

COSLA submission of 8 August 2023

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

Thank you for your letter of 4th July 2023.

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. 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 attending funded early learning and childcare can also access free lunches.

Planning is currently underway, through joint governance arrangements which include representation from Scottish Government, COSLA, and Local Government professional associations, for the delivery of further expansion to P6-7 pupils. From work to date, we are aware that the school estate's readiness for accommodating the expansion of universal free school meals can look significantly different depending on each individual school. In some cases, there is capacity to accommodate the likely increase in uptake, whilst other schools are likely to require changes to infrastructure to meet the expected increase in demand.

Information gathering is currently underway with local authorities to enable an understanding of the resource and capital costs (based on infrastructure changes required) associated with this expansion (the Scottish Government have indicated their desire for an initial expansion to P6-7 pupils in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment in the first instance, followed by universal expansion to P6-7). This exercise is intended to inform the agreement of funding arrangements and timescales for delivery. COSLA is clear that in order for the expansion to be deliverable, the full resource and capital costs of the programme

must be provided by Scottish Government. Any contractual matters arising from expansion would be considered by councils locally.

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, including infrastructure requirements, should be considered in partnership with Local Government. As with the primary school expansion programme, any new commitments would require full resourcing (both capital and resource) to enable successful delivery.

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