

The root causes of child morning hunger

Magic Breakfast is the UK's leading school breakfast charity, making a difference to over 350,000 children and young people by partnering with schools to provide breakfasts and expert advice across Scotland and England. Currently, over 7% of young Scots can access a "magic" breakfast every school morning supporting educational equity, reducing barriers to learning, and delivering for busy families. Our mission is to ensure that every child and young person in Scotland is nourished, empowered, and able to thrive.

Across Scotland, child morning hunger remains a persistent and often invisible barrier to educational equity and social mobility. Currently, around [210,000 children and young people are living in poverty in Scotland](#) – this is the equivalent of 6 pupils in every classroom of 30.



But morning hunger is not inevitable – it is the result of deep-rooted systemic barriers across a matrix of national (macro), community (meso), and individual (micro) levels. Magic Breakfast's report, [The Root Causes of Child Morning Hunger](#), examines the complex and interconnected drivers of child morning hunger in the UK and outlines the systemic changes needed to break the cycle.



The previous Scottish Government took a number of welcome steps to address these challenges, including through [Bringing Hope, Building Futures](#), the last Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan before the legally binding 2030 child poverty targets. Within that plan, as announced in the 2026/27 Scottish Budget, the Government committed to providing universal school breakfast provision in both primary and special schools. At a UK level, the Child Poverty Strategy also contains policies designed to lift children out of poverty. But at both UK and devolved levels, more needs to be done to disrupt the root causes of these issues and prevent these challenges from persisting.

Understanding the root causes of child morning hunger

Macro – National and systemic challenges

Key Challenge: 49% of households with children and young people are living below Minimum Income Standards	Examples of the drivers of child morning hunger include:
Poverty and economic insecurity	72% of children and young people living in poverty in the UK are in working families. In Scotland, that figure is higher at 75%.
Housing policy and cost	A recent survey found that 96% of paediatricians reported that poor housing conditions affect the health of the children and young people they treat.
Inadequate social security system	34% of UK households receiving Universal Credit are food insecure.
Childcare costs and policy	Many families struggle to afford childcare, limiting their ability to access work and further straining household income.
Lack of nutritional expertise in education.	Schools can lack the expertise needed to effectively support pupils' nutritional needs and promote healthy eating habits. This is compounded by a lack of nutrition education in Initial Teacher Education.

Meso – School, community, and local challenges

Key Challenge: 69% of UK schools have no school breakfast provision or barriers to access.	Examples of the drivers of the operational challenges facing schools and communities that lead to child morning hunger include:
Logistical barriers	School breakfast provision is not reaching 41% of Scottish schools. Free breakfast provision is reaching even fewer.
Institutional and cultural barriers	17% of girls aged 15 and older report being embarrassed to eat at school.
Community food environment	Limited access to healthy food and the prevalence of unhealthy options lead to 'food deserts'.

Micro – Individual and household challenges

Key Challenge: 1 in 5 children and young people worry about not having enough food to eat at home.	Examples of the drivers of morning hunger found in children, young people and families' daily lives include:
Household challenges and individual welfare	40% of children and young people cite 'lack of time' as a reason for not eating breakfast.
Health and wellbeing, including SEND and neurodiversity	In 2023, 1 in 5 children and young people had a probable mental health disorder, which can be compounded by food insecurity.
Attitudes and behaviours among secondary-aged pupils	Research finds that body image pressures are increasing among secondary-aged young people, with 20% of girls aged 11-14 skipping breakfast due to weight concerns and 30% of boys trying to 'bulk up.'
Childcare costs and policy	Some pupils cannot access safe or appropriate food options

Breaking the cycle

As our report highlights, the three levels of barriers have a knock-on effect on one another. This is a self-reinforcing cycle – when child morning hunger compromises learning today, it limits a young person's potential tomorrow, feeding directly back into intergenerational poverty.

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



The benefits of breakfast

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

- Pupils who regularly eat breakfast achieve, on average, at least [2 key exam grades higher](#).
- School breakfast provision results in [26 fewer half-days of absence per year](#) in a class of 30 and reduced late arrivals.
- [92% of Magic Breakfast partner school parents](#) agree breakfast positively impacts physical health, 88% agree it improves mental health, 86% agree it improves behaviour and [84% agreed it contributes to a better sense of belonging](#).
- [Breakfast provision in early years settings can support school readiness](#), promote early development, support the identification of additional needs, and reduce inequalities.
- A typical, balanced breakfast provides [one third](#) of a school child's recommended daily food intake, and those who eat breakfast are more likely to develop positive dietary habits.



- A key recommendation from a recent report at the London Assembly recommends secondary [school breakfast provision as a means of reducing knife crime and protecting young people from gang violence](#).
- School breakfast provision could generate long-term benefits to the economy of around £9,200 per child. This means that for every £1 invested, the [return on investment](#) is over £50.

The benefits of breakfast are far-reaching. Alongside improvements for educational outcomes, school breakfast provision can bring enrichment opportunities, improvements in long-term health and wellbeing, and wider social benefits such as improving rates of Positive Destinations through increased attainment and the development of workplace skills. By engendering a sense of belonging and community, breakfast can also contribute towards reducing anti-social behaviour and protecting children from gang violence.

Change through action

[Our report](#) pinpoints three priority areas for action to drive lasting, systemic change:

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

Understand and tackle the complex barriers to access to strengthen school and community delivery: Continue to work with schools and communities to understand the barriers to accessing breakfast to ensure the effective delivery and impact of the August 2027 launch of the universal primary and special school breakfast club programme.

Centre Lived Experience Voices: Centre lived experience voices, particularly the voices of children and young people, to help shape policy solutions at all levels.



If you would like to get in touch or [learn more about our work](#), please don't hesitate to reach out to our Scotland team:

Finlay Allmond
Scotland Policy & Public Affairs Manager
finlay.allmond@magicbreakfast.com

Emma Murphy
Policy & Public Affairs Officer
emma.murphy@magicbreakfast.com