

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 19 February 2025
3rd Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

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

Introduction

Petitioner Alison Dowling

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to expand universal free school meals provision for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1926>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 17 April 2024.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received a new written submission from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, which is set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage.](#)
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial position on this petition on 23 February 2022.](#)
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 101 signatures have been received on this petition.
8. Members may wish to note that [a debate on the provision free school meals for primary pupils took place on 11 September 2024](#), with Parliament agreeing the following motion –

That the Parliament believes that free school lunches should be provided for all primary school children, including provision in the school holidays, in this parliamentary session, as promised by the Scottish Government.

Action

9. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
February 2025

Annexe A: Summary of petition

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

Petitioner

Alison Dowling

Date Lodged

8 March 2022

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to expand universal free school meals provision for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils.

Previous action

I have contacted a number of MSPs and local authority councillors. They have given positive and supportive responses to the petition aim.

I've consulted with low income families who struggle to meet the cost of school dinners for their children and supported families in accessing affordable credit, advice, benefit entitlement and local foodbank provision.

Background information

Urgent action is needed at a national level to tackle child and young person's food poverty in Scotland. No child or young person should go through the school day hungry. The Scottish Government can ensure that schools are free from hunger by providing universal access to a free, healthy meal for all pupils, regardless of age.

Free school meals for all pupils would remove the stigma of 'difference'. Some children entitled to free meals don't take them because of the stigma.

A national expansion of free school dinners by Scottish Government will alleviate hunger for pupils of all ages during the school day.

Some low-income families are not entitled to free meals but can't afford them or can only afford to pay for a school dinner for a few days each week.

Food poverty is sometimes hidden within schools, especially with secondary school age pupils. Many children lose access to free school meals because of moving out of the year group that provides a free school dinner. While P1-4 provision is intended to expand to include older primary children, no such expansion is planned to include children attending secondary school.

Hunger doesn't recognise an age limit therefore the Scottish Government should not discriminate against tackling school day hunger on the basis of age. This is set against a backdrop of rising food and energy prices that disproportionately impact families with the lowest incomes.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1926 on 17 April 2024

The Convener: PE1926, which was lodged by Alison Dowling, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to expand universal free school meals provision for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils. It was last considered by the committee at our meeting on 28 June 2023. At that point, we agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities notes that planning is under way for the delivery of expansion of free school meals to pupils in primary 6 and primary 7, with the school estate's readiness to accommodate the expansion looking significantly different depending on each individual school. It has also been clear that, in order for the expansion to be deliverable, the full resource and capital costs of the programme must be provided by the Scottish Government. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities does not have an agreed position on further expansion to include secondary school pupils, but it noted that any new commitments in the area would require full resourcing to enable successful delivery.

The cabinet secretary stated that it is her priority to roll out universal provision of free school meals to primary 6 and primary 7 pupils, starting with those who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment. The response also indicates that the Scottish Futures Trust surveyed the resource and capital needs of local authorities to deliver a phased roll-out of free school meal provision.

Since our last consideration of the petition, the 2023-24 programme for government has been published, with a commitment referring only to the roll-out of universal free school meal provision to primary 6 and primary 7 during 2026, with no further mention of the plans to deliver a pilot in secondary schools.

In the light of that, do members have any suggested options for action?

Maurice Golden: We should write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to seek an update on action that is being taken to ensure that the phased roll-out of free school meal provision proceeds without delay, including further information on the outcomes of the Scottish Futures Trust survey on the resource and capital needs of local authorities to deliver the commitment.

It might also be helpful to ask the cabinet secretary to confirm, in respect of the commitment that is included in the programme for government—as the convener mentioned—whether the Scottish Government still intends to take forward a pilot of universal free school meals in secondary schools during the current parliamentary session.

The Convener: We would particularly like to know whether that is the case, given that that was a Government commitment.

Are colleagues content with the proposals from Mr Golden?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Annexe C: Written submission

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills written submission, 28 May 2024

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

Thank you for your letter of 23 April regarding the Committee's consideration of the above Petition and seeking a further update on the Scottish Government's actions to deliver our programme of free school meals, including a pilot in secondary schools.

When I wrote on 21 August, I reaffirmed our intention to roll out the next phase of our free school meal programme to those in receipt of Scottish Child Payment in Primary 6 and 7. As I have previously informed the Committee, this remains my priority and will help support up to an additional 26,000 children and young people in having access to a nutritious meal as part of the school day.

You are aware that we commissioned the Scottish Futures Trust (SFT) to undertake a data collection exercise to support our discussions and development of future stages of the programme. This exercise concluded in February and allowed SFT to carry out rigorous scrutiny of the data provided by local authorities to ensure information on capital projects is robust. This work has identified that 609 schools need to carry out capital works, which vary in nature and size, to enable the expansion to those recipients of Scottish Child Payment in Primary 6 and 7 to proceed.

Having worked closely with COSLA we agreed the distribution of £10m of capital funding in financial year 2023/24 to local authorities to allow their priority capital works to begin. As part of the 2024/25 budget process I have secured a further £43m capital and £22m resource which will support the roll out of the next stage of the expansion from February 2025. My officials continue to work with COSLA and stakeholders on the roll out of this important stage of the expansion.

The Committee also enquired to progress being made with a pilot for universal free school meals in secondary schools. As mentioned previously, my priority remains to build towards universal free school meals for all primary school pupils however we are considering initial views on a pilot from local authorities. These important areas need serious consideration as we think through the develop of proposals around a pilot. I am eager to ensure that the pilot is developed in conjunction with local authorities to ensure it provides meaningful results and will seek to identify funding to take this work forward. I will happily update the Committee when there is further detail.

I hope that this information is helpful.

JENNY GILRUTH