

Fair milk for a fair start

EXTEND MILK TO ALL IN RECEPTION AS A SIMPLE CHANGE FOR A STRONGER START

Cool Milk, together with other providers, schools, local authorities, farmers, the School and Nursery Milk Alliance and organisations spanning health, social mobility and education, is calling on the Government to extend the free milk entitlement until the end of the reception school year for children turning five, from September 2027.

Extending the free school milk entitlement to the end of the reception academic year is a low-cost, evidence-based intervention that will support the Government to:

- Fulfil its commitments to supporting children to have the best start in life, and be school ready, rather than having these efforts fall off a cliff-edge once a child turns five.
- Improve nutrition and cognitive development in all children, leading to better and more equitable educational, health and social outcomes.
- Tackle worrying increases in poor child oral and mental health, in turn reducing pressure on over-stretched NHS services.
- Reduce unnecessary bureaucratic processes and management for time-poor school staff.
- Support British farmers and local rural economies through increased guaranteed incomes.

FOR THE COST OF £23.75 PER PUPIL ALL THE ABOVE BENEFITS COULD BE ACHIEVED

THE CURRENT SCHEME

Milk is currently provided free of charge for all under-fives in all educational or childcare settings, fully funded by the Department of Health and Social Care. After a child turns five, milk is available optionally at a subsidised rate via the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs' School Milk Scheme (with the rest being covered by parents).

Despite the many varied benefits of milk for children beyond the age of five, there is a sharp decline in the number of milk drinkers in school after fifth birthdays. The end of the free milk entitlement comes at a critical time in a child's development, and currently results in almost a quarter of a million children losing access to the continued social, educational and health benefits of milk in a school setting. The end of the entitlement also creates many additional behavioural and bureaucratic challenges for schools, particularly without a universal deadline for the fully funded scheme.

Extending the free milk entitlement until the end of the school year will not only address challenges created by the fifth birthday cut-off but will also deliver countless direct benefits for schools, NHS services, local farmers and rural economies, all while supporting the Government's mission to give every child the best start in life.

ONLY 13.5%

OF CHILDREN CONTINUE TO RECEIVE MILK
VIA THE SUBSIDISED SCHEME

OVER 480,000

CHILDREN ON AVERAGE NO LONGER RECEIVE
THE BENEFITS OF MILK FROM SCHOOLS AFTER
THEIR FIFTH BIRTHDAYS

GIVING CHILDREN THE BEST START IN LIFE

The reception age (4-5) is not only an important stage of a child's physical development but it also influences their educational progress and life outcomes for years to come. To fulfil its commitments to improve school readiness, close the opportunity gap and give every child the best possible start – and chance – in life, the Government must ensure every child has access to the nutritional benefits of milk for as long as possible.

- Introducing a universal cut-off date for free milk would ensure all Reception children receive equal access to the significant benefits of free milk throughout their first year of primary education, whilst reducing inconsistencies and confusion for the children caused by the current fifth-birthday rule.
- Good nutrition, provided by milk, is consistently linked to improved learning outcomes in early years, supporting cognitive function, attention and memory in young children so extending the free milk entitlement will support a child's readiness to learn and stay engaged.
- 'Milk breaks' have important implications for a child's mental health and wellbeing so its essential children have access to these for as long as possible.
 - Milk breaks provide opportunities for connections and conversations with peers and adults, supporting the development of feelings of belonging and confidence as well as essential social skills, supporting positive mental health outcomes in later life.
 - These breaks also allow teachers to speak to children beyond lesson time, developing important trusted relationships that can boost children's engagement with learning, as well as creating avenues of support for safeguarding and wellbeing.
- A universal cut-off date will help tackle the opportunity gap and reduce inequalities as children from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly less likely to continue to access the benefits of milk beyond the end of the entitlement, whether that be inside school via the subsidised scheme or at home.
 - With 4.3 million children living below the poverty line, school milk is often their only reliable source of vital nutrients. The inconsistent end of the entitlement risks exacerbating nutrition gaps that contribute to attainment, socio-economic and health disparities, ultimately impacting life outcomes and future success.
- Children must have access to the benefits of milk for as long as possible to improve school readiness and success, emotional and social development, educational progress and give every child the best possible start – and chance – in life.



"MILK PLAYS A VITAL ROLE IN SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S NUTRITION, CONCENTRATION AND OVERALL READINESS TO LEARN, AND MILK BREAKS OFFER CALM MOMENTS THAT BUILD CONFIDENCE, WELLBEING AND SOCIAL SKILLS. EXTENDING THE SCHEME WOULD SIMPLY ALLOW MORE CHILDREN TO BENEFIT FROM THESE ADVANTAGES FOR LONGER, WHILE ALSO REMOVING UNNECESSARY BURDENS FROM SCHOOLS."

DENTAL HEALTH AND NHS SERVICES

Extending free access to milk for reception-age children allows them to continue to access essential nutrients – such as calcium, protein and vitamin D – for growth and long-term bone and dental health at a crucial stage in their physical development.

TOOTH DECAY IS THE LEADING CAUSE OF HOSPITAL ADMISSIONS AMONG 5-9-YEAR-OLDS IN ENGLAND.

21,162

CHILDREN AGED 5 TO 9 WERE ADMITTED TO HOSPITAL DUE TO TOOTH DECAY IN 2024/25.

Expanding access to free nutritious milk will improve dental outcomes for young children and tackle the child oral health gap, a growing area of concern for health professionals, by ensuring all children have access to the long-established benefits of milk for protecting and preserving teeth health.

Maintaining free access to milk – a wholesome source of nutrients – throughout the whole reception year supports the establishment of healthier drinking and eating habits, in turn contributing to better long-term oral health, possible preventative health savings and a reduction in pressure on NHS dental services.

34.3% vs. 13.7%
NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN DEPRIVED AREAS VS NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN LESS DEPRIVED AREAS EXPERIENCING DENTAL DECAY

SUPPORTING HEALTHY EATING THROUGH MILK PROVISION IN BLACKPOOL

Liz Petch, Public Health Consultant for Blackpool Council

Blackpool Council recognises milk as a vital component of healthy eating for primary-aged children, supporting bone health, growth, cognitive development, and immunity.

Childhood obesity remains a serious public health challenge in Blackpool: 27% of Reception children are overweight or obese, compared to 21% nationally (NCMP). High sugar consumption, particularly from sugary drinks, is a major contributing factor and is also linked to poor oral health.

In 2015, Blackpool became the first local authority to sign the Healthy Weight Declaration, making healthy weight in childhood a strategic priority. As part of this commitment, the Universal Free School Breakfast Scheme offers all primary pupils milk and fruit on arrival at school, with a nutritious breakfast for those who have not eaten at home. The scheme is fully funded by the Council's Public Health Department and operates in every school in the authority.

All primary pupils have access to milk, with uptake ranging from 60–90% (highest among younger children). Teachers report that milk consumption helps maintain hydration and with appetite regulation, stabilise energy levels and support concentration in class.

Blackpool's commitment to improving child health through accessible nutrition is evident in its proactive approach to milk provision in schools. By integrating milk into the daily routine of primary-aged children—alongside fruit and nutritious breakfasts—the town is addressing multiple public health challenges, including obesity, poor oral health, and educational readiness. The inclusion of fluoridated milk further strengthens this initiative, offering long-term benefits for dental health without compromising taste or quality.

This case study highlights how a simple, evidence-based intervention can have a wide-reaching impact on children's wellbeing, development, and future health outcomes.

SIMPLIFYING PROCESSES FOR SCHOOLS

Cool Milk



- The current scheme places an additional burden on schools and teachers which would be significantly reduced by an extension to the free milk entitlement for the full year – critical at a time when staff time is a precious resource.
- A universal cut-off date will streamline additional administrative and bureaucratic processes that schools currently experience due to the fifth birthday cut-off.
- Behavioural challenges and possible class schedule disruptions, including separating milk drinkers from non-drinkers, which can cause emotional distress and confusion for the children can be prevented by ensuring all children receive free milk until the end of the school year.

BACKING BRITISH FARMERS AND RURAL ECONOMIES

The extension of the free milk entitlement would generate additional guaranteed income to farmers, strengthening the rural and regional economy by ensuring that the additional free milk provided is sourced from local dairy farmers.

- Locally sourcing the additional milk required for the extended entitlement supports Defra's national food strategy by:
 - Ensuring that the food system and associated policies bolsters the foundations of the economy, enabling the food sector to reach its growth potential.
 - Supporting more affordable, healthier and balanced diets for all.
 - Having a smaller environmental footprint in line with net zero commitments.
 - Celebrating and strengthening the UK's national, local, and regional food heritage and cultures, for which local school milk is central.
- The increased guaranteed demand created by an extension to the free milk entitlement would stabilise farm incomes and help to sustain agricultural employment opportunities in local areas, whilst aligning with Government priorities to ensure public sector catering is locally sourced.



COOL MILK IS THE UK'S LEADING SCHOOL MILK SUPPLIER, WORKING IN CLOSE CONJUNCTION WITH SCHOOLS AND EARLY YEARS SETTINGS TO PROVIDE FREE AND SUBSIDISED MILK TO CHILDREN.

FOUNDED ON THE BELIEF THAT EVERY CHILD DESERVES ACCESS TO NUTRITIOUS MILK, REGARDLESS OF THEIR BACKGROUND AND CIRCUMSTANCES, COOL MILK WORKS CLOSELY WITH MORE THAN 200 LOCAL AUTHORITIES TO PROVIDE NUTRITIOUS MILK TO CHILDREN IN MORE THAN 26,000 SETTINGS ACROSS THE UK. THIS IS ALSO ALIGNED WITH THE EFFORTS OF THE SCHOOL AND NURSERY MILK ALLIANCE WHICH REPRESENTS 152 MEMBERS AND SERVES 1.5 MILLION CHILDREN ACROSS THE UK.

COOL MILK PRIDES ITSELF ON ITS PARTNERSHIPS WITH LOCAL FARMERS, WORKING WITH MORE THAN 400 DAIRIES THROUGHOUT THE UK, TO ENSURE THAT THE MILK PROVIDED IS FRESH AND AS LOCAL AS POSSIBLE TO THE SETTING.