Education and Work & Pensions Select Committees inquiry on Delivering the Child Poverty Strategy

Submission from Feeding Britain (March 2026)

About Feeding Britain

Feeding Britain is an award-winning charity with a vision of a UK where no one goes hungry. We support a national network of 140 regional and local anti-hunger partnerships comprising more than 700 frontline organisations – ranging from community centres and schools, to local authorities and social enterprises.

By piloting innovative and effective new projects, and showing how severe or chronic food insecurity can be prevented, we are designing a road map for eliminating hunger from the communities we serve. By sharing this knowledge with others, and using it to work for systemic changes at a national level, we will ensure hunger becomes a thing of the past.

Consultation response

Is the Child Poverty Strategy sufficiently ambitious?

We strongly welcome the measures set out in the Child Poverty Strategy which will free hundreds of thousands of children from the clutches of poverty and the risk of destitution.

That said, we believe the Strategy would be particularly strengthened by implementing these four key recommendations:

1) The Government should move towards the auto-enrolment of all eligible households for their NHS Healthy Start entitlement. Companies administering Healthy Start have assured us this is possible if the Government were to adopt this policy. The auto-enrolment approach should also apply to registration for free school meals. The application of an auto-enrolment policy to these two programmes would benefit hundreds of thousands of poorer children.
2) The Government's Cost of Living Champion, Lord Walker, should convene an industry-wide in-store top-up initiative, which enables Healthy Start recipients to access even more healthy foods from supermarkets.
3) The Government should, from April 2027, introduce revised eligibility criteria for the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme in England, to ensure as a bare minimum that many fewer children living in poverty are disqualified from the programme. While we applaud the Government for introducing new termtime free school meal eligibility criteria, from September 2026, this does not benefit poorer children from working families during the school holidays.
4) School food funding requires urgent reform to prevent schools in England's poorest areas from registering large and growing budget deficits.

Are the drivers and outcomes that the Government has set out in the Strategy the right ones?

The Strategy would benefit from a greater focus on both pursuing the outcome of improved nutrition, and introducing policies like those recommended above to give every child the best start in life. There is no recognition of, or questioning why there are, such widespread nutritional deficiencies nor consideration of what actions should be taken, specifically with manufacturers, suppliers and supermarkets, to address them. Whilst the Child Poverty Strategy alludes to food poverty in certain contexts, nowhere does it explicitly state that the quality of the food available being less than adequate may be a significant factor in these outcomes.

According to published statistics "Most people do not meet UK government fibre recommendations (at least 30g per day for adults and 15 to 25g per day for children depending on their age). For younger children, 78% of those aged 18 months to 3 years and 86% of those aged 4 to 10 years did not meet the recommendation for their age group. For children aged 11 to 18 years and for adults, 96% did not meet the fibre recommendation".[1]

Fruit and vegetable consumption in the UK has also fallen to even lower levels, with fewer than one in ten 11-18 year-olds eating their five-a-day. Fruit and vegetable intake is correlated with income. The most deprived children eat almost one less portion of fruits and vegetables a day compared to the least deprived.[2]

There are also issues of quality, palatability and desirability to be addressed. We have heard from one school which receives piece of free fruit for each child. The fruit supplied is often out of season, under or over ripe. The result is that vast quantities are simply discarded rather than being eaten, increasing food waste rather than children's intake of fruit and veg.

In another example, a former head teacher confirmed that the quality of the meals supplied to their former school, through a council catering contract, was so dismal and unappetising that staggering quantities ended up being thrown away every single day. They further commented that putting the onus of ensuring adequate nutrition for pupils on the shoulders of school head teachers was unsustainable and unrealistic.

All of these examples should lead us to question why there is no overarching, joined-up strategy to tackle the obvious links between child poverty and food poverty, focusing on both quantity and quality of food provision. These are not separate issues.

Are there any policies and initiatives that could strengthen the outcomes in (i) boosting families' incomes; (ii) saving families' money; (iii) securing families' finances; and (iv) strengthening local support, that were not included in the Child Poverty Strategy?

For (i) boosting families' incomes, we would suggest the following:

- Reforming the five-week wait for Universal Credit
- 'Child Benefit Plus' - the creation of an additional payment ('top up') for low-income families in receipt of child benefit when inflation rises above government targets. In addition, a body in the image of the Low Pay Commission should recommend annually the benefit levels that are required to protect all families from destitution

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-diet-and-nutrition-survey-2019-to-2023/national-diet-and-nutrition-survey-2019-to-2023-report
[2] https://foodfoundation.org.uk/news/uk-still-failing-meet-basic-dietary-guidelines

- Expansion of the Universal Credit Flexible Support Fund

For (ii) saving families' money, we would suggest the following:

- Restructure the Warm Homes Discount to reflect not just a household's income but also their energy usage
- Auto-enrolment for Healthy Start and free school meals, and revised eligibility criteria for the Holiday Activities and Food programme

For (iii) securing families' finances, we would suggest the following:

- Greater focus on reducing household debt. We understand that, though absent from this strategy, this government is working on this issue, primarily through the Financial Inclusion Strategy. There is a case that 'Reducing the household debt burden' should constitute a fourth overarching objective of this strategy; without it, the other objectives risk being fatally undermined
- Supporting strategic partnerships between credit unions and affordable food clubs such as pantries and social supermarkets, whereby families on low incomes are empowered to save affordable sums of money into a credit union savings account each time they visit their affordable food club.

For (iv) strengthening local support, we would suggest the following:

- Greater focus on local support in rural areas. For some of Feeding Britain's projects in rural communities, a trip to the local cheaper supermarket is only possible if you have a car, necessitating a 20+ mile round trip. As a result, a number of families have to rely on the smaller, more expensive shops. Support should be given to affordable food clubs which can operate in those areas where good quality food is least accessible to families on low incomes.