

Public Health Scotland submission of 6 June 2022

PE1926/D: Expand universal free school meals for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils

Public Health Scotland (PHS) submit this response to The Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee following their request to the Community Food and Health team for views on expanding universal free school meals to all nursery, primary and secondary pupils and whether community food initiatives would have a role to play in providing universal free school meals.

The Family Resource Survey (for the UK) highlights high levels of food insecurity among priority groups. Nearly a third of single-parent households with children and 13% of families with three or more children were food insecure in 2019/20.¹ To reduce the cost of living for low-income families and reduce food insecurity, PHS support the continued expansion of free school meals (FSMs) and food provision during school holidays and support further extension of food provision, breakfast, and lunch, in primary and secondary schools.

Consideration and support should also be given to the types of activity that could increase uptake of free school meals; and that further analysis is carried out of the extent to which families, with school age children, and who are living in poverty in Scotland are currently ineligible for free school meals and how such families may receive an entitlement to free school meals.

PHS suggest that the implications of any extension of any provision of the school meal service should be fully explored with local authorities including education colleagues and those delivering school food to consider the opportunities and challenges of implementation. It will also be important to engage with children and young people and their families.

¹ Family Resources Survey, Table 9.2: Households by composition and household food security status1, 2019/20, United Kingdom

It will be important to consider several key areas to support successful implementation including:

Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in schools (Scotland) Regulations 2020

- Any changes to the delivery of school meals would need to ensure that the Nutritional regulations are upheld. These updated regulations took effect on 8 April 2021 and are closely aligned to our Scottish Dietary Goals. The regulations ensure that food in schools is meeting current dietary recommendations and provide an opportunity to teach our children the importance of a healthier diet.

Anonymity

- It is well documented that receiving FSMs can be stigmatising. To fully remove the stigma associated with FSMs, children and young people must be able to consume the same food as their peers, paid for in the same way and eaten in the same space. Providing universal FSMs is a clear solution that helps to ensure no child misses out or feels embarrassed about receiving food at school.² Most secondary schools use a cashless system to ensure anonymity, consideration would need to be given as to how this would be maintained if food were offered for free out with the school setting, for example within community cafes.

Voices of children and young people

- Universal provision does not always result in universal reach, and it is widely known that uptake of FSMs is higher in primary than secondary schools.³ It is important that attention is paid to what young people need and want from their school meals, especially now that The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has been incorporated into Scots law. Lunchtime is a social time and space for young people. Providing opportunities to be with friends and to be independent

² The Cost of Learning in Lockdown, CPAG, June 2020 11 E Harwood, 'Discretion, dignity and choice: free school meals', Poverty, 169, CPAG, 2021, <https://askcpag.org.uk/content/206856/discretion--dignity-and-choice--free-school-meals>

³ Scottish Poverty & Inequality Research Unit. 2019. Are pupils being served? A secondary review of the sector's evidence base on school meal provision at lunchtime in Scotland. Available at [SPIRU Report for Assist FM 190826 \(gcu.ac.uk\)](https://www.gcu.ac.uk/spirureport) [Accessed 25 May 2022]

of the 'school environment' are key considerations for young people.

Procurement opportunities

- As Anchor Institutions, local authorities can use their economic footprint in their local area to increase their social impact. This includes a review of procurement policies to increase their profile of local spend and working with Scottish Enterprise and Supplier Development programmes to support a diverse range of local suppliers in the provision of food products and other services to increase the universal provision of school meals. PHS is working with the Scottish Government to support NHS and Local Authorities to consider how they maximise their social impact and build economic resilience in communities, through their role as Anchor Institutions, through procurement, employment and management of their estates and buildings.
- The approach is likely to be different in each local authority area dependant on the local food system, current or potential suppliers, as well as community food networks and their ability to engage/respond. As well as the procurement of food, the procurement of school holiday services and activities from voluntary sector organisations, including community food initiatives should be considered where this expertise is available and where voluntary sector organisations can ensure nutritional regulations are maintained.

Infrastructure

- Any expansion to school meal provision would need to consider the practical implications of managing the delivery of school meals within the current school estate. In many cases, school dining provision is multipurpose, or space is limited.

PHS would welcome further opportunities to discuss these and the contributions of PHS Scottish Government colleagues