

Lynne Neagle AS/MS
Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg
Cabinet Secretary for Education



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref: PO221

Jenny Rathbone MS
Chair of the Equality and Social Justice Committee

Copied to: Buffy Williams MS, Chair of the Children, Young People, and Education Committee.

8 May 2025

Dear Jenny,

Thank you for your letter dated 27 March 2025 to Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Trefnydd and Chef Whip, Jane Hutt MS. As the issue relates to Free School Meal policy, it has been transferred to the education portfolio for a response.

As you are aware our Programme for Government commits us to continue to meet the rise in demand for Free School Meals resulting from the pandemic and review the eligibility criteria, extending entitlement as far as resources allow and at least to all primary school children.

Whilst the commitment of providing a free school meal to all primary school children was fulfilled in September 2024, I recognise that there are secondary aged learners who are living in socio-economic disadvantage that are currently excluded from receiving free school meals based on their parents' immigration status irrespective of household income.

This is why I wrote to local authorities in November 2024 to remind them of the vital role they play in meeting our shared commitment of tackling child hunger and to consider how they can use their discretionary powers to provide meals in secondary schools without charging – specifically targeting those children from low-income families with No Recourse to Public Funds whose immigration status means there is no automatic entitlement. I have also raised my concerns about this issue directly with the WLGA.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

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Extending eligibility to free school meals to include learners from low-income households with no recourse to public funds would require primary legislation, and whilst the Department of Education has indicated that it plans to legislate for the changes it has made, currently their extension of free school meals to learners from households with no recourse to public funds has been achieved through issuing non-statutory guidance only.

In adopting this approach, the Department of Education has not been able to accurately monitor the impact of the policy in terms of its efficacy or cost and given the very difficult decisions that have been made in setting the Welsh Government budget for 2025-26, pursuing a similar policy position in Wales in the absence of reliable data about the potential impacts, is not under consideration at this time.

However, I am aware that my recent communication to local authorities on the use of discretionary powers to provide meals without charging may not be having the desired effect. I am deeply concerned about this.

I have therefore asked my officials for urgent advice on what more can be done to support local authority efforts to identify and support NRPF learners in need of a meal, to understand and remove barriers that may be preventing these learners from accessing support, as well as maximising opportunities for the collection of data that can be used to reliably inform and monitor future policy decisions about support for NRPF learners in the longer term.

I will provide a further update to the Committee as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lynne Neagle".

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