

## **Written evidence submitted by Sustain to the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill (CWSB169)**

### **Who We Are**

1. Sustain is an alliance of over 100 national organisations working with many more local communities, groups, enterprises and experts across the UK for a better system of food, farming and fishing, and cultivating the movement for change. Together, we advocate food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the working and living environment, enrich society and culture, and promote equity.
2. The Children’s Food Campaign, coordinated by Sustain, brings together around 80 organisations including children’s and health charities and professional bodies, trade unions, school food experts and environmental organisations. We campaign for policy changes in our schools, in our communities and throughout our society so that all children can easily eat sustainable and healthy food.

### **Executive Summary**

3. The Children’s Food Campaign appreciates the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee Stage of the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill. We wish to focus our evidence around the Bill’s provisions to improve school-based access to healthy food for children.
4. We welcome the government’s introduction of the national primary breakfast club programme in England via this Bill. However, we believe that the passage of this Bill is an unmissable opportunity to also enact a number of pragmatic, evidence based improvements to the wider delivery of equitable, healthy nutrition to support children’s physical and mental health. These would ensure the investment in primary breakfast clubs is amplified further within the school system, and delivers more robust impact in breaking down barriers to opportunity and improving children’s dietary health through the school day. In particular our submission calls on the Government and Parliament to consider amending the Bill to include:
  - Establishment of a national auto-enrolment system for Free School Meals.

- A requirement for Government to ensure that means-tested eligibility for Free School Meals reaches all school-age children living in poverty in England who currently attend state-maintained or funded schools - from nursery to sixth form.
- A commitment to develop a progressive longer-term roadmap towards the implementation of universal free school meals, starting with expansion of eligibility to include all children living in poverty, followed by universal programme roll out for nursery, primary and secondary pupils.
- Placing the Holiday Activities and Food Programme as a statutory provision, beyond short-term funding.
- A formal compliance programme for monitoring school food standards progressively across England over the next 12-24 months.
- A continued commitment to provision of targetted secondary school breakfast programmes via the National School Breakfast Programme and work with early adopters of the new breakfast club provision, to ensure primaries and secondaries with a high % of pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds continue to access adequate funding and support.

### **Widen Access to Healthy School Food for all Children**

#### **Improving uptake of school meals for eligible children through auto-enrolment**

5. Sustain urges Parliament to amend the Bill with the aim of removing barriers to children taking up their entitlement to Free School Meals, by introducing processes to auto-enrol all eligible children (eg noting current amendments NC8, NC32).<sup>1</sup>
6. Currently an estimated 250,000 eligible children across the UK are missing out on their entitlement to free school meals because of lack of awareness and administrative complexity.<sup>2</sup>
7. A growing number local authorities have piloted 'opt-out' schemes, whereby eligible families are signed up to free school meals unless they choose not to. When successfully introduced, these

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<sup>1</sup> House of Commons, *Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill (Amendment Paper)*, Committee Stage: Wednesday 29 January 2025, available: [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/59-01/0151/amend/children\\_rm\\_pbc\\_0129.pdf](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/59-01/0151/amend/children_rm_pbc_0129.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/266339/DFE-RR319.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/266339/DFE-RR319.pdf)

local schemes have helped to increase uptake of meals, as well as ensuring schools are able to claim pupil premium to support their learning and participation in activities at school. Sheffield's auto-enrolment in 2016 led to 6,403 more children registering for FSM by 2022, bringing £3.8 million in extra Pupil Premium funding to schools.<sup>3</sup>

8. Lambeth council saved £265,800 for 580 children and gained £722,000 in annual Pupil Premium funding. Their analysis of families who were not taking up meals identified that 79% were from minority groups, 50% did not have English as a first language, 89% were from lone parent households.<sup>4</sup> This highlights how important this process might be for national Government and local authorities to ensure delivery of FSM in line with their duties under both the Education Act and the Equalities Act.
9. However, it is important to note that local authority-led 'opt-out' schemes are resource-intensive and difficult to implement, which could make them unfeasible for all local authorities.<sup>5</sup> These challenges include receiving conflicting legal advice on data-sharing, encountering limitations in capacity and time, and managing the enrolment of pupils who attend schools in a different local authority from their place of residence.<sup>6</sup> Local authority and council boundaries also mean that they are not always able to identify or support all eligible children, as many travel across these boundaries from home to school.
10. Therefore, a national system instead of a localised approach would be necessary which would register eligible families using benefits data, unless families decide to opt out. This requires data-sharing between the Department for Work & Pensions to provide data that identifies children who are eligible for these schemes, to Department of Education who would administer the scheme. We urge the Government therefore to consider amending the Bill to include a commitment to auto-enrolment for school meals.

### Widening Access to Healthy School Food for all Children

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<sup>3</sup> <https://fixourfood.org/what-we-do/our-activities/schools-and-nurseries/fixourfood-in-schools-initiatives/>

<sup>4</sup> The Food Foundation, Fix Our Food, Bremner and Co. *Local Authority Case Studies*, 2024, <https://fixourfood.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/FixOurFood-Auto-E-Report-Nov-2023-v5.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Bryant M., et al, *FixOurFood Free School Meal Auto-enrolment action-oriented project*, Nov 2023, available: <https://fixourfood.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/FixOurFood-Auto-E-Report-Nov-2023-v5.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> The Food Foundation, Fix Our Food, Bremner and Co. *Local Authority Case Studies*, 2024, <https://fixourfood.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/FixOurFood-Auto-E-Report-Nov-2023-v5.pdf>

11. Sustain urges Parliament to amend the Bill to commit the Government to progressively expand access to healthy school lunches for children (noting current amendments with this purpose: NC2, NC5 on Holiday Activities and Food, NC31)
12. There is a growing body of evidence that healthy and nutritious meal at lunch time provides numerous benefits to children's wellbeing, including improved attainment, attendance, and future earnings.<sup>7</sup>
13. Cost-benefit analysis conducted by PwC for Impact on Urban Health estimates that for every £1 invested in universal healthy school meals, £1.71 would be returned in increased educational outcomes, better health and longer-term economic benefits.<sup>8</sup> This creates a strong case for investment in children's health, education and future working life, as part of the overall plans to grow our economy.
14. The proven impact of universal primary free school meals (UFSM) is evident in Mayor of London's rollout, where 84% of parents, particularly those on Universal Credit, have reported positive effects on household budgets, significantly easing financial pressures.<sup>9</sup>
15. Additionally, UFSM has fostered inclusivity in schools by addressing hidden hunger, reducing stigma,<sup>10</sup> and eliminating dinner money debts, leading to calmer, more focused classrooms and stronger school-family relationships.<sup>11</sup>
16. Health impact assessment from UFSM in 4 London boroughs (prior to the Mayor's commitment) revealed a 7% reduction in obesity rates among Reception-aged children and a 5-8% reduction in Year 6 students who had access throughout primary school.<sup>12</sup>
17. Children's Food Campaign polling of 2000 parents across the UK has shown 3 in 4 parents support expanding free school meals from nursery through to sixth-form regardless of background.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Feed the Future (2022), *The Superpowers of Free School Meals Evidence Pack*, available: [FSM Evidence Pack.pdf](#)

<sup>8</sup> Impact on Urban Health (2022) *The case for expanding free school meals: Executive summary*. Available at: <https://urbanhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/FSM-Executive-Summary.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Impact on Urban Health (2024), *More than a meal: An independent evaluation of universal primary free school meals for children in London*, available: <https://urbanhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/loUH-Free-School-Meals-Report.pdf>

Poverty Action Group (2023), *The Universalism Multiplier: The Case for Expanding Universal Free School*, available: [https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-12/Universalism\\_multiplier.pdf](https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-12/Universalism_multiplier.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://urbanhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/loUH-Free-School-Meals-Report.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/misoc/reports/Impact-of-the-UFSM-schemes-in-England.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Sustain, *Polling Parents: The Impact of Free School Meals on Families and Children, 2024*, available: <https://www.sustainweb.org/assets/cfc-parent-polling-report-1713789519.pdf>

18. However current eligibility threshold for free school meals (FSM) in England is set at an annual household income of £7,400 (excluding benefits) for those on Universal Credit. This threshold has remained unchanged since its introduction in April 2018.
19. As a result, approximately 900,000 children living in poverty are not eligible for FSM due to this restrictive threshold.<sup>14</sup>
20. A polling of 2000 parents across the UK has shown 9 in 10 parents support expanding free school meals to all children in poverty.<sup>15</sup>
21. Given the rising cost of living and increasing child poverty rates, it is imperative to reassess and update the FSM eligibility threshold to ensure that all children in need have access to nutritious meals during the school day.

Sustain's Recommendations:

22. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill should include a clause to establish a national auto-enrolment system for Free School Meals.
23. The Children's Wellbeing Bill should be amended to include a review of the eligibility threshold for free school meals and keep a requirement to keep updating with inflation. The threshold should adequately capture children living in poverty in England
24. The Children's Wellbeing and Food Bill should be amended to place a requirement on the Secretary of State to establish a progressive roadmap towards the implementation of universal free school meals, with the immediate priority being the expansion of eligibility to include all children living in poverty.

**Holiday Activities and Food Programme**

25. Children eligible for Free School Meals are able to access healthy school food during school holiday through the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Child Poverty Action Group. Free school meals: a third of kids in poverty miss out. Child Poverty Action Group. Available at: <https://cpag.org.uk/news/free-school-meals-third-kids-poverty-miss-out>

<sup>15</sup> Sustain, Polling Parents: The Impact of Free School Meals on Families and Children, 2024, available: <https://www.sustainweb.org/assets/cfc-parent-polling-report-1713789519.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Department for Education, *Holiday activities and food programme 2023*, updated March 2024, [Holiday activities and food programme 2023 - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1171378/HAF_2023.pdf)

26. The evaluation of the HAF programme reveals several benefits for families. Parents in Yorkshire noted that their children had access to a greater variety of healthy foods during holiday clubs.<sup>17</sup>
27. The programme also provides free childcare to working families, alleviating the financial impact of losing access to free school meals, while also mitigating summer learning loss through educational activities.<sup>18</sup>
28. HAF funding is currently short-term, with recent extensions lasting only one year. This uncertainty hampers long-term planning for local authorities and providers, putting children at risk of holiday hunger if funding is not renewed in a timely manner. A multi-year settlement would allow more effective and efficient use of resources.
29. Eligibility for free places on HAF programmes is restricted by the current low threshold for eligibility for Free School Meals, and many families living in poverty are not able to access free places.

Recommendation:

30. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill should adopt amendments (eg NC5) to make the Holiday Activities and Food Programme a statutory provision, beyond short-term funding.

**Compliance with School Food Standards throughout the school day**

31. We welcome the publication of new guidance to support the introduction of primary breakfast clubs. It is vital to ensure that national funding of these programmes and for Free School Meals must meet mandatory school food standards. All state-funded schools should be required to follow these standards.
32. Breakfast clubs have demonstrated multiple benefits, including boosting educational attainment, with Year 2 pupils achieving an additional two months of progress.<sup>19</sup> They also contribute to improved mental wellbeing, as greater fruit and vegetable consumption is

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<sup>17</sup> The Food Foundation and FixOurFood (2021), *A Yorkshire-based review of the implementation and impact of the Holiday Activities and Food programme*, Available here: [https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-10/HAF%20Evaluation\\_PrelimReport\\_0.pdf](https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-10/HAF%20Evaluation_PrelimReport_0.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Feeding Britain, *Healthy Holidays*, January 2025: [Healthy Holidays - Feeding Britain](#)

<sup>19</sup> Education Endowment Foundation (2019), *Magic Breakfast: Evaluation report and executive summary*, available: [Magic Breakfast report.pdf](#)

positively associated with higher wellbeing scores.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, breakfast clubs help increase the intake of key nutrients, such as fibre, B vitamins, and iron, addressing common dietary gaps.<sup>21</sup>

33. However, evaluations of current breakfast schemes indicates that many breakfast clubs do not consistently meet the school food standards due to resource constraints.<sup>22</sup> Results from Scale-up evaluation of the NSBP found that from 1,743 schools, 33.2% were failing to serve fruit and 23.7% were serving sugary cereals or spreads.<sup>23</sup>

34. This problem is not limited to breakfast provision, but there is widespread evidence of non-compliance with nutritional standards at lunchtime. Food for Life estimates that at least 60% of secondary schools are non-compliant with the School Food Standards due to lack of monitoring.<sup>24</sup>

35. A study with 36 secondary schools and 2,273 pupils (mix of compliant and non-compliant) across England, showed compliance for reducing unhealthy items like high-fat or sugary foods was 26.1%. Students in schools required to follow the standards ate less free sugar at lunch (about 2.78 grams less on average).<sup>25</sup>

#### Recommendation:

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<sup>20</sup> Hayhoe R., et al, *Cross-sectional associations of schoolchildren's fruit and vegetable consumption, and meal choices, with their mental well-being: a cross-sectional study*, 2021, BMJ Nutrition, Prevention & Health, available: [Cross-sectional associations of schoolchildren's fruit and vegetable consumption, and meal choices, with their mental well-being: a cross-sectional study | BMJ Nutrition, Prevention & Health](#)

<sup>21</sup> British Nutrition Foundation, *Good Breakfast Guide*, available: [Good Breakfast Guide \(Booklet \(Small\)\)](#)

<sup>22</sup> Food Standards Agency. (2025). *Food Standards Agency publishes final report on school food standards compliance pilot*. Food Standards Agency. Available: <https://www.food.gov.uk/news-alerts/news/food-standards-agency-publishes-final-report-on-school-food-standards-compliance-pilot>

<sup>23</sup> Bogiatzis-Gibbons D., et al, *The National School Breakfast Programme: Scale-up Evaluation Report*, September 2021, Education Endowment Foundation, available: [National-School-Breakfast-Programme.pdf](#)

<sup>24</sup> Soil Association. (2019). *State of the Nation 2019*. Soil Association. Available at: [https://www.soilassociation.org/media/20412/state-of-the-nation\\_2019.pdf](https://www.soilassociation.org/media/20412/state-of-the-nation_2019.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 21(1), pp. Article 10. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-024-01672-w>

36. The Children's Wellbeing Bill should establish a requirement on the government to establish a formal monitoring and compliance programme to be introduced progressively across England over the next 12-24 months. This evidence all supports proposed amendments of NC41.<sup>26</sup>

### **Maintaining the targetted National School Breakfast Programme**

37. The National Schools Breakfast Programme (NSBP) currently funds 75% of the cost of breakfast clubs in up to 2,700 schools nationally.<sup>27</sup> The programme aims to reduce the stigma around free school meals by ensuring universal access in schools where at least 50% of pupils come from disadvantaged areas, as identified by the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI). It prioritises schools with little or no breakfast provision and those in 12 high-deprivation identified by the Department for Education.<sup>28</sup>

38. The NSBP has had various positive impacts including improved leaning, reduced attainment gaps, support for working parents, better attendance and punctuality.<sup>29</sup>

39. However, funding for the NSBP is available only until July 2025. While the breakfast club initiative will replace the NSBP in primary schools, a gap in provision will remain for secondary schools, Pupil Referral Units, and Alternative Provision schools in high-deprivation areas that are currently benefiting from subsidised breakfasts.

### Recommendation:

40. It is crucial the government maintains a targeted approach to the National School Breakfast programme whilst they work with early adopters, to ensure all primaries and secondaries with a high percentage of pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds continue to access support. This will support the amendment 28 requiring the Secretary of State to establish a

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<sup>26</sup> House of Commons, Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill (Amendment Paper), Committee Stage: Wednesday 29 January, available: [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/59-01/0151/amend/children\\_rm\\_pbc\\_0129.pdf](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/59-01/0151/amend/children_rm_pbc_0129.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Department for Education, *National school breakfast club programme*, March 2024 update, available: [National school breakfast club programme - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/118444/national-school-breakfast-club-programme-2024-update.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> Magic Breakfast. (2023). *National School Breakfast Programme*. Magic Breakfast. Available at: <https://www.magicbreakfast.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/National-School-Breakfast-Programme.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> Magic Breakfast. (2023). *Magic Breakfast Benefits of Breakfast Briefing*. Magic Breakfast. Available at: <https://www.magicbreakfast.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Magic-Breakfast-Benefits-of-Breakfast-Briefing.pdf>



national school breakfast club programme within three months of the passing of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act.<sup>30</sup>

**Submitted to Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill Public Committee**

***29 January 2025***

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<sup>30</sup> House of Commons, Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill (Amendment Paper), Committee Stage: Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> January, available: [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/59-01/0151/amend/children\\_day\\_pbc\\_0128.pdf](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/59-01/0151/amend/children_day_pbc_0128.pdf)