

The background of the cover features a photograph of a group of children and an adult sitting around a table, eating. The children are wearing school uniforms. The table is set with colorful plastic cups and lunchboxes. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue and purple gradient.

eis

The Educational
Institute of Scotland

EIS Briefing on Hunger and Food Insecurity

February 2022

Context and purpose

The EIS remains deeply concerned that large numbers of children and young people are underfed and undernourished as a result of poverty at home and of the insufficiency of social security measures to prevent this.

The Covid 19 pandemic has significantly exacerbated pre-existing societal inequalities and intensified austerity-induced poverty and deprivation. In stark contrast, the fortunes of the richest in our society have multiplied.

A report published by Oxfam in January 2021 highlighted the global picture that:

‘The world’s ten richest men more than doubled their fortunes from \$700 billion to \$1.5 trillion —at a rate of \$15,000 per second or \$1.3 billion a day— during the first two years of a pandemic that has seen the incomes of 99 percent of humanity fall and over 160 million more people forced into poverty.’

“The briefing aims to highlight the key issues relative to hunger and food insecurity for EIS members”

The economic shocks of Covid continue to be felt by the poorest and now rising costs of living are compounding the struggles that a fifth of the population of Scotland- a million people, including 270,000 children- face every day, not least with regards to access to food, a fundamental necessity for human survival.

This briefing is the second of a series that will culminate in a refresh of the EIS’s highly respected ‘Face Up to Child Poverty’ publication. The briefing aims to highlight the key issues relative to hunger and food insecurity for EIS members, and to provide advice on the kinds of interventions that can be made at school and Local Association level to address them.

Hunger, lack of nutrition and learning

Whilst hunger and undernourishment are a human rights issue in themselves, they also conspire to impact on children and young people's learning- how they engage in it and in terms of the outcomes from it, both in the short and the long term.

Hunger impacts directly on a young person's ability to concentrate and associated dips in blood sugar can also influence behaviour. Young people who are hungry will often appear withdrawn or will exhibit challenging behaviour as their brains react to the physical impacts of insufficient food intake.

Over time, where insufficiency of healthy food is a chronic issue, young people are likely to experience the longer-term effects of undernourishment. Lack of key nutrients and vitamins damages both physical and mental wellbeing.

This can be manifest in young people's weight, pallor, proneness to illness caused by weakened immune systems, frequency of headaches, in energy levels- low energy and fatigue, and/or hyperactivity, brain function and general emotional state.

Lack of a sufficient, healthy diet won't always present in terms of weight loss in young people. Sometimes, it will be evident in weight gain and obesity due to the cost and other barriers that there are in the way of access for families on low income to healthy, nutritious foods and the ability to prepare healthy, balanced meals.

Parents and young people with very little amounts of money to spend on food are left with little choice but to buy cheaper foods that are often faster to prepare but that are laden with sugar and fat and low on nutritional value, with resultant negative impacts on health.

“Young people who are hungry will often appear withdrawn or will exhibit challenging behaviour”

Coupled with this, there is the anxiety that children and young people experience when they are aware that their parents/carers are struggling financially. This can be acute when there's a lack of food at home and ongoing uncertainty as to how the family will be able to eat from one day to the next.

Both in the short and the longer-term, hunger, undernourishment and the stress and trauma that arise from food insecurity, erode physical, emotional and mental health, and undermine a young person's ability to learn and therefore to benefit from their school education.

Hunger and food insecurity, therefore, contribute to the poverty-related achievement and attainment gap, which evidence shows, can have lifelong negative consequences for the young people who are on the wrong side of the gap.

Hunger and food insecurity

Public Health Scotland defines food insecurity as 'the inability to acquire or consume an adequate or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so'.

By this definition, the EIS is clear that food insecurity affects large numbers of children and young people who attend our educational establishments.

EIS concerns in this regard are borne out by data held by leading national and third sector organisations with expertise on food insecurity.



Foodbank use

Before the introduction of Austerity policies, in 2009 there was only 1 Trussell Trust foodbank in Scotland. That number has increased by more than a hundred-fold to 119 in 2022. In June 2019, there were known to be over 80 other independent foodbanks in operation.

The latest data from the Trussell Trust records that 84,555 food parcels were issued by the organisation in Scotland in the period between April and November 2021. Almost 30,000 of these were to children.

A survey conducted by the Trust in August 2021 found that 7% of people in Scotland had used a foodbank in the preceding 30 days.

Data from the Food Foundation from August 2021 indicates that 10.3% of the population of Scotland experiences food insecurity.

With a quarter of children in Scotland living in poverty, it can be concluded that many are living in homes in which food insecurity is a real issue and for whom, in the absence of adequate social security provision, even with recent Scottish Government supplementary payments, foodbanks are a lifeline.

“10.3% of the population of Scotland experiences food insecurity.”



Foodbank and other charity collections of food

Many schools collect items for donation to local foodbanks at various points in the year and/or organise collections of food to donate as a way of marking Harvest-time and Christmas.

In light of the widespread use of foodbanks in Scotland and of the fact that thousands of children receive food aid from them, it's important to be sensitive to the fact that some families within the school community are likely to be dependent on foodbanks or other charity donations of food for their own survival.

Many will therefore be unable to donate items and are likely to feel the associated stigma of being unable to contribute, as well as the stigma that could arise from the school's focus on foodbanks generally.

Schools' approaches to supporting local foodbanks and organising other charitable donations of food should be carefully considered with these things in mind.

A starting point for the relevant collegiate discussion would be whether it is appropriate at all for the school to be setting up such a charity drive. If the collegiate decision is to proceed, then very careful planning is required to ensure that no child experiences stigma in the course of the school's charity activity in this area.



Free School Meals (FSM)

Free school meals are another essential support for children whose families are struggling as a result of low incomes and high living costs, to buy enough food.

The EIS has welcomed the extension of the universal free school meals offer to children in P4 and P5 during academic session 2021-22.

Universal free school meals provision is a longstanding EIS campaigning objective.

The Union supports universal provision because:

- It increases uptake of school meals and therefore the numbers of children receiving at least one healthy meal during each school day, by removing the need for families to apply. Sometimes the bureaucracy of the current means-tested approach can be onerous, especially where families face challenges with adult literacy or where English is an additional language. The stigma of applying, perhaps by design, is off-putting for many.
- Means-testing also results in unsuccessful applications by families whose incomes are low but not quite low enough to meet the threshold of entitlement. The result for them is ongoing struggle to consistently provide nutritious food for their children. Universalism would help mitigate these challenges.
- Universal provision also increases uptake by removing the stigma that many young people experience in taking a free meal. (The issue of stigma is dealt with more fully later in this briefing.)

Although there have been positive developments over the course of this Scottish Parliament so far, the EIS remains concerned about the time that it's taking to make the free school meals offer to P6's and P7's. The Scottish Government originally committed to providing FSM for all P6 and P7 by August 2022. That is a long time away for hungry children whose families are missing out on free school meals entitlements now. And more recently, the Scottish Government has indicated that the timescales for extending provision to these year groups are likely to be even longer than originally pledged.

That the Scottish Government has said in recent months that it has no plans to extend universal provision to Secondary-aged pupils has prompted further campaigning by the EIS and others in the trade union movement towards securing access to free school meals for the whole of this cohort.

Supporting access to FSM entitlements

As campaigning continues, it's important to try to ensure that all families who have children in P6-S6 who might be eligible, are supported as necessary to apply for free school meals.

Members are encouraged through their EIS Branch to raise the matter with the appropriate members of the school management team with a view to ensuring that effective processes are in place to make families aware, with due sensitivity, of their entitlements and to support them with applications as necessary.

In the context of increasingly diverse school communities, it's important to ensure that associated communication with families and young people from minority ethnic backgrounds is underpinned by an understanding of the intersectional disadvantage that many within BAME communities experience- discrimination and disadvantage on the grounds of race or ethnicity, resulting in greater risk of socio-economic disadvantage and associated stigma. Additionally, it's important that all relevant advice for families, whether written or verbal, is available in the range of languages that are spoken within the school community.

Some parents will have literacy difficulties regardless of the main language spoken and may require additional support in accessing the relevant information about FSM entitlements.

Consideration should also be given to the schools' approach should it become clear that a young person who may be entitled to free school meals is not included in the provision. This should be with a view to ensuring that there is a clear and sensitive, including culturally sensitive, means of referring and addressing such a wellbeing concern.



Breakfast clubs

The need for breakfast clubs has grown over the past decade in response to the increasing numbers of children who arrive in school hungry. The EIS has also called for universal provision of free breakfasts for children of all ages and stages. The Scottish Government is now planning for this.

In the meantime, there are gaps in provision but the need for breakfast clubs is further heightened by the fact that lunchtimes in many schools are currently being staggered across year groups to enable social distancing in school canteens. Without the provision of breakfast in school, many children who are arriving in school hungry will be going hungry for even longer in the school day than would normally be the case.

In October 2021, Kellogg's commissioned YouGov and Assist FM to survey Primary school teachers and school food providers across Scotland on breakfast club provision within their settings.

The survey found that:

- Children regularly attend school hungry
- 28% of teachers in Scotland say that between 5 and 10 pupils in their class go to school without breakfast
- 14% say that more than 10 pupils in their class go to school hungry
- 58% of schools surveyed have a breakfast club
- A quarter of schools have over 50 pupils attending their breakfast club, highlighting the widespread nature of provision
- 90% of teachers in Scotland say the impact of children not having breakfast is a lack of concentration
- 68% of teachers surveyed said breakfast clubs help children settle down before the school day.

In the current context, members are advised to seek to ensure that all children and young people who could be, especially those whose families are on low incomes, are included in any breakfast club provision that's in place within the school.

Ideally breakfast club access should be universally available to all children and young people. In terms of the food available at breakfast clubs, this should be fully inclusive of the dietary requirements of all children and young people who attend, with regards to religious/cultural observance and/or any specific health needs.

Associated referrals and approaches to families/ young people who are not currently included in the offer should be handled with due sensitivity and means of ensuring inclusivity of access to the relevant information for all.

Where breakfast clubs are not currently in place, this could be raised as a matter for collegiate discussion with the management of the school with a view to exploring the possibilities of setting one up, for example, using PEF money to support such an initiative, including the employment of appropriate additional staff.

The EIS will monitor the Scottish Government's progress towards universal provision of free breakfast clubs, nationally



Provision of snacks

The EIS has previously highlighted how members in many instances are providing food to hungry children in their classes, having purchased this themselves. It is commendable that teachers have gone, and continue to go to, such lengths in response to the urgent wellbeing issues that hunger presents.

As outlined earlier in this briefing, staggered breaks and lunchtimes as a Covid mitigation, will mean that some children could be going hungry for longer in the school day than they otherwise would until breaktime or lunchtime. In such a context, arrangements for the provision of snacks are even more important.

Arrangements for the provision of snacks should be raised as a matter of collegiate discussion involving the management of the school, with a view to establishing systematic approaches to ensuring that such wellbeing needs are addressed using school resources.

Many schools have developed approaches that enable effective, sensitive responses where children and young people present with hunger and for the recording of such instances within GIRFEC processes.



Poverty-related stigma

Poverty-related stigma poses a further wellbeing concern for thousands of young people.

That Secondary-aged pupils are entirely missing from the current Scottish Government plans to extend universal free school meals provision makes little sense from a policy perspective, and more importantly, it's prolonging the suffering that many young people between the ages of 12 and 18 are experiencing with regards to hunger itself and the stigma associated with applying for free school meals on a means-tested basis, and going (or not) to collect one each day.

The impact of stigma on young people's wellbeing can't be underestimated.

Research involving people who have lived experience of poverty shows that the associated stigma arising from prejudice and stereotyping is damaging to their wellbeing. Much of the 'povertyist' propaganda that's evident in media portrayals and political rhetoric, is quite deliberately engineered by think tanks and media experts who wish to other and scapegoat people living in poverty.

Those who are the target of this callous stereotyping and shaming, experience embarrassment, humiliation, stress and low self-esteem. Many experience social exclusion as a result of others' attitudes; many others are socially excluded by their own withdrawal from and avoidance of, social situations that risk further shaming.



Young people and stigma

We can conclude that the same applies for many parents who are put in the position of having to apply for free school meals for their children and, of course, for the young people taking free meals in school. This is particularly true for those who are of an age to have awareness of inequalities, especially older children who are more likely to feel the stigma and shame that result from political, social and media attitudes to poverty.

The shift in recent years to using electronic cards to pay for school meals in part addresses some of the issues of stigma. All young people using school canteens have the same types of card- there is no longer the stigmatisation arising from obvious differences in colours of dinner tickets, for example.

But stigma remains. Young people who are entitled to free meals may have less value on their cards than those who are more affluent, and this could be obvious in the meal choices that they make or whether a breaktime snack is purchased or not.

In Secondary schools where young people are generally able to leave the school building at lunchtime, many visit local shops and cafes to buy their lunch using cash. Those on free school meals either can't participate in this at all or can't to the same extent. Either they stay in school to have a free meal, which is obvious to their peers and to school staff, and they miss out on the social aspects of lunchtimes; or so as to be involved in the social aspect, they go along to the high street but are unable to buy anything, often pretending not to be hungry, thus missing an essential meal. For many young people, hunger is preferable to stigma.

Evidently, neither is beneficial to the health and wellbeing, or the learning, of young people.

The EIS previously highlighted how some young people are bullied because they can't afford to purchase items of food during the school day.

It is for these reasons that the EIS continues to campaign for universal stigma-free provision of free school meals for all children and young people at every stage of their schooling.

With this in mind and in the lead up to the local government elections in May, EIS members, Branches and Local Associations are encouraged to lobby election candidates of all parties on the issue.

Summary of advice to members

Discuss this briefing with colleagues within your Branch, with a view to raising any matters as necessary with the management of the school.

Seek to ensure:

- the availability of whole school advice on how to make a referral when hunger is identified in a child by a member of staff as a concern
- that staff feel confident in identifying and raising any associated issues
- that there is a systemic approach to providing food for children and young people who present with hunger outwith established school meal times
- that processes are in place to support families to access any free school meal entitlements and that associated communication is sensitive, inclusive and accessible to parents/ carers with literacy difficulties and/or for whom English is an additional language
- that children who may be at risk of hunger are included within any breakfast club provision; or where there is none, to begin collegiate discussion of how this might be made possible using school resources
- that school lunches, breakfast clubs and snacks are fully inclusive of the dietary requirements of all children and young people, such as those fulfilling religious/ cultural observance and/or who have any health-related dietary requirements
- that families are advised of or referred to, outside agencies that can offer support in the form of food-aid or advice on matters such as income maximisation, and that associated communication is sensitive, inclusive and accessible to those with literacy difficulties and/or for whom English is an additional language
- that information about such provision to address low income and resultant hunger and food insecurity is available to all students, e.g., via school noticeboards, websites or PSHE lessons to help reduce stigma and increase uptake

- sensitive consideration of plans for any charity efforts in support of local foodbanks or other charitable donations of food to avoid poverty-related stigma.

Finally, give consideration to how you and colleagues within your Branch/ Local Association might contribute to EIS campaigning for the urgent expansion of universal free school meals provision to Secondary aged young people, particularly in the context of the forthcoming local government elections.

Call for good practice sharing

Any member who wishes to share good practice in addressing the impact of hunger and food insecurity on children and young people in their establishment is welcome to get in touch with the EIS Education and Equality Department by contacting: [**jharris@eis.org.uk**](mailto:jharris@eis.org.uk)



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