

Nourishing Our Future

Research Briefing: Preschools

#NOFessex



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Researched by



Funded by



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PRESCHOOL BRIEFING

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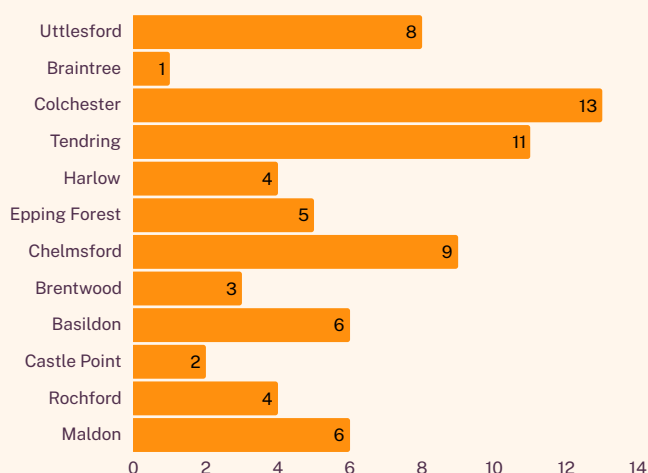
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Nationally, preschools are classed as group-based providers in the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) group-based setting category, along with day nurseries, as defined in the annual Childcare and Early Years Providers Survey (DfE, 2024a). At the time of the Nourishing Our Future (NOF) research, there were 21,200 group-based providers operating nationally, 2,500 (38%) of which were based in the East of England (DfE, 2024). In Essex there are 298 preschools, of which a total of **67 preschool** practitioners took part in the NOF project, 100% of these settings confirming that they were an Ofsted registered preschool setting in Essex, thus achieving engagement from 22% of these provider types. This report highlights unique insights from 67 preschool settings gathered throughout the Nourishing Our Future research, that comprised a survey, workshops, photo activities and conference.

A **preschool** is an Ofsted registered early years setting that provides sessional-based education and care for children aged three to five during term time. Preschools most often operate as morning and afternoon sessions between school hours of 9.00am - 3.30pm rather than full-day care, and may be attached to primary schools or run as a voluntary or private organisation from a base within community spaces, such as village or church halls, or purpose built buildings. Preschools follow the EYFS grouped-based framework (DfE, 2024b) to ensure a high-quality provision of early education and care for children prior to transitioning to school. Many parents utilise the 30 hours government-funded scheme available to three and four-year-olds to support their child in becoming familiar with group-based education at preschool, prior to starting reception year at school. Children attending preschool will sometimes also attend a childminder setting to stretch their childcare over the full working day.

Preschool engagement by Essex District



*Five survey respondents work across multiple preschools increasing the number of settings represented across districts to a total of 72 preschools.

For a fuller introduction to the NOF project please see the conference report, available at the website: <https://nourishingourfuture.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/digital-nof-conference-report-march2025-1.pdf>





DEPRIVATION DECILES

The setting postcodes shared by participating preschools through an online survey were mapped to the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) postcode reader, to determine the level of deprivation of that specific area. The highest percentage of preschool settings who took part in the survey are located in the mid-range IDACI deciles, with six settings located in the highest areas of deprivation in Essex; Tendring and Colchester and a further 12 settings located in the lowest levels of deprivation in Essex; the latter includes three preschools in Uttlesford, one in Chelmsford, one in Epping Forest, one in Brentwood, two in Rochford and one in a specific area of Colchester.

8.9%

6 preschools located in the highest areas of deprivation (IDACI 1-2)

32.8%

22 preschools located in the higher-mid areas of deprivation (IDACI 3-5)

40.2%

27 preschools located in the lower-mid areas of deprivation (IDACI 6-8)

17.9%

12 preschools located in the lowest areas of deprivation (IDACI 9-10)

PHOTO ENGAGEMENT

The photos displayed throughout this report depict food and meals consumed by children in preschool settings. In addition, they showcase examples of food education activities offered by preschools across Essex. Through the 6 month NOF research project, a total of 329 photos were submitted by preschools, depicting a 'Typical Day on Our Plate', and 76 photos illustrated food education 'Beyond Our Plate'. One preschool explains the complexity of food provision in preschool settings:

'We are a packed lunch setting so children bring their own food, we encourage the parents to send in healthy food in lunch boxes, with one treat but not chocolate, we always encourage the children to eat their healthy food before the treat, we offer cereal for breakfast and fruit for snack.'



Workshop

33 Preschools



A Typical Day on Our Plate

329 Photos



Beyond Our Plate

76 Photos

FACILITIES AND MEALS

Offering sessional-based early education, preschools are varied in their access to food preparation facilities. A total of 57% of preschools reported only having access to basic kitchen equipment such as a fridge or microwave. Whilst other preschools have access to a full commercial kitchen. This diversity is very much dependent upon the type of building space in which the preschool is located.

We don't have the facilities ourselves to cook meals for our children, however, we do promote healthy eating through some group cooking sessions, talking during snack preparation with the children, and some activities we have on the shelves.



94%

Have a food policy in place

Water bottle
freely available

76%

Basic kitchen

57%



64%

Don't provide breakfast

Parent-
provided lunch

69%

Don't provide
tea/dinner

75%

'We are based within a school building although we are an independent setting and parents have the option of ordering a hot meal cooked by the kitchen. We have no input into the menu unfortunately'

Sessional hours account for the high percentage of preschools who do not offer breakfast or tea. Food provision in this type of setting is primarily morning and afternoon snack as well as lunch.

[illegible]

A cartoon illustration of a yellow banana and an orange. The banana is on the right, curved, with two small green spots and a small green stem. The orange is on the left, round, with two small brown spots and a small green stem. They are both smiling.

PARENT-PROVIDED FOOD



75%

Parent conversations



39%

Display menus

WORKING WITH PARENTS

Parent-provided food via lunchboxes is common in preschool settings (69%), primarily due to the location of their setting often being in community spaces, which can result in limited access to basic kitchen facilities. In addition, the morning and afternoon sessional based approach, lends itself to children bringing lunch with them via a parent-provided lunchbox. Preschools demonstrate innovation in working with parents to promote healthy lunchboxes, 75% of communication is carried out daily at drop off or pick up times, 39% display weekly menus and 36% share information on food and nutrition via newsletters or email.

'We share ideas with parents every other month on healthy eating tips. The Healthy Lunch Box Book is a good resource in our setting that we share with the children and we send ideas to parents, when their children start staying for lunch, as to what a healthy lunch looks like.'

NUTRITIONAL CONTENT

PHOTO ANALYSIS

As part of the photo activity, a sample of 414 photos were analysed for the nutritional portion size composition. Most photos were of home-packed foods (87%), with the other food provided by the settings (13%). These photos were assessed against the Eat Better Start Better guidelines to determine the suitability of the portion sizes provided. The guidelines report typical portion sizes for:

- Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates - Page 17
- Fruit and vegetables – Page 19
- Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins – Page 21
- Dairy and alternatives – Page 23
- Desserts, puddings and cakes – Page 25

Using this guide, the typical portion sizes recommended by the Eat Better Start Better guidelines were compared to the provided photos.



KEY TRENDS

Starchy carbohydrates and desserts are well-aligned with portion size guidelines.

Fruit and veg slightly exceed the target, which is a positive trend.

Starchy Carbs

Well aligned

Fruit & Veg

Slightly over

Proteins are notably lower, falling well short of recommended portions.

Dairy intake is a slightly low, but closer to the target than protein.

Proteins

Significantly under

Dairy

Slightly under

THE LUNCHBOX DEBATE

Throughout our work with early years practitioners, parents, and professionals in the public health and education sectors, lunchboxes have consistently emerged as a topic of concern and discussion.

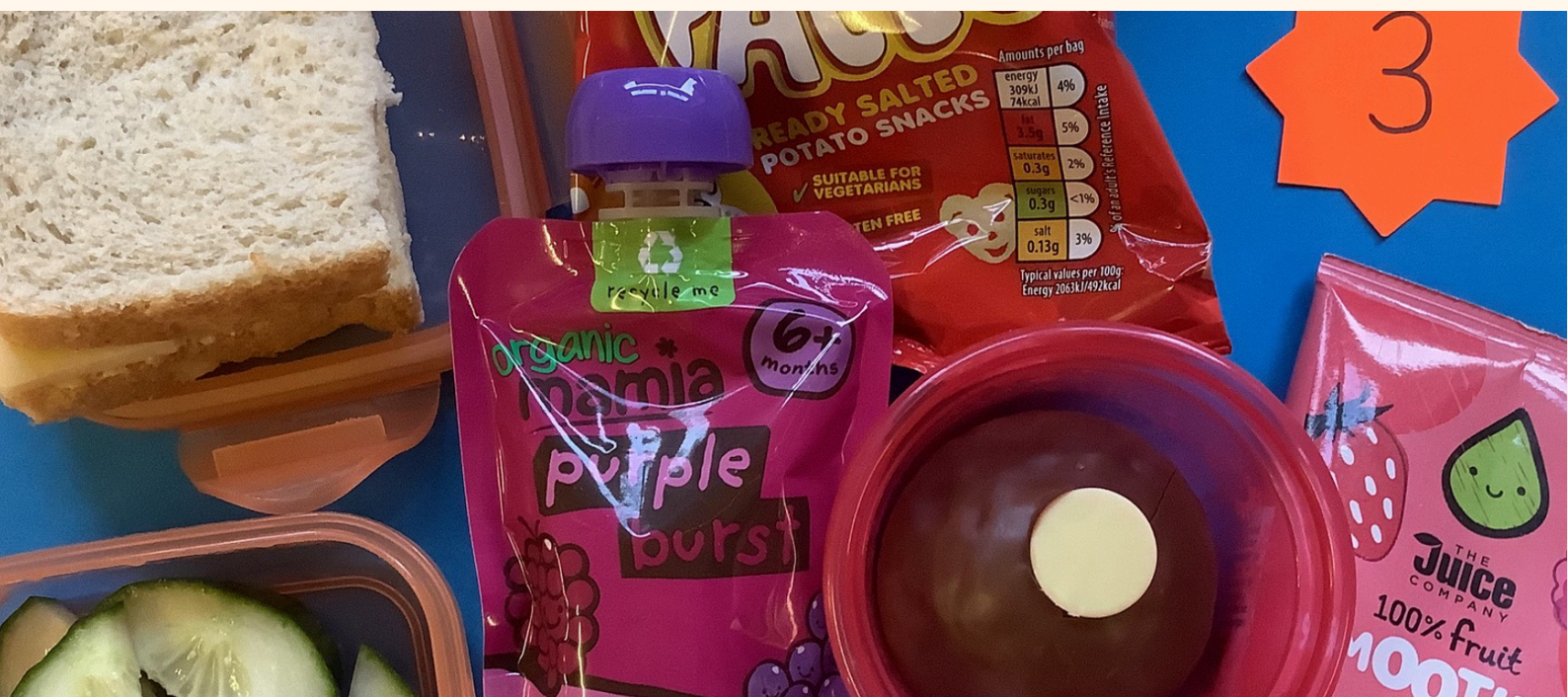
The new EYFS Nutrition Guidance (DfE, 2025) recognises that families may choose to provide food from home, yet also asks early years settings to ‘ensure that food from home aligns with the healthy options offered by the setting.’ (p.26). While this intention supports the goal of consistency in healthy eating, it places an unrealistic level of responsibility and accountability on settings who have limited influence over the broader economic, social, and cultural factors that shape family food choices.

If our solution to these challenges is simply to stop allowing lunchboxes or parent-provided meals, then we aren't addressing the real issues. We're just moving them out of our line of sight.

- Simply replacing lunchboxes with a setting provided meal on a specific day of the week, does not solve the wider issues for the child or their family.
- Lunchboxes can offer young children a link to home that is secure, comfortable and valued. This is especially important for children who have SEND or severe food allergies.
- There is a beautiful cultural diversity that can be found in the foods that children eat at home. Home-packed meals can reflect family heritage, traditions, and love.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO INSTEAD?

- Make healthy food affordable
- Stop flooding supermarket shelves with convenience, HFSS foods targeted at children
- Support education and training for practitioners, parents, and children
- Fund healthy food as a core part of early years provision
- Celebrate the cultural and practical diversity of food in early years settings
- Work across organisations, settings, charities, and companies to build a unified and informed approach to food and nutrition in early childhood





COST OF FOOD

Since the time in which the research was carried out (September 2024 - March 2025), the DfE released clarifying guidance to confirm that preschools, childminders and day nurseries are not permitted to charge a compulsory fee for food. Instead any setting-provided food provision must be itemised for parents on invoices as a voluntary contribution. Although this was not the case at the time of this research, insights from preschools demonstrate that 59% considered the lack of funding for food and the increasing cost of healthy food to already be a barrier to healthy food provision in the early years, 63% calling for support with the cost of food.

‘Fresh food is increasing in price all the time, food purchasing in general has increased over the last two years.’

‘We have recently signed up to the local food bank (we are a Charity Preschool) and twice a week they bring a variety of food. Sometimes it has things in that we cannot give the children as there are no ingredients on the packets but I normally give them back so somebody else can use it. We keep the fruit i.e. bananas, apples, bread, cereal, pasta and rice. This all helps to cut our costs down but we do still buy the rest of the food and fruit/veg. It still helps though.’

Preschools engage with local food banks and charities to supplement their own provision and to provide additional support for parents.

‘We are part of the Fare Share food scheme and collect food from our local Tesco branch to reduce food waste. We use this for snacks, part of cooking activities (making french bread pizza for example) and making available to parents who wish to take it home.’

CHILDREN'S FOOD PREFERENCES



50%

Children's food preferences are the greatest challenge.

Half of preschool respondents indicated that children's limited food preferences were the greatest barrier that they faced when working to support and promote healthy eating in early years settings.

'Children are sometimes not used to being encouraged to try anything new! This is evident in some lunch boxes, where the contents never vary.'

'Children start with preferences or intolerances that are not diagnosed so are not working through the dairy ladder for example. We are proactive in working with parents and professionals so that all children are accessing as wide a range of food as possible by the time they start school.'

A lot of children have never eaten the type of food we serve such as soup or pulses and only consume fruit from pouches. Some children never drink water only juice or squash at home. It is an increasing challenge to encourage children to try new foods but our family mealtimes where they can watch other children and staff eating and drinking really helps and, if they have plenty of outdoor play, they are hungry by lunch time!'



'We face a significant challenge with promoting healthy eating to families. Our children's lunchboxes consist of a lot of processed, unhealthy foods that are high in sugar and additives.'

Preschools share some of the ways in which they work with children to become familiar with healthy foods, supporting them to build a positive relationship with food and expand their food experiences.

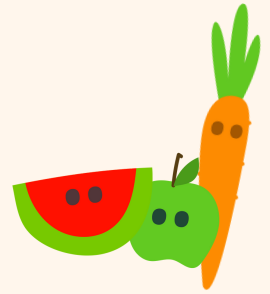
'We were following a rigid regime around lunch time, children to eat sandwiches first, then dairy, then fruit etc which I felt as a manager was creating an unhealthy mindset around eating. The children were over eating to get to the chocolate or 'sweets' (which we were/are trying to discourage) or not eating anything because they wanted the chocolate etc creating issues. We relaxed our 'rule' and work on the premise that their parents pack their lunchbox so they can eat what is in their box in whichever order they choose. Now the children are eating better, recognising when they are full and are much more relaxed, as are the adults! We speak to parents about the food in their children's lunchbox and what we would expect to see in it. On the whole our children have good balanced lunchboxes, after all, food is fuel!'

'We offer a vegetarian two-course hot lunch cooked on the premises to every child. We use protein from pulses, beans etc, cheese and yoghurt and carbs such as pasta, rice and potatoes. We also offer home made veggie soup/chowders, sauces with hidden veg etc. A lot of our children find the food unfamiliar when they start but the vast majority learn to taste and enjoy new foods and look forward to our family style lunch times where the staff sit and eat with the children'

'When our children attend snack we often have something for them to try. So alongside their snack we would offer fruits or vegetables or cultural foods that they may not have had the opportunity to try. These would be cut up into smaller pieces and they can just try to see if they like them whilst still having full snack that may be more familiar to them.'



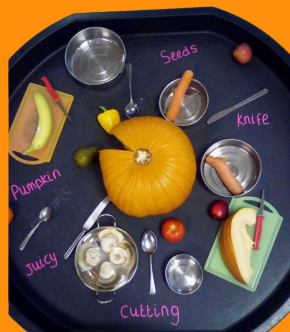
FOOD EDUCATION



'We invite parents into the setting to share their culture and offer food tasting to children.'

We also support other local charities like SANCTUS and the Chelmsford Food Bank by collecting food on their behalf which is then distributed to those in need. A representative from their organisation comes to the setting to talk to the children about food poverty in the UK.

We have a 'healthy eating' topic each term to reinforce good habits to children. The setting holds an annual 'healthy lunchbox' competition and the winner receives a fruit basket.'



'We have recently started to implement supervised tooth brushing in setting, which has helped us to also think about healthy eating practices and look at contents of lunch boxes!'



FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Preschools, provide a unique sessional-based approach to supporting children's learning and development between the ages of 3 and 5 years. Through NOF, preschools have made visible a wealth of examples of best practice in relation to the ways in which they support children and families to navigate a complex food environment, including meeting challenges associated with the cost of healthy food, increasing allergies and intolerances and the prevalence of convenience and highly processed foods that are packaged to entice children's and parental lunchbox choices.

Policy recommendations set out in the Nourishing Our Future report include a nationally funded early years food scheme to support both preschool and parent-provided meals, ensuring affordability and respecting parental choice, establishing public health support for parents on healthy eating, and educational support and resources for practitioners including nutrition advice, and developing targeted programmes to help children build positive relationships around food preferences.

	FINDINGS	POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
 REQUIREMENTS AND GUIDANCE	Recommended guidance and supporting documents tend to be extensive, complex, and difficult to engage with. Practice achieves implementation beyond minimum requirements.	Create concise and accessible guidance and resources to inform healthy eating policies and practices in the early years, ensuring it reflects the specific needs and complexities of preschool settings.
 NUTRITION AND PORTION SIZE	There is a need for targeted funding and tailored training that supports early years practitioners and parents to provide and promote nutritious meals and snacks.	Develop public health support for parents on healthy eating, extending beyond health visitor services during the first year, including nutritional guidance and resources to support parents in fostering healthy eating habits in early childhood.
 FOOD ENVIRONMENT	Early years settings vary widely in their food provision and facilities, requiring a deeper understanding and tailored support to navigate the real-world complexities of each setting.	Advocate for a healthy food environment that actively reduces the targeted marketing of HFSS foods, ultra-processed foods (UPFs), and convenience items with particular focus on influencing the lunchbox landscape.
 FOOD INCLUSIVITY	Early years settings report children's food preferences, SEND, allergies and intolerances to be the greatest challenge in the inclusive provision of healthy food.	Address the financial pressures on preschools and families, through a national funded early years food scheme, including viable funding options to support both preschool and parent provided meals ensuring affordability and respecting parental choice.
 FOOD EDUCATION	Food education is a core responsibility of early years provision, there is considerable opportunity to promote, develop, share and enhance best practices.	Elevate the role of food education in preschools, ensuring practitioners are supported to move beyond statutory food hygiene training. Provide training and resources that promote and value high quality food education activities for children and parents.
 SUSTAINABLE FOOD	Food waste and excess food packaging, particularly in lunchboxes, is a growing concern among practitioners, especially in relation to encouraging children to explore new foods.	Promote both healthy eating and sustainability education in preschools as core components of children's education and development.

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This briefing report shows that although there is a great deal of excellent work being done by preschools across Essex, there is a need for urgent and significant action to improve the nutritional landscape for parents and young children, including improving children's relationship with food.

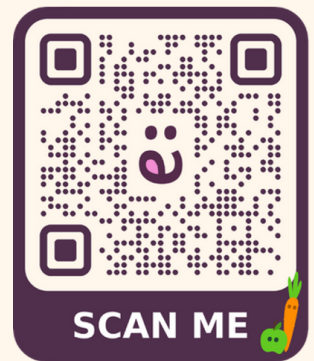
We encourage you to stay connected and engaged by using the hashtag #NOFessex across social media platforms to stay up to date, contribute and be a part of this important conversation.

The recommendations outlined in this report, alongside the thoughtful contributions made by practitioners, parents and children throughout the ongoing research, will shape our collective efforts to develop practice networks, inform policy, and create opportunities for discussion, training, and collaboration.

Together, we can enhance healthy eating and food provision in the early years, making a lasting impact on the lives of our youngest children.

Please get in touch directly for more information or to get involved:
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Nourishing Our Future

Exploring food and nutrition in Essex early years settings

Researched by



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