

School Briefing

Food Poverty and Primary Schools: Key Principles and Recommendations for Support

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Summary

Deepening poverty across the UK is evidenced by the proportion of people who struggle to access enough nutritious and varied food. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the number of people in the UK who are food insecure has increased by 2.8 million between 2021/22 and 2023/24, which amounts to a 60% increase in two years.

UK-wide research by the food bank charity Trussell (2025) found that:

- 14.1 million people were food insecure
- One in six households were experiencing food insecurity
- 6.5 million people were turning to charitable food providers.

Children are more likely to be living in food insecure households than other groups and food insecurity is most prominent among families headed by a single parent. In 2024:

- More than one in four (27%) children were growing up in food insecure households
- Children aged 0-5 were particularly likely to be living in a food insecure household (31%)
- Over two in five (42%) families with three or more children experienced food insecurity, which was more than twice the rate of families with two children (20%).

Repeated evidence shows that families with primary-aged children are at risk of food poverty and insecurity, leading to educational challenges linked to reduced concentration, lower classroom participation, tiredness, poor emotional wellbeing and difficulties engaging consistently in learning activities.

KEY PRINCIPLES to guide school support for children and families experiencing food poverty and insecurity:

Whole School Approach - food poverty and insecurity, and mechanisms for their alleviation, require the understanding and backing of all those working within and linked to the school environment. This includes school governors, senior leaders, teachers and support staff, parents and families, and children. It may also include third-party providers of food and linked supplementary support.

Openness and Inclusivity - school support needs to be equitably accessible to and inclusive of all families in the school community. It needs to be offered in ways that enable the development and building of trust between schools and families, and schools and the wider community. This requires fundamental respect and courtesy towards families facing food poverty and insecurity, and recognition of the stigma often faced, and shame often felt, in accessing support.

Terminology and Language - in communicating with families about support offered by schools, language and terminology should avoid a focus on individual problems and instead focus on wider social and cost-of-living challenges. The potentially stigmatising terminology of food banks can be replaced with larder or pantry to avoid negative connotations of reliance on food charity and make their use more socially acceptable.

Cultural Awareness - school food support must be culturally sensitive and appropriate. This may require collaborative outreach to communities and other charitable providers to ensure awareness of support is raised consistently across the school community.

More Than Food - provision of non-food basics such as toothbrushes and toothpaste, and other hygiene products, including nappies for babies and sanitary products for girls and women, are essential for inclusion in any support provision. Support should also direct families towards services beyond the school gates.

Community Knowledge and Engagement - any response to food poverty needs to be underpinned by knowledge of the socio-economic circumstances of the school and wider community, including levels of material deprivation and any localised challenges facing families. A community-engaged approach is best placed to respond to questions on how to most effectively support local families.

RECOMMENDATIONS for schools to support children and families experiencing food poverty and insecurity:

1. **Raise awareness** among school staff and governors of food poverty and insecurity, their impact on children and families, and effective school responses. This should cover available support, be culturally sensitive, use appropriate language, and recognise the stigma and barriers associated with accessing emergency food support.
2. **Encourage discussions around food**, cooking and nutrition within the curriculum and co-curricular activities to better understand children's own experiences of food, develop capacity-building activities and events, and co-design longer-term food-based support interventions to benefit the whole school community.
3. **Working with the school community, consider operating a food pantry or larder** to support families experiencing food insecurity. Provision should be developed with charitable providers and external support networks, offer healthy food, essential household items, pre-packed emergency food and non-food parcels.
4. **Enhance understanding of the local community through partnerships** with other schools, third sector organisations, community centres, faith groups and local authorities to develop a coordinated response to food poverty.
5. **Collaborate with local authorities and external providers** to deliver food clubs and community kitchens during school holidays, facilitating communal cooking skills and culturally informed food nutrition education. These initiatives should be inclusive, co-designed with families where possible, free or at a low cost.

Full Report

Wainwright, E. and McHugh, E. (2026) *Food poverty and primary schools: New understandings of the literature and evidence*. Brunel University of London.

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