Education Select Committee inquiry on Early Years: Improving Support for Children and Families

Submission from Feeding Britain (October 2025)

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 there more that could be done to improve quality and the outcomes for children in early years settings which is missing from the Government's Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life Strategy?

For the Strategy to improve outcomes for children in early years settings, much greater focus is needed on those affected by food poverty.

We note the Strategy has some measures that recognise and address the impact of food poverty on early years development. These include the expanding eligibility for free school meals, and restoring the value of the NHS Healthy Start scheme for 2026-27. We welcome these measures but wish to see them go further, in two ways.

First, we believe that the eligibility criteria for Healthy Start should be revised so that no child under the age of four, living in poverty, is disqualified from the scheme - one of our member organisations voiced their concern that at present, "it seems it's almost no one is eligible."

Second, we believe that eligible families should be registered automatically for their Healthy Start entitlement, through the effective and proactive sharing of data between the Department for Work and Pensions and the NHS Business Services Authority. While there are excellent examples of local practice seeking to increase registration rates - our Good Food Lewisham partnership achieved this through effective partnership building with local VCS partners, strategic communication and marketing efforts, and data-driven approaches to identify potential Healthy Start beneficiaries, for example – we believe that an auto-enrolment policy represents the most equitable and efficient means of maximising them.

Beyond this, there is scope for the Strategy to go much further in addressing food insecurity, through the design of the Best Start Family service. From its inception, Best Start must include support for those dealing with food poverty as part of its service provision. There are many initiatives across the

Feeding Britain network, showing how and why the co-location of such support works in practice, that the Government could draw upon:

- Cedarwood Trust, North Shields: This charity runs a co-located family hub where parents can get affordable food, early years support, advice, and learning in one visit, supporting around 1200 households each month. Alongside an Affordable Food Club, the hub also provides an early years support service called Flourish; in September 2025, a parent survey of families scored 4 to 5 out of 5 across child development and adult support. Co-location of food provision with other support is seen as vital to the hub's overall success: "Food is the honest doorway. Families come in for the shop or a meal, then accept support they might avoid elsewhere. Co-locating food, early years, and advice means fewer missed appointments, faster Healthy Start uptake, better weaning, and steadier budgets."
- BrightStore, Brighton: This Affordable Food Club operates within some family hubs across Brighton. They also run a weekly surplus food shop and community café, which also has a nursery and midwifes on site. In their view, "every family hub in the country should also have a community food provision attached."
- First Steps, Bath: Charity providing childcare and family support, including free meals and snacks for children ineligible for free school meals, and advice for parents on building a healthy, balanced diet for their children. This service is particularly important as those not in receipt of free school meals are more likely to take a packed lunch to school; often packed lunches are filled with processed food and are not suitable to nourish a child for a full day of activity and learning.
- Bow Foodbank, London: Offers advice and casework for families. Parents who cannot afford baby formula can also collect this from them for the first year of their child's life.
- The Vale Family Hub, Dorset: This initiative started out as The Vale Pantry, however recognising the complex needs of its users, they expanded their services to include debt and welfare advice, early help, breastfeeding, weaning, stay and play, toddler activities, speech and language, SEND support, domestic abuse support and mental health support.
- E P Youth, Norfolk: Charity offering universal wellbeing services for children, young people and families, including a food hub. They feed everyone who uses their services, by collecting waste food and donations from supermarkets and local producers and redistributing through a range of projects, including the Holiday Activities and Food programme.
- Chesterfield Food Bank: Additional support services from the food bank includes Baby Basics Chesterfield, which provides essential baby items such as clothing, bedding and toiletries for new and expectant parents. They have now also developed a new Pre-Food Bank Support Hub, providing all the same services to anyone without needing a food bank voucher, so they can receive early help before they reach crisis point.
- Calderdale Voluntary & Community, West Yorkshire: An Affordable Food Club has started a weekly drop-in session, in partnership with the council's Better Living Service, that provides support to young families.
- Eastbourne Food Partnership: Operates a community fridge housed in a council-run family hub, which is also the base for a health visiting team and other healthcare practitioners. They run a number of workshops and courses for early years families.
- Hastings Voluntary Action: Have set up a social supermarket which has embedded support services such as benefits advice, physical activity sessions, health checks and cookery

workshops. It has also held joint activities with a children's centre (previously a SureStart centre) based nearby.

- New Parks Community Mission, Leicester: This food bank provides emergency food parcels on a referral basis. On receipt of the parcel, they are also signposted to other services as appropriate.
- Mansfield District Council: A number of food clubs operate in deprived areas of Mansfield offering additional services, including life skills, smoking cessation, and benefits and housing advice. They also have a funding agreement with Cadent to offer energy advice, give out carbon monoxide detectors and sign residents up to the Priority Service Register which has been very successful.
- Blacon Beacon, Chester: This charity which runs a pantry for those struggling with food poverty; also provides digital support and mentoring. The charity also have regular visits from PCSOs, NHS Starting Well, Citizen's Advice, and Early Help Navigators from the council.

For the Strategy to improve outcomes for children in early years settings, we make the following recommendations:

- **Make food security a core pillar of Best Start.** If a family is worrying about the next meal, it's hard to focus on the wider activities which can boost a baby's or infant's life chances. Build affordable food access into every family hub so that parents can stretch their money further and have easier access to nutritious food.
- **Co-locate food with advice and care.** Put affordable food offers next to midwifery, health visiting, perinatal mental health, benefits and debt advice. One warm welcome, one doorway, less shame. Parents shouldn't be sent from pillar to post.
- **Practical features to include in every Hub:**
    - Affordable Food Clubs or social supermarket memberships with clear concessions for pregnancy and under-5s
    - Help to claim Healthy Start, and active follow-up for those who fall through the net
    - Advice at the point of food, including on benefits, debt, housing and energy
    - Baby and toddler-friendly food boxes when income drops
    - Essentials shelf - nappies, wipes, period products, weaning kits, safe feeding guidance
    - Dignity first - choice-based models, clear pricing
    - Opening hours that work for shift patterns, with outreach to rural estates and villages
- **Work with what's already there.** Many of our members run pop-ups in community centres, churches, libraries and existing family hubs. Best Start should fund coordination and space, not just short-term projects.
- **Data and outcomes.** Track simple and useful data, e.g. Healthy Start uptake, the cost of a basic weekly shop via the Club, referrals completed for income maximisation, maternal wellbeing, child growth and development flags, attendance at parenting groups. Share anonymised data across local systems with informed consent.
- **Cash-first where it helps.** Some families need immediate income boosts, not only food. Link hubs to local welfare assistance, hardship funds and trusted vouchers, with clear safeguarding.

- **Commissioning and funding.** Provide small core grants for coordination, volunteer training, food safety, and evaluation. Tie outcomes to reduced crisis demand, improved Healthy Start uptake, and fewer unplanned midwife and HV DNAs.
- **Workforce.** Train volunteers and staff in trauma-informed practice, infant feeding basics, budget cooking, and warm conversations about money.