

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

6th Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), 20 April 2022

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

Note by the Clerk

Petitioner	Alison Dowling
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to expand universal free school meals provision for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1926

Introduction

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 8 March 2022.
2. The petition seeks to expand provision of free school meals to all nursery and school pupils throughout Scotland. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. While not a formal requirement, petitioners have the option to collect signatures on their petition. On this occasion, the petitioner elected to collect this information. 85 signatures have been received.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered. A response has been received from the Scottish Government and is included at **Annexe C** of this paper.

Action

6. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

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

Petitioner

Alison Dowling

Date Lodged:

08/02/22

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to expand universal free school meals provision for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils.

Previous action

I have contacted a number of MSPs and local authority councillors. They have given positive and supportive responses to the petition aim.

I've consulted with low income families who struggle to meet the cost of school dinners for their children and supported families in accessing affordable credit, advice, benefit entitlement and local foodbank provision.

Background information

Urgent action is needed at a national level to tackle child and young person's food poverty in Scotland. No child or young person should go through the school day hungry. The Scottish Government can ensure that schools are free from hunger by providing universal access to a free, healthy meal for all pupils, regardless of age.

Free school meals for all pupils would remove the stigma of 'difference'. Some children entitled to free meals don't take them because of the stigma.

A national expansion of free school dinners by Scottish Government will alleviate hunger for pupils of all ages during the school day.

Some low-income families are not entitled to free meals but can't afford them or can only afford to pay for a school dinner for a few days each week.

Food poverty is sometimes hidden within schools, especially with secondary school age pupils. Many children lose access to free school meals because of moving out of the year group that provides a free school dinner. While P1-4 provision is intended to expand to include older primary children, no such expansion is planned to include children attending secondary school.

Hunger doesn't recognise an age limit therefore the Scottish Government should not discriminate against tackling school day hunger on the basis of age. This is set against a backdrop of rising food and energy prices that disproportionately impact families with the lowest incomes.

Annexe B

The logo for SPICe, featuring the letters 'SPICe' in a white, sans-serif font on a dark purple background.The logo for The Information Centre, featuring the text 'The Information Centre' and 'An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh' in a white, sans-serif font on a dark blue background.

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition PE1926: Expand universal free school meals for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils, lodged by Alison Dowling

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

The petition calls for universal free school meals for all pupils in schools and nurseries.

Provision of free school meals is a little complex. Policy and practice of providing free meals goes beyond statutory duties.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide a school lunch to pupils whose school education they are responsible, including those accessing funded Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) who meet certain criteria. These criteria are generally in relation to benefits or tax credits the parent/carer receives.

However, the Scottish Government has worked with local government to create a universal offer of free lunches. Up to August 2021, free school meals were offered in primary schools up to the end of P3 (with some local areas going beyond this). This offer is being expanded in the current (2021/22) academic year and is planned to cover all primary pupils during the lifetime of this parliamentary session.

In terms of ELC, the Scottish Government and COSLA made a joint commitment that every child attending a funded ELC session will be provided with a free meal.

There are further policy developments in the provision of food in schools, however this is focused on breakfasts. The 2021-22 Programme for Government stated:

“In the next year, we will develop plans to deliver free breakfasts to all primary and special school children and start to pilot provision. We will also commence the phased roll-out of a food offer during the school holidays, starting with those who will benefit the most.”

In 2019-20, the total net local government expenditure on free school meals was £146 million. In its budget for 2022-23, to support the expansion of universal free school meals, the Scottish Government has planned for £42 million of resource funding and £30 million of capital funding. COSLA’s ‘Budget Reality’ document, published on 9 December 2021, estimated that “£200m will be required to deliver on Scottish Government’s policy commitment of Free School Meals for all Primary School Children”.

The universal provision is not planned to cover secondary pupils. Secondary pupils are commonly allowed to leave school premises at lunchtime. At the time of writing, the latest Healthy Living Survey where data on pupils taking meals was taken, was undertaken in February 2020. This showed that 45% of pupils in secondary schools took free school meals. Of those secondary pupils who were registered for free school meals and present in school, 71% took a meal.

The extent to which secondary schools would require capital investment to be able to serve meals that were free to the pupils is unclear.

Local authorities have statutory duties to promote school lunches and protect the identity of pupils receiving free school lunches.

Ned Sharratt

Senior Researcher (Education, Culture)

18/2/2022

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot.

Annexe C

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 23 February 2022

PE1926/A – Expand universal free school meals for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils

Thank you for your letter of 10 February 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 fully recognise that free school meals are a vital support to thousands of children and young people across the country - ensuring that they are fed and ready to engage in learning. We also fully recognise the financial benefits they provide to families across Scotland, providing savings of around £400 per child, per year.

As you will know, we have been providing funding to local authorities to offer free school lunches to all children in primaries 1 to 3 at publicly-funded schools during school term-time since January 2015. The provision of free school lunches during school term-time has now been further expanded to include all children in primaries 4 and 5 and we are committed to rolling this universal provision even further, to include all children in primary and special schools, during the lifetime of the current parliamentary session.

In the meantime, for older children in primaries 6 and 7 and young people in secondary schools, they will remain eligible to receive free school meals if their parents or carers are in receipt of any eligible qualifying benefits. This is supported by £74.6 million pounds of funding.

In 2022-23 the Scottish Government's will provide £42.2 million to provide for all children in primaries 4 and 5 to receive free school lunches during the 2022-23 school year, this is in addition to continued funding of £53 million to provide free school lunches for all children in primaries 1 to 3.

Whilst I can fully understand why many people would like to see the full programme of expanded universal free school lunch provision put in place earlier, I would add that a commitment of this scale requires a significant delivery and financial planning and discussion with our local authority partners to ensure everything is in place to deliver a healthy and nutritious free meal to every child who wants one. It is important to understand, for instance, the current capabilities of existing school kitchens and dining settings and to identify where these may need to be upgraded or improved in order to accommodate the anticipated increase in uptake.

With this in mind, we 2022-23 will also provide £30 million in capital in 2022-23 to be invested in school kitchen and dining areas in order to prepare for this further expansion and we will continue to work with local government partners on planning over the next academic year. This will help to ensure that the expansion can be delivered equitably across all schools, in all areas, whilst maintaining high quality meal provision for pupils.

With regards to the further expansion of free school meals to include nursery-aged children and young people in secondary schools, I'm sure you will be aware that the Scottish Government's policy of increasing funded early learning and childcare to 1,140 hours per year came into effect in August 2021. As part of this offer, all three and four year olds and eligible two year olds are now entitled to receive a free meal on every day they attend at a funded early learning and childcare session.

With regards to universal free school meals for young people in secondary schools, at this time the Scottish Government's primary focus is on expansion for children in primary schools. However, during the course of this parliamentary session, we are also committed to piloting approaches to universal meal provision in secondary schools.

Finally, we will keep our eligibility criteria under continual review to ensure that free school meals are available to those who need it most - plus there is a legal duty on local authorities to promote the availability of free school meals to all eligible children and young people, in every educational setting. Furthermore, local authorities also have a statutory duty to take all reasonable steps to ensure that all children and young people who are eligible for free school meals receive them.