

Recommendations in Full

Recommendation 1

Expand eligibility for the Free School Meal scheme to include every child (up to the age of 16) from a household where a parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits.[†]

The impact of COVID-19 on some families has been acute, with a clear rise in food insecurity. In the first two weeks of lockdown, food bank use among families with children doubled compared to March 2019.

Children who are hungry at school struggle to concentrate,¹⁷⁹ perform poorly, and have worse attendance records.¹⁸⁰ More generally, children who experience food insecurity suffer worse physical and mental health outcomes.¹⁸¹ This is both an acute and a long-term issue: food insecurity undermines any serious prospect of improving social equality.

Only 1% of packed lunches meet the nutritional standards of a school meal.¹⁸² A hot, freshly-cooked school lunch is, for some children, the only proper meal in the day,¹⁸³ providing a nutritional safety net for those at greatest risk of hunger or poor diet.

Free school meals are currently provided to all children in the first three years of school, under the national universal infant free school meals (UIFSM) scheme. After this point, only children from very low-income households are eligible for free school meals (those with an annual income of £7,400, or less, before benefits).¹⁸⁴

This threshold is much too low. Many of the families on Universal Credit who currently do not qualify for free school meals fall well below the government's own threshold for poverty. Ensuring the health and development of our children should be a priority.

We recommend that the free school meals scheme should be expanded, with new money, so that every child up to the age of 16 from a household on Universal Credit or equivalent benefits is eligible. The UIFSM policy should also be maintained.

More work must be done to ensure that all school meals are as healthy and appetising as they can be. I will be returning to this issue in Part Two of the National Food Strategy. Even a bad school lunch, however, is likely better than a packed lunch.

Under this recommendation, we estimate an additional 1.5 million 7-16 year olds would benefit from free school meals, taking this to a total of 2.6 million children. This is estimated to cost an additional £670 million a year.

Recommendation 2

Extend the Holiday Activity and Food Programme to all areas in England, so that summer holiday support is available to all children in receipt of free school meals.

Summer holidays are a particularly hard time for households experiencing food insecurity. An estimated 3 million children are at risk of hunger in the school holidays,¹⁸⁵ and data from food banks shows the need for emergency supplies accelerates over the summer.¹⁸⁶ This issue has been exacerbated by the economic fallout from COVID-19.¹⁸⁷

During term time, teachers make valiant efforts to ensure equality of opportunity for their pupils. During the holidays, much of that work unravels.

Evidence suggests that children from disadvantaged families are less likely to access organised out-of-school activities,¹⁸⁸ more likely to experience social isolation,¹⁸⁹ and more likely to experience "unhealthy" holidays in terms of nutrition and physical health.¹⁹⁰

Conversely, providing enrichment activities and healthy food over the holidays can help pupils return to school engaged, invigorated and ready to learn.¹⁹¹ Plugging the summer holiday gap will be essential if the Government is to fulfil its promise of "levelling up".

The Holiday Activities and Food Programme – which has been running since 2018 – provides healthy meals and fun activities for disadvantaged children. This summer the Government is funding the delivery of the programme by 10 coordinators (a mixture of Local Authorities and voluntary organisations) in 17 Local Authority areas, at a cost of £9 million. The aim is to provide a programme of activity for all children entitled to free school meals in these Local Authority areas, for four hours a day, four days a week, for four weeks of the summer holidays.^{††}

Children on these holiday schemes receive at least one meal a day which meets the school food standards. The programmes include an element of nutritional education, to improve children's knowledge and awareness of healthy food, as well as training and advice sessions for families and carers on how to source, prepare and cook nutritious, low-cost food. They also provide activities to help children develop new skills and knowledge and get plenty of exercise.

Evidence suggests that such schemes have a positive impact on children and young people¹⁹² and that they work best when they involve children (and parents) in food preparation.¹⁹³ An evaluation of a Welsh pilot, the Food and Fun School Holiday Enrichment Programme found "evidence of multiple positive impacts on children's activity levels, diet and attitudes to eating more healthily, social isolation, and opportunities for learning and engagement with school".¹⁹⁴

We recommend that the Government extends the Holiday Activities and Food Programme so that provision is available in all areas in England, rather than just in the 17 Local Authority areas in which the scheme currently operates. It should be made available to all children in receipt of free school meals.

In 2019, the HAF reached 50,000 children. Under this recommendation, we estimate an additional 1.1 million children will participate in the programme. This is estimated to cost an additional £200 million a year.

Recommendation 3

Increase the value of Healthy Start vouchers to £4.25 per week, and expand the scheme to every pregnant woman and to all households with children under four where a parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefits.

I am delighted that in the last week the CEOs of the Co-op and Waitrose have agreed, in principle, to supplement these vouchers with additional free fruit and vegetables. Most of the other major supermarkets and convenience stores (with support from the Association of Convenience Stores) are keen to follow suit and we are in discussions with them to explore mechanisms for delivery.

Healthy Start is a means-tested scheme for low income pregnant women and families with children under the age of four. It is also a universal entitlement for mothers under 18 years of age. The scheme provides coupons for vitamins and vouchers which can be used to buy fruit and vegetables, as well as milk. The voucher is currently worth £3.10 per child per week, or double that for babies under 12 months.

Studies on the effects of Healthy Start have shown that it plays an important role in helping pregnant women and their children access healthier foods.¹⁹⁵ Women registered for the scheme report that Healthy Start made them think more about their health and diet and led to better dietary choices.¹⁹⁶

[†] "Equivalent benefits" is a term drawn from DWP. It covers any of the legacy benefits which Universal Credit is replacing, i.e. working age Jobseeker's Allowance (income-related), Employment and Support Allowance (income-related), Income Support, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit and Housing Benefit.

^{††} In 2019, the HAF reached 50,000 children out of an eligible 142,000, with a take up of 35%.

However, the current scheme needs improving. The value of the voucher has not changed since 2009. Uptake of the scheme has been falling and is currently at 48%.[†]

We recommend that the Government:

- Increases the voucher value to £4.25/week in line with the Best Start Grant system in place in Scotland. This would cover the weekly cost of providing the recommended daily portion of fruit/vegetables (five portions) and milk (½ pint) for a child per day.¹⁹⁷ In future, the value of the voucher should be index linked.
- Extends eligibility to pregnant woman and households with children under four from a household where a parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit (or equivalent benefits). This would mean one million babies and young children would be eligible.
- Accelerates the switch from paper vouchers to a digital card, to help to improve uptake and ease of use and reduce stigma.
- Promotes the scheme with communications aimed at parents and retailers.

Under this recommendation, an additional 290,000 pregnant women and children under the age of 4 will benefit, taking the total number of beneficiaries to 540,000. This is estimated to cost an additional £100 million a year, plus the cost of a £5 million communications campaign.

Recommendation 4

Extend the work of the Food and Other Essential Supplies to the Vulnerable Ministerial Task Force for a further the 12 months up until July 2021.

The purpose of the Task Force should be to ensure that vulnerable people have access to food, as the impacts of COVID-19 play out across the economy and on individuals' economic circumstances.

Specifically, it should be responsible for collecting data and monitoring levels of food insecurity in England, as well as agreeing cross-departmental actions, where necessary, to support those who cannot access or afford food.

At the start of the COVID-19 crisis, the Government responded swiftly and effectively to alleviate the challenging circumstances that some people found themselves in as a result of health conditions or a

dramatic change in economic circumstance. It did so with the establishment of the Food and Other Essential Supplies to the Vulnerable Ministerial Task Force, chaired by Minister Victoria Prentis of Defra, and with the participation of five government departments, the Food Standards Agency and the devolved administrations.

As a result, a proven, cross-governmental ministerial decision-making structure, supported by a senior officials group, currently exists. It has enabled more joined-up work within Government and yielded concrete results. By maintaining this governance structure, and the associated investment in data and monitoring, the Government will be well-placed to respond to the changing situation of the coming months and to act in a coordinated and timely way.

Recommendation 5

The Government should only agree to cut tariffs in new trade deals on products which meet our core standards.^{††} Verification programmes – along the lines of those currently operated by the US Department of Agriculture to enable American farmers to sell non-hormone-treated beef to the EU – should be established, so that producers wishing to sell into the UK market can, and must, prove they meet these minimum standards.

These certification schemes should not only cover animal welfare but also environmental and climate protections where the impact of a particular product is severe (for example, we should not cut tariffs on beef reared on land recently cleared of rainforest). The full set of core standards should be defined by the newly formed Trade and Agriculture Commission.

As it negotiates trade deals, the Government should define a set of standards that we as a country believe should be applied in the production of the food we eat. Some environmental standards may only be required for particular reasons in specific regions. Others, however – including standards of food safety, public health, animal welfare, and the prevention of severe environmental impacts (for example, the clearing of rainforest for beef grazing) – should be applied universally.

The UK should apply these standards through a verification process similar to that currently operated by the US Department of Agriculture. This would allow for a much nimbler approach to trade negotiations, with bespoke agreements between countries.

Recommendation 6

The Government should give itself a statutory duty to commission an independent report on all proposed trade agreements, assessing their impact on: economic productivity; food safety and public health; the environment and climate change; society and labour; human rights; and animal welfare. This report would be presented alongside a Government response when any final trade treaty is laid before Parliament. Sufficient time must be guaranteed for the discussion of these documents in the House of Commons, the House of Lords, and by the relevant select committees.

The Government should decide whether this impact assessment function requires the establishment of a new body – similar to those which exist in many mature trading nations including Australia, Canada and the USA – or whether it could be performed by an existing body or by independent consultants (as is the case in the EU).

Any impact report should have five key attributes:

1. It should adopt a **holistic** view. It would assess not only the economic impacts of a deal (particularly where it is likely to impact certain groups of citizens disproportionately), but also the environment and climate change, labour practises and human rights (both here and abroad), food safety, public health and animal welfare.
2. It should be **independent**. The purpose of these impact assessments is to help Parliament scrutinise the agreement, and to build public confidence that the deals the Government has negotiated genuinely serve the national interest. Some countries, including the United States, have independent, non-partisan bodies responsible for their trade impact assessments,^{†††} while others make use of independent consultants whose report is published without prior scrutiny by the executive.
3. The impact assessment should be performed by **experts**. Those conducting and overseeing the assessment should be selected as recognised experts in their field, and not (like the Trade and Agriculture Commission) a combination of experts and representative groups. There is often a fine line between the two, but recognising the principle is an important first step.

4. The impact assessment function would be **permanent**. The UK will be negotiating trade agreements for several years to come, and each of these will need to be assessed individually. While the Trade and Agriculture Commission will undoubtedly produce a useful report, its six-month term means it will not be able to assess the impact of any agreements concluded after that point. (Which will be most if not all of them.)
5. The impact assessment – and subsequent parliamentary scrutiny – should have a **statutory** basis. There should be a legal obligation for the Government to ensure that the impact assessment is published well before the ratification of any trade agreement, to allow appropriate parliamentary scrutiny.

Recommendation 7

The Government should adopt a statutory duty to give Parliament the time and opportunity to properly scrutinise any new trade deal. It must allow time for relevant select committees to produce reports on any final deal, and allow a debate in the House of Commons and in the House of Lords.

Making both these things a matter of statutory duty, would, in my view, have no downsides and would considerably improve the quality of the debate.

However – again, like all other nations – any vote in a debate should be restricted to a straightforward yes or no. Allowing Parliament to amend treaties would undermine the vital principle of ministerial responsibility and make trade negotiations impossible. No other country would agree to a trade deal if they knew it could be altered piecemeal. It is the job of the executive to negotiate treaties, and the job of the legislature to scrutinise them.

[†] According to England Local Authority uptake data, dated June 2020. Source: <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/healthy-start-uptake-data/>

^{††} While this would not amount to an outright ban – which could be challenged in the WTO – the UK's tariffs on imports of animal products without a free trade agreement are sufficiently high that very little non-compliant product would be imported.

^{†††} For example, the United States International Trade Commission or the Australian Productivity Commission.