

## Session 3:

# Tackling Inequalities from the Start: Insights from Communities, Families and Practice



University  
of Exeter



Blackpool Council



# FOOD IN EARLY YEARS SETTINGS

Free Early Years Meals research & policy implications



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Bremner & Co | Early Years Food Coalition

*Bremner & Co*

# Who are Bremner & Co?

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- Independent consultancy
- Research, policy and advocacy
- Focused on tackling health inequalities
- First 8,000 days: from pregnancy to early adulthood
- Work with NGOs, academics, local and national government, communities
- Across public health, education, children's services, community programmes

# Our work in early years

## Research & evidence

Commissioning & conducting evidence examining food children access and eat in settings

## Policy & advocacy

Convening on policy asks for early years nutrition – across access, quality, funding

## Government relations

Strong relationships at national and local level, strong DfE engagement, consultation responses

Commissioned by Local authorities, NGOs, academics and impact funders to improve early years nutrition in settings and wider policy



# Early Years Food Coalition

## Secretariat for the coalition

Brings together **NGOs, academics, local authorities, early education providers and campaigners**

Collective advocacy and evidence-building to:

- Improve food in early years settings
- Campaign for equitable access nutrition
- Strengthen nutrition standards and implementation
- Support settings to improve food practice



# Why food in early years matters

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72%

of children aged 0-4 attend  
childcare<sup>1</sup>

90%

of daily energy consumed in  
full-time care<sup>2</sup>

14%

Children starting Reception  
living with obesity in most  
deprived areas<sup>3</sup>

36%

families with youngest  
under-5s live in poverty<sup>4</sup>

**Early years settings are the site with greatest potential for nutrition  
intervention at scale**

Settings offer consistent opportunities for children to share meals, try new foods, and learn  
about different food cultures

# Access: fragmented & inconsistent

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## SCHOOLS (Age 4+)

- £2.53-£3.00 per meal funded
- Mandatory food standards
- No monitoring
- Universal infant free school meals
- Free school meals for children in UC households (from Sept 2026)
- Auto-enrolment being piloted

## EARLY YEARS (Age 0-4)

- NO food funding
- 'Should have regard to' semi-mandatory standards
- No monitoring
- 75% of sector ineligible for free school meals
- Settings run at deficit to feed hungry children

# Too Young to Count

Free Early Years Meals Research

# 290,000

disadvantaged children under 5 will miss out on  
free meals\*

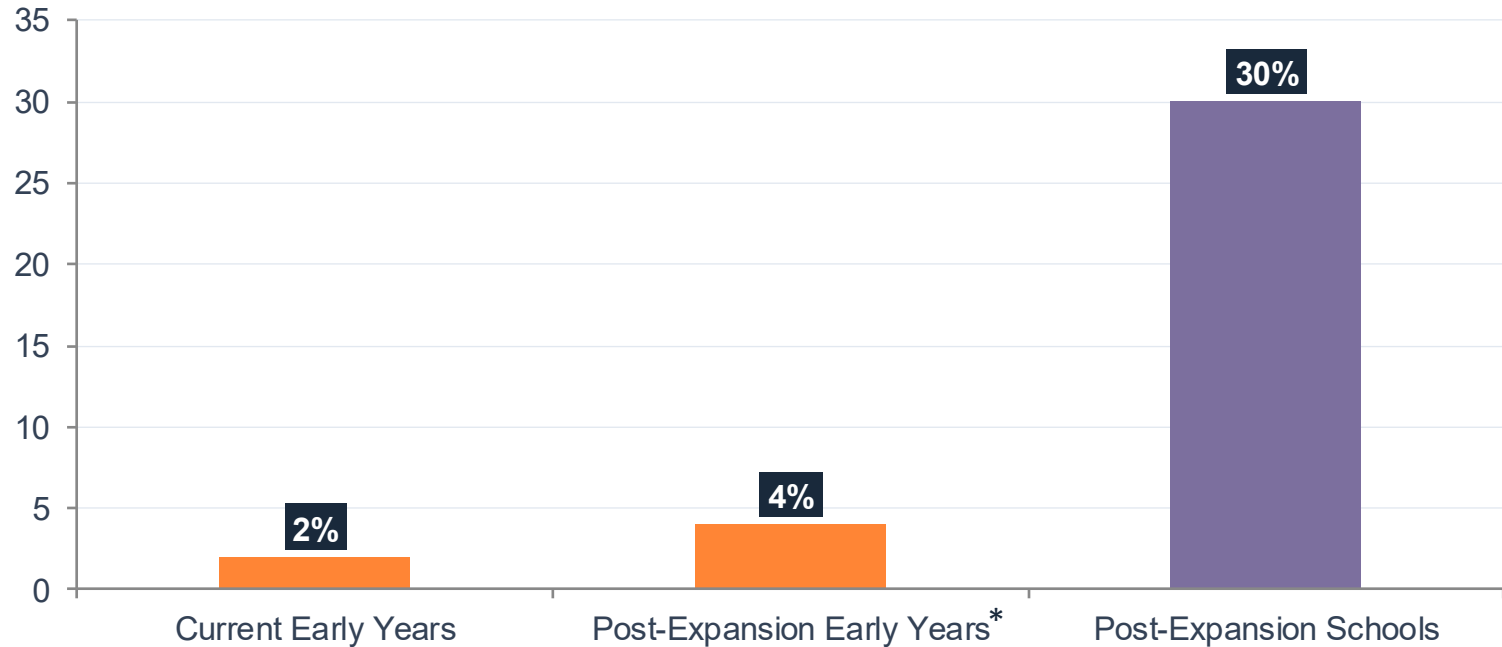
*Despite FSM expansion to all Universal Credit households in schools*

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\*Analysis conducted pre-announcement of school-based nursery (SBN) inclusion in expanded FSM, will impact figure slightly.

# The access gap: early years vs schools

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*\*Analysis conducted pre-announcement of school-based nursery (SBN) inclusion in expanded FSM, will impact figure slightly.*

# What this means in practice

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## For Settings

*"We run a £200k deficit feeding disadvantaged children with no funding support"*

## For Families

*"Money runs out quickly. £10+ every few days on lunchbox items adds up to a scary amount"*

## For Children

Reliance on packed lunches with more HFSS foods, fewer exposures to new foods, missed development opportunities

## For Development

28% of children entering school unable to eat and drink independently (up from 26% last year)<sup>1</sup>

# Urgent policy recommendations

**1** Extend free early years meals to all UC households across ALL setting types

**2** Remove lunch attendance rule so sessional care children can receive meals

**3** Automatically register entitled children, learning from pilot success in schools

**4** Make equitable nutrition a core priority in DfE's 2026 funding review

**Vital nutrition support for children in disadvantage in early years must receive the same commitment as in schools**