

**P-06-1178 Free school meals for all pupils in Wales, Correspondence –
Petitioner to Committee, 03.01.22**

Dear Chair and members of the Petitions Committee

I would again like to thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Minister's 17.12.2021 statement before your Committee meets on 10.1.2022.

I'm very pleased and supportive of the 'transformatory' commitment to start the move to universal free school meals in Wales by the Cooperation Agreement including "At the heart of this approach, is a commitment to extend Free School Meals to all primary school pupils over the lifetime of the agreement."

I would very much appreciate it if the following points could be considered by your Committee and be submitted to the Minister with your support.

1. I would like to propose that although the commitment is to full implementation over the next three years and the life of the agreement, it should not rule out the possibility of 'front loading' the implementation so that it is fully implemented well before the expiry of this period. The justification of this step has been well covered in my previous submissions and in the original paperwork in support of the petition, many points of which are referred to by the Minister in the third and fourth paragraph of the statement.

2. Whilst welcoming the start of the approach to implementation of the decision I would like to propose that as soon as it is possible to start the provision of free school meals in areas where the infrastructure exists it should be done, with the aim of having as much as possible in place by Easter 2022. It could be that where it is not possible immediately to provide for all primary school students in a school or area that provision is started in the early years.

I would like to remind the Committee that in England, free school meals are already available to reception, years 1 & 2 of primary education - introduced in 2014 I believe - and it would be of real benefit to families and children in Wales if this could be achieved and exceeded with urgency.

3. Could I ask the Petitions Committee to seek clarification from the Minister as to whether the commitment to provide free meals during the holiday periods will continue over the course of the Cooperation Agreement?

4. I fully welcome the proposal to link this policy to the Community Food strategy and the start of bringing together partners in each of the 22 Welsh councils. I welcome the recent cross-party vote a few weeks ago that passed a motion calling on the Welsh Government to 'explore all options on ensuring that the 'Right to Food' is embedded in cross-governmental policy approaches to poverty'.

I would further suggest the Welsh Government should introduce a statutory 'Right to Food' and would like to propose that the local community involvement in this current policy

should provide the basis of establishing this aim in practice as well as an early extension of universal free school meal provision to secondary and further education in the very near future.

It is not at all clear who will constitute the partners in these local initiatives or how and when they will meet. I would like to strongly propose that the relevant trade unions are involved as well as representative of local community food providers such as food banks.

I understand that Beth Winter MP is involved in discussions to help to start organising such a group in her Cynon Valley constituency, and might consequently be able to offer some experience.

5. In my previous response I argued that benefits of free school meals and their provision are felt across the different Welsh Government budgets, including health, agriculture and economic development. I've not yet been able to identify whether this consideration has been taken up in the draft budget 2022/23. Perhaps the Committee could ask the relevant questions?

In relation to this I would like to suggest that the local implementation partnerships are asked to place an emphasis on locally produced and organic ingredients and help to establish procurement networks and processes that could provide the foundation for wider use.

Finally, in relation to the draft budget, I notice that an additional £90m has been made available to fund the Primary changes up to 2024-25. Could I suggest to the Petitions Committee that they clarify the current baseline to which this sum is additional to so that the overall funding is made clear to the public?

6. I have raised the issue of those families that have 'No recourse to Public Funds' in my earlier submissions. It is not clear what the current situation is and it would be helpful if the Petitions Committee could also raise this question with the Minister. As I understand it funds are made available to local councils for this purpose but it is not at all clear if the provision is being made available across Wales.