

From Menu to Framework to Basket: Bridging Nutrition Policy and Practice in Early Childhood Development Programmes

Development, Nutritional Basis, Implementation Learning and Preliminary Costing of an ECD Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket

Prepared by: Philippa Barnard, Public Health Nutrition Consultant and Registered Dietitian

In collaboration with: Zero2Five Trust and Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group

Date: Updated 05 October 2026

Status: Development and pilot phase



Contents

Executive Summary	5
1. Introduction.....	9
1.1. Nutrition in the ECD context	9
1.2. From nutrition guidance to implementation	9
1.3. Origins of the ECD Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket.....	9
1.4. Purpose and scope of this report	10
1.5. Terminology used in this report.....	10
2. Development of the ECD Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket	11
2.1. The NDoH Nutrition Guidelines as the starting point	11
2.2. From the Zero2Five two-week menu to a practical one-week menu.....	11
2.3. Implementation testing and learning.....	12
2.4. From implementation learning to the Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework ...	13
2.5. From programme menu to nationally costable basket.....	14
2.6. Nutrition first, affordability informed	16
3. From Nutrition Guidance to a Nationally Costed Basket	17
3.1. The complementary roles of the NDoH Guidelines and the ECD NCN Basket	17
3.2. Alignment with core nutrition principles	18
3.3. Practical features of the costed Basket.....	19
3.4. The Framework, Menu and Basket: how the components fit together	20
3.5. Why the Basket matters	20
4. Nutritional Basis of the ECD NCN Basket	21
4.1. Purpose of the nutritional analysis	21
4.2. Nutritional contribution of the ECD NCN Basket	21
4.3. Interpretation of nutritional contribution during time in care	22
4.4. Nutrient density as a design principle.....	22
4.5. Younger children and the milk-feeding boundary	23
4.6. Limitations of the nutritional model	23
5. Preliminary Costing: August 2026 Baseline and September 2026 Refinements	23
5.1. Purpose of costing.....	23

5.2.	August 2026 pilot pricing	24
5.3.	Cost by age group.....	25
5.4.	Illustrative centre-level costing	26
5.5.	Relationship between Basket cost and the R9.60 food allocation	26
5.6.	Effect of subsidy coverage.....	26
5.7.	Costs included and excluded	27
5.8.	Interpretation and limitations of the preliminary costing	27
5.9.	Ongoing price monitoring	28
6.	Emerging Findings and Implementation Learning	28
6.1.	Nutrition first, affordability informed	28
6.2.	Flexibility without nutritional dilution	28
6.3.	Standardisation enables costing and monitoring	29
6.4.	Implementation testing is essential	29
6.5.	Age composition affects resource requirements.....	29
6.6.	The Basket is an evolving evidence base	29
7.	Relevance for ECD Planning, Financing and Policy.....	30
7.1.	Bridging nutrition policy and implementation	30
7.2.	Making the resource requirement visible	30
7.3.	Implications for ECD centres and implementing organisations.....	30
7.4.	Implications for funders and resource mobilisation	31
7.5.	Potential relevance to national nutrition and stunting-prevention priorities	31
7.6.	Potential applications of the Basket and price-monitoring mechanism.....	32
7.7.	Avoiding interpretation of the Basket as a full nutrition-service cost	33
8.	Next Steps and October 2026 Transition	33
8.1.	Completion of the pilot phase.....	33
8.2.	September price monitoring and review	33
8.3.	Finalisation of product specifications and costing methodology	34
8.4.	Technical and visual quality assurance	34
8.5.	Finalisation of implementation and substitution guidance	35
8.6.	Preparing the Basket for broader use and communication.....	35

8.7.	Ongoing monthly price monitoring.....	35
8.8.	Future modelling and adaptation opportunities	35
9.	Conclusion	36
Technical Annexes		38
Annex A – Implementation Testing and Field Learning		38
Annex B – Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework.....		40
Annex C – ECD NCN Basket Menu and Portion Specifications.....		47
Annex D – Nutritional Analysis of the ECD NCN Basket Menu		50
Annex E – National Price-Monitoring Methodology and Product Specifications		55
Annex F – August 2026 ECD NCN Basket Pilot Costing		59
Annex G – September 2026 ECD NCN Basket Pilot Costing		61

Executive Summary

The ECD Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket (ECD NCN Basket) emerged from a practical question: how can national nutrition guidance for young children be translated into food that can be planned, purchased, prepared, served and costed within real-world ECD settings?

The work began within the Zero2Five Trust's Project Khula Nathi as an implementation exercise, rather than as an attempt to develop a national costing model. The original two-week menu was developed from the National Department of Health (NDoH) Nutrition Guidelines for Early Childhood Development (ECD) Programmes. The Guidelines provided the nutritional foundation for meal structure, food-group selection, dietary diversity, protein-rich foods, fruit and vegetables, dairy, fortified staple foods and healthy eating practices. The subsequent development of the Basket has therefore been an exercise in operationalising existing nutrition guidance, rather than creating an alternative nutrition standard.

The menu was subsequently refined into a practical one-week cycle. This was not a change in nutritional intent. The NDoH Guidelines continued to guide meal choices, structure and recipe development, while the shorter cycle supported simpler implementation and provided a more practical basis for procurement, preparation and subsequent costing. The ECD NCN Basket Menu was then tested in an ECD setting. This formative implementation testing demonstrated that flexibility is necessary in practice, but also that substitutions are not necessarily nutritionally equivalent. This learning contributed to the development of substitution principles and implementation guidance.

The experience also demonstrated that a menu alone was insufficient as the longer-term technical reference. This led to the development of the Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework, which provides an upstream technical reference for defining nutritional adequacy, meal architecture, portion logic and acceptable substitutions. The resulting hierarchy is:

- The Framework defines the nutritional logic
- The Basket Menu operationalises it
- The Basket quantifies it
- Price monitoring establishes what it costs

This distinction is important because it ensures that affordability is considered after the nutritional requirement has been defined, rather than allowing financial constraints to silently determine the nutritional standard.

The development process has therefore followed a nutrition first, affordability informed approach. Nutritional requirements provided the starting point. Practical implementation experience then informed what could work in an ECD setting, while food price information provided evidence about the financial implications of the resulting food provision. The Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group's (PMBEJD) existing price-monitoring system provided an important mechanism for generating market price information, but it did not determine the nutritional food selection. The

final ECD NCN Basket Menu included foods that were not already part of the PMBEJD price-monitoring basket, requiring these foods to be added as the Basket moved into price-monitoring.

Nutritional contribution

The ECD NCN Basket Menu was analysed for two age groups: EG1 (9–23 months) and EG2 (2–6 years). The analysis indicates a modelled energy contribution of approximately 40% for EG1 and 47% for EG2 against the reference values used in the assessment. Contributions for other nutrients were higher: protein 110% and 133%; iron 75% and 95%; zinc 121% and 128%; calcium 57% and 55%; and vitamin A 185% and 262%, respectively.

These results indicate a meaningful nutritional contribution from food provided during ECD care. They should not be interpreted as evidence that the Basket provides children's complete daily nutritional requirements. The analysis represents the ECD-provided food component within a partial-day feeding model, while children's total nutritional intake extends beyond the ECD setting.

Preliminary August 2026 costing and September 2026 refinements

The August 2026 pilot costing provides the first preliminary estimate of what this defined food provision costs.

Age group	Cost per child/day	Cost per child/month*
Energy Group 1 (9-23 months)	R7.54	R150.88
Energy Group 2 (2-6 years)	R13.25	R265.05

**Based on 20 days*

Using an illustrative 20-child centre comprising four EG1 children and 16 EG2 children, the weighted average food ingredient cost is R12.11 per child per day, or R4,844.39 per month based on 20 days of attendance. This age composition is illustrative and based on Zero2Five implementation experience; it is not presented as nationally representative.

Compared with the R9.60 per child per day nutrition/food component of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) ECD subsidy for the 2026/27 financial year, the illustrative centre has a modelled food-cost gap of R1,004.39 per month even at 100% coverage of that allocation. At 70% coverage, the available food allocation falls to R2,688 per month while the modelled food requirement remains R4,844.39, resulting in a modelled gap of R2,156.39.

These comparisons provide a transparent way of examining the relationship between the defined food requirement and available financing. They do not determine the appropriate subsidy level or funding response.

Further stakeholder engagement and the September price-monitoring exercise informed a refinement to the form of milk specified and costed in the Basket. The August costing used full-cream milk powder (FCM), costed in kilograms. During September, stakeholder engagement highlighted practical concerns regarding the use of powdered milk in ECD settings, including the safety of water required for reconstitution and the potential for inappropriate substitution with products such as coffee creamers. In parallel, challenges were experienced in obtaining reliable market pricing for full-cream milk powder.

In response, the September costing specifies fresh/UHT full-cream milk, costed in litres, rather than FCM powder. The underlying nutritional requirement and purpose of the milk component remain unchanged. The September costing therefore represents a further refinement of the pilot model to improve practical implementation, clarity and costability for potential national application.

The August costing is retained as the baseline costing for that iteration of the Basket, while the September costing provides the current refined costing following this stakeholder and market-pricing review. A comparison of the August and September costing iterations is provided in the costing section below.

Important costing boundaries

The costing represents food ingredients only. It excludes labour, cooking fuel or electricity, water, cleaning materials, storage, equipment and other operational costs associated with providing a nutrition service.

The EG1 costing also represents the ECD-provided food component. It does not attempt to monetise breastmilk or include infant formula as a standard priced Basket component. Milk feeding may remain an important component of nutritional intake for EG1 children alongside complementary foods. The lower EG1 food cost should therefore not be interpreted as meaning that the complete nutritional or feeding cost for a child in this age category is lower.

What the Basket contributes

The principal contribution of the work is not a single food price, but a transparent methodology linking nutrition, implementation, quantification, costing and monitoring.

The ECD NCN Basket translates nutritional guidance into a defined food requirement and makes the resources required to provide that food visible. It provides an evidence base for ECD planning, procurement, financing discussions and ongoing price monitoring, while retaining a clear distinction between the cost of the food component and the broader cost of providing nutrition services.

The Basket also has potential relevance to broader nutrition and stunting-prevention priorities. It is not itself a stunting-prevention intervention and does not establish a causal effect on stunting outcomes. Rather, it provides a practical mechanism for defining and costing one component of the nutritional environment during an important period of growth and development.

October 2026 transition and next steps

The ECD NCN Basket remains in a pilot and refinement phase. The September costing represents the next iteration of the model following further stakeholder engagement and price-monitoring experience. In particular, the milk component has been refined from FCM powdered milk to fresh/UHT full-cream milk, costed in litres. This refinement responds to both practical implementation considerations and challenges in obtaining reliable market pricing for full-cream milk powder.

The change illustrates the iterative nature of the Basket's development: food specifications need to be nutritionally appropriate, practically implementable, clearly communicated and sufficiently

costable to support a potential national model. The September costing should therefore be regarded as the current pilot costing iteration rather than a final national price.

The immediate next steps include completion and review of September price monitoring, refinement of product specifications and costing assumptions, technical and visual quality assurance, finalisation of implementation and substitution guidance, and transition towards ongoing monthly price monitoring from October 2026.

The Basket should be understood as a living technical model rather than a static costing exercise. Its ongoing value will depend on continued technical stewardship, periodic review and transparent documentation as food prices, product specifications, implementation experience and the evidence base evolve.

In this sense, the ECD NCN Basket provides a practical bridge between nutrition guidance and implementation: the Guidelines establish the nutritional foundation, the Framework defines the nutritional logic, the Basket Menu operationalises that logic, the Basket quantifies the food requirement, and price monitoring establishes its cost. Together, these components make both the nutritional food requirement and the resources needed to provide it more visible.

1. Introduction

1.1. Nutrition in the ECD context

The National Department of Health (NDoH) Nutrition Guidelines for Early Childhood Development (ECD) Programmes provide the nutritional foundation for food provision in ECD settings. The Guidelines promote dietary diversity, regular consumption of protein-rich foods, fruit and vegetables, dairy products, fortified staple foods and healthy eating practices, while also providing practical guidance on how these principles can be applied through menus, recipes and portion guidance.

This combination of nutritional principles and practical guidance provides an important foundation for ECD food provision. However, from the perspective of procurement, quantification and cost monitoring, further specification is required. Portion guidance is generally provided as ranges, while menus and recipes are not structured as a standardised food requirement that can be consistently quantified, priced and monitored over time. In addition, implementation experience highlighted the value of giving practitioners greater flexibility to adapt meals through appropriate food substitutions while maintaining the nutritional purpose of meals.

The ECD Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket (ECD NCN Basket) was developed to build on this existing foundation. It provides a more standardised mechanism for translating the nutritional food provision into defined quantities and product specifications that can be quantified, costed and monitored, while retaining flexibility in how the nutritional intent is implemented in different ECD settings.

1.2. From nutrition guidance to implementation

The NDoH Nutrition Guidelines and the ECD NCN Basket serve complementary purposes. The Guidelines establish the nutritional principles and provide practical guidance for their application, while the Basket builds on this foundation by translating the food provision into a defined, quantifiable and cost-monitorable requirement.

The Basket is intended to build on and strengthen the practical application of the existing Guidelines, not to replace, duplicate or redefine them. Its particular contribution is to provide greater standardisation of food quantities, product specifications and costing so that the resources required to provide the defined food provision can be measured and monitored over time.

1.3. Origins of the ECD Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket

The development of the Basket brought together the ECD implementation experience of Zero2Five Trust, the food-costing and price-monitoring expertise of the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group (PMBEJD), and the public health nutrition expertise of Philippa Barnard, Registered Dietitian.

The work originated through nutrition programme implementation with Zero2Five Trust as part of Project Khula Nathi. The initial objective was to strengthen nutrition support within ECD centres

through a practical menu aligned with the NDoH Guidelines. At that stage, the work was not conceived as a national costing model.

The subsequent development process involved menu refinement, implementation testing, development of substitution principles, technical nutrition work and engagement with food-costing expertise. Over time, this work evolved into the ECD NCN Basket described in this report.

The development process described in this report therefore traces the evolution of the work from national nutrition guidance, through practical implementation and iterative refinement, to a defined and nationally costed food provision. The stages of this development are described in the following section.

1.4. Purpose and scope of this report

This report consolidates the technical development of the ECD NCN Basket from its origins in the NDoH-informed Zero2Five menu through to the current pilot costing and price-monitoring phase.

It describes:

- the development pathway from nutrition guidance to the ECD NCN Basket;
- the implementation learning that informed menu refinement and substitution principles;
- the role of the Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework;
- the adaptations required to create a nationally costable basket;
- the nutritional contribution of the ECD NCN Basket Menu;
- preliminary August 2026 costing of the ECD NCN Basket;
- the limitations and methodological boundaries of the current model; and
- the next steps towards ongoing monitoring and broader application.

Detailed technical evidence is provided in the accompanying annexes.

1.5. Terminology used in this report

The terms *ECD NCN Basket*, *ECD NCN Basket Menu* and *menu* refer to related but distinct elements of the model.

The *ECD NCN Basket Menu* is the defined five-day food provision used to translate the nutritional principles of the *Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework* into specific meals, foods and portion sizes. Nutritional analysis is undertaken on the *ECD NCN Basket Menu*, assessing the nutritional contribution of the food provided during the ECD day.

The *ECD NCN Basket Menu* forms the food and specification basis for the ECD NCN Basket, which quantifies the food required and applies standardised quantities and prices to establish the cost of that defined food provision.

In simple terms: The Framework defines the nutritional logic; the Basket Menu operationalises it; nutritional analysis assesses its nutritional contribution; and the Basket quantifies and costs the resulting food requirement.

Figure 1 summarises how the Framework, Basket Menu, nutritional analysis, Basket and price monitoring fit together within the overall model.

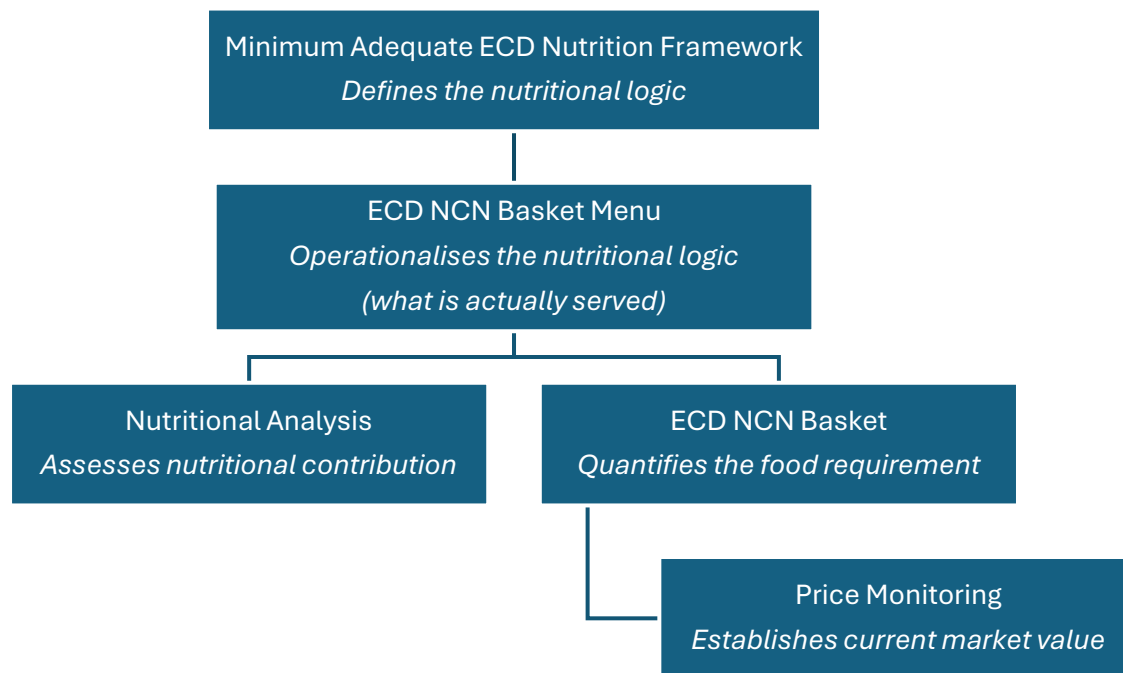


Figure 1 Relationship between the Nutrition Framework, Basket Menu, Nutritional Analysis, Basket and Price Monitoring

For consistency throughout the report, *ECD NCN Basket* is used as the formal name of the overall model, while the *Basket* is used as its defined short form. *ECD NCN Basket Menu* is used for the specific five-day menu underpinning the Basket, with the *Basket Menu* as its defined short form. The term menu is used in lower case when referring generically to a menu or to earlier programme menus.

2. Development of the ECD Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket

2.1. The NDoH Nutrition Guidelines as the starting point

The NDoH Nutrition Guidelines provided the primary nutritional foundation for the original menu. They informed the types of foods included, meal frequency and structure, dietary diversity, regular inclusion of protein-rich foods, fruit and vegetables, dairy and fortified staple foods, as well as broader healthy eating principles. The Guidelines also provided practical examples of how these principles could be applied through menus, recipes and portion guidance.

The project therefore began with a two-week menu based on the NDoH Guidelines, as part of an effort to strengthen nutrition support within an actual ECD context. At this stage, the work was focused on practical implementation rather than on establishing a national costing methodology.

2.2. From the Zero2Five two-week menu to a practical one-week menu

The original two-week menu provided a range of meal examples that demonstrated dietary diversity and the application of the NDoH Nutrition Guidelines in an ECD setting. During implementation, the project team identified a need for a simpler and more flexible approach that could support

practitioners to make appropriate substitutions according to the foods available to them. The menu was therefore adapted into a one-week implementation cycle, while retaining the underlying nutritional principles and meal architecture.

This was an implementation refinement developed through project experience, rather than a replacement for the two-week menu provided in the NDoH Guidelines. The purpose was to make the underlying principles easier to apply consistently while giving practitioners greater flexibility to work with the foods and resources available to them.

The resulting one-week menu established a consistent meal architecture across the ECD day. Breakfast was structured around porridge with milk, alternating between a cooked maize-based porridge and a fortified specialised no-cook instant porridge. The mid-morning snack combined fruit and dairy; lunch followed a protein–starch–vegetable structure; and the afternoon snack was provided as a sandwich or bread-based item with a nutritionally appropriate spread. Within these patterns, specific foods could vary according to availability and context.

This approach created space for nutritionally appropriate substitutions and for the incorporation of suitable foods available through donations, ECD food gardens, local markets and other local sources of food. Rather than requiring centres to reproduce an identical menu, the intention was to support practitioners to understand the nutritional function of a meal and make appropriate choices when the exact food specified was not available. In this way, flexibility was positioned as an implementation skill rather than simply permission to substitute one food for another.

2.3. Implementation testing and learning

The revised one-week menu was tested in an ECD setting as a formative implementation exercise. The purpose was not to conduct a formal compliance audit or evaluate health outcomes, but to observe how the proposed meal pattern worked in practice and to identify where further guidance was needed.

The testing generated learning that could not have been obtained through nutrient analysis alone. It demonstrated that some meal structures were relatively resilient to substitution. Different protein sources could be used while maintaining the intended protein–starch–vegetable structure of a meal. Fruit and dairy options could similarly be varied without necessarily changing the nutritional purpose of the meal.

However, the testing also demonstrated that not all substitutions were nutritionally equivalent. In particular, replacing a fruit-and-dairy snack with a processed maize-based snack could result in the loss of an important macro and micronutrient contribution.

This distinction was important. It showed that the question in implementation is not simply, *“Can one food be replaced by another?”* but rather, *“Does the replacement continue to fulfil the nutritional function of the food or meal component being replaced?”*

Implementation testing therefore provided an important form of practical technical learning. It allowed the development process to move beyond asking whether a menu was nutritionally

appropriate on paper to asking whether its nutritional intent could be maintained when the menu was implemented in a real ECD environment.

The detailed implementation testing and field learning is provided in Annex A.

2.4. From implementation learning to the Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework

Implementation testing demonstrated that flexibility is essential in ECD feeding programmes. Centres may encounter changing food prices, variable availability, donated foods, different procurement arrangements and fluctuating budgets. A model that requires strict adherence to a fixed list of foods is therefore unlikely to be sufficiently practical across different settings.

At the same time, the testing demonstrated that flexibility does not mean that all food substitutions are nutritionally equivalent. For example, substitutions between different protein sources or staple foods may be appropriate where the replacement continues to fulfil the relevant nutritional function of the original food. In contrast, replacing a fruit-and-dairy snack with a processed maize-based snack may remove an important protein and micronutrient contribution, even where the replacement is cheaper or readily available.

This highlighted the need to move from a fixed-food approach towards principles-based flexibility. The emphasis shifted from requiring practitioners to reproduce a particular food list to helping them understand the nutritional function of foods within meals and snacks. The resulting principle was:

Exact food items may change, but the nutritional purpose of the meal should be protected.

This principle highlighted the need for clearer technical boundaries. As the work progressed from a programme-specific feeding approach towards a nationally costable basket, questions emerged around how much of children's daily nutritional requirements should reasonably be provided during ECD hours, which nutritional components should be prioritised, what constitutes minimum nutritional adequacy within the ECD setting, how age-appropriate portions should be determined, and what constitutes a nutritionally acceptable substitution.

The Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework was developed to provide this technical definition. It established the nutritional principles and boundaries to be protected as menus, food products and implementation arrangements change. The Framework addresses the proportion of daily nutritional requirements to be provided during ECD hours, meal architecture, food-group frequency, age-appropriate portion logic, acceptable substitutions and the assumptions underpinning nutritional modelling and costing.

The Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework therefore emerged directly from the practical development and testing of the menu and the need to ensure that flexibility in implementation did not result in unintended dilution of nutritional adequacy.

The Framework became the upstream technical reference for the ECD NCN Basket. It defines the nutritional logic; the Basket Menu operationalises that logic; the Basket quantifies the resulting food requirement; and price monitoring establishes what that defined requirement costs.

This separation of functions also establishes an important methodological principle: nutritional adequacy is established before affordability is considered. Affordability analysis tests the cost and feasibility of a defined nutritional requirement rather than determining that requirement implicitly. Where nutritional requirements and available resources do not align, the resulting gap should be made visible rather than addressed through an unacknowledged reduction in nutritional quality.

The development and rationale for the Framework, including the nutritional parameters, planning ranges, substitution principles and supporting assumptions, are set out in Annex B.

2.5. From programme menu to nationally costable basket

Once the nutritional and implementation principles had been made explicit through the Framework, the work moved into a different phase: translating the programme-specific menu into a model that could be quantified and costed nationally.

This required several methodological and product-level adaptations. Food products needed to be specified in forms that could be purchased and consistently priced. Portion sizes needed to be standardised sufficiently to calculate quantities, and weekly food requirements needed to be extrapolated into monthly quantities for costing.

PMBEJD, with its established price-monitoring and food-costing infrastructure, provided the mechanism through which this defined food requirement could be translated into a monitored cost.

2.5.1. *Defining the age groups for the costed basket*

An important methodological decision at this stage was to define the age groups to which the costed Basket would apply. Earlier versions of the Zero2Five menu included guidance for children aged 6–9 months. As the work progressed towards a nationally costable Basket, this age group was no longer treated as a separate costing category. This was a deliberate methodological decision.

For children aged 6–8 months, complementary foods form part of the transition to family foods, but milk feeding remains a major component of nutritional intake. Breastmilk does not have an equivalent market price that can be incorporated into the costing model, while including infant formula as a priced basket component without an equivalent basis for valuing breastmilk would create an asymmetric costing model. Costing only the relatively small complementary-food component could therefore give a misleading picture of the resources required to provide the full feeding contribution for children in this age group. Implementation experience also indicated that relatively few children in the ECD settings were in the 6–9-month age range.

The exclusion of 6–9 months as a separate costing group does not mean that these children are excluded from the feeding approach. The Basket Menu and portion guidance retained specific guidance for children in this age range: where they attend an ECD programme, they may be offered small amounts of appropriate complementary foods from the menu, prepared in an age-appropriate form, while breastfeeding or other milk feeding continues according to the child's circumstances and agreed feeding arrangements. The costed Basket, however, does not assign a separate monetary value to this complementary-food provision.

The costed Basket was therefore defined around two programme age groups: EG1 (9–23 months) and EG2 (2–6 years), for which food provided through the ECD programme represents a more substantial and measurable component of dietary intake.

2.5.2. Standardising the food requirement for national costing

As the work moved from the Zero2Five implementation menu towards a nationally costable Basket, greater standardisation of food products and specifications was required. Product substitutions therefore needed to be considered in terms of nutritional purpose, implementation feasibility and the requirements of consistent national price monitoring.

For example, the specialised porridge used in the Zero2Five menu was not readily accommodated within the PMBEJD price-monitoring methodology. The breakfast specification was therefore adapted for the costed Basket to use a standardised instant sorghum porridge. This change was not simply a matter of identifying an alternative product that could be readily priced. The no-cook characteristic was intentionally retained because implementation realities in ECD settings—including variation in available time, staffing and cooking resources—made a no-cook breakfast option valuable. The change therefore reflected both the requirements of national price monitoring and practical implementation considerations, while retaining the intended role and meal structure of the breakfast component.

Other examples included the use of soya mince or textured vegetable protein (TVP) as a shelf-stable protein source that could be incorporated into the Basket, and powdered full-cream milk (FCM), which was initially considered as a practical dairy reference product for national costing, particularly because of its storage, transport and procurement characteristics.

October 2026 update: The September 2026 costing iteration subsequently refined the milk specification from powdered full-cream milk (FCM) to fresh/UHT full-cream milk, costed in litres. This refinement followed stakeholder engagement regarding practical implementation considerations, including water safety and the potential for inappropriate substitution, as well as challenges experienced in obtaining reliable market pricing for FCM powder. The nutritional purpose of the milk component remains unchanged. See Annex G for the September 2026 costing and refinement.

These examples illustrate an important distinction in the development process: the food product used in the implementation menu and the reference product used for national costing were not necessarily identical. What needed to remain consistent was the nutritional purpose of the food within the meal, together with sufficient product specification to support consistent national price monitoring. The move towards standardised, costable reference products was therefore part of the transition from a programme-specific menu to a nationally monitorable Basket.

The one-week menu provided a practical basis for implementation, menu planning and food preparation. Subsequent standardisation of foods, portions and product specifications enabled the defined food provision to be quantified and costed, while retaining variety across protein sources, fruits, vegetables and fortified staple foods. The resulting model could therefore be purchased,

quantified, costed and monitored using defined reference products, while allowing appropriate substitutions where the nutritional purpose of the food was maintained.

This process provided an early illustration of a principle that continued to shape the development of the ECD NCN Basket: The form of implementation can change without changing the underlying nutritional intent.

The ECD NCN Basket Menu is provided in Annex C.

2.6. Nutrition first, affordability informed

1.1. Nutrition first, affordability informed

The development process established a central methodological principle: Nutrition first, affordability informed.

This principle reflects the sequence through which the Basket was developed. The nutritional requirement was defined first, informed by national guidance, the Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework, age-appropriate portions and implementation learning. The food requirement was then quantified and its cost established through national price monitoring.

In simple terms: *Nutrition determines the food requirement; the food requirement determines the cost.*

Affordability therefore informs the feasibility and resource implications of the defined nutritional requirement; it does not determine the nutritional standard itself.

The existing PMBEJD price-tracking basket was not, however, the nutritional basis for selecting the foods in the ECD NCN Basket Menu. The final one-week menu included foods that were not already part of the PMBEJD price-monitoring dataset. Those foods consequently needed to be added as the ECD Basket moved into price monitoring.

This is an important methodological point. It demonstrates that the process was not: Select the cheapest foods already being monitored and build the nutrition model around them. Rather, it was: Define the nutritional food provision, test what is feasible in practice, and then establish what that defined food provision costs.

Figure 2 summarises the development pathway from menu refinement to nutritional framework to quantified and costed food basket.

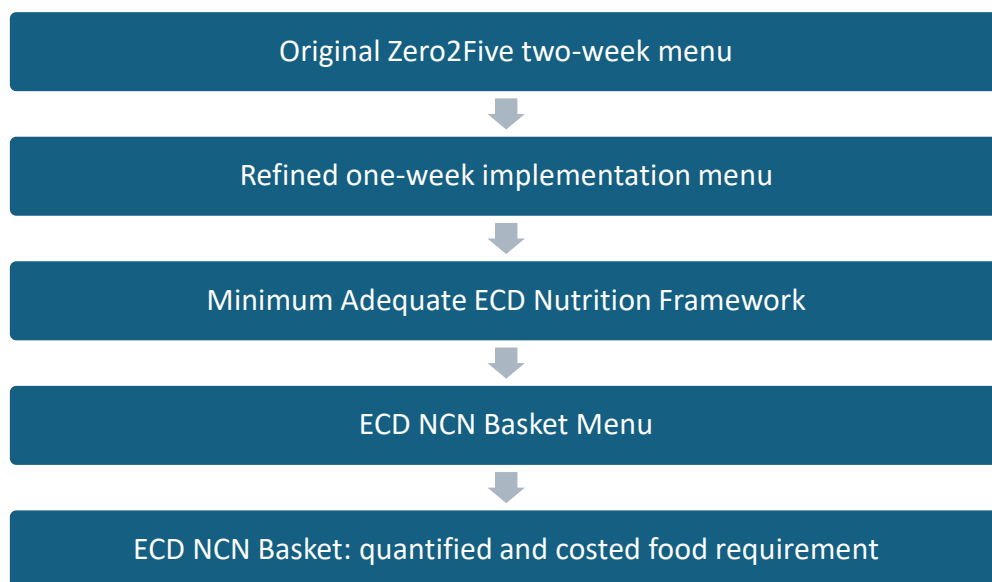


Figure 2 Evolution from implementation menu to nationally costed Basket

3. From Nutrition Guidance to a Nationally Costed Basket

The development process described in Section 2 resulted in a model that brings together nutrition guidance, implementation principles, defined food provision, quantification and price monitoring. This section describes the resulting model and clarifies how the ECD NCN Basket relates to the NDoH Nutrition Guidelines.

3.1. The complementary roles of the NDoH Guidelines and the ECD NCN Basket

The NDoH Nutrition Guidelines and the ECD NCN Basket share the objective of supporting nutritious food provision for young children, but they fulfil different functions. The Guidelines establish the nutritional principles and provide practical guidance for their application, including menus, recipes and portion guidance. The Basket addresses a complementary question: What does it take to provide that food provision in a defined, quantifiable and costable form?

Table 1 Distinct but complementary roles of the NDoH Nutrition Guidelines and the ECD NCN Basket

Feature	NDoH Nutrition Guidelines	ECD NCN Basket
Primary purpose	Nutrition guidance and practical application	Defined implementation and costing model
Core question	What should children eat and how can this be applied?	What does it take to provide the defined food provision?
Focus	Healthy eating patterns and practical food provision	Defined foods, quantities and costs
Menu format	Practical/ illustrative menus	Defined, costable menu and quantities
Portion guidance	Age-appropriate serving ranges	Standardised planning quantities
Procurement	Guidance for food provision	Defined food requirement for procurement and costing
Costing	Not a costing methodology	Core application
Primary users	Health professionals, ECD practitioners, programme managers	ECD centres, implementers, funders, planners and costing partners

The Basket is therefore best understood as an implementation and costing application that builds on the principles and practical guidance contained within the NDoH Guidelines, rather than as an alternative nutrition framework.

3.2. Alignment with core nutrition principles

The ECD NCN Basket operationalises the core nutrition principles reflected in the NDoH Guidelines. These include:

- dietary diversity;
- variety within food groups;
- regular inclusion of fruit and vegetables;
- regular inclusion of dairy or appropriate dairy products;
- protein-rich foods from plant and animal sources;
- legumes;
- fortified staple foods;
- regular meals and snacks; and
- healthy eating practices.

These principles are expressed through the Basket Menu's weekly meal structure, food-group composition and product specifications. The one-week cycle represents a practical implementation format rather than a change in nutritional intent.

Daily fruit and dairy were intentionally retained during refinement despite their associated costs. Similarly, nutrient-dense vegetables, legumes, fortified staples and selected animal-source foods were retained because of their contribution to protein and micronutrient intake.

3.3. Practical features of the costed Basket

The costed Basket incorporates several defined features that allow the nutritional principles to be translated into a quantifiable food requirement:

Menu cycle

The Basket uses a one-week menu cycle rather than the two-week menu provided in the Guidelines. This supports simpler planning, procurement, preparation and costing while maintaining variety.

Standardised portions

The Guidelines provide serving ranges appropriate to nutrition guidance. Costing requires defined quantities. The Basket therefore uses standardised planning portions that can be translated into raw purchase quantities and monthly food requirements.

These portions should not be interpreted as rigid limits on what an individual child may eat. They provide a planning and procurement baseline while allowing additional servings where food is available and children indicate hunger.

Age-specific portions

The Basket distinguishes between:

- **Energy Group 1 (EG1):** younger children, aged 9–23 months
- **Energy Group 2 (EG2):** older children, aged 2–6 years

The two groups have different food quantities and costs. This allows the Basket to reflect the age composition of an ECD centre rather than applying a single undifferentiated food quantity to all children.

Food forms and product specifications

National costing requires foods to be defined in forms that can be purchased and compared consistently. This has informed the specification of products such as instant fortified porridge, soya mince/TVP and fresh/UHT full-cream milk. The milk specification was refined in September 2026 from powdered full-cream milk (FCM), which had been used in the August costing, to fresh/UHT full-cream milk, costed in litres.

Nutrient density

Within constrained resources, the Basket prioritises foods that contribute important nutrients rather than simply maximising food volume or energy intake. Items such as added sugar, tea, stock cubes and soup powders are therefore treated separately from the core nutrient-providing food requirement. Water is assumed to be routinely available and is the preferred beverage in line with the NDoH Guidelines.

3.4. The Framework, Menu and Basket: how the components fit together

The ECD NCN Basket comprises several linked components, each with a distinct function:

The Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework establishes the nutritional logic and adequacy principles.

The ECD NCN Basket Menu translates those principles into a defined five-day food provision.

The ECD NCN Basket quantifies the food required to provide that defined provision for a specified population and period.

Price monitoring assigns current market prices to the defined food requirement and therefore establishes what that requirement costs.

This creates a clear sequence:

Framework → Basket Menu → Basket → Price monitoring

Nutrition defines the requirement; price monitoring establishes its cost.

The separation of these functions allows the operational expression of the Basket to evolve—for example, through changes in products, suppliers or prices—without automatically changing the underlying nutritional requirement.



Figure 3 From nutrition framework to nationally costed food requirement

3.5. Why the Basket matters

The significance of the ECD NCN Basket extends beyond establishing the price of a group of food items. It provides a mechanism for translating nutrition guidance into a defined food requirement that can be quantified, costed and monitored within the ECD setting. This is important because the question is not simply whether policy expects young children to receive nutritious food while in ECD

care, but whether ECD programmes have the resources required to provide the food that nutrition guidance expects them to provide.

The Basket therefore creates a bridge between nutritional aspiration and resource requirement. It makes it possible to define the food provision, quantify what is required, establish what that provision costs, and assess the extent to which available resources can support its provision. It does not, however, by itself establish the level of funding that should be provided; rather, it provides a transparent evidence base for considering the resources required to provide the defined food provision.

4. Nutritional Basis of the ECD NCN Basket

4.1. Purpose of the nutritional analysis

Nutritional analysis was undertaken on the ECD NCN Basket Menu to assess the nutritional contribution of the defined food provision during ECD care.

The purpose was not to determine whether the Basket independently meets 100% of children's daily nutrient requirements. Rather, it was to assess whether the defined food provision makes a meaningful nutritional contribution during the period children are in ECD care.

The detailed nutritional analysis is provided in Annex D.

4.2. Nutritional contribution of the ECD NCN Basket

The ECD NCN Basket Menu demonstrates a nutritional profile characterised by strong contributions to protein and several key micronutrients, as shown below. The percentages represent the modelled contribution of the Basket Menu against the reference values used in the nutritional analysis.

Nutrient	EG1: 9–23 months	EG2: 2–6 years
Energy	40%	47%
Protein	110%	133%
Iron	75%	95%
Zinc	121%	128%
Calcium	57%	55%
Vitamin A	185%	262%

The analysis indicates an energy contribution of approximately 40–47% of the relevant daily reference values, accompanied by substantially higher modelled contributions for protein and several key micronutrients.

This profile is consistent with the design emphasis on nutrient-dense foods, including dairy products, fruit, vegetables, legumes, fortified staple foods and selected animal-source foods, rather than simply maximising energy provision. These results should be interpreted as a contribution during the ECD day, rather than as a measure of complete dietary adequacy.

4.3. Interpretation of nutritional contribution during time in care

Children's total dietary intake extends beyond the meals consumed at an ECD centre. Depending on attendance patterns, children may also consume food before arriving at the centre, after returning home, and during weekends and holidays.

The Basket was therefore developed on the basis that responsibility for children's overall nutritional intake is shared between ECD programmes, households and the wider food environment.

This distinction is particularly important when interpreting the EG1 and EG2 age groups. Children aged 9–23 months are at a developmental stage in which complementary feeding is established alongside continued milk feeding. Complementary foods contribute energy and nutrients while also supporting the transition towards a wider range of foods, textures and meal types.

As children grow, their capacity to consume food and participate in regular meal and snack patterns increases. Older children can therefore consume larger portions and obtain a greater proportion of their nutritional intake from foods provided through the ECD menu. This developmental difference is reflected in the larger planning portions used for EG2.

The smaller ECD-provided food component for EG1 should therefore not be interpreted as indicating lower overall nutritional or feeding requirements. Rather, it reflects the different role of complementary foods within the diets of younger children, for whom a greater proportion of nutritional intake may continue to be provided through breastmilk and/or other milk feeds.

The current Basket costing captures the ECD-provided food component. Breastmilk is not assigned a monetary value, and infant formula is not included as a standard priced Basket component. The EG1 costing should therefore be understood as the cost of the ECD-provided complementary food component, rather than the full cost of meeting the nutritional needs of children within the 9–23-month age category.

4.4. Nutrient density as a design principle

Nutrient density was an important design principle in the ECD NCN Basket. Within a constrained resource environment, increasing food volume does not necessarily maximise nutritional value. The development process therefore prioritised foods that contribute protein, vitamins and minerals important for growth and development.

This influenced the retention of:

- daily dairy;
- daily fruit;
- legumes;
- fortified staple foods;
- selected animal-source foods; and
- nutrient-rich vegetables.

It also informed the decision to exclude added sugar and several flavouring products with limited nutritional contribution from the core Basket.

The resulting nutritional profile reflects this approach: the Basket provides a smaller proportion of the selected energy reference value than of several nutrient reference values, while providing substantial contributions to protein, zinc and vitamin A.

4.5. Younger children and the milk-feeding boundary

The EG1 age group requires particular care in interpreting both nutritional and costing results.

Children aged 9–23 months continue to receive a proportion of their nutritional intake through milk feeding while complementary foods become increasingly important. The Basket costing captures only the ECD-provided food component. It does not attempt to quantify children's total dietary intake or the cost of milk feeding.

The costing model does not assign a monetary value to breastmilk, nor does it include infant formula as a standard priced Basket component. This is a deliberate methodological boundary. Breastmilk does not have an equivalent market price that can be incorporated into the model, while including formula as a priced component without an equivalent basis for valuing breastmilk would create an asymmetric costing approach.

Consequently, the EG1 costing should be understood as the cost of the specified ECD-provided food component, rather than the complete cost of meeting the nutritional needs of a child in the EG1 age category. The August 2026 preliminary costing of this food component is presented in Section 5.

4.6. Limitations of the nutritional model

The current analysis should be interpreted within several boundaries.

It does not:

- represent children's complete 24-hour dietary intake;
- capture household dietary intake;
- assess individual children's nutritional status;
- demonstrate health or growth outcomes;
- capture individual variation in appetite, dietary intake or nutrient requirements; or
- establish a causal relationship between the Basket and outcomes such as stunting.

The analysis provides a technical assessment of the nutritional contribution of the defined Basket under the specified modelling assumptions. It should therefore be interpreted as a population-level planning and modelling assessment rather than an assessment of individual children.

5. Preliminary Costing: August 2026 Baseline and September 2026 Refinements

5.1. Purpose of costing

The purpose of costing is to determine what the defined food provision requires financially under current market conditions. The costing therefore follows the nutritional and implementation specification rather than defining it.

This reflects the core principle: Affordability should test what an adequate nutritional food contribution costs; it should not determine what counts as adequate.

Costing provides a way to make the resource requirement visible and to compare that requirement with available financing.

5.2. August 2026 pilot pricing

The August 2026 costing provides the first preliminary price point for the ECD NCN Basket and establishes the baseline costing for the initial Basket iteration. It tests the affordability of a defined nutritional food requirement; it does not determine the composition of that requirement.

For the 2026/27 financial year, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) ECD subsidy is R24 per child per day. The ECD conditional grant framework provides for 40% of the subsidy to be spent on nutrition, equivalent to R9.60 per child per day. The R9.60 figure is therefore used in this report as the reference point against which the food ingredient cost of the defined Basket is compared.^{1,2}

This comparison is not intended to imply that the full DBE subsidy is a food allocation, nor does it constitute a recommendation regarding the appropriate subsidy level. It simply makes visible the relationship between the defined food requirement and the portion of the existing subsidy intended for nutrition.

The age-specific results are shown in the table below.

Table 2 August 2026 pilot food cost of the ECD NCN Basket by age group

	EG1: 9–23 months	EG2: 2–6 years
Monthly food cost, 20 days	R150.88	R265.05
Average food cost/day	R7.54	R13.25
Food component allocation of subsidy	R9.60	R9.60
Difference	+R2.06	–R3.65

The September 2026 costing represents the next iteration of the pilot following further stakeholder engagement and price-monitoring experience. In this iteration, the milk specification was refined from full-cream milk powder to fresh/UHT full-cream milk, with the milk component costed in litres. This refinement responds to practical implementation considerations and challenges in obtaining reliable market pricing for full-cream milk powder. The underlying nutritional purpose of the milk component remains unchanged.

The August figures represent the food ingredient cost of the Basket based on August 2026 price data and the costing assumptions applicable to that iteration. They should be treated as pilot pricing rather than as final national prices.

The detailed August 2026 ECD NCN Basket pilot costing is provided in Annex F. The September 2026 costing and refinement are provided in Annex G.

¹ Republic of South Africa. 2026. *Division of Revenue Bill, 2026 (B5-2026)*. Schedule 5, Part A: Early Childhood Development Grant. National Treasury, Pretoria.

² Pieterse, D. 2025. Statement on the Early Childhood Development subsidy and nutrition allocation, reported in *Daily Maverick*, “Treasury proposes alternatives in fight against child malnutrition,” 5 November 2025.

5.3. Cost by age group

The age-specific results illustrate the importance of age composition and the different role of ECD-provided food within the diets of younger and older children.

The EG1 and EG2 categories use different portion sizes. Younger children have smaller planning portions for meals and snacks, reflecting their developmental stage and smaller food intake capacity. The quantity of food required from the ECD Basket is therefore lower for EG1 than for EG2. Older children are able to consume larger portions and obtain a greater proportion of their nutritional intake from the foods provided during the ECD day.

This means that the lower EG1 Basket cost reflects the smaller ECD-provided food component; it does not mean that the overall cost of meeting the nutritional needs of a younger child is lower.

For EG1 children, the ECD-provided complementary food component may sit alongside continued milk feeding, depending on the child's feeding circumstances and the arrangements in place between the ECD centre and household. The current Basket costing does not assign a monetary value to breastmilk and does not include infant formula as a standard priced Basket component. Any costs associated with milk feeding outside the defined ECD Basket therefore fall outside the current food-cost model.

At the individual age-group level, the R9.60 food component allocation of the DBE subsidy is higher than the modelled EG1 food cost by R2.06 per child per day, while it is lower than the EG2 food cost by R3.65 per child per day.

The current DBE subsidy food allocation is expressed as a common per-child amount rather than an age-differentiated food allocation. The Basket, by contrast, models different food requirements for EG1 and EG2 because portion sizes and the role of ECD-provided food differ between the age groups.

The difference between these two approaches is important for interpretation. A common per-child subsidy amount and an age-differentiated food requirement are not necessarily conceptually inconsistent, because the nutritional needs of children are met through different combinations of food sources and feeding arrangements at different ages. The Basket does, however, make the age-related difference in the ECD-provided food component visible.

Whether a common per-child allocation provides sufficient resources across different age compositions and centre contexts is ultimately a financing and policy question that can be explored using the Basket.

These results should not be interpreted in isolation. ECD centres generally serve a mixture of age groups, and the resulting food cost will therefore vary according to the age composition of the children enrolled. Centres also operate within different funding and resource environments. Some receive the DBE subsidy, which may cover all or only part of the children enrolled; others do not receive the subsidy and may rely on parent fees, donor support or other resources; and some operate through a combination of these funding sources. The relationship between the cost of the defined food Basket and the resources available to provide it therefore needs to be considered at centre level rather than inferred from an age-group cost alone.

5.4. Illustrative centre-level costing

To demonstrate the implications of age composition, the August model uses an illustrative centre of 20 children:

- 4 children in the younger EG1 age category (20% of children in illustrative centre)
- 16 children in the older EG2 age category (80% of children in illustrative centre)

This produces a total monthly food ingredient cost of **R4,844.39**, equivalent to a weighted average of approximately **R12.11 per child per day** over 20 days³.

The 80:20 age composition is based on Zero2Five implementation experience and is used for illustration. It should not be interpreted as a nationally representative age distribution.

The R12.11 figure is consequently an illustrative weighted average for the modelled centre, not a universal national ECD food cost or proposed funding rate.

5.5. Relationship between Basket cost and the R9.60 food allocation

If the R9.60 food component of the DBE subsidy were available for all 20 children for 20 days, the illustrative centre would receive **20 children × 20 days × R9.60 = R3,840 per month**.

The modelled food requirement is **R4,844.39 per month**.

The resulting difference is **R1,004.39 per month**, or approximately R2.51 per child per day.

This illustrates an important distinction between the age-specific and centre-level results. Although the R9.60 allocation is above the modelled EG1 food cost, the larger proportion of EG2 children in the illustrative centre produces a weighted food cost of R12.11.

5.6. Effect of subsidy coverage

A second dimension is the proportion of children for whom subsidy funding is actually received.

At 70% coverage, the illustrative monthly allocation would be **R3,840 × 70% = R2,688**.

The food requirement does not change. The same 20 children still require the same meals.

The modelled gap therefore becomes **R4,844.39 – R2,688 = R2,156.39 per month**.

This demonstrates two distinct financing pressures:

1. whether the allocation per child is sufficient relative to the food requirement; and
2. whether the centre receives that allocation for all children requiring food.

These pressures can occur simultaneously.

A useful way of expressing the second issue is:

³ The centre-level calculations are based on the underlying unrounded age-specific costing values; displayed figures may therefore not reproduce the centre total exactly when recalculated from rounded daily figures.

Incomplete subsidy coverage does not reduce the number of children who need food; it reduces the resources available to provide that food.

The Basket makes this relationship visible but does not determine how any financing gap should be addressed.

5.7. Costs included and excluded

The current Basket costing represents food ingredient costs only.

It does not include:

- labour;
- cooking fuel, gas or electricity;
- water;
- cleaning materials;
- food storage;
- kitchen and food-preparation equipment; or
- other operational inputs associated with providing a nutrition service.

The distinction is therefore between Cost of the ECD NCN Basket and Full cost of providing an ECD nutrition service.

The current methodology establishes the first. It does not attempt to establish the second.

5.8. Interpretation and limitations of the preliminary costing

The August 2026 costing should be interpreted as a pilot rather than a final national estimate.

The result is influenced by:

- the food products specified;
- the quantities used;
- current market prices;
- the assumed age composition;
- the 20-day month;
- and the boundaries of the food-only costing model.

Food prices also change over time and may vary geographically and between products.

For these reasons, the value of the August 2026 exercise lies not only in the R7.54, R13.25 or R12.11 figures, but in establishing a reproducible methodology through which the cost of the defined Basket can be monitored over time.

5.9. Ongoing price monitoring

PMBEJD's established price-monitoring methodology provides an appropriate infrastructure for ongoing monitoring of the ECD Basket.

However, the ECD NCN Basket required the price-monitoring system to be adapted to the actual foods included in the Basket. The fact that some foods in the final menu were not already tracked demonstrates that the existing price basket was not simply adopted as the nutritional specification.

The August 2026 exercise established the initial pilot price-monitoring point. The September 2026 costing provided a further opportunity to test repeatability, refine product specifications and address practical issues identified through stakeholder engagement and market-pricing experience. The September iteration, including the refinement of the milk specification, is presented in Annex G. These iterations provide the basis for ongoing monthly price monitoring and further refinement of the methodology.

6. Emerging Findings and Implementation Learning

6.1. Nutrition first, affordability informed

The development process reinforced a fundamental methodological principle: nutritional adequacy needs to be established before affordability is considered. Nutrition and affordability therefore need to be connected without reversing their order.

Nutrition first, affordability informed: nutritional adequacy determines the food requirement; affordability and market information then inform how that requirement can be operationalised, monitored and costed, without silently reducing the underlying nutritional standard.

Implementation experience tests whether the defined food provision can be delivered in an ECD setting, while market price information establishes what that provision costs. This means that affordability is understood more broadly than price alone. A food provision that is theoretically affordable but cannot be stored, prepared or served consistently is not practically feasible. Conversely, a food provision that is practical to deliver but cannot be financed requires a different response: the resulting resource gap needs to be made visible rather than resolved by reducing the nutritional requirement.

The purpose of the costing exercise is therefore to establish what it costs to provide a defined nutritional food requirement, rather than to allow the available budget to determine that requirement.

6.2. Flexibility without nutritional dilution

The implementation experience demonstrated that flexibility is necessary but must operate within nutritional boundaries. The appropriate question is not whether a substitute is cheaper or whether it belongs to the same broad food category. The question is whether it continues to fulfil the nutritional function of the food being replaced.

This learning informed the development of substitution principles and supports a model in which menus can adapt to local circumstances without progressively eroding nutritional quality.

6.3. Standardisation enables costing and monitoring

National costing requires sufficient standardisation to ensure that the same or appropriately comparable foods are being monitored over time.

This does not mean that every ECD centre must purchase one commercial brand. Rather, reference product specifications need to be sufficiently clear to allow consistent costing and comparison.

Without this standardisation, changes in the reported Basket cost could reflect differences in what was priced rather than genuine changes in food prices.

The September 2026 costing provided a practical example of this process. The milk specification was refined from full-cream milk powder to fresh/UHT full-cream milk following stakeholder feedback and experience with market pricing. The change demonstrates that product specifications may need to evolve as implementation and price-monitoring experience develops, while the nutritional purpose of the specified food remains protected.

6.4. Implementation testing is essential

The testing process demonstrated that nutritional analysis alone cannot establish whether a food provision model is sufficiently practical for ECD implementation.

Field experience revealed how substitutions occurred, which components were resilient and where nutritional quality could be lost.

Implementation testing therefore provides an important form of technical validation and should remain part of the ongoing development cycle.

6.5. Age composition affects resource requirements

The August costing demonstrates that the age composition of an ECD centre materially affects the food requirement.

The current model has different food quantities and costs for younger and older age categories. A centre with a higher proportion of older children will therefore have a different food requirement from one with a higher proportion of younger children.

This means that a single average cost should be used cautiously. Centre-level planning and financing discussions need to recognise the age composition of the children being served, as well as the different role of the ECD-provided food component within the diets of younger and older children, including the contribution of milk feeding for EG1 children.

6.6. The Basket is an evolving evidence base

The Basket brings together several forms of evidence: national nutrition guidance; nutritional modelling; menu development; implementation testing; food quantities; product specifications; and market price information.

It should therefore be treated as an evolving technical tool rather than a static costing exercise.

Monthly price monitoring will provide a time series of Basket costs, while further implementation experience may identify areas where product specifications, substitution guidance or other technical assumptions require refinement.

The key outcome of the development process is consequently not a fixed price, but a methodology that can continue to generate evidence as the Basket is implemented and monitored.

7. Relevance for ECD Planning, Financing and Policy

7.1. Bridging nutrition policy and implementation

The ECD NCN Basket provides a practical bridge between nutrition guidance and implementation.

The NDoH Guidelines establish the nutritional principles. The Framework provides a more explicit technical structure for adequacy and substitution. The Basket menu translates those principles into meals, and the Basket translates meals into quantities and costs.

This makes the resource implications of nutrition provision more visible without replacing existing policy or guidance.

7.2. Making the resource requirement visible

Nutrition objectives necessarily have resource implications.

The Basket provides a transparent mechanism for asking, “What does the specified nutritional food provision cost?” rather than simply asking, “How much money is available for food?”

The August 2026 costing provides the initial illustration of this relationship, while the September 2026 costing provides the next pilot iteration following further refinement of the Basket specifications. Both demonstrate how the modelled food requirement can be compared with available allocations, while retaining a clear distinction between the two.

This provides an evidence base for planning and discussion without presupposing the appropriate financing response.

7.3. Implications for ECD centres and implementing organisations

For ECD centres and implementing organisations, the Basket has potential value as a planning and procurement tool.

The quantified food requirements can support:

- menu planning;
- procurement planning;
- budgeting;
- stock planning;
- training;
- and informed substitution.

The principles-based approach also allows centres to respond to local availability and seasonal variation without requiring strict adherence to one fixed commercial product.

The Basket should nevertheless be interpreted as a technical reference rather than a requirement that every ECD centre purchase identical products in identical quantities.

7.4. Implications for funders and resource mobilisation

For funders and organisations involved in resource mobilisation, the Basket provides a defined reference against which food resource requirements can be considered. This allows a funding discussion to be framed around a specified food provision rather than an arbitrary amount.

It also allows stakeholders to distinguish between:

- the cost of food ingredients;
- the extent to which available resources cover those ingredients; and
- the additional operational resources required to provide a nutrition service.

The Basket does not determine how funding should be structured. Its contribution is to make the food component of the resource requirement more transparent.

7.5. Potential relevance to national nutrition and stunting-prevention priorities

The ECD setting is potentially important to broader child nutrition efforts because young children may spend a substantial portion of their day in ECD settings and may consume several meals and snacks while in care.

The ECD NCN Basket provides a mechanism for translating nutrition guidance into a defined food provision at the point where children are being fed. It also provides a basis for quantifying and costing the food resources associated with that provision.

This has potential relevance to national nutrition and stunting-prevention priorities. The Basket makes it possible to move from a general expectation that nutritious food should be provided in ECD settings to a more specific understanding of what food is required and what that food provision costs.

Where the cost of the defined food provision exceeds the resources available to an ECD centre, the resulting gap becomes visible. This can inform discussion of subsidy levels, subsidy coverage and other sources of food financing, without the Basket itself determining what the appropriate financing response should be.

The Basket has not been evaluated as a stunting-prevention intervention and is not intended to demonstrate a causal effect on stunting outcomes. Stunting is influenced by multiple factors extending beyond food provided in ECD settings. The significance of the Basket is therefore not that it can be expected to prevent stunting, but that it makes visible one of the resource conditions that may support adequate nutrition provision within ECD settings.

If ECD settings are expected to contribute to children's nutritional wellbeing during this important period of growth and development, an important planning question is whether they have the resources required to provide the defined food provision.

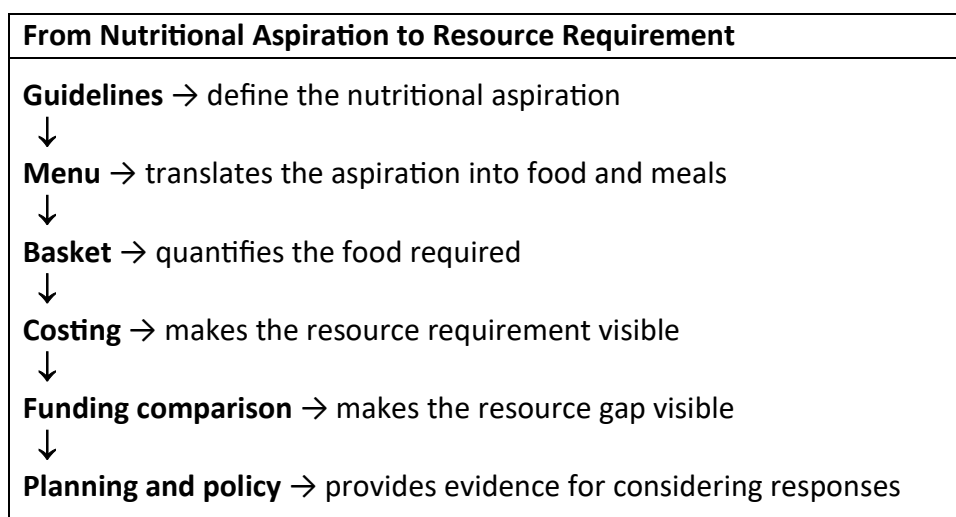


Figure 4 From nutritional aspiration to resource requirement

7.6. Potential applications of the Basket and price-monitoring mechanism

As the methodology develops, potential applications include:

- ECD food planning and budgeting;
- procurement planning;
- programme design;
- implementation and training;
- resource mobilisation;
- price monitoring;
- monitoring of food affordability pressures;
- scenario modelling; and
- policy dialogue.

The ECD NCN Basket also provides a foundation for further modelling and field-based investigation. Future applications could examine different age compositions, seasonal availability, geographic price differences, alternative products and the nutritional implications of different substitution choices. Modelling could also incorporate programme-level food production and other in-kind food resources, such as food gardens, eggs from laying hens, locally produced foods or food supplied through linked food-security and livelihood initiatives. This could help assess how such resources contribute to the defined food provision and the extent to which they may offset purchased food requirements.

Further work could examine how the Basket performs under different implementation and financing scenarios, including different subsidy levels, levels of subsidy coverage, parent contributions, donor support and combinations of funding sources. This would allow the model to explore what different financing and resource scenarios make possible in practice.

The price-monitoring mechanism could provide a longer-term evidence base for understanding how the cost of maintaining a defined nutritional food provision changes over time, including the effects of food-price inflation, seasonal variation and changes in food availability.

With further funding, dedicated technical input and field testing, the Basket could therefore evolve from a preliminary costing model into a broader planning, monitoring and decision-support tool for ECD nutrition.

7.7. Avoiding interpretation of the Basket as a full nutrition-service cost

The Basket must not be interpreted as the full cost of providing nutrition services in an ECD setting. It captures food ingredients only. A full nutrition-service costing would need to consider labour, utilities, water, cleaning, storage, equipment and other operational inputs.

Similarly, the Basket is not the cost of a child's complete daily diet. These boundaries should remain explicit in technical and public communication so that the Basket's results are neither overstated nor misunderstood.

8. Next Steps and October 2026 Transition

8.1. Completion of the pilot phase

The immediate priority is to complete the current pilot and refinement phase. This includes consolidating learning from the initial price-monitoring exercises, reviewing the technical assumptions and documenting the methodology sufficiently for consistent application and future use.

The pilot should conclude with a clear documented record of:

- nutritional assumptions;
- menu and portion specifications;
- product specifications;
- substitution principles;
- costing assumptions;
- price-monitoring methodology; and
- known limitations.

8.2. September price monitoring and review

The September 2026 price-monitoring exercise provided a further test of the repeatability of the August methodology and identified areas requiring refinement.

Review of the August and September costing data provides an opportunity to distinguish between:

- genuine food-price changes;
- product availability;
- changes in product specifications;
- pack-size or unit differences; and
- methodological issues.

The August and September costing sheets are retained as separate supporting records for the two pilot pricing points. The underlying price data provide an indication of food-price movement between the two monitoring points; however, the overall Basket costs should not be interpreted as

a direct like-for-like price comparison because the milk specification was changed between the two iterations. The September costing therefore reflects both changes in observed market prices and the refinement of the Basket specification. Direct comparison of individual food items is more appropriate where the product specification and costing unit remained unchanged.

The September exercise also demonstrated the importance of stakeholder feedback and practical implementation considerations in refining product specifications. In particular, the milk specification was changed from full-cream milk powder to fresh/UHT full-cream milk for the September costing. The detailed September costing and refinement are provided in Annex G.

These lessons should inform the transition to routine monthly price monitoring and further development of the costing methodology.

8.3. Finalisation of product specifications and costing methodology

Product specifications should be sufficiently detailed to allow comparable prices to be collected over time.

The documented methodology should specify:

- product description;
- relevant product characteristics;
- pack size or reference unit;
- quantity required;
- unit price;
- and treatment of unavailable or materially changed products.

The process should be reproducible rather than dependent on a one-off costing exercise.

8.4. Technical and visual quality assurance

Before broader communication, the technical materials should undergo a final quality-assurance process.

Technical review should confirm consistency between:

- the Framework;
- the Basket Menu;
- portions;
- food quantities;
- product specifications;
- nutritional analysis; and
- costing.

Visual review should ensure that tables, figures and explanatory materials present these relationships clearly.

Particular attention should be given to maintaining the distinction between the food ingredient cost of the Basket and the broader cost of providing a nutrition service.

8.5. Finalisation of implementation and substitution guidance

The substitution guidance should be finalised into a practical tool that helps ECD practitioners preserve nutritional intent while adapting to local circumstances.

The objective should not be to create an unnecessarily complex set of rules.

Rather, the guidance should help practitioners understand:

- what nutritional function a food fulfils;
- which alternatives can fulfil a similar nutritional function;
- which substitutions require additional consideration;
- and which substitutions materially change the intended nutritional contribution.

8.6. Preparing the Basket for broader use and communication

The October transition should prepare the Basket for broader communication and use while retaining its technical documentation and evidence base.

Different audiences will require different levels of detail. ECD practitioners may need practical food and substitution guidance, while technical stakeholders may need access to the nutritional assumptions, costing methodology and product specifications.

The underlying evidence base should remain accessible so that users can understand what the reported Basket cost does and does not represent.

8.7. Ongoing monthly price monitoring

Monthly price monitoring should become a routine component of the ECD NCN Basket methodology. Maintaining consistent product specifications will be important so that changes in reported Basket cost primarily reflect changes in market prices rather than changes in what is being measured. Over time, the resulting series can provide evidence of how the cost of the defined nutritional food provision changes. Significant or persistent changes should prompt technical review rather than automatic changes to the nutritional specification.

The ECD NCN Basket should be understood as a living technical model rather than a static costing exercise. As food prices, product specifications, implementation experience and the evidence base evolve, the Basket will require ongoing technical stewardship, periodic review and transparent documentation of changes. This should include review of price data, product specifications, implementation and substitution guidance, nutritional assumptions and evidence, together with appropriate version control of the Basket and its supporting technical materials.

8.8. Future modelling and adaptation opportunities

Once the core methodology is established, future modelling could explore:

- different age compositions;
- seasonal food availability;
- alternative products within defined food groups;
- regional price differences;

- changes in individual food prices;
- alternative procurement arrangements; and
- different subsidy coverage scenarios.

Future work could also examine implementation factors such as food waste, acceptability and procurement feasibility. Any adaptation should remain evidence-informed and transparent, with the nutritional purpose of the Basket protected throughout.

The October 2026 transition should therefore be understood not as the point at which the Basket becomes permanently fixed, but as the point at which it moves from initial development into a more structured phase of implementation, monitoring and iterative refinement.

9. Conclusion

The ECD NCN Basket has evolved from a practical ECD feeding intervention into a technical model for translating nutrition guidance into defined food requirements and preliminary costs.

The development process began with the NDoH Nutrition Guidelines and an implementation-focused two-week Zero2Five menu. The menu was subsequently refined into a practical one-week cycle while retaining the underlying nutritional principles and meal structures. Implementation testing highlighted the importance of flexibility, while also demonstrating that substitutions need to operate within clear nutritional boundaries. These lessons contributed to the development of substitution principles and the Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework.

The Framework provides an important conceptual bridge in the development process. It establishes the nutritional logic that should remain protected as food provision adapts. The Basket Menu operationalises that logic, the Basket quantifies the resulting food requirement, and price monitoring establishes what that defined requirement costs.

The resulting approach is best characterised as nutrition first, affordability informed. Nutritional requirements are established before costing. Implementation experience informs what is practical and feasible in real ECD settings, while market price information establishes the financial implications of the defined food provision. Affordability therefore tests the cost of a defined nutritional model rather than determining the model itself.

Nutritional analysis indicates that the ECD NCN Basket Menu makes a meaningful nutritional contribution during the ECD day, with particularly strong modelled contributions to protein, zinc and vitamin A, and meaningful contributions to iron and calcium. Its modelled energy contribution is approximately 40–47% of the reference values used in the current assessment. These results should be interpreted as a contribution from food provided during ECD care, rather than as an assessment of children's complete daily dietary intake.

The August 2026 costing provides the initial financial reference point for this defined food provision, with a modelled food ingredient cost of R7.54 per child per day in the EG1 age category and R13.25 per child per day in the EG2 age category. For the illustrative mixed-age centre, the weighted average is R12.11 per child per day. The September 2026 costing represents the next pilot iteration following further stakeholder engagement, price monitoring and refinement of the Basket

specifications, including the change from full-cream milk powder to fresh/UHT full-cream milk. The August and September costing iterations should not be interpreted as a direct like-for-like measure of overall price change because the milk specification changed between the two iterations. The figures presented are preliminary outputs of the current methodology, not universal costs or recommended funding rates.

The development process has also made important boundaries explicit. The Basket is a food ingredient costing rather than a full nutrition-service costing. It does not include labour, utilities, water, cleaning, storage, equipment or other operational resources. The EG1 costing similarly represents the ECD-provided food component and does not monetise breastmilk or include infant formula as a standard priced Basket component.

The value of the work therefore lies not simply in the current price of the Basket, but in the methodology that produced it. The ECD NCN Basket comprises both the quantified food requirement and the technical methodology that defines how that requirement is constructed, interpreted, costed and monitored.

Importantly, the Basket makes more visible the resources required to translate nutrition guidance into actual food provision in ECD settings. It provides a way to move from nutritional guidance, to a defined food requirement, to a measurable cost — and therefore to make visible where available resources do not match the defined food provision.

This has potential relevance to broader nutrition and stunting-prevention efforts. The Basket is not itself a stunting-prevention intervention and does not establish a causal effect on stunting outcomes. Rather, it provides a practical tool for understanding and costing one component of the nutritional environment during an important period of growth and development, and for informing discussion about the resources, subsidy levels and coverage required to support that provision.

The next phase will build on this foundation through continued price monitoring, technical refinement, implementation guidance and further testing. The September 2026 costing provides the current pilot iteration, while ongoing monitoring will allow the methodology and product specifications to be refined as implementation and market conditions evolve. The Basket should remain an evolving evidence base: sufficiently standardised to support consistent costing, sufficiently flexible to respond to implementation realities, and sufficiently grounded in nutritional principles to protect the purpose for which it was developed.

The ECD NCN Basket should therefore be understood as a living technical model rather than a static costing exercise. Its ongoing value will depend on continued technical stewardship, periodic review and transparent documentation as food prices, product specifications, implementation experience and the evidence base evolve.

Ultimately, the work provides a practical bridge between nutrition, implementation, quantification, costing and monitoring. It makes more visible what is required to translate nutrition guidance into the food that children actually receive during the ECD day, while providing a structured evidence base for considering whether available resources are sufficient to sustain that provision.

Technical Annexes

Annex A – Implementation Testing and Field Learning

Site and Duration

Site: Little Stars Creche

Age Group Observed: 2–6 years

Duration: Five consecutive days (December 2025)

The purpose of the rapid learning exercise was to assess the practical implementation of the revised 5-day menu under routine centre conditions. The exercise was observational and formative in nature, intended to document feasibility, substitution patterns and alignment with intended meal structure.

Planned Meal Structure

Each day included:

- Breakfast
- Mid-morning snack (fruit + dairy)
- Cooked lunch (starch + protein + vegetable)
- Afternoon snack

Portion guidance was provided by age group.

Observed Implementation Patterns

1. Lunch Structure

The core **protein–starch–vegetable** structure was consistently maintained across all five days.

Substitutions occurred (e.g., fish replaced with chicken; lentils replaced with minced meat), but food group balance was preserved.

Learning: Structural meal architecture proved resilient and practicable.

2. Breakfast

Fortified porridge was served daily, typically prepared with milk.

Learning: Donation patterns may support consistency in breakfast provision. Inclusion of milk meaningfully supports protein and calcium intake.

3. Mid-Morning Snack

Fruit substitutions were generally nutritionally equivalent (e.g., banana for apple).

Dairy was occasionally omitted.

On one day, fruit and dairy were replaced with a commercially packaged maize snack product (recorded as a flavoured “popcorn” product). Review confirmed this was a refined maize-based processed snack with minimal protein and no dairy component.

Learning: Without explicit substitution boundaries, lower-cost or donated items may unintentionally displace nutrient-dense foods, particularly dairy and protein sources.

4. Portion Flexibility

Portion sizes functioned effectively as planning guidance.

Some children occasionally requested additional servings at lunch.

Learning: Portion guidance should serve as a baseline rather than a fixed limit, allowing responsiveness to appetite variability while maintaining nutritional balance.

Overall Insights

The testing exercise demonstrated that:

- A structured meal architecture is feasible in community ECD settings
- Food group balance can be maintained despite routine substitutions
- Clear substitution principles are necessary to protect nutritional adequacy
- Adequacy assumptions and modelling criteria should be formally documented to guide implementation consistently

The field experience strengthened the case for formalising a Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework to define and steward these principles beyond a single menu document. See table below summarising field learnings and their implications for basket development.

Table 3 ECD Menu Pilot Testing Field Learnings and Implications for Basket Development

Field learning	Implication for Basket development
Meal structure remained resilient despite food substitutions	Basket should specify nutritional function, not only individual foods
Fruit substitutions were generally manageable	Appropriate flexibility can be retained
Dairy could be omitted or displaced	Dairy/protein substitution boundaries need to be explicit
Lower-cost processed snack did not provide equivalent nutrition	Cost alone cannot determine acceptable substitution
Children sometimes wanted additional food	Portions are planning guidance, not rigid limits

Annex B – Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework

B.1 Purpose and role of the Framework

The Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework provides the upstream technical reference for the ECD NCN Basket. It brings together the nutritional principles, planning assumptions and boundaries that guide the development and assessment of ECD food provision.

The Framework builds on the NDoH Nutrition Guidelines and does not replace or redefine them. Its purpose is to make explicit the technical assumptions required when translating nutrition guidance and implementation learning into a defined, quantifiable and costable food provision. The Framework is therefore a project-derived technical reference for the ECD NCN Basket; it is not intended to establish a new national nutrition standard or to supersede existing national guidance.

The Framework is not a menu or a fixed list of foods. Rather, it provides the nutritional logic within which menus can be developed, adapted and assessed. This allows the operational expression of the food provision to change according to context while protecting its underlying nutritional purpose.

In the ECD NCN Basket model: The Framework defines the nutritional logic; the Basket Menu operationalises it; the Basket quantifies the resulting food requirement; and price monitoring establishes what that requirement costs.

B.2 Core principles

The Framework is based on the following principles:

Nutritional adequacy comes before affordability.

The nutritional contribution to be provided during ECD hours is defined before the resulting food requirement is costed. Affordability is used to assess feasibility and resource requirements; it does not determine what constitutes an adequate nutritional contribution.

Adequacy is more than energy provision.

Nutritional assessment should consider energy alongside protein, dietary diversity and key micronutrients. The Framework therefore places emphasis on nutrient-dense foods and a varied food provision rather than achieving energy targets through additional starch or fat alone.

Meal structure and food-group function are protected.

The Framework supports a structured ECD eating pattern incorporating breakfast, snacks and a cooked lunch, with appropriate combinations of staple foods, protein-rich foods, fruit, vegetables and dairy. The nutritional function of these components is more important than adherence to a fixed list of individual foods.

Flexibility is permitted within nutritional boundaries.

Foods may be substituted in response to availability, seasonality, procurement arrangements and local context, provided that the nutritional purpose of the meal is maintained. Exact food items may change, but the nutritional function of the meal should be protected. Substitutions should therefore

preserve the relevant food-group and nutrient contribution and should be considered in relation to the whole meal rather than the individual food alone. Cost or availability alone does not establish nutritional equivalence.

Portion guidance provides a planning baseline, not a rigid limit.

Portions are age-responsive and support quantification and nutritional modelling, while allowing reasonable adjustment in response to appetite and individual variation. The portion specifications should therefore be understood as a planning and procurement baseline rather than a rigid limit on what an individual child may eat.

B.2.1 Substitution principles

Core principle: *Exact food items may change, but the nutritional purpose of the meal should be protected.*

The nutritional role of the food matters more than the specific food item. Substitutions should therefore be assessed according to whether the replacement continues to fulfil the relevant food-group and nutritional function of the original food or meal component.

These principles are intended to support flexibility rather than create a rigid prescription. ECD practitioners should be able to respond to local food availability, seasonality, donations, food gardens and procurement realities while maintaining the nutritional structure and function of the planned meal. Availability, seasonality, procurement arrangements and cost may justify changes in specific foods, but cost or availability alone does not establish nutritional equivalence.

The principles should therefore be used alongside the ECD NCN Basket Menu, rather than interpreted as a requirement to reproduce a fixed list of foods.

The substitution approach is consistent with the food-group approach underpinning South Africa's Food-Based Dietary Guidelines, while applying additional considerations relevant to structured ECD feeding, age-appropriate portions and the nutritional contribution expected during ECD hours.

The tables below outline the principles for acceptable substitutions, how to interpret substitution and the nutritional substitution guidance by meal component.

Table 4 Principles for acceptable substitution

Substitution principle	Application
Maintain meal structure	The intended meal architecture should remain intact, including the relevant food groups and components.
Preserve nutritional function	A replacement should continue to provide the nutritional function of the food being replaced.
Allow food-group flexibility	Appropriate foods within the same food group may generally be substituted where their nutritional contribution is sufficiently comparable.
Consider the whole meal	Substitution should be considered in relation to the contribution of the complete meal or snack, rather than the individual food alone.
Do not use cost as the sole criterion	A cheaper or more readily available food is not necessarily a nutritionally appropriate substitute.
Allow contextual flexibility	Seasonality, local availability, donations, food gardens and procurement arrangements can inform food choice within the nutritional boundaries.

How to interpret substitution

Generally interchangeable within a food group

- Examples: apple ↔ banana; rice ↔ samp ↔ pasta ↔ phuthu/pap

Interchangeable with nutritional consideration

- Examples: different protein sources; dairy products; bread products with different fortification profiles

Not necessarily nutritionally equivalent without adjustment

- Examples: fruit + dairy ↔ processed maize snack; fortified bread ↔ an unfortified alternative where the nutrient contribution differs materially.

Table 5 Nutritional substitution principles by meal component

Meal / component	Substitution principle	Example of appropriate substitution	Example requiring caution	Important boundary	Technical consideration
Breakfast: porridge/cereal + dairy	Maintain the staple/porridge component and its intended dairy contribution.	One suitable porridge or cereal → another suitable staple; dairy → milk, maas or yoghurt where appropriate.	Sweetened or highly flavoured cereal/porridge products; omission of the dairy component.	A substitution should not remove a key component of the breakfast structure without considering its nutritional contribution.	Consider the nutritional characteristics of the replacement, including fortification, added sugar and the contribution of the dairy component.
Mid-morning snack: fruit + dairy	Maintain the combination of fruit and dairy.	Apple → banana; one appropriate seasonal fruit → another; milk → maas or yoghurt.	Fruit provided without dairy; fruit + dairy → processed maize-based snack.	The combination of fruit and dairy is the intended nutritional structure; removing one component changes the nutritional contribution of the snack.	The fruit itself can generally vary according to season and availability, but replacement of the complete snack requires consideration of the nutritional functions being lost.
Lunch: protein	Replace with another food that continues to fulfil an appropriate protein function.	Fish → chicken; lentils → minced meat; beans → egg, where appropriate.	Replacing a protein source with a food providing substantially less protein or a substantially different nutritional contribution.	Protein sources are not automatically nutritionally equivalent. Particular care is needed where a substitution materially changes the nutritional profile of the meal or removes an important source of particular nutrients.	Consider protein as well as relevant micronutrient contributions; the replacement should be assessed as part of the meal rather than on protein quantity alone.
Lunch: starch	Starchy foods can generally be varied within the food group while maintaining appropriate portions.	Rice → samp → pasta → phuthu/pap.	Repeated reliance on the same staple across multiple meals or days where this reduces dietary variety.	Substitution should retain the intended staple component and appropriate portion.	Variety can respond to availability and local preferences while maintaining the overall meal structure.

Meal / component	Substitution principle	Example of appropriate substitution	Example requiring caution	Important boundary	Technical consideration
Lunch: vegetables	Substitute with another appropriate vegetable while maintaining the vegetable component of the meal.	One seasonal vegetable → another; garden-grown vegetable → purchased vegetable.	Consistent replacement of vegetables with starchy or processed foods; very limited vegetable variety across the week.	Vegetable substitutions should not result in the progressive loss of the vegetable component.	Vegetables may be substituted according to availability and seasonality, while maintaining variety across the week and including a range of differently coloured vegetables.
Afternoon snack: bread/starch + spread/filling	Maintain the bread/starch component and an appropriate spread or filling.	One suitable bread product → another; margarine → peanut butter or avocado, where appropriate.	Highly processed/high-salt meat products as the default filling; replacement of fortified bread with an unfortified alternative without considering the difference.	The nutritional characteristics of the replacement need to be considered, particularly where products differ materially in fortification or processing.	Consider fortification, protein contribution, fat quality and degree of processing.
Beverage	Maintain water as the standard beverage.	Water remains the standard beverage.	Sugary drinks or beverages routinely replacing water; regular or caffeinated teas as the default beverage.	Beverages should not introduce unnecessary sugar or displace food-based nutritional contributions.	The beverage component should remain consistent with the NdoH Guidelines, which identify water as the beverage of choice.

B.3 Nutritional planning parameters

The ECD NCN Basket uses nutritional planning parameters to assess the contribution of food provided during ECD hours. These parameters are intended for menu development and assessment; they should not be interpreted as clinical requirements or as a universal requirement for every ECD programme.

The current planning and assessment ranges are:

NUTRIENT	PLANNING/ ASSESSMENT RANGE
Energy	40-60% of daily reference
Protein	60-100%
Iron	40-70%
Zinc	60-100%
Calcium	40-70%
Vitamin A	≥100%

These ranges reflect the current modelling approach for the ECD NCN Basket and are applied to the nutritional contribution provided during ECD hours. They recognise that ECD food provision represents one component of a child's overall daily intake.

B.4 Application and boundaries

The Framework is applied to the ECD NCN Basket through the development of a defined five-day Basket Menu, age-responsive portions, nutritional analysis, food quantification and price monitoring.

The Framework and resulting Basket relate specifically to the nutritional contribution provided through food consumed during ECD hours. They do not represent a child's total daily dietary intake or the full cost of meeting that child's nutritional requirements. The proportion of daily nutritional requirements represented by the Basket is therefore interpreted within the context of ECD attendance and the eating occasions provided during the ECD day.

The current Basket uses two programme age groups — EG1 (9–23 months) and EG2 (2–6 years). Nutritional reference values used in analysis are described separately in the nutritional analysis annex and are applied as a consistent modelling basis rather than as precise age-specific requirements for every child within these broad programme groups.

Children 6–8 months – implementation boundary

Children under 9 months are not included as a separate costing group in the current Basket. This reflects the relatively small quantity of complementary food consumed at this stage, as children are still developing the skills and capacity to eat complementary foods. The current implementation approach nevertheless recognises that appropriately prepared foods may be offered to younger children in accordance with relevant feeding guidance. The boundary therefore relates to the costing model, rather than to the provision of appropriate food guidance or the recognition of younger children within ECD nutrition practice.

Children 9–23 months and the role of milk feeds – costing boundary

The lower food cost of children in the 9–23 month age category (EG1) should not be interpreted as representing the full cost of meeting the nutritional needs of children aged 9–23 months. Children in this age group are still deriving a greater proportion of their nutritional intake from milk feeds than older children, while progressively increasing their intake of complementary foods. Breastmilk does not have an equivalent market price that can be incorporated into the Basket in the same way as purchased foods. Including the cost of infant formula as a proxy would introduce a different methodological problem and could imply a standard that is not intended by the Basket.

The EG1 costing should therefore be understood as the cost of the food component provided through the ECD Basket, rather than the total cost of meeting the child's nutritional requirements.

These parameters and boundaries are intended to support consistent planning, assessment and costing of the ECD NCN Basket; they should not be interpreted as replacing clinical or individualised nutrition assessment where this is required.

Framework stewardship

The Framework should be treated as a living technical reference. Its parameters, assumptions and guidance should be reviewed periodically as implementation experience, nutritional evidence, product specifications and costing information develop. Any substantive changes should be documented transparently so that the nutritional basis of the Basket remains clear. Changes to the Framework, Basket Menu, product specifications or costing methodology should be version-controlled so that the basis for changes remains transparent over time.

Annex C – ECD NCN Basket Menu and Portion Specifications

This annex presents the one-week menu developed as the operational menu for the ECD Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket (ECD NCN Basket). It builds on the earlier two-week menu developed and implemented through the Zero2Five Trust's Project Khula Nathi which was later refined to a one-week implementation menu. The ECD NCN menu represents the menu specification developed as the work transitioned from an implementation-focused feeding menu to a nationally costable food Basket.

The five-day menu translates the nutritional principles and meal architecture established through the Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework into a defined and repeatable food provision that can be quantified, nutritionally analysed and costed.

It is important to note that this menu represents one operational application of the Minimum Adequate ECD Nutrition Framework. The Framework defines the underlying adequacy criteria, substitution boundaries and modelling assumptions that guide such menus.

Table 6 One-week menu for ECD Centres

ECD NCN Basket Menu		ECD: Weekly Menu				
		Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Breakfast	Starch	Fortified porridge	Maize meal porridge	Fortified porridge	Maize meal porridge	Fortified porridge
	Dairy	Milk	Milk	Milk	Milk	Milk
	Beverage	Water	Water	Water	Water	Water
Mid-morning snack	Fruit	Banana	Apple	Banana	Apple	Banana
	Dairy	Maas	Milk	Maas	Milk	Maas
	Beverage	Water	Water	Water	Water	Water
Lunch	Protein dish	Tinned fish stew	Bean stew	Scrambled egg	Lentil stew	Soya mince
	Starch dish	Rice	Potato	Brown bread	Rice	Phutu pap
	Vegetables	Carrots	Spinach & onion	Fresh tomato	Butternut	Cabbage
	Beverage	Water	Water	Water	Water	Water
Afternoon snack	Starch	Brown bread	Brown bread	Brown bread	Brown bread	Brown bread
	Topping/spread	Margarine	Peanut butter	Margarine	Peanut butter	Margarine
	Beverage	Water	Water	Water	Water	Water

Menu Notes:

- Children under 12 months:
 - Continue breastfeeding where possible. Where breastmilk is not available follow the feeding arrangements agreed with the child's caregiver. Do not offer cow's milk as a drink before 12 months.
- Children 1-5 years:
 - Fresh pasteurised full cream cow's milk or UHT full cream milk are recommended.
 - Do not use coffee creamers or other milk substitutes that are not nutritionally equivalent to milk.

Table 7 Recommended portion sizes for meals

How Much Should Each Child Eat?			Age Group	
			9 - 23 months	2 - 6 years
Breakfast	Porridge	Fortified or cooked maize meal	½ cup cooked	1 cup cooked
	Milk	Fresh/ UHT	50ml	75ml
	Beverage	Water	½ cup or more	1 cup or more
Mid-Morning Snack	Fruit	Fresh	½ piece	1 piece
	Milk/Maas	Fresh/ UHT	100ml	125ml
	Beverage	Water	½ cup or more	1 cup or more
Lunch	Option1	Cooked stew	¼ cup cooked	½ cup cooked
		Cooked starch	¼ cup cooked	½ cup cooked
		Cooked vegetable	¼ cup cooked	½ cup cooked
	Option 2	Scrambled egg	1 Tablespoon	2 Tablespoon
		Brown bread	½ slice	1 slice
		Fresh tomato	1 slice	2 slices
	Beverage	Water	½ cup or more	1 cup or more
Afternoon snack	Starch	Brown Bread	½ slice	1 slice
	Topping/ spread	Peanut butter/ Margarine	½ teaspoon	1 teaspoon
	Beverage	Water	½ cup or more	1 cup or more

Portion Guidance Notes

1. Children between 6 and 9 months of age:

- Continue breastfeeding where possible. Milk remains the child's primary source of nutrition.
- Where a child in this age group attends an ECD programme, offer small amounts of appropriate complementary foods from the menu, prepared to an age-appropriate texture and according to the feeding arrangements agreed with the child's caregiver.
- Children aged 6-9 months are not included as a separate costing group in the ECD NCN Basket. The Basket costing begins at 9 months, as described in Section 2.6.1.

2. Children over 9 months of age:

- Portion sizes are age-adjusted to reflect physiological differences in energy and nutrient requirements.
- These are standard serving sizes for planning and procurement guidance and may be flexibly adjusted in response to appetite variability.
- Where food is available, offer additional servings to children who remain hungry and would like more.

Annex D – Nutritional Analysis of the ECD NCN Basket Menu

D.1 Purpose and approach

The ECD NCN Basket Menu was developed to translate nutrition guidance into a practical, implementable and costable model for ECD programmes. Nutritional analysis was undertaken on the defined menu to assess the nutritional contribution of the food provided during the ECD day.

For cooked lunch meals, recipes were used to define the ingredient composition of each meal for nutritional analysis and costing.

The purpose of this assessment was not to determine whether the Basket could independently meet 100% of children's daily nutrient requirements. Rather, the assessment sought to determine whether the Basket provides a meaningful contribution to the nutritional needs of children during the period that they are in ECD care, while remaining feasible to implement within resource-constrained settings.

The analysis therefore assesses the nutritional contribution of the defined ECD food provision rather than children's total daily dietary intake.

D.2 Nutritional provision framework and assessment benchmark

The nutritional contribution of the ECD NCN Basket Menu was assessed within the nutritional provision framework developed through the earlier Zero2Five menu work. The framework recognises that ECD feeding programmes generally provide a partial-day food contribution, rather than the full daily dietary intake of a child. The purpose of the ECD NCN Basket Menu is therefore not to provide 100% of children's daily nutrient requirements, but to provide a meaningful and nutritionally coherent contribution during the period children are in ECD care.

Earlier project work identified references in South African ECD guidance to an expectation of approximately 50–75% of daily nutritional requirements being provided through ECD feeding. However, the guidance reviewed did not consistently specify whether this contribution referred to energy, all nutrients or selected nutrients, nor did it clearly distinguish between different programme configurations such as full-day and partial-day provision. The project therefore interpreted 50–75% as an aspirational benchmark associated particularly with more intensive or full-day provision, rather than as a universal minimum for all ECD programmes.

On this basis, the nutritional provision framework established minimum nutritional thresholds and a target nutritional range for practical application in ECD settings. For the purpose of assessing the ECD NCN Basket Menu, the target performance ranges shown in Table 8 were applied.

Table 8 Target range used for assessment

Nutrient	Target range used for assessment
Energy	40–60%
Protein	60–100%
Iron	40–70%
Zinc	60–100%
Calcium	40–70%
Vitamin A	≥100%

These benchmarks were intended as planning and assessment parameters, rather than as a claim that every ECD programme should deliver an identical proportion of children's total daily nutritional intake. They provide a practical reference against which the nutritional contribution of the defined Menu can be assessed and should not be interpreted as clinical requirements or as targets that imply that all children should receive the same proportion of their total daily nutrient intake from ECD meals.

D.3 Reference values and age groups

The ECD NCN Basket Menu and Basket use two programme age groups: EG1 (9–23 months) and EG2 (2–6 years). These do not correspond exactly to the age categories used for the nutrient reference values applied in the analysis. The nutrient analysis therefore uses the defined reference values applied in the Basket modelling for each age group. These reference values provide a consistent planning basis for assessing the nutritional contribution of the Menu and should not be interpreted as age-specific clinical requirements for every child within the programme age band.

For EG1, the analysis uses the reference value for children aged 1–3 years; for EG2, it uses the reference value for children aged 4–8 years. The reference values are used as a consistent benchmark for assessing the nutritional contribution of the ECD NCN Basket Menu. Individual nutritional requirements vary between children; the reference values therefore provide a programme-level yardstick for assessing the nutritional contribution of the Menu rather than representing the precise requirements of every child.

D.4 Nutrient analysis results

The nutritional analysis of the ECD NCN Basket Menu provides the nutritional basis for the defined food requirement represented in the Basket. The analysis considered the nutrient contribution of meals and snacks provided through the Menu and compared these with the defined reference requirements for the two programme age groups and the target performance ranges established for partial-day ECD feeding programmes.

Table 9 Nutrient contribution of the ECD NCN Basket Menu for EG1 (9-23 months)

Nutrient	ECD NCN Basket Menu provision	Reference value used	% of reference value	Target range	Interpretation against benchmark
Energy (kJ)	1673	4200	40%	40–60%	At lower end of target
Protein (g)	14.27	13	110%	60–100%	Above defined target range
Iron (mg)	5.24	7	75%	40–70%	Above defined target range
Zinc (mg)	3.62	3	121%	60–100%	Above defined target range
Calcium (mg)	284.98	500	57%	40–70%	Within defined target range
Vitamin A (µg)	555.25	300	185%	≥100%	Above defined target range

Table 10 Nutrient contribution of the ECD NCN Basket Menu for EG2 (2-6 years)

Nutrient	ECD NCN Basket Menu provision	Reference value used	% of reference value	Target range	Interpretation against benchmark
Energy (kJ)	3074	6500	47%	40–60%	Within defined target range
Protein (g)	25.26	19	133%	60–100%	Above defined target range
Iron (mg)	9.5	10	95%	40–70%	Above defined target range
Zinc (mg)	6.4	5	128%	60–100%	Above defined target range
Calcium (mg)	436.29	800	55%	40–70%	Within defined target range
Vitamin A (µg)	1049.61	400	262%	≥100%	Above defined target range

D.5 Key nutritional findings

The analysis indicates that the ECD NCN Basket Menu provides a meaningful nutritional contribution within the intended partial-day ECD feeding model. Energy provision falls within the defined target range for both age groups, while protein, iron, zinc and vitamin A exceed their defined 40-70% target ranges. Calcium falls within the defined target range for both groups. Exceeding the defined assessment range should not, in itself, be interpreted as indicating excessive intake or clinical risk; the ranges are planning and assessment parameters for the ECD food contribution.

D.5.1 Energy

The Menu provides 40% of the reference energy value for EG1 and 47% for EG2. Both values fall within the defined 40–60% target range, with EG1 at the lower boundary. This is consistent with the intended role of the Menu as a meaningful contribution during ECD hours rather than a complete daily diet.

D.5.2 Protein

Protein provision is above the defined target range in both age groups, at 110% of the reference requirement for EG1 and 133% for EG2. This indicates a strong protein contribution from the defined Menu.

D.5.3 Iron

Iron provision reaches 75% of the reference requirement for EG1 and 95% for EG2. Both values exceed the defined 40–70% target range. The stronger iron contribution of the ECD NCN Basket Menu is particularly relevant given the importance of adequate iron intake during early childhood. However, these values should not be interpreted as demonstrating complete dietary adequacy, as the analysis represents the ECD-provided food component rather than children's total daily intake.

D.5.4 Zinc and Vitamin A

Zinc provision is 121% for EG1 and 128% for EG2, while vitamin A provision is 185% and 262%, respectively. Zinc provision exceeds the defined 60–100% target range, while vitamin A exceeds the defined minimum target of 100% in both age groups.

D.5.5 Calcium

Calcium provision is 57% for EG1 and 55% for EG2, placing both age groups within the defined 40–70% target range. This represents a meaningful contribution within a partial-day feeding model.

D.6 Variation and interpretation of the weekly Menu

Daily nutrient provision varies across the five-day menu cycle for both age groups, as shown in the table below. This variation reflects differences in the nutritional composition of individual menu days and is an expected feature of a menu designed around a range of foods and meal combinations rather than identical daily nutrient targets. The five-day pattern, rather than uniformity across individual days, is therefore important when interpreting the overall nutritional contribution of the Menu.

Table 11 Daily variation in nutrient contribution across the five-day ECD NCN Basket Menu

Nutrient	EG1 daily range	EG2 daily range
Energy	1,508–1,839 kJ	2,743–3,407 kJ
Protein	11.94–16.41 g	20.63–29.54 g
Iron	4.51–6.41 mg	8.52–11.14 mg
Zinc	3.41–3.98 mg	5.77–7.26 mg
Calcium	192–387 mg	274–625 mg
Vitamin A	231–1,419 µg	413–2,788 µg

Note: Daily values show the range across individual menu days; the assessment benchmarks are applied to the overall five-day menu contribution rather than requiring each day to achieve the same proportion of the reference value.

These differences reflect variation in the nutritional composition of individual menu days.

The nutritional benchmarks are therefore interpreted against the average contribution of the defined five-day Menu rather than as a requirement for every individual day to achieve the same percentage of daily nutrient requirements. The weekly pattern is important because the nutritional contribution is supported by the cumulative contribution of different foods and meals across the menu cycle.

This approach is consistent with the principles underpinning the ECD NCN Basket Menu: specific foods can vary while the overall nutritional structure and intended food-group contributions are maintained.

D.7 Summary

Overall, the nutritional analysis indicates that the ECD NCN Basket Menu provides a meaningful nutritional contribution during the ECD day within the defined partial-day feeding model.

Energy provision falls within the defined 40–60% target range for both age groups, at 40% for EG1 and 47% for EG2. Protein, iron and zinc contributions are above their respective assessment ranges, while calcium falls within the defined 40–70% range. Vitamin A exceeds the defined minimum assessment threshold of $\geq 100\%$ in both age groups.

These results reflect the nutritional composition of the defined five-day Basket Menu and should be interpreted as a modelled contribution from food provided during ECD care, rather than as an assessment of children's total daily dietary adequacy.

Annex E – National Price-Monitoring Methodology and Product Specifications

This annex describes the methodology used to translate the ECD NCN Basket into a consistently monitorable food cost. It documents the reference products, specifications, units, quantities and approach to price collection and interpretation. The methodology is intended to support comparability over time while allowing the Basket itself to remain responsive to evidence and implementation learning.

E.1 Purpose

The ECD NCN Basket requires a consistent approach to product selection and price monitoring so that changes in food prices can be tracked over time using comparable products and purchasing units.

The product-selection methodology was developed to support consistent nutritional analysis, practical implementation within ECD settings, affordability analysis and standardised monthly price monitoring. The approach identifies preferred product categories, acceptable substitutes, products that should not be included in the core Basket, and standard purchasing units for price monitoring.

The methodology is intended to support standardised costing and monitoring rather than prescribe specific branded products or rigid procurement practices.

E.2 Product standardisation principles

Products selected for price monitoring should, as far as practical:

- maintain the nutritional intent of the Basket;
- be appropriate for implementation in low-income ECD settings;
- be commonly available within South African retail environments;
- minimise unnecessary processing and additives where possible;
- be operationally feasible within ECD feeding contexts; and
- support consistent price tracking and Basket costing.

Where an exact reference product is unavailable, an alternative may be used where it is nutritionally comparable and consistent with the product-selection principles.

E.3 Product specifications

The following product specifications define the reference products used for Basket costing and price monitoring, together with acceptable substitutes and products that are not recommended for inclusion in the core Basket.

Table 12 Standardised product specifications for ECD NCN Basket costing and price monitoring

Food category	Reference product	Acceptable alternatives / substitutions	Products not recommended
Instant porridge	Plain/original instant sorghum porridge	Other plain/original instant sorghum or nutritionally comparable fortified instant porridges	Highly sweetened, dessert-style or non-fortified products
Maize meal	Fortified maize meal	Comparable fortified maize meal	—
Rice	White rice, dry	Comparable white rice	—
Bread	Brown sliced bread, 700 g loaf	—	—
Lentils	Plain dry red split lentils	Plain dry brown lentils	Flavoured or tinned lentils
Beans	Dried red speckled/sugar beans	Comparable dried beans	—
Soya mince/TVP	Plain unflavoured TVP	Knorrox Savoury Mince Flavour where plain TVP unavailable	Highly processed, high-sodium or heavily flavoured variants
Fish	Pilchards in tomato sauce	—	—
Eggs	Fresh large/XL eggs (50g)	—	—
Milk	Fresh/UHT full cream milk	Fresh pasteurised full cream milk or UHT full cream milk, depending on availability	Coffee creamers, whiteners, dairy blends, fat-filled milk products or non-dairy substitutes
Maas	Fresh maas	Comparable maas	—
Vegetables	Specified fresh vegetables	Comparable vegetables where substitution principles allow	—
Fruit	Apple, banana	Appropriate fruit substitutions	—
Fats/oils	Sunflower oil, soft margarine, peanut butter	Comparable products	—
Seasoning	Salt	—	—

October 2026 update: The milk specification was refined in September 2026 following stakeholder engagement and further price-monitoring experience. The August costing used full-cream milk powder as the reference product. For the September 2026 costing and ongoing price monitoring, the reference product has been changed to fresh/UHT full-cream milk, costed in litres. This refinement does not change the nutritional purpose of the milk component. See Annex F for the August 2026 costing and Annex G for the September 2026 costing and refinement.

E.4 Key product-specific specifications

Instant porridge

The reference category is plain/original instant sorghum porridge. The specification is deliberately for an instant/no-cook product. The guidance identifies other plain/original instant sorghum porridges and comparable fortified instant cereal porridges as acceptable alternatives, while highly sweetened, dessert-style and non-fortified products are not recommended.

Lentils

The reference product is plain dry red split lentils, with plain dry brown lentils identified as an acceptable substitute. The guidance notes that the two have broadly comparable nutritional profiles and price points, while red lentils offer practical advantages in cooking time and texture.

Soya mince/Textured Vegetable Protein (TVP)

The nutritional analysis was based on plain unflavoured TVP. Where this is unavailable, Knorrox Savoury Mince Flavour was identified as a standard substitute, with the explicit caveat that flavoured products are not nutritionally equivalent because of their sodium, flavourants and fillers.

Milk

The reference category is fresh/UHT full-cream milk, costed in litres. Fresh pasteurised full-cream milk and UHT full-cream milk are both suitable reference products, depending on availability and market pricing. Coffee creamers, whiteners, dairy blends, fat-filled milk products and non-dairy substitutes are excluded from the core Basket because they are not considered equivalent to full-cream milk for the purposes of the Basket specification.

The September 2026 refinement from full-cream instant milk powder to fresh/UHT full-cream milk followed stakeholder engagement regarding practical implementation considerations and challenges in obtaining reliable market pricing for full-cream milk powder. The nutritional purpose of the milk component remains unchanged.

E.5 Standardised purchasing units for price monitoring

The table below outlines the preferred and alternative purchasing units and package sizes for each food item. Where products are available in different package sizes, prices should be standardised to the relevant unit of measurement for comparison.

Table 13 Standard purchasing units for monthly price monitoring

Product	Preferred Package Size	Alternative Package Size
Instant sorghum porridge	2kg	1kg
Maize meal	10kg	5kg
Rice	5kg	10kg
Brown bread	700g loaf	-
Dried beans	2kg	5kg
Lentils	1kg	500g
TVP	1kg	400-500g
Eggs	Tray of 30	Tray of 48/60
Fresh/UHT full cream milk*	1 litre	2 litre; 6 x 1 litre (UHT)

* Where milk is sold in different package or multipack sizes, the observed price should be converted to a price per litre for monthly price monitoring and comparison.

E.6 Monitoring and substitution principles

Where product substitutions are necessary because of availability constraints, nutritionally comparable alternatives should be selected where possible and recorded consistently during price monitoring.

The original guidance also makes an important distinction between standardisation for monitoring and rigidity in implementation: the Basket is intended to be adaptable to local availability, affordability and operational realities rather than functioning as a rigid procurement list.

E.7 Items outside the core Basket costing

Some products commonly used in ECD settings are intentionally excluded from the core ECD NCN Basket costing because they do not make a substantive contribution to the priority nutritional objectives of the model. These include discretionary items such as rooibos tea, brown sugar and stock cubes. Where relevant to implementation monitoring, these may be tracked separately from the core Basket.

Note on infant formula and the Basket age boundary

Infant formula is not included as a core component of the ECD NCN Basket. The Basket is defined from 9 months of age, and the costing model does not assign a monetary value to breastmilk. Including infant formula as a priced Basket component while assigning no equivalent value to breastmilk would create an asymmetry in the costing model and could give a misleading impression of the cost of meeting the nutritional needs of younger infants.

Infant formula also requires careful treatment within ECD nutrition guidance, as its inclusion within a standardised food basket could be interpreted as implying that formula should routinely replace breastfeeding or that it represents a standard ECD food cost. For these reasons, infant formula is outside the core Basket costing and would require a separate approach if its costs were to be considered in future.

Annex F – August 2026 ECD NCN Basket Pilot Costing

This annex presents the detailed August 2026 pilot pricing of the ECD NCN Basket, including product-level prices, quantities and calculations for the two age groups and the illustrative mixed-age centre. The costing represents food ingredients only and should be interpreted alongside the assumptions, exclusions and limitations described in the main report.

ECD Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket (ECD NCN Basket) August 2026 Data				Energy Group 1		Energy Group 2		ECD Centre Example	
Draft version currently undergoing pilot testing				Children 9-23 months		Children 2-6 years		20 children (4:16 ratio)*	
Food Group	Foods Tracked	Unit (kg, L, Loaves)	Prices per unit	AP weight	Cost	AP weight	Cost	AP weight	Cost
Starchy Foods	Maize meal	Kilogram	R 9.84	0.18	R 1.78	0.36	R 3.56	6.52	R 64.13
	Enriched porridge, Morvite	Kilogram	R 30.45	0.3	R 9.14	0.6	R 18.27	10.8	R 328.86
	Brown Bread	Loaves (700g)	R 16.11	0.6	R 9.67	1.2	R 19.34	21.6	R 348.04
	Rice	Kilogram	R 13.26	0.10	R 1.31	0.20	R 2.62	3.56	R 47.17
	Potatoes	Kilogram	R 9.64	0.18	R 1.78	0.37	R 3.56	6.64	R 64.02
Vegetables	Onions	Kilogram	R 15.14	0.27	R 4.09	0.54	R 8.18	9.72	R 147.19
	Tomatoes	Kilogram	R 24.34	0.155	R 3.77	0.31	R 7.55	5.58	R 135.82
	Carrots	Kilogram	R 10.08	0.27	R 2.72	0.54	R 5.44	9.72	R 97.93
	Spinach	Kilogram	R 15.05	0.14	R 2.15	0.29	R 4.29	5.13	R 77.23
	Cabbage	Kilogram	R 21.62	0.234	R 5.06	0.468	R 10.12	8.424	R 182.09
	Butternut	Kilogram	R 10.57	0.234	R 2.47	0.468	R 4.95	8.424	R 89.08
Fruit	Apple	Kilogram	R 15.03	0.6	R 9.02	1.2	R 18.04	21.6	R 324.74
	Banana	Kilogram	R 16.80	0.9	R 15.12	1.8	R 30.24	32.4	R 544.33
Dry beans, peas, lentils, legumes	Dried beans, red speckled (sugar beans)	Kilogram	R 37.51	0.05	R 1.88	0.1	R 3.75	1.8	R 67.52
	Dried lentils	Kilogram	R 54.23	0.05	R 2.71	0.1	R 5.42	1.8	R 97.61
	Dehydrated soya mince	Kilogram	R 81.72	0.032	R 2.62	0.064	R 5.23	1.152	R 94.14
Fish, chicken, lean meat, eggs	Eggs	each (50g each)	R 2.37	2	R 4.74	4	R 9.48	72	R 170.69
	Pilchards, tinned in tomato sauce	Kilogram	R 70.31	0.12	R 8.44	0.24	R 16.87	4.32	R 303.73

Milk, maas	Fortified Milk (from FCMP - 130g/1000L)	Kilogram	R 155.47	0.2418	R 37.59	0.3406	R 52.95	6.4168	R 997.65
	Maas	Litres	R 16.08	1.2	R 19.30	1.5	R 24.12	28.8	R 463.16
Fats, oil	Margarine (soft tub/spreading)	Kilogram	R 41.78	0.03	R 1.25	0.06	R 2.51	1.08	R 45.12
	Oil, sunflower	Litres	R 32.70	0.055	R 1.80	0.11	R 3.60	1.98	R 64.74
	Peanut butter	Kilogram	R 107.93	0.02	R 2.16	0.04	R 4.32	0.72	R 77.71
Seasoning	Salt	Kilogram	R 16.89	0.02	R 0.32	0.04	R 0.65	0.69	R 11.67
	Stock/ soup powder	Kilogram	R 65.88	0	R -	0	R -	0	R -
Total cost per month (20 days)**					R 150.88		R 265.05		R 4,844.39
Total average cost per person per day					R 7.54		R 13.25		R 12.11
Current subsidy***					R 9.60		R 9.60		R 3,840.00
Shortfall in subsidy					+R 2.06		-R 3.65		-R 1,004.39
Shortfall in subsidy when only 70% coverage is achieved****									-R 2,156.39

Notes:

- * The ECD age composition (20% younger age group and 80% older age group) is based on implementation experience of Zero2Five Trust, where centres typically have more older than younger children enrolled
- ** Please note that the total cost per month does not include other essential items for keeping clean (hands and equipment) and for cooking (fuel such as gas or electricity)
- *** The food component of the ECD subsidy used is R9.60 (40% of R24) as per DBE 2026/2027 financial year
- **** In practice, 100% ECD subsidy coverage is not seen across all ECD centres. This illustrative example uses 70% coverage.

Important note about the calculated cost of the ECD NCN Basket:

The cost of the ECD NCN Basket should not automatically be equated with the full cost of providing a nutrition service to children attending ECD centres. Food ingredients are only one component of meal provision. Labour, cooking fuel, water, cleaning materials, storage and equipment all carry costs which are not included in this costing model.

Important note on EG1 costing and milk feeding:

The EG1 (9-23 months) costing represents the food component provided through the ECD NCN Basket and does not include a monetary value for breastmilk or infant formula. Milk feeding remains an important component of nutrition for children in this age group, but breastmilk is not assigned a monetary value within the Basket and infant formula is not included as a standard Basket cost. The lower EG1 food cost should therefore not be interpreted as indicating that meeting the nutritional needs of younger children is inherently less costly than for older children. It reflects the defined scope of the Basket costing and the contribution of ECD-provided complementary foods.

Annex G – September 2026 ECD NCN Basket Pilot Costing

This annex presents the detailed September 2026 pilot costing of the ECD NCN Basket, including product-level prices, quantities and calculations for the two age groups and the illustrative mixed-age centre. The September costing reflects the refined Basket specifications described in the main report, including the use of fresh/UHT full-cream milk. The costing represents food ingredients only and should be interpreted alongside the assumptions, exclusions and limitations described in the main report.

ECD Nationally Costed Nutrition Basket (ECD NCN Basket) September 2026 Data				Energy Group 1		Energy Group 2		ECD Centre Example	
Draft version currently undergoing pilot testing				Children 9-23 months		Children 2-6 years		20 children (4:16 ratio)*	
Food Group	Foods Tracked	Unit (kg, L, Loaves)	Prices per unit	AP weight	Cost	AP weight	Cost	AP weight	Cost
Starchy Foods	Maize meal	Kilogram	R 9.79	0.18	R 1.77	0.36	R 3.55	6.52	R 63.83
	Enriched porridge, Morvite	Kilogram	R 29.41	0.3	R 8.82	0.6	R 17.65	10.8	R 317.61
	Brown Bread	Loaves (700g)	R 16.28	0.6	R 9.77	1.2	R 19.54	21.6	R 351.71
	Rice	Kilogram	R 13.15	0.10	R 1.30	0.20	R 2.60	3.56	R 46.77
	Potatoes	Kilogram	R 10.02	0.18	R 1.85	0.37	R 3.70	6.64	R 66.53
Vegetables	Onions	Kilogram	R 17.23	0.27	R 4.65	0.54	R 9.31	9.72	R 167.52
	Tomatoes	Kilogram	R 22.31	0.155	R 3.46	0.31	R 6.92	5.58	R 124.48
	Carrots	Kilogram	R 9.96	0.27	R 2.69	0.54	R 5.38	9.72	R 96.82
	Spinach	Kilogram	R 14.32	0.14	R 2.04	0.29	R 4.08	5.13	R 73.48
	Cabbage	Kilogram	R 20.81	0.234	R 4.87	0.468	R 9.74	8.424	R 175.34
	Butternut	Kilogram	R 11.33	0.234	R 2.65	0.468	R 5.30	8.424	R 95.46
Fruit	Apple	Kilogram	R 15.82	0.6	R 9.49	1.2	R 18.98	21.6	R 341.68
	Banana	Kilogram	R 19.98	0.9	R 17.98	1.8	R 35.96	32.4	R 647.26
Dry beans, peas, lentils, legumes	Dried beans, red speckled (sugar beans)	Kilogram	R 37.76	0.05	R 1.89	0.1	R 3.78	1.8	R 67.97
	Dried lentils	Kilogram	R 52.76	0.05	R 2.64	0.1	R 5.28	1.8	R 94.97
	Dehydrated soya mince	Kilogram	R 80.63	0.032	R 2.58	0.064	R 5.16	1.152	R 92.89

Fish, chicken, lean meat, eggs	Eggs	each (50g each)	R 2.31	2	R 4.62	4	R 9.25	72	R 166.46
	Pilchards, tinned in tomato sauce	Kilogram	R 71.16	0.12	R 8.54	0.24	R 17.08	4.32	R 307.42
Milk, maas	Full Cream Milk (Fresh or UHT)	Litres	R 16.40	1.86	R 30.50	2.62	R 42.96	49.36	R 809.42
	Maas	Litres	R 16.11	1.2	R 19.33	1.5	R 24.16	28.8	R 463.96
Fats, oil	Margarine (soft tub/spreading)	Kilogram	R 41.61	0.03	R 1.25	0.06	R 2.50	1.08	R 44.94
	Oil, sunflower	Litres	R 32.29	0.055	R 1.78	0.11	R 3.55	1.98	R 63.93
	Peanut butter	Kilogram	R 105.56	0.02	R 2.11	0.04	R 4.22	0.72	R 76.01
Seasoning	Salt	Kilogram	R 17.39	0.02	R 0.33	0.04	R 0.67	0.69	R 12.02
	Stock/ soup powder	Kilogram	R 66.89	0	R -	0	R -	0	R -
Total cost per month (20 days)**					R 146.92		R 261.30		R 4,768.47
Total average cost per person per day					R 7.35		R 13.06		R 11.92
Current subsidy***					R 9.60		R 9.60		R 3,840.00
Difference in subsidy					+R 2.25		-R 3.46		-R 928.47
Difference in subsidy when only 70% coverage is achieved****									-R 2,080.47

Notes:

- * The ECD age composition (20% younger age group and 80% older age group) is based on implementation experience of Zero2Five Trust, where centres typically have more older than younger children enrolled
- ** Please note that the total cost per month does not include other essential items for keeping clean (hands and equipment) and for cooking (fuel such as gas or electricity)
- *** The food component of the ECD subsidy used is R9.60 (40% of R24) as per DBE 2026/2027 financial year
- **** In practice, 100% ECD subsidy coverage is not seen across all ECD centres. This illustrative example uses 70% coverage.

Important note about the calculated cost of the ECD NCN Basket:

The cost of the ECD NCN Basket should not automatically be equated with the full cost of providing a nutrition service to children attending ECD centres. Food ingredients are only one component of meal provision. Labour, cooking fuel, water, cleaning materials, storage and equipment all carry costs which are not included in this costing model.

Important note on EG1 costing and milk feeding:

The EG1 (9-23 months) costing represents the food component provided through the ECD NCN Basket and does not include a monetary value for breastmilk or infant formula. Milk feeding remains an important component of nutrition for children in this age group, but breastmilk is not assigned a monetary value within the Basket and infant formula is not included as a standard Basket cost. The lower EG1 food cost should therefore not be interpreted as indicating that meeting the nutritional needs of younger children is inherently less costly than for older children. It reflects the defined scope of the Basket costing and the contribution of ECD-provided complementary foods.