

# Child Poverty Action Group submission of 4 August 2022

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

### CPAG in Scotland

#### **Response to request for views from [Scottish Parliament's Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee](#): consideration of petition PE1926: Expand universal free school meals for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils**

CPAG believes that the most effective way of ensuring all children, but particularly those in low income families and at risk of poverty, receive a healthy school lunch is to move toward a universal, non means-tested approach to free school meal delivery. The cost of school meals is a significant pressure on increasingly hard pressed household budgets, particularly for those just above the means-tested threshold for free meals. We know that many children living in poverty are not currently entitled to free school meals.

Free school meals provide a vital source of support to low income families and their children, ensuring children have access to at least one healthy meal a day and freeing up cash for other essentials within hard pressed family budgets.

Research continues to show that universal provision is progressive and helps tackle inequality<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, we welcomed the Scottish Governments commitment to introduce free school meals to all primary school children by August 2022<sup>2</sup>. It was disappointing that in this year's budget the commitment was only to roll out universal free school meals by the end of this parliamentary term, and that families still have no timetable for the full roll out of this policy.

---

<sup>1</sup> For example C.J. Morelli and P.T. Seaman (2022), *Understanding Society: Poverty, Wealth and Inequality in the UK*, London: Routledge also see C.J. Morelli and P. Seaman, 2010, Devolution as a policy crucible: the case of universal free school meals, *Poverty & Public Policy*, Vol. 2: Iss. 1, pp.139-61, DOI: 10.2202/1944-2858.1032 <http://www.psocommons.org/ppp/vol2/iss1/art7/> also see C. J. Morelli, G. Mooney and P. Seaman 2012, 'Moving 'Upstream'? The Case for Universalism and Redistribution in Tackling Poverty and Inequality in the Devolved Scotland', in M. Leith, I. McPhee and T. Laxton, (ed.s), *Scottish Devolution and Social Policy - Evidence from the First Decade*, (Cambridge). ISBN 978-1-4438-3790-3

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/news/budget-deal-secured/>

The Scottish Government should take the same universal approach towards pupils in high school. We know that universal provision can boost uptake<sup>3</sup> and ensure all pupils can benefit from a healthy meal at lunch time. We understand that there are capacity and logistical barriers to extending provision in high schools, but a commitment, plan and timeline for delivering universal free school meals should be put in place as a matter of priority. An immediate first step could be the extension of free school meals to all families in receipt of universal credit, or an equivalent means tested-benefit.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> For example research from the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex analysed the wider impact of free school meal pilots. <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/publications/working-papers/iser/2012-12.pdf>. The paper “attributes the rise in take-up of FSMs by those always entitled to a positive peer effect: FSM-registered individuals became more likely to participate because a greater proportion of other students in the school were doing so....The magnitude of the effect is such that in a typical school a 10 percentage point rise in peer-group take-up would reduce non-participation (i.e. non take up by those already entitled) by almost a quarter.” More recent research (e.g. Evaluating universal infant free school meals, Scotland: second monitoring report of school-meal uptake. 2016 , NHS available at [http://www.healthscotland.scot/media/1186/28354-universal-free-school-meals-report\\_oct\\_english.pdf](http://www.healthscotland.scot/media/1186/28354-universal-free-school-meals-report_oct_english.pdf)) and Universal Infant Free School Meals in England: Uptake and outcomes, 2021, NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR) available at <https://sphr.nihr.ac.uk/research/uptake-and-outcomes-associated-with-universal-infant-free-school-meals-in-england/>) confirms these findings.

<sup>4</sup> The benefits of extending entitlement beyond the current entitlement are explored in our free school meals policy paper available from <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/briefing/free-school-meals-policy-paper>