



Ensuring children's access to food 365 days a year

September 2018

This toolkit is designed to help identify five key target areas where UK food poverty alliances can be effective and advocate for change to improve children's access to food. As Food Power's work focuses on tackling the roots causes of food poverty, many areas of action involve working with the local council, schools or other statutory services but there is a clear role for community organisations as well.

Menu of actions

1. Increase the uptake of Healthy Start vouchers
2. Promote breastfeeding to boost the health of infants and mothers
3. Harness the value of children's centres to reach families
4. Ensure all eligible children are registered for and eating free school meals and that breakfast is provided to pupils who qualify for free school meals
5. Advocate for and help coordinate strategic food provision during the holidays, including statutory support

Information is included about each of the above issues, as well as a set of 'Food for thought' questions to help spark ideas for action and ways to pursue these further. The opportunities and potential challenges for each will vary by region or nation, however the aim of this toolkit is to offer general questions that can be addressed across a variety of contexts.

Please visit the Food Power [Resources](#) and [Action](#) pages for further information and case studies.



Increase the uptake of Healthy Start vouchers

[Healthy Start](#) is the UK's food welfare scheme for pregnant women, infants and young children in low-income families, who are amongst the groups most at risk of being in food poverty. Healthy Start vouchers are an important means-tested scheme providing a basic nutritional safety net to encourage families to make healthy food choices. Pregnant women and children under four years old can get one £3.10 voucher per week. Children under one year old can get two £3.10 vouchers (£6.20) per week. Local food partnerships have led initiatives with public health in order to improve the uptake of vouchers, increase the number of retailers who accept vouchers and expand knowledge of the scheme to those working in the health and community sectors ([see case studies and resources](#)). Eligibility criteria are being review in England and Wales as Universal Credit is rolled out, although no public consultation has taken place as of August 2018.

As a part of devolution, the Scottish Government is in the process of developing a [new Welfare Foods package](#). This will include a system for Best Start Foods payments, replacing Healthy Start vouchers, to be delivered by the new Social Security Agency. Best Start Foods will continue to provide targeted financial support for low income pregnant women and families to purchase healthier foods.



Food for thought

Increasing participating retailers

1. Have Healthy Start retailers been mapped against need in the local area? Or mapped to track areas of underspend? Are any gaps in provision being addressed through targeted outreach to retailers and families? ([Search who accepts vouchers in your area](#))
2. Have outlets offering cheaper fruit and veg been effectively engaged to accept Healthy Start vouchers, such as street markets? ([Download info sheet for retailers](#))
3. Are food retailers provided with information about the Healthy Start scheme by public health and/or the local authority? Is there in-store promotion of the vouchers to let customers know they are accepted?

Increasing uptake and promotion

4. Is Healthy Start promoted in a wide range of relevant settings, e.g. children's centres, GP surgeries, food banks, community food projects, childcare providers, financial advice teams, etc.? ([Case study in Brighton & Hove](#))
5. Are there partnership opportunities available to help with promotion? Or to help enhance the value of vouchers, such as with [Alexandra Rose](#)?

Increasing coordination

6. Is training available to staff/volunteers at the above places so they are able to support families to apply or signpost them to someone who can? Or, in lieu of training, are there resources available to share with families on what the scheme is and how to register, e.g. flyers, translated documents?
7. Are relevant organisations able to pool resources in order to host or pay for joint staff/volunteer training? Is the local authority taking an active role in this?
8. Has the local authority designated a council officer or health professional to have overall responsibility for Healthy Start vouchers and vitamins?



Promote breastfeeding to boost the health of infants and mothers

The World Health Organisation and UK Governments recommend that babies should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months, to boost child and maternal health, and thereafter with other food for the first two years. In the UK [only 34% of babies](#) are receiving any breastmilk at six months, compared to 71% in Norway. Importantly, women living on low incomes or in deprived areas are among those least likely to breastfeed.

Social and cultural factors are held to be the main obstacles, so promoting breastfeeding and supporting mothers is a shared responsibility. To ensure that new mothers have the knowledge and confidence to begin and continue breastfeeding, maternity, health visiting, neonatal and children's centre services can follow a set of interlinking standards to become accredited with the [Baby Friendly Initiative](#), run but Unicef UK. Analysis has shown that the initiative is an effective strategy for increasing breastfeeding



rates. The programme has three stages: (1) assessing how the team plans to implement the standards; (2) assessing staff knowledge and skills; and (3) assessing parents' experiences when the Baby Friendly standards have been implemented. Alliances or others working together regionally can also set up their own breastfeeding strategy, [such as in Brighton & Hove](#) where the focus is on peer support, mentoring and community engagement.

In spring 2018, the Wales Breastfeeding Task and Finish Group recommended the creation of a national action plan and strategic oversight group to encourage and support breastfeeding, as well as the appointment of a strategic infant feeding lead for each of the seven health boards. The work is due to commence autumn 2018 ([news on planned initiative](#), info on breastfeeding for health from [Every Child Wales](#)).

Local authorities can play an important role by welcoming breastfeeding in all public spaces and council-run workplaces and ensuring all settings are aware that the Equality Act 2010 allows for mums to feed their babies without discrimination. All employers can develop plans or policies that actively ensure that staff are given time off for breastfeeding or expressing milk. Sustain publishes two annual reports which include case studies of how London local authorities are taking action on this issue, [Good Food for London](#) and [Beyond the Food Bank](#). Visit Food Power's actions pages for a full list of [resources and case studies](#).

Food for thought

1. Does your local authority have full Baby Friendly accreditation for maternity, neonatal, health visiting/ public health nursing and within children's centres?
2. Has contact been made with your regional coordinator for the [National Infant Feeding Network](#)? Can links be made between their work, either with progressing Baby Friendly accreditation, promoting breastfeeding in the wider community or establishing better links between their work and action on food poverty?
3. Is there another local strategy, initiative or action plan to promote breastfeeding? How can the food poverty alliance engage with this?



Harness the value of children's centres to reach families

Many children's centres provide a one-stop-shop for a range of community health services, parenting and family support, plus links to training and employment opportunities. A six year evaluation found that attending centres improved children's personal, social and emotional

development, and school readiness. Adults benefited from improved parenting skills and greater knowledge of child development, as well as receiving help with personal needs ([read the full evaluation](#)). As such, centres can play a vital role in supporting families at risk of food poverty (see examples of [Flying Start](#) and [Healthy and Sustainable Preschools](#) in Wales).

Access to high-quality, affordable childcare is essential if parents, and especially mothers, are to be able to work to support their families and maintain their skills. The cost of childcare can be a barrier and the availability of affordable childcare can vary in different areas. However, local authorities have a duty to ensure that there is 'sufficient' childcare available by carrying out Childcare Sufficiency Assessments every three years, and if provision is lacking, to produce plans to remedy the situation.

Food poverty alliances have approached this issues in a number of ways. For example, the Greenwich Co-operative Development Agency has set up [fruit and vegetable stalls at three children's centres](#) in one of the borough's most deprived wards where very little fresh food is available. Each week a total of 500kg fruit and vegetables are sold at affordable prices to 300 residents and families. In Lambeth, seven [children's centres distribute Rose Vouchers](#) to 150 families on low incomes to access fresh fruit and vegetables from street markets.

Food for thought

Coordination and food access

1. Are there any local examples of children's centres being used to address food poverty? For example by supporting Healthy Start, healthy cooking on a budget courses, or debt and employment advice? Can this work be championed and/or replicated at other children's centres?
2. Are all children that are cared for over a mealtime provided with a healthy meal? Are healthy snacks and drinks available at other times? Are staff sufficiently trained to support healthy eating?
3. Can children's centres play a role in increasing access to fresh fruit and vegetables, for example through stalls or coops?



Childcare provision

1. Are there other organisations who could offer services at children's centres? How can a more joined-up approach be brought to include these services?
2. Who at the council oversees work on children's centres? Are they connected with groups working on food poverty? How can they be an advocate for the above?

3. When did the local authority last conduct a childcare assessment to ensure provision is both adequate and appropriately distributed throughout the area? Were there areas of deficiency and how have these been addressed?
4. Is funding for children's centres protected in the local authority's budget? Has this been affected by budget cuts and what action is the local authority taking to ensure the quality and quantity of children's centres is not diminished?



Ensure all eligible children are registered for free school meals and that breakfast is provided to pupils who qualify for free school meals

Free school meals are a critical safety net and for some children school lunch can be their biggest meal of the day. But children may need more than lunch. Nationally, almost three-quarters of teachers reported seeing children arriving at school hungry. School breakfast clubs can help improve concentration, behaviour and educational outcomes. Maximising the uptake of free school meals as well as auditing and fostering provision of breakfast clubs is a key way to ensure children who are at risk of or experiencing food poverty can learn properly. In Wales and some local authority areas in the UK, school breakfasts are provided with statutory support in primary schools. (See further [case studies, evidence and resources](#) on free schools meals and breakfast clubs.)

As of August 2018, under Universal Credit, children are eligible for free schools meals if their parents earn up to £7,400 a year in [England](#), up to £7,320 in [Scotland](#) and up to £14,000 in [Northern Ireland](#). Over the summer of 2018 [Wales consulted on eligibility](#) for free schools meals under Universal Credit. All children in reception, Year One and Two automatically qualify for free school meals in England and Scotland.

Food for thought

Provision

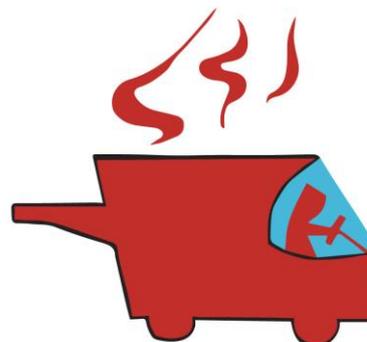
1. What is the uptake of free school meals in your area? (View data for [England](#), [Scotland](#), [Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#))
2. Is a cashless card system in place to minimise the stigmatisation of free school meals during lunch? ([Advice on how to avoid stigma](#))

Promotion

3. When available, are free school meals and breakfast clubs promoted to parents? If so, how? (Flyers, letters home, parent taster sessions, etc.) If printed, are they available in appropriate languages? ([Case study to improve uptake of FSM in Leeds](#))
4. Are promotional materials available in other areas where families visit, e.g. GP office and children's centres?
5. Has there been any targeted promotion to families that are particularly at risk of or experiencing food poverty?

Coordination

6. Does schools or the local authority have a plan or policy in place around free school meals and/or breakfast clubs in terms of ensuring all children are registered?
7. Has breakfast club provision been mapped, both to identify gaps in provision and areas of need? (Examples in [Southwark](#) and [Birkenhead](#)) Is there adequate provision in areas where more than 35% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, with a goal of universal free school breakfasts in these schools?



Advocate for and help coordinate strategic food provision during the holidays, including statutory support

Children who depend on school for their main meal are left at risk of food insecurity during school holidays, contributing to a 'learning slump' over the holiday period. Food poverty alliances can help improve knowledge, coordination and provision of holiday programmes which include food through strategic mapping and referral systems. They can also advocate for statutory support and coordination of these programmes.

Some statutory funding is available from national and local governments to pilot and/or deliver programmes. For example, the Welsh Government is currently rolling out [School Holiday Enrichment Programme](#) (SHEP), a school-based programme that provides healthy meals, food and nutrition education, physical activity and enrichment sessions to children in areas of social deprivation during the summer holidays. 'Food and Fun' is the brand identity used at a local level to promote the clubs to children and families. Additionally, in spring 2018 the Department of Education gave out [£2 million in grants for holiday activity and food provision](#) pilot programmes in England during the summer holidays to gain better insight and evidence on impact of holiday hunger. (More [case studies and resources](#) available on holiday food provision.)

Food for thought

1. What role is the council taking in terms of leadership, coordination and support for holiday programmes with food? This could be in terms of financial support, space use, catering facilities, etc. or a champion Councillor ([Islington case study](#))
2. Has the local authority designated a council officer or health professional to oversee what sort of holiday food provision is available across the locality?
3. Has information been collected and shared on local activities where food is available during the holidays?
4. Has the above information been mapped to identify need and gaps in provision? Is there a joined-up plan for delivery to ensure areas of need are targeted?
5. What other partners in the area work with children and families who could help promote holiday programmes to families who are at risk of or experiencing food poverty?