British Nutrition Foundation

FOOD a fact of life

Food education:

The missing ingredient in a healthier, more sustainable future

Foreword

Food shapes almost every measure of a child's future: their health, their readiness to learn, the workforce they may join, and the sustainability of the food system they will inherit. At the British Nutrition Foundation, we have spent over 30 years putting food and nutrition education at the heart of that future through *Food – a fact of life,* our flagship education programme, established in 1991 and now reaching at least half of UK secondary schools.

We publish this whitepaper at a pivotal moment. A national curriculum review and consultation is underway in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland, alongside renewed attention to school food, children's health and food insecurity, and the climate and sustainability agenda. Food education sits at the intersection of these conversations, yet it is rarely treated as one connected plan. In July 2026, more than 100 organisations wrote to the Prime Minister calling for a Good Food Bill to place food security, public health, and system resilience on a statutory footing, including a duty on ministers to consider food in decisions across health, education, farming, planning and trade. Food education has a clear place in that ambition. Done well, it can support attainment and readiness to learn, strengthen the future food and farming workforce, and equip children to navigate an increasingly complex food environment.

The British Nutrition Foundation is uniquely placed to lead this work. We are a leading UK nutrition charity, and through *Food – a fact of life,* delivered in partnership with the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB), we bring together nutrition science, education expertise, and British food and farming knowledge.

Our work in education is supported by four independent Education Working Groups that comprise teachers, awarding organisations, initial teacher education and government departments across all four nations. This is an important aspect of our governance structure and ensures that our work remains relevant, up to date and independent.

In addition, as Chief Executive of the British Nutrition Foundation, I am proud that Frances Meek, our Education Services Manager, is the drafter of the revised Key Stage 1 to 3 Food and Nutrition curriculum for England.

This whitepaper sets out why food education matters more than ever, examines the current state of provision and teacher confidence across the UK, and argues that fragmented, inconsistent delivery is holding back a subject with real potential to drive change across education, health, sustainability, and ultimately, the economy.

Our hope is that this whitepaper is not the end of the discussion, but the beginning of a shared conversation. We look forward to working with policymakers, teachers, schools, industry, families, young people and other stakeholders to identify practical improvements that strengthen food education and deliver lasting benefits for all.

Elaine Hindal,
Chief Executive Officer,
British Nutrition Foundation

Why food education matters now

While there is no single piece of research that reports on every measure of diet, nutrition and health status for children of all age groups across the UK, there are many studies that provide evidence of shortfalls in specific areas which, collectively, paint a patchy but stark picture.

Consumption of fruit and vegetables, and fibre among all children (aged 4 - 18 years) remains below recommendations for most age groups[1], while consumption of saturated fat and free sugars are above recommended limits. Studies of micronutrient intake point to low intakes of vitamin D, folate and iodine in many age groups.

Data show that prevalence of early childhood obesity hasn't changed significantly since 2017[2], with around a quarter of 4 - 5 year olds who are overweight or living with obesity across the UK[3]. However, rates of overweight and obesity have increased in older children living in England, to over a third of 10 - 11 year olds.

Data show that over a quarter of children (aged 2 - 15 years) in England are either overweight or living with obesity.

Socio-economic factors including deprivation markers, geographical location, and ethnicity also have a role to play in childhood eating habits, physical activity, and obesity. This all matters because overweight and obesity in children are so clearly linked with adverse health outcomes in later life[4] including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease (CVD), liver disease, obstructive sleep apnoea, cancer, and musculoskeletal conditions.

Children may also experience poor mental health because of stigma associated with their weight.

Poor diet can impair children's attention, memory and classroom engagement, increasing the risk of poorer educational attainment and widening attainment gaps for disadvantaged pupils[5], and not only through the longer-term health outcomes described above. This is an increasingly urgent problem given the growth of AI-generated content and diet misinformation online: children and young people are increasingly following influencer-led diets that can be nutritionally harmful, often without the tools to critically evaluate what they are seeing[6]; teachers report that influencer-driven food trends on platforms such as TikTok are increasingly powerful and persuasive, and difficult to counter within the classroom[7].

The cost of living also plays a significant role in health outcomes associated with poor diet. Households in the lowest income fifth of the population would need to spend 49 per cent of their disposable income to afford the government-recommended healthy diet, rising to 85 per cent for those with children[8].

In 2024, 3.8 million children lived in food insecure households, which is 600,000 more than just two years previously[9].

This means that those children were, and likely still are, at a higher risk of consuming cheaper foods high in fat, sugar and salt and fewer fresh fruit and vegetables, and so the cycle of poor health continues.

Increasing consumption of less healthy ready-to-eat foods is, in turn, linked with a decline in home cooking[10,11] and cookery skills. While time is undoubtedly a factor in declining home cooking[12], research suggests that adults and children believe that learning to cook healthy meals and make informed food choices is an essential life skill, comparable to physical activity or digital literacy[13]. Currently, both physical activity[14] and digital literacy[15] receive significantly more curriculum time than food and cooking[16].

It is no secret that indirect marketing can also heavily influence young people's food choices, through blurring the lines between organic and paid for promotion; despite many young people calling for clearer guidance on what is an advert[17]. This form of subtle exposure normalises foods high in fat, sugar or salt and can sit uneasily alongside government-led efforts on product reformulation and school food standards. This runs parallel with the rise of big food chains securing outlets near schools; according to a 2024 Bite Back study, nearly 3,500 schools in Great Britain now have a major fast-food outlet within 400 metres of their school gates[17].

Food education also has a clear influence on the economy. The agri-food sector employs 4.1 million people across the UK, equivalent to around one in eight jobs, and contributed over £162 billion to the economy in 2024[18], yet it faces a persistent skills and labour shortage. The Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD), the industry body for the food and drink industry, has relaunched Feeding Britain's Future, a nationwide programme connecting young people with careers across farming, manufacturing, retail and food service[19]. *Food – a fact of life* already supports this pipeline through dedicated careers resources that introduce pupils to the breadth of roles in food, from agronomy and food science to nutrition and food communications[20,21]. This ambition aligns with the UK Government's food strategy for England, which emphasises a food sector that "attracts talent and develops a skilled workforce in every region" as one of its priorities[22]. Positioning food education as a genuine pathway into the agri-food industry, and not only a health or life skills subject, strengthens the case for treating it as economic as well as educational infrastructure.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 Poor diet drives childhood obesity and long-term disease risk, and can impact on attention and learning. The cost of living is widening dietary inequalities.

2 Marketing, social media, and fast-food outlets clustered near schools all compete directly with what children are taught in the classroom.

3 Home cooking and food skills are in decline, even though children and adults consistently rate them as essential life skills.

4 Food education is also a pathway into the UK's 4.1-million strong agri-food workforce, an economic opportunity that is currently underutilised.

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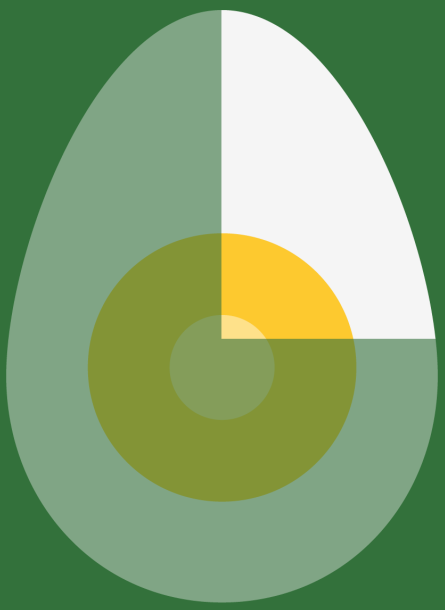

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The current state of food education in the UK

Although food education in the UK is mandatory up to 14 years old, each country has distinct national curricula with significant differences in accountability, consistency and quality between schools. While there are commonalities across different education settings, food education provision at a school level varies significantly, depending on:

- GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION
- STAFF EXPERTISE
- SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUALITY
- SCHOOL-LEVEL PRIORITISATION
- RESOURCE ALLOCATION
- WHOLE-SCHOOL INTEGRATION

In England, Cooking and Nutrition is a statutory component of the Design & Technology (D&T) programme for children in Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 3[23], though provision is widely described as a postcode lottery: schools funded on a similar basis, even within the same borough, can deliver a markedly different quality of food education depending on how senior leadership prioritises it; even where teachers, pupils and parents consistently say they value the subject[24]. In Key Stage 4, food education is optional and uptake is variable, with only 46 per cent of state-maintained schools entering students for GCSE Food Preparation and Nutrition in 2024/25[25]. The Curriculum and Assessment Review's Final Report, published in November 2025, recommended renaming Cooking and Nutrition to Food and Nutrition, and that Food and Nutrition should have its own aims and purpose of study to better reflect what it covers and its discrete identity whithin D&T[23].

Even where a school prioritises the subject, practical constraints shape what can be taught. For example, in England no national guidance sets a minimum amount of curriculum time at Key Stages 1 to 3; only at Key Stage 4 is time prescribed at 120 learning hours, leaving earlier provision entirely to individual schools[24]. A 50-minute lesson is often too short to cook anything meaningful once registration, handwashing and setup are accounted for. While some schools employ technicians to prepare ingredients in advance, many do not. Who is responsible for purchasing ingredients, and whether parents are expected to contribute, remains unresolved from school to school[24]. A direct disadvantage for lower-income households is created where families are asked to provide or fund ingredients, echoing wider evidence on the hidden costs of schooling. Research by the Child Poverty Action Group and Children North East into the cost of the school day finds that costs linked to subjects requiring materials and equipment fall disproportionately on families already experiencing poverty[26].

Scotland takes a different approach through its Curriculum for Excellence, which embeds food education into Technologies (Food and Textile Technology) and Health and Wellbeing for all children aged 3 to 18 years old. This is supported by the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022, which requires children and young people to be educated about food[27], and the first national Good Food Nation Plan, which explicitly links food education policy to six overarching outcomes[28]. Unlike England, Scottish schools are required to provide ingredients for pupils to cook with, removing one of the most direct sources of inequality seen elsewhere in the UK[24]. However, implementation continues to vary between local authorities.

In Wales, the Curriculum for Wales entrenches food education in the Health and Well-being Area of Learning and Experience[29]. The curriculum provides opportunities for students to develop understanding of healthy eating, nutrition, sourcing local goods, food production, and sustainability alongside practical skills.

Food education in Northern Ireland closely aligns with the health-focused approach of the Welsh education system. Delivered through Home Economics, food education is mandatory in Key Stage 3 and focuses on food preparation, nutrition, food safety, consumer issues and dietary needs. At Key Stage 4, students can choose to study the CCEA GCSE Home Economics: Food and Nutrition[30] or Hospitality qualifications. Students can also opt to study A Level Nutrition and Food Science. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs' Going for Growth strategy links agri-food education to wider goals around productivity and employment[31].

Across the UK, the extent and nature of independent oversight of food education varies considerably. In England, for example, despite the government's recently published Enrichment Framework and 8 Benchmarks[33] and Ofsted's role in creating a culture and ethos of healthy eating through its new Common Inspection Framework[34], Ofsted has no dedicated food subject specialist, and the last national dedicated subject report was published in 2005[24]. With Food and Nutrition now being strengthened in the curriculum, a new Ofsted subject report would provide a timely opportunity to establish an up-to-date evidence base on the quality and consistency of provision, identify what excellent practice looks like, and ensure future curriculum and policy decisions are grounded in current evidence. Alongside the lack of an Ofsted subject report, there is no professional association championing the subject in the way other subjects have: the Home Economics Association no longer exists, and while the Design and Technology Association does cover food, it isn't its sole focus[24].

A 2021 BBC Good Food Nation survey of 1,000 children highlighted a growing demand among children and young people for practical food skills, information on alternative diets, and sustainable approaches to food and nutrition[35], but there is no clear national mechanism for ensuring schools are equipped to meet that demand.

There is currently limited and inconsistent inspection and monitoring of food education across the UK, making it difficult to build a clear picture of the quality and extent of provision, identify areas for improvement and ensure that all pupils have access to high-quality food education.

In England, proposed changes to Progress 8 risk accelerating this decline further by not including food within the "breadth" category but within the "choice" category along with a significant number of other subjects[24]; progression beyond GCSE is similarly limited. Teachers who lived through the earlier loss of the Home Economics and Food Technology A Levels describe a downward spiral that followed; fewer pupils, reduced funding, lower subject status, and less curriculum time at Key Stage 4, felt even at Key Stage 3[24]. This uncertainty sits alongside a separate, still-evolving policy shift. In July 2026, the Prime Minister announced new technical education routes for 14-year-olds from 2028, with funding and Ofsted's assessment role yet to be confirmed and no detail so far on whether catering or food-related provision will be included[36] and there is no clear pathway from GCSE Food Preparation and Nutrition to V and T Levels. Demand for the subject remains strong regardless: GCSE results published in August 2026 show more than 91,000 students in England sat a Progress 8 food and catering-related exam, and over 105,000 students across the UK sat a 'food' exam[37].

This is reinforced by a 2024 roundtable convened by the British Nutrition Foundation and the Food Teachers Centre, which found a need for food-specific post-16 qualifications, clearer pathways for subject progression, and work to enhance the subject's profile to attract more learners post-Key Stage 4[38]; the British Nutrition Foundation remains committed to advocating for the reintroduction of a Food A Level.

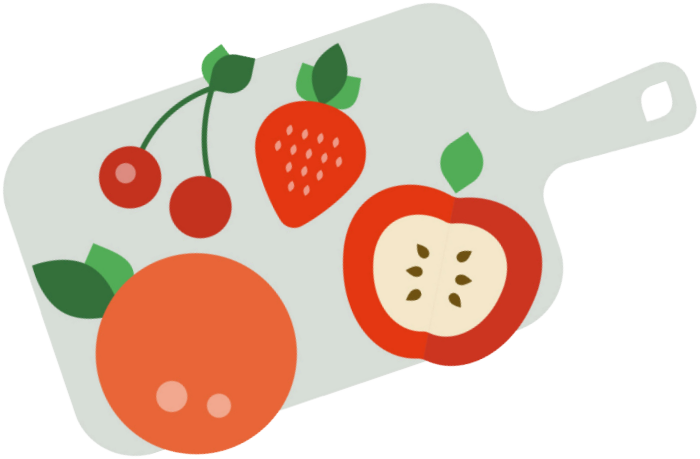
Anecdotally, teachers report growing concern about food and nutrition misinformation, a desire for greater specificity in the curriculum, and a need to scaffold learning more deliberately from the primary into the secondary phase.

Crucially, while food education builds lifelong skills and provides the infrastructure to support national health, sustainability and workforce policy goals, its delivery remains fragmented at both a national and local level, leading to repetition rather than reinforcing learning throughout a student's academic career. To effectively respond to the escalating challenge of misinformation and support wider strategic social change in health outcomes, employment and sustainability, food education needs to be embedded into students' academic journeys from the early years through to post-16, building food literacy and practical skills. Much of that fragmentation, however, is shaped by the conditions facing those who deliver the subject day to day, from the lack of specialist training and curriculum time to resources, facilities and continuing professional development.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 Provision is inconsistent within and between the four nations, shaped by curriculum design, funding, inspection, and local priorities.

2 Compulsory food education effectively ends at 14 across the UK, just as young people become more independent and more exposed to misinformation.



Teacher confidence and skills gaps

How confident teachers feel delivering food education depends on factors that recur across all four UK nations:

How many specialist teachers are trained

Whether curriculum time is protected

Whether schools and/or parents and carers can afford the ingredients and equipment the subject demands

Whether professional development keeps pace with what pupils are exposed to online

Recruitment and curriculum time are under pressure everywhere. The evidence is clearest in England; D&T teacher numbers fell by roughly half between 2011 and 2020, from 14,800 to 7,300[39]. The Department for Education (DfE) stopped funding Subject Knowledge Enhancement courses for D&T trainees from April 2024, removing a route previously used to build subject knowledge before initial teacher training begins[40]. England also has no requirement that food is taught by a subject specialist: as with several other subjects, teachers are sometimes allocated food lessons simply because they have space on their timetable, rather than because of relevant training[24].

A 2026 survey of 316 secondary food teachers found the subject highly valued but at risk, with teachers expecting the proposed changes to Progress 8, discussed above, to marginalise GCSE Food Preparation and Nutrition further.

Timetable constraints, funding pressure, staffing and expertise gaps, and facilities limitations are cited as the most common barriers to delivering food education[41].

An earlier survey found only 38 per cent of teachers agreed there was enough curriculum time to teach the subject effectively[42]. Scotland's workforce has followed a similar trajectory, with Home Economics teacher numbers falling from around 1,000 to below 800 and specialist recruitment hardest in remote and rural areas[43]. Northern Ireland's route into the subject is narrower still: a single PGCE at the Ulster University, capped at 12-13 trainees a year[44].

Cost compounds the recruitment problem in every UK nation. A survey of more than 1,000 food teachers across the UK, produced with input from the Child Poverty Action Group, reveals that 78 per cent believe cost is a barrier to pupils accessing food education, worsened by a lack of technician support and continued under-investment in facilities[45], echoing the concerns about ingredient costs and disadvantage previously raised. So much so, the cost of running food classes means that some teachers can only demonstrate a dish rather than let pupils cook it for themselves[46]. Facilities add a further layer of inequality: some schools are rebuilding with shared-use spaces rather than dedicated kitchens.

Keeping pace with what pupils are exposed to is a further strain on confidence, and each nation is now responding through curriculum reform rather than isolated training fixes in relation to diet and health.

Wales reports that no professional learning currently exists for teachers on diet-related health, learning and neurodivergence, with confidence further limited by inspection frameworks, such as Estyn, which do not currently treat food education as core education. This means the responsibility for embedding food literacy as a fundamental piece of learning, rather than an add-on, sits with individual school leadership[46].

Comparable concerns about misinformation, from myths about frozen versus fresh produce to influencer-driven diets, are raised as areas of concern for teachers across the UK without dedicated training[6]. Both Northern Ireland's TransformEd reform and Scotland's REFORM work reflect a move towards greater curriculum specification, with clearer expectations for what pupils should learn and less reliance on individual teachers to determine curriculum content and progression. How guidance reaches teachers matters as much as content: newsletter-style updates have proved a weaker way of keeping teachers current than shorter, more frequent, bite-sized communication[7].

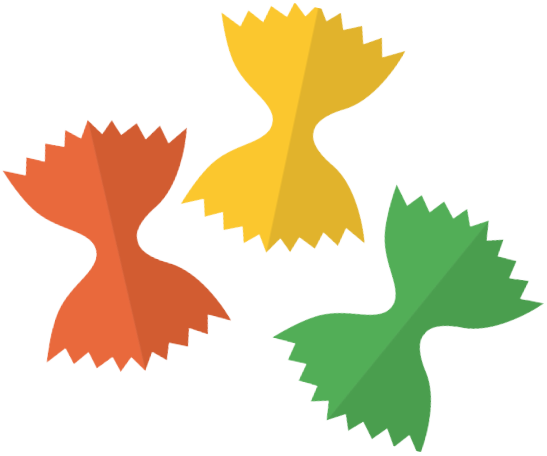
Beyond the curriculum, practical levers are emerging to rebuild confidence. In England, one recommendation is closer engagement with school governors and senior leadership on catering and whole-school food culture, rather than relying on curriculum change alone[7]; particularly as healthy eating and food culture now form part of Ofsted's personal development judgement. Northern Ireland already promotes career pathways from Home Economics into medicine, food technology and product design[44], while Scotland's Food and Drink Federation and Springboard programme send industry ambassadors into schools, although this remains patchy rather than systematic[43]. In Wales, school-based food and learning projects, such as Big Bocs Bwyd, are scaling to ensure that schools are properly supported to inspire pupils through food education[46]. Joining up these approaches, alongside targeted training, would help close the confidence gap across the UK.

Amid this uneven picture, the British Nutrition Foundation's *Food – a fact of life* education programme, which has been used in schools for over 30 years, stands out as one of the few consistent points of stability. It is one of the only free-at-point-of-contact, curriculum-aligned resources available to teachers, parents and pupils aged three to 18 across all UK jurisdictions, described by contributors to this white paper as the gold standard[44]. Because its resources are practical and teacher-tested, they give time-poor, under-resourced teachers the confidence to use them without extensive adaptation[7], while also allowing schools to build a consistent, whole-school approach that unifies learning across breakfast clubs, holiday clubs, enrichment and classroom teaching. Food and nutrition education should equip children and young people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to plan, select, cook, and eat in healthier and more sustainable ways, an ambition that aligns closely with the British Nutrition Foundation's own Theory of Change.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Teacher recruitment, curriculum time, and ingredient costs are under pressure in every nation, though the specific barriers differ.
2. Professional development must keep pace with newer pressures such as online misinformation.
3. *Food - a fact of life* remains one of the few consistent, free, UK-wide resources teachers can rely on.

Recommendations



Taken together, the evidence in this white paper points to a clear conclusion: food education in the UK is undermined not by a lack of value that young people, teachers/schools and parents place on it, but by fragmented delivery, inconsistent oversight, and a widening gap between what pupils are taught and what they encounter daily around them and online.

The following recommendations set out where non-profit organisations, governments, schools and industry can act.

1 **Recognise and integrate food education within prevention policy:** Health policies across UK nations commit to prevention but say nothing specifically about the role of food education. Name food education explicitly, linked to childhood obesity, diet-related disease, mental health, and health inequalities.

2 **Fund the ingredients and equipment schools need:** Provide funding so that schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland can deliver practical learning without relying on parental contributions. In line with the government's ambition to give families breathing space on the cost of living, it would remove the hidden school-day costs that fall hardest on the poorest households. We estimate that this would cost on average less than £10 per KS3 pupil per year[47], which is equivalent to less than 0.12 percent of the government's secondary per pupil spending in England[48], and it could be met from within existing allocations.

3 **Protect food education from further marginalisation:** Ensure curriculum and assessment reform - including Progress 8, GCSE pathways, 14 - 16 technical reforms and post-16 qualifications in England, - gives food education a clear progression route and considers reinstating a dedicated Food A Level in England to support routes into higher education and food-related careers. This should be underpinned by action across the UK to recruit, train and retain food specialist teachers, including strengthened initial teacher education routes and funded subject-specific professional development, so that all young people can benefit from high-quality teaching.

4 **Strengthen monitoring, inspection and accountability for food education:** Require the relevant inspection body in each nation to explicitly consider the quality and impact of food education within its own curriculum and inspection framework. This could include every nation having food education specialists as part of the inspection team to offer supportive, constructive and clear guidance to help strengthen provision especially when many schools rely on non-specialists to deliver the subject.

5 **Embed food education within school food and whole-school health policy:** Bring food education together with school food standards, breakfast clubs, holiday provision and healthy school environments in one coherent framework, for all young people up to 18 years, so that schools and inspectors can recognise a genuine whole-school approach.

6 **Treat food literacy with equal importance to digital, media and financial literacy:** In the same way that digital, media and financial literacy should be properly incorporated into the revised national curriculum in England through all Key Stages, food literacy should be treated in the same way, across UK curricula. Food could be a powerful carrier for all three literacies, from evaluating influencer-led diet claims and AI-generated content to budgeting and planning menus.

7 **Link food education to sustainability and food systems policy:** Food education can support progress towards net zero, sustainable consumption and promotion of local food systems. Position cooking, meal planning, food safety, nutrition and an understanding of food origins as core competencies that every young person should develop. A collaborative review of the core competences for children and young people aged 5–16 years[49] should be funded, updating and extending the framework to age 18 so it remains relevant to the lives, choices and challenges of today's young people.

8 **Connect food education with the workforce, skills, and economic growth:** With the government's ambition to support a million young people not in education, employment or training into work, food education offers a practical route into agri-food careers, hospitality and food science; sectors employing 4.1 million across the UK and experiencing persistent skills shortages.

British Nutrition Foundation

About The British Nutrition Foundation

The British Nutrition Foundation is a charity that strives to prevent diet-related illness and promote health and wellbeing through evidence-based nutrition science. It provides a bridge between nutrition science, government, industry, healthcare, education and people, and is a conduit to a healthier, more sustainable food environment for all.

The British Nutrition Foundation's team is made up of highly qualified and experienced nutrition scientists and educators who work to disseminate evidence-based peer reviewed research findings which: support industry strategy and healthy, sustainable product innovation; inform government policy and regulations; and help people build their knowledge, skills and confidence in making positive, food and lifestyle choices to help prevent illness and disease and promote health and wellbeing.

The British Nutrition Foundation's education work is supported by Education Working Groups across all four UK Nations. Further information can be found here: **nutrition.org.uk/about-us/governance-and-leadership**

For more information visit: **nutrition.org.uk**

FOOD a fact of life

About *Food – a fact of life*

Food – a fact of life is designed to instil a culture of healthy eating and food literacy in children, equipping children and young people with the food knowledge, skills and confidence to make healthy food choices throughout their lives.

The *Food – a fact of life* resources, which are aligned with UK curricula and are developed by qualified teachers, experienced nutrition scientists, and experts in food and farming, provide up-to-date, evidence-based information about food and nutrition. The *Food – a fact of life* professional development programme is designed to give trainee, new, non-specialist and more experienced teachers the knowledge, skills and confidence to succeed in the classroom.

The resources are free and widely used by teachers in schools across the UK. They can also be used by anyone involved in educating or supporting the learning of children and young people about food, including parents and carers, those working in clubs, and home education.

Food – a fact of life is the flagship education programme of the British Nutrition Foundation, delivered in partnership with the Agriculture & Horticulture Development Board (AHDB). AHDB is the independent, evidenced-based statutory levy board funded by around 100,000 producers in the food supply chain.

For more information visit: **foodafactoflife.org.uk**

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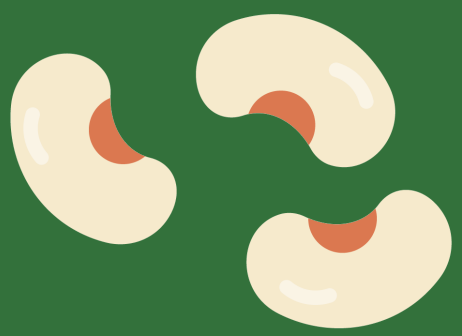

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