "low stakes" environment for young people to practice life skills and prepare for future independence and responsibilities.
- One school discussed gives out 'health points' to students for attending breakfast provision, including those who do not eat. This encourages children and young people to come "for the social", even if they are not eating.
- Another school which has a number of young carers has reported that attending breakfast allows young carers to start to talk about things going on at home and for staff to refer them to support. The breakfast club becomes a 'referral touchpoint' in this way.
- A school has worked with mental health services to support young people in areas with high levels of need. Senior leadership teams check in with young people during breakfast provision, to support wellbeing and mental health.

Additionally, Rocket Science's engagement with a SEND specialist school showed that:

- Breakfast club offered the opportunity for:
 - a slow, quiet start to the day, reducing behaviour challenges and anxieties;
 - getting to know other students, building friendships and increasing confidence.
- Access to breakfast during tutorial times offered the opportunity for:
 - taking on roles and responsibilities, building social skills;
 - reducing conflict by improving cohesion around a regular activity.



"I'm not sure with a breakfast we are looking at the right outcomes [...such as] young people's resilience, mental wellbeing and feelings of social isolation - softer outcomes are as important."

- Professor Greta Defeyter, Northumbria University



“At secondary school they have so little time to interact with each other - at lunch time half an hour, and they are missing out on social skills and doing other things.”

– Children North East Staff member

Breakfast provision can be a space for social and extra-curricular development and enjoyment for secondary school age children and young people.

For example, the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme was launched as a pilot by the Department for Education (DfE) in 2018 and has since expanded to include 151 local authorities in England in 2021. The programme provided meals alongside enriching activities for children and young people who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals. It should be noted that HAF is largely aimed towards primary aged school children. HAF provision is required to cover more than just breakfast or lunch.

Young people benefited from (Cox, et al., 2022):

- Increased confidence – 77% of HAF attendees reported that they felt more confident because of going to the holiday club.
- Increased physical activity – children and young people who attended HAF were more likely to engage in 30 minutes or more activity a day than those who didn't. This included physical activity at HAF and outside of HAF provision.

Taking part in new activities – HAF attendees often tried new activities they would not have otherwise accessed, such as drama or playing a musical instrument. This approach could be replicated in a breakfast enrichment programme.

3.3 Nutrition and development

Table 3: Key findings - Nutrition and development

Short-term	Long-term
Nutrient deficiencies	Adult height, weight and skeleton mass
Development of metabolic conditions	Risk of diabetes, stroke and heart disease
Onset and patterns of puberty	Neurodevelopment

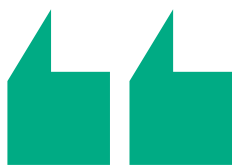
Adolescence is a key stage of children and young peoples' development and the stage at which diet quality tends to deteriorate significantly (Moore Heslin & McNulty, 2023). An international study of the UK and socio-economically comparable countries found a consistent 'u-shaped' trend in breakfast consumption by age (Gibney et al., 2018). Regular breakfast consumption was at its lowest in adolescents (ages 13-18 in the UK). This suggests an urgent need for focus on adolescent breakfast-eating.

Between the ages of 10-19, young people gain:



Nutrition plays a formative role in the progression of puberty, which impacts adult height, muscle, fat mass accrual, and non-communicable diseases. Nutrition also influences **cardiorespiratory fitness, neurodevelopment, and immunity** (Norris et al., 2022). Adolescents also experience an increase in iron requirements for physical and cognitive development, as well as the onset of menstruation (Moore Heslin & McNulty, 2023).

Poor nutrition can lead to short and long-term consequences, such as micronutrient deficiencies, increased risk of overweight/obesity and increased presentation of cardiometabolic risk factors (Moore Heslin & McNulty, 2023).



“[Breakfast is] a really good mechanism to alleviate individual food insecurity, good for dietary and nutritional intake, provides opportunities for increased fibre, calcium, protein”

- Professor Greta Defeyter, Northumbria University

Breakfast consumption is linked to diet quality. For example, **children and young people who have breakfast have higher intakes of vitamins and minerals**, including B vitamins, vitamins A and C, iron, calcium, iodine, magnesium, potassium and zinc (Gibson-Moore et al., 2023). Children and young people who skip breakfast are more likely to develop metabolic conditions linked to increased risk of diabetes, stroke and heart disease (Monanzi et al., 2019).

Another study found that that **having breakfast, alongside good nutrition and sleep habits, may reduce symptoms of ADHD**. (Elvin et al., 2024). Further research is needed to determine the mechanisms of impact.

3.4 Exploitation, Violence and contact with the Criminal Justice System

Table 4: Key findings- exploitation, violence and contact with the CJS

Short-term

Physical fighting

Antisocial behaviour

Long-term

Offending

Potential reduced contact with CJS and related positive outcomes

Risk of exploitation

Shoplifting

Breakfast skipping and nutritional quality have been linked to young people's behaviour, violence, and contact with the Criminal Justice System (CJS). For example, a study across 38 countries found that physical fighting was 40% higher among young people with lower quality diets (Jackson & Vaughn, 2021).

The Youth Endowment Fund estimates the **impact of nutritional interventions on violent crime to be 'high'** (Thege, 2025, Barr & Smith, 2025).

Average estimated behaviour changes for nutrition programmes are:

- Offending reduced by 82%
- Antisocial behaviour reduced by 52%
- Aggression reduced by 38%

These programmes introduce Omega-3 fatty acids and vitamin D supplementation and broad diet change. However, the evidence base for this is currently very limited, being drawn from just two studies. Furthermore, these interventions are not necessarily delivered through breakfast. These results show the potential of dietary change to influence behaviour, but further research is needed to link this directly to breakfast.

Stopping young people going hungry has the potential to directly impact on the risks of young people being exploited. We spoke to a programme manager at London Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) about the Mayor of London's Holiday Hope programme.



"Food in our work is a massive driver to county lines and exploitation. Food is used to coerce young people into negative friendships."

– London VRU Programme Manager

The offer of free fast food to recruit young people is a known tactic used by criminal networks (Elks, 2019). By providing regular, free food, interventions like London VRU's Holiday Hope and the Department for Education's HAF programme can reduce this risk. The community setting of the Holiday Hope provision is seen as key to supporting the most vulnerable young people, who are less likely to be engaged in education, employment or training (to be 'NEET'). Some local authorities have seen HAF as a way to reduce the risk of child criminal exploitation (Cox et al 2022).

Hunger has also been linked to shoplifting. During the cost of living crisis, young people, school staff and youth workers have reported young people taking food without paying at shops, due to food insecurity and financial worries (Cohen & Mansour 2022). One study of a Norwegian municipality found that shoplifting decreased following the introduction of free school meals, which school staff directly linked (Heim, 2022).

Providing a point of contact between young people and trusted adults can also increase opportunities for raising safeguarding concerns. While there is no robust research that directly connects breakfast

provision to improving safeguarding opportunities, there is research suggesting children (aged 9-16) are more likely to report abuse to trusted adults in schools (Thulin, et al. 2020).

Additionally, HAF clubs sometimes provided tailored activities for children at risk of exploitation and domestic violence, who had had contact with the Criminal Justice System or looked after children, providing positive role models and positive activities.

There is also significant evidence that trusted adult support reduces harmful outcomes across a range of areas including better mental health, better school attendance, and better emotional health (Fredrick, et al., 2023).



“There are lots of safeguarding issues. Breakfast is seen as a way of providing a warm welcome to students.”

- Leading academic at UK university

3.5 Academic performance and lifetime earnings

Table 5: Key findings- academic performance and lifetime earnings

Short-term	Long-term
Attendance, cognition and performance	Higher educational attainment
	Higher lifetime earnings

Eating breakfast has been linked to improvements in young people’s cognition, attendance and performance in school (Fischer et al., 2001). Skipping breakfast has been linked to lower cognitive and emotional engagement at school (Moller et al., 2021).

Schools themselves report the benefits of breakfast provision to **concentration, learning, routine and punctuality** (Department for Education 2025). These impacts are well-known within academic literature and organisations that work in this sector.



“Anecdotally we have seen increased attainment, concentration, mood, behaviour.”

- Chefs in Schools staff member

Young people from a sixth form College in the North East of England described the impact that hunger during the school day had on them:



“Sometimes not eating will give me a bad head and causes me to not perform well with work at college”

- Young person

However, inconsistencies in findings indicate that more research is needed to consider (Gibson-Moore et al., 2023, Lui et al, 2019):

- The cost benefit of eating breakfast.
 - Breakfast food type.
 - Unintended nutritional consequences of eating multiple breakfasts.

It is also important to note that breakfast is not the only time young people eat at school. There is growing research into nutrition and food across the school day, particularly lunch, that demonstrates the role of comparative benefits of school meals rather than packed lunches in improving health, behaviour, and attainment (Defeyter et al., 2024).

While reports indicate positive impacts, further studies are needed to build strong evidence of impacts in the UK. The Education Endowment Foundation recently found that more Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) and UK-based studies may also be needed to build evidence quality (Education Endowment Foundation, 2024).

There are potential long-term benefits of breakfast provision. Educational attainment, such as GCSE results, has been linked to balanced diet and habitual breakfast-eating (Gibson-Moore et al., 2023; Prangthip et al., 2021). On the other hand, food insecurity negatively impacts educational and lifetime attainment (Hartgen-Walker, et al., 2023).

Improved lifetime earnings are a potential outcome of consistent breakfast provision throughout childhood and adolescence. A Swedish study of free school lunch provision showed increased lifetime earnings as a result of 9 years of provision, from age 7 to 16. Young people from lower socio-economic areas saw increased lifetime earnings of 5.8% (Lundborg et al., 2022).

Young people saw an increase in lifetime earnings of...

Source: (Lundborg et al., 2022)

While 'NEET' was one of the key search terms used, there were no studies directly relating breakfast provision to NEET status. However, evidence on behaviour, educational outcomes and lifetime earnings do indicate there could be a link. NEET status is linked to lower levels of educational attainment and higher levels of unemployment or economic inactivity and poorer physical and mental health (Scottish Government, 2015).



3.6 Young people's experiences of hunger in education

Between July and September 2025, Rocket Science conducted research into financial difficulties affecting young people at a college in England. We, and 10 young people working as peer researchers, engaged 97 young people through interviews and 863 through a survey.

Over a third reported that hunger affected their education at a sixth form college either daily or weekly. Young people (aged 16-18) said that this impacted their ability to focus in college and that there was a lack of affordable food available in or near college. Food insecurity compounds with wider challenges. Young people who had part-time jobs, contributed to household bills and had caring

responsibilities, experienced additional stresses and barriers. Some had even considered dropping out of college due to the pressures caused by financial difficulties.



4. Barriers to breakfast

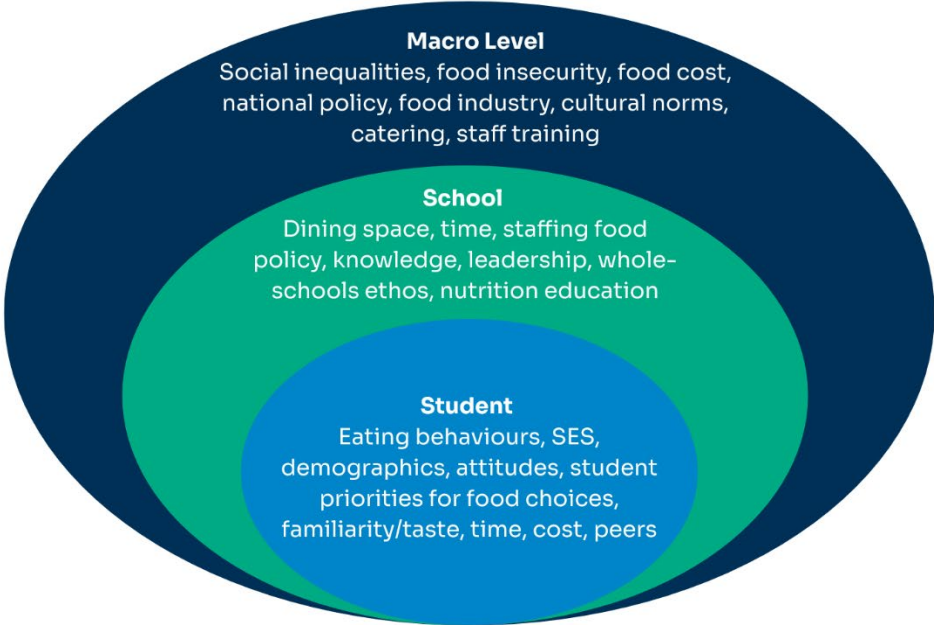
Skipping breakfast is fairly common among children, especially older children and can be compounded by various factors either due to intrinsic challenges faced by young people or due to the external factors interacting with the young people. While some factors can only be influenced through long-term changes, a majority of barriers can be managed by short-term interventions.



48%
of children and young people aged 11-16 yrs in Wales don't have breakfast on weekdays

Source: Public Health Wales NHS Trust

Understanding the complex factors that influence children's breakfast consumption is essential for developing effective school nutrition programmes and policies. Barriers to regular breakfast consumption operate across multiple interconnected levels - from individual student preferences and family circumstances to broader school policies and societal inequalities. These multi-level influences create a complex web of factors presenting as barriers to breakfast.



4.1 Barriers for Young People

The barriers to breakfast consumption among children and adolescents are complex and multifaceted, involving both internal personal factors and external environmental influences.

Internal barriers include biological changes during adolescence, weight concerns, food preferences, and lifestyle choices, while external barriers encompass socioeconomic constraints, family influences, time pressures, peer dynamics, and stigma.

Understanding these interconnected barriers is essential for developing comprehensive interventions that address both individual behaviours and structural challenges to promote regular, healthy breakfast consumption among young people.

4.1.1 Internal factors

Each morning, children and adolescents face choices about eating breakfast, influenced by their personalities, habits, and feelings toward the meal. These personal factors like attitudes and everyday behaviours have a major impact on whether they include breakfast as part of their routine.

Age and Gender related self-consciousness

Age plays a significant role in breakfast consumption patterns, with older children and adolescents more likely to skip breakfast. Gender differences are particularly notable, with girls showing higher rates of breakfast skipping compared to boys (Esquius et al., 2021).



This gender difference may be related to altered glucose and insulin levels in girls (Afeef et al., 2025). Recent research with young people (aged 8-18) confirms that female participants are significantly more likely to skip breakfast, with one study showing girls were 5.28 times more likely to skip breakfast than boys (Sincovich et al., 2022). This is likely due to self-consciousness about weight and appearance being more prominent among girls who may deliberately skip breakfast as a weight control strategy (Gibson-Moore et al., 2023; Godin et al., 2018). Gendered body norms are explored further in [section 5.7](#), and impact both boys and girls who experience social pressure to conform to beauty expectations.

Social media influences compound these concerns by promoting unrealistic body standards and diet culture messages. Studies indicate that weight control intentions and disordered eating behaviours are closely linked to breakfast skipping patterns (Gibson-Moore et al., 2023; Godin et al., 2018).



“Skipping meals [is a challenge for uptake], especially girls wanting to skip meals for weight loss. A school spoke a bit about this. They had lots of fainting. We suggested a late provision in the medical room, as they noticed often it was just hunger.”

- Magic Breakfast Engagement Partner

Biological and Physiological Factors

Circadian rhythm¹ changes during adolescence create natural barriers to morning eating. These biological shifts affect appetite patterns and sleep schedules. As a result of these altered schedules, teenagers usually end up having later sleep times due to which they feel less hungry in the morning, contributing to a lower-quality diet overall (Afeef et al., 2025; Gibson-Moore et al., 2023). The problem is further compounded with late bedtimes and insufficient sleep either due to study pressure or general habits, creating time pressures in the morning.



“Students aren’t necessarily hungry at that time, we looked at second chance breakfast, offered at both points. Secondary age [young people] at school might not have lunch till 1:30 which means they have already been in school for hours and hours without food.”

- Magic Breakfast Engagement Partner



“I don’t usually eat breakfast because I get out so early”

- Young person

Food Preferences and Dietary Patterns

Many young people (aged 2-20) show preferences for unhealthy foods over relatively nutritious options available in breakfast provision, creating barriers to adequate breakfast consumption (Gibson-Moore et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023).

Lower nutrition knowledge among adolescents, often exacerbated by misinformation on social media, contributes to poor food choices and understanding of breakfast importance (Harvey-Golding, 2017; Wadolowska et al., 2019a). Research shows that taste preferences and food enjoyment significantly influence breakfast consumption patterns. There is no high-quality longitudinal evidence that examines whether eating breakfast in primary school settings leads to secondary school-aged children

¹ The body’s natural, 24-hour cycle of sleep, wakefulness, and other physical processes, regulated by an internal clock in the brain, primarily influenced by light and darkness.

being more likely to take up the offer. Again, this could be an interesting avenue for research, to better understand what shapes young peoples' motivations for eating breakfast.

Food intolerances and allergies

The difference between a food allergy and intolerance:

- Food allergies mean that specific foods trigger an individual's immune system which leads to an inflammatory response.
- Food intolerances mean that an individual's digestive system finds it difficult to digest specific foods.

Food allergies and intolerances commonly found in British breakfast foods include dairy products (milk, cheese, butter), wheat-containing items (toast, cereals, baked goods), and eggs create significant barriers to breakfast. For this reason, many may follow an 'elimination diet', where specific foods are removed from the child and young person's diet. Evidence on primary school aged children shows that living with a food allergy can cause daily fear and leads to the avoidance school lunches (Nishida et al 2023). It is likely that breakfast provision may be similarly avoided by children and young people with allergies and intolerances, especially if adjustments are not made to ensure breakfast provision is accessible to them.

Neurodiverse children and young people

Research demonstrates that **children (aged 3-17) with autism spectrum disorders are significantly more likely to have food allergies**, with 11.25% experiencing food allergies compared to 4.25% of neurotypical children (Xu et al., 2018). The heightened prevalence of food allergies in neurodiverse children, combined with the abundance of common allergens in traditional British breakfast items such as cereals containing gluten, dairy-based spreads, eggs in various preparations, and processed breakfast items containing multiple allergens, creates a complex web of dietary restrictions that can effectively exclude these children from standard breakfast offerings (Cermak et al., 2010; Xu et al., 2018).



"I've worked with quite a few neurodivergent young people and certain sauces and textures they don't like"

- Pathfinders staff member

The intersection of food intolerances and sensory processing challenges compounds these barriers significantly. Neurodiverse children (aged 2-13) frequently exhibit extreme sensory sensitivities that affect their tolerance to the taste, texture, smell, and appearance of foods (Cermak et al., 2010). This sensory over-responsivity can manifest as avoidance behaviours toward foods with specific characteristics such as the creamy texture of yogurt, the crumbly nature of toast, or the mixed textures found in cereals with milk regardless of whether these foods contain actual allergens. These sensory-based food restrictions often develop into more severe conditions like Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID), which affects a significant proportion of neurodiverse children and can lead to extreme dietary limitations that make participation in communal breakfast settings nearly impossible.

The combination of food intolerances requiring careful allergen management and sensory-driven food selectivity creates a dual barrier system that can leave neurodiverse children without safe, acceptable breakfast options in school breakfast clubs and other institutional settings (Cermak et al., 2010; Kelly Dorfman, 2025).

Activity Preferences and Screen Time

Unwillingness to involve in school activities and preferences for other activities rather than eating, can lead to breakfast skipping. (Godin et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2017). Excessive screen time especially in older children due to availability of smartphones has also been associated with irregular eating patterns and reduced breakfast consumption (Wadolowska et al., 2019a). These lifestyle factors often reflect broader patterns of unhealthy behaviours among adolescents who skip breakfast.

4.1.2 External influences

Many children and adolescents face external barriers that affect their ability to regularly eat breakfast. Social circumstances, economic challenges, and aspects of the environment all play a role in shaping their morning routines and access to nutritious meals.

Socioeconomic Factors and Food Insecurity

Food insecurity represents a major barrier to breakfast consumption. Children from low-income families are more likely to experience irregular eating patterns due to limited food access and financial constraints. **Deprivation affects both food availability and quality; families are often unable to afford nutritious breakfast options** (Gibson-Moore et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2023), with low household income also associated with breakfast skipping (Nagata et al., 2025a).

One young person at a sixth form college in the North East described how their financial situation made it difficult to afford food:



“With mother on benefits due to being an at home carer money is tight. Bills need to be paid therefore no food money.”

- Young person



Skipping breakfast is
30% higher for girls
28% higher for boys
in most disadvantaged Socio-Economic position

Family Environment and Parental Influence

Parental habits and attitudes toward breakfast significantly influence children's eating patterns. Multiple Japanese research studies demonstrate strong associations between parental breakfast consumption and children's behaviours, with children (aged 2-20) more likely to skip breakfast when

parents do the same (Okada et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2023). A few studies from African countries also show that family structure and household size matter in breakfast-related behaviours, with larger families (more than 5 members) showing increased likelihood of breakfast skipping (Teferi et al., 2025). School interventions can be supported or obstructed by the home environment (Devine et al., 2023).



“Attitude change should lead to change in behaviour, but only if attitude is reinforced. With breakfast – if their routine at home and during the holidays is not doing what they are doing in the breakfast club at school – teenagers will experience two different ways.”

- Professor Greta Defeyter, Northumbria University

Time Pressures and Practical Constraints

Lack of time due to study pressures, job responsibilities, and long travel times creates significant barriers to breakfast consumption (Gibson-Moore et al., 2023c; Wang et al., 2023). Morning routines often prioritise getting to school on time over eating breakfast, particularly when transportation schedules are inflexible. Time constraints represent one of the most commonly cited reasons for breakfast skipping across multiple studies, including a study focusing specifically on 16-28 year olds (Gibson-Moore et al., 2023; Hovdenak et al., 2024).



68% of families

said they face challenges or barriers around breakfast time with their child or children

Social and Peer Influences

Peer pressure becomes increasingly important as children age, affecting breakfast consumption behaviours. The desire to be socially acceptable in terms of food choices can lead young people (aged 9-11) to avoiding school breakfast programmes or adopting peers' eating patterns (Harvey-Golding, 2017). Social dynamics in school settings can either support or discourage healthy eating behaviours.

Stigma and School Environment

Stigma associated with school breakfast programmes creates barriers, particularly for students eligible for free meals. Many adolescents avoid participating in breakfast programmes to prevent being perceived as poor or different (Graham et al., 2017; UK Parliament, 2023). This stigma is particularly pronounced among older students and can significantly impact programme uptake and effectiveness.



“The other things we hear, where schools are doing free breakfast provision, sometimes there is a stigma attached with accessing free provision. Students eligible don’t want to access it as it’s obvious they’re accessing the provision.”

- Stakeholder

Educational and Environmental Factors

Research from Ethiopia shows that maternal education levels strongly influence breakfast consumption patterns, with children of mothers without formal education being more likely to skip breakfast (Teferi et al., 2025).



Children of mothers without formal education are **3.89 times more likely** to skip breakfast (Teferi et al., 2025).

Living in rural settings also increases the likelihood of breakfast skipping compared to urban areas, potentially due to different cultural norms, limited food access, and varying emphasis on regular meal patterns (Teferi et al., 2025).

4.2 Barriers for secondary schools

Breakfast provision in school faces significant barriers that vary by school type, funding systems, and student needs. Drawing on recent research from both the UK and internationally, this review summarises key challenges political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental as well as cultural and knowledge-based barriers. It highlights important differences across school settings, including local authority (LA) versus academy status, school size, catering contract type, cohort needs, and geographical location.

4.2.1 Economic and Political Barriers

Economic and political barriers represent some of the most fundamental challenges to implementing effective breakfast provision in secondary schools, often stemming from competing priorities. These barriers lead to resource strains that hinder programme sustainability.

The key challenge surrounds funding shortfalls

Both UK and US research consistently highlight inadequate funding as a major barrier.

The 2025 tes survey found that only a small fraction of England primary schools felt the Government’s breakfast club funding fully covered operational costs, with many experiencing significant annual losses (Turner, 2025). The school Rocket Science visited was no longer able to provide full provisions, meaning now, although bread and milk is provided as standard, and yoghurts and juice occasionally,

teachers pay for spreads, cereals and other items. Since undertaking this school visit the Department for Education has announced increased rates of funding for the primary school breakfast programme in England, with rates increasing to £1 per pupil per day plus a £25 daily rate for staffing and administration. In addition to this, schools will receive a £1,000 startup grant when launching their breakfast club.



70% respondents

identified funding as their primary concern.
(tes school survey, 2025)

Other challenges include:

- **Staffing Constraints:** Schools across settings report difficulties affording additional staff or extending staff hours to run breakfast clubs. This is especially acute in secondary schools with high deprivation, where existing staff are already stretched thin (Godin et al., 2018). Similarly, a US study from Philadelphia identified high staff turnover and communication breakdowns between administration and staff as major implementation barriers (Fornaro et al., 2022).
- **Competing Priorities:** Schools working in challenging circumstances find themselves juggling multiple interventions and often end up deprioritising breakfast provision if it is seen as less urgent than other school improvement initiatives (Graham et al., 2017).
- **Catering Contracts:** External catering contracts can delay or complicate the introduction of new breakfast services, which may struggle to get into schools, especially when renegotiating terms or coordinating between multiple providers.

4.2.2 Review of free school meal policies

Free School Meals Policy:

FSMs are currently available to pupils who receive, or whose parents receive, Universal Credit (with annual household income thresholds varying across devolved nations), other forms of income support, and under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. There are also universal FSM policies for infants (Reception to Year 2 in England) and primary-aged children (P1-P5 in Scotland and all primary children in Wales).

Recently, the Department for Education in England has confirmed the expansion of the eligibility criteria for FSMs starting from September 2026. The change means that all households receiving Universal Credit, above the current £7,400 income cap, will qualify for FSMs, totalling over 600,000 extra children (Department for Education, 2025).

However, research done by Northumbria University (Northumbria University, 2025), has shown that this expansion could mean that schools across England could face an annual shortfall of £310 million in covering the cost of extra FSMs. Without an increase in Government funding, schools could be forced to take money from their teaching and learning budgets to cover this deficit.

This would impact individual secondary schools hardest, costing them an average £25,565 from their 2026/27 budgets, compared to costing primary schools £11,708. It would also have a greater impact

on schools in the most disadvantaged areas with higher proportions of pupils receiving FSMs. The impact is thus not distributed evenly across schools and could present a source of significant social injustice between schools and regions. It could also create a financial barrier to schools implementing breakfast clubs.

There are also still national challenges across the UK regarding the uptake of FSMs. In research done by LACA and ParentPay Group in 2025, they found that:

- 71% of FSM entitled pupils are not accessing their free meals every school day.
- Only 29% of eligible children are using FSMs four to five times per week.
- Around 1 in 10 children who are eligible are not registered at all – often due to stigma, confusion, or language barriers.
- Whilst 55% of UK schools offer breakfast provision, a third of parents said their child doesn't attend, even when the service is available.

The Welsh Children's commissioner is also calling on political leaders to address the problem of 'deep poverty' in Wales, a standard of poverty that is far from the acceptable minimum standards of living. One of the potential means to addressing this is rolling out universal free school meals (UFSMs) to all secondary schools, aiming to reduce the stigma around them and address the high rates of child poverty that persist in Wales.

4.2.3 Review of Breakfast Club Policy

The Government in England has also committed to offering a free breakfast club in every state-funded school with primary aged pupils in England, consisting of the new breakfast club offer. This would offer a free 30-minute session before school where children can get a free breakfast. The programme began in Easter 2025 with the early adopter's scheme, including 750 schools of different types, sizes, and areas, affecting around 180,000 children. Of those children, around 80,000 attend schools in deprived areas.

The Scottish Government has launched the Bright Start Breakfasts fund, a £3 million initiative designed to expand access to free breakfast clubs for primary school children. The programme provides grants to schools, local authorities, and third-sector providers to establish new clubs or expand existing ones for the 2025/26 academic year. The fund prioritises schools with high levels of deprivation (linked to Pupil Equity Funding and SIMD data) and aims to provide both nutritious food and childcare to support working parents, building toward a long-term goal of universal provision. Furthermore, the Scottish Government have committed to an additional £15 million in 2026-27 in preparation for the introduction of universal breakfast club services by August 2027, with a plan to invest £44 million per year from 2027-28 to deliver the clubs for all primary school children in Scotland who want to access them.

Whilst these policy initiatives could be a great start to ending child morning hunger for good, there is a concern that many other children and young people could be left out by these plans, particularly those in secondary schools. The new breakfast club offer in England runs alongside the National School Breakfast Programme (NSBP), due to end in July 2026, which provides subsidised breakfast food and delivery for schools in areas facing the highest levels of deprivation across England, including secondary schools.

Furthermore, a child poverty campaign group in Wales has found that more than 1 in 7 lower income parents with primary age children can't get a breakfast club place, reporting that their school didn't have breakfast provision or that there wasn't space for their child (Nation/Cymru 2022). Whilst the Welsh Government is committed to offering free breakfast places for all primary school children, there is no obligation on schools to run a free breakfast club.

Furthermore, whilst Welsh schools receiving local authority funds cannot charge for breakfast clubs, where schools run their own breakfast clubs or offer longer childcare hours, they can charge parents. In England's new breakfast club offer, whilst 30 minutes of time is free, schools will be able to charge for any extra childcare time.

4.2.4 Social, Cultural, and Knowledge Barriers

Social, cultural, and knowledge barriers encompass the interpersonal and perceptual challenges that affect breakfast programme uptake and effectiveness in secondary schools, often influenced by student behaviours, community dynamics, and institutional awareness. These factors can create disconnects between programme intentions and actual participation, particularly among adolescents who may face unique social pressures or informational gaps.

- **Low Attendance and Engagement:** Secondary schools in the UK report much lower breakfast club attendance (12–24%) compared to primary schools (Graham et al., 2017). This may reflect adolescent reluctance to participate, competing morning commitments, or lack of awareness in line with the findings presented above. This reluctance in engagement translates into lower engagement by schools in breakfast provision programmes.
- **Parental and Community Communication:** Effective engagement requires clear communication with parents and the wider community. Some schools struggle to convey the benefits of breakfast attendance with parents, leading to low uptake (Jessiman et al., 2023). The Philadelphia study also points to the need for effective communication between administration and staff to ensure smooth programme implementation (Fornaro et al., 2022).
- **Importance of Perceptions of Leadership:** School leadership may regard breakfast provision as beyond the scope of the school's responsibilities or not as a strategic priority for supporting students, which can result in limited institutional support within schools (Graham et al., 2017).



"For me, [schools engaged positively] when SLT are engaged, when they are onboard and understand why they are working with us, easy to get a breakfast visit or offer engagement. Easiest way of getting into a school."

- Magic Breakfast Engagement Partner

- **Knowledge Gaps:** Educational institutions may encounter challenges in developing inclusive breakfast programmes, particularly for students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), who may have distinct preferences or requirements (Ismail et al., 2020). Furthermore, schools occasionally overestimate the level of support that external organisations are able to provide (Graham et al., 2017).



50% of respondents

expressed concerns about SEND provision (tes school survey, 2025)

4.2.5 Technological, Legal, and Environmental Barriers

Technological, legal, and environmental barriers involve the practical and regulatory hurdles that schools must navigate to establish breakfast provision, including physical infrastructure limitations and compliance requirements that can vary by location and school type. These barriers often intersect with broader operational challenges, as seen in both UK and international studies, where logistical decisions play a critical role in programme success or failure.

1. Infrastructure Limitations: Many schools lack appropriate kitchen or dining space, particularly larger or older buildings for group breakfast provision to enable social interaction. This is compounded in secondary schools and larger institutions as they have large number of students and therefore busier mealtimes (Jessiman et al., 2023).
2. Legal and Policy Constraints: Regulatory requirements such as food safety can create additional burdens, especially for schools with less administrative capacity (Kellogg's, 2019).

4.2.6 Engagement by school type

Breakfast provision in schools face multifarious barriers across different types of schools. While economic constraints and staffing shortages are universal, the impact of infrastructure, leadership philosophy, and student demographics varies by school type and location necessitating tailored approaches, increased funding, better communication, and flexible delivery models being needed especially for secondary, SEND/ASN, and larger schools.

Table 6: Barriers faced by different types of schools

School Type/Setting	Key Barriers & Challenges	Attendance/Outcomes
Primary Schools	Lower reported barriers to engagement, higher staff and parent buy-in	Higher attendance rates (~25%)
Secondary Schools	Infrastructure limitations, low adolescent engagement, competing priorities, large size increases complexity	Much lower attendance (12–24%), often <20% in participating schools
SEND/ASN/PRUs	High need for tailored environments, additional staff, and funding for one-to-one support	Highest average attendance (over half in special schools, two-thirds in PRUs), but

		provision may be limited to a subset
Academies/LA Schools	Academy status may introduce additional administrative or contractual complexities; LA schools may have more standardised support	Varies by local context and leadership
Urban vs Rural	Urban schools may lack space; rural schools may face transport or isolation barriers	No direct comparative data in sample, but context likely affects access
Delivery model	Different breakfast delivery models influence participation rates and operational effectiveness;	Breakfast in Classroom (BIC) and Cafeteria After the Bell (CAB) achieve higher rates than the traditional before-the-bell cafeteria service



5. Broader challenges and barriers around food

5.1 Section summary

Secondary school age children and young people live complex lives with structural, social and economic factors influencing their access and relationship to food.

Adolescent young people's diet is poorer than any other age group, significantly reducing in quality compared to children aged 4-10. At home, young people are impacted by inequalities between families, socioeconomic groups and regions. There is uncertainty around the quality of food provided in schools, which may be lower in secondary schools than in primary schools. Perceptions of food and body ideals are influenced by parents, peers, school environments and social media, influencing dietary habits.



Figure 2: Challenges and Barriers around broader food habits



Teenage lifestyle and associated challenges

- Decline in diet quality as young people enter adolescence
- Preference for fast food outlets



Inequalities

- Children and young people disproportionately affected by food insecurity
- Food insecure households cutting down on healthy foods due to costs
- Geographic disparities cause inequalities.



Home lives

- Meal consumption and wider wellbeing are affected by young people's homelives
- Young carers face acute challenges



School food standards

- Secondary schools may not be meeting school food standards, however there is a lack of monitoring of this.
- Most young people do not enjoy school food or feel that it is healthy



Formation of perceptions

- Perceptions of food are influenced by parents, peers, the school environment, and the local built environment.
- Social media and targeted advertising can play a significant role shaping young people's understanding of nutrition and disordered eating.



Gender norms

- Young women and girls are exposed to a culture of over dieting and may prioritise body image over health
- Young men and boys are increasingly affected by body issues and may be using steroids as young as 13.

5.2 Teenage lifestyle and associated challenges

As noted earlier in Section 3, as young people enter adolescence, not only does their breakfast consumption reduce, but also their general diet quality. The table below shows how diet deteriorates between childhood and adolescence.

Table 7 Adolescents nutritional intake changes (all UK nations). Source: Office for Health Improvement and Disparities 2025.

Children aged 4-10 years	Children and young people aged 11-18 years
1 in 5 meet the recommended “5-a-day”.	Fewer than 1 in 10 adolescents achieve “5-a-day”.
86% fall below the fibre intake target.	96% fall below the fibre intake target.
Free sugars intake is more than double the recommended maximum (5% of energy), with less than 1 in 10 meeting the goal.	Free sugars intake remains very high, especially among girls (12% of energy). Less than 1 in 10 meet the 5% target.



Young people’s lifestyles and the wider structures around them do not necessarily support healthy eating habits. This may be related to the increased independence that secondary-school-aged young people gain (Shaw et al., 2023):

- Young people favour fast and chain food outlets;
- The social experience and familiarity of these settings appeal to young people;
- Young people don’t want to ‘waste’ their limited opportunities to make their own choices on ‘healthy’ foods.



“All young people know what foods they should be eating. They don’t have the behaviour and the structures currently in place to support those behaviours.”

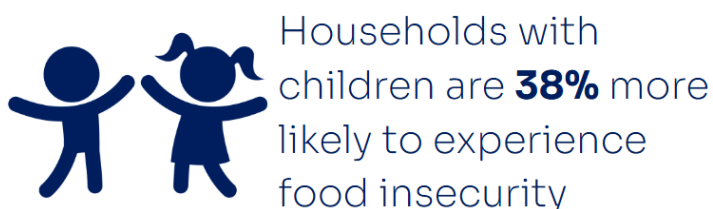
- Professor Greta Defeyter, Northumbria University

5.3 Household inequalities and cost of living

Systemic inequalities put young people in the UK's most deprived places at particular disadvantage. For example,

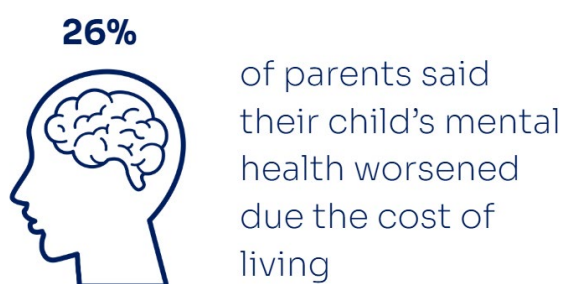
- Households with children are 38% more likely to experience food insecurity compared to households without children. This gap between households with and without children has persisted since the start of The Food Foundation's nationally representative surveys in March 2020 (The Food Foundation, 2025).
- Households with children in the fifth most deprived areas of the UK, have to spend over two of their disposable income on food to afford the government-recommended healthy diet (The Food Foundation's, 2025)
- Almost a third of food outlets in England's most deprived areas are fast-food businesses. Across England, a quarter are fast food.

The data on Family resources survey shows that there has been an increase in the number of children that either live in households with income below 60% of the median household income in the UK or in material deprivation from 2008 to 2021. A more recent increasing trend has been noticed in the number of children that come from low-income families and live in material deprivation from 2022 to 2023. According to the Child food poverty data, children living in London, the North West, and West Midlands, are more likely to experience food poverty. (Open Data Institute, 2022). While there are plausible links between housing status and diet quality, the relationship has yet to be established (Thompson, 2021). Temporary or insecure housing can negatively impact general health and can hinder family meal routines (Mayberry, 2014; Leng, 2011).



At an individual level, socioeconomic class is strongly linked to health-related behaviour, including diet (Moore Heslin and McNulty, 2023). In Britain, financial difficulties mean parents cut back on food, struggle to provide sufficient food, sell possessions and take on new debt. Children and young people's health are worsened as a result (Barnardo's, 2022).

There are disparities in food quality too. Due to increasing costs, food insecure households are cutting



households. Healthier foods are **more than twice as expensive** per calorie than less healthy foods and less available. (Food Foundation 2025).

5.4 Home lives

Children and young people's home lives have a significant influence on their breakfast and wider eating habits.

- In the UK and US, low levels of parental education have been associated with young people's meal skipping, and areas that are more highly-educated are associated with healthier and more diverse diets (Nagata et al., 2025b; Azizi Fard et al., 2021).
- Unmanaged parental stress and chaos can negatively impact meal regularity and quality, suggesting a need for more support in this area (Fulkerson et al., 2019).
- Sedentary lifestyle indicators are linked with meal-skipping (Wadolowska et al., 2019b).
- Young carers report difficulties eating and sleeping due to the overwhelm and exhaustion. They often have responsibilities around food, including preparing main meals and shopping for food (Warren, 2023;)(Bou, 2023).

Studies show high levels of stress among secondary-school aged young people. For example, 66% of young people (aged 15-16) in 72 OECD countries felt stressed about poor grades (OECD, 2017). Stress experienced by children and young people is related to (OECD, 2025):

1. Academic performance
2. Psychological wellbeing
3. Children and young people's agency and engagement on issues important to them
4. Resilience
5. Engagement in school
6. Social relationships
7. Study-life balance
8. Openness of individuals and social environment to diversity

Food insecurity itself can be a cause of stress, As one young person from a college in the North East of England explained that "**worries about affording food lead to stress**". Children and young people's exposure to stress is also associated with unhealthy eating from the age of 8 upwards (Hill et al., 2018). Stress both increases unhealthy eating habits and decreases healthy ones.

Rocket Science's visit to a SEND school highlighted the importance of access to breakfast food in reducing stress factors faced by young people with additional needs. For example, one young person that struggled with social interactions, was allocated the role of collecting breakfast orders and making toast in his tutorial group. The tutor explained that this had a noticeable impact on the pupil's behaviour and allowed him to develop better social relations with his peers. It also served as a point of routine in the classroom setting for all pupils. For others, the access to food in the classroom was important as a way to regulate emotions during difficult periods.

5.5 School Food Standards

There is evidence that School Food Standards (SFS) in England have not always been applied in many secondary schools (McIntyre et al., 2022; Haney et al, 2022; Lalli et al., 2024). In 2019, Food for Life estimated that up to **60% of secondary schools** in England may not comply to School Food Standards. There is also a lack of monitoring and reporting on levels of compliance for school food and healthy eating guidance across UK schools. As a result, we are not sure of the full extent of the issue. Food For Life reported that caterers had had spending on ingredients cut, alongside facing additional charges to the Local Authority, and had therefore had to source lower quality produce. Another potential factor is that funding for free school meals is not ringfenced and so may not all be spent on providing quality meals for children and young people (Food for Life, 2018).

A systematic review of international literature showed that secondary schools are doing worse than primary schools (Peral-Suárez et al., 2024):

- Secondary schools comply to SFS less than primary schools.
 - There is a low availability of fruits and vegetables and milk.

Young people do not feel that school food is healthy, well priced or enjoyable. Only **6% of young people felt their school food is healthy** and **less than 20% enjoy eating it**, according to youth-led activist organisation BiteBack’s survey of their School Food Champions. (BiteBack, 2022).

One stakeholder interviewed reflected that **“quality” and “portion size”** of school meals are frequently mentioned by young people when discussing the financial costs of going to school.

Other UK-based stakeholders with significant expertise in children’s food and poverty also highlighted the importance of food provision being culturally appropriate and young people having input into what is available:



“The quality of food in school isn’t always appealing, particularly to teenagers”

- Stakeholder who wished to remain anonymous

The **“siloed”** funding streams for providing different meals within the school day may be another barrier to consistent provision:



“Different organisations delivering food at different times of the day. Multiple providers – it’s almost become a product of the funding system from DfE who have heavily relied on charitable organisations to supplement the breakfast offer”

- Professor Greta Defeyter, Northumbria University

Variations in contract arrangements mean that there can be wide variation on young people’s experiences with meal provision in schools:



“Who is making decisions about school food in the really fragmented system we have? It may not be an individual head teacher, considering the role of Local Authority and multi-academy trusts in choosing catering contracts.”

- Stakeholder who wished to remain anonymous

5.6 Formation of perceptions

Relationships with others

Parents and carers model, reinforce and instruct breakfast-eating and broader dietary behaviour for children and young people. As teens become older, peer and school environments become increasingly influential as opposed to parents. Peer acceptance is central to dietary choices in a school setting, which can impede selecting healthier items. It has been observed that this effect is higher in female than male adolescents (Harvey-Golding, 2017).

Advertising

Advertising surrounding food can impact children’s dietary behavior, including explicit advertising such as TV ads, billboards or posters. The prevalence of this advertising is disproportionate across different geographical areas. BiteBack surveyed four Local Authorities across the UK. They found that 77% of food adverts in Newcastle featured a High in Fat, Sugar, or Salt (HFFS) food or drink product compared to 38% in Southwark. This can be attributed to Southwark’s local healthier food advertising policies, indicating the influence more regulation can have (Bite Back, 2025). Advertising often ‘health-washes’ food products to make them seem healthier to young people too (Bite Back, 2021). Methods such as ‘Big Food’ sponsoring school trips, curriculum materials and fundraisers can provide further exposure for brands that sell unhealthy foods (Bite Back, 2025). This influences children’s perceptions of healthy foods and dietary choices.

Social media

Social media has become a significant influencer of young people’s understanding of nutrition, mental health and dietary habits. Young people are “heavily reliant” on social media for information on diet and nutrition (Thege, 2025).

Social media has also been found to influence children and young people’s eating disorder psychology. Young people can quickly become bombarded with harmful content as algorithms are trained to show users more of what they engage with. In turn, this can reinforce negative ideas and attitudes. For example, a study about TikTok found that adolescents with eating disorders received (Griffiths et al, 2024):

- 146% more appearance-oriented videos;
- 335% more dieting videos;
- 142% more exercise videos; and
- 4,343% more toxic eating disorder videos than average users.

Social media use in young people (aged 2-18) is associated with skipping breakfast, increased intake of unhealthy snacks and sugar-sweetened beverages, and lower fruit and vegetable intake (Sina et al.,

2022). Social media use negatively impacts body image and depressive and disordered eating symptoms.

Social media has been shown to impact (Healthy Voices, 2023):

- Self-esteem, which then impacts binge-eating;
- Body image, which then impacts disordered eating;
- A person's concept of beauty, which then impacts their body image and ultimately their respect for feelings of hunger and fullness; and
- Anxiety, which then impacts emotional eating.

5.7 Gendered body ideals

Gendered differences in breakfast skipping have been linked to girl's fears of gaining weight (Gibson-Moore et al., 2023). Gender norms mean that typically young women and girls are exposed to a culture of over-dieting and unhealthy weight loss (de Silva et al., 2017).

Girls may prioritise body image over health, engaging in unhealthy weight control behaviours and less physical activity than boys (Spencer et al., 2015). While girls are more likely to struggle with eating disorders, boys are increasingly affected. There is evidence that the number of boys dealing with eating disorders had risen from nearly 0% in 2027 to 5.1% in 2023 (The Centre for Social Justice, 2025).

Although there is still a lack of recognition of young men and boys' experiences of eating disorders, who have been excluded from studies and diagnoses, studies from the US (Nagata et al., 2020;) (Glazer et al., 2021) indicate that:

30%
 of young men are trying to 'bulk up'

25%
 of young men worry about not having enough muscles

Recent research suggests that 'muscle dysmorphia' is common among adolescent boys and young men, who exercise excessively and compulsively (Nagata et al., 2020). Boys as young as 13 are reportedly using steroids. This is another type of 'bodywork' with a focus on building muscles associated with masculine identity. Social media and pornography can lead to distorted perceptions of body image and unhealthy comparisons. Steroid use can lead to Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) and other psychiatric disorders. Steroids can lead to a number of health conditions and triples users' overall likelihood of death (The Centre for Social Justice, 2025).

6. Best practice in the UK

6.1 A SEND school in the North East of England

In October 2025, Rocket Science visited a specialist SEND secondary school in the North East of England and observed two models of breakfast provision being practiced.

Before-school breakfast club

Similar to a traditional 'breakfast club', young people were dropped off at school to attend breakfast provision between 7.45am - 8.50am. Young people arrived throughout the hour of provision into a calm and informal environment.

The breakfast:

- The breakfast provided was available to all and not means-tested.
 - A toaster and spreads (including a chocolate nut spread) were provided for young people to prepare themselves toast with.
 - One young person explained that they didn't always feel like having breakfast at home due to their living situation, explaining that "the house is falling apart. Its leaky and there are mice."

A calm environment:

- Young people were able to socialise to the extent that they wanted to do so.
- Some spend the morning chatting with other young people and staff and, watching television and playing games such as Uno.
- Others spent time by themselves on their phones or tablets.
- This provided a calming and positive space for young people to relax before school.
 - For example, a school staff member explained how one student known for being frequently hyperactive had come to the breakfast club and sat down and played Uno, which had "shocked" other teachers.

Breakfast during form time

From 9.05am - 9.30am young people attended a pastoral session before lessons started. These took place in classrooms where breakfast equipment, including a toaster, bowls, plates, fridge and sink were available.

The breakfast:

- Like the breakfast club, this breakfast was available to all young people.
- Breakfast items included tea, coffee, toast and spreads.
- Staff explained that in the past they had had a bigger budget for items like yogurts which had been very popular.
 - Bread is provided by the school, while teachers' pay for spreads.
 - Food is available throughout the day, should young people need to eat or take a break in the afternoon.

- Food can be a source of support for young people. A staff member explained that one young person with autism had found going to have some toast a way to calm down during a difficult day.

A constructive social activity:

- Breakfast provision was embedded in the pastoral approach, taking place alongside joint group activities such as watching NewsRound.
- In the classroom Rocket Science attended, one young person had the responsibility of preparing and giving out breakfast each morning with the support of a staff member.
- The form tutor explained that the routine of breakfast provision had helped young people in the group to interact positively with each other.
 - The young person responsible for breakfast had previously “bothered” other young people. Handing out plates of toast to the rest of the class had helped to break down barriers and build friendships.

Key learnings

1. A welcoming environment. Young people benefitted from the informal and non-means-tested provision of breakfast.
2. Multiple options for provision provide a flexible way for young people to engage with breakfast as they feel.
3. Breakfast does not need to be the ‘main event’ but rather can be embedded in the pastoral approach of schools.
4. Giving young people roles and responsibilities can create a sense of community and facilitate communication.

Impacts

1. Access to breakfast: young people who might not have otherwise had breakfast were given access in a non-stigmatising environment.
2. A calming environment: both models of provision provided a calm environment, with the breakfast club being unstructured and the form time provision being more structured around shared activity. This provides a positive start to the day and a place where young people can relax.
3. Social connections: attending the breakfast club gave young people an opportunity to interact with peers and staff to the extent that they wanted to. Breakfast can provide a structure and roles which encourage young people to connect.
4. Food as support: classroom kitchens are available to use throughout the day and having food can be a form of support and a means for young people to feel calm.

Learnings for the wider sector

The successes of the two models show that there is no one single ‘correct model’ to be implemented, even in specialist delivery settings. The social and wellbeing benefits of breakfast provision are

striking and show the value of a flexible approach that gives young people opportunities for structured and unstructured engagement.

6.2 Hammersmith and Fulham:

Overview:

After hearing about families experiencing food poverty and realising the number of pupils eligible for FSM was rising, Hammersmith and Fulham Borough Council decided to act. In 2019, they launched an innovative pilot scheme in which two secondary schools offered FSMs to *all* pupils, providing everyone with free lunches. The pilot aimed to understand how UFSMs in secondary schools can change pupils' behaviour, instil healthier food habits, and be important in the transition to adulthood.

This pilot is particularly unique given that previous UFSM pilots and initiatives have only focused on primary schools. The researchers highlighted how secondary school is a crucial time for a student's development, and a time where people begin to make more independent choices around the food they eat.

Key Learnings:

Whilst the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has made tracking data on some outcomes difficult, particularly educational attainment, many of the findings are encouraging.

1. **Successes of Universal Access:** the school saw benefits across the community particularly around increased concentration and socialising. It also improved uptake for pre-existing FSM students.
2. **Support for Families:** who may not be entitled to FSMs but have a low household income. It also showed to relieve stress for busy parents, saving them money and time.
3. **Ease of Implementation:** the school reported that the scheme was easy to organise and a good use of funds.

Impact:

1. **School Meal Uptake:** The percentage of students in one school eating a school meal per day increased from 39% to 68%.
2. **Reduces Stigma:** Eliminates singling out children who were entitled to FSMs. There was a large increase in the FSM uptake for students who were previously eligible for FSMs, highlighting the benefits of a universal (rather than targeted) programme in reaching targeted populations.
3. **Increased Social Interaction:** one of the pilot school's headteacher reported a positive change in eating habits and social interaction, where more students sat down for a meal in the lunch hall.
4. **Improved Behaviour and Engagement:** particularly in afternoon lessons.

5. **Healthy Food Access:** Encourages students to eat a variety of healthy foods. However, whilst healthy options were available, not all students took them.

Learning for the wider sector

This initiative shows promising outcomes for Universal FSM access in a UK based secondary school. It has delivered significant benefits, including removing stigma, increasing uptake among pupils eligible for FSMs, and supporting families on low incomes who may not qualify for FSMs. It also shows additional advantages such as improved concentration in class, and stronger social cohesion across the school community.

6.3 National School Breakfast Programme

Overview

The National School Breakfast Programme (NSBP) is a national led programme funded by the Department for Education and delivered by Family Action. It is a programme that supports schools in England to provide children with a healthy breakfast at the start of the school day (UK Parliament, 2024).

This initiative provided support for schools that have 40% or more children in IDACI (income deprivation affecting children index) bands A-F, and included state funded primary, secondary, and special schools. Around 2,700 schools are supported, although secondary schools are a minority.

All schools on the programme received a 75% subsidy for breakfast club provision, meaning that schools only pay 25% of the cost of food and delivery. This programme is running until the end of the 2025/2026 academic year.

Key Learnings

- **Increased Attendance:** Marked effect on attendance, reduced latecomers, and happiness of pupils coming into school.
- **Academic Progress:** programme has been praised for its effectiveness in improving children's reading, writing, and maths attainment, particularly in some of the most vulnerable pupils.
- **Promotes Social Interaction and Positivity in Schools** – it made mornings more appealing for all pupils, including those who found the start of the day difficult. Allowing children to eat in the classroom also enabled them to talk with one another.

Impact

- **High number of children reached:** In 2025, over 375,000 children are estimated to be having an NSBP breakfast on an average school day. (Family Action 2025).
- **Healthy Foods:** 93% of headteachers say they have seen a reduction in inappropriate food coming into the school since starting NSBP.

- Wider benefits: most headteachers reported they had seen a big improvement in readiness to learn, attendance, wellbeing, concentration, and over half said increased parental engagement.

Learning for the wider sector

This programme has demonstrated the tangible benefits of providing a supported breakfast provision, with clear positive outcomes observed first-hand. **As this programme comes to an end, it is essential that Government builds on the successes, incorporates the lessons learned and looks at ways to continue supporting secondary school breakfast provision.**



7. International best practice

Taken together, these international examples show that well-structured school food programmes that integrate nutrition, education, and equity within school food programmes can deliver far-reaching benefits, from enhanced learning and health outcomes to stronger community ties and economic resilience.

Exploring international best practice in school meal provision highlights the multiple ways countries have successfully designed programmes that go beyond hunger relief to improve educational outcomes, reduce inequalities, and foster lifelong healthy habits. Looking at different models is especially useful because it reveals a range of approaches to access and delivery from universal systems to locally tailored initiatives that can inform more effective breakfast provision in the UK.

7.1 Finland: Kouluruokailu

Finland's school meals programme- Kouluruokailu's, established over 70 years ago, aims to support healthy growth while teaching food literacy, covering all students (about 850,000 per day) in pre-primary (ages 5-7), basic (6-16), and upper secondary (15-19) education with universal free lunches, plus snacks and occasional breakfasts in extended programmes provided in about half of municipalities in Finland. The system operates through decentralised municipal implementation with national oversight from multiple ministries, requiring detailed plans for procurement, safety, and student involvement. Funding integrates into education budgets, with 25% from national sources, 75% from municipal taxes, and EU supplements; average per-student costs range £386-£616 annually (Gary Hoyer et al., 2024).

Key Learnings

1. **Universal Access and Social Innovation:** Demonstrates school meals as both nutritional support and educational tool, integrating food literacy into curriculum without stigma.
2. **Decentralised Implementation:** Balances national standards with local flexibility, enabling adaptation while maintaining quality.
3. **Multi-sectoral Cooperation:** Involves ministries in complementary roles for robust oversight on nutrition, education, and safety.
4. **Monitoring & Evaluation:** Programme monitored both locally and nationally, focusing on food waste, pupil participation, and nutritional quality using dietary software and nutrient databases. Feedback from pupils is gathered regularly, fostering their active involvement. National surveys and local data monitor food safety, budget costs, and cooperation among stakeholders for continuous improvement (Katri Pellikka et al., 2019).

Figure 3: Finland School meal programme



Photo credit: Riku Isohella, Velhot Photography Oy

Source: [School feeding: investment in effective learning – Case Finland](#)

Impact

1. **Health Improvements:** Reduced undernutrition from 60% to near-zero historically; school meals provide the healthiest daily intake, boosting vegetable/fruit consumption and overall nutrition (Katri Pellikka et al., 2019).
2. **Educational Outcomes:** Enhances learning ability, regular meal patterns, and food literacy, with studies showing healthier eating habits persisting into adulthood.
3. **Social Equity:** Levels socioeconomic differences by ensuring all children receive balanced meals, including breakfast options in some programmes, reducing hunger-related barriers.
4. **Economic Benefits:** Lowers long-term health costs through better childhood nutrition; supports local economies via procurement.
5. **Sustainability Gains:** Reduces food waste through monitoring and promotes sustainable practices, though challenges remain in scaling.

How this could shape UK practice

Finland's universal free meal model, including breakfast elements in extended school activities, offers lessons by demonstrating how stigma-free, nutritionally balanced provisions improve attendance, health, and learning. This could inform an expanded UK school breakfast programme with integrated education and local funding.

7.2 Copenhagen: Food Schools

Copenhagen operates an exemplary independent school food programme, emphasising food education, quality, taste, health, and student involvement since 2007. The municipality funds all school meals fully, including staff costs, without national funding. Two main schemes exist: “Food Schools,” where meals are prepared on-site with student participation in menu planning and kitchen work, and “EAT,” a centralised kitchen delivering meals daily. This holistic approach links diet to identity and cultivates food literacy through hands-on engagement, with free and reduced-price meal options ensuring access and inclusivity (Bent Egberg Mikkelsen et al., 2025; Copenhagen Food schools et al., 2024).

Key Learnings

1. **Student Involvement:** Active student participation in food production and menu planning strengthens food literacy and engagement.
2. **Holistic Quality Focus:** Attention to taste, nutrition, sustainability, and cultural relevance builds positive food experiences.
3. **Municipal Funding Model:** Full local funding allows programme consistency and autonomy, though without national financial support.
4. **Nutrition and Identity:** Encourages youth to reflect on food choices, connecting diet with personal and social identity.
5. **Two Complementary Models:** On-site kitchens foster direct engagement while centralised kitchens ensure efficient meal delivery

Impact

1. Sustainability achievement: Food Schools exceed 90% organic food targets and actively work to reduce carbon footprints and food waste by 50% by 2030.
2. Educational integration: Interdisciplinary learning opportunities connect food production to broader curriculum subjects, enhancing overall educational experience.
3. Health and Nutrition: Programmes follow Danish Food Administration recommendations, providing varied, recognisable meals with vegetarian options and accommodating dietary restrictions.
4. Student Engagement: Direct participation in food production processes increases food literacy, cooking skills, and understanding of sustainable food systems.
5. Community Building: Shared meal experiences foster social connectedness, reduce conflict levels, and support local food economies.

Figure 4: A food school



Source: 1: [Food School Guide: Explore the food culture of Copenhagen food schools](#)

How this could shape UK practice

Copenhagen's model highlights the benefits of integrating food education with meal provision to combat food insecurity and promote health. A similar UK-wide approach prioritising student engagement strategies and a holistic focus on food's social and cultural significance would likely have much wider benefits for UK society. Additionally, exploring centralised and on-site kitchen hybrid models may improve reach and operational efficiency for UK breakfast programmes.

7.3 Brazil: PNAE

Brazil's National School Nourishment Programme (Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar - PNAE), established in 1955, serves over 40 million students across 155,000 public schools, making it one of the world's most extensive school meal programmes. The programme combines universal free meals with local family farming support, food education, and nutrition security objectives through comprehensive federal legislation and decentralised implementation. PNAE operates with a 2024 budget of R\$5.5 billion (£819M), managed by the National Fund for Educational Development under the Ministry of Education, with constitutional guarantee making school feeding a universal right for all public education students from early childhood through adult literacy programmes (Betzabeth Slater et al., 2025; Gary Hoyer et al., 2024).

Key Learnings

1. **Universal Rights-Based Approach:** PNAE's constitutional guarantee ensures school feeding as a universal right rather than targeted welfare, reaching 100% of public school students without stigmatisation or means-testing.
2. **Integrated Policy Framework:** Strong federal legislation combined with intersectoral collaboration across education, agriculture, health, and planning sectors creates comprehensive food and nutrition security strategy (Sidaner et al., 2013).
3. **Local Procurement Mandate:** The innovative 30% family farming requirement generates approximately R\$1.2 billion annually for local farmers while improving meal quality and supporting rural economies.
4. **Professional Nutrition Standards:** Over 7,000 qualified nutritionists with legal responsibility for menu planning, implementation, and oversight ensure evidence-based nutrition delivery.
5. **Robust Oversight System:** School Meal Councils at local levels monitor resource use, food quality, safety, and financial accountability throughout implementation.



Source: 2: Brazil celebrates 70 years of public school feeding policies, [RAES](#)

Impact

1. **Nutritional Improvements:** School menus offering fruits increased from 28% to 62% between 2004-2006, while vegetable offerings rose from 57% to 80%, with adherence associated with 24% lower obesity rates among adolescents (Boklis-Berer et al., 2021).
2. **Educational Outcomes:** Recent studies indicate larger PNAE transfers to schools are associated with better academic performance and school achievement.
3. **Agricultural Development:** The programme supports over 50,000 family farmers through direct procurement, stimulating local economies and strengthening rural cooperatives while promoting regional food culture.
4. **Food Security:** PNAE significantly contributes to food security among vulnerable populations, providing essential nutrition safety net for millions of children in public education.
5. **Sustainability Gains:** Emphasis on fresh and minimally processed foods (75% of purchases) with maximum 20% processed foods improves both health outcomes and environmental sustainability.

How this could shape UK practice

Brazil's PNAE model offers valuable insights by demonstrating how constitutional guarantees and strong legal frameworks can ensure universal access without stigma. The programme's integration of nutrition education with meal provision, supported by qualified nutritionists and robust oversight systems, provides a comprehensive approach that extends beyond basic hunger relief to promote long-term healthy eating habits. PNAE's emphasis on local procurement and fresh food preparation could inform sourcing strategies, while the intersectoral collaboration model shows how breakfast

programmes can align with broader educational, agricultural, and economic development objectives to create sustainable, community-based food systems that benefit both students and local economies.



8. Gaps in the evidence base

There are several gaps in the evidence base for secondary school breakfast provision such as limited literature on direct links to NEET status, social benefits, impacts on attendance/attainment impacts, and SROI quantification. Addressing these could foster intersectional understanding, support buy-in, and demonstrate societal value.

Table 8: Gaps in Evidence base

What's the gap	Why is it important / what could be achieved if known
<p>While there is national survey data available for Wales, there is a lack of national public health data on adolescent breakfast-eating in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland.</p>	<p>We know from Public Health Wales that only 52% of secondary school aged young people get breakfast on weekdays. To get a statistic for the three other nations would be give greater understanding of the prevalence of breakfast skipping.</p>
<p>High-quality research comparing and/or evaluating the effectiveness and impacts of different models in the UK.</p>	<p>Comparative research can be important in unlocking insight around the best ways to deliver breakfast provision. There is unlikely to be a one-size fits all approach, but developing insight into the benefits of different models in different settings would support decision makers and schools to make more informed decisions.</p>
<p>Understandings of enablers at the individual, school and macro levels. While there is significant research about barriers, evidence around enablers is more anecdotal.</p>	<p>Developing insight into enablers is important to drive forward change and build in efficiencies in delivery and implementation.</p>
<p>Considering the relationship between different types of food provision in schools. While research exists around lunch, breaktime and breakfast provision, insight into the entire school day is limited.</p>	<p>Breakfast is not eaten in isolation and it is important to take a holistic approach to food to better appreciate where the benefits for young people may be, and where there are barriers and opportunities in provision.</p>
<p>Demographic analysis beyond gender - where demographic factors are considered, it is almost exclusively gender being analysed. This inhibits an intersectional understanding of the challenges and impacts for different groups of young people.</p>	<p>Other evidence from this research indicates the potential importance of culturally appropriate provision, NEET status and housing status.</p>

Impacts of breakfast on NEET status – while evidence on other factors may support a link, there is a lack of evidence directly linking breakfast and NEET status. Existing evidence on the impact of breakfast on factors linked to NEET, such as attainment and wellbeing suggest that there could be a link between breakfast and NEET status. This is worth further exploration.

Social benefits of breakfast provision – there is a lack of evidence specific to secondary schools.

Impacts of breakfast on attendance and attainment - there is a need for RCTs and UK-based studies to develop robust evidence base.

Social Return on Investment (SROI) - has not been explored in depth for secondary school provision specifically. Evidence we have synthesised suggests possible savings for the NHS and Criminal Justice System.

Type of school provision – the role of Local Authority, Academy, SEND/ASN, PRU and alternative settings have not been explored in depth and are rarely mentioned in existing evidence.

Evidence supporting a link between breakfast and NEET status would show the importance of breakfast provision in terms of its links to long-term life outcomes for young people.

Based on evidence from primary and mixed primary/secondary evaluations, the potential impact in secondary-school aged young people could be high.

Robust evidence for this would show direct impacts linked to school targets, supporting buy-in to the importance of breakfast in secondary schools.

The SROI of secondary school provision would provide quantified evidence of wider societal impacts in the form of monetary value. This could be a valuable tool to support stakeholders and decision makers to make better informed policy and budget decisions.

Understanding differences across provision types could help to understand influences on uptake and outcomes and what works within different settings.

9. Conclusion and recommendations

9.1 Conclusions

Short and long-term health and social impacts of not having / having breakfast

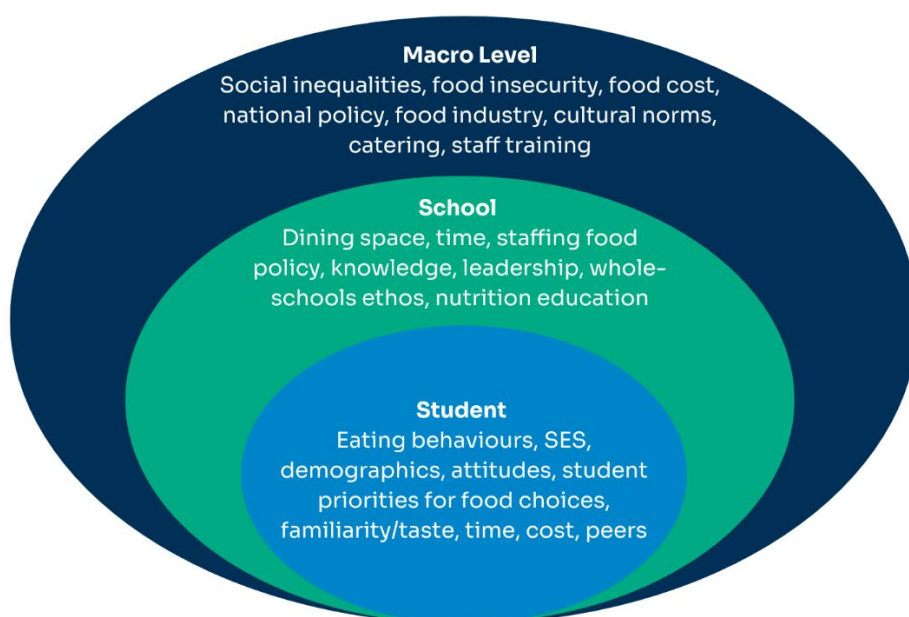
Skipping breakfast has a negative impact on young people in a range of broad-reaching health and social outcomes with potentially life-long effects. Conversely, having access to a regular, nutritious breakfast can reduce risks and improve young people’s lives in the immediate and long term.

Physical health is dependent on a nutritious diet for the healthy development of adult height, weight and skeleton mass and the avoidance of metabolic conditions linked to diabetes, stroke and heart disease. Mental health is improved by breakfast-eating, lowering depression and anxiety and increasing happiness and quality of life.

The social impacts on young people’s lives can also have lasting implications. In the immediate short term, food insecurity, skipping breakfast and a lack of nutritious diet are linked to increased risk of exploitation, shoplifting, physical fighting, antisocial behaviour and offending. Breakfast provision can alleviate these risks and provide an alternative positive space for young people to receive food and socially engage, which can lead to better socialisation and confidence in school environments.

Educational outcomes and earnings can be improved by breakfast provision. In the short-term, there is improved cognition, attendance and performance during the school day. This can lead to higher educational attainment and potentially higher lifetime earnings.

Barriers to engaging with breakfast provision for young people and schools



Young people face a complex mix of personal and external barriers to regular breakfast consumption. On an individual level, attitudes towards breakfast, habits shaped by age, gender, and body image concerns, as well as biological factors like sleep schedules and appetite changes during adolescence, all influence whether breakfast is part of their routine. Girls are especially likely to skip breakfast due to self-consciousness. For neurodiverse children, sensory sensitivities and food intolerances commonly found in British breakfast staples such as dairy, wheat, and eggs create further exclusion from school breakfast offerings. Preferences for less nutritious foods, low nutrition knowledge, high screen time, and competing activity choices among adolescents compound these internal barriers. External influences such as family eating habits, parental attitudes, socioeconomic deprivation, time pressures, stigma around free meals, and peer dynamics further restrict access, making breakfast provision a multifaceted challenge for young people.

Schools encounter a wide range of operational, social, and strategic barriers in delivering effective breakfast provision. Additionally, a lack of clarity in policy direction at secondary, means breakfast provision is often at the discretion of individuals within schools, rather than viewed as a strategic consideration for senior leadership. Funding shortfalls remain a persistent issue, forcing many schools to subsidise breakfast provision from other budgets and stretching staff resources thin, particularly in high-deprivation settings. Limited kitchen and dining infrastructure, regulatory requirements, and complications with external catering contracts hinder expansion and flexibility. Engagement varies widely by school type: secondary schools face the steepest barriers, including low adolescent attendance, competition with other priorities, and difficulties reaching parents and communities. School leadership often deprioritises breakfast provision if not recognised as strategic, and knowledge gaps around inclusive provision especially for SEND/ASN and neurodiverse cohorts limit participation. Finally, logistical models, school size, governance structure, and location further complicate implementation, underlining the need for tailored, well-funded, and flexible approaches to overcome the multifarious barriers faced by schools.

Broader challenges and barriers young people face around food

Secondary school aged children and young people face wider challenges in their lives that impact their relationship with and access to food. Adolescence is a time when young people need high-quality nutrition to ensure healthy development, yet their general diet quality deteriorates compared to younger children.

Inequalities create significant challenges. Those from lower socio-economic groups have worse outcomes around health and food access than those living in less deprived areas. For families with children, the challenges are further exacerbated. Home lives have a significant impact on young people's breakfast and wider eating habits, with young carers in particularly reporting acute challenges. Parental education and stress can negatively impact meal regularity and quality and young people's own stress can also negatively impact eating habits.

Fewer secondary schools than primary schools comply to school food standards or provide healthy, fresh food options. Young people and stakeholders report that school food is unappealing, unhealthy and overpriced. At this age, young people have a preference to use their newly found autonomy eating out at fast food and chain outlets.

Parents influence young people's dietary habits and receptiveness to interventions, with peers and school environments becoming more influential as children and young people grow older. Social

media influences young people’s understanding of nutrition as well as their mental health and disordered eating. Body ideals directly influence dietary behaviours, with young women and girls prioritising weight loss over health. Young men and boys’ body image issues are under-studied, but research indicates these affect a large proportion of the population.

9.2 Recommendations

The research highlighted multiple key recommendations for decision-makers, including commissioning further research on existing gaps, formalising internal learning, prioritising nutritious and holistic models that minimise stigma, extending provision beyond schools, and tailoring messaging to highlight benefits for schools and decision-makers to boost engagement and long-term outcomes.

Table 9: Priority-wise Recommendations

Recommendation	Description	Priority (1 high, 2 medium, 3 low)
Research gaps and priorities for further research		
Deepen knowledge of the impacts of breakfast provision on different demographic groups (i.e., ‘NEET’, SEND, type of geography, etc.)	Better understanding the impacts of breakfast for different groups is important to make informed decisions about the types of provision models that are appropriate. Focusing on priority groups, i.e., young people that are most affected by socioeconomic inequalities, or who have SEND/ASN, is important to ensure breakfast provision addresses inequalities.	1
	Existing evidence from primary schools and around factors related to NEET indicate that these are two areas of high potential impact for young people. Research is needed to evidence this link and understand the mechanisms of impact. More evidence on social impacts in secondary school settings is also needed.	
What type of models should be prioritised in secondary schools		
Focus on providing a nutritious breakfast	Many of the impacts discussed are dependent on high-quality nutrition, making the nutritious content of the breakfast provided important; possibly enabled through local procurement approaches. Schools and third-party breakfast providers should review the nutrition content of their breakfast provision to ensure it aligns to school food standards, healthy eating and nutritional guidance, and benefits children and young people.	1
Promote holistic approaches to breakfast	Breakfast should be considered as an opportunity for wider nutritional intervention and education for young people, for example through providing activities involving culturally appropriate food preparation/cooking. A flexible approach to the timings of breakfast provision would help to overcome barriers of travel and circadian rhythms.	2
Continue to promote provision that minimises stigma	Universal provision is less stigmatising for young people than means-tested provision. Behaviour change strategies in schools could reduce stigma, for example by providing additional activities alongside breakfast that are marketed as the key	2

	attraction which can help improve uptake for young people. This follows the approach of the Mayor of London's Holiday Hope programme.	
Consider need for provision outside of schools	Secondary school aged children and young people who are excluded from schools are at risk of exploitation and perpetration of serious violence. They are also excluded from the benefits of free school breakfast provision. Initiating the expansion of provision to community settings could bring the benefits of breakfast to those children and young people who are most vulnerable.	2
What messaging works		
Promote the benefits of breakfast to schools	Benefits include improved attendance and attainment, reducing physical fighting and antisocial behaviour and potentially reducing risks of exploitation, improving school spirit and giving young people skills by involving them in delivery. These are all areas of impact that directly affect schools and so should be used to target messaging towards schools.	1
Promote the benefits of breakfast to other key stakeholder groups	Benefits to children and young people's health, social and emotional skills, confidence and life skills, attainment, lifetime earnings and contact with the criminal justice system have the potential for long term impact on their life chances. Any further evidence developed on NEET status similarly should be promoted. These areas of impact are important indicators to increase support and awareness of the importance of school breakfast provision for key stakeholder groups including schools, parents, decision-makers and children and young people.	1
Recommendations for Government		
UK and Devolved Governments should continue investment into school breakfast programmes, growing the evidence-base for secondary schools	The UK and Devolved Governments should continue to build upon the evidence of existing school breakfast programmes (including the National School Breakfast Programme in England, local authority funded schemes in Scotland, the Extended Schools Programme in Northern Ireland, local initiatives in Wales and other school or charity-led models) to better understand the impact of secondary school breakfast provision.	1
	This report also provides learnings from international programmes, which could form the basis of pilot testing in the UK.	
UK and Devolved Governments should recognise the wider impacts of school breakfast provision across multiple policy areas	This research outlines the far-reaching social impact of school breakfast provision for secondary-aged children and young people. Governments in all four UK nations should recognise the cross-cutting impact of school breakfast provision beyond education; convening across policy areas such as health, welfare, the economy, and justice to see school breakfast provision as a long-term human capital investment with wider associated benefits for society as a whole.	2
UK and Devolved Governments should ensure school food is nutritious and accessible for all and children and young people	All Governments' standards on school food should embed a right to accessible food including regard for dietary needs, allergies, and neurodiversity. Governments should commit to monitoring provision in schools to ensure these standards are upheld, enabling all children and young people to benefit from high quality and nutritious school food, including breakfast provision and school lunches.	2



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