

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE1926](#): Expand universal free school meals for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils, lodged by Alison Dowling

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

The petition calls for universal free school meals for all pupils in schools and nurseries.

Provision of free school meals is a little complex. Policy and practice of providing free meals goes beyond statutory duties.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide a school lunch to pupils whose school education they are responsible, including those accessing funded Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) who [meet certain criteria](#). These criteria are generally in relation to benefits or tax credits the parent/carer receives.

However, the Scottish Government has worked with local government to create a universal offer of free lunches. Up to August 2021, free school meals were offered in primary schools up to the end of P3 (with some local areas going beyond this). This offer is being expanded in the current (2021/22) academic year and is planned to cover all primary pupils during the lifetime of this parliamentary session.

In terms of ELC, the Scottish Government and COSLA made a joint commitment that every child attending a funded ELC session will be provided with a free meal.

There are further policy developments in the provision of food in schools, however this is focused on breakfasts. The 2021-22 Programme for Government stated:

“In the next year, we will develop plans to deliver free breakfasts to all primary and special school children, and start to pilot provision. We will also commence the phased roll-out of a food offer during the school holidays, starting with those who will benefit the most.”

In 2019-20, the total net local government expenditure on free school meals was £146 million. In its budget for 2022-23, to support the expansion of universal free school meals, the Scottish Government has planned for £42 million of resource funding and £30 million of capital funding. COSLA's '[Budget Reality](#)' document, published on 9 December 2021, estimated that "£200m will be required to deliver on Scottish Government's policy commitment of Free School Meals for all Primary School Children".

The universal provision is not planned to cover secondary pupils. Secondary pupils are commonly allowed to leave school premises at lunchtime. At the time of writing, the latest [Healthy Living Survey where data on pupils taking meals was taken, was undertaken in February 2020](#). This showed that 45% of pupils in secondary schools took free school meals. Of those secondary pupils who were registered for free school meals and present in school, 71% took a meal.

The extent to which secondary schools would require capital investment to be able to serve meals that were free to the pupils is unclear.

Local authorities have statutory duties to promote school lunches and protect the identity of pupils receiving free school lunches.

Key Organisations and relevant links

Scottish Government

COSLA

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18/2/2022

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

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