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for Education

Breakfast Club Early Adopters Research

Research report

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1 Executive summary

Introduction

The Department for Education commissioned Ipsos UK, in partnership with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) and Professor Greta Defeyter (Northumbria University), to evaluate the Free Breakfast Clubs Early Adopters (EA) scheme. As part of the Labour Party's 2024 Manifesto commitment to establish free breakfast clubs in every primary school in England, the EA scheme launched in April 2025, working with a minimum of 750 schools to test and learn what works before national rollout to nearly 18,000 schools serving 4.5 million pupils.

The programme aims to provide pupils with a soft start to the day to ensure no child starts their school day hungry, support pupils' academic readiness and alleviate financial pressures through at least 30 minutes of free before-school childcare alongside breakfast. This research examined how EA schools deliver the free breakfast clubs, how pupils engage with provision, and parents' attitudes, experiences, barriers and perceived impacts, generating evidence to inform national rollout and evaluation design.

Methodology

The research employed a mixed-methods approach structured around test-and-learn principles, enabling continuous insight generation throughout the project. A Parent Advisory Group of 8 parents met 3 times to advise on recruitment materials, survey questions, and recommendations.

Qualitative research comprised structured observations of free breakfast clubs across 8 purposively sampled schools, alongside 26 in-depth interviews and 4 focus groups with 43 parents (29 users of the free breakfast club, 14 non-users). A census survey distributed to all EA schools achieved 5,487 parent responses from 321 schools (42% school response rate), comprising 69% breakfast club users and 31% non-users.

Key Findings

School's current delivery models

Schools demonstrated considerable flexibility in implementation whilst maintaining calm, child-centred environments. Physical arrangements varied from dual-space models (separate eating and activity areas) to single rooms and rented church halls, with all providing sufficient capacity despite seasonal attendance variations. Staff-to-pupil ratios ranged from 1:10-1:13 in observed mainstream settings, whilst the observed special school offered 1:1 support alongside individualised provisions.

Food provision typically included hot and cold options, with minimal waste and well-established routines supporting smooth transitions into the school day. Across all settings, free breakfast clubs operated with settled atmospheres requiring minimal behaviour management.

Pupil engagement with the free breakfast club

Pupils exercised considerable autonomy in choosing what to eat, which activities to pursue, and how to interact socially, distinguishing free breakfast clubs from structured classroom time. Pupils showed strong engagement with both food and activities, although some attended primarily for social interaction and play.

The environment fostered peer support and mixed-age socialisation, with older pupils often supporting younger children. A calm atmosphere with limited adult intervention appeared central to the provision's appeal.

Understanding family morning routines

The free breakfast club sits within existing family routines rather than replacing them entirely. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of families report that their child usually has breakfast at home, though breakfast club users are less likely to eat at home than non-users (74% vs 94%).

Current before-school arrangements varied considerably: 45% of families used the free breakfast club for childcare, whilst 41% had a parent or carer at home. Among breakfast club users, 44% attended daily, while others used the provision flexibly across the week.

Parents' attitudes to and experiences of the free breakfast club

Parent awareness of provision was high (92%), primarily through school newsletters (36%) and apps (19%). The free breakfast club usage reflected family circumstances: 69% of aware parents reported their child attends, with higher rates among full-time employed parents (79%) and lower among free school meal eligible families (66%).

Enabling employment emerged as the primary motivation for use (53%), followed by child enjoyment (43%) and easier drop-offs (35%). Parents expressed high satisfaction across all aspects of the provision (67%+ satisfied), particularly regarding safety (94%), flexibility of attendance (92%) and space (90%), though some desired more variety in food (8% dissatisfied) and earlier start times (8% dissatisfied).

Parents of children with SEND particularly valued the provision, with 78% feeling it supported their child's needs. Interviewed parents highlighted calm environments, structured transitions and opportunities for social interaction as particularly beneficial.

Barriers and enablers to engagement

Non-use reflected diverse circumstances rather than uniform barriers. Nearly half (49%) of non-users cited adequate existing arrangements, whilst 32% preferred family breakfast time. Child preference significantly affected engagement, with 26% reporting their child did not want to attend, rising to 38% among former users.

Practical barriers included timing issues (17%), particularly where start times did not align with work schedules or sibling drop-offs, food concerns (9%) relating to uncertainty about provision suitability, and booking inflexibility (7%). Limited understanding persisted about universal eligibility, with some incorrectly assuming the funding is only relevant to families eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and having limited knowledge on what the session involved.

Child interest emerged as the strongest potential enabler (53%) would attend if their child asked, exceeding practical motivators like free provision (22%) or easier drop-offs (21%). Greater flexibility in timing, booking and drop-off arrangements would support engagement alongside clearer communication about universal availability.

Perceived impacts

Parents reported diverse benefits across child development, family functioning and household finances. For pupils, 42% of parents observed reduced morning stress and 38% noted increased settling at school start, with perceived impacts higher for pupils with SEND (49% and 46% respectively). Social development featured strongly: 72% reported their child made friends and 21% noted improved social skills.

For families, 68% reported less stressful mornings and 76% more predictable routines. Employment support was substantial: 80% said the provision helped them get to work on time and 73% said it enabled them to work earlier or additional hours.

Financial benefits were significant, with 52% spending less on childcare, 36% reducing breakfast food costs and 33% having more money for other needs. Notably, 22% reported that they were less likely to run out of food before payday, indicating impacts on household food security.

Conclusions and recommendations

This research suggests that, from parents' perspectives, free breakfast clubs are valued for a wide range of benefits. As well as providing breakfast, parents describe the provision as helping children start the day in a calmer and more settled way, supporting opportunities for social interaction and independence, and making family mornings easier to manage. Many also report wider benefits for their households, including support with work, childcare arrangements and household finances.

Parents' experiences indicate that there is no single model of delivery that works best in every context. Instead, the findings suggest that schools are most successful when they can adapt provision to local needs whilst maintaining the features that parents and pupils value most, such as a calm atmosphere, flexibility, and appropriate support for different groups of children, including those with SEND.

The findings point to several areas for consideration as the programme develops. These include schools and the DfE continuing to communicate the offer as more than just a breakfast programme by highlighting benefits such as the 'soft start' to the school day and support for working families; maintaining flexibility in how schools deliver provision whilst preserving core elements that parents value; strengthening support for pupils with SEND through quiet spaces; improving communication about universal eligibility; increasing visibility of the provision so parents better understand what it offers; and ensuring booking and attendance arrangements remain flexible enough to accommodate different family circumstances.

2 Introduction

Background and context

Ipsos UK, in partnership with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) and Professor Greta Defeyter of Northumbria University, were appointed by the Department for Education (DfE) to deliver research on the Free Breakfast Clubs Early Adopters (EA) scheme. This report presents findings from that research, examining how schools are delivering the free breakfast club offer, how pupils are engaging with the provision, and the attitudes, experiences, barriers, and perceived impacts reported by families.

Policy context and rationale

As part of its 2024 Manifesto, the Labour Party committed to establishing a free breakfast club in every primary school in England.¹ The programme aims to provide pupils with a soft start to the day, ensure no child starts their school day hungry, support pupils' academic readiness and alleviate financial pressures associated with before-school childcare and food costs. To embed this commitment in law, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act includes a duty on state-funded schools with primary-aged pupils to offer a breakfast club, bringing consistency of provision across England for the first time.² Timing of commencement of the statutory duty for schools to deliver a free breakfast club will be announced by the Government in due course.

¹ Labour Party (2024). *Labour Party manifesto 2024* (p. 20). Labour Party. <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Labour-Party-manifesto-2024.pdf>

² Department for Education (2026, March 13). *Free breakfast clubs: Summary business case*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/free-breakfast-clubs-summary-business-case/13-march-2026-free-breakfast-clubs-summary-business-case>

While an estimated 85% of primary schools currently offer some form of breakfast provision, many do not include before-school childcare, or provide food and care only to a limited number of pupils, in most cases, at a cost to parents.³ At the same time rising food insecurity and increasing childcare costs are placing growing financial pressure on families across England, with many parents facing difficult trade-offs between work commitments and the cost of before-school care. Concurrently school absences and disruptive behaviour have risen since the COVID-19 pandemic, raising concerns about pupils' readiness to learn at the start of the school day.⁴

A free, universal breakfast club which offers at least 30 minutes of before-school childcare alongside a nutritious breakfast has the potential to help address each of these pressures simultaneously. The club can help pupils arrive at school fed, settled and ready to engage, while reducing the financial burden on families and supporting parents to work.⁵

The EA scheme launched in April 2025, working with a minimum of 750 primary schools across England to test and learn what works in implementing free breakfast clubs ahead of national rollout.⁶ The national rollout will reach nearly 18,000 schools and 4.5 million pupils. Participating schools in the EA scheme receive DfE funding to run free breakfast clubs, which may be delivered alongside any existing breakfast or before-school provision the school already offers.

Evidence from previous breakfast intervention programmes points to meaningful impacts on pupils' academic outcomes. An evaluation of Magic Breakfast (a programme sharing similar elements to the EA scheme) found that Year 2 pupils made approximately 2 additional months' progress in reading, writing and mathematics. The evaluation also found slight improvements in attendance, alongside substantial improvements in teacher-reported classroom behaviour and concentration.⁷

Beyond academic outcomes, breakfast clubs offer wider benefits for pupils' social development and wellbeing. Both longitudinal and causal evidence suggests that regular breakfast club attendance is associated with the development of stronger friendships.⁸

³ Magic Breakfast (2022). *Hidden hunger: The state of UK breakfast provision in 2022*. Magic Breakfast. <https://www.magicbreakfast.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/hiddenhunger-the-state-of-uk-breakfast-provision-2022.pdf>

⁴ Education Policy Institute (2022). *Examining post-pandemic absences in England*. EPI. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/absence/>

⁵ Department for Education (2025, April 22). *Free breakfast clubs roll out as costs for families cut by £8,000*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/free-breakfast-clubs-roll-out-as-costs-for-families-cut-by-8000>

⁶ Department for Education (2025). *Breakfast clubs early adopters: Methodology for September 2025 to March 2026*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/breakfast-club-early-adopters-grant-2025-to-2026-academic-year/breakfast-clubs-early-adopters-methodology-for-september-2025-to-march-2026>

⁷ Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Greaves, E., Hyatt, J., Johnson, R., & Shaw, J. (2019, December). *Magic Breakfast: Evaluation report and executive summary*. Education Endowment Foundation. https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/documents/projects/Magic_Breakfast_report.pdf

⁸ Defeyter, M. A., Stretesky, P. B., Long, M. A., Furey, S., Reynolds, C., Porteous, D., & Mann, E. (2015). More than just a meal: Breakfast club attendance and children's social relationships. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 3, 183. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2015.00183>

Further, there is school-reported evidence that breakfast clubs help improve punctuality and attendance and foster a more settled and inclusive start to the school day for pupils.⁹

In addition, a key dimension of the free breakfast club policy is its implications for parents and families. Free before-school childcare has the potential to meaningfully reduce household costs, with survey data suggesting that around 59% of working parents would be likely to increase their working hours if a free breakfast club were available.¹⁰ For many families, a breakfast club can help parents get to work earlier or manage their morning routine more easily, thereby alleviating some of the day-to-day pressures that before-school childcare can place on households.

Research aims

This research sits within a wider test-and-learn implementation and process evaluation of the Free Breakfast Clubs Early Adopters scheme being conducted by the DfE. The research is structured around 3 core aims:

- to capture variations in how schools are delivering the EA free breakfast club offer, and to identify which delivery models and approaches appear to work well and less well across different school contexts
- to understand the motivators, enablers and barriers that influence whether parents and carers bring their child to the free breakfast club, and to explore their perceptions of the programme's impact on their children and household
- to generate evidence that can inform the national rollout of free breakfast clubs and the associated evaluation, with particular attention to the implications for scaling and sustaining both the programme and the evaluation design over time

With these aims in mind, the research is guided by the following key research questions:

School delivery

- how are EA schools delivering free breakfast clubs?
- what has aided EA schools in delivering the intervention, and which approaches have been more successful?

Pupil engagement

- how are pupils engaging with their schools' free breakfast club offer?
- what aspects of the offer appear to support positive interactions with peers and staff and engagement with activities?

⁹ Magic Breakfast (n.d.). *School breakfasts and the attendance crisis*. Magic Breakfast. <https://www.magicbreakfast.com/wp-content/uploads/School-Breakfasts-and-the-Attendance-Crisis-1.pdf>

¹⁰ Deltapoll (2025, April). *Deltapoll/DfE breakfast clubs summary*. Deltapoll. <https://deltapoll.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Deltapoll-DfE-Breakfast-Clubs-Summary.pdf>

- what aspects of the offer appear to support consuming a healthy breakfast?

Parent perceptions and experiences

- what are parents' attitudes to and experiences of free breakfast clubs?
- what are parents' perceptions of the impact of the programme on their children and households?
- why have non-participating parents not engaged with the free breakfast club offer, and what would enable or encourage them to take advantage of it?

Evaluation

- how do interviews compare to focus groups in terms of overall parental preference (as measured by take-up) and parental preference among parents from harder-to-reach backgrounds?
- which strategies appeared to be most effective in recruiting parents for qualitative fieldwork, and were any strategies more effective for hard-to-reach parents?

3 Methodology

Overarching methodology

This study was designed around a test and learn approach, recognising that free breakfast clubs are at an early stage of policy development, with a limited number of schools piloting the programme ahead of national rollout. Rather than waiting until all fieldwork was complete, the research was structured to generate and share insights continuously throughout the project. Interim qualitative and quantitative findings were presented at key stages, meaning that emerging evidence could feed into planning for national rollout in a timely manner.

Alongside this, executive summaries of findings were produced for early publication and shared directly with participating schools, including practical recommendations to support them in running their breakfast clubs effectively. The study also tested which research methods proved most effective for engaging different parent groups, with this methodological learning intended to inform the design of the full rollout evaluation.

The research comprised several workstreams:

- a Parent Advisory Group (PAG) of 8 parents to help co-design research materials and recommendations
- qualitative observations of EA breakfast clubs across 8 schools, alongside in-depth interviews and focus groups with parents
- quantitative census survey of all EA schools, capturing the attitudes and experiences of parents and carers

Parent advisory group

A Parent Advisory Group (PAG) was established to embed parents' and carers' lived experience in the research design, with members advising on engagement materials, survey questions, and findings. The PAG was initially designed to include a 50/50 split of free breakfast club users and non-users, alongside diversity requirements spanning ethnicity, employment status, family composition, and geographic spread.

Recruitment was conducted through parental WhatsApp groups and personal networks building on Prof Defeyter's network. For example, asking organisations involved in breakfast clubs (such as Magic Breakfast and Family Action) to circulate the recruitment survey to parents who might be interested in taking part. Achieving a diverse sample proved challenging, likely reflecting the extra demands placed on parents in committing to 3-hour long evening sessions alongside their existing responsibilities.

Recruitment may also have been affected by the framing of the group as a "breakfast club" advisory panel, which non-users may have assumed was not relevant to them, a challenge also encountered when recruiting non-users for the qualitative fieldwork.

In total, 8 parents took part in the PAG, all with children attending mainstream state schools. While all participants were women and all stated that they were a user of breakfast clubs, the group represented a mix of regions and ethnicities.

The PAG met virtually 3 times across the duration of the project, as set out in the table below.

Table 1: Overview of Parent Advisory Group sessions

Session Name	Session Details	Timelines
Session 1 - Research recruitment and engagement	The 1 st session introduced members to the PAG, its purpose, and how their contributions would feed into the research. It then focused on recruitment and engagement materials, including email and text message templates.	December 2025
Session 2 - Survey co-design	The 2 nd session covered engagement materials and survey co-design, with parents reviewing draft questions, suggesting additional topics, and advising on language and terminology.	February 2026
Session 3 - Findings interpretation and recommendations	The 3 rd session was used to present preliminary findings, reflect on implications for national rollout, and co-design recommendations, with parents drawing on their lived experience to shape practical suggestions for policymakers and schools.	March 2026

The PAG's input led to a number of tangible changes to the research. Engagement materials were refined to be easier to scan with key messages made more prominent. New survey response options and questions were added to better reflect the realities of family life. Together, these changes helped to better capture the lived experience of families and strengthened the overall research. Additionally, the PAG were kept informed of the impact of their contributions throughout the process, for example, receiving a written summary of how their input had shaped the final survey.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research was conducted to explore how free breakfast clubs are delivered and experienced in practice. Recruitment and selection started at the school level, and then parents were recruited from within the selected schools.

School recruitment and sampling

All EA schools were invited to take part via email, and 60 expressions of interest were received. From this pool, schools were sampled purposively so that the observed settings reflected the diversity of the EA school population, with variation in school type, size, location, and pupil characteristics. In total, 8 schools were observed.

The table below provides a list of the observed schools' characteristics.

Table 2: School observations characteristics

Characteristic	Detail
School type	7 mainstream primary; 1 special school
School size	2 small; 3 medium; 2 large ¹¹
Location	4 urban; 4 rural
FSM¹² eligibility	Range: 9.6% to 58.5%; 4 schools at 40% or above; 2 schools below 20%
SEND¹³ profile	Range: 12.9% to 32.6%; 1 school catering exclusively for pupils with SEND

Parent recruitment and sampling

To recruit parents, all 8 of the observation schools sent invitations to take part in the research via standard school communication channels (such as emails, newsletters or posters in the school). If interested, parents were asked to submit an expression of interest survey.

Following initial recruitment, analysis of the expression of interest responses revealed that certain schools had generated fewer parent participants than others, creating potential gaps in demographic diversity. To address this and ensure representation across key

¹¹ Schools are grouped as small (up to 210 pupils), medium (211–420 pupils) or large (more than 420 pupils). The current figure excludes the 1 special school.

¹² Free School Meals

¹³ Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

parent groups, 2 additional schools were identified and recruited specifically to support parent recruitment. These schools were selected to broadly match the characteristics of the observation schools where recruitment gaps were most apparent, ensuring that the additional recruitment did not skew the overall profile of the sample. These 2 schools were not included in the observation phase but were engaged solely to facilitate access to a more diverse range of parents for interviews and focus groups.

Overall, the expression of interest survey received 152 responses across 10 schools. In the survey, parents were asked to indicate whether they wished to take part in an in-depth interview, a focus group, both or if they had no preference. They also provided data on free breakfast club usage status, employment status, and free school meals (FSM) eligibility, which were the primary sampling criteria. They were also asked about ethnicity, whether their child had special educational needs or a disability (SEND), and family composition, which were the secondary sampling criteria.

In total, 43 parents took part in the qualitative research across 26 in-depth interviews and 4 focus groups. Of these, 29 were free breakfast club users and 14 were non-users. The table below provides a full breakdown of the achieved sample.

Table 3: Parent sample characteristics for both focus groups and interviews

Characteristic	Breakdown¹⁴
Free breakfast club usage	Users (29); Non-users (14)
Employment status	Full-time (18); Part-time (8); Not working or in education/training (11)
FSM eligibility	FSM eligible (20)
Family size	1 child (12); 2 or more children (27)
Ethnicity	White (29); Asian or Asian British (4); Black, Black British, Caribbean or African (3)
Gender	Female (35); Male (4)
Child with SEND	Yes (12)

Data collection

Observations of free breakfast clubs were conducted by 2 researchers using a structured observation grid, with notes reviewed and organised promptly following each visit. Before

¹⁴ Based on demographic data provided by participants, excluding those with missing information

each observation, researchers held informal conversations with breakfast club staff to understand what to expect from the session and followed up with further informal conversations afterwards to clarify anything observed during the visit.

Interviews and focus groups with parents were semi-structured, lasting approximately 45 minutes for interviews and 60 minutes for focus groups. These were conducted either online or in person. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed with participants' consent. Immediately following each session, researchers completed a brief fieldwork notes document capturing initial impressions and any observations not easily conveyed through transcription alone, such as body language or group dynamics.

Analysis

Analysis was structured around a deductive coding framework, with an analysis grid developed in advance to cover the key themes and questions required to address the research objectives. An inductive element was built in through an additional column to capture themes identified during analysis that were not anticipated at the outset. Moderators were asked to complete transcription and populate the analysis grid within the week following each fieldwork session.

Throughout the fieldwork period, the research team held weekly meetings to discuss emerging findings, identify any new themes identified under the inductive column, and ensure these were incorporated consistently across the grid. Interview, focus group, and observation data were then entered into a thematic framework organised by research question.

Analysis proceeded in 2 stages. In the first stage, data was triangulated within each school, comparing findings across observations, interviews, and focus groups to identify converging and diverging themes, and to validate practices reported by parents against what was observed in practice. In the second stage, a cross-case analysis was conducted across all 8 schools to identify patterns and commonalities, as well as findings that were more context specific. This approach allowed the research to build a comprehensive picture of how free breakfast clubs operate in practice whilst capturing the range of experiences across different school contexts.

Parent survey

Recruitment and implementation

A census approach was adopted for the parent survey; whereby individualised survey links were distributed to all EA schools to share with their parent communities. This approach was selected to maximise the number of responses and enable robust analysis across subgroups including parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds, parents of children with SEND, and families across different regions.

This survey was administered online and designed to be accessible on any device, including mobile phones. Participants in the parent survey were entered into a free prize draw, with 3 prizes of £100 vouchers available.

To support schools in promoting the survey, ready-to-use materials were provided including posters and QR codes, which could be displayed around the school or shared through existing communication channels such as newsletters and school apps. Fieldwork ran from 2 March to 30 March 2026. The questionnaire took an average of 11.5 minutes to complete.

Sample descriptives

A total of 5,487 parents and carers from 321 schools responded to the parent survey, representing a 42% school response rate. Of these, 3,514 were free breakfast club users (69%) and 1,973 were non-users (31%). Non-users included those who had never attended breakfast clubs, those whose children used to attend but no longer did, and parents who reported that their school did not offer a breakfast club. Responses were received from all 9 regions of England, ranging from 7% of the sample living in the East of England and South West to 15% of the sample living in London.

Table 4: EA parent survey sample characteristics

Characteristic	Detail ¹⁵
FSM eligibility	40% (n=2,194) were eligible for free school meals
Gender	90% (n=4,920) were women 10% (n=530) were men
Employment	38% (n=2,041) were in full-time employment, 18% (n=986) were working part-time 16% (n=832) were not working
Working pattern	37% (n=1,655) in part-time work 37% (n=1,684) in standard hours 12% (n=544) in staggered hours 9% (n=419) in compressed hours
Household size	8% (n=428) less than 3 people in their household 23% (n=1,260) 3 people in their household 43% (n=2,336) 4 people in their household 26% (n=1,431) 5 or more people in their household
Household structure	24% (n=1,285) were single parent/carers households 73% (n=3,961) were 2 parent/carers households
Children with SEND	16% (n=493) had a child with SEND 10% (n=295) awaiting a diagnosis

¹⁵ Based on demographic data provided by participants, percentages exclude those with missing information or prefer not to say.

Characteristic	Detail ¹⁵
Ethnicity	28% (n=1524) identified as having an ethnicity other than English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, or British ¹⁶
Age	1% (n=53) aged under 25 7% (n=377) aged 25 to 29 52% (n=2,829) aged 30 to 39 36% (n=1,984) aged 40 to 49 4% (n=214) aged over 50
Area	11% (n=623) were from the East Midlands 9% (n=502) were from the East of England 15% (n=807) were from London 8% (n=414) were from the North East 13% (n=729) were from the North West 9% (n=491) were from the South East 8% (n=458) were from the South West 13% (n=696) were from the West Midlands 14% (n=767) were from Yorkshire and the Humber
Income before tax	23% (n=1,121) with a household income of less than £25,000 30% (n=1,466) with a household income of £26,000 to 51,999 28% (n=1,337) with a household income of £52,000 to £99,999 11% (n=517) with a household income of £100,000 or above

Weighting & analysis

The parent survey data was weighted to ensure results were representative of the EA school population. Weighting was calibrated against 4 school-level characteristics: region, school size, proportion of pupils eligible for FSM, and proportion of pupils with SEND. Region and school size were applied as interlocking weights. This information was drawn from the DfE's Get Information about Schools (GIAS)¹⁷ database and grouped by quartiles. The final weight was calculated based on the number of pupils per school, rather than the number of schools, to account for variation in school size.

Limitations

The findings from this study should be interpreted in light of several methodological limitations.

Schools that took part in the qualitative strand opted in to the research, and those that chose to participate may differ systematically from those that did not, for example, being more confident in their delivery of free breakfast clubs or more engaged with research generally. The findings from the qualitative strand should therefore not be read as

¹⁶ The percentages of each ethnic group has not been specified here as they are low and usually 1% or less

¹⁷ Department for Education. Get Information about Schools (GIAS). <https://get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/>

representative of all EA schools but instead as offering insight into the experiences, perspectives, and practices among the schools included in the sample.

As schools were given advance notice of observations, there is a risk that the sessions observed were not fully representative of typical practice. Staff and pupils may have adjusted their behaviour in response to the presence of a researcher, which may have resulted in a different picture of delivery than is usually the case.

As with all research of this nature, there is a risk of positivity bias in participants' accounts. Parents may have presented their experiences of free breakfast clubs in a more favourable light, particularly in the presence of researchers. Where possible, findings from interviews and focus groups were triangulated with observational data to mitigate this risk.

Finally, whilst the EA parent survey achieved a strong response rate, the sample skewed towards women, with men accounting for only 10% of respondents. Findings from the survey should be interpreted with this in mind, as the views and experiences of fathers and male carers may be underrepresented.

4 Findings

The findings from this mixed-methods research across 321 EA schools reveal how free, universal breakfast clubs are being delivered in practice, how pupils and families engage with the provision, and the perceived impacts on pupils and parents.

The findings are organised to address the study's research questions across 6 interconnected areas. The first section examines how schools are currently delivering the free breakfast clubs, and the second section investigates how pupils engage with the breakfast club environment.

The third section contextualises the breakfast club within family morning routines, establishing how the provision fits within existing household patterns and childcare arrangements. The fourth section explores parents' attitudes and experiences, while fifth identifies barriers and enablers to engagement, distinguishing between families who choose not to use the provision and those who face practical obstacles, whilst examining what factors might encourage greater uptake.

The final section documents the perceived impacts of breakfast clubs across multiple domains - from pupils' emotional wellbeing and social development to household finances and parental employment opportunities. Throughout, the perspectives of parents, pupils, and school staff are woven together to provide a comprehensive picture of how free breakfast clubs operate and are experienced in practice.

4.1 Schools' current delivery models

This chapter examines how EA schools are delivering free breakfast clubs in practice, exploring the physical environments, food provision, staffing arrangements, and operational logistics of implementation. Evidence from observations across 8 schools reveals considerable flexibility in delivery approaches, with schools adapting spaces, service models and supervision styles to meet their specific contexts and pupil needs. While approaches vary, all observed schools maintain calm, child-centred environments that promote pupil autonomy and smooth transitions into the school day.

Physical spaces and environments

Multipurpose space arrangements

Schools varied in how they set up spaces for breakfast club provision, with most adopting multipurpose spaces that balance practical constraints with pupil needs. The majority of observed schools used 2 separate areas, one dedicated to eating (typically set up in the canteen or gymnasium) and another for activities (often the hall or playground). This dual-space model allowed schools to create distinct zones for different aspects of the breakfast club experience.

Figure 1: School using the gymnasium for free breakfast club provision



The way pupils moved between these spaces varied across schools. In some settings, pupils could move freely between eating and activity areas according to their preferences. In others, staff managed these transitions more formally, with pupils requiring permission or adult supervision to move between spaces. These different approaches appeared to reflect practical considerations such as the distance between spaces and the age profile of attending pupils.

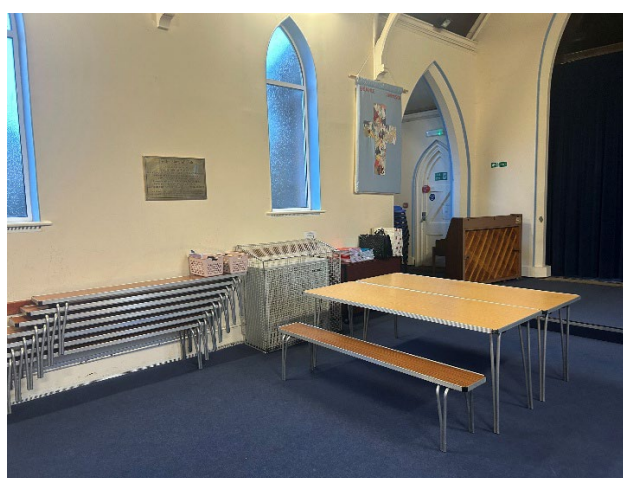
Not all schools adopted the dual-space model. Some operated their entire breakfast club provision within a single dedicated room, creating different zones within one space. In cases where school facilities were insufficient, schools rented additional spaces such as nearby church halls.

Across all settings, schools provided sufficient seating for attending pupils, however, in schools using smaller rooms, there was noticeably less space for pupils to move around freely during the breakfast club session.

Figure 2: School using one space for all free breakfast club activities



Figure 3: School using rented church hall for free breakfast club provision



Access to hygiene facilities differed across schools. Some schools benefited from sinks located either within the main breakfast club room or in immediately adjacent bathrooms, enabling pupils to wash hands independently. However, in other settings, pupils had to wait for staff to escort them to bathroom facilities.

Creating inclusive environments for SEND pupils

Several mainstream schools offered provisions specifically designed for smaller groups of pupils who needed quieter, less overwhelming environments. In some schools, these were offered as different rooms. Where space allowed within the main breakfast club area itself, some schools established quieter zones enabling pupils with SEND to remain part of the broader free breakfast club community whilst having access to calmer spaces when needed. Some schools also provided access to sensory rooms, though it was not always clear whether these were routinely available during free breakfast club hours. It is worth noting that these were the accommodations that were visible to the researchers observing the club. It is possible other accommodations were in place that were not obvious to the researchers.

Managing capacity and flow

Observed schools generally demonstrated effective capacity management, with observed attendance numbers closely aligning with free breakfast club staff's predictions, suggesting that most had established stable patterns of use.

The approach to predicting pupil attendance varied. Parents at some schools described a pre-booking system, requiring parents to indicate planned attendance the day in advance. Other parents indicated their school runs a drop-in approach. The registration system employed did not seem to affect the predictability of numbers. Both schools that operated a pre-booking system and those who allowed drop-in attendance could plan food quantities and staffing according to the number of anticipated pupils.

Informal conversations with free breakfast club staff indicated that seasonal and weekly patterns affected attendance across schools. Several schools reported lower attendance during winter months, which staff attributed to the additional challenges families faced in reaching school during periods of heavy rain or cold weather. This reported seasonal variation was particularly pronounced in schools serving rural communities or those with limited local transport links. Staff had also noticed weekly patterns, with multiple schools noting that Fridays typically saw lower breakfast club attendance, possibly reflecting different family routines at the end of the working week or parents' varied work patterns. This is also supported by parent survey data, which showed that parents report using the breakfast club least on Fridays (26%).

Despite these variations, all observed schools maintained sufficient physical capacity to accommodate attending pupils, with no instances observed of overcrowding or pupils being turned away due to space limitations. This suggests that schools have successfully calibrated their physical provision to meet typical demand, whilst maintaining flexibility to accommodate unexpected fluctuations in attendance.

Food provision and service models

Range and variety of food offerings

The majority of observed schools provided a range of foods that included both hot and cold options. Hot offerings typically included beans on toast and porridge, whilst cold options included various branded and unbranded cereals with milk. Fresh fruit featured prominently across schools, with bananas, apples, oranges and grapes commonly available. Bread-based items such as toast, crumpets, bagels and crackers were standard offerings, accompanied by a selection of spreads including butter and jam. There were observed instances where schools served foods that were not compliant with school food standards, namely peanut butter and chocolate spread.

Figure 4: Picture map of food choices in special school



Figure 5: Different food options within a free breakfast club provision



Figure 6: Different food options within a free breakfast club provision



The variety of food offerings enabled pupils to exercise choice according to their preferences. Pupils could select between different types of food, from cereals and toast to hot options (where available). They could also decide what and how much they wanted to eat. Even in the one school where food options were limited to cereal only, pupils could still exercise choice between three different cereal types, maintaining some element of pupil autonomy within resource constraints.

School resources appeared to affect the range and types of food served. Schools with access to kitchen facilities within or near the free breakfast club space offered more extensive hot food options, whilst those with more limited facilities who were operating from spaces such as their gymnasium focused on simpler items that required minimal preparation, such as cereal.

Figure 7: Kitchen facilities in a free breakfast club provision



Service approaches

Schools employed mixed service models that balanced efficiency, hygiene requirements, and opportunities for pupil independence. Food preparation timing varied according to food type and practical requirements. Some items, particularly fruit and cold options, were laid out in advance for pupils to access as they arrived, promoting independence and reducing queuing. Other items underwent simple pre-preparation, with cereal being pre-portioned into bowls to speed service during the busy morning period.

Hot food items, such as beans and sausage sandwiches,¹⁸ were typically prepared before pupils arrived and served on request, with staff consistently serving these directly to pupils to maintain control over portion sizes and ensure safe handling of heated items. For cold food, schools demonstrated more variation in their approach - some allowing pupils complete autonomy in self-serving, whilst others positioned staff to portion or support pupils in serving themselves. This division between self-service and staff-served items reflected both practical and safety considerations whilst maintaining opportunities for pupil choice where appropriate.

At the end of the club, researchers observed minimal food waste, especially for pre-prepared items like beans on toast. This suggests that schools have developed knowledge of their pupils' preferences and consumption patterns. Additionally, staff were seen managing surplus by offering remaining items such as buttered toast to pupils as they prepare to leave.

Meeting dietary and medical needs

Schools were observed accommodating pupils' dietary requirements and medical needs, with specialist settings demonstrating the most comprehensive approaches. Pre-booking systems, where used, typically incorporated questions about pupils' allergies, dietary requirements, and medical needs such as diabetes. This information enabled schools to plan appropriate provision and ensure staff awareness of individual needs during free breakfast club sessions.

The special school observed demonstrated the highest level of individualised support, maintaining detailed logs of dietary and medical information readily accessible during breakfast club hours. This included complex medical needs, with observations capturing specialised support for a pupil requiring tube feeding, where food was pre-prepared specifically for their requirements and administered by trained staff.

¹⁸ Please note that in the new school food standards, sausage sandwiches will not be compliant.

Figure 8: Tube feeding material prepared in special school



Staffing and supervision

Staff to pupil ratios and deployment models

Schools demonstrated variation in staffing levels, reflecting differences in provision size, pupil needs, and operational models. Observed staff-to-pupil ratios¹⁹ ranged from 1:5 to 1:13 across mainstream settings, with most schools operating at ratios between 1:10 and 1:13. The special school used a 1:1 support ratio that ensured staff could meet the individual needs of their pupils during breakfast provision.

All schools allocated specific staff members to food service responsibilities, ensuring consistent and safe food handling throughout the breakfast session. Beyond this core function, other staff focused on supervising activities, managing transitions between spaces, and taking attendance.

The special school observed offered the most extensive support, including one-to-one staff support, visual aids and communication tools such as picture maps of food choices, communication boards, and devices to help non-verbal pupil express their needs. Medical support was also available, including specialist assistance for pupils requiring tube feeding.

Managing behaviour and creating positive atmospheres

Across all observed schools, free breakfast clubs operated with visibly settled atmospheres requiring minimal behaviour management interventions. Pupils demonstrated high levels of self-regulation, playing and interacting with peers with limited need for adult intervention. Staff maintained general, distant supervision that allowed pupils autonomy whilst ensuring safety. This light-touch approach appeared to foster pupil independence

¹⁹ These findings describe the staffing arrangements used by participating schools and should not be interpreted as recommended minimum or maximum staffing levels. Staffing requirements vary according to factors such as pupil age, attendance numbers, individual support needs, and the format of provision.

and created a relaxed, informal atmosphere distinct from the more structured classroom environment that follows.

The success of this approach appeared to rest on well-established routines that pupils understand and follow independently. Researchers observed pupils following consistent patterns of behaviour upon arrival at free breakfast clubs. Pupils entered the free breakfast club space and immediately placed coats and bags in designated areas without prompting from staff. They then moved directly to either the food service area or activity stations, demonstrating familiarity with the layout and available options. When staff signalled the end of the session, pupils responded by tidying materials, putting away games, or rolling up mats before transitioning to their classrooms.

When staff intervention was required, it took the form of gentle guidance rather than formal discipline. Observations captured staff using soft prompts such as asking whether a pupil would like to use a spoon when eating with their hands or saying 'no thank you' to redirect unwanted behaviour. This approach maintained a welcoming, non-punitive atmosphere whilst still establishing appropriate boundaries. Staff modelled calm, patient interactions that appeared to influence the overall tone of the provision.

Delivery logistics

Registration approaches

Attendance tracking methods varied in formality and purpose. Some schools marked attendance on arrival using Excel spreadsheets or paper lists, with staff often knowing pupils' names without needing to ask. Others conducted more formal registration during the session, calling out names and marking attendance on prepared registers.

Transition from paid to free provision

Some schools offered paid provision prior to the free breakfast club. This would usually take place 30 minutes before the free breakfast club, serving the same food options to a smaller cohort of families who required childcare from an earlier start time. When the free provision period began, researchers observed a sudden influx of pupils arriving simultaneously. This created a distinct transition point that staff had to manage carefully by overseeing pupils' movement through the breakfast club space, including supporting them with taking bags and coats off in designated spaces, and offering food or activities.

Observations showed that despite the different funding models and potentially different user groups, the experience remained consistent across paid and free provision. The same food options, activities, spaces, and staff support were available regardless of whether families were paying for the service or accessing it free of charge. This consistency ensured that no stigma was attached to either form of provision and that all pupils received equal experiences regardless of their families' financial arrangements.

Transition to the school day

Schools used varied but clear strategies to manage the transition from free breakfast club to the formal school day. All schools used distinct signals to indicate the approaching end of the free breakfast club, though the nature and timing of these signals varied. Some schools employed verbal announcements, whilst others used acoustic signals such as whistles, tambourines, or the standard school bell. Some schools provided dual warnings, helping pupils gradually prepare for the transition by signalling first that the end is approaching, then that it has arrived. Others gave a single 5-minute warning, whilst some staff took a more individualised approach, encouraging slower eaters to finish whilst allowing others to begin tidying.

Pupil involvement in tidying and reset activities varied considerably across schools. Some schools operated on an 'everyone helps' model, with each pupil allocated specific responsibilities such as rolling up activity mats or clearing tables. Others emphasised individual responsibility, requiring each pupil to clear their own plate and chair. Several schools specifically delegated responsibilities to older pupils, who took charge of clearing games and tablecloths, fostering leadership and responsibility. In contrast, some schools, particularly special schools and specialist provisions, handled all clearing tasks through staff.

The actual transition into classrooms followed different models that reflected schools' physical layouts and teaching approaches. Some used staggered exits, with pupils leaving by year group or key stage, while others released all pupils simultaneously. Several schools had introduced a 'soft classroom start', allowing pupils 10 minutes in their classrooms before formal lessons began. This buffer period enabled pupils to settle, organise their belongings, and transition mentally from the informal breakfast club environment to structured learning activities.

Summary and recommendations

The observations demonstrate that successful breakfast club delivery does not depend on a single model, but rather on schools' ability to adapt provision to their specific contexts whilst maintaining core principles of calm, child-centred environments. Schools showed flexibility in using available spaces, managing food service, and deploying staff, with approaches ranging from dual-space models to single rooms, from self-service to staff-served food, and from formal pre-registration to drop-in arrangements. Despite this variation, all schools achieved settled atmospheres with minimal behaviour management needs, smooth transitions into the school day, and effective accommodation of diverse pupil needs including SEND. The consistency observed between paid and free provision, combined with schools' ability to predict and manage attendance patterns, suggests that the free breakfast club model is both scalable and sustainable across different school contexts.

Recommendations for programme implementation

- allow flexibility within quality standards: Policy frameworks should avoid prescriptive requirements about physical spaces or service models, instead setting quality standards that schools can meet through varied approaches suited to their facilities and communities.
- support infrastructure adaptations: Funding should recognise that some schools may need to rent additional spaces or adapt existing facilities, particularly where school buildings lack suitable multipurpose areas.
- establish appropriate staffing guidance: The observed ratios of 1:10 to 1:13 in mainstream settings appear effective, though schools should have flexibility to adjust based on pupil needs, with special schools likely requiring higher staffing levels.
- ensure equity across funding models: Where schools offer both paid and free provision, guidance should continue to emphasise maintaining consistent quality and experience to avoid creating stigma for those attending the free breakfast club.

Recommendations for evaluation

- observe delivery during set up phase: It would be useful to understand schools' experiences during earlier phases of setting up the breakfast club, particularly for schools that previously had no before-school provision or ran different models from the free breakfast club (such as childcare or food only models).
- examine inclusion practices: Further observations and staff interviews should investigate both visible and invisible inclusion strategies, particularly for pupils with SEND, to understand what enables successful participation across different school settings.

4.2 Pupil engagement with the free breakfast club

This chapter explores how pupils engage with the free breakfast club offer, including the food provision, activities, and social interactions within the breakfast club environment. Evidence from observations across 8 schools reveals that pupils exercise considerable autonomy in how they use the provision, with pupils making independent choices about what to eat, which activities to engage with, and how to interact socially. The breakfast club environment is characterised by a calm, settled atmosphere with minimal adult intervention, creating a distinct space between home and the formal school day. While engagement patterns vary, observations consistently show high levels of pupil enthusiasm and purposeful participation.

The free breakfast club experience

Ethos: Pupil autonomy and calm environment

A notable feature of the breakfast clubs that were observed was opportunities for pupil agency, which distinguished them from more structured elements of the school day. Pupils were observed exercising meaningful choice across multiple aspects of their breakfast club experience, from selecting what to eat from available options to deciding which activities to engage with and when.

In some schools, pupils were observed drawing or colouring whilst simultaneously eating breakfast, while in others, pupils finished their food before moving to activity areas. Some pupils rushed directly to the food provision area upon arrival, whilst others went straight to games or activity stations without eating at all. Several pupils were observed engaging solely with activities from the outset, only approaching the food area when prompted by staff or not eating at all during the session. Older pupils and those who said they had eaten at home were particularly likely to spend the entire session on activities and socialising rather than eating.

This autonomy extended to social choices, with pupils left free to determine whether to sit with friends, engage individually with activities, or move between different social configurations as they wish.

The environment consistently demonstrated a notably calm, settled atmosphere. Pupils were observed managing themselves with minimal adult intervention, creating a peaceful setting where morning transitions could occur at a gentler pace.

Researchers observed staff maintaining general, distant supervision rather than close monitoring of pupils' activities. Pupils were seen playing and interacting with minimal adult input, with staff positioned around the room but not actively directing behaviour. Throughout the observed sessions, voices remained at conversational levels, with no or minimal instances of staff raising their voices or implementing formal discipline procedures. Through interviews and focus groups, parents of children with SEND particularly noted valuing this calm environment.

Engagement with food provision

Pupils demonstrated generally high engagement with food provision across all observed schools, though patterns of consumption and preference varied considerably. Pupils showed genuine enthusiasm for breakfast offerings, eagerly approaching food service areas upon arrival, singing songs about food, and visibly enjoying eating.

Food preferences varied widely among pupils, with observations revealing no single dominant choice within a school's offering.

Not all pupils engaged equally with food provision, with some choosing not to eat at all during breakfast club. Observations identified older pupils and those who have already eaten at home as more likely to use breakfast club time purely for social and activity engagement rather than food consumption. Schools accommodated this variation without pressure, with staff taking gentle, non-coercive approaches to food provision. Staff were observed offering food to pupils but accepting refusal without comment or further encouragement. When serving, staff asked pupils what they would like rather than placing food in front of them automatically. Researchers observed staff supporting pupils in serving themselves when requested but not insisting pupils take food if they moved directly to activities.

This flexibility indicated that breakfast clubs served multiple purposes for pupils and families beyond nutrition.

Social interactions and peer relationships

Observations revealed flexible opportunities for socialising within the breakfast club setting, with some pupils sitting in established groups for the whole session, whilst others moved between individual and group engagement. Pupils appeared equally comfortable in either social setting. There were no observed instances of forced social interaction or exclusion.

Age and gender appeared to influence social patterns in some schools with pupils tending to cluster by year group or gender. However, in some schools, social groups had no apparent demographic groupings. Older pupils commonly grouped together for games and conversation, whilst younger pupils engaged in parallel play or sought support from older peers when engaging with activities.

Peer support emerged as a notable feature of observed breakfast club social dynamics. Pupils spontaneously helped one another without adult prompting, sharing resources such as pens and worksheets, and assisting with practical tasks. Observations captured older pupils helping younger pupils with walking to the bathroom when requested by staff.

Pupils in special schools were more likely to engage in parallel activities such as simultaneous drawing or colouring rather than direct peer-to-peer interaction. Staff facilitated these interactions, supporting social engagement whilst respecting pupils' different communication needs and preferences.

Participation in activities

Schools provided diverse activity options that catered to different interests, energy levels, and developmental stages, creating engaging environments beyond food provision. Indoor activities formed the core offering across all schools, comprising arts and crafts opportunities such as colouring and drawing, board and card games, active play options like ball games in the gymnasium or table tennis, and construction activities with toys and

building blocks. This range ensured pupils could select activities matching their morning mood and energy levels, from quiet creative pursuits to more physically engaging options.

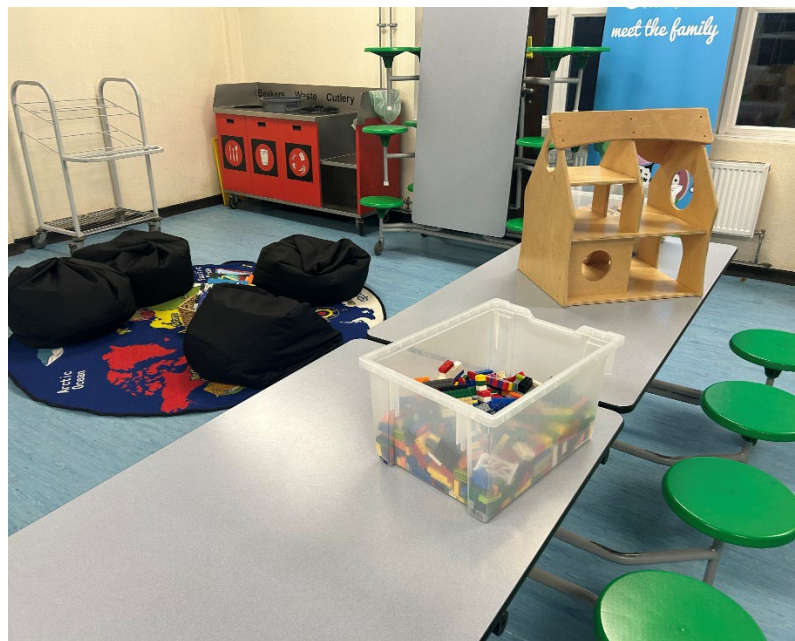
Figure 9: Different activity options within a free breakfast club provision



Figure 10: Different activity options within a free breakfast club provision



Figure 11: Different activity options within a free breakfast club provision



Outdoor activities supplemented indoor provision in schools where facilities and weather permitted, with playground access offering additional space for physical activity and free play. However, the availability of outdoor options remained weather-dependent, with schools tending to restrict access during rain or cold conditions. This variability meant outdoor provision could not be guaranteed as a consistent element of breakfast club experience, though when available it provided valuable opportunities for physical activity before the classroom day began.

The organisation of activities reflected child-led, unstructured approaches that prioritised pupil choice over adult-directed engagement. Some schools created clearly separated

activity zones, with designated tables for colouring, mat areas for games and reading corners for books, enabling pupils to navigate independently between different activity types. Others arranged different tables for different activities, creating distinct spaces whilst maintaining visual connection across the provision.

The timing of activity engagement varied both between schools and between individual pupils within schools. In some settings, activities occurred alongside eating, with pupils drawing whilst consuming breakfast. In others, pupils finished eating before moving to activities, creating a clearer sequence between breakfast and play. This flexibility allowed schools to accommodate different preferences, with some pupils prioritising play whilst others focused initially on eating.

Pupils demonstrated familiarity with available activities, moving confidently and independently to preferred options upon arrival or after eating. This familiarity suggested consistent provision that enabled pupils to develop routines and preferences over time.

The level of pupil engagement with activities appeared consistently high, with pupils rushing eagerly into breakfast club rooms and moving purposefully toward preferred activities. This enthusiasm indicates that activity provision met pupils' morning needs for play, creativity, and social interaction.

Summary and implications

The observations reveal that free breakfast clubs function as distinctive transitional spaces where pupils exercise autonomy over their morning experience, choosing how to balance food, activities, and social interaction according to their individual needs and preferences. The calm, child-led atmosphere with minimal adult intervention appears fundamental to the provision's appeal and effectiveness, creating an environment markedly different from both home and formal classroom settings. Pupils demonstrated high engagement levels precisely because the provision accommodates varied patterns of use - from those prioritising food to those seeking purely social or activity-based experiences. This flexibility and respect for pupil agency, combined with the gentle supervision approach, enabled free breakfast clubs to serve multiple functions simultaneously whilst maintaining their inclusive, welcoming character.

Recommendations for programme implementation

- prioritise pupil autonomy: Policy frameworks should continue to avoid prescriptive requirements about food consumption or structured activities, instead protecting the child-led nature that makes free breakfast clubs distinctive and effective.
- recognise breakfast clubs as multi-purpose provisions: Implementation guidance should continue to acknowledge that free breakfast clubs serve varied functions beyond nutrition - including social development, transition support, and activity provision - and that not all attending pupils will or should eat.

- support diverse activity provision: Schools should continue to be encouraged to offer varied activities catering to different energy levels and developmental stages, with flexibility for pupils to engage with these alongside or instead of eating.

Recommendations for evaluation

- include pupil voice methods: Given the centrality of pupil agency to successful provision, the evaluation should incorporate child-friendly methods to capture pupils' own perspectives of their breakfast club experiences.
- examine the 'soft start' mechanism: Further research should investigate how the calm, transitional nature of breakfast clubs supports school readiness and whether this contributes to downstream academic and behavioural outcomes.

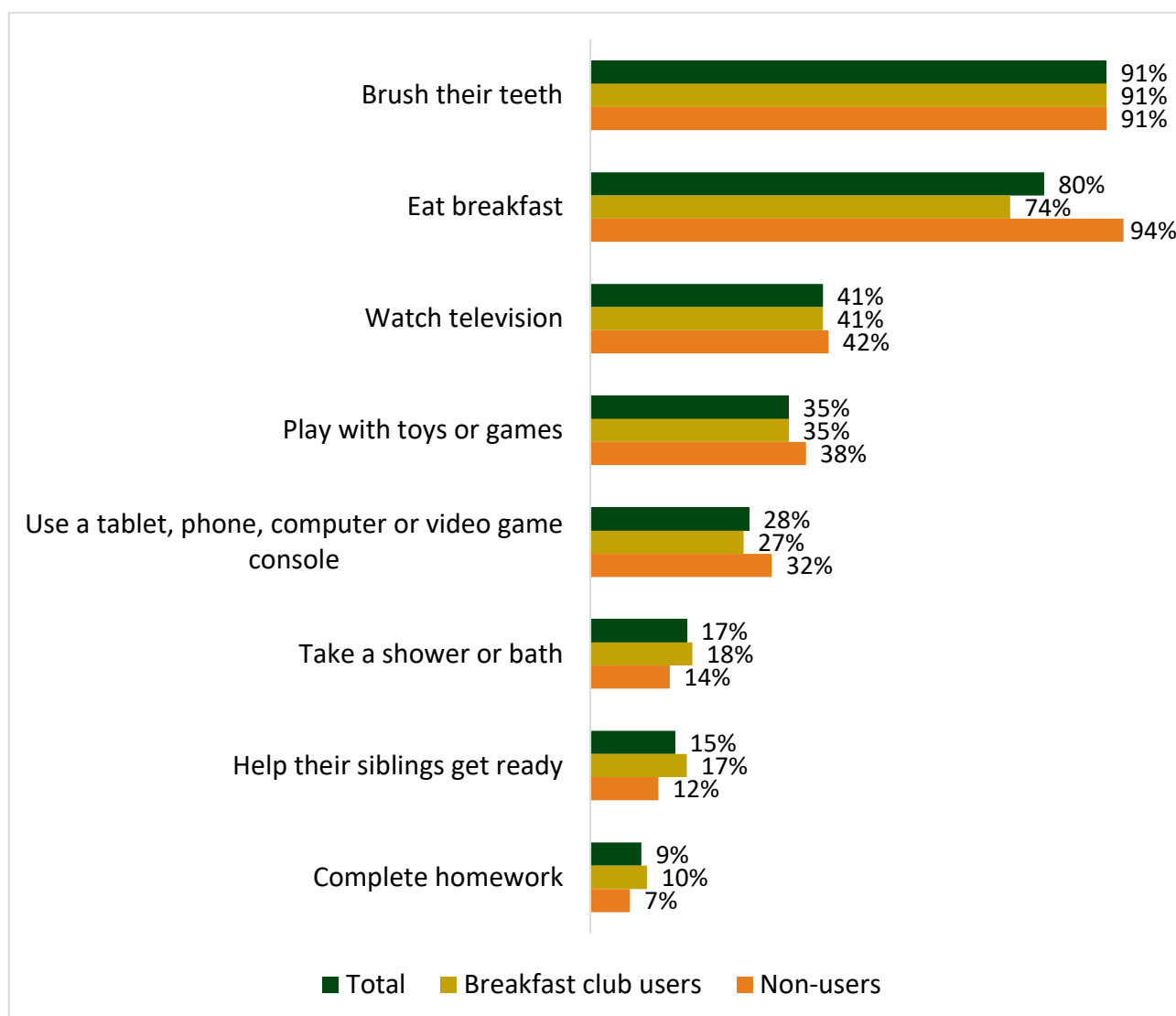
4.3 Understanding family morning routines

This chapter examines how the free breakfast club fits within families' existing school-day morning routines. Evidence shows that mornings typically involve practical preparation, breakfast, informal activities and childcare arrangements, and that the provision can shape where some pupils eat breakfast and how families manage time before school. While many families continue to have breakfast at home, evidence also suggests that the free breakfast club can provide before-school care for some parents and can be used flexibly across the week depending on work patterns, family preferences and practical arrangements.

Usual morning activities

Pupils' morning routines usually include essential tasks, breakfast and informal activities before they leave for school. Parent survey data shows that brushing teeth is the most common activity before school, which was reported by 91% of parents, followed by eating breakfast (80%). Other activities include watching television (41%), playing with toys or games (35%), using a tablet, phone, computer or games console (28%), taking a shower or bath (17%), helping siblings get ready (15%), and completing homework (9%).

Figure 12: What children typically do before going to school²⁰



Source: What does your child/children typically do before going to school? (Multi-select), Base: All respondents: 5,469, free breakfast club users: 3,577 non-users: 1,502

Interviewed parents describe these activities as part of a tightly managed routine. Mornings involve practical tasks such as getting children dressed, preparing food, packing bags and leaving the house on time.

Free breakfast club users and non-users report broadly similar morning activities. However, free breakfast club users are less likely than non-users to report their child eats breakfast before going to school (74% compared with 94%).²¹ They are also less likely to report that their child uses a tablet, phone, computer or games console before school

²⁰ This was a multi-select question, so responses may reflect different routines on different school days.

²¹ This was a multi-select question about activities their children typically do before school. Parents were allowed to select more than one option in order to reflect that morning routines may vary across different days of the week. Therefore, responses do not necessarily indicate that children eat breakfast both at home and at the free breakfast club on the same day. For example, a child may eat breakfast at home on some school days and at the free breakfast club on others.

(27% compared with 32%). These differences may reflect where and when activities take place on days when pupils attend the free breakfast club. They may also reflect wider differences between families who use the provision and those who do not.

Qualitative evidence suggests that, for some families, the free breakfast club changes the order and pace of the morning. Parents still need to get children ready for school, but the provision can reduce pressure around breakfast and leaving the house on time. Some parents also report a calmer start with less screen time.

“Bring them here [free breakfast club], ‘at 8 o’clock, no screen, no TV’.”
Parent, free breakfast club user

“It feels a lot more relaxed because we’re not rushing out the door.”
Parent, free breakfast club user

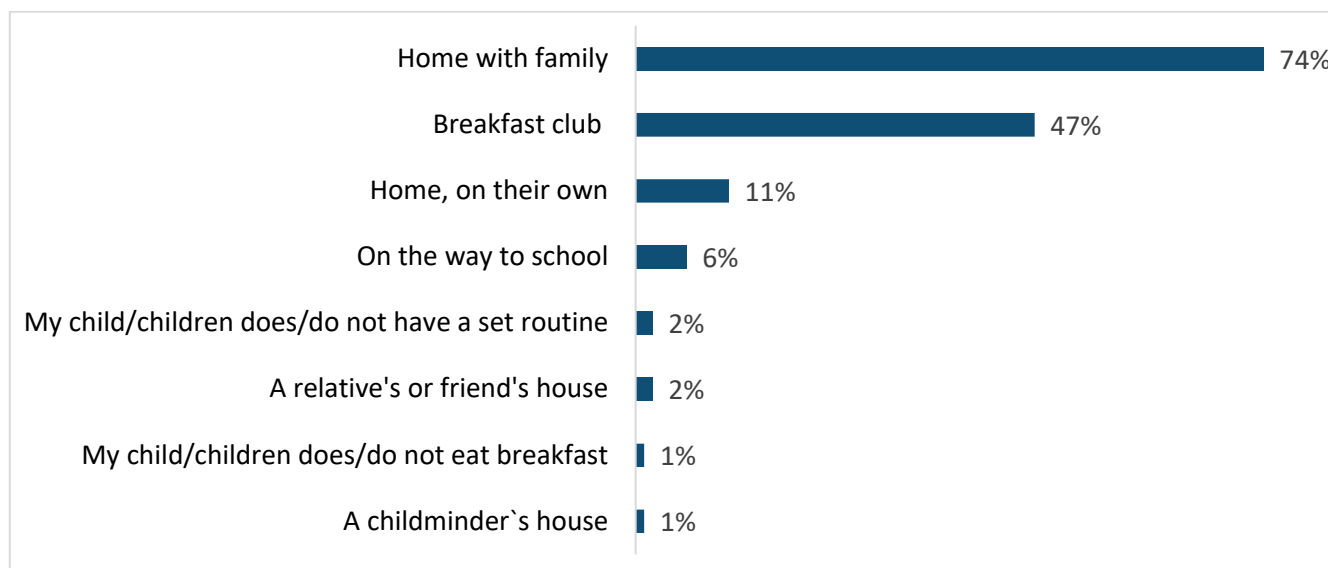
Section 4.6 explores the perceived effects of the provision on household routines in more detail.

Existing breakfast patterns

Breakfast at home remains central to many families’ school-day routines followed closely by using a breakfast club. Overall, three-quarters (74%) of parents report that their child usually has breakfast at home with family on school days.²² Nearly half (47%) say their child usually has breakfast at the free breakfast club. Smaller proportions report that their child usually has breakfast at home on their own (11%), on the way to school (6%) or without a set breakfast routine (2%).

²² Parents were allowed to select more than one option to reflect that morning routines may vary within a given week.

Figure 13: Where children usually have breakfast on school days²³



Source: Where does your child/children usually have breakfast on school days? (Multi-select), Base: All respondents: 5,469

Breakfast location differs by attendance status. Children who do not attend the free breakfast club are more likely to usually eat breakfast at home with family than current users (87% compared with 68%).

Some interviewed parents report spending less time preparing breakfast or encouraging children to eat before leaving home on days when they attend the free breakfast club. On days when children do not attend, breakfast at home can take longer and place more pressure on the morning routine. As one parent explains:

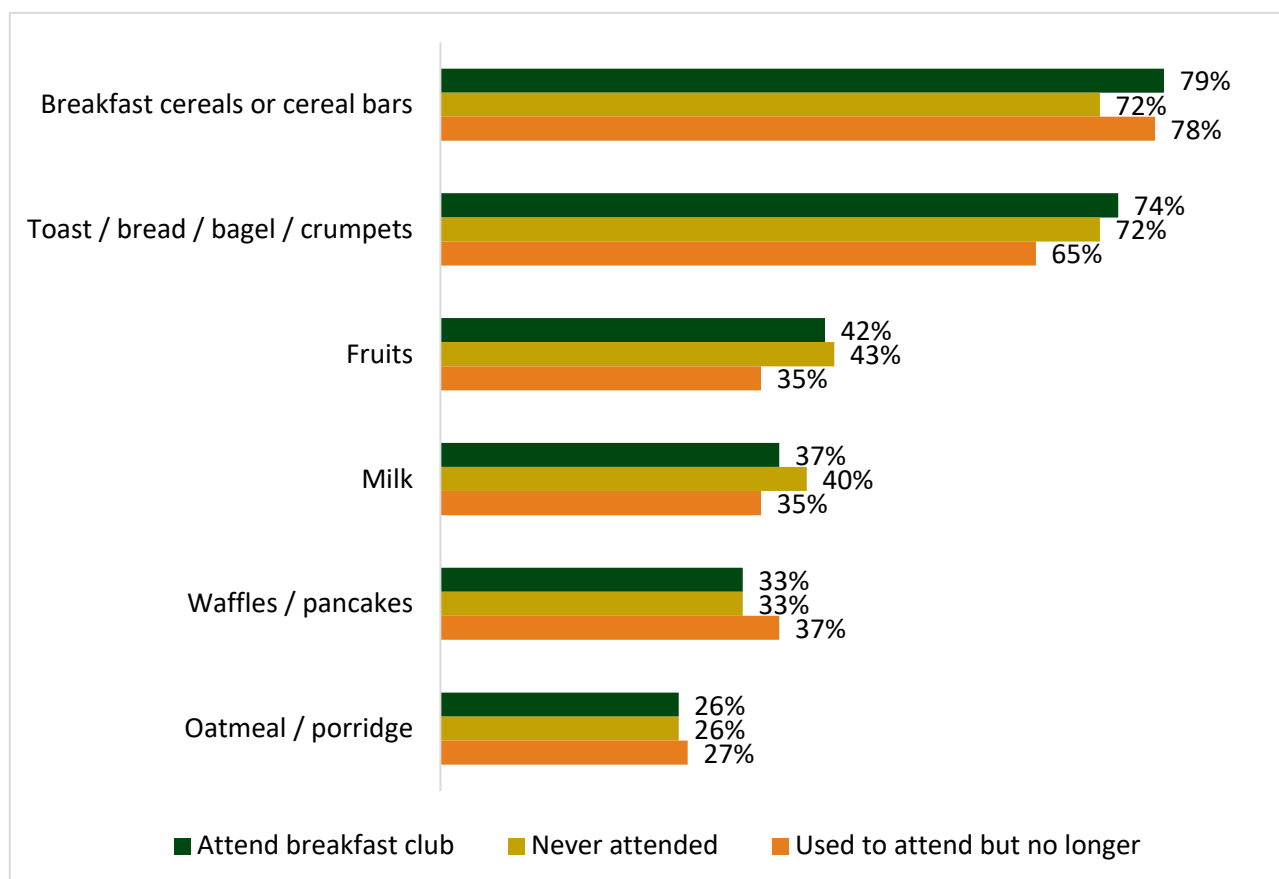
"Forcing them to eat at home, it takes me time."

Parent, free breakfast club user

Parents report broadly similar breakfast choices at home, regardless of free breakfast club attendance. Among children who attend free breakfast club, the most reported breakfast foods at home are breakfast cereals or cereal bars (79%) and toast, bread, bagels or crumpets (74%). These findings are similar to those for children who have never attended a free breakfast club.

²³ This was a multi-select question, so parents reporting use of paid breakfast club provision may also use free provision on some days or for part of the morning.

Figure 14: Types of food children usually have for breakfast at home, by breakfast club attendance²⁴



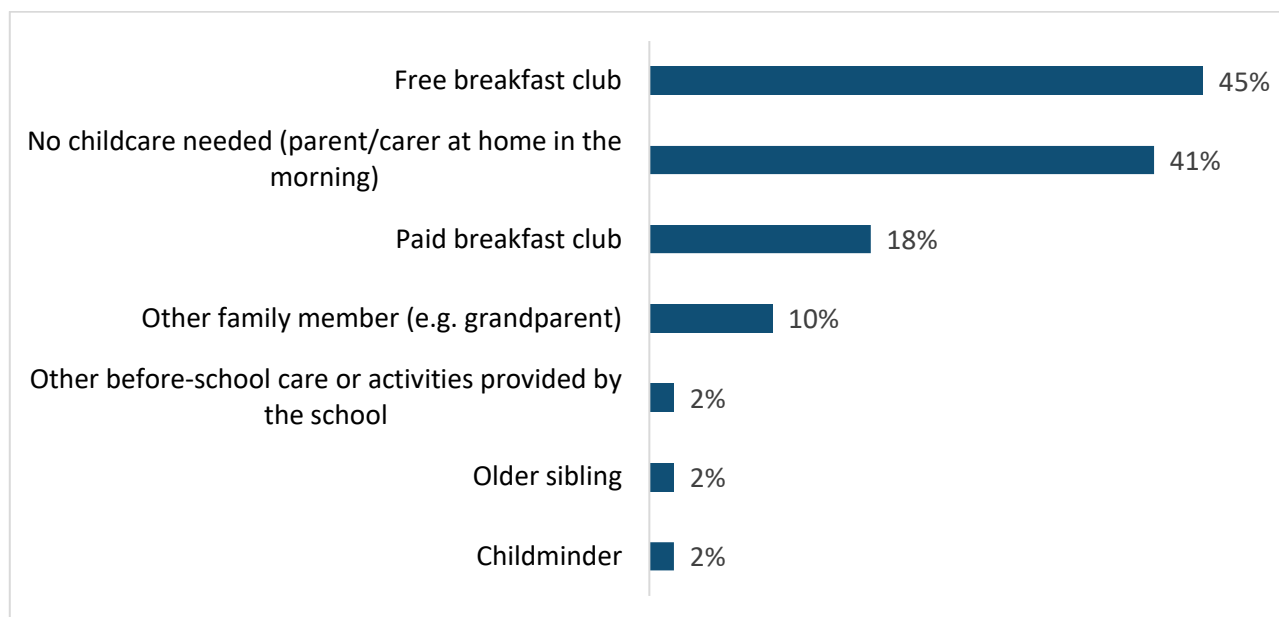
Source: What type of food does child/children usually have for breakfast when at home? (Multi-select) Base: All respondents whose children have breakfast: 5,047, attend breakfast club: 3,565, never attended breakfast club: 1,131, used to attend but no longer: 351

Current before-school care arrangements

Before-school care arrangements vary across families. Almost half of surveyed parents (45%) use the free breakfast club for before-school childcare. A similar proportion (41%) say that they do not need childcare because a parent or carer is at home in the morning. Smaller proportions use a paid breakfast club (18%) or another family member, such as a grandparent (10%). Other arrangements include before-school care or activities provided by the school (2%), an older sibling (2%), or a childminder (2%).

²⁴ This was a multi-select question, so parents may report multiple types of breakfast food served when they eat breakfast at home

Figure 15: Childcare arrangements mainly used before school²⁵



Source: What childcare arrangements do you mainly use before school? (Multi-select) Base: All respondents: 5,456

The reported need for before-school care varies by employment status. Two-thirds (66%) of parents who are not employed say that they do not need childcare before school because a parent or carer is at home. This compares with 28% of parents working full-time in salaried roles and 29% of those working full-time in hourly paid roles.

Attendance patterns show that the free breakfast club is used flexibly across the week. Among families using the provision, 44% report attendance on 5 days a week. Other families use it on selected days or report variable attendance. This reinforces the role of the free breakfast club as part of families' morning routines, while indicating that use is not always daily. Wider patterns of attendance, including variation by day of the week, are explored further in section 4.4.

Overall, the evidence shows that the free breakfast club sits within a wider set of family morning routines rather than replacing them entirely. Many pupils continue to have breakfast at home and families retain established routines around preparation, childcare and school drop-off. However, for some families, the provision changes where breakfast is eaten, reduces pressure around leaving the house, and provides a flexible source of before-school care that can be used in line with work patterns, family preferences and practical needs.

²⁵ This was a multi-select question, reflecting that childcare needs may vary by day and that some families may use both the free breakfast club and paid version on the same day.

4.4 Parents’ attitudes to and experiences of the free breakfast club

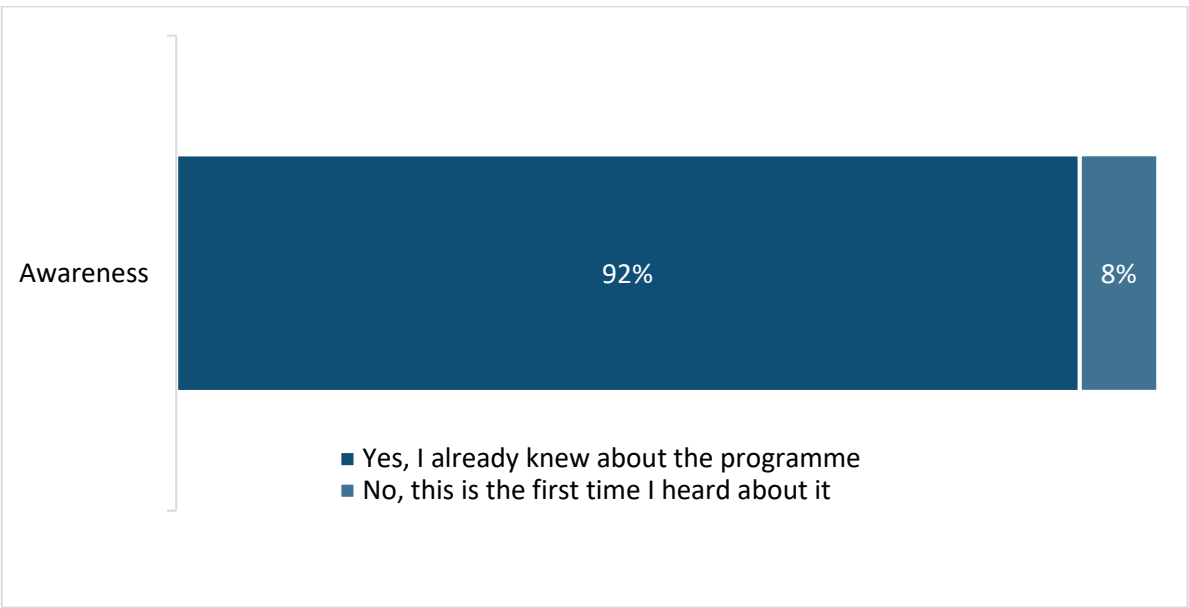
This section explores parents’ awareness and understanding of the free breakfast clubs, including how they discovered the provision, their understanding of eligibility and the offer, and patterns of attendance. It then delves into motivations for use and satisfaction levels with different aspects of the provision, including areas for improvement. Finally, it outlines the experiences of parents of children with SEND.

Awareness and understanding

How parents discover the provision

The majority of surveyed parents (92%) are aware that their child’s school runs a free breakfast club. Only 8% report not knowing about the programme before taking part in the survey.

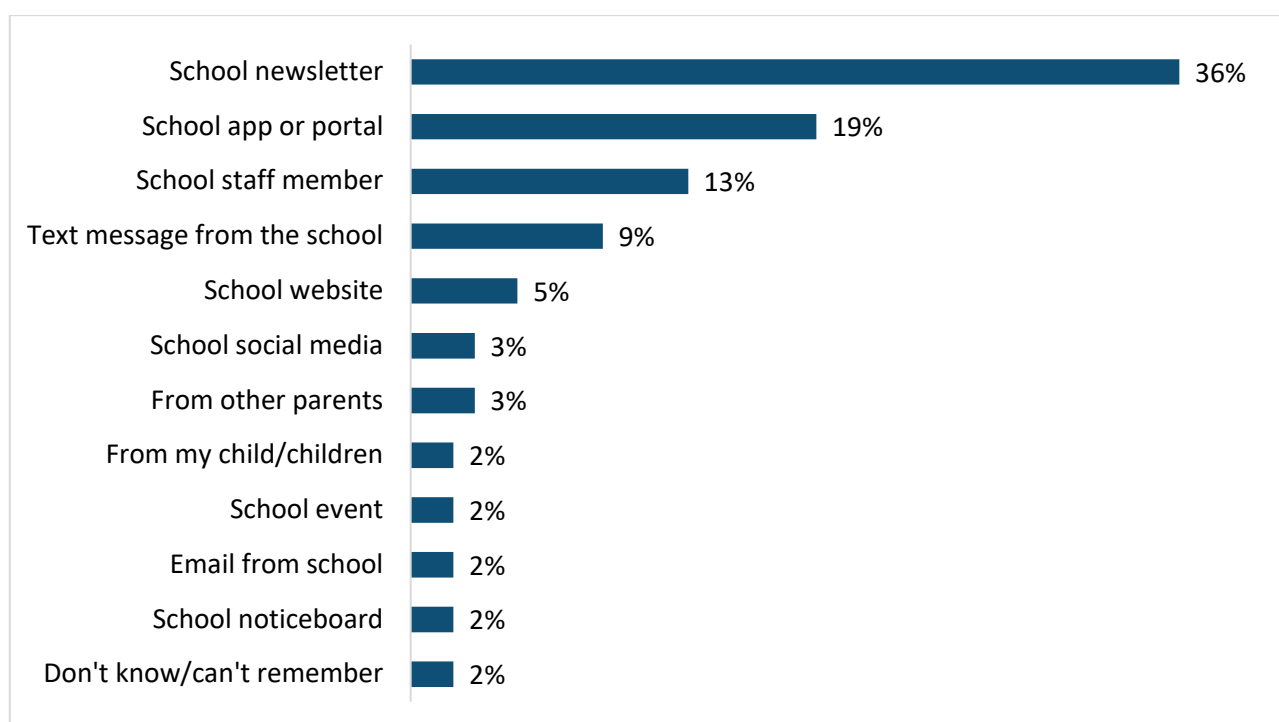
Figure 16: Awareness of the free breakfast club



Source: Before taking part in this survey, were you aware that your child/children’s school runs a free breakfast club? Base: All respondents: 5,456

Parents primarily learn about the free breakfast clubs through routine school communication channels. The school newsletter is the most common source, with over 1 in 3 (36%) parents reporting they first heard about the free breakfast club in their child’s school through this channel, followed by school apps or portals (19%) and direct communication from school staff members (13%).

Figure 17: How parents first heard about the free breakfast club at their child's school



Source: How did you first hear about the breakfast club at your child's school? Base: All respondents who attend a free breakfast club sometimes or regularly: 3,587

The importance of routine school communications in informing parents about the programme is supported by the interviews with parents. Parents report first hearing about the free breakfast club through official school communications, including newsletters, weekly emails, dedicated school communication apps, and direct conversations with teachers. Some parents learn about it during initial meetings with the headteacher when choosing a school for their child, while others are approached by staff who notice specific needs, such as parents waiting in the car park each morning.

"An email the school sent out saying obviously there was this new initiative. They explained what was happening in terms of the government initiative and then explained what it would look like at [school name]."

Parent, free breakfast club user

"The school do a lot of promoting of the breakfast club because they're keen to get a lot of people utilising it." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

Schools actively promote the free breakfast club through various channels and special promotional events. Parents say school apps are effective, facilitating easy sign-up and regular updates. However, some families say they remain unaware of the provision for months after joining the school.

"I'm quite new in this school, probably one year. So, I didn't know the school offered [a breakfast club]. [...] In the beginning I didn't ask them about any kind of breakfast and they didn't also communicate it with us."

Parent, free breakfast club non-user

Understanding eligibility and offer

Parents' understanding of the free breakfast club offer varies, including their awareness of the activities, environment and food provided. Some parents are able to describe specific activities organised by the school staff, having learned about them either from their child or through active communication from school staff. One example of an activity communicated to parents is the world menu initiative, in which pupils explore foods from different countries on designated days of the week. As part of this initiative, pupils are given a passport that can be stamped each day they attend.

"They get to try lots of different foods as well that they probably wouldn't. They did like a world menu. [...] So, they did like a different country each day." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

Some parents express a desire for more information about what their child does during the breakfast club. Parents also indicate that greater visibility of what the free breakfast club actually looks like in practice would help them feel more informed and confident about enrolling their child. When communication is successful, it often addresses specific parental concerns about work schedules or clarifies the universal nature of the free provision.

"I think I'd like to know what he's eaten because there's only five. He's quite good at telling stories so I think it'd be useful if they said what was on offer so at least, I could question him a little bit more about what did you have or if they could let us know what." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

"I think for me just a clearer structure of timetable and what they're getting. Maybe I have got that but I don't remember seeing what they have to eat or do. If I wanted to market a breakfast club I would want to know, want parents to know this is a safe environment, these are the times you can bring your child in, these are the details between gates opening at 8 and then closing at 10 past 8. That should have been clearer from the start. We found out over time which wasn't a problem but it could have been made more clear from the start." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

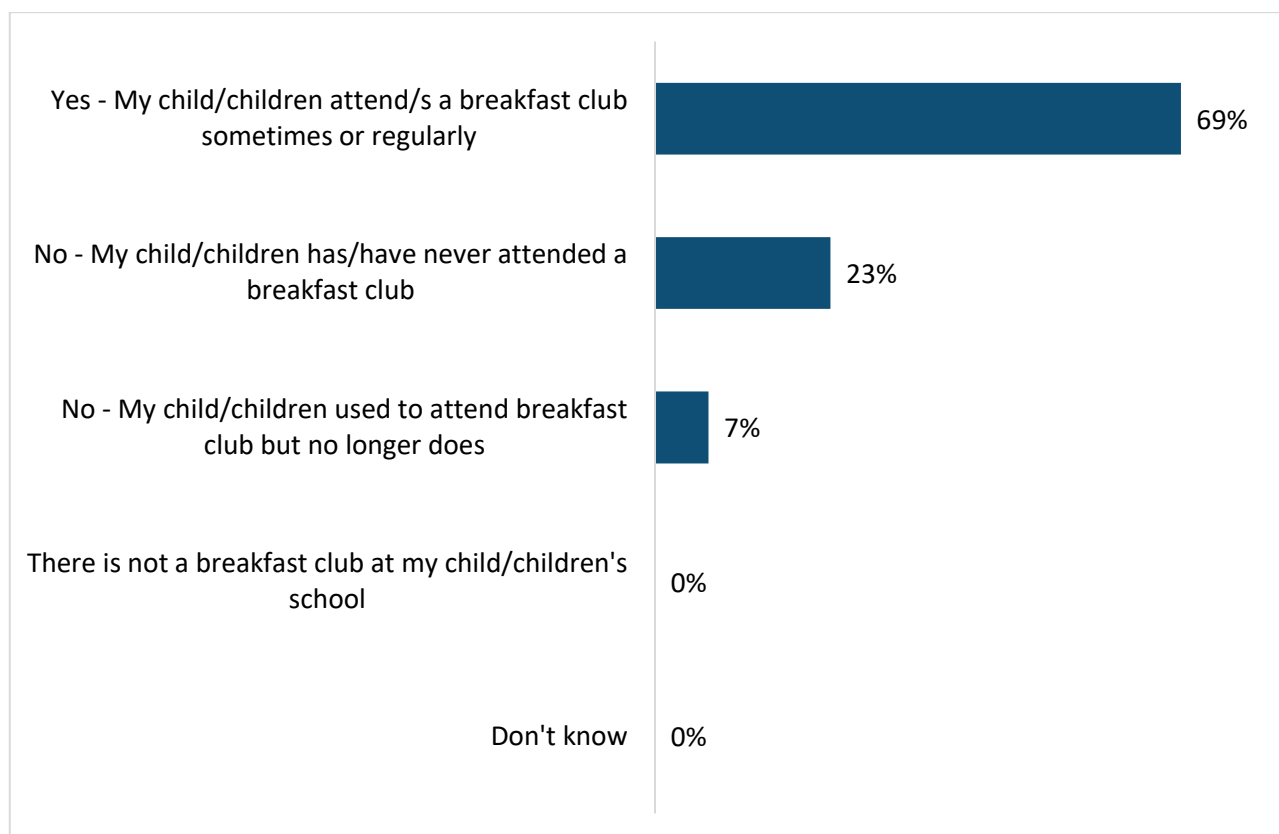
Patterns of attendance and participation

Attendance level and variations

The parent survey data confirms strong engagement, with 69% of parents who are aware of free breakfast clubs reporting that their child attends a breakfast club (free or otherwise) sometimes or regularly. Section 4.3 outlined that 45% of parents report using breakfast clubs specifically as a form of childcare. The discrepancy between these 2 figures indicates that parents may not always be using breakfast clubs for childcare purposes.

As described in section 4.1, observations reveal generally good alignment between schools' predicted attendance numbers and actual pupil attendance, suggesting that breakfast clubs have established consistent usage patterns within their communities.

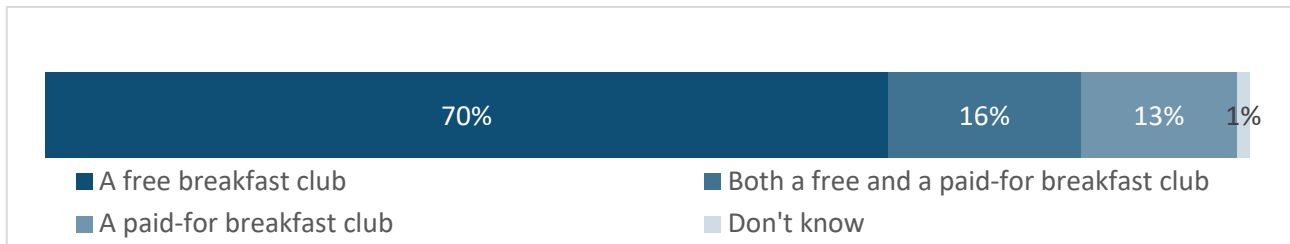
Figure 18: Whether child/children have attended a breakfast club



Source: Does your child/children currently attend a breakfast club? (Multi-select) Base: All respondents aware of the free breakfast club: 5,114

Participation rates are higher among families not eligible for FSM (74%) compared to FSM-eligible families (66%), and among parents in full-time salaried employment (79%). The type of provision accessed varies by family circumstances. Most families (70%) exclusively use free breakfast club provision, whilst 16% combine free and paid provision, and 13% use only paid provision. Parents not currently employed are most likely to solely use the free provision (90%), whilst families with higher incomes are more likely to use paid provision either exclusively or in combination with free offerings.

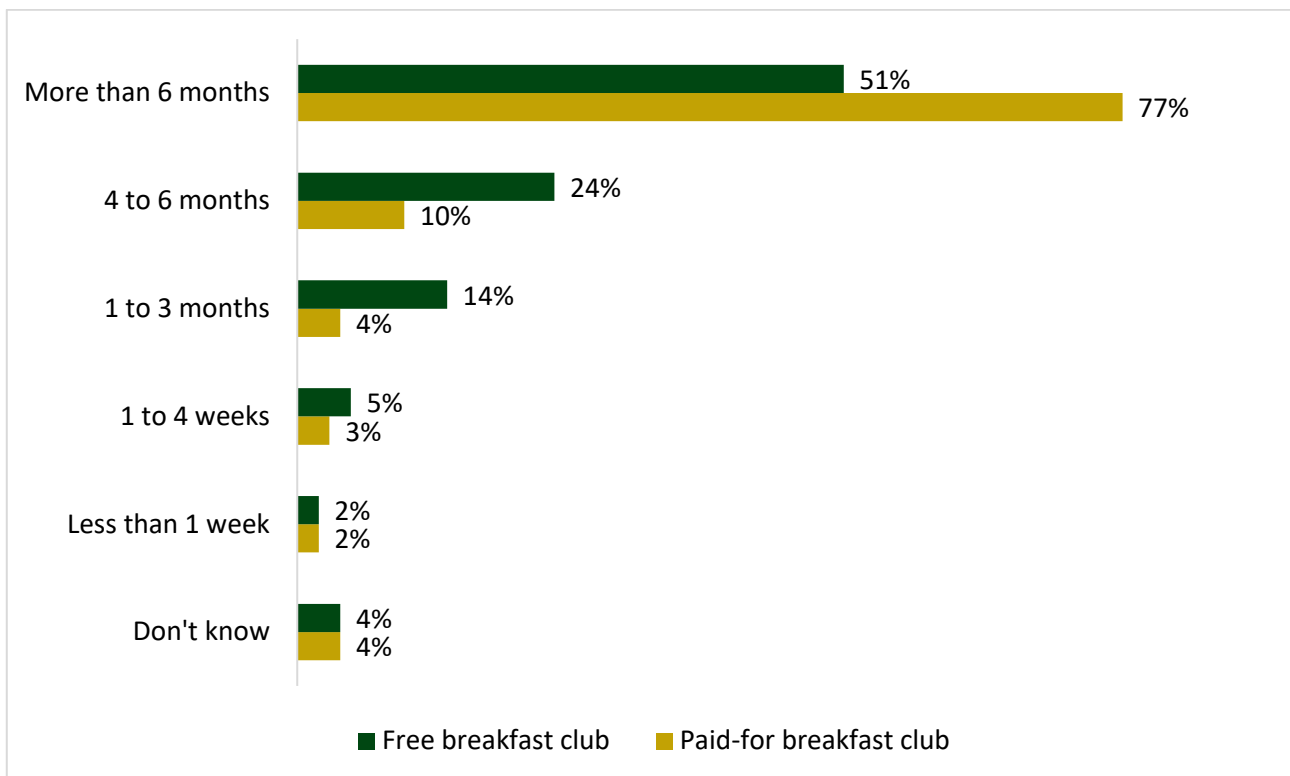
Figure 19: Type of breakfast club provision children attend as reported by parents



Source: What type(s) of breakfast club does child/children attend? (Multi-select) Base: All respondents whose child(ren) attends a breakfast club: 3,587

There is a steadily growing number of parents using the free breakfast club, with 51% having used it for more than 6 months, 24% having used it for 4 to 6 months, and 14% having used it for 1 to 3 months.

Figure 20: Length of time children have been attending the free/paid provision



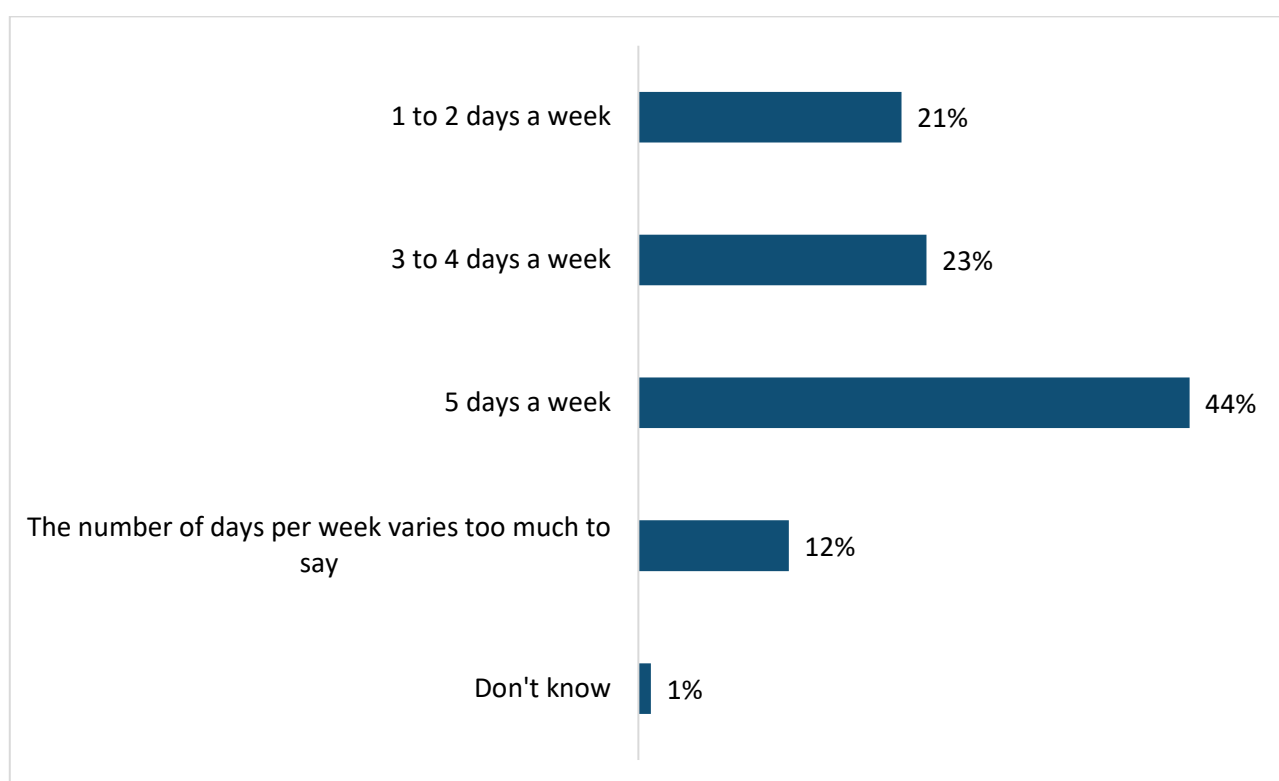
Source: How long has/have your child/children been attending the free/paid-for breakfast club? (Multi-select) Base: All respondents whose child(ren) attends the free provision: 3,140, attends the paid provision: n=1,106

Frequency and patterns of use

Among families using free breakfast clubs, 44% send their children every weekday, whilst 44% use the provision 1 to 4 days per week (21% attending 1 to 2 days, 23% attending 3 to 4 days). The remaining 12% report that attendance varies too much to establish a pattern, highlighting the flexibility that families value in the provision.

This flexibility emerges as particularly important in the qualitative research, with parents valuing the ability to choose when to use the breakfast club based on daily needs rather than rigid schedules. Parents appreciate being able to attend on selected days rather than committing to all 5 days as required by some paid provisions and value that the free breakfast club could adapt to their varying work patterns and family circumstances.

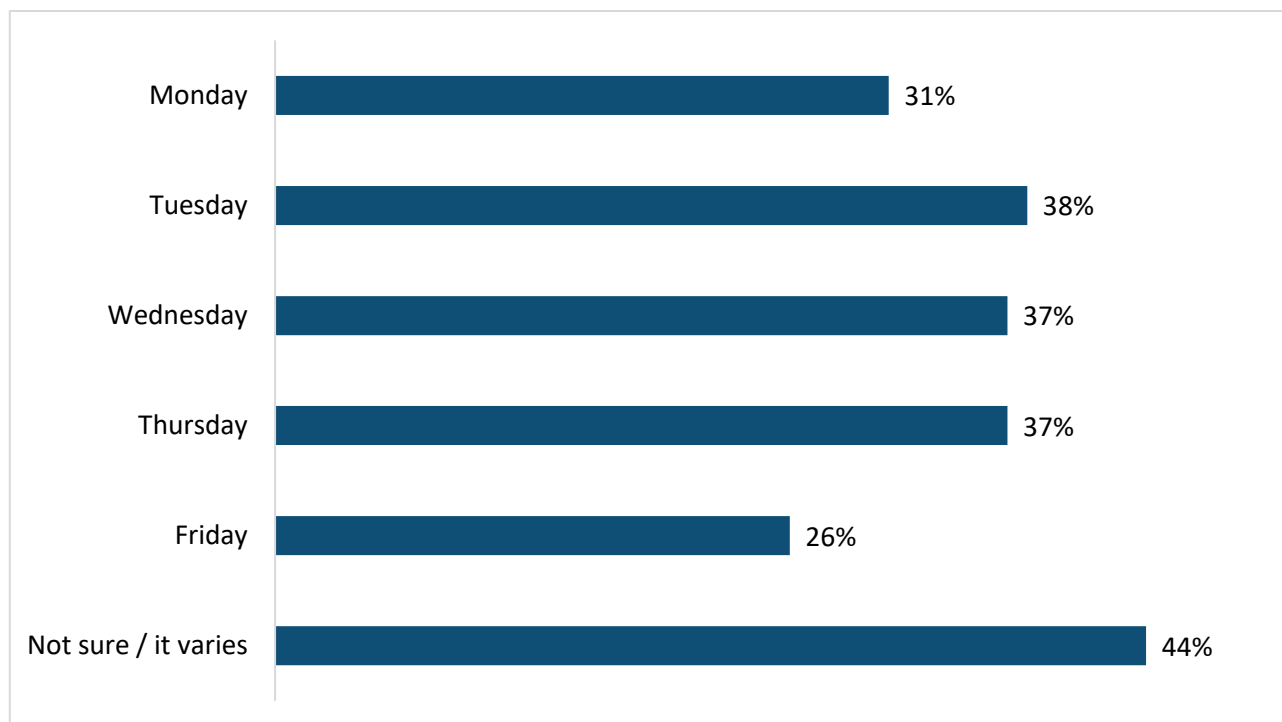
Figure 21: Number of days per week children attend the free breakfast club



Source: On average, how many days per week does child/children attend the free breakfast club? Base: All respondents whose child(ren) attends the free provision: 3,140

Weekly attendance patterns show variation across the school week. Tuesday sees highest usage (38%), followed closely by Wednesday and Thursday (both 37%) and Monday (31%), whilst Friday consistently shows lowest attendance at 26%. Observations confirm this Friday drop-off across multiple schools, with staff attributing this to different family routines at the week's end and parents' varied work patterns. Nearly half of parents (44%) indicate their child's attendance varies from week to week.

Figure 22: Days of the week children attend the free breakfast club

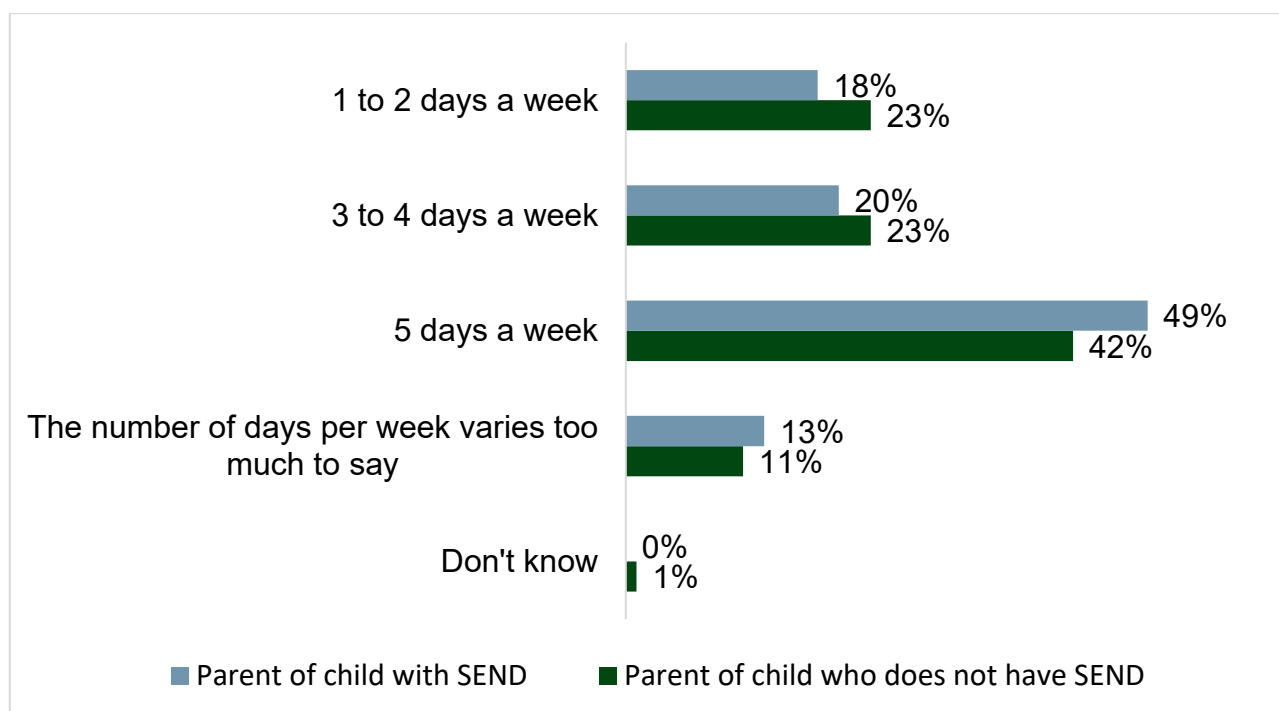


Source: On which day(s) of the week does child/children normally attend the free breakfast club? (Multi-select) Base: All respondents whose child(ren) does not attend the free breakfast club every day (incl. 'Don't know'): 1,848

Parents working part-time in salaried roles are more likely to use provision on Wednesdays (47%), whilst those in full-time hourly employment show higher Friday usage (41%) than other employment groups. These patterns reflect how breakfast clubs adapt to diverse parental work schedules, with the flexibility to attend on specific days proving particularly valuable for families navigating complex employment arrangements. This aligns with findings from the interviews where parents who are currently doing shift work share how the flexibility enables their current working patterns.

Parents of children with SEND demonstrate slightly different usage patterns, being more likely to send their child to breakfast clubs every weekday (49%) compared to parents of children without SEND (42%). This higher frequency of attendance aligns with findings from parent interviews, where parents of children with SEND describe breakfast clubs as particularly valuable for providing calm, structured morning transitions.

Figure 23: Number of days per week children with and without SEND attend the free breakfast club



Source: On average, how many days per week does child/children attend the free breakfast club? Base: All those who have a child with SEND: 506, All those who do not have a child with SEND: 2,259

Attendance Initiatives

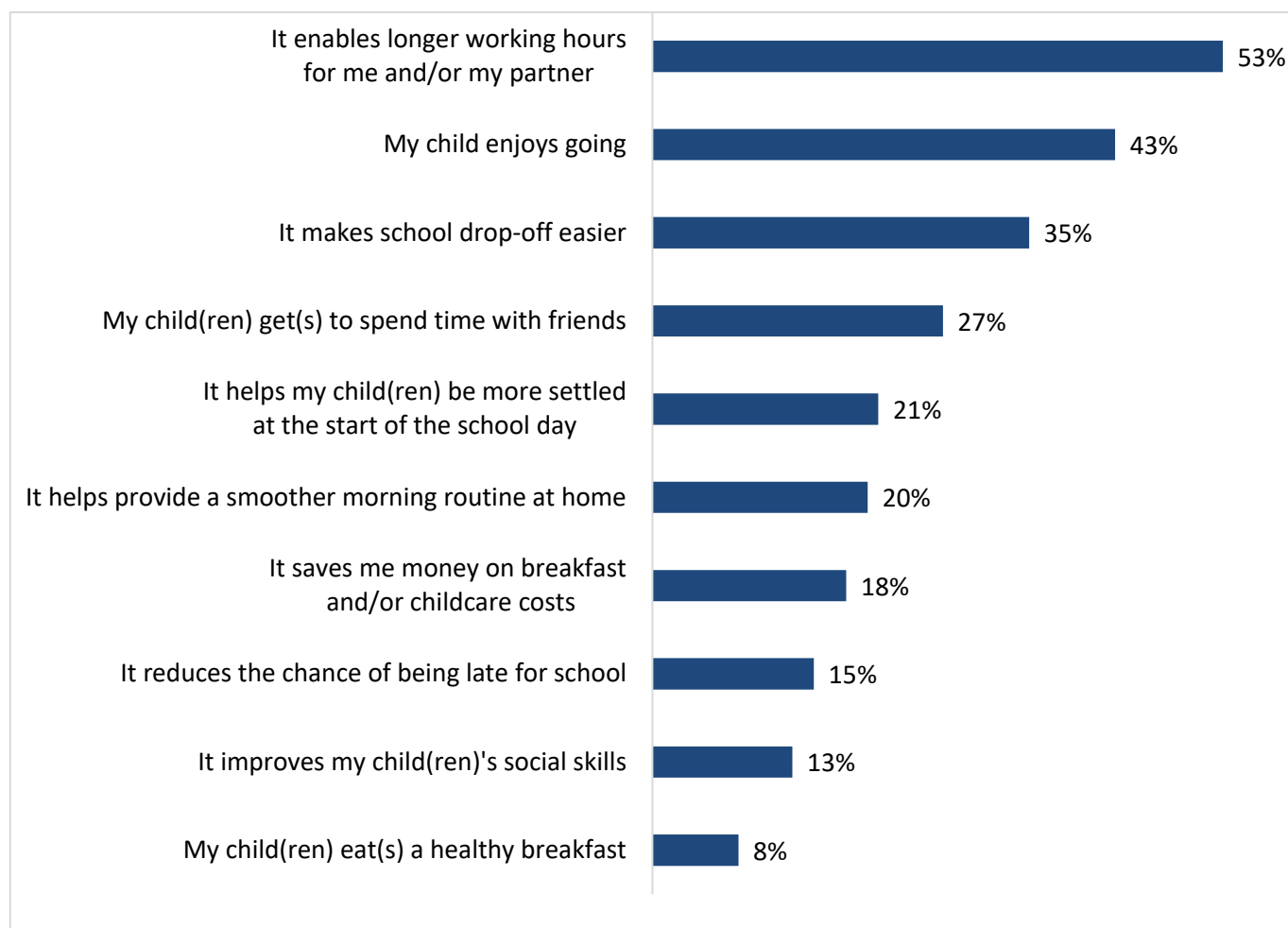
Some schools run special initiatives to encourage more regular attendance. One observed school used special activities such as a week in which pupils tried different breakfast foods from around the world.

Schools also run special seasonal activities to increase attendance, such as a visit from Father Christmas in the lead up to the Christmas break.

Motivations for use

Enabling employment is the most common motivation for free breakfast club use among surveyed parents. Over half (53%) of parents select this option as one of their top 3 reasons for sending their child to the free breakfast club. The second most common motivator is that their child enjoys attending the breakfast club (43%), followed by the practical benefit of making school drop-off easier (35%).

Figure 24: Reasons parents use the free breakfast club



Source: What are the top three reasons your child attends free breakfast club? Base: All who said their child attends breakfast club: 3,140

Interviewed parents recognise the provision serves multiple purposes including providing childcare support, facilitating work routines, offering socialisation opportunities, alleviating financial pressures, helping their children settle into the school environment, and building confidence. This multifaceted nature of the breakfast club makes it valuable to families across diverse circumstances.

“It’s a win-win situation... it lets parents drop their children off earlier and it sets that child up for the day with a good breakfast.” Parent, free breakfast club user

Enabling employment

Parents shared in interviews that the free breakfast club is essential for being able to maintain work schedules, supporting them when they need to be at work early in the morning, or have little to no flexibility in their work patterns.

"There's no flexibility in the NHS where I work and it's obviously I'm the only wage coming into the house. [...] So, it was quite important I keep my job going because otherwise we won't be able to pay the mortgage."

Parent, free breakfast club user

"I think the main, main focus of breakfast club is to allow parents to have that flexibility while working. Trying to keep a work home life balance is extremely difficult especially when like most people are starting work at 8, 9 o'clock in the morning." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

"I wouldn't have been able to work without it. The shifts wouldn't have worked, so it's quite fundamental." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

Additionally, the provision offers employment support across different family structures and work arrangements. For families with complex work patterns, the free breakfast club enables different family members to coordinate childcare responsibilities around their own employment. This is particularly valuable in households where both parents have non-standard and changeable working hours requiring careful orchestration of responsibilities, and parents that work in locations that vary day by day.

"With both of us working odd hours, it just works." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

"For us, it's purely a work thing... Being able to have her there gives us the freedom to get to places that we need to be." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

For those running their own businesses, the free breakfast club reduces morning stress and the need for additional staff support in the business, creating a double financial benefit - saving on childcare while enabling additional income generation.

"So I run a coffee shop, which provides wedding cakes and celebration cakes. Having an extra hour or so when the shop isn't actually open yet, I can get tasks done a lot faster. It gives me that opportunity just to get my working day started and get some jobs done that I wouldn't necessarily get done with him in tow or with the shop open." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

The provision also supports the critical transition time needed for work preparation. Parents say they use the extra morning time for business administration, travelling to client sites, or switching between home and office working based on daily needs.

However, for some parents the current opening time does not go far enough to meet their work schedules. Nearly 1 in 10 parents (9%) indicate dissatisfaction with the starting time (see the *User experience and satisfaction* section). Several interviewed parents express a need for an earlier start time of 7:30am, which would allow a partner or family member to

complete the drop-off before leaving for work. Parents also note that some of their children are already awake and ready as early as 6am due to household work patterns, making an earlier opening a practical necessity rather than a preference.

Child-centred reasons

Child-centred benefits are an important motivator for free breakfast club use for some parents. As seen in Figure 24, children enjoying the programme is a motivator for over 2 in 5 parents (43%). Additionally, the social aspect of children spending time with friends is a motivator for over a quarter of parents (27%), followed by helping children to be more settled at the start of the school day (21%), and reducing the chance of being late for school (15%). More than 1 in 10 (13%) parents report being motivated by the perception that the club improves their child's social skills.

According to interviewed parents and observation data, the less formal, stress-free atmosphere helps children transition smoothly into the school day. It is particularly valuable for children with SEND, giving them time to regulate themselves prior to lessons starting. It also enables a calmer arrival at school, as drop-off times are less busy with fewer people arriving at the same time.

Interviewed parents also say they are motivated by their child asking to attend. One parent even notes that their child gets upset when they do not attend the breakfast club. Parents report that their children perceive breakfast club as playtime and enjoy interacting with peers from different year groups.

“They're quite happy to go [...] and he'll happily go and sit with his friends and his brother, have his breakfast and then, you know, go and play.”

Parent, free breakfast club user

Practical benefits (easier drop offs, morning routines)

Practical benefits are key motivators for free breakfast club use. As seen in Figure 24, more than 1 in 3 (35%) parents report being motivated by making school drop-off easier. The second most common practical motivator is helping provide a smoother morning routine at home (20%), followed by reducing the chances of being late for school (15%).

Interviewed parents value the practical convenience of free breakfast clubs as they facilitate easier school drop-off routines, reducing the chances of being late for school and avoiding busier travel and drop-off times. One important aspect of the smoother school drop-off routine is when parents have more than one child and they attend different schools. The free breakfast club allows parents to do multiple drop-offs in distant schools without having to worry that a child is late.

"I use the breakfast club because I have to get my 2-year-old to preschool at [school name] half past because he starts at half eight down there and it wouldn't work the other way around. It just actually would be late."

Parent, free breakfast club user

"Well, if they come at 8 o'clock, the extra 45 minutes, it helps a lot. Because you could go to work early as well. If I drop at 8 o'clock, get ready to work early, I go to work earlier. I could miss the traffic as well."

Parent, free breakfast club user

Another practical motivator is the smoother morning routine. Parents report the free breakfast club helps streamline morning routines by eliminating the need for breakfast preparation and cleanup at home.

"I don't have to worry about. Have I got cereal in? Have I got enough milk in? Have I got bread in? Have I got everything else that she likes to have in? Because I know it's there at breakfast club. It's took a lot of stress away from me having to prepare and pre think for breakfast in the morning." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

"I started booking them in on a Tuesday just because it's my day off and it gives me an extra half an hour... it shortens the morning freak out if there's any sort of craziness going on. It makes a huge difference because there's less time for craziness, it's just a bit easier."

Parent, free breakfast club user

Financial considerations

The financial benefits emerge as an important motivator for parents, and they extend beyond direct savings on childcare. Interviewed parents express immediate relief from financial pressure. For example, parents explain that they don't have the burden of not being able to afford sending their child on certain days. Others report signing up immediately when learning it was free, having previously been unable to afford the paid provision. Parents also note reduced food waste and grocery costs.

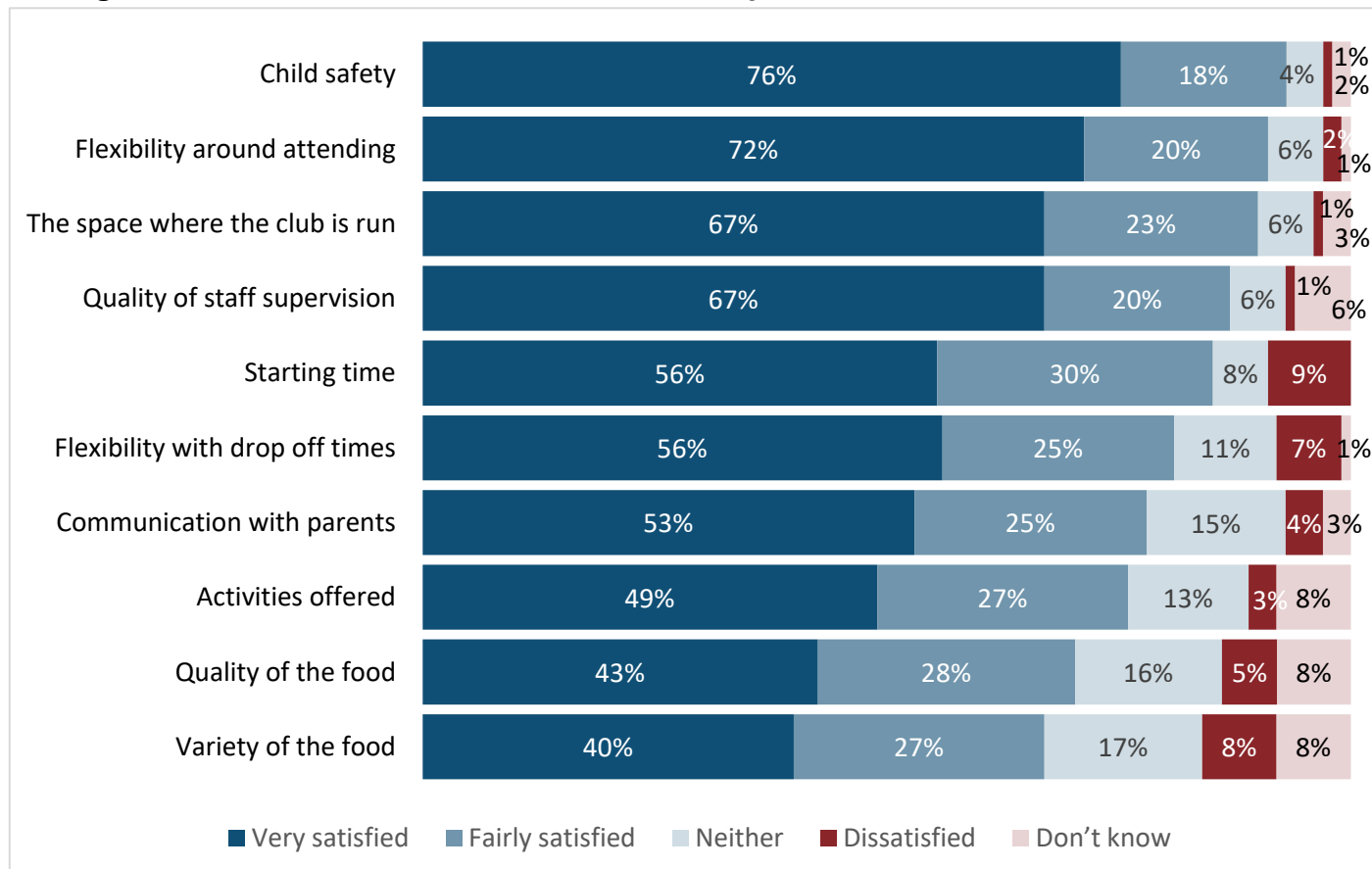
"There is a good variety here. At home, you are only going to buy Shreddies or Cheerios, but not both because of the cost. Here they can have whatever they want." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

User experience and satisfaction

Overall satisfaction levels

Surveyed parents report high satisfaction levels across all aspects of the free breakfast clubs. At least 2 in 3 parents (67%) are satisfied with each aspect of free breakfast clubs, with 90% or more expressing satisfaction with safety, flexibility, and the club's space.

Figure 25: Satisfaction levels with different aspects of the free breakfast club



Source: Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the following aspects of the free breakfast club your child(ren) attends? Base: All respondents whose child(ren) attends the free provision: 3,140; Note that 'Very dissatisfied' and 'Fairly dissatisfied' have been merged in this figure.

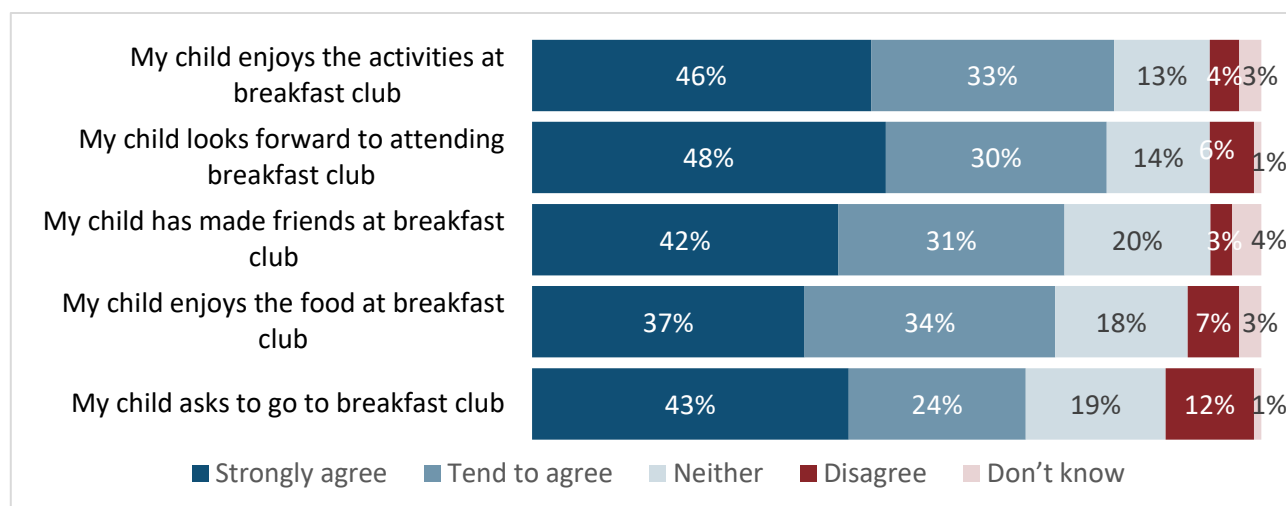
Table 5: Satisfaction levels with different aspects of the free breakfast club

Component	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Neither	Dissatisfied	Don't know
Child safety	76%	18%	4%	1%	2%
Flexibility around attending	72%	20%	6%	2%	1%
The space where the club is run	67%	23%	6%	1%	3%
Quality of staff supervision	67%	20%	6%	1%	6%
Starting time	56%	30%	6%	9%	0%
Flexibility with drop off times	56%	25%	11%	7%	1%
Communication with parents	53%	25%	15%	4%	3%
Activities offered	49%	27%	13%	3%	8%
Quality of the food	43%	28%	16%	6%	8%
Variety of the food	40%	27%	17%	8%	8%

The aspect with the highest dissatisfaction levels is starting time (8%) and variety of food (8%). There is also notable uncertainty among parents about some aspects, with around 8% unsure about the quality of food, the variety of food and the activities offered.

Parent perceptions of their child's experience are positive. Almost 4 in 5 (79%) surveyed parents report that their child enjoys the activities at the free breakfast club and the same amount (79%) report their child looks forward to attending.

Figure 26: Child's experience at the free breakfast club



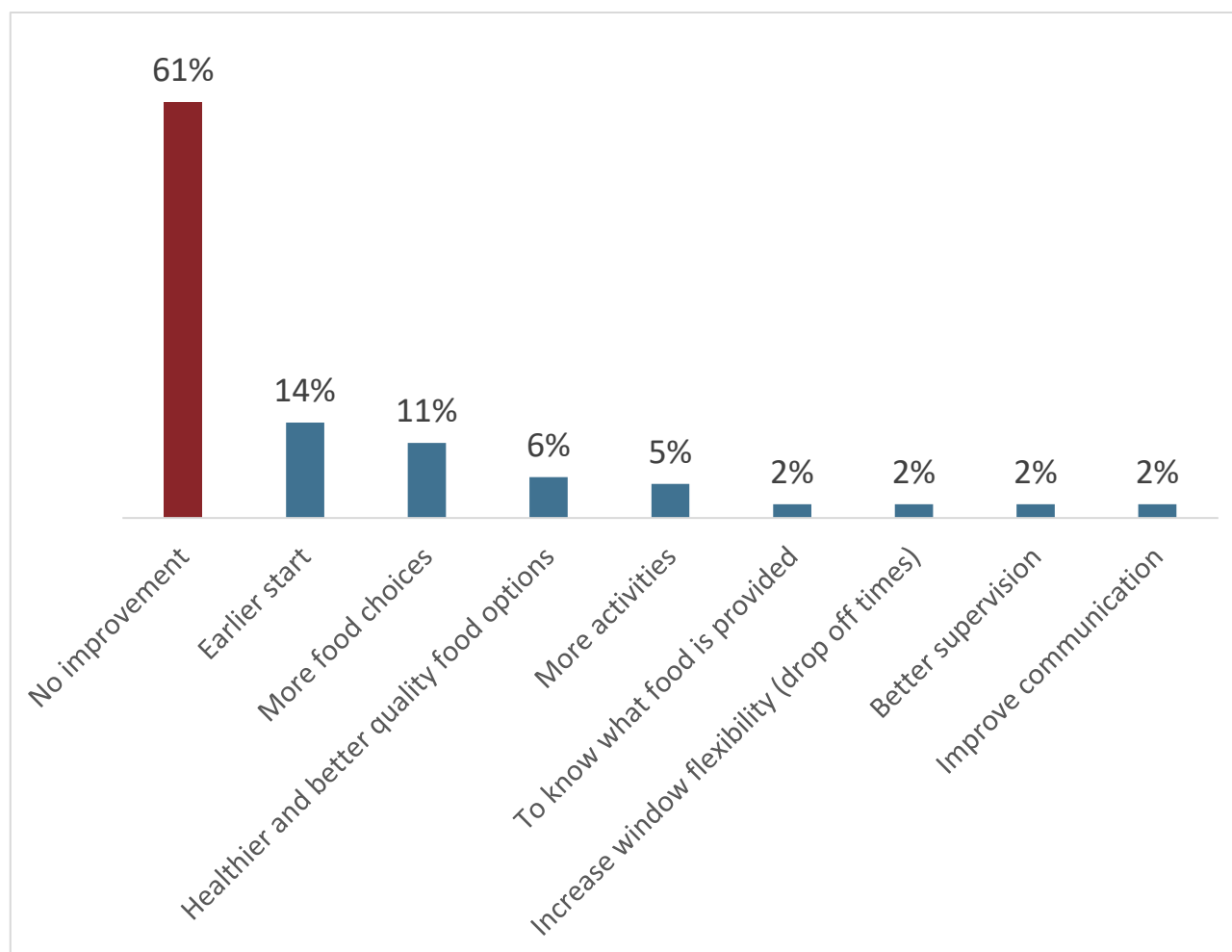
Source: Thinking about your child's experience at free breakfast club, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Base: All respondents whose child(ren) attends the free provision: 3,140; Note that 'Tend to disagree' and 'Strongly disagree' have been merged in this figure.

Interviewed parents particularly value the reassurance that pupils have access to food in a safe setting.

"When I send them here, I feel relaxed, because they are eating." Parent, free breakfast club user

When asked about areas for improvement about the free breakfast club, over 3 in 5 surveyed parents (61%) say there are no improvements to be made.

Figure 27: Parents' perceived areas for improvements



Source: What, if anything, would you like to see improved about the free breakfast club? Base: All respondents whose child(ren) attends the free provision: 3,022²⁶

Perspectives on programme delivery

Parents place value on the reliability and consistency of breakfast clubs. Sessions run without cancellations, and booking systems, whether app-based, email, or walk-in, overall work well, with some clubs allowing same-day decisions and others requiring no booking at all.

²⁶ Participants were asked what, if anything, would they like improved about the free breakfast club? They were given the option to write in a response or choose 'nothing' or 'prefer not to say'. 'No improvement' is the sum of those who chose 'nothing' as a response and those who typed in 'no improvement' or a variation of this.

Activities provided

Although 8% of surveyed parents report not knowing how to rate their satisfaction levels of the activities provided (see Figure 25), 4 in 5 (79%) parents report that their child enjoys the activities at the breakfast club (see Figure 26).

While current activities are well received, such as themed activities around foods from around the world, parents suggest that introducing a broader range of options could better cater to children with varying interests and further enhance engagement.

Food quality

Food quality is another frequently valued aspect of provision, with over 7 in 10 (71%) parents saying their child enjoyed the food at the breakfast club (see Figure 26). In interviews, parents say they appreciate the variety on offer, from fruits and cereals to warm meals and themed breakfasts, and feel the options give children a nutritious start for the school day.

However, food provision is also the area where parents most commonly identified room for improvement, with 8% dissatisfied with the variety of food on offer, and 8% saying they do not know how to rate their satisfaction with food quality, indicating a lack of awareness. Some interviewed parents feel the current offer at their child's school is limited in nutritional value, with menus relying heavily on white bread, toast, and cereal, and call for healthier options including a choice of bread types. Fresh fruit is noted by parents as inconsistent in availability, with requests for it be offered more regularly.

Parents also express a desire for greater variety and cultural diversity in the food on offer, reflecting the backgrounds of the children attending. For some, the introduction of hot food options would represent a meaningful upgrade, with a number indicating they would be willing to pay a small cost for this.

Staff and operations

Staff are highlighted by interviewed parents as central to the success of breakfast clubs. Parents say they feel reassured by the safe, supervised environment and value seeing the same familiar faces each day. The strength of these relationships is evident to parents, and children often develop a strong bond with the breakfast club staff.

“One of them is literally [child's name]’s most favourite person at the school.” *Parent, free breakfast club user*

Parents also praise the operational reliability of breakfast clubs. Parents report the schools have never cancelled a session due to staffing, providing the dependability they say is essential for working families. Additionally, parents value staff flexibility, appreciating the responsive approach to individual family needs, including flexibility around arrival times and attendance patterns.

While staffing is broadly praised, parents raise 2 operational concerns. First, some parents note that handover between breakfast club staff and classroom teachers can be inconsistent, with important messages from parents occasionally failing to reach the right person. This is seen as a gap in the communication chain that could affect pupils' experience during the school day. Second, some parents express concern about staffing resilience, noting that in some schools the club appears to rely heavily on a single member of staff, raising questions about continuity should that person be unavailable.

The convenience and flexibility of breakfast clubs are seen as particularly valuable by working parents. By accommodating varying family schedules and taking some of the pressure out of morning logistics, the clubs reduce stress and allow parents to choose how they handle drop-off. They can choose to stay during setting-in periods or say quick goodbyes at the door, with staff accommodating different family needs and preferences.

Atmosphere and socialisation

Consistent with what was observed in schools (see section 4.1), parents consistently describe the atmosphere as relaxed and non-structured, which parents see as a strength. Interviewed parents value children exercising considerable agency in breakfast clubs, being able to choose their activities freely and decide which areas to engage with. This independence extends to practical skills, with staff encouraging pupils to make their own breakfast and help with tidying up the room.

Pupils are free to socialise across age groups, and the mixed-age setting fosters a sense of community, with older pupils naturally looking out for younger ones. However, other parents see the socialisation across different age groups as a potential issue, as they are concerned about their child picking up language or behaviours from older pupils.

"It's helping the kids create better bonds with each other because they're in a relaxed environment. It's not a structured environment where they're in lessons and the learning. It gives the kids the ability to be able to socialise as kids." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

"They might learn something bad [...] from other children." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

Physical space and infrastructure

Finally, parents' perception on the physical space varies. Some parents report the infrastructure is well-suited to its purpose, and the hall or dedicated area is large enough to comfortably accommodate the number of pupils attending.

However, some parents are concerned about the adequacy of facilities in certain schools. Where the breakfast club is housed in a separate, smaller building, parents worry the space could feel cramped and would benefit from being larger and more open. In other instances, parents report not being aware of what the space looks like at all.

Booking and access experiences

Parent experiences of booking and access vary. Some interviewed parents appreciate the simple initial registration and see the booking process as straightforward. One parent says their school's process includes multiple options available to suit different family circumstances.

"You can either do it on a weekly basis [...] an email comes out the week before that you click on to and you sign up to say what days you want to go, or if you know the same days you're going to attend for the whole term, then you would send an email [...] you don't have to book on each week." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

This flexibility is reflected in the survey data with 44% of surveyed parents saying the days their children attend varies. Additionally, some schools have eliminated booking requirements entirely, with parents praising this approach, as it removes barriers in the sign-up process or pre-booking and children can just walk in.

The transition from paid to free provision has been particularly smooth in some schools, with existing paid provision users being automatically rolled over without needing to re-register, removing administrative burden from families.

While many parents report having a good experience with the booking system, others report that the system is not particularly user-friendly, and there are strict booking deadlines that can occasionally create inconvenience.

"The system's terrible... it's just a really not a user-friendly website... but that's not the school's fault." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

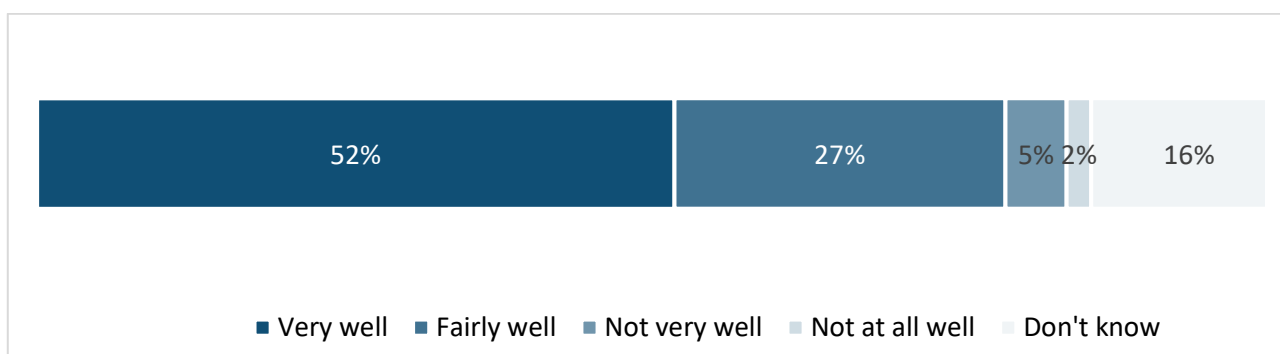
However, parents acknowledge that, despite the inconvenience, they are able to complete the registration process if they want to do so.

A critical factor in parent satisfaction is the consistent availability of places. Parents report never experiencing capacity constraints, and this unlimited access removes a significant source of potential stress for working families who depend on the service and ensures no pupil is turned away.

User experience of parents of children with SEND

Nearly 4 in 5 (78%) surveyed parents of children with SEND feel that free breakfast clubs support their children's needs.

Figure 28: Parents' perceived support for their children's needs



Source: How well do you think the free breakfast club supports the needs of child/children with SEND? Base: All respondents with a child with SEND who attend free provision: 802

For many of the interviewed families, the benefits go beyond convenience, and the free breakfast club provides something more fundamental. For interviewed parents of children with SEND, the period before the school day formally begins can be one of the most challenging. Breakfast clubs offer a calm, less crowded space to regulate and settle before lessons start, away from the noise and rush that can feel overwhelming. Parents say this quieter, more manageable environment supports a smoother transition into the school day. A predictable morning routine offers stability and reassurance, helping pupils arrive at lessons feeling grounded rather than unsettled. For pupils who rely on structure, knowing what to expect each morning can make a meaningful difference to how they engage with the rest of the day.

"He has a bit of school aversion... He just wants to hang out at home on his iPad. Obviously, he is not doing that. I won't allow him to do that. There has to be a bit of encouragement in the morning for me to get him in, but when he's here, he's happy to come in... There are no meltdowns when coming in." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

"The breakfast club in particular is really helpful, especially for SEND parents because it gives us that chance to be away from the morning rush [...] and kids running around screaming. It gives our kids time to regulate themselves prior to lessons starting." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

The relaxed, mixed-age setting also creates natural opportunities for social interaction. Interviewed parents of children with SEND say their child benefits from the inclusive atmosphere, building friendships and developing social skills in a low-pressure context that the busier parts of the school day may not always allow. As one parent describes, her daughter finds it easier to socialise at the free breakfast club due to the calmer environment.

"She's getting more one-to-one with other students rather than being in a big crowd. There's a lot less kids, she can socialise a little bit easier. She also has access to the staff members if she becomes overwhelmed and stressed. Me and her SENCO have noticed that she needs that time in the morning just to do what she wants to do for a little bit with her friends before she can engage into learning. It's like a transitional period for her."

Parent, free breakfast club user

Nevertheless, some parents express concerns about the size implications of moving to a universal programme where there were previously caps in the paid-for provision. They report that the new provision can become overcrowded, making the environment overwhelming for their child with SEND. However, parents report that schools have been responsive in these cases, ensuring children have access to a quiet space or other accommodations when needed.

"I was worried that it'd get overcrowded because going from paid provision to free, obviously there's an increase in children attending my daughter in specific struggles with allowed busy environment. I was worried about that. But staff straight away, you know, there's provisions put in place if that ever caused a disruption. There is a route opposite that can be taken." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

Summary and recommendations

Overall, whilst awareness of the provision is high, some parents remain uncertain about eligibility or the full offer available to them, suggesting communication could be strengthened. Parents report high levels of satisfaction with the free breakfast clubs, valuing the provision for the multiple benefits it delivers, from enabling employment as the key benefit to easing morning routines, providing financial relief and giving children a positive start to the school day. Where areas for improvement are identified, these centre on food variety, starting times, and clearer communication about the offer. Usage patterns vary significantly by family circumstances, with some attending daily and others using flexible attendance patterns that accommodate diverse work schedules and family needs. For parents of children with SEND, the clubs provide something beyond convenience, offering the calm, structured environment that supports a smoother transition into the school day.

Recommendations for programme implementation

- strengthen universal messaging: All schools should explicitly communicate that breakfast clubs are free and universally available to all families, addressing misconceptions about eligibility requirements or costs that deter some families from accessing the programme.
- enhance information provision: Schools should provide clear information about daily activities, food offerings, and the breakfast club environment to help parents make

informed decisions and feel confident about enrolment. They could also offer open mornings to allow parents to see the programme in action.

- enable child-led programme promotion: Give pupils the opportunity to design posters and parent invitations to open mornings to increase take-up.
- improve booking flexibility: The research shows that families particularly value models that remove barriers to spontaneous use. While booking systems are useful for schools for planning purposes, it would be useful to also accommodate last-minute changes to support families with unpredictable schedules.
- ensure inclusive SEND provision: Schools should maintain calm, structured environments with appropriate quiet spaces and staff training to support inclusion of pupils with SEND.

Recommendations for evaluation

- assess communication effectiveness: Explore how schools communicate to families about the programme, both in terms of content and modality, particularly among harder-to-reach families who may not engage with routine school communications.
- explore SEND-specific accommodations: Document how schools accommodate diverse needs among attending pupils to ensure the programme is inclusive and supporting successful transition to the school day.

4.5 Barriers and enablers to engaging with the free breakfast club

This section examines why some families do not use the free breakfast club, why some use it only occasionally, and what may encourage greater engagement. The evidence suggests that non-use does not always reflect a practical barrier that can be addressed. For some families, existing routines, family breakfast time or pupils' preferences mean that the provision is not currently needed or wanted. For others, practical barriers limit engagement. These include understanding the offer, times, booking arrangements, transport, flexibility and confidence in the food and wider provision.

Reasons for non-use

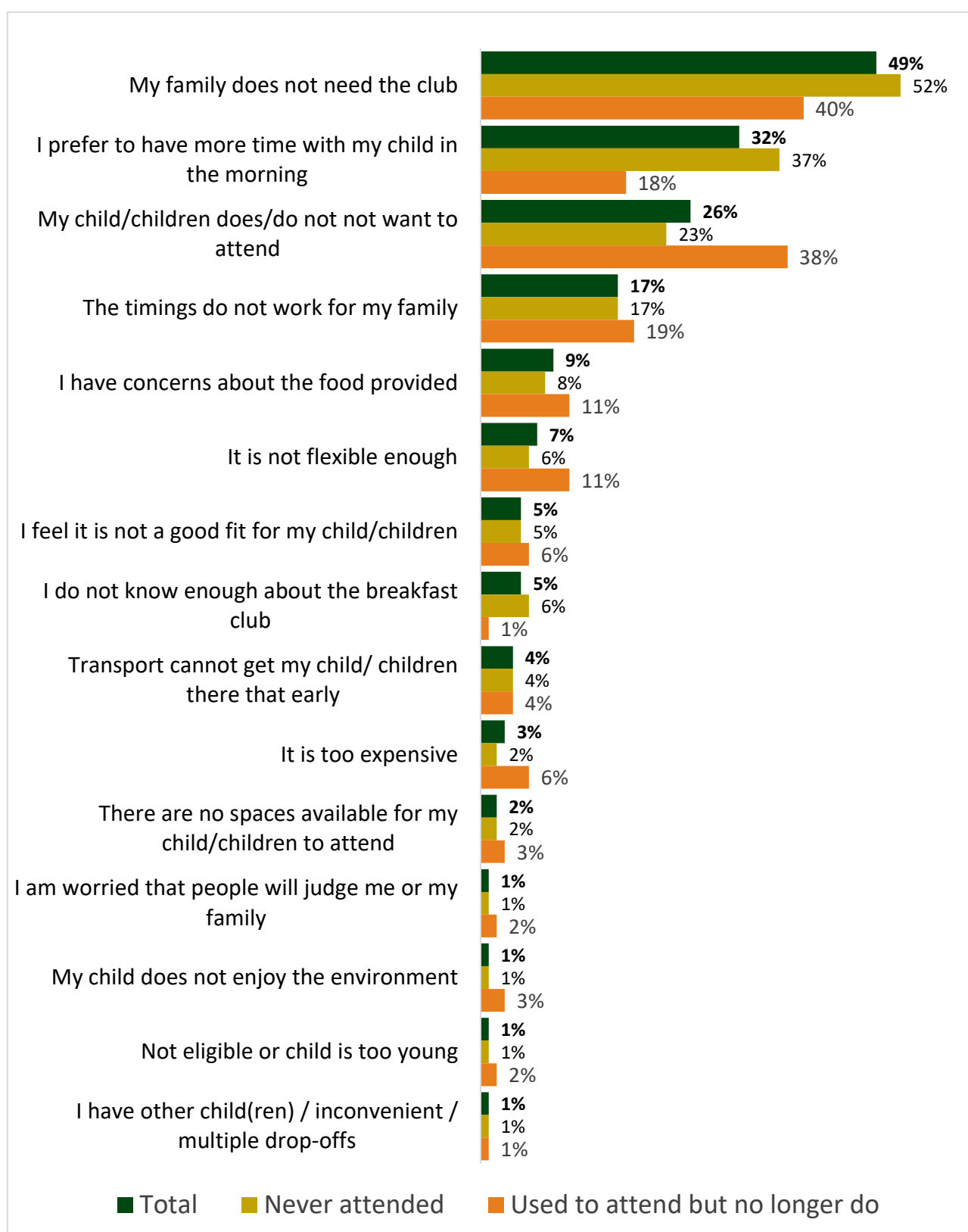
Families' reasons for not using the free breakfast club, or for using it only on certain days, vary. Some families have established morning routines, prefer to eat breakfast together or find that their child does not want to attend. Others face practical constraints that make the provision difficult to fit around their existing arrangements.

Adequate existing arrangements

Almost half (49%) of parents of children who do not attend or no longer attend a breakfast club say their family does not need the club.²⁷ This is more common among parents whose children have never attended a breakfast club than among parents of former users (52% compared with 40%). This suggests that non-use may reflect adequate existing routines rather than dissatisfaction after trying the provision.

²⁷ Survey questions on non-attendance and barriers referred to "breakfast club" rather than specifically to the free breakfast club, as parents may have previously experienced other breakfast club provision prior to the DfE free breakfast club. Findings from these questions are therefore reported as relating to breakfast clubs generally and interpreted in the context of the EA free breakfast club offer where relevant.

Figure 29: Reasons children do not attend or no longer attend the breakfast club



Source: Why does your child/children not attend or no longer attend the breakfast club? (Multi-select) Base: All respondents whose child(ren) does not attend the breakfast club: 1,507

Perceived need varies by family circumstances, including household income and employment status. Parents of children who are not eligible for FSM are more likely to say their family does not need the free breakfast club than parents of FSM-eligible children (57% compared with 41%). The reported lack of need also varies by employment status. It is most common among parents working in part-time salaried roles (61%), compared with parents working in full-time hourly paid roles (42%), full-time salaried roles (52%), part-time hourly paid roles (47%) and those who are not employed (43%). This suggests that perceived lack of need is linked to existing working patterns, care arrangements and morning routines, rather than to employment status alone.

Qualitative evidence indicates that existing before-school care arrangements vary. Some households have a parent or carer at home in the morning because they are not employed or have flexible working arrangements. Other households receive support from another family member. Other families have routines that allow them to manage breakfast and school drop-off without additional provision. Parents describe weighing the free breakfast club against arrangements that they already consider manageable. This is particularly the case when their working hours and proximity to school allow them to provide breakfast and manage the school run themselves.

“My school's local to me. I'm not working that time of day. Like, my life fits around my kids.” *Parent, free breakfast club non-user*

This is consistent with wider survey findings showing that existing care arrangements vary by employment circumstances. Two-thirds (66%) of parents who are not employed say that they do not need childcare before school because a parent or carer is at home, compared with 28% of parents working in full-time salaried roles and 29% of those working in full-time hourly paid roles. Section 4.3 explores these patterns in more detail.

Preference for family breakfast times

A preference for family time in the morning is another reason some families do not use the free breakfast club or do not use it every day. Among parents whose child does not attend or no longer attends, 32% say they prefer to have more time with their child in the morning. This is also reflected among families who already use the free breakfast club. Among parents whose child does not attend every day, 25% say they want family breakfast time on some days.

Parents' accounts show that this is often an active preference rather than a negative view of the provision. Some parents value breakfast as part of the family's morning routine, particularly when they feel able to provide breakfast at home and get their child to school on time. For these families, non-use appears to reflect a preference for maintaining breakfast at home and time together in the morning.

Barriers to engagement

This section examines factors that may prevent families from using the free breakfast club, including limited understanding of the offer, timing, booking, transport and concerns about food or suitability.

Awareness and understanding

Parents' awareness and understanding of the offer also affect engagement. In the parent survey, 5% of parents whose child does not attend or no longer attends a breakfast club say they do not know enough about the provision. While this is lower than other reported barriers, the qualitative evidence suggests that awareness is not simply about whether parents have heard of the free breakfast club. For some parents, limited understanding may make it harder to judge whether the offer is relevant and suitable for their family. This is particularly true for new arrivals to the area or those familiar with the previous paid provision.

Some parents are unsure whether the free breakfast club is intended for all pupils. Several parents are deterred by assumptions there is a cost to attend or that there were eligibility requirements. Qualitative evidence suggests that some assume the offer is only available to pupils who are eligible for free school meals. Others understand that the provision is universal but are concerned that using it could take a place away from a family with greater need. Parents share instances of not being aware that they are eligible to use the provision until actively sought out by school staff who explained this to them. This suggests that uncertainty about eligibility and who the offer is for can act as a barrier to use.

"[Before starting to use the free breakfast club] I thought it's only for kids who are also eligible for free school meals, not that it's for everybody."

Parent, free breakfast club user

Understanding also relates to what the free breakfast club involves in practice. Some parents know that the provision exists, but are less clear about what food is served, which activities pupils take part in, whether pupils can attend occasionally, how booking works, and how staff support pupils during the session.

Overall, the evidence suggests that limited understanding can act as a barrier to engagement, even when parents know the free breakfast club exists. This includes limited understanding of who the free breakfast club is for, what happens during the session, and whether the offer can meet their child's practical, dietary or support needs.

On the other hand, it appears that school emails are not consistently reaching all parents, with some reporting they had not received emails about the free breakfast club at all. This suggests that reliance on email alone may leave certain families, particularly those who are newer to the school or less engaged with digital communications - without the information they need to access the provision.

Child preference and wellbeing concerns

Child preference also affects whether families use the free breakfast club. Among parents whose child does not attend or no longer attends, 26% say their child does not want to attend. This is more common among former breakfast club users than among those who have never attended (38% compared with 23%), suggesting that pupil preference can affect both initial take-up and continued use.

This finding is consistent with qualitative accounts in which parents describe their child's willingness to attend as central to decision-making. Parents also describe their child's reluctance to attend because of tiredness, a preference to remain at home or concerns about a longer school day.

These decisions are often made in relation to the pupil's wider school day, rather than the free breakfast club in isolation. Parents consider whether attending before school would make the day feel too long, especially where their child is younger, is often tired by the end of the day or already attends after-school provision. Some parents also describe concerns about the cumulative impact of longer days. Even where parents recognise the benefits of the free breakfast club, they may decide that it does not fit their child's current needs.

"It's already quite a long day for school kids anyway." Parent, free breakfast club non-user

"Especially you know in the winter time. It's really short time when they come back from school. Sometimes they have club until 4:30pm and they come tired." Parent, free breakfast club non-user

"If they did breakfast club and after-school club, they'd be there for like 10 hours a day." Parent, free breakfast club non-user

These concerns do not necessarily indicate dissatisfaction with the free breakfast club itself. Rather, they show that parents weigh the benefits of the provision against their child's energy levels, preferences and wider school-day routines.

Practical concerns

Practical concerns are less commonly reported than lack of need, family time or child preference, but they remain relevant for some families. Among parents whose child does not attend or no longer attends, 17% say the times do not work for their family, 9% report concerns about the food provided. A further 7% say the provision cannot be booked at short notice, 4% say transport arrangements prevent their child from arriving that early and 2% say there are no spaces available.

Qualitative evidence shows that practical concerns often relate to whether the free breakfast club fits around families' morning routines. For some families, the provision only helps if it reduces the number of tasks, journeys and deadlines that parents need to

manage. Earlier journeys, fixed arrival times and advance booking can make it difficult to fit the provision around work, transport and other drop-offs, particularly where parents need to coordinate several journeys or meet other time-sensitive commitments. One parent explained that the available start time did not allow them to begin work any earlier:

“Half 8 breakfast club is a bit of a funny time because then I won't be able to start till half 9.” *Parent, free breakfast club non-user*

Another parent described the drop-off time as precise:

“I know it's a very precise drop off time. You've got to be there at that time.” *Parent, free breakfast club non-user*

Advance booking requirements can create a further difficulty for families whose work patterns, transport arrangements or caring responsibilities change at short notice.

“I don't always know 24 hours beforehand because it's got to, you've got to book it 24 hours beforehand on [booking site].” *Parent, free breakfast club non-user*

In these circumstances, limited flexibility around timing and booking can mean that the free breakfast club adds another task or deadline to the morning, rather than making the routine easier to manage.

Food-related concerns are connected to practical concerns, awareness and suitability. In the survey, 9% of parents who do not use the free breakfast club report concerns about the food provided. One parent describes preferring breakfast at home because of uncertainty about whether the food provided at the free breakfast club would meet their child's needs.

“If they give only like toast with butter, it wouldn't be enough to give them energy for the day. I would prefer home food, so I can make sure that they have enough calories and vitamins before they go.”
Parent, free breakfast club non-user

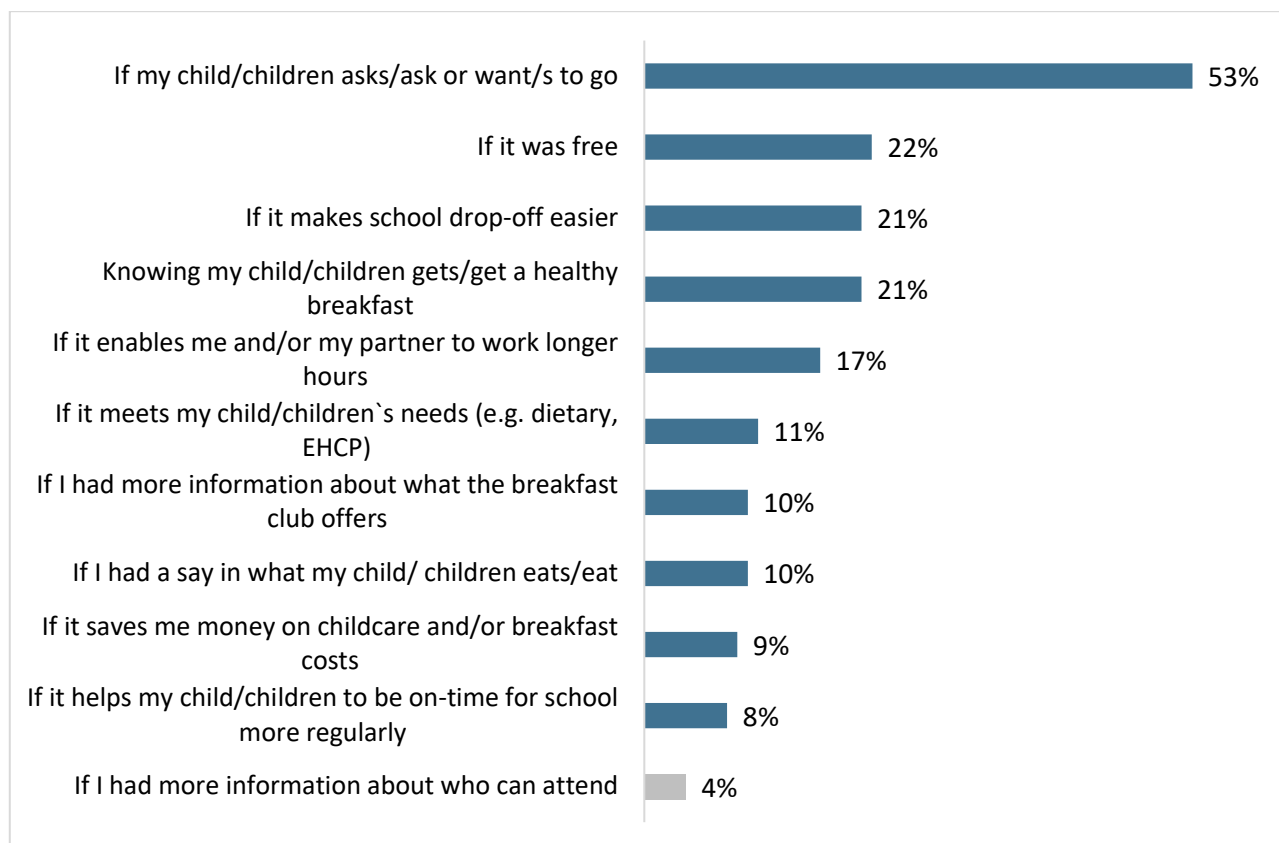
Practical issues also affect how often current users attend. Among parents whose child does not attend the free breakfast club every day, 48% cite their own or their partner's schedule, 23% cite family circumstances, and 16% cite transport or timing issues. These findings suggest that even where families value the free breakfast club, attendance may still depend on changing work patterns, household routines, travel arrangements and whether the provision fits the school run.

Enablers for engagement

This section examines the factors that may encourage greater engagement with the free breakfast club among families whose children do not currently attend or who may use the

provision more often. Evidence suggests that engagement is shaped by a combination of pupil interest, parental confidence in the offer, flexibility in how the provision can be used and awareness of the practical benefits for families. While pupil motivation is the strongest potential enabler, a clearer understanding of the offer and more flexible arrangements may also help parents assess whether the provision fits their child’s needs and their family routines.

Figure 30: Factors that would encourage parents to send their child to the free breakfast club



Source: Which of the following, if any, would most encourage you to send your child/children to a breakfast club? (Multi-select, up to 3 responses) Base: All respondents whose child(ren) does not attend the breakfast club: 1,900

Pupil-led motivations

Pupil interest is the strongest potential enabler for engaging families who do not currently use the free breakfast club. In the parent survey, more than half (53%) of parents whose child does not attend say they would be encouraged to send their child if the child asked or wanted to go. This is higher than the proportion who say they would be encouraged if the provision was free (22%),²⁸ if it made school drop-off easier (21%) or if they knew their child would get a healthy breakfast (21%).

²⁸ The EA survey question referred to “a breakfast club” rather than specifically to the free breakfast club. This was done so that “if it was free” could be listed as a potential factor that might encourage take-up. This

This suggests that, for some families, engagement is shaped not only by whether the offer is available, but by whether children see the free breakfast club as something they want to attend. This reflects qualitative evidence from current users, who report that their children are motivated to attend by the opportunity to spend time with friends and take part in activities.

Parents' perceptions of the benefits for their child also play an important role in continued engagement. Parents describe the free breakfast club as offering more than an opportunity to eat breakfast. It can provide time to socialise, build relationships and settle into the school day in a less formal environment. The value of this wider experience is reflected in one parent's account.

"It's giving room for more development. It's educational, it's helping the kids create better bonds with each other because they're in a relaxed open environment." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

Pupil interest may be particularly relevant to families who do not need the free breakfast club for childcare or food provision. For these families, messages that focus only on breakfast or before-school childcare may not address the factors most likely to encourage take-up. Qualitative findings suggest that the offer may be more relevant to these families when framed around pupils' experience of the provision, including enjoyment, social interaction, activities and a smoother transition into the school day.

The survey findings also point to the importance of pupil experience for re-engagement. Both parents of former users and parents of pupils who have never attended are similarly likely to say they would be encouraged if their child asked or wanted to go (58% and 56%, respectively). This suggests that pupil preference may affect both initial engagement and whether families return to the provision after their child stops attending. Where pupils enjoy the free breakfast club, their interest may encourage parents to reconsider the offer.

Motivations also vary according to parents' and pupils' circumstances. Parents who are not employed are more likely than other employment groups to give child-focused reasons for using the free breakfast club, including that their child enjoys going, spends time with friends, is more settled or is less likely to be late. Smoother morning routines and pupils feeling settled are also more commonly selected as motivations by parents of children with SEND than by parents of children without SEND.

Communicating the benefits for parents

Clear communication about the practical benefits of the free breakfast club may also encourage engagement. In the survey, 17% of free breakfast club non-users say they would be encouraged if the provision enabled them or their partner to work longer hours. A further 9% say they would be encouraged if the provision saved them money on childcare

figure should therefore not be interpreted as a measure of parent understanding of whether their school's breakfast club is free.

or breakfast costs. Former free breakfast club users are more likely than those who have never used the provision to identify several practical or offer-related motivations, including that the provision is free (23% compared with 15%), makes school drop-off easier (23% compared with 20%), provides a healthy breakfast (23% compared with 18%), enables longer working hours (18% compared with 14%) and saves money on childcare or breakfast costs (8% compared with 6%).

Qualitative evidence shows that the free breakfast club can support parents' ability to plan for work, training or other commitments. For some parents, reliable before-school provision creates opportunities to take up education or training. For others, the free breakfast club is important in enabling them to maintain working arrangements that would otherwise be difficult to manage around school drop-off times.

These findings suggest that communication about the free breakfast club may need to explain its potential benefits for parents as well as pupils. For some families, the offer is not only a source of breakfast or before-school care, but also practical support that can make work, training and household routines easier to manage.

Better information and visibility

Better information and visibility may also support engagement, particularly for families who are aware of the free breakfast club but do not have a clear understanding of what it involves. In the survey, 10% of free breakfast club non-users say they would be encouraged by having more information about what the free breakfast club offers, and 10% say they would be encouraged by having a say in what their child eats. These proportions are lower than pupil-led motivation, but they indicate that information remains relevant for some families.

Information needs appear to differ across parent groups. Parents from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely than white parents to say they would be encouraged by more information about what the free breakfast club offers (17% compared with 8%), having a say in what their child eats (13% compared with 8%), and more information about who can attend (8% compared with 3%). This suggests that clearer information may be particularly helpful for families who want more detail on how the provision works and whether it meets their expectations.

Qualitative evidence shows that information needs can be specific. Interviewed parents are interested in knowing more about who can attend, whether the provision is free, how booking works, what food is served, what activities pupils take part in, and whether the environment will suit their child. Parents' accounts also suggest that visibility is important because parents do not always directly observe the free breakfast club. Drop-off arrangements can mean that parents hand their children over without seeing the food, activities or atmosphere of the session. Current free breakfast club users say confidence can build through their children's feedback, staff communication and the reliability of the

provision. For non-users, greater visibility may help parents decide whether the free breakfast club is suitable for their child.

“Because breakfast club isn’t mentioned on a weekly basis, then it doesn’t get you thinking.” *Parent, free breakfast club non-user*

Clear information and greater visibility may support engagement by helping parents understand how the free breakfast club works in practice. This includes who can attend, how booking works, what food and activities are provided, and how the provision could fit their child’s needs and family routines.

Greater flexibility in provision

Greater flexibility is another enabler for engagement, particularly where families need the free breakfast club to fit around work, transport, sibling drop-offs or other practical responsibilities. For these families, flexibility in start times, drop-off arrangements and booking can make the provision easier to use.

Where provision is more flexible, this appears to be valued by current users. Among parents whose child attends the free breakfast club, 92% are satisfied with flexibility around attending and 81% are satisfied with flexibility around drop-off times. Qualitative evidence also shows that, where schools allow more flexible booking or accept pupils without prior booking, this can make the free breakfast club easier for families to use when morning arrangements change. One parent described how being able to use the provision at short notice helped when morning plans changed:

“You could just sort of turn up and so if I, at the last minute, if I thought, oh, I’m gonna need to do this, I need to drop the big girls off early, it was quite useful that I could just at the last minute, you know drop her at breakfast club.” *Parent, free breakfast club non-user*

During the observation, school staff reported that pupils would not be turned away if they arrived without a booking.

This suggests that flexibility around booking, start times, drop-off windows and attendance arrangements may support both initial engagement and continued use. For non-users, greater flexibility may help make the provision easier to fit around existing routines. For current users, it may help the provision remain useful when family routines vary or when parents need more flexible before-school care.

Summary and recommendations

Overall, the evidence shows that engagement with the free breakfast club is shaped by a combination of household routines, pupil preference, practical fit and parents’ confidence in the offer. For some families, non-use reflects existing arrangements that already meet their needs, including breakfast at home, family time in the morning or other childcare

routines. For these families, non-use does not necessarily indicate dissatisfaction with the provision.

For other families, engagement appears more likely to be affected by barriers that may be more amenable to change. These include uncertainty about who the offer is for, limited understanding of what happens during the session, concerns about food or suitability, and practical issues around timing, booking, transport and flexibility. The evidence also suggests that some of these barriers affect both non-users and current users, particularly where attendance needs to fit around changing work patterns, household routines or pupils' needs.

The strongest potential enabler is pupil interest, with parents more likely to consider the offer where pupils want to attend and where the provision is seen as enjoyable, social and supportive. However, wider enablers also matter. Clearer understanding of the offer, greater flexibility in how it can be used, and awareness of the practical benefits for parents may help more families assess whether the free breakfast club fits their circumstances. This suggests that increasing engagement is likely to depend not only on making the offer available, but on ensuring that families see it as relevant, suitable and workable within their own morning routines.

Recommendations for programme implementation

- use several parent communication channels: Schools should use multiple channels simultaneously (newsletters, apps, texts, and face-to-face communication) and at several time points over the school year. Particular attention should be paid to reaching new families, with information provided during school tours and induction processes.
- shift messaging from need to opportunity: Rather than focusing solely on childcare and breakfast provision, emphasise the broader benefits that resonate with all families: pupils' enjoyment, the calm transition into learning, opportunities for independence and choice, and cross-age friendships.
- consider extended operating hours: The current model provides 30 minutes of before-school care, but many families indicated they would value an earlier provision to accommodate work schedules. Consider extending the length of the provision (for example, schools could consider an optional earlier paid provision to support these families).
- allow for flexibility in drop-off times: This could support families who are managing multiple school or childcare drop-offs, as well as strict work schedules to manage a complex morning routine.

Recommendations for evaluation

- explore parent communications: Gather examples of parent communications materials from schools to understand how the programme is promoted.

- explore mechanisms for increased take-up: Interview parents who report not needing the programme to understand whether better information about pupil benefits could encourage uptake.

4.6 Perceived impacts of the free breakfast club

This section examines the multi-dimensional perceived impacts of the free breakfast clubs on pupils, families, and household finances. Evidence shows the provision is perceived by parents to deliver benefits across emotional wellbeing, social development, morning routines, and parental employment, with particularly pronounced effects for families with children with SEND and those managing complex circumstances.

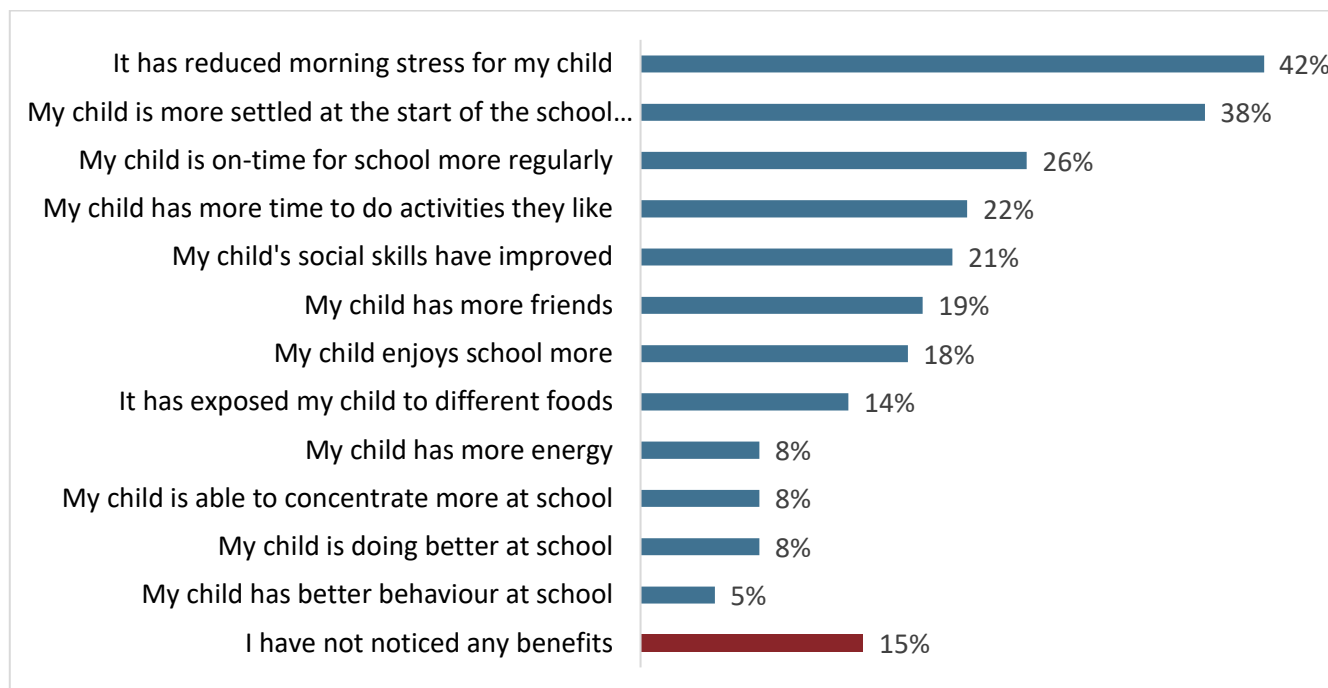
Impact on children

Attendance at the free breakfast club is associated with multiple benefits for pupils, particularly in relation to school readiness and social development. Parents report observable perceived changes in their children's emotions and behaviours, social relationships and development, and nutrition.

Emotional and behavioural benefits

Parents perceive the free breakfast club as contributing to more settled morning routines for children. The survey shows that the most commonly reported perceived benefits are the club has reduced morning stress for their child (42%) and their child is more settled at the start of the school day (38%). Qualitative evidence suggests several factors may support these perceived benefits including unstructured playtime, the transitional period it provides, consistent routines, and social opportunities.

Figure 31: Perceived benefits of attending the free breakfast club



Source: Since your child has been attending the free breakfast club, which of the following benefits have you noticed, if any? (Multi-select) Base: All respondents whose child(ren) attends the free provision: 3,140

The consistent routine supports school readiness by offering pupils a transitional period between home and school. Parents describe the provision as setting their child up in a positive mood for the day. Supporting this, nearly 1 in 5 (18%) surveyed parents agree their child enjoys school more since attending a free breakfast club.

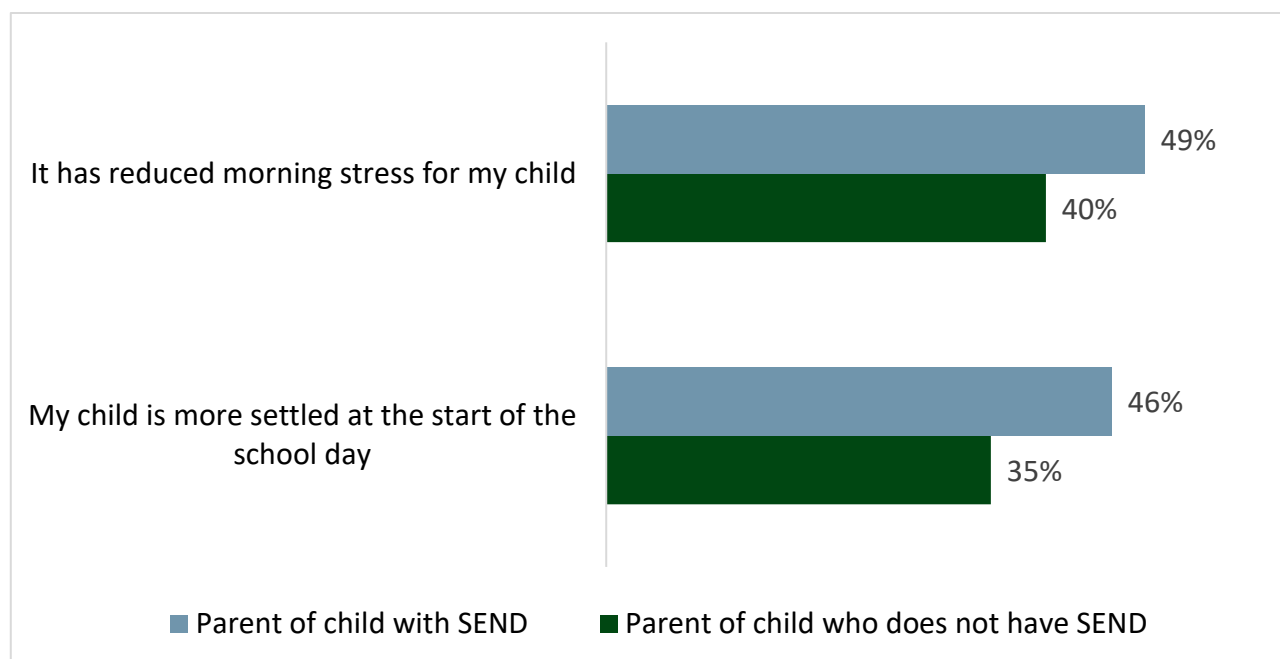
For some parents, an important aspect of the club is that it allows their children to develop independence and exercise agency. Parents report that their children enjoy the independence of choosing their own activities and trying foods they would not normally eat at home. The environment provides an opportunity for pupils to make their own choices in a safe setting, from what they eat to the activities they participate in.

"Learning how to choose things because in their everyday life as a child, you don't choose very much." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

These impacts appear more noticeable for parents of children with SEND. Among these parents, 49% report reduced morning stress and 46% indicate their child is more settled at the start of the school day, compared with 40% and 35% respectively for parents of children who do not have SEND. Parents of children with SEND say they value the small numbers at breakfast clubs, reporting that with fewer pupils, there are more opportunities for one-to-one socialisation and easier access to staff for support. The morning time is described as a transitional period, allowing pupils to adjust at their own pace before formal learning begins.

"When I bring her in, she'd probably scream or try and not get out the car. Whereas she jumped out the car, she runs in and she's happy. So that's a sign to me she's happy at breakfast club." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

Figure 32: Benefits of attending the free breakfast club for pupils with SEND



Source: Since your child has been attending the free breakfast club, which of the following benefits have you noticed, if any? (Multi-select) Base: All those who have a child with SEND: 506, All those who do not have a child with SEND: 2,259

Social development and relationships

Attendance at the free breakfast club provides valuable opportunities for pupils to interact with their peers before the school day starts. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of parents agree their child has made friends at breakfast club and 21% of parents reporting improvements in their child's social skills. Interviewed parents value the mixed-age environment, which enables pupils to form relationships across year groups that might not occur during the standard school day. They also describe the free breakfast club as giving pupils additional time with existing friends in a relaxed setting, helping to strengthen peer relationships before lessons begin.

"The bigger aspect [of the breakfast club] is the social activity and having the time, and less about the food." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

"It's made him more confident in school, and I think he's made friends in other years he wouldn't necessarily have made if he hadn't gone to breakfast clubs." *Parent, free breakfast club user*

Nutritional impacts

The free breakfast club provides regular access to breakfast for attending pupils. For some pupils, this is their first nutritious meal of the day. This provides reassurance for parents, who report feeling more relaxed knowing their children are eating. Qualitative evidence highlights parental reassurance around nutrition on mornings when pupils do not want to

eat at home. Some parents mention their children eating something at home before breakfast club, but did not express any concern about pupils eating breakfast twice. School observations confirm that pupils can decline breakfast if they have eaten at home and are never compelled to eat. Pupils are also exposed to foods that they might not have at home, with 14% of parents noticing the club has introduced their child to different foods.

“She's tried different things. She would never try jam, but she's tried jam now and stuff like that.” *Parent, free breakfast club user*

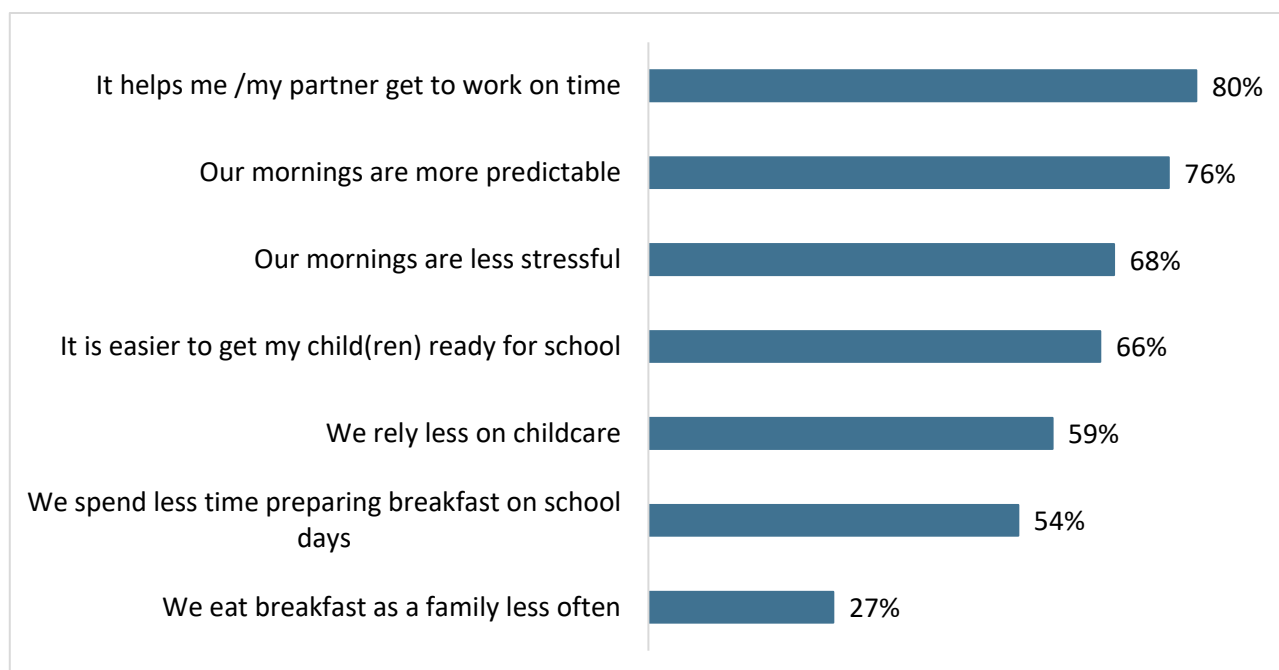
Impact on family life

Morning routines and stress reduction

Parents share that the free breakfast club helps reduce pressure and stress in the morning. Survey findings support this, with 68% of parents agreeing that their mornings are less stressful and three-quarters (76%) agreeing that their mornings are more predictable since their child started attending the free breakfast club. For many parents, the value of the provision lies in reducing the pressure of breakfast preparation itself. This is reflected in the survey, where over half (54%) of parents agree that they spend less time preparing breakfast on school days since their child started attending the free breakfast club. This is particularly important where parents are trying to manage food, time and children's preferences within a short morning window. The provision can also make mornings feel more predictable, as parents know that breakfast and before-school care are in place for their children before the school day starts and their family has a standard routine to follow on days when they are using the free breakfast club. It can also make it easier to get pupils ready for school, with 66% of parents agreeing that this has improved since their child started attending.

“It just makes mornings easier. We know what we're doing and when we're doing it. It takes a bit of pressure off.” *Parent, free breakfast club user*

Figure 33: Impact on household routines since attending the free breakfast club



Source: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact on household routines since your child(ren) started attending the free breakfast club? (Multi-select) Base: All respondents whose child(ren) attends the free provision: n=3,140; Note that the chart represents all those who chose 'Strongly agree' and 'Tend to agree'.

The time freed up in the morning also allows parents to attend other responsibilities, such as household chores, personal errands, or health appointments. Parents of children with SEND particularly value this additional time in the morning.

"I get an extra half an hour... it's given me some extra free time in the morning, which is very welcome, especially if you have a really stressed morning. I think we as SEND parents, every bit of time we can get, it's just magic... We can take every bit of 5 minutes we can get. For us it feels like gold dust." Parent, free breakfast club user

The integration of predictable routines appears particularly valuable for families managing complex circumstances, such as health challenges. Some parents describe the club as helping their family manage school mornings during difficult pregnancies or periods of recovery after surgery. The provision offers important support for parents who are also carers. One parent whose partner is disabled describes how the free breakfast club reduces the physical demands of school drop-off for their partner. Direct drop-off means their partner does not need to wait at the school gates in cold or wet weather, which helps the parent maintain employment as the family's sole earner.

These practical benefits extend to family dynamics more broadly. The consistency of the offer also supports the development of positive household habits. Parents report that the breakfast club helps establish consistent bedtime routines, as children do not want to miss

the club, and can contribute to better mood management throughout the day. This suggests that morning support can affect the entire family routine.

“Having the breakfast club actually [got] us into a good routine... It actually is a good discipline... they get scared of sleeping late... If they miss the breakfast club... sleeping early, go to bed early and rise up early in the morning.” *Parent, free breakfast club user*

Family time

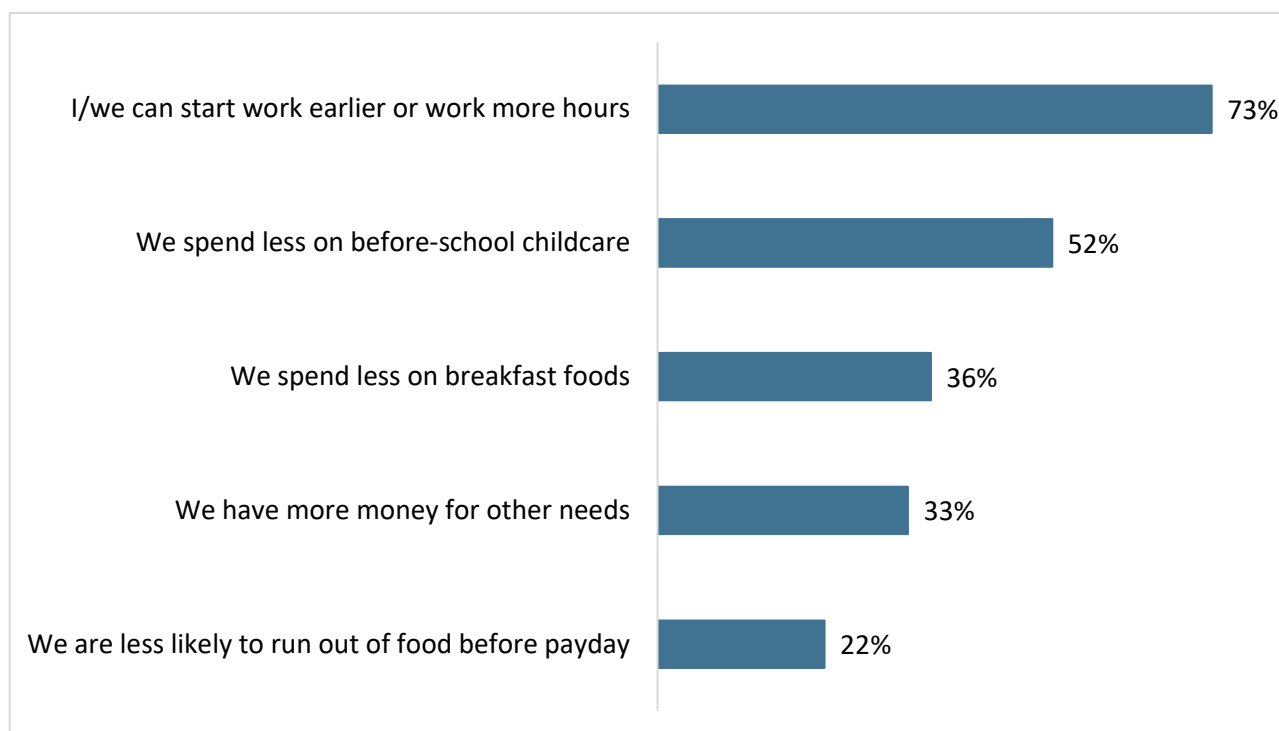
While the free breakfast club supports morning routines, survey evidence indicates it also involves thinking about how to balance family time in the mornings. Just over a quarter (27%) of parents report eating breakfast as a family less often since their child began attending. This change in family breakfast patterns is not strongly reflected in the qualitative evidence as a reported impact among current users. However, the qualitative evidence does suggest that time together in the morning is important to some families. One current user describes mornings without the free breakfast club as less rushed and as providing more time together, while some non-users describe breakfast at home and time with their child as valued parts of the morning routine. Among families not using the provision, 32% cite preferring more time with their child in the morning as a reason for non-attendance. This suggests that, for some families, decisions about using the free breakfast club may involve balancing practical support against time together before school.

Economic and employment impacts

Enabling work patterns

Enabling employment was the key motivators for parents using the free breakfast club (53%; please see section 4.3 for more). This translates into reported impacts, within the survey findings showing that the free breakfast club provides critical support for parental employment. Four in 5 (80%) parents report the provision helps them or their partner get to work on time, while nearly three-quarters (73%) indicate they can start work earlier or work more hours.

Figure 34: Impact on household finances since attending the free breakfast club



Source: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact on household finances since your child(ren) started attending the free breakfast club? (Single-select)

Base: All respondents whose child(ren) attends the free provision: n= 3,140; Note that the chart represents all those who chose 'Strongly agree' and 'Tend to agree'.

Financial savings

The free provision removes financial barriers. Parents described a range of potential savings in interviews, with estimates of up to £120 per month compared to paid alternatives. For larger families, the impact is particularly substantial, with parents noting that affording the paid-for provision for multiple children would be expensive.

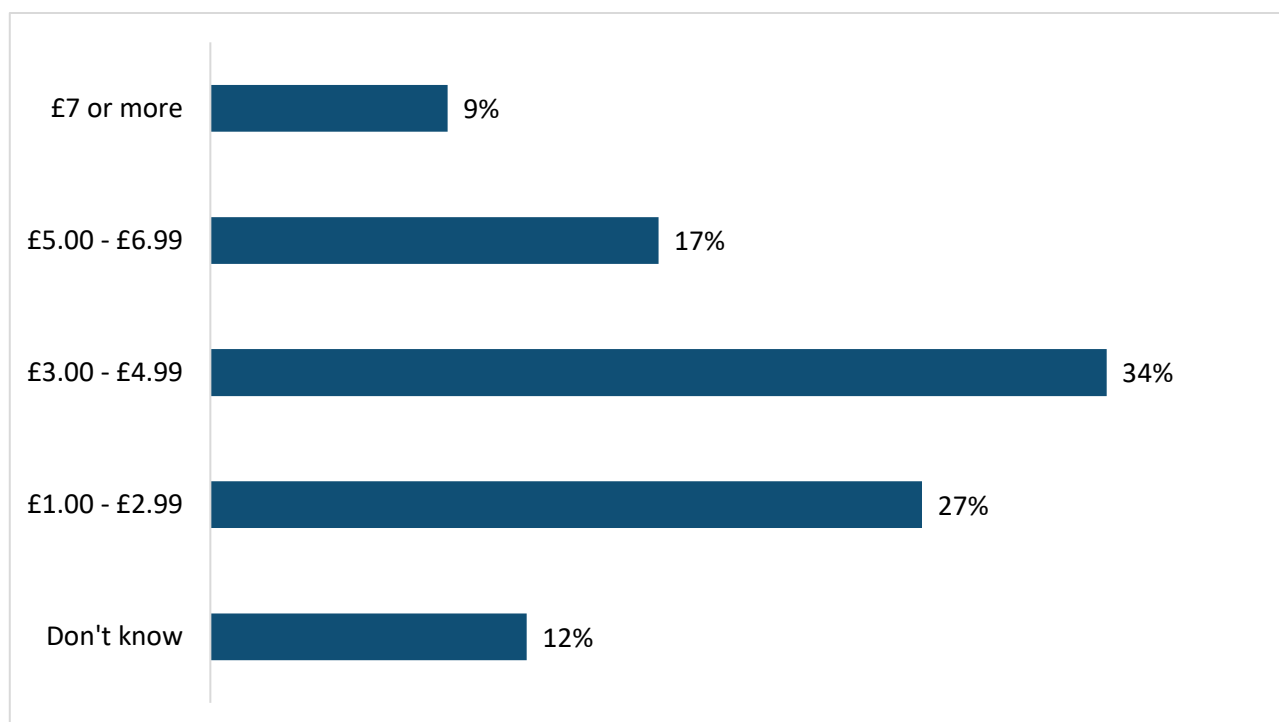
"£4 a week. I have 4 children. £16 is too expensive." Parent, free breakfast club user

Parents who previously used paid-for services note the direct financial relief of no longer having before-school childcare costs. Surveyed parents paying for breakfast clubs report spending an average of £3.44 per child per day, with costs ranging from under £3 for 27% of users to £7 or more for 9% of families. A quarter of parents using paid provision (25%) access tax-free childcare benefits to offset costs, rising to 28% among non-FSM families.

Additionally, interviewed parents report saving money on groceries, as they no longer need to buy as many breakfast items.

"The financial benefits to it for parents especially... not having to think about cereal, milk and everything else in the morning because it will be provided for." Parent, free breakfast club user

Figure 35: Cost of paid breakfast clubs per day



Source: How much do you pay per day for one child to attend the paid breakfast club? Base: All respondents whose child(ren) attends the paid provision (Numeric value up to £20): 1,106

When directly asked about financial impacts, over half (52%) of parents agree they spend less on before-school childcare, while 36% report spending less on breakfast foods since they started using the free breakfast club. One third (33%) of parents state they have more money for other household needs.

For some, the impact is even more profound, with over 1 in 5 (22%) parents reporting they are less likely to run out of food before payday. This suggests that for some families, the financial benefit of free breakfast club provision affects household food security.

Career and education opportunities

The free breakfast club may enable parents to pursue development opportunities alongside family responsibilities. The reliable morning provision allows some parents to consider education or training that would otherwise conflict with school drop-off times.

"This September, I want to do a course. If the breakfast wasn't there, I would be thinking who would babysit or can I even do the course?"

Parent, free breakfast club user

This suggests that the provision's impact extends beyond immediate employment support to potentially influence longer-term career trajectories. By reducing uncertainty around morning childcare, parents report that the free breakfast club enables forward planning for work or study commitments. The provision's reliability and predictability are valued by parents with the certainty it provides for their daily routines.

Summary and recommendations

Overall, parents perceive a range of positive effects on their children's emotional wellbeing, social development, and nutritional intake. The breakfast club aids morning routines and is particularly valuable for families managing complex circumstances including health challenges, disabilities, and caring responsibilities. Parents of children with SEND particularly value small amounts of freed time, using it for essential tasks and work preparation. Whilst families eat breakfast together less often, parents report that calmer mornings improve the quality of family time.

The provision supports with parental employment, with parents reporting it helps them get to work on time and being able to work earlier or additional hours. In terms of financial benefits, less is being spent on before-school childcare and on breakfast foods. The breakfast club also enables longer-term planning, supporting parents to pursue education and training opportunities.

The evidence suggests that parents see the free breakfast club as offering a range of benefits to their families and children. In addition to providing nutritious breakfast, it also functions as comprehensive family support that enables employment, reduces household stress, and supports child development. These multi-dimensional impacts showcase the importance of viewing breakfast clubs as integrated support systems rather than as isolated food programmes.

Recommendations for programme delivery

- maintain multi-faceted approach: Continue providing unstructured play, transitional time, and social opportunities alongside nutritional provision, as multiple factors contribute to positive outcomes.
- find balance in universal provision and small group setting: For some pupils, particularly those with SEND, a smaller, calmer breakfast club experience appears particularly beneficial. Schools may need to consider how to offer this small group experience while also supporting a universal provision open to all.
- preserve child-centred approach: Maintain the gentle, no-pressure approach to food provision and continue offering choice in activities to support independence.

Recommendations for evaluation

- develop comprehensive outcome measures: Track impacts across multiple domains including emotional wellbeing, social development, family stress, employment outcomes, and financial benefits.
- create SEND-specific indicators: Given differences in perceived benefits for this group, conduct sub-group analysis for pupils with SEND and their families, where possible.

- incorporate teacher perspectives: Some outcomes will be best observed by classroom teachers and should be incorporated in the evaluation approach.

5 Conclusion

Summary of findings

Schools' current delivery models: Schools demonstrate flexible use of space, typically using 2 spaces for eating and activities, with staff-to-pupil ratios ranging from 1:5 to 1:13 in mainstream settings and 1:1 ratios in special school settings. Free breakfast clubs operate with settled atmospheres requiring minimal behaviour management, offering comprehensive hot and cold food options with effective dietary accommodation and minimal waste. The transition from paid to free provision maintains consistent experience, with clear signals ensuring smooth movement into the formal school day.

Pupil engagement: The environment promotes pupil autonomy through meaningful choice in food, activities, and social interactions, with pupils demonstrating high engagement and spontaneous peer support. Pupils visibly enjoy the sessions – they sing about their food, interact with the activities, and engage with their peers.

Family morning routines: Free breakfast club users are less likely to eat breakfast at home (74% vs 94% non-users) and use screens less, suggesting use of the provision may change morning activities. Forty-five percent use free breakfast clubs for before-school childcare, with usage strongly correlating with employment status (66% of non-employed parents need no childcare versus 28 to 29% of full-time workers).

Parents' attitudes and experiences: While 92% of parents know about the provision, 69% of parents aware of the free breakfast club report their child attends, with 44% attending daily and highest usage among parents in full-time employment (79%). Parents of children with SEND report higher daily attendance (49% vs 43% overall) and particularly value the calm, structured morning transitions.

Enabling employment is the primary motivation for using the free breakfast club (53%), followed by children's enjoyment (43%), with satisfaction high across all aspects of delivery (67% satisfied overall, 90% or more for safety, flexibility and space). Eighty percent of parents report their children enjoy the activities, though some desire healthier food options and better handover communication.

Barriers and enablers: The research identifies multiple reasons for non-engagement with nearly half (49%) of non-users citing adequate existing arrangements and nearly a third (32%) preferring family breakfast time. Child preference is a key barrier, with 26% reporting their child does not want to attend (rising to 38% among former breakfast club users). Understanding of eligibility varies with some misconceptions that only those eligible for FSM are able to make use of the free provision. Practical concerns include timing

issues (17%), food concerns (9%), and booking inflexibility (7%), whilst misconceptions about eligibility persist. However, child interest emerges as the strongest enabler (53% would send their child to the free breakfast club if their child asked to go), alongside providing more visibility and information (particularly for ethnic minority families), flexible booking systems, and clear communication about practical benefits for parents.

Perceived impact of the free breakfast club: The provision is perceived by parents as delivering substantial benefits for pupils, with 42% of parents reporting reduced morning stress and 38% sharing their children are more settled at the start of the school day. Social development is notable, with 72% of parents noting making friends as a benefit and 21% sharing that their children are showing improved social skills. Perceived impacts are higher for pupils with SEND (49% reduced stress, 46% more settled). For families, 68% report less stressful mornings and 76% more predictable routines. Parents perceive impacts on their employment, with 80% of parents able to get to work on time and 73% able to work more hours. Financial benefits include reduced spending on childcare (52%) and breakfast foods (36%), with 22% less likely to run out of food before payday.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, there are three streams of recommendations, which focus on policy and strategy, delivery, and parent engagement.

Policy and strategic communication

Strengthen the programme narrative beyond breakfast provision. The evidence demonstrates that free breakfast clubs deliver multiple interconnected benefits that extend beyond food provision. The Department should consider strengthening the programme branding and communication strategy to reflect this broader value proposition. Rather than "breakfast clubs," consider terminology such as "before-school clubs" or "morning clubs" that better captures the comprehensive nature of the provision. This re-emphasis should emphasise the programme as offering a supported transition into the school day ('soft start') that can foster pupils' social development and cross-age relationship building while providing an opportunity eat a nutritious breakfast. To appeal to parents, it should also focus on the free breakfast club as enabling parental employment and reducing household stress. This positions the free breakfast club as one component of a holistic morning experience. This shift in narrative would help address the 49% of non-users who cite "lack of need" by demonstrating relevance beyond food provision alone.

Delivery

Maintain flexibility whilst ensuring core standards. Schools should continue to be encouraged to maintain flexibility in their delivery models, as the research demonstrates successful implementation across varied approaches. However, core standards should include provision of varying food options where feasible, dedicated spaces that allow for

both eating and activities, and maintenance of the calm, child-led atmosphere that distinguishes breakfast clubs from formal school time.

Ensure SEND provision meets the needs of attending pupils. Given the perceived benefits for pupils with SEND (49% reduced stress vs 42% overall), all schools could consider establishing quiet zones or 'soft start' spaces within breakfast club provision.

Address operational improvements. Schools should establish clear handover protocols between breakfast club staff and classroom teachers to ensure important messages reach the appropriate staff. Staffing resilience should be strengthened to avoid over-reliance on single staff members. Schools should also review food provision to ensure variety, nutritional balance, and cultural diversity, with regular rotation of options to maintain pupil interest.

Maximise booking flexibility. Schools should consider offering multiple booking options including term-long arrangements for regular users, weekly booking for variable needs, and same-day walk-in access where possible. The research shows that families particularly value models that remove barriers to spontaneous use. Where booking systems are necessary, it would be useful to also accommodate last-minute changes to support families with unpredictable schedules.

Parent engagement

Implement universal messaging strategies. All communications should explicitly state that breakfast clubs are free and universal for all pupils, not restricted to FSM-eligible families. Schools should use multiple channels simultaneously (newsletters, apps, texts, and face-to-face communication) rather than relying on single methods. Particular attention should be paid to reaching new families, with information provided during school tours and induction processes.

Create targeted engagement for under-represented groups. Develop specific outreach strategies for FSM-eligible families (who show lower usage despite potentially greater need) and ethnic minority families (who express higher information needs). Consider translated materials and community champions who can address cultural concerns and misconceptions.

Shift messaging from need to opportunity. Rather than focusing solely on childcare and breakfast provision, emphasise the broader benefits that resonate with all families: pupils' enjoyment (one of the strongest enablers at 53%), the calm transition into learning, opportunities for independence and choice, and cross-age friendships. Frame the breakfast club as enhancing pupils' school experience rather than addressing deficits. As one of the key motivators for parents to use the free breakfast club is enabling employment (53%) this is also a key opportunity that could be highlighted.

Increase visibility of provision. Create regular opportunities for parents to see free breakfast clubs in action through taster sessions, open mornings, or photo displays (with

appropriate permissions). Where possible, provide detailed information about daily activities, food menus, and the atmosphere through school websites and newsletters. Share pupils' feedback and experiences to help parents understand what their child would gain from attendance.

Enable child-led promotion. Since child interest is the strongest enabler, implement strategies that allow pupils to experience and promote free breakfast clubs themselves. Consider 'bring a friend' weeks, pupil ambassadors who can talk to peers about their experience and letting pupils design breakfast club posters or parent invitations to open mornings. Ensure children understand they can attend occasionally rather than daily if preferred.

Address practical communication gaps. Develop clear factsheets addressing common misconceptions, explicitly stating universal eligibility, free provision, flexible attendance patterns, and that places are not limited. Create separate information for working parents (emphasising employment support) and non-working parents (emphasising child development benefits). Establish feedback mechanisms to understand why families stop attending and address issues promptly.

Support incremental engagement. Recognise that many families successfully combine free breakfast club attendance with family breakfast time on different days. Promote flexible attendance patterns that allow families to maintain valued routines while accessing support when needed. Avoid all-or-nothing messaging that might deter families who value morning family time but could benefit from occasional use.

Annex 1: Effective strategies for parent engagement

This annex presents methodological learning from the recruitment and participation of parents and carers in the qualitative strand of the evaluation. It considers the effectiveness of the recruitment approach, participation in interviews and focus groups, and the implications for future research with parents and carers.

The analysis draws on recruitment monitoring data, the fieldwork tracker²⁹ and qualitative evidence from interviews and focus groups with users and non-users of the free breakfast club. The findings are intended to inform the design of future research undertaken as part of the national rollout evaluation.

Recruitment effectiveness

Recruitment approach

Recruitment followed a test-and-learn approach, using schools as the main access route to parents and carers. This meant that the research team tested different approaches to communication, follow-up and scheduling during fieldwork, and adapted the recruitment approach where gaps in the achieved sample remained.

Parents and carers were recruited through participating schools. Schools were provided with standardised recruitment materials, including newsletter or email copy and a link to an expression of interest survey, to share through their preferred communication channels. The survey asked parents and carers whether they were willing to take part in the qualitative research. It also captured demographic information, identified users and non-users of the free breakfast club, and supported purposive sampling for interviews and focus groups.

Recruitment began in December, when the first email was sent to 8 participating schools. By the Christmas break, 106 parents and carers had registered interest. The research team emailed these parents and carers before Christmas and followed up in early January by email and telephone to arrange interviews and focus groups. Schools were also asked to send reminder communications to parents and carers during the recruitment period.

The recruitment approach was adapted as fieldwork progressed. Where groups were underrepresented, schools were asked to send more targeted reminders, including to specific groups such as fathers and male carers. Schools also supported recruitment for in-person focus groups during observation visits. In some cases, these were arranged as separate sessions; in others, they were linked to existing school activities such as parent coffee mornings.

²⁹ The fieldwork tracker is a project monitoring tool used by the research team to record scheduled and completed interviews and focus group places, including the participation method and free breakfast club usage status where recorded.

Two additional schools were recruited specifically to support parental engagement. These schools were selected based on the demographic characteristics of the parents and carers who were underrepresented in the achieved sample. This helped the research team to address gaps in participation and strengthen the range of perspectives included in the qualitative evidence.

The recruitment monitoring data records 152 expressions of interest across 10 schools. The number of expressions of interest varied by school, ranging from 7 to 26. This indicates the value of recruiting across multiple schools, as the number of parents and carers willing to participate varied between settings.

Conversion patterns

The final fieldwork tracker records 59 scheduled participation records. Of these, 45 resulted in completed participation, representing a completion rate of 76%. Overall, the 59 scheduled participation records are equivalent to 36% of the 152 expressions of interest received, while the 45 completed participation records are equivalent to 28%.

Table 6: Progression through the qualitative recruitment process

Recruitment stage	Number of parents or participation records	Conversion rate
Expressions of interest received	152	No data
Scheduled participation records in the fieldwork tracker	59	39% of expressions of interest
Completed interviews or focus group places	45	76% of scheduled participation records
Completed participation	45	30% of expressions of interest

Source: BCEA qualitative fieldwork tracker

There is attrition between the initial expression of interest and the scheduling of a session, as well as between scheduling and completion. The test-and-learn approach indicated that longer gaps between parents and carers registering interest and the research team arranging participation could weaken engagement. This was particularly relevant where parents and carers completed the expression of interest survey before the Christmas break, but interviews and focus groups were scheduled after the holidays.

The findings suggest that prompt follow-up is important for maintaining engagement after parents and carers complete an expression of interest survey, particularly when recruitment takes place around school holidays.

Recruitment outcomes and engagement patterns

The findings in this section should be interpreted as methodological learning from a relatively small qualitative recruitment exercise. Subgroup comparisons are included where they provide useful insight into recruitment and retention patterns, but they should be treated with caution because the number of scheduled participation records is small.

Recruitment was primarily routed through school communications, most commonly newsletters and emails. This meant that initial engagement depended on parents and carers noticing, reading and acting on messages from their child's school. Engagement varied between schools and was not directly proportional to school size. For example, one school with around 50 pupils generated 16 expressions of interest, while another school with around 300 pupils also generated 16 expressions of interest. A mid-sized school, with around 160 pupils, generated 26 expressions of interest. This suggests that factors other than school size, including the visibility of school communications and relationships between schools and families, may have influenced engagement.

The test-and-learn approach also led to changes in the recruitment materials. Initial materials referred mainly to breakfast clubs. This may have meant that some parents and carers whose pupils did not use the free breakfast club saw the research as less relevant to them. The wording was therefore broadened to refer to morning routines, so that non-users as well as users were more likely to recognise that their experiences were relevant to the research.

The expression of interest survey was completed by 152 parents and carers. Of these, 117 reported that their child used the free breakfast club and 34 reported that their child did not use it. One parent or carer preferred not to say. Users therefore accounted for 77% of expression of interest survey completes and non-users accounted for 22%.

The fieldwork tracker indicates that 41 scheduled participation records relate to users and 17 relate to non-users. The completion rate is 73% for users and 88% for non-users.

Table 7: Expressions of interest, scheduled participation and completed participation by free breakfast club usage

Usage status	Expressions of Interest	Scheduled participation records	Completed participants	Completion rate among scheduled records
Users	117	41	30	73%
Non-users	34	17	15	88%
Usage status not recorded	1	1	0	No data
Total	152	59	45	76%

Source: BCEA qualitative fieldwork tracker

The findings suggest that non-users were less represented at the expression of interest stage but were not more difficult to retain once a session had been scheduled. This indicates that recruitment challenges may have related more to initial engagement, including whether non-users saw the research as relevant to them, than to participation after scheduling. This supports the change made to recruitment materials, which broadened the framing from breakfast clubs to morning routines.

Participation in interviews and focus groups

The research provides parents and carers with an opportunity to participate in an individual interview or a focus group. The final fieldwork tracker records 39 scheduled interview records and 20 scheduled focus group places. Of these, 30 interviews and 15 focus group places are completed.

Completion rates are similar for the 2 methods: 77% for interviews and 75% for focus group places. The findings therefore do not indicate that either method is consistently more effective at retaining parents once participation has been arranged.

Table 8: Scheduled and completed participation by research method

Research method	Scheduled participation records	Completed participants	Completion rate
Individual interviews	39	30	77%
Focus groups	20	15	75%
Total	59	45	76%

Source: BCEA qualitative fieldwork tracker

The 2 methods play complementary roles. Individual interviews support in-depth exploration of parents' circumstances and experiences. Focus groups provide an opportunity for parents to reflect on shared experiences and develop points through discussion.

The qualitative evidence indicates that parents' and carers' preferences vary according to their personal circumstances and confidence participating in different formats. No single approach is appropriate for all parents.

Survey responses also show varied preferences by free breakfast club usage. Among users who answered the question, one-to-one interviews were the most preferred option (32%), followed by either an interview or focus group (29%). Among non-users who answered the question, preferences were more mixed: 32% selected 'none of the above', 26% selected either an interview or focus group, and 23% preferred a one-to-one interview.

Table 9: Preferred qualitative participation methods by free breakfast club usage

Preferred participation method	Users %	Non-users %
One-to-one interview	32%	23%
Focus group	15%	13%
Either one-to-one interview or focus group	29%	26%
None of the above	15%	32%
Prefer not to say	8%	6%

Base: parents and carers who completed the expression of interest survey and answered the research method preference question: users (117), non-users (34).

Source: BCEA expression of interest survey

The survey findings should be interpreted alongside wider learning about who was reached through the recruitment approach. Parents and carers who engaged with the research tended to have a clear relationship to the free breakfast club, either as active users or as non-users who had made a clear decision not to use the provision. The implications for reaching parents and carers with lower awareness of the offer are discussed in the lessons for future research.

Reflections on participation formats

Individual interviews are often preferred because they offer flexibility. Parents and carers describe interviews as easier to fit around work and caring responsibilities, particularly where sessions can be undertaken by telephone or online. A one-to-one format also provides greater scope to rearrange a session where an unexpected work meeting or family commitment arises.

Some parents and carers prefer interviews because they feel more comfortable expressing their views in a one-to-one setting. They report that focus groups can be dominated by more confident participants and that it may be more difficult to raise questions or explain a personal experience fully in a group. Some parents also describe anxiety or shyness about group participation.

Focus groups nevertheless remain valuable for some parents. Parents participating in group discussions describe the benefit of hearing different perspectives and developing ideas in response to the experiences of others. Some parents prefer a face-to-face group setting because it feels more personal and supports a more natural discussion.

Online surveys are also valued by some parents because they can be completed at a convenient time. However, other parents feel that surveys provide less opportunity to explain their views in detail or ask questions. The evidence therefore supports the use of a mixed-method approach.

Lessons for future research

Challenges for parent recruitment

The recruitment process identified several challenges that should inform future research with parents and carers. These related to converting initial interest into participation, contacting parents and carers, maintaining engagement over time, attendance after booking, and reliance on school communication channels.

There was a clear reduction between parents and carers completing the expression of interest survey and taking part in an interview or focus group. Of the 152 completed expressions of interest, 45 resulted in completed participation. This means that 30% of completed expressions of interest converted to participation.

Issues with being able to contact parents limited conversion from interest to confirmed participation. Missing, incorrect or unusable phone numbers, repeated call failures and

unanswered voicemail messages reduced the research team's ability to follow up effectively. Of the 99 phone numbers where contact was attempted, 56 were not usable.

Longer gaps between expression of interest and scheduling also appeared to weaken engagement. This was particularly relevant where parents and carers completed the expression of interest survey before the Christmas break, but interviews and focus groups were scheduled after the holidays.

Participation was not guaranteed once a session had been booked. The fieldwork tracker recorded 10 no-shows across interviews and focus groups.

Reliance on school communications also created uneven reach. Recruitment depended on parents and carers noticing and acting on newsletters or emails from schools. This may have limited reach to parents and carers who are less engaged with routine school communications.

Recommendations for recruiting parents for research participation

Offer a choice of participation methods

Future research should continue to offer a choice of participation methods where possible. Individual telephone or online interviews are likely to support participation among parents and carers balancing work and caring commitments. Focus groups remain appropriate where the research would benefit from interaction between participants. Online surveys can complement these approaches by providing an option that parents and carers can complete in their own time.

Provide schools with easy-to-use recruitment materials

Schools should be provided with easy-to-use recruitment materials that can be shared through a range of communication channels. In this research, schools were able to share the research opportunity quickly and easily using standardised newsletter or email copy and a survey link. This reduced the administrative burden on schools and supported consistent communication about the research.

Initial school communication appeared to be the strongest point of engagement. Parents and carers were more likely to respond at the first recruitment prompt, indicating that well-timed school newsletters or emails can generate interest without extensive follow-up.

Frame recruitment broadly to include users and non-users

Recruitment materials should make clear that parents and carers can participate regardless of whether their child uses the free breakfast club. This is important because the perspectives of non-users are needed to understand barriers to take-up and the extent to which the provision meets the needs of different families.

The test-and-learn approach indicates that recruitment framing can affect who engages with the research. Initial recruitment materials framed participation around breakfast clubs, while explicitly inviting non-users to take part. After lower response rates from non-users, the materials were reframed more broadly around morning routines. Interest among non-users increased after these revised materials were used. This suggests that broader framing can help non-users recognise that the research is relevant to them.

Reach parents and carers with lower awareness of the offer

Parents and carers who engaged most readily with the research tended to have a clear relationship to the free breakfast club. This included active users, who had direct experience of the provision and clear views to share. It also included decisive non-users, who had consciously decided that the free breakfast club was not the right fit for their family.

The qualitative research did not appear to include parents and carers who were completely unaware of, or uninformed about, the free breakfast club. Alongside engaged users and decisive non-users, there may therefore be a group of parents and carers who have more limited awareness of the offer, its purpose or their eligibility to use it. These parents and carers may not have made an active and informed decision about whether to use the provision.

This group may also be less engaged with routine school communications, such as newsletters or emails. As a result, they may have been less likely to notice or respond to recruitment communications or may not have strongly identified as either users or non-users of the free breakfast club. This group may therefore be under-represented in the qualitative evidence, although the size and characteristics of this group are not fully known. They are likely to be an important audience for future engagement.

Maintain prompt follow-up after expressions of interest

Parents and carers should be contacted promptly after submitting an expression of interest. Confirmation messages and reminders should be used to reduce the likelihood of non-attendance. Where a parent or carer is unable to attend, an opportunity to rearrange the session should be offered where feasible.

Prompt follow-up appeared to support conversion from interest to participation. Contacting parents and carers within 1 to 2 days of completing the expression of interest survey appeared to support booking rates. Longer gaps between expression of interest and scheduling, such as pre-Christmas recruitment followed by post-Christmas booking, appeared to weaken engagement.

Use direct phone contact alongside email follow-up

Direct phone contact improved booking outcomes where parents and carers were successfully reached. In this research, phone calls helped convert interest into confirmed interviews, resulting in 6 additional interviews from 43 potential parents and carers.

However, phone contact should be used alongside email or other routes, rather than as the only follow-up method. Contact-ability issues, including missing or unusable phone numbers and unanswered calls, limited the effectiveness of telephone follow-up for some parents and carers.

Use reminders within a short timeframe

Multiple contact attempts had some benefit. Follow-up reminders increased engagement, although gains reduced with each additional attempt. This suggests that persistence can support recruitment, but reminders should take place within a short timeframe while initial interest remains active.

Use existing school events to support in-person engagement

In-person focus groups may be easier to arrange when they are linked to existing school events. In this research, 2 of the 3 in-person focus groups were arranged after coffee mornings or parent meet-ups that had already been organised by schools. This suggests that parent and carer engagement may be easier when research participation is connected to activities that parents and carers are already attending.

Future research should consider scheduling in-person focus groups alongside existing school events where this is practical and appropriate. This may reduce the additional effort required from parents and carers and make participation feel more familiar and accessible.

Monitor the achieved sample throughout fieldwork

Recruitment monitoring should be reviewed regularly to identify gaps in the achieved sample. Where particular groups are under-represented, additional schools or more targeted recruitment routes may be required. The current research indicates the value of approaching additional schools where gaps remain.

Record recruitment progression consistently

Future monitoring should record progression through each stage of recruitment at an individual level: initial expression of interest, contact by the research team, scheduling, completion and, where relevant, cancellation or non-attendance. Usage status and other relevant subgroup characteristics should be recorded consistently at each stage.

This would enable future research to distinguish between barriers to initial recruitment and barriers to continued participation. It would also support more robust subgroup analysis.

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ISO 27001 International standard for information security designed to ensure the selection of adequate and proportionate security controls. Ipsos UK was the first research company in the UK to be awarded this in August 2008.



The UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the UK Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA) Ipsos UK is required to comply with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the UK Data Protection Act (DPA). These cover the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy.



HMG Cyber Essentials Cyber Essentials defines a set of controls which, when properly implemented, provide organisations with basic protection from the most prevalent forms of threat coming from the internet. This is a government-backed, key deliverable of the UK's National Cyber Security Programme. Ipsos UK was assessed and validated for certification in 2016.



Fair Data Ipsos UK is signed up as a "Fair Data" company by agreeing to adhere to twelve core principles. The principles support and complement other standards such as ISOs, and the requirements of data protection legislation.



Department
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