

Brenner & Co

Too young to count?

Why most disadvantaged
under-5s miss out on free meals



About this research

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Bremner & Co is a UK-based research and strategy consultancy specialising in food policy and systems change. We work with partners across the public, voluntary and community sectors to generate robust evidence, unlock insight and drive practical solutions to tackle inequality.

Our work on early years nutrition includes detailed analysis of free meal entitlements, barriers to access, and the broader policy context shaping child food insecurity. We combine quantitative data modelling with qualitative research and stakeholder engagement to help organisations and policymakers design more equitable food support for children and families.

By publishing this research, we hope to strengthen the evidence base for improving access to healthy food in the early years and to inform debate and action among policymakers, practitioners, and wider stakeholders.

Acknowledgements

This research was originally commissioned by The Food Foundation, with support from the Waterloo Foundation, as part of the third instalment of their Early Years series, **Boosting Early Years Nutrition to Support a Healthy Childhood**. We are grateful to The Food Foundation for recognising the value of this detailed analysis on Free Early Years Meals and for supporting its publication in full.

We would like to thank those who contributed their time, insight and expertise to this work. We are grateful to our expert ratifiers; Abigail Page, Lead Researcher at Bremner & Co; Beatrice Merrick, of Early Education; Dr Kerris Cooper, of the Education Policy Institute; Hannah Brinsden, of The Food Foundation, and to Ana María Narváez all of whom provided invaluable critique and guidance.

This research was also supported by **Impact on Urban Health**, whose mission is to tackle complex urban health inequalities by supporting innovative approaches that address their root causes. We are grateful for their commitment to improving children's health and nutrition, and for funding the Early Years Food Coalition's work to champion better food access and provision for young children and families. The Early Years Food Coalition is a coalition of charities, councils, early years settings, academics, and campaigners who work together on policy and advocacy to improve food for young children.



Published: September 2025

Please cite as: Bremner & Co (2025), *Too young to count? Why most disadvantaged under-5s miss out on free meals*. Available from: https://bremnerco.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Too-young-to-count_Why-most-disadvantaged-under-5s-miss-out-on-free-meals_Appendix-.pdf

Report design: Katie White, WhiteCreativeCompany.co.uk

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ABBREVIATIONS

CEYPS: Childcare and early years provider survey
DfE: Department for Education
DWP: Department for Work and Pensions
EAL: English as an additional language
EYPP: Early years pupil premium
FEYM: Free Early Years Meals

FSM: Free School Meals
HBAI: Households Below Average Income
PP: Pupil premium
PVI: Private, voluntary, and independent settings
SPC: Schools, pupils and their characteristics
UC: Universal Credit

Entitled vs eligible: *Entitled* to Free School Meals means a child meets all criteria, whereas *eligible* means the child is both entitled and has been registered to receive free meals.

Foreword

The early years lay the foundations for children's health, development and future opportunities. Good nutrition in these first years is vital, helping children to grow, learn and thrive. It is also one of the most powerful ways to tackle inequalities before they become deeply entrenched.

Yet, despite this, most disadvantaged under-fives in childcare are missing out on the nutritional support they need. Our analysis shows that an estimated 290,000 young children will not qualify for a free meal, even though they live in households receiving Universal Credit and attend nurseries, pre-schools or childminders.

Government has made a clear commitment to giving every child the best start in life, and the upcoming expansion of Free School Meals to all children in households on Universal Credit is an important step forward. But without a similar focus on the early years, a significant disparity will remain.

We estimate that the number of children receiving Free Early Years Meals will increase from just 24,000 to 39,000 - still fewer than 4% of the 1.1 million children in formal childcare. By contrast, in schools, almost a third of pupils will be eligible for a free meal once the policy change comes into effect. This stark difference in coverage between school-aged and early years children illustrates the scale of the gap.

“Free Early Years Meals should be extended to all children in households on Universal Credit, whatever setting type they attend”

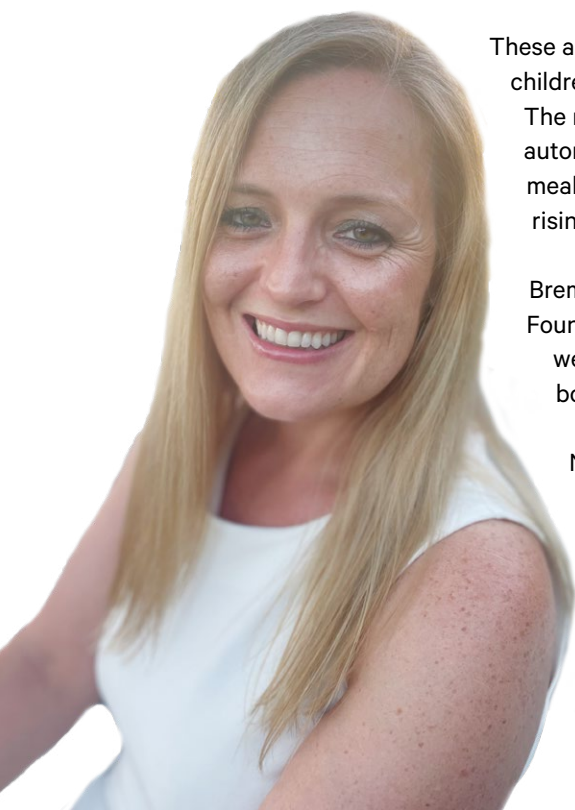
This is about health equity. Childcare providers are increasingly reporting that children are arriving hungry, yet they lack the financial support to respond to this growing need. The children who could benefit most from nutritious food in childcare are too often the least likely to receive it.

These are all solvable problems. Free Early Years Meals should be extended to all children in households on Universal Credit, whatever setting type they attend. The requirement to attend both before and after lunch should be removed, and automatic registration introduced so that every entitled child actually receives a meal. Crucially, providers must be properly resourced, so they are not asked to meet rising need without the means to do so.

Bremner & Co is proud to have worked alongside Impact on Urban Health, The Food Foundation and the Early Years Food Coalition to produce this analysis. Together, we share a commitment to ensuring that early years food is treated as a priority in both policy and practice.

No child should be too young to count.

Dayna Brackley
PARTNER, BREMNER & CO



Executive summary

Starting in September 2026, all children in households receiving Universal Credit (UC) will be entitled to receive Free School Meals (FSM) - a major step toward reducing child food insecurity and improving health and educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. However, this welcome progress risks leaving children in the early years behind.



This research sought to identify the numbers of early years children who will continue to miss out on free meals following the FSM expansion to those in households receiving UC. Free Early Years Meals (FEYM) are tied to FSM eligibility thresholds. However, additional restrictive qualifying criteria, such as the early years setting type, attendance pattern and registration, mean most disadvantaged under-5s do not benefit.

A more inclusive FEYM policy is essential to ensure disadvantaged young children are not left behind. Government has stated a clear commitment in giving every child the best start in life. From September 2025, children as young as 9 months in working families are entitled to 30 hours of free childcare per week, which is likely to mean more children in childcare ineligible for free meals despite living in disadvantage.

Table 1 below outlines the key findings of this research. Including an estimated figure of 290,000 disadvantaged children in early years who will not qualify for free meals, despite living in households receiving UC and attending formal childcare.

TABLE 1
Headline findings for current and projected FEYM eligibility following the UC FSM expansion

FIGURE	NUMBER OF CHILDREN*	REPRESENTATIVE PERCENTAGE**
Number of children attending formal childcare	1,102,000	100%
Total number of children attending formal childcare currently eligible ¹ for FEYM	24,000	2%
Total number of children attending formal childcare likely to be eligible for FEYM from September 2026 due to Universal Credit expansion <i>i.e. 15,000 more children eligible, taking the total to just 4% of all children in childcare</i>	39,000	4%
Number of children who will still miss out despite living in a household on Universal Credit and attending formal childcare	290,000	26%

*Rounded to nearest 1,000, estimates as of July 2025.
**Corresponding percentages each cohort represents out of the total attending formal childcare.

Introduction

This research set out to quantify the impact of barriers to accessing FEYM for disadvantaged children in England. It reveals how eligibility criteria, setting- and attendance-related rules and under-registration combine to exclude the majority of disadvantaged under-5s from this vital nutritional support. The findings also highlight a significant and worsening disparity between access within schools and early years settings, with potential consequences for children's health, wellbeing, attainment

and school-readiness. The research was originally commissioned by the Food Foundation to inform their latest early years report, *Boosting Early Years Nutrition to Support a Healthy Childhood*².

To understand the role and value of FEYM, it is important to acknowledge the broader food system, social conditions and wider policies shaping children's earliest experiences of food.



Systemic and food-environment factors

The early years are a time of rapid physical and cognitive development, yet a growing number of families are unable to access or afford nutritious food. 36% of families with their youngest child under five are living in poverty, and in early 2025, 17% of households with children under four were experiencing food insecurity³. Childcare providers increasingly report children arriving hungry yet lack the financial support to respond to this growing need⁴.

The cost of living and constraints in the home, such as lack of equipment or high energy costs, make it hard for families to consistently prepare nutritious meals⁵. These challenges for families are reflected in packed lunches brought to settings, where commercial baby foods and high in fat salt and sugar (HFSS) products are becoming more common⁶. These foods fail to meet children's nutritional needs and have potentially harmful effects

on their health. As a result, many young children fall short of dietary recommendations in fibre and free sugars⁷, with long-term implications for health, development and school readiness.

These challenges are not equally distributed. Rates of food insecurity and obesity are highest in areas of deprivation, and children in the North of England face disproportionately worse nutrition and access to healthy food environments⁸. The reality is often that the children who may benefit most from nutritious food in childcare are the least likely to receive it.

As the government expands funded childcare for working families to 30 hours a week from the age of nine months⁹, it must also ensure that early years settings are equipped to support healthy diets for these increasing numbers of children attending. Nutritional lifelines like FEYM are not peripheral - they are foundational to health equity from the very start.

“In early 2025, 17% of households with children under four were experiencing food insecurity”

The changing childcare landscape

Data from the Childcare and Early Years Provider Survey (CEYPS) shows that private, voluntary, and independent (PVI) nurseries represent around 65% of the early years sector and offer 85% of available places^{10,11}. It's important to note that private and

independent nurseries are not only accessed by the wealthiest households – they are accessed by families of all levels of deprivation (low and high).

Currently, to qualify for FEYM, children must attend a state-maintained nursery.¹² However, even where children in low-income households attend a state-funded setting, FEYM are not available in all these settings; some school-based nurseries are classed as ‘governor-led’ or alternative provision and are not entitled to offer FEYM. Children who attend PVI settings and childminders.

With the expansion of funded childcare - including 30 hours per week for eligible working families with children aged 9 months and older from September 2025¹³- the number of families accessing formal childcare is expected to rise significantly. Funded hours apply across all setting types, not just state-funded. However, the minimum household income threshold for accessing expanded funded childcare hours (£10,158/y¹⁴) essentially locks out the poorest families from funded childcare.

The significant shifts occurring across the childcare landscape underscore the urgent need for consistent policy support across childcare settings, including adequate funding for food, staff training, facilities, and nutrition guidance; and fairer access to free meals for young children living in disadvantage.



Changes to the early years system should not just be seen as quick fixes around the sides, a more holistic view of what works, what would support the workforce, how to ensure there is high quality early education and childcare should be considered. LGA Policy Paper: Early education and childcare: Changes and challenges for the future¹⁵

Policy disparities and under-registration

Childcare in England varies widely in terms of availability, type, and cost, depending on family needs and local provision. This diversity makes it essential for policies - whether universal or means-tested - to be carefully designed to support all types of childcare settings effectively¹⁶.

In schools, registering a pupil for FSM secures funding for those meals to be provided, as well as unlocking Pupil

Premium (PP) funding. FSM status can often act as a proxy for other disadvantaged funding, such as local authority-provided grants for uniform, help with travel costs and holiday activity clubs.

However, this is not the case in early years - registering a child for FEYM has no implication for Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) receipt for the setting. This, together with a lack of dedicated funding for FEYM (or any food) provision in settings, is likely to contribute to under-registration for FEYM amongst entitled children.

There is no dedicated funding for providing FEYM in state-maintained nurseries, though separate support is provided for some disadvantaged children via the Early Years Pupil Premium.

Research from the Education Policy Institute (EPI) shows a substantial 'jump' in free meal eligibility from 8% in entitled early years settings to 18% in Reception. This highlights a clear disparity in eligibility between cohorts that are so close in age¹⁷. Whilst we cannot assert this due to a lack of data, we believe this 10% disparity may be a result of under-registration and the use of sessional care for potentially eligible early years children.

As is evident in local authority led auto-enrolment pilots for FSM¹⁸, auto-enrolment for FEYM could help address this disparity, ensuring more entitled children benefit. Campaigners continue to advocate for automatic enrolment as a key first step for government to support disadvantaged children who meet existing eligibility criteria.



Free Early Years Meals policy

FEYM are not governed by a standalone policy. Instead, eligibility is determined through the existing FSM criteria.



FEYM ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

To be eligible for FEYM, children must:

- Attend a state-maintained setting (see definition in [Appendix](#))
- Attend both before and after lunch (attendance either before or after lunch is referred to as sessional care in this report¹⁹)
- **Meet current income-related eligibility:** Live in a household which has an income below £7,400 (aligned with FSM eligibility threshold) and is in receipt of certain benefits
- **From September 2026 onwards:** Live in a household in receipt of Universal Credit support
- Have a claim to take up FEYM made on their behalf and have that claim approved (note: to be 'eligible' a pupil must be both entitled according to criteria, and registered) .

Current eligibility - in numbers

According to DfE data, there are currently **24,000 children in early years eligible for FEYM in England**.

Table 2 outlines these current FEYM eligibility figures, as reported in DfE's schools, pupils and their characteristics data for 2024-2025 (latest available at time of analysis).

TABLE 2

FSM eligibility by national curriculum year group in England for 2024/25²⁰

NATIONAL CURRICULUM YEAR GROUP*	NUMBER OF PUPILS**
Early 1	19
Early 2	473
Nursery 1	4,667
Nursery 2	19,278
TOTAL	24,437

* Year group age ranges provided in [Appendix](#).

**Totals include state-maintained nursery, primary, secondary, alternative provision (AP) schools and special schools, and non-maintained special schools. Does not include independent schools.

Comparing FEYM with FSM

More children in early years miss out on free meals than in schools because the criteria for FEYM are much more restrictive, especially around the type of setting they attend. Table 2 compares how application of the free meals policy differs between early years and schools.

TABLE 3

A comparison of policy details between FEYM and FSM. Accurate as of July 2025

POLICY DETAIL	FEYM	FSM*
Number eligible (entitled and registered)	24,000²¹	2,172,000²²
Current eligibility rate (as a percentage of all pupils attending settings where the policy applies)	8%²³	26%²⁶ across all year groups <i>(Note: in Reception the figure is lower at 18%).</i>
Current: Household income threshold	Less than £7,400 after tax (and before benefits).	Less than £7,400 after tax (and before benefits).
From September 2026	Live in a household in receipt of Universal Credit.	Live in a household in receipt of Universal Credit.
Other stipulations	Child must attend a specific type of state-funded school, also called a state-maintained nursery. Child must be a registered pupil of the setting, excluding certain state-funded settings (like governor-led settings) Child must attend both before and after lunch. Child's household must be in receipt of one of a list of benefits (see FEYM eligibility criteria detail).	Child must attend government-funded school. Child's household must be in receipt of one of a list of benefits. <i>FSM are also offered universally to pupils in Reception to Year 2.</i>
Funding	No dedicated or additional funding to provide free meals	£495 per pupil funding per year allocated as part of the National Funding Formula
Linkage to other benefits for settings and schools	No linkage to Early Years Pupil Premium or other disadvantage benefits. Consequently, there are no additional incentives for settings to register children.	FSM registration unlocks Pupil Premium and fsm6 funding for schools, which acts as incentive to get pupils registered. ^{***}

*Rounded to nearest 1,000.

**National FSM, from Reception through to Year 14.

***This mechanism may change come September 2025 when FSM eligibility expands to all children in households receiving UC. The government is yet to confirm details on this.

Key factors limiting access to FEYM

A 2024 EPI report titled '*How can we reduce food poverty for under-fives?*' highlighted key limitations in the application of FEYM²⁵. Our analysis quantifies the impact of these limitations that prevent most children living in households receiving UC from being eligible for FEYM²⁶, including:

- Children who attend non-state settings (e.g. PVIs, childminders) who meet other eligibility criteria but are excluded from FEYM because the policy does not apply outside specific types of state-funded setting.
- Children who meet all eligibility criteria but remain unregistered, likely due to sessional attendance (e.g. mornings or afternoons only) or under-registration similar to that reported for FSM²⁷.

Several key assumptions, including that at a minimum, the same proportion of children should be eligible for FEYM in applicable state-maintained settings as children in Reception, underpin our analysis. Details on these assumptions are available in the [Appendix](#).





Findings

The upcoming expansion of FSM to all children in households receiving UC is a welcome step. But in the early years, the impact will be limited. Whilst eligibility rates may shift as more children enter childcare under the expansion of funded hours entitlements, the underlying picture is unlikely to change: the vast majority of disadvantaged children in childcare will still not receive a free meal. This research aimed to quantify the impact of barriers to accessing FEYM, to provide a clearer picture of who is missing out and why.

How many disadvantaged children are missing out on FEYM, and why?

We estimate that around **1.1 million children aged 1-3 attend formal childcare** (see note on inclusion in **Appendix**). To quantify the impact of multi-layered barriers that limit access to FEYM, we used existing datasets (government and non-government) to identify estimates for how many children miss out due to each barrier 'scenario'.

The 24,000 children who are currently eligible for FEYM represent 8% of those attending state-maintained early

years settings where the policy applies. However, as a **percentage of the total number of children attending formal childcare** across all types of setting in England, the 24,000 children figure represents a much lower percentage: **just 2%**. This is particularly stark considering **32% of children aged 0-4 are estimated to be living in poverty**²⁸.

Universal Credit FSM expansion and FEYM

Will FSM expansion improve access for disadvantaged early years children?

Following the announcement of the expansion of FSM to children in households receiving UC²⁹, we sought to quantify the impact of the expansion for children in early years. For school aged children, an additional 620,000 children aged 4-15 will qualify for FSM in the first year alone.³⁰ Whilst the expansion of FSM will ensure many more disadvantaged children are fed at school, it also exacerbates the need to address persistent inequities in the early years. **We estimate that it will increase the number of children accessing FEYM from 24,000 to just 39,000.**

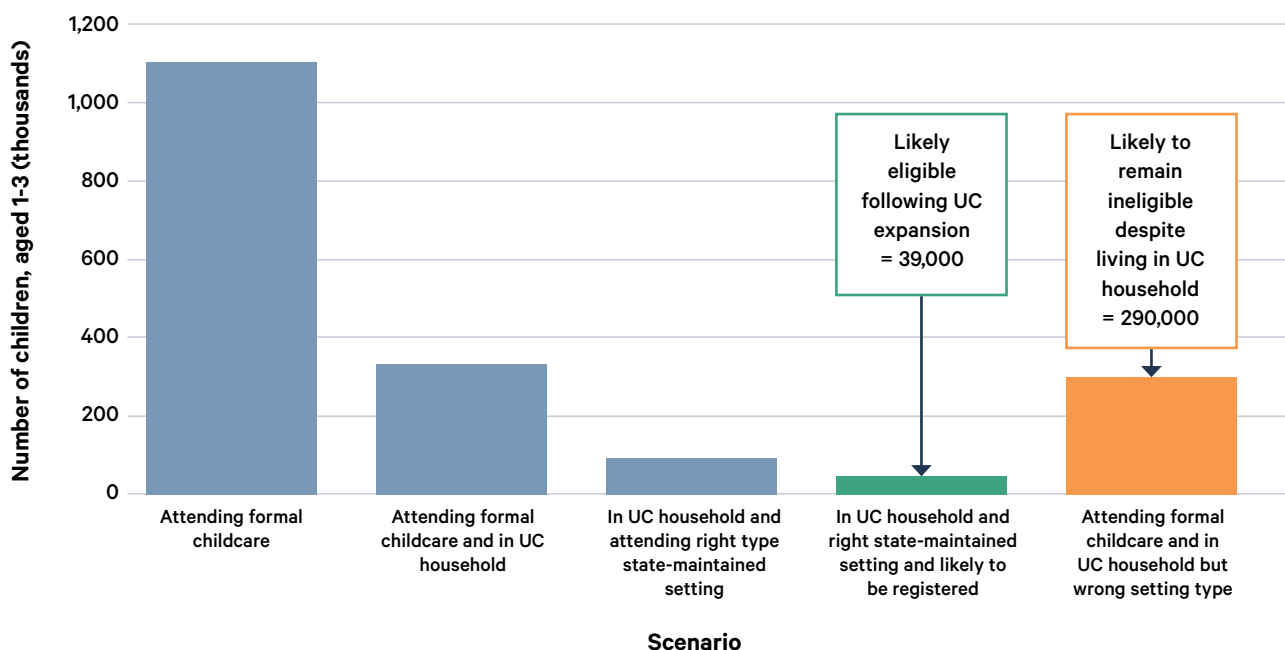
This means that an estimated 290,000 children who attend formal childcare and live in households receiving UC will continue to be ineligible for FEYM.

Figure 1 presents this finding, comparing the small proportion of children in households receiving UC likely to be eligible for FEYM following the policy expansion with the total number of UC children attending childcare.

The findings of this research illustrate the extent to which existing barriers will continue to significantly limit access to free meals for early years children living in deprivation despite the upcoming expansion.

FIGURE 1

Chart comparing the projected FEYM eligibility with total number in childcare and in households receiving UC



This means that just 15,000 additional children attending early years settings are likely to benefit from the expanded policy. These are children expected to live in UC-recipient households, attend the 'right' type of state-funded early years setting full-time, and be successfully registered.

The new total of 39,000 eligible children **represents less than 4% of all children in formal childcare.** Headline figures are summarised in Table 4, including estimates of children in early years who will, and will not, benefit from the Universal Credit expansion.

"This means that just 15,000 additional children attending early years settings are likely to benefit from the expanded policy compared with over 500,000 in schools."

TABLE 4

Estimated impact of UC FSM expansion on children attending early years settings

ESTIMATE HEADLINE	NO. OF CHILDREN*	DETAIL
Children aged 1-3** living in households receiving UC attending formal childcare	328,000	Assumed % of UC children attending formal childcare, applying known % of total 1-3 age cohort population living in households receiving UC (30%) to total known attending formal childcare (1,102,000)
Additional children aged 1-3 attending formal childcare who will likely benefit from UC expansion and become eligible for FEYM	15,000	Estimated total out of those potentially eligible due to UC expansion, by applying % known to currently miss out due to existing barriers out of those in households receiving UC and in state-maintained settings (sessional care use and under-registration)
Total children aged 1-3 attending formal childcare eligible for FEYM from September 2026	39,000	Total of currently eligible and estimated newly eligible due to UC expansion
Children aged 1-3 living in households receiving UC attending formal childcare still not eligible for FEYM	290,000	Calculated by taking currently eligible combined with estimated newly eligible from total children estimated to be living in households receiving UC and attending formal childcare

*Rounded to the nearest 1,000

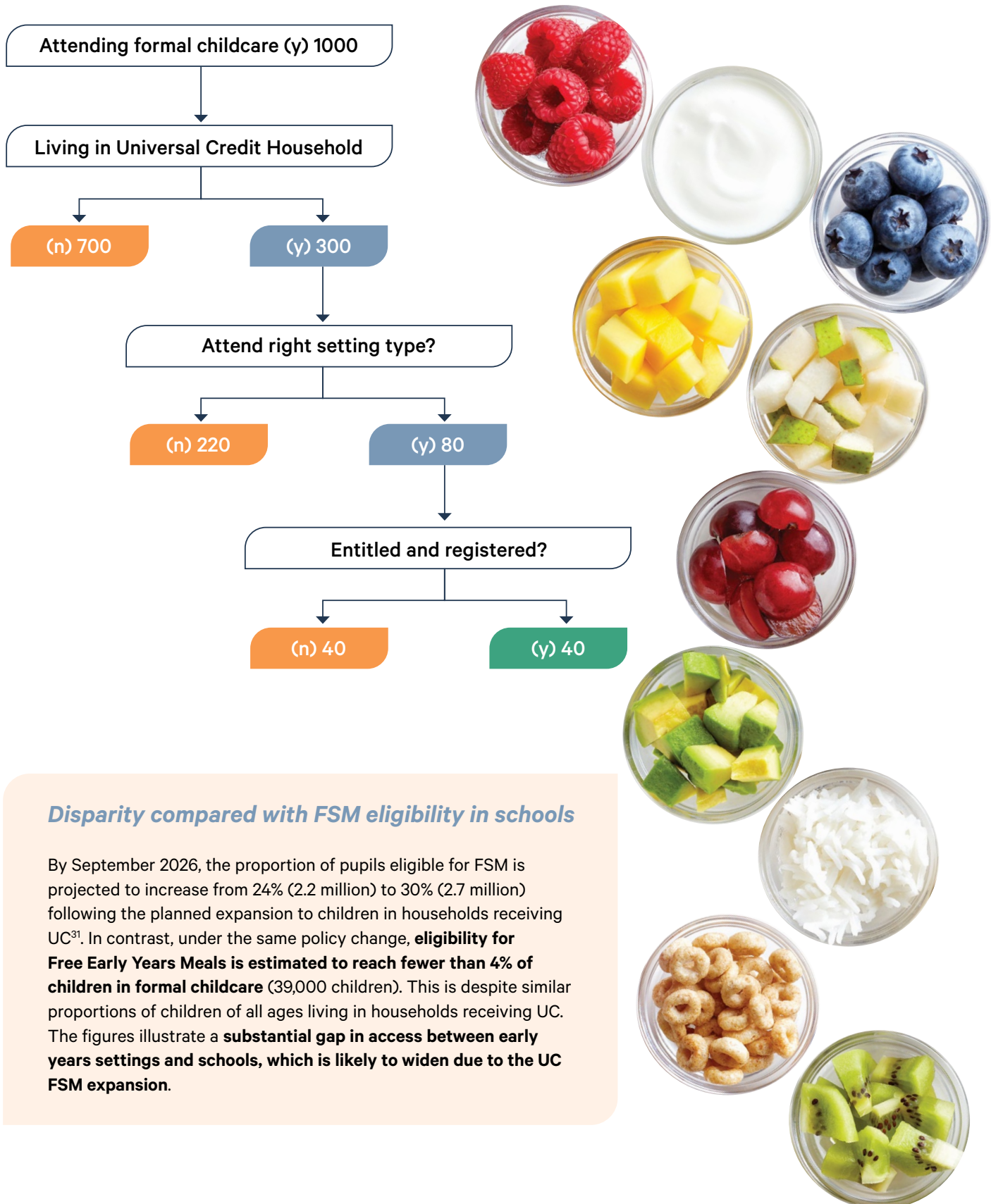
**aged 1-3 on 31st August prior to school year start. See [Appendix](#) for details on inclusion for analysis.

Additionally, using our estimates, Figure 2 illustrates how the barriers to eligibility would play out in practice for a representative group of 1,000 children in childcare. We find that **only 40 of every 1000 children aged 1-3 attending formal childcare are likely to be registered for FEYM**, compared with around 300 out of every 1,000 school age children from September 2026 (not counting Universal Infant FSM).



FIGURE 2

An eligibility pathway diagram representing estimated FEYM eligibility for 1,000 children attending formal childcare, from September 2026.





Conclusion & policy recommendations

This research reveals a significant gap in access to FEYM for disadvantaged children in England. Barriers such as restrictive eligibility criteria and low registration rates mean that many children in early years settings miss out on vital nutritional support.

The government's Best Start in Life strategy recognises the importance of early years and that some children, including those eligible for FSM, need extra support. However, it largely overlooks food provision and free meal access in early years settings.³² To realise the government's ambition of giving every child the best start in life³³, especially considering the expansion of funded childcare hours, there must be a commitment to fair and consistent access to food in early years settings. This includes addressing inequalities in nutritional support between nurseries and schools and recognising the critical role that good nutrition plays in shaping lifelong health.

We present the following policy recommendations to government:

1. **Extend Free Early Years Meals eligibility to all children in households on Universal Credit, regardless of setting type.**
2. **Remove the requirement that children attend both before and after lunch to qualify for a free meal.**
3. **Implement automatic registration for Free Early Years Meals so that all children who are entitled can access a free meal.**
4. **Ensure food provision is a core focus of the Department for Education's 2026 early years funding review, with sufficient investment to meet nutritional standards across all settings.**

Whilst it will deliver significant progress for school-age children, the roll-out of FSM expansion to children in households receiving Universal Credit will have a minimal impact on increasing access to free meals for disadvantaged under-fives. This has serious consequences for their health, wellbeing, attainment and levels of school-readiness; and demands a more inclusive and equitable approach to ensure that all children have access to adequate nutrition in their early years.

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