

# Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

13th Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Wednesday  
28 September 2022

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

## Note by the Clerk

<b>Lodged on</b>	8 March 2022
<b>Petitioner</b>	Alison Dowling
<b>Petition summary</b>	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.
<b>Webpage</b>	<a href="https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1926">https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1926</a>

## Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [20 April 2022](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to Child Poverty Action Group, Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, COSLA, Community Food and Health Scotland, and The Trussell Trust. The Committee also agreed to write to the Scottish Government.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new responses from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, COSLA, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, Public Health Scotland, Child Poverty Action Group, and the Trussell Trust, which are set out in **Annexe C**.

4. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
5. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
7. Members may wish to note that Stephanie Callaghan MSP asked the First Minister for an update on plans to expand universal free school meal provision during First Minister's Question Time on 9 June 2022. The question and the First Minister's response can be found in the [Official Report](#). Monica Lennon MSP also raised this matter during General Questions on 8 September 2022, where the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills restated the commitment to expand free school meals to Primary 6 and 7 pupils in this parliamentary session. A video of this question and response is available [here](#).
8. Members will also be aware that a proposed amendment "to ensure the provision of universal free school meals for all children and young people" be included in the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill was not accepted at Stage 3. Further details of the consideration of amendments is available in the [Official Report](#) from 14 June 2022.

## Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

### Clerk to the Committee

## Annexe A

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

## Petitioner

Alison Dowling

## Date lodged

8 March 2022

## 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

### Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1926 on 20 April 2022

**The Convener:** The first new petition before us, PE1926, which has been lodged by Alison Dowling, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to expand the provision of free school meals universally to all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils. Alison has lodged the petition as she believes that urgent action is needed at a national level to address food poverty for children and young people. She suggests that food poverty is sometimes hidden in schools, particularly among secondary school-aged pupils. She notes that, although an extension of free school meals is planned for younger pupils, there are currently no plans in place for older, secondary school-aged pupils.

In its submission to the committee, the Scottish Government indicates that its present focus is on expanding the provision of free school meals in primary schools. However, it notes that

“during the course of this parliamentary session, we are also committed to piloting approaches to universal meal provision in secondary schools.”

Do members have any comments or suggestions as to how we might take forward the petition? My screen has gone blank. We have lost Paul Sweeney, so I will go to David Torrance.

**David Torrance:** I would like us to write to several stakeholders, because the petition raises a really important issue that needs to be looked into. Those stakeholders should include the Child Poverty Action Group, the Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Community Food and Health Scotland, which does work on inequalities and barriers to healthy and affordable food, and the Trussell Trust.

I would also like us to write to the Scottish Government. Everything has a cost, so I would like to find out what investment would be needed to make possible the universal provision of free school meals in all nurseries, primary schools and secondary schools.

**The Convener:** I call Fergus Ewing.

**Fergus Ewing:** I have no comments to make on this petition, convener.

**The Convener:** Sorry—there was a misstep in our communications.

Paul Sweeney, is there anything that you would like to add?

**Paul Sweeney:** There is definitely merit from a social justice point of view in the petition's proposed creation of a universal public good. It is also worth thinking about the fact that, although the issue is often talked about in terms of the cost of infrastructure and provision, increasingly, there are advances in community food growing and provision. Therefore, perhaps the issue needs to be considered in the wider context of communities' food resilience.

There is an interesting project in Glasgow involving Locavore, which is a community food local enterprise. It has taken over parts of public parks to start growing produce that can be sold commercially and used for food justice projects through food pantry networks and so on. That can all be part of the picture, and there is perhaps a bigger piece of work that needs to be done about how we improve the supply of food in the local community. That could be part of the exercise, too—the approach could be part of a broader public good than simply being the mechanical exercise of providing catering for schools.

**The Convener:** I am quite happy to incorporate that point into the request for information that we are seeking from the organisations that David Torrance has mentioned. Do we agree to keep the petition open and take forward the gathering of information that was suggested a moment ago?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Annexe C

### COSLA submission of 19 May 2022

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

COSLA works on behalf of Scotland's Councils to focus on the challenges and opportunities they face, and to engage positively with governments and others on policy, funding and legislation. COSLA is a politically led organisation, with collective Local Government positions agreed through COSLA Leaders and our four themed policy Boards, including the Children and Young People Board. The CYP Board is made up of the Councillor from each of the 32 Local Authorities with lead responsibility for education and children's services.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the petition highlighted on Universal Free School Meal expansion.

Since 2014, all Primary 1-3 pupils at Scottish local authority schools, regardless of family income levels, have been able to access free, healthy school lunches during term-time. Universal provision was extended to Primary 4s in August 2021, and Primary 5s in January 2022. Local authorities are also responsible for providing free school meals to children in primary and secondary schools who are entitled due to low-income eligibility. Children in funded early learning and childcare can also access free lunches. This work has been delivered as a result of agreement and joint working between Scottish and Local Government.

Scottish Government and Local Authorities have committed to further expansion to include P6-7 pupils and, as with previous phases, COSLA has emphasised, in discussions with Scottish Government and other partners, the crucial need for Scottish Government to provide full resourcing to enable implementation. COSLA, together with Local Government professional associations such as ADES and Directors of Finance, is working with the Scottish Government to agree funding arrangements (including both revenue and capital resourcing) and timescales for delivery of this next phase of expansion.

COSLA does not have an agreed position on expanding free meal provision in secondary schools beyond the current arrangements. Any proposed changes to secondary provision, and plans for delivery, should be considered in partnership with Local Government. As with the primary school expansion programme, any new commitments would require full resourcing to enable successful delivery.

We hope that this information is helpful to the Committee in their consideration of this petition.

## Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland submission of 6 June 2022

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

Established by the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2003, the Commissioner is responsible for promoting and safeguarding the rights of all children and young people in Scotland, giving particular attention to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Commissioner has powers to review law, policy and practice and to take action to promote and protect rights.<sup>1</sup> The Commissioner is fully independent of the Scottish Government.

#### **Introduction**

We welcome the opportunity to provide the Committee with our views in relation to the present petition to expand universal free school meals for all nursery, primary, and secondary school pupils. This briefing builds upon previous evidence that we have submitted in relation to the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill<sup>2</sup> and the proposal for a Right to Food Bill.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Section 4, Commissioner for Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2003

<sup>2</sup> See for example, our response to call for views by the Rural Affairs, Islands and National Environment Committee on the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, December 2021. Available here: <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Good-Food-Nation-Scotland-Bill-response.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Response, Proposal for a Right to Food Bill, February 2022. Available here: <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Download-Right-to-Food-Bill-Consultation-response-1.pdf>

Children and young people in Scotland have told us that poverty is the single-most important issue for them. This includes food poverty. Thousands of children across Scotland currently live in food insecurity - where they do not have consistent access to sufficient affordable, nutritious food. The rising cost of living and [increasing child poverty numbers](#) continues to affect children and young people's right to food across Scotland. Food insecurity affects children's physical and mental health and lifelong development.<sup>4</sup> Children who experience food insecurity are more likely to face adverse health outcomes, developmental risk, obesity, and malnutrition. Food insecurity also affects educational performance and can make it harder to self-regulate behaviours and emotions.

Free school meals are a crucial measure that help ensure children's right to food is fulfilled. More widely, free school meals also play an important role in promoting food security and tackling child poverty. We therefore welcome the Scottish Government's Commitment to further expand universal free school meal provision to all children in primary schools.<sup>5</sup> We however note with concern the delay to the rollout of universal provision to all children in primary 6 and 7.

While free school meals are an important lever to tackle child food poverty in Scotland, they are not being consumed on a typical day by a substantial number of children. We note that in secondary schools there is evidence of declining uptake of free school meals, with increasing children and young people choosing to leave school at lunchtime. Children and young people have told us that there are several barriers to taking up free school meals, including lack of awareness of eligibility for free school meals; stigma; quality of food and portion sizes; lack of choice; and desire for time away from the school estate.

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<sup>4</sup> UNICEF, Prevalence and Correlates of Food Insecurity among Children across the Globe, Office of Research – Innocenti Working Paper WP-2017-09, June 2017. Available here: [https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IWP\\_2017\\_09.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IWP_2017_09.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Page 60, Best Start, Bright Futures: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026. Available here: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2022/03/best-start-bright-futures-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2022-26/documents/best-start-bright-futures-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2022-2026/best-start-bright-futures-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2022-2026/govscot%3Adocument/best-start-bright-futures-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2022-2026.pdf?forceDownload=true>

We welcome the principle that extending access to universal free school meals to all secondary school pupils will remove the current age-based cliff-edge of access to support.

However, we do not consider that there is sufficient evidence at present to show that simply expanding universal free school meals to secondary schools, through the current model of provision, will have the desired impact on raising uptake of free (and paid) school meals.

The Scottish Government, local authorities and individual schools must take steps to address the barriers which discourage children and young people in secondary schools from taking up free school meals; working with children and young people to create offers of support which better meet their needs.

### **Human rights framework**

The right to food as a human right is enshrined in international human rights law in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Article 11 recognises that:

- everyone has the right to an adequate level of food,
- governments must take measures to improve the production, conservation, and distribution of food,
- governments must tell people about the principles of nutrition,
- governments should develop or reform the ways they produce food so that natural resources are developed and used in the most efficient way, and
- the world's food supplies should be distributed in an equitable way.

The [UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) has provided further guidance in its [General Comment no. 12](#) on the right to adequate food. The right to food is comprised of four key elements: 1.) availability, 2.) adequacy, 3.) accessibility, and 4.) sustainability – for present and future generations. ‘Adequacy’ refers to the dietary needs of an individual which must be fulfilled not only in terms of quantity but also in terms of nutritious quality. ‘Accessibility’ includes affordability; individuals in all settings should be able to have an adequate diet without it affecting their other basic needs, such as housing, fuel, and other key costs.

The right to food is closely linked to children’s rights to health (UNCRC article 24) and education (UNCRC articles 28 and 29), among others. Nutrition is an essential component of the right to health and of the right

to food and poor health impacts on the realisation of a wide range of children’s human rights.

### **Free school meals in secondary schools – evidence**

According to the Scottish Government’s latest [School Healthy Living Survey](#), 44.6% of secondary school pupils in 2020 took a school meal (whether free or paid for). The proportion of pupils registered for free school meals who typically consume a free school meal has fallen in each of the last four years for secondary school pupils (from 73.9% in 2016 to 70.9% in 2020).<sup>6</sup> We note that these statistics pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic. We anticipate that a combination of the pandemic and the rising cost of living will result in more children becoming eligible for free school meals.

We recognise that the majority of secondary school pupils, particularly older children, will choose to leave school at lunchtime. There is some evidence to indicate that food and drink purchasing habits of secondary school pupils out of school at lunchtime may be contributing to poor dietary intakes and obesity.<sup>7</sup>

[Childhood obesity remains a significant concern in Scotland](#), particularly between the ages of 12 and 15 and for children living in poverty. Poverty and deprivation are associated with poor nutritional outcomes. [Across the UK](#), there is a marked socio-economic gradient for childhood obesity and children in the most deprived parts of the country do not grow as well and are on average a centimetre shorter by the time they reach age 11 than children in the richest areas.

Young Scottish Ambassadors working with the [Future Food Inquiry](#) highlighted how easy it was for school pupils to eat unhealthy foods. [One Ambassador stated](#), “In our community there is a dot-to-dot of takeaways lining our streets. They offer lunchtime specials to school children, they are even promoted on our bus tickets.”

In EU Member States there is no consistent approach in relation to universal free school meal provision in secondary schools.<sup>8</sup> For example, In Sweden, as of 1997, it has been mandatory by law for schools to provide free lunches to all primary and lower secondary

<sup>6</sup> School Healthy Living Survey supplementary statistics, 2020. Table 17

<sup>7</sup> Macdiarmid, Food and drink purchasing habits out of school at lunchtime: a national survey of secondary school pupils in Scotland, published August 2015.

<sup>8</sup> EU Commission, Provision of school meals across the EU, An overview of rationales, evidence, facilitators and barriers, 2021

school pupils (ages 6-16) and as of the 2010 Education Act, they must also be 'nutritious'. Recently, it has also become common for schools to provide breakfast and snacks, in addition to lunch. While school meals began as a means to combat undernutrition, the rationale has since shifted towards combatting obesity, with one in five children in Sweden now overweight or obese.

## Expanding eligibility thresholds

One of the biggest challenges to free school meal uptake is the eligibility thresholds, which [do not include all children affected by poverty](#),

To be eligible for free school meals the [income threshold](#) for families in receipt of child tax credits is £16,105 and, for those in receipt of both child tax credits and working tax credits, the income threshold is £7,500. The threshold for those in receipt of universal credit is also £7,500 (multiply £625 by 12).

We note that these income thresholds have changed little in 20 years. In this regard, we note that in 2002 the income threshold for families in receipt of child tax credits was £13,230. We also note that the threshold for free school meal entitlement on the Scottish Government's and local authorities' websites has not changed since it was set in 2015, a full seven years ago (£16,105). This means that far fewer lower income families are now eligible for free school meals.<sup>9</sup>

We are of the view that a substantial increase in the income threshold is essential to ensure that more children affected by poverty are eligible for free school meals.

## School meal debt

The low eligibility threshold for free school meals means that many families who earn just above the threshold, but who are affected by poverty, must pay for their children's school meals.

As of December 2021, parents in Scotland have accrued over £1,000,000 in school meal debt.<sup>10</sup> These debts affect around 24,000 pupils. A number of local authorities in Scotland have a policy or written procedure on school meal debt, including steps for debt recovery.

<sup>9</sup> Professor Morag Treanor, Report on the FOIs for school meal debt, February 2022

<sup>10</sup> Based on responses of 29 local authorities that responded to Freedom of Information Requests submitted by Professor Morag Treanor

We also note that it is also possible for secondary school child to receive a meal and to accrue debt. The way this happens is that the secondary school pupil has to go to the school office and request a special voucher to access a school meal and then the debt is applied to the parents' ParentPay or IPayimpact, or other cashless account. We share concerns expressed by Professor Morag Treanor that in reality children may not be presenting to the school office for a voucher that will result in stigma, shame and debt accrued to the parents. Rather, it is exceedingly likely that such pupils are going hungry.

The increasing cost of living is placing significant pressure on family finances. Pursuing debt, which in many cases families will never be able to pay back, is causing families and children additional stress and embarrassment.

Therefore, in addition to raising the eligibility threshold for free school meals, we also support calls<sup>11</sup> for the Scottish Government to make available funds for local authorities to write off school meal debt.

### **Barriers to accessing free school meals in secondary schools**

Children and young people have told us that free school meals are a positive policy that can help reduce poverty and inequality. However, in 2022 one young person highlighted to us the inconsistency between different schools and local authorities with regards to the delivery of free school meals:

“I think [free school meals] are great. But when you think about it, it's only one meal in the day. Some schools do a breakfast club, and this is good, but loads of schools don't do this. If you're not in school then you don't have access to [free school meals]. A lot of people, due to poverty, might drop out of school early, so you lose the opportunity to get a free meal. More could also be done to ensure that people are getting at least 2 meals a day, with 3 obviously being ideal.”

Further challenges to free school meal uptake include the amount provided and the cost of school meals. In 2019, a young person told us of the limitations of free school meals, noting, “I only get £2.55 on my

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<sup>11</sup> The Herald, “School dinner debt to councils ‘should be written off’, 25 March 2022. <https://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/20021147.school-dinner-debt-councils-should-written-off/>

card so I can't afford very much. Sometimes I can only get a juice or a drink and a snack".

Stigma remains a barrier to accessing free school meals. In particular, children and young people have told us that many pupils who need free school meals in their schools do not get them, though they were not sure why this was the case.

In 2022, one young person told us that the method of delivering free school meals by automatic transfer to school cards was a good policy, since it is anonymous and therefore reduces any stigma. But, the pandemic has demonstrated that a cash-first approach to the provision of free school meal alternatives when schools closed was essential and most effective.

A recent [report commissioned by the Poverty and Inequality Commission](#)<sup>12</sup> has highlighted several examples of practices by schools to reduce the negative stigma attached to claiming free school meals. In one school it was noted that "parents were too ashamed to admit that help was required and were choosing to struggle on instead of claiming that to which they were entitled. Many families were not even aware that their children were entitled to free school meals".<sup>13</sup> However, the report found that parents are more likely to register for free school meals if they have personal help to assist them through the registration process. Increasing awareness of free school meal entitlement, signposting families to specialised supports, and speaking more openly about free school meals can also serve to reduce the stigma associated with free school meals.

Children and young people have also told us that the quality of school meals has worsened and the portion sizes have decreased. Many children and young people, including those eligible for free school meals, choose to leave school during lunchtime to buy their lunch. While it is important to respect this choice, it must be balanced with the need to guarantee a healthy and nutritious lunch. Indeed, the quality of school meals has been cited by some children and young people as a reason for going out for lunch. This places secondary school pupils who take free school meals at a particular disadvantage. In 2022, one young person told us: "The standard of the food has dropped significantly from

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<sup>12</sup> John H. McKendrick and Sophie Cathcart, Tackling Food Insecurity in Scottish Schools: Case Studies of Strengthening Free School Meal Provision in Scotland, published March 2021

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, page 17, example of Sound Primary School in the Shetland Isles,

when I started primary to when I finished secondary... Now we've learned we should just go out for lunch. It's cheaper, you get better quality of food and you get more food".

Children and young people have also told us that long queues for school lunches coupled with school canteen capacity discourages uptake of school lunches. In 2022, one child told us that their school operates a 'first come first serve' for school lunch, which often results in a shortage of food towards the end of the lunch period, therefore undermining the policy objectives of free school meals.

In line with Article 12 UNCRC (respect for the views of the child) we consider that involving children and young people is the key to increasing uptake of school meals. Examples of successful practices include involving pupils in the whole process of school meals production; relationship building with pupils; and consulting with pupils on what they actually want.<sup>14</sup> We note that in one secondary school, pupils are consulted through focus groups to share their opinions with the catering staff, and as a result, concept packages such as 'Taco Tuesday' and 'Fish and Chip Friday', have been introduced.<sup>15</sup> Together with other measures, this has led to higher levels of uptake of school meals in this particular school.

## Conclusions

We welcome the principle that extending access to universal free school meals to all secondary school pupils will remove an age-based cliff-edge of access to support. However, we do not consider that there is sufficient evidence to indicate that simply expanding universal provision of free school meals to all secondary school pupils, through the current model of provision, will lead to the desired increase in uptake of school meals. Indeed, children and young people have identified several challenges with regards to free school meals, including quality and quantity of food, lack of choice and insufficient facilities. At the same time, lunch options outside the school premises often present greater value for money, leading to children and young people (including those eligible for free school meals) to eat outside school.

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<sup>14</sup> McKendrick and Cathcart, Tackling Food Insecurity in Scottish Schools, page 20

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Page 12, Dunoon Grammar School.

To address these issues, we consider that it is important that school meals are viewed as an 'attractive' option for all school pupils. Best practice examples cited above demonstrate that where children and young people have been properly consulted with regards to both the design and delivery of school meals, then uptake rises. The role of teachers and other staff has also been identified as an important factor, both in ensuring that the meal is a positive experience for children and young people, but also to help increase awareness of free school meal eligibility and signposting to support for parents. Teachers need to be well-equipped to facilitate informal education on nutrition and healthy lifestyle.

At the same time, we consider that the Scottish Government and local authorities must take steps to address the barriers to accessing free school meals. In particular, in light of the rising cost of living we consider the Scottish Government ought to review and expand the eligibility thresholds for free school meals, including by substantially increasing the income threshold. The Scottish Government should also explore options to promote awareness of free school meals with the aim of both encouraging increased registration among eligible families and to reduce stigma.

## Public Health Scotland submission of 6 June 2022

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

Public Health Scotland (PHS) submit this response to The Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee following their request to the Community Food and Health team for views on expanding universal free school meals to all nursery, primary and secondary pupils and whether community food initiatives would have a role to play in providing universal free school meals.

The Family Resource Survey (for the UK) highlights high levels of food insecurity among priority groups. Nearly a third of single-parent households with children and 13% of families with three or more children

were food insecure in 2019/20.<sup>16</sup> To reduce the cost of living for low-income families and reduce food insecurity, PHS support the continued expansion of free school meals (FSMs) and food provision during school holidays and support further extension of food provision, breakfast, and lunch, in primary and secondary schools.

Consideration and support should also be given to the types of activity that could increase uptake of free school meals; and that further analysis is carried out of the extent to which families, with school age children, and who are living in poverty in Scotland are currently ineligible for free school meals and how such families may receive an entitlement to free school meals.

PHS suggest that the implications of any extension of any provision of the school meal service should be fully explored with local authorities including education colleagues and those delivering school food to consider the opportunities and challenges of implementation. It will also be important to engage with children and young people and their families.

It will be important to consider several key areas to support successful implementation including:

#### Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in schools (Scotland) Regulations 2020

- Any changes to the delivery of school meals would need to ensure that the Nutritional regulations are upheld. These updated regulations took effect on 8 April 2021 and are closely aligned to our Scottish Dietary Goals. The regulations ensure that food in schools is meeting current dietary recommendations and provide an opportunity to teach our children the importance of a healthier diet.

#### Anonymity

- It is well documented that receiving FSMs can be stigmatising. To fully remove the stigma associated with FSMs, children and young people must be able to consume the same food as their

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<sup>16</sup> Family Resources Survey, Table 9.2: Households by composition and household food security status1, 2019/20, United Kingdom

peers, paid for in the same way and eaten in the same space. Providing universal FSMs is a clear solution that helps to ensure no child misses out or feels embarrassed about receiving food at school.<sup>17</sup> Most secondary schools use a cashless system to ensure anonymity, consideration would need to be given as to how this would be maintained if food were offered for free out with the school setting, for example within community cafes.

### Voices of children and young people

- Universal provision does not always result in universal reach, and it is widely known that uptake of FSMs is higher in primary than secondary schools.<sup>18</sup> It is important that attention is paid to what young people need and want from their school meals, especially now that The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has been incorporated into Scots law. Lunchtime is a social time and space for young people. Providing opportunities to be with friends and to be independent of the 'school environment' are key considerations for young people.

### Procurement opportunities

- As Anchor Institutions, local authorities can use their economic footprint in their local area to increase their social impact. This includes a review of procurement policies to increase their profile of local spend and working with Scottish Enterprise and Supplier Development programmes to support a diverse range of local suppliers in the provision of food products and other services to increase the universal provision of school meals. PHS is working with the Scottish Government to support NHS and Local Authorities to consider how they maximise their social impact and build economic resilience in communities, through their role as Anchor Institutions, through procurement, employment and management of their estates and buildings.

<sup>17</sup> The Cost of Learning in Lockdown, CPAG, June 2020 11 E Harwood, 'Discretion, dignity and choice: free school meals', Poverty, 169, CPAG, 2021, <https://askcpag.org.uk/content/206856/discretion--dignity-and-choice--free-school-meals>

<sup>18</sup> Scottish Poverty & Inequality Research Unit. 2019. Are pupils being served? A secondary review of the sector's evidence base on school meal provision at lunchtime in Scotland. Available at [SPIRU Report for Assist FM 190826 \(gcu.ac.uk\)](#) [Accessed 25 May 2022]

- The approach is likely to be different in each local authority area dependant on the local food system, current or potential suppliers, as well as community food networks and their ability to engage/respond. As well as the procurement of food, the procurement of school holiday services and activities from voluntary sector organisations, including community food initiatives should be considered where this expertise is available and where voluntary sector organisations can ensure nutritional regulations are maintained.

### Infrastructure

- Any expansion to school meal provision would need to consider the practical implications of managing the delivery of school meals within the current school estate. In many cases, school dining provision is multipurpose, or space is limited.

PHS would welcome further opportunities to discuss these and the contributions of PHS Scottish Government colleagues

## 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.

## 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>19</sup>. Therefore, we welcomed the Scottish

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<sup>19</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

Governments commitment to introduce free school meals to all primary school children by August 2022<sup>20</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.

The Scottish Government should take the same universal approach towards pupils in high school. We know that universal provision can boost uptake<sup>21</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>22</sup>

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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>20</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/news/budget-deal-secured/>

<sup>21</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>)

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>22</sup> The benefits of extending entitlement beyond the current entitlement are explore in our free school meals policy paper available from <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/briefing/free-school-meals-policy-paper>

## 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.