

Insight Paper: Colleges Tackling Food Poverty



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Background

Scotland's colleges play a key role in addressing and alleviating poverty. Across Scotland, colleges engage directly with learners from the most deprived areas, with more than half of full-time further education students coming from the lowest two SIMD quintiles. Sitting within their local communities, colleges provide routes into learning and employment as well as delivering a range of crucial support services directly to these learners.

In new research, released today, it is clear that feeding students for free is now a core part of the work of many colleges:

- Approximately 3,100 learners across Scotland take up the offer of a free meal at their college each day, with either a free breakfast, lunch, or both.
- This totals c15,500 meals each week.

Tackling food poverty is a major part of the work colleges undertake as strong community anchors. Students experiencing food poverty can struggle to learn and may face challenges participating at college because of hunger. In 2022, more than 2,000 students from colleges across Scotland participated in the [Thriving Learners study](#) which found that among students who have experienced food insecurity, a quarter (25%) had severe symptoms of depression. At that time, one in six students (17%) lived in a household that had run out of food in the past 12 months.

Methodology

In February 2026, Colleges Scotland conducted a survey of colleges in order to gather data on how colleges are tackling food poverty. This was a short survey with three questions:

1. Does your college offer any free breakfasts for students?
2. Does your college offer any free lunches for students?
3. On average, how many students does your college feed for free each day, across breakfast and lunch?

The survey also allowed space for colleges to provide further details on any projects or methods they taken in tackling food poverty. Responses were received from 20 out of 24 colleges covering approximately 86% of the total number of college students across Scotland.

Results

From those 20 colleges:

Breakfast

- 17 colleges provide free breakfasts for students.
- Of the three which don't, one indicated they had previously provided this but the funding allocation had now been used up and they were no longer able to provide this service, although they did provide lunch.

- Another college which did not provide breakfasts noted that most of their campus students live in accommodation and already have breakfast included in their packages.

Lunch

- Of the colleges surveyed, nine provide free lunches to students
- Of those who don't provide lunches, one highlighted that they supply ready meals to as many students as possible, another provides cooking facilities for students bringing in lunches, and another noted their heavily subsidised student run catering offer.
- The college referred to above regarding campus students having breakfast included in their accommodation package also noted that lunch was also included.

Wider Initiatives

Eleven of the colleges surveyed also noted that they offered some form of food bank for their students, whether this was working directly with the local food banks or operating a Student Pantry. In addition to food banks, four colleges also noted that they provided wider supplies such as clothing and toiletries. In particular, one college noted that they had several "shops" allowing free access to not only adult but also children's clothing and toys demonstrating the far-reaching impact supporting not only learners but also their families and the wider community.

Three colleges also highlighted their green initiatives in reducing food waste alongside tackling food poverty demonstrating creativity in addressing both sustainability and poverty in single initiatives. College noted in the survey the importance of offering support in discreet, non-judgemental ways in order to provide wider student wellbeing which such joint efforts are able to support. Another college emphasised the importance of early intervention, citing their example of breakfast provision, working with local communities as well as Foot Allotment Projects as part of a wider plan to address poverty before learners reach a crisis point.

Nine colleges also noted that their initiatives to address food poverty included collaborations, most notably with their respective student unions, but also working closely with local supermarkets and with the local food banks.

Colleges also demonstrated their adaptability of poverty within their distinct communities. One rural college demonstrated this with their example of a "welly bank" alongside their food bank, as well as operating a minibus to the local supermarkets, alleviating the specific challenges of transport in rural communities - a common challenge faced in rural poverty populations. Another college also gave an example of an evening community hub which targeted families, including cooking skills activities and a shared meal for local residents.

Yet, these efforts are not without challenges. One college noted that they used to provide free breakfast but are no longer able to do so as funding received from a local organisation has not been renewed nor replaced by another sponsor and are now trying to mitigate the challenges by helping student with referrals to the local food bank and provide a student larder. Another college which still provides free student breakfasts noted the challenge to continue doing so on reduced college budgets, whilst another highlighted that they seek funding from external companies in order to aim to continue to provide their free breakfasts.

Case Studies

Dundee & Angus Colleges

The Thrive with D&A initiative provides a comprehensive offer to all students and is designed to avoid the stigma of having to seek help or be singled out as a student 'in need.' Thrive offers free breakfasts, lunches and food larders to all students. In addition, the D&A Thrive shops on each campus offer free access to adult and children's clothes, toys, toiletries and a range of other goods (new and pre-owned).

Dundee & Angus College works in close partnership with a wide range of food banks across the region to provide single referral point to food banks and other community based support access for students (and staff) thus avoiding the need to apply or register multiple times.

Thrive with D&A is funded through a range of student and staff fundraising, commercial links and donations and a significant contribution (£160,000 in AY 2024/25) from College funds to ensure that a consistent and universal offer is available to support students throughout the year.

Forth Valley

At Forth Valley College in addition to the free breakfast and lunch which we offer students we also offer a service called 'FVC to Go'. The teams in our refectories portion all unsold foods from that days menu in our Refectories and make them available free of charge to any student on a first come first serve basis.

The products range from any hot food from the day or sandwiches and salads out of date on the day. We offer this to reduce food waste but also as a further support to reduce food poverty within our student population.

UHI Perth

At UHI Perth, tackling food poverty is a key part of our wider commitment to student wellbeing, inclusion, and retention. Through The Big Project, we provide free access to food, toiletries, and essential household items for students who are experiencing financial pressure. This support is offered in a discreet, non-judgemental way and is available to students across all courses and modes of study. The project now supports hundreds of students each week and continues to adapt in response to rising living costs.

Food poverty is addressed not just through emergency provision, but through longer-term, preventative approaches. This includes complementary breakfast provision on campus, partnership working with local community organisations, and the development of our funded Food Allotment Project, which focuses on sustainability, wellbeing, and fresh produce to support students and the wider college community. Alongside practical support, Student Services work closely with students to provide advice, signposting, and early intervention, helping to reduce financial stress before it impacts on learning or progression.

Our approach is rooted in dignity, accessibility, and partnership, ensuring that students feel supported and able to succeed.

New College Lanarkshire

New College Lanarkshire (NCL) offers a free breakfast programme that feeds 3,500 students per month. This is possible thanks to the support of NCL Foundation which was set up two years ago

after staff realised that some students were showing up to class without eating which was affecting their ability to learn.

The Foundation's ability to deliver is a result of the enormous buy-in of our staff and students who see the value of a breakfast reflected in class performance and student retention. Staff and students have raised funds for the foundation through bake sales, running marathons and climbing Ben Nevis.

The foundation has also supported College food banks, clothing banks, and hair and beauty banks for students all of which feed into our *Better Than 52* initiative. This is focused on the fact that healthy life expectancy in North Lanarkshire is just 52, the lowest level in Scotland. At NCL we have a deep commitment to improving health and providing opportunities for our students and staff as well as the wider community.

Conclusion

Colleges across Scotland are being proactive in addressing poverty and making efforts to alleviate challenges for their learners and communities. By examining colleges addressing food poverty alone, it is clear colleges play a crucial role. With most colleges offering free breakfast or lunch to learners, colleges are providing over 15,000 free meals each week. Beyond this and despite facing financial challenges, colleges are being creative in their endeavours to address food poverty, collaborating with local organisations, using interventions which also reduce food waste and simultaneously offering support within wider communities. Together, these efforts highlight the essential role colleges play in supporting learners' wellbeing, addressing poverty widely across Scotland and serving as vital anchors within communities.

Colleges Scotland
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