

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 26 October 2022

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

Thank you for your further letter dated 3 October 2022 in relation to Petition PE1926, seeking an update on the work being undertaken to expand the provision of free school meals, and to ask what priority is being given to extending the provision of free school meals in secondary schools.

As you will be aware, universal free school lunches are now available during school term time to all 281,856 children in primaries 1 to 5 and special schools, as well as eligible pupils in P6-S6.

Whilst Scotland is currently leading the way with the most generous universal free school meal entitlement of any UK nation, we are committed to expanding our offer even further by making universal free school lunches available for all primary school children during the course of the current parliamentary term.

During the academic year 2022-23, we will continue to work with our partners in local authorities to plan for the expansion of free school meal provision to primaries 6 and 7 and this work is being supported by £30 million of capital funding during this financial year to support expansion of catering and dining facilities to help schools prepare for the anticipated increase in uptake in school meals.

With regards to your point about what consideration we are giving to expanding universal availability into secondary schools, we are committed to a pilot of free school meals in secondary schools to support our consideration of further expansion.

I also fully acknowledge the current cost of living crisis is having an adverse impact on many household budgets, including an impact on some families who may not have previously been experiencing financial difficulties.

Whilst all local authorities have a statutory duty to promote school meals, and to take all reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people entitled to free school meals are supported to access them, where families do not meet the regular eligibility criteria for

receiving free school meals, local authorities have the flexibility to make discretionary offers where families are experiencing financial hardship due to exceptional circumstances. I would therefore encourage any families experiencing difficulty with meeting the cost of school meals to contact their local council to enquire about what assistance may be available.

I hope this information is helpful to the committee.