



The Food Foundation representation ahead of the Autumn Statement 2023

BACKGROUND

Hungry children struggle to achieve and poor nutrition damages their health. Food prices have increased drastically in the cost of living crisis, and wages and benefits have not kept up. As a result, levels of food insecurity have doubled over the course of 2022. Our latest survey shows levels remain high with 21% of households with children experiencing food insecurity in June 2023¹. These children have struggled for long enough, first through the covid-19 crisis and now through the cost of living crisis. Government must ensure all children are able to access a nutritious diet to protect their physical and mental health, and help them reach their full potential.

The following document proposes commitments for consideration in the 2023 Autumn budget statement in 3 key areas, summarised as follows.

1. **Healthy Start:** Expand eligibility, invest in increasing uptake and increase the value of the digital card.
2. **Free School Meals:** Invest in offering Free School Meals to all children, starting with all children from households on Universal Credit.
3. **Food industry levy:** Build on the success of the soft drink industry levy and commit to introducing a similar levy for salt and sugar in food.

1. HEALTHY START

- The Healthy Start scheme provides pregnant women or pre-school aged children in low-income households with a weekly payment to spend on healthy foods and infant formula.
- Food Foundation data shows that 27% of UK households home to children under the age of four experienced food insecurity in January 2023. This is compared with 23% of households with school-age children (5-17 years) and 15% of households without children. The data illustrates that this age group is at particularly high risk of food insecurity and more needs to be done to support this group specifically.
- To help these households to eat well during the cost-of-living crisis, the Healthy Start scheme should urgently be strengthened – by expanding the eligibility, increasing uptake rates and increasing the value of the scheme.

Invest in increasing uptake

- Government data shows that Healthy Start uptake was at 68% in September 2023², continuing to fall short of the NHS' target of 75% set for March 2023.

¹ <https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking>

² <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/healthcare-professionals/>

- For all families to benefit from this scheme, a concerted effort from Government is needed to increase take-up.
- **OUR ASK:** To commit £5 million to fund a comprehensive communications campaign to improve awareness and uptake of Healthy Start.

Expand Eligibility

- Restrictive eligibility criteria result in children falling through the gaps:
 - The current thresholds mean that many families experiencing food insecurity do not benefit – only those with a household income of £408 per month or less excluding benefits are currently eligible.
 - The scheme is currently only available to families with children under 4 years old, leaving a gap between Healthy Start ending and Free School Meals starting, during which children are at higher risk of food insecurity and poor quality diets.
 - Though the scheme has been temporarily expanded to some children from households with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), not all children from these highly vulnerable families are eligible.
- **OUR ASKS:**
 - Expand eligibility to all families on Universal Credit and equivalent benefits with children under 5 years old. This would ensure that more children at risk of food insecurity can benefit and would close the gap in support for 4-year-olds before they start school.
 - Consult immediately on the permanent extension of Healthy Start to all children in families with NRPF.

Increase the value of the scheme

- The scheme currently provides each beneficiary with £4.25 per week (£8.50 for children under the age of 1).
- The government announced in the Autumn Budget in 2020 that the value of the scheme would increase in value from £3.10 to £4.25 from April 2021 (having previously not changed in value since 2009). However, since then food prices have increased drastically so the scheme is now worth less in real terms.
- Between March 2021 (before food prices started to rise) and April 2023, the most widely available and purchased powdered infant formulas increased in cost by an average of 24% and the only 'own-brand' infant formula increased 45% over the same two-year period.
- Looking at the six main first infant formula brands across all nine retailers, the price of a tin of powdered formula ranges from £9.39 to £15.95, compared to the Healthy Start transfer value for babies of £8.50 per week³.
- **OUR ASK:** Healthy Start allowance should be raised in line with food price inflation along with other forms of social security. Thereafter, the Government should review the value every six months.

³ <https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/kids-food-guarantee-update-infant-milk-formula-july-2023>

Please click [here](#) to see our full briefing paper on investing in Healthy Start.

2. FREE SCHOOL MEALS

- Free School Meals provide a nutritional safety net for children at risk of food insecurity.
- 900,000 school children living in poverty in England are currently not eligible for Free School Meals due to the strict eligibility criteria. At present, children are only eligible if their household receives one of a small number of state benefits and/or has earnings below £7,400 per annum after tax and benefits.
- There is strong evidence linking Free School Meals with improved educational and health outcomes, and longer-term economic prosperity.
- Children who eat free school meals consume more fruit and vegetables and have lower rates of obesity – studies in London boroughs where Universal Free School Meals have been in place for approximately a decade show that obesity is reduced in Reception children by 9.3%. This is significant given how hard it is to influence obesity through other interventions.
- Research from PwC commissioned by Impact on Urban Health found that extending Free School Meals to all children in households on Universal Credit would result in a benefit of £8.9bn between 2025 and 2045 - this compares to a cost (including CapEx) over the same period of £6.4bn. This means for every £1 invested, £1.38 is returned. In addition, wider economic benefits to local economies and supply chains amount to £16.2bn.
- **OUR ASK:** Invest in offering Free School Meals to all children, starting with all children from households on Universal Credit

Please click [here](#) to see our full briefing paper on extending Free School Meals.

3. FOOD INDUSTRY LEVY ON SALT AND SUGAR

- The Soft Drink Industry Levy (SDIL) has been a success, reducing total sales of sugar from soft drinks by 35% and raising £1.5 billion in the first 5 years which has been invested back into children's health. Two thirds (68%) of the public support a new levy if the funds raised are invested back into children's health.
- As recommended by the Recipe for Change⁴ campaign and National Food Strategy⁵, there is an opportunity to introduce a new industry levy on food that contains high levels of salt and sugar. This could take a number of forms, but one option is to apply a levy at a rate of £3/kg on sugar (and some ingredients used for sweetening, but not non-nutritive sweeteners) and £6/kg on salt. This would be applied to all sugar and salt used in manufactured foods or in restaurants and catering and would therefore impact all manufactured food categories in which sugar or salt is used as an ingredient. An exemption would be applied for sugar and salt that goes straight to retail to avoid taxing ingredients that are used in home cooking.
- A levy on all sugar and salt sold used in manufactured foods or in restaurants and catering could:
 - **Prevent almost 2 million cases** of chronic disease, including over 1 million cases of cardiovascular disease (CVD1), 571,000 cases of type 2 diabetes, 11,000 cases of cancer and 249,000 cases of respiratory disease over 25 years

⁴ <https://www.recipeforchange.org.uk/>

⁵ <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/>

- Provide **gains of more than 3.7 million quality adjusted life years, worth £77.9 billion** to the economy over 25 years

Please click [here](#) to see the Recipe for Change campaign's full evidence briefing.

ABOUT THE FOOD FOUNDATION

We are a young, dynamic, and impactful charity with a mission to change food policy and business practice to ensure everyone, across the UK, can afford and access a healthy diet, supplied by a sustainable food system. We are independent of all political parties and business. We work with others who believe there is a problem with the system and want to change it.

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