

Written evidence submitted by Bite Back 2030

Bite Back 2030 submission to the inquiry on the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

1. Introduction to Bite Back 2030

Bite Back 2030 is a youth-led movement, working to ensure every child has access to a good diet; at home, on the high street and at school. Bite Back is strongly led by young people who want to know the truth about our food system; how we can reshape it to put young people's health first; and build a powerful alliance that will help make our vision a reality. Our Youth Board is backed by our board of trustees, and an expert advisory group.

Our Youth Board is made up of ten young people, aged 14 to 19. The Youth Board are from all over England, with different backgrounds, experiences and interests, but all united to create positive change and promote happier and healthier lives. Bite Back 2030 is responding to this inquiry because we are working to ensure every child has access to a good diet, at all times, and we want everyone involved with the food we eat to make our health their priority.

2. Summary of our response

Thank you for allowing us to respond to the inquiry. Our response focuses on *the effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)*.

There has been huge public support for the provision of free school meals over the school holidays since England entered lockdown. While the scheme has provided vital support for vulnerable families and young people, the system itself as well as the speed and scope of the government's response have been slow and inadequate. We recommend extending the scheme to year-round provision, while also ensuring the system works for both for the families and those involved in provision, such as schools and local authorities.

Dev Sharma and Christina Adane, Bite Back 2030 Youth Board members, have contributed to our response.

3. Detailed response to the inquiry

A national call to action

“The pandemic has highlighted the need for some form of food allowance during the holidays. For many families, it is always a crisis, pandemic or not. This crisis has already left the most vulnerable including those on free school meals, more disadvantaged than their more affluent peers. Allowing them to have their basic right of food could help narrow classroom inequality and could prove more crucial than ever before.”

Dev Sharma MYP, 15
Bite Back 2030 Youth Board member

For many of the 1.3 million children in England who receive free school meals, they can be the difference between whether these children eat or not. And when schools closed at the start of the pandemic, young people from low-income families who got free school meals were missing out on lunch. So the Government's £15 weekly voucher scheme set up to support them was a great start. And we were very pleased that the Government extended it over the Easter, May half-term and summer holidays. But more needs to be done to ensure that our most vulnerable children have access to healthy food all year round.

On Monday 18th May, **our Youth Board Co-Chair Christina launched [a petition](#) on behalf of the 1.3 million young people in England who receive free school meals**, asking the Government to extend provision over the school holidays. Christina's petition has almost 300,000 signatures to date.

“It's up to all of us to speak up, especially in lockdown, for young people that feel like their needs are a burden on others.

I shouldn't have to worry if my parents are going to reach breaking point soon, and if they did, how we would cope.”

Christina Adane, 16
Bite Back 2030 Youth Board Co-Chair

The Government's series of announcements over the past months have answered the calls of Christina and her signatories, young people, headteachers, other organisations, MPs and of course Marcus Rashford. **Public support has been huge.**

A slow and inadequate official response

The official response had been slow and very last-minute, which has caused additional stress to families who are already reaching breaking point. Back in May, 2.8 million (36%) of households with children had lost income since the COVID-19 outbreak, affecting 5.3 million children.¹ We know that a vulnerable family's food budget is typically the only budget which can be reduced, and parents skip meals to feed their children. It is also stressful for families to have to re-budget at the end of each school term. England's inertia was in contrast to the situation in Wales for example, where the government had committed £33 million towards summer provision already in April.

While we continue to campaign for provision to be extended over the school holidays, we ask the Government to consider how else it can ensure that our most vulnerable young people have access to healthy food during this crisis.

For instance, **while the Government's supermarket voucher scheme is welcome and much-needed**, there have been well-documented issues with its implementation. Six of the main retailers accepted the vouchers from the start, but there were serious delays in involving those retailers that are particularly relevant to low-income families. We have heard that this was not due to apathy on the retailers' part, but rather inadequate effort by the Department for Education to find a technical solution. In addition, many families rely on local convenience stores; however, policy and process

¹ https://foodfoundation.org.uk/vulnerable_groups/new-poll-data-more-than-five-million-people-in-households-with-children-have-experienced-food-insecurity-since-lockdown-began/

challenges including lack of central management and the inability to process gift vouchers, excluded them from the scheme too, though the addition of McColl's at the end of April was a positive move.

“The government is spending so much to protect businesses, and that’s the right thing to do. But surely, we need to protect the health of children too? Don’t all kids have the right to get a decent lunch?”

Christina Adane, 16
Bite Back 2030 Youth Board Co-Chair

We have also heard about the administrative burden of the voucher scheme on schools and families. We know that parents were using up mobile data as they waited in line on the online system and that issues in cross-departmental communication meant that some families were experiencing a 9-week delay from when they requested free school meals to when they got the resource they needed.

Vulnerable families need support as soon as possible, and the Government should always take steps to reduce lags and issue clearer guidance , for example to schools on how to manage new universal credit claimants in relation to free school meals.

Free school meals impact hunger, but also health and educational attainment

Free school meals are not just about providing immediate relief to young people and their families. They also play an important role in **building up young people’s health and resilience**. We know that ‘underlying health conditions’ play a huge role in the impact of Covid-19 on individuals. And the data is revealing a stark link between having overweight and obesity and being critically ill with the virus. **Almost three-quarters of critically ill patients have been found to have overweight or obesity.**²

1 in 5 children have obesity and children living in a low-income area are more than twice as likely to have obesity; and the gap is growing. Two big lasting issues are clearly emerging from the pandemic; health and inequality. And there is a significant risk that one legacy of Covid-19 is increased childhood obesity rates.

Studies on free school breakfasts have found a positive correlation between provision and pupils’ attention, memory, and executive function. Furthermore, a 2016 independent study by the Education Endowment Foundation and The Institute for Fiscal Studies concluded that pupils in schools supported by a free breakfast programme (Magic Breakfast) made an additional 2 months’ academic progress compared to pupils in schools with no such breakfast provision over the course of an academic year.

A recent YouGov survey found that 57% of teachers surveyed anticipate there will be an increase in the number of children arriving at school hungry this September, compared to September 2019. 64% of teachers surveyed think that hunger will harm efforts to catch children up on the learning they missed out on during school closures. This rises to 79% of teachers in schools with above average levels of disadvantage.

A suite of solutions are needed

² <https://www.icnarc.org/Our-Audit/Audits/Cmp/Reports>

There is no single solution to ensuring that our most vulnerable young people have access to healthy food during this crisis. For young people receiving free school meals, **we need a suite of solutions** (including food hampers and cash payments), **depending on what works for schools and communities**. Not all families have the time, skills and facilities for cooking and ability to get to the supermarkets.

Families must be able to afford a healthy basket with their vouchers. Eligibility for free school meals is based on a family's income, yet the NHS's Eatwell Guide is not used in the calculation of benefit payment rates and it is unclear how households receiving Universal Credit can achieve it. One recommendation would be to embed the Eatwell Guide in social policy, including in the benefits system, to provide some protection to the poorest families.

An additional help would be for **the government to signpost families to healthy shopping lists and meal ideas, to ensure the £15 vouchers are spent in the best possible way.** At Bite Back for example, we have produced [weekly shopping lists and meal ideas](#), and launched '[Cook with Jack](#)', a series of live short videos to show people how to prepare quick, tasty and affordable lunches using these lists.

We believe that no child should have a benefit taken away from them because of the timings of a school term. **We need year-round provision for children on free school meals**, and so we hope that the Government will build on the commitments made so far. At Bite Back 2030, we are working with partners over the summer, as part of our plan to 'Feed Britain Better', to develop a comprehensive policy solution that we would be happy to share with the Department for Education in due course.

“Pre-lockdown not many young people knew or thought of children not feeling safe at home. Nor did they know that a lot of their peers might be going hungry through the crisis. This pandemic has given young people the chance to speak about these taboo subjects. Young people started speaking about kids going hungry, they are showing empathy that a lockdown might leave some of the most vulnerable food insecure... the stigma covering free school meals may slowly fade as we speak and acknowledge these issues more broadly.”

Dev Sharma MYP, 15
Bite Back 2030 Youth Board member

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