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Convener  
Education, Children and Young People Committee  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

18 April 2023

Dear Convener,

Thank you for your correspondence dated 21 March 2023 following my predecessor's appearance at the Education, Children and Young People's Committee on 8 March.

### **Funded Early Learning and Childcare**

The Minister for Children and Young People agreed at the meeting to provide further detail on a number of points and I have set this out below. I apologise for the delay in responding:

- **Timing of data sharing project**

We expect to be in a position to share data with local authorities imminently and we will write to the Committee once the data sharing is operational.

- **The number of families that the Scottish Government anticipates will be eligible for funded ELC**

We will be able to update the Committee on more accurate estimates once the data sharing is operational.

- **The membership of the Scottish Government's Deferral Working Group and how often it has met.**

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## Membership

- Scottish Government Early Learning and Childcare
- Scottish Government Analytical Services
- Aberdeen City Council
- Angus Council
- Argyll and Bute Council
- Clackmannanshire Council
- Falkirk Council
- Fife Council
- Glasgow City Council
- Scottish Borders Council
- Shetland Islands Council
- Stirling Council
- Forth Valley & West Lothian Collaborative Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC)
- Northern Alliance RIC
- South East Alliance RIC
- South West Collaborative RIC
- Tayside Alliance RIC
- West Partnership RIC
- Care Inspectorate
- Education Scotland

## Meeting dates

- 1 March 2021
- 2 May 2021
- 3 July 2021
- 4 November 2021
- 5 April 2022
- 30 June 2022
- 24 October 2022
- 27 February 2023
- 19 April 2023

## Free School Meals and School Clothing Grant

The Committee also requested information following consideration of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 (Modification) Regulations 2023:

- **Has the Scottish Government considered extending eligibility for free school meals.**

All primary school pupils in P1 to 5, and eligible pupils in P6 through to S6 can benefit from free school meals in Scotland. On 15 December, the Scottish Government announced that we will continue to fund the expansion of free school meals for all P6 and P7 pupils in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment. This will be the next step in fulfilling our commitment to universal free school meal provision in primary schools.

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We recognise that rises in the cost of living are putting a huge strain on some families and they are facing unforeseen challenges. Local Authorities have the flexibility to make discretionary offers of free school meals to families who do not meet the regular eligibility criteria but are experiencing financial hardship due to exceptional circumstances.

- **What action could the Scottish Government take, in conjunction with COSLA, to enhance take up of school uniform grants and free school meals.**

The Committee may be aware that the Scottish Government recently undertook a public consultation on matters related to school uniform to support the development of national policy and guidance in this area. The consultation analysis report will be published shortly. A working group has been established to take forward development of the guidance and will be informed by evidence from the consultation and engagement with children and young people. While matters related to the school clothing grant were out of scope of the consultation, in developing school uniform guidance, consideration will be given to how education authorities and schools can ensure families are aware of the available financial support.

- **Has the Scottish Government considered the use of automatic enrolment to ensure that families receive the support that they are entitled to.**

We are committed to ensuring that those who are entitled to passported benefits such as free school meals and clothing grants, receive them. We are currently working with the UK Government on approaches to enable the provision of data to local authorities for the purposes of awarding free school meals, school clothing grants and education maintenance allowances. Additionally, local authorities have a statutory duty to promote school meals and to take all reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people entitled to free school meals are supported to access them.

I hope this information is helpful and I look forward to working with the Committee in my new role.

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