

Trussell Trust submission of 12 August 2022

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

About the Trussell Trust

The Trussell Trust is an anti-poverty charity supporting a UK-wide network of more than 1,400 food bank centres and together, we provide emergency food and support to people locked in poverty, and campaign for change to end the need for food banks across the UK.

There are currently 426 food banks across the UK operating more than 1,200 food bank centres and delivered by 28,000 food bank volunteers. There are 43 food banks in Scotland, distributing parcels at over 130 centres, and in 26 local authorities.

Poverty and food bank use in Scotland

It is simply not right that so many people in Scotland are facing impossible choices, unable to afford the essentials that we all need to eat, stay warm and dry, and keep clean. Scotland is one of the richest nations in the world, yet one in four children are caught up in a cycle of poverty from which it is difficult to escape. We have the power to change this, but only if ending poverty is at the heart of all Scottish Government policy. No one should be going hungry in Scotland. There is no challenge more urgent for Scotland than ending poverty and in particular, destitution, shaping a future where everyone can afford the essentials.

We welcome the commitment of the Scottish Government to act, but people living in poverty now cannot afford to wait; commitments need to be matched with bold action. We need transformative policy change, in the short, medium, and long term, if we are to achieve the vision of a Scotland where no one needs to access charitable food aid.

We will only end the need for food banks in Scotland if we increase people's incomes; food insecurity is not about a lack of food, it is about lacking income to buy food. Food bank need is a symptom of poverty, particularly of destitution. Our latest State of Hunger research, published in May 2021, found that low income was the main reason people in Scotland need to use a food bank. 95% of people needing to use a Trussell Trust food bank are destitute, with an average monthly

household income after housing costs of just £248 a month, or just £8 a day for a couple without children. This needs to cover energy bills, council tax, food, and other essentials.

Compared to five years ago, there has been a significant increase in people needing charitable food aid, with the number of food parcels given out by food banks in our Scottish network alone, up by 63%, from 136,000 in 2015/16 to 221,500 in 2020/21. Of the 221,500 parcels distributed in 2020/21, over a third (77,000 or 35%) were issued to children. 94% of people referred to a food bank in our Scottish network in late 2018 or early 2020 (the two points at which data for our State of Hunger reports was collected) were experiencing destitution, meaning they are unable to afford the essentials like heating and food.

Child poverty and food bank use in Scotland

More than one in four (260,000) of Scotland's children are officially recognised as living in poverty, with 13% of children living in material deprivation, in families that cannot afford essentials such as a warm winter coat. The JRF's most recent Poverty in Scotland report found that 16% of children were trapped in poverty for at least three to four years. This is more than three times higher than the Scottish Government's target of less than 5% of children being trapped in persistent poverty. Without a far greater scale and pace to activity designed to reduce child poverty, the Scottish Government will fail to meet its own targets by a significant margin and too many children will continue to be caught in a cycle of poverty.

Of the families supported by our network, larger families with three or more children were over-represented: 15% of households referred to Trussell Trust food banks in late 2018 or early 2020 had three or more children. We therefore welcome the commitment to increase the Scottish Child Payment (SCP) to £20 a week from April 2022, and to £25 and to all under 16s by the end of this year.

Expansion of free school meals

We support the Scottish Government's expansion of free school meals and action to ensure families with children can access free school meals all year round. We support the STUC's campaign for universal free school meals, to ensure every child and young person at school in Scotland receives at least one nutritious meal a day.

It is disappointing that the roll-out of free school meals to P6 and P7 children has been delayed and there is no clear commitment on when

the necessary capital and revenue spending will be provided to local authorities to fully roll out this policy. We have been urging the Scottish Government to implement this commitment in time for the start of the new school year in August 2022, to ensure every primary school child in Scotland receives at least one healthy meal every day. We would also like to see a clear timeline for the introduction of free school meals to all young people in Scotland's secondary schools.

Providing universal free school meals is an effective way to reduce food insecurity for all children, relieve pressure on family finances and provide support in a dignified and non-stigmatising way.

We fully support the expansion of free school meals to all nursery, primary and secondary pupils.