

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 21 June 2022

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

Thank you for your letter of 16 May 2022 in relation to Petition PE1926, raised by Alison Dowling, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to expand universal free school meals provision for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils. I note your committee's further point, referred to in your letter, about whether community food initiatives would have a role to play in providing universal free school meals.

As per my previous letter to your committee on 23 February 2022, we have committed to the further expansion of free school meals and will continue to work with our partners in local authorities to plan for this over the next academic year. We have provided local authorities with funding of over £169 million in this financial year to offer free school lunches to all children in primaries 1 to 5 and to provide for pupils in P6-S6 whose families are in receipt of eligible qualifying benefits for free school meals.

In addition, the funding we provide to local authorities for early learning and childcare provision includes a free meal for all pre-school children on every day when they attend. In 2022-23 we are also providing £21.75 million of funding for local authorities to provide support to families eligible for free school meals during holiday periods throughout the school year. This support will be provided at the summer, Christmas and Easter holidays as well as the mid-term holidays in October and February.

With regards to your committee's proposal on whether community food initiatives could have a role to play in providing universal free school meals, the Scottish Government have made significant efforts to transition toward more dignified responses to food insecurity including through taking a human-rights and cash-first approach to our response.

The value of the community food sector contribution to this work cannot be overstated and we are grateful for all of their ongoing efforts. We believe that community food initiatives should be places where people come together to share food because they want to and choose to, in line

with our Dignity Principles. It is the role of public bodies to ensure that people have access to the resources they require, including free school meals and alternatives, and we do not believe it is appropriate to ask the sector to step into this space.

I would also add that we introduced the Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in Schools (Scotland) Regulations 2020, which came into effect in April 2021. The Regulations are designed to help ensure children and young people are provided with meals containing an appropriate amount of energy and key nutrients to support their healthy growth and development. They also limit salt, sugar, fat and saturated fat content of all food and drink and require plenty of fruit and vegetables to be on offer across the school day.

We expect local councils and schools to meet the standards set out in the Regulations and we produced guidance which supports them to enable them to provide balanced and nutritious food, drink and meals throughout the school day and they have been designed to be flexible enough to allow a wide range of food, drink and mealtime choices to be provided in schools to meet all children and young people's dietary needs and also account for local tastes and preferences. Therefore the delivery of free school meals is a matter for each local authority, taking into account their statutory duties as well as local circumstances and needs.