

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom

10 Downing St,
Westminster,
London. SW1A 2AA

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP, Secretary of State for Education

Department for Education
20 Great Smith St,
Westminster,
London. SW1P 3BT

14th January 2021

Dear Prime Minister,

cc. Secretary of State for Education

Government Needs to Urgently Fix Free School Meal Policy Long-Term

We are writing to you to express our concern that the issue of Free School Meals risks once again becoming divisive, and to encourage the Government to undertake an urgent comprehensive review of Free School Meal policy to reform the system for the longer term. We are ready and willing to support your Government in whatever way we can to make this review a reality and to help develop a set of recommendations that everyone can support. It is only by working together that we end child food poverty.

We know that all political parties agree on the outcome that we are aiming for – ensuring that all children have access to enough healthy, good quality food to fulfil their potential. Last Autumn, the Government announced several very positive new measures to help combat child hunger, and we strongly welcomed those announcements. This week, we were heartened to see the Department for Education's swift response to reports of inadequate Free School Meal food parcels being provided by private companies. The robustness of the message from you and the Secretary of State on this issue was very welcome.

Despite these positive commitments, we strongly feel that now (following the series of problems which have arisen over school food vouchers, holiday provision and food parcels since the start of the pandemic) is the right moment for you to step back and review the policy in more depth. **The signatories to this letter urge the Government to conduct an urgent comprehensive review into Free School Meal policy across the UK to provide recommendations for the next Spending Review.**

This would allow the Government to provide strong national leadership on children's food so that our nation's most disadvantaged children and their families, already disproportionately impacted by Covid-19, don't continue to bear the brunt. In the first lockdown (March-August), 2.3 million children experienced food insecurity and during the 2020 summer holidays 850,000 children reported that they or their families visited a food bank. Free School Meals are a very important part of the safety net that protects children from impoverished families from hunger and poor nutrition.

We believe the review should be debated in Parliament and published before the 2021 summer holidays. The process will require collaboration from politicians in all the devolved nations with responsibility for school food in their regions, and must involve close consultation with children and young people, as well as teachers, charities, NGOs, frontline catering staff and school meals service providers. It should draw on evidence of food insecurity and health inequalities. We stand ready to provide our full support to the review process.

We recommend that its scope include:

1. The current eligibility thresholds for Free School Meals. The Government should seek to ensure disadvantaged children are not excluded from Free School Meal eligibility (in line with National Food Strategy recommendations) and to work with the Devolved Administrations to eliminate disparities between the nations. Current estimates show 2 in 5 UK children under the poverty line are missing out.¹ The ongoing eligibility for children with No Recourse to Public Funds should be addressed explicitly.
2. How funding for Free School Meals can deliver the biggest nutritional and educational impact, supporting children's learning and well-being throughout the school day and during the school holidays (including breakfast provision and the School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme). This should include whether the current allowance for Free School Meals is adequate and whether funding for national breakfasts adequately covers all who would benefit from access to provision.
3. How schools can be supported to deliver the best quality school meals which adhere to school food standards and which ensure the poorest children receive the best possible offer. This should include introducing mandatory monitoring and evaluation on an ongoing basis of Free School Meal take-up, the quality/nutritional adequacy of meals, and examining how the financial transparency of the current system can be improved.
4. What we have learned from Covid-19 and its impact on children in low-income families and the implications of this for school food policy for the next 5 years, as the country recovers.
5. Ensuring that existing school food programmes (such as Free School Meals, holiday provision and breakfast provision) eliminate experiences of stigma for the poorest students. Review the impact that Universal Infant Free School Meals has had on stigma, health, and education.
6. The role of family income (wages and benefits) in enabling families to afford quality food in and outside of school time and during the holidays with choice and dignity.

This review would provide the Government with the opportunity to future-proof its policy on school food, and to carefully consider how best to support low-income children and families in the aftermath of the pandemic. It would also demonstrate the Government's commitment to tackling child food poverty in the longer term and be a significant step towards a comprehensive long-term plan.

¹ <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/two-five-uk-children-under-poverty-line-are-not-eligible-free-school-meals>

School food is essential in supporting the health and learning of our most disadvantaged children. Now, at a time when children have missed months of in-school learning and the pandemic has reminded us of the importance of our health, this is a vital next step.

Yours sincerely,

Individuals

Marcus Rashford MBE

Jamie Oliver MBE

Dame Emma Thompson

Tom Kerridge

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall

Civil Society, Professional Bodies and Industry

Anna Taylor OBE, Executive Director, Food Foundation

Stephanie Slater, Founder/CEO, School Food Matters

Naomi Duncan, Chief Executive, Chefs in Schools

Mark Russell, Chief Executive, The Children's Society

Barbara Crowther, Coordinator, Children's Food Campaign

Paul Wright, Lead, Children's First Alliance

Andrew Forsey, CEO, Feeding Britain

Rob Percival, Head of Policy, Soil Association

Mark Game, CEO, The Bread and Butter Thing

Clara Widdison, Head of Social Inclusion, Mayor's Fund for London

Stephen Forster, National Chair, LACA The School Food People

Peter McGrath, Operational Director, Meals & More

Bill Scott, Chair Poverty and Inequality Commission

Lindsay Graham, Vice Chair Poverty and Inequality Commission

Sabine Goodwin, Coordinator, Independent Food Aid Network UK

Kieron Boyle, Chief Executive, Impact on Urban Health

Sam Butters and Gina Cicerone, Co-CEOs, The Fair Education Alliance

Melissa Green, General Secretary of the WI

Jayne Jones, National Chair, ASSIST FM

Alysa Remtulla, Head of Policy and Campaigns, Magic Breakfast

Thomas Lawson, Chief Executive, Turn2Us

Joseph Howes, Chief Executive, Buttle UK

Graham Whitham, Director, Greater Manchester Poverty Action

Judith Cavanagh, Coordinator, End Child Poverty Coalition

Andy Elvin, CEO, TACT

Irene Audain MBE, Chief Executive, Scottish Out of School Care Network

Cara Cinnamon, CEO, Khulisa UK
Dr. Nick Owen MBEC EO, The Mighty Creatives
Joseph Howes, Chief Executive, Buttle UK
Dr Wanda Wyporska, Executive Director, The Equality Trust
Satwat Rehman, CEO, One Parent Families Scotland
Claire Donovan, Campaigns Manager, End Furniture Poverty
David Holmes CBE, CEO, Family Action
Paddy Lillis, General Secretary, USDAW
Alison Garnham, Chief Executive, Child Poverty Action Group
James Toop, CEO, Biteback2030
Jess McQuail, Director, Just Fair
Sue Tanner, Oxford & District Action on Child Poverty, Chair of the Board of Trustees, Rose Hill & Donnington Advice Centre, Oxford
Jo Whitfield, CEO, Coop Retail

Health Bodies

Dr Max Davie, Officer for Health Improvement, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
Diane Ashby, Change Programme Director, The British Psychological Society
Dr Ruth Allen, CEO, British Association of Social Workers

Education Leaders

Geoff Barton, General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders.
Emyr Fairburn, Headteacher, King's Cross Academy
Julian Drinkall, CEO, Academies Enterprise Trust
Steve Taylor, CEO, Cabot Learning Federation
Chris Tomlinson, CEO Co-op Academies Trust
Catherine Barr, CEO, The Shared Learning Trust
Susan Douglas, CEO, The Eden Academy Trust
Elizabeth Wolverson OBE, Chief Executive, LDBS Academies Trusts (LAT and LAT2)
Emma Knights OBE, Chief Executive, National Governance Association
Louise Johns-Shepherd, Chief Executive, Centre for Literacy in Primary Education
Russell Hobby, CEO, Teach First