

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP  
Secretary of State for Education

The Rt Hon Vicky Ford MP  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families

Friday 16 October 2020

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We write to you with a matter of urgency regarding the ongoing provision of healthy food to vulnerable children from households experiencing low and unpredictable incomes, including those whose situation has worsened as a result of the ongoing Covid-19 emergency.

Prior to Covid-19, an estimated 4.2 million children were living in poverty in the UK, equivalent to nine children in every classroom of 30<sup>1</sup>. In total, 600,000 more children are in relative poverty compared to 2012. According to the Food Foundation, 14% of parents and guardians living with children have experienced food insecurity in the last six months. There are four million people living in these affected households including 2.3 million children. This remains higher than pre-Covid-19 levels of 11.5% of households with children<sup>2</sup>.

The most recent figures indicate that eligibility for free school meals had already risen from 1.3 million to 1.44 million children in England, based on the January 2020 census<sup>3</sup>. By July 2020, over 5 million people were still furloughed, the rate of redundancy had risen to 4.1% (highest level since 2009)<sup>4</sup>, and 5.6 million people were on Universal Credit<sup>5</sup>. A recent ACAS/YouGov polling revealed that around a third of UK businesses are planning to make some staff redundant<sup>6</sup>. The Trussell Trust forecasts a 61% increase in need for food parcels between October and December compared to the same period last year, with families with children hardest hit.<sup>7</sup>

We believe that funding should be available to ensure that support for vulnerable children is provided over holiday periods during *normal times*. If your stated opposition to the extension of free school meals during the holidays is that they are normally only provided during term-time, then we would seek to emphasise that 2020 has not been a normal year.

With cases of coronavirus once again on the rise, and local lockdowns now being enforced, the situation for many families experiencing food insecurity is worsening. The arrival of autumn and winter also brings

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<sup>1</sup> Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG). (2020). Calculated from: Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2018/19, Department for Work and Pensions, 2020 [https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/child-poverty-facts-and-figures#footnote3\\_m5yvu8w](https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/child-poverty-facts-and-figures#footnote3_m5yvu8w)

<sup>2</sup> Food Foundation data calculated from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2309 parents or guardians living with children under 18 years. Fieldwork between 24 August and 1 September 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults aged 18+. Population Calculations made by the Food Foundation using mid-year population estimates available on request: <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/new-food-foundation-data-sept-2020/>

<sup>3</sup> UK Government. Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Academic Year 2019/2020. (2020). <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/methodology/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-methodology>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/september2020#main-points>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-9-july-2020/universal-credit-statistics-29-april-2013-to-9-july-2020#people-on-uc-header>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/oct/01/more-than-third-uk-employers-planning-make-staff-redundant-job-losses>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2020/09/14/new-report-reveals-how-coronavirus-has-affected-food-bank-use/>

increased heating and lighting costs, putting household food budgets under even further pressure. The Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the Health Secretary Matt Hancock have warned that the current situation is likely to remain difficult until at least Christmas.

**Will this Government therefore commit to funding benefits-related free school meals during the autumn half-term and Christmas holiday periods, including children from households with no recourse to public funds?**

We recommend a top-up grant be distributed via local authorities (or directly to schools and academy trusts) to cover the respective autumn half-term and Christmas holiday periods. The grant would be allocated according to free school meal registration and the funds could be converted into food hampers, supermarket vouchers or cash support payments for families.

By committing to this measure now, it would provide schools and local authorities with time to plan their provision in consultation with their existing caterers, local partners and eligible families.

We look forward to your reply,

Barbara Crowther, Coordinator, Children's Food Campaign  
Stephanie Slater, Founder/CEO, School Food Matters and Co-Chair School Food Plan Alliance  
Anna Taylor OBE, Executive Director, Food Foundation  
Naomi Duncan, Chief Executive, Chefs in Schools  
James Toop, CEO, BiteBack2030  
Rob Percival, Head of Policy, Soil Association's Food for Life  
Becca Lyon, Head of Child Poverty, Save the Children  
Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive, Sustain  
Peter McGrath, Operational Director, Meals and More  
Clara Widdison, Head of Social Inclusion, Mayor's Fund for London  
Sam Royston, Director of Policy and Research, The Children's Society  
Jonathan Pauling, Chief Executive, Alexandra Rose Charity  
Dr Debbie Weekes-Bernard, Deputy Mayor for Social Integration, Social Mobility and Community Engagement, Greater London Authority  
Andrew Forsey, National Director, Feeding Britain  
Paul Wright, Founding Member, Children's First Alliance  
Dr Helen Crawley, Director, First Steps Nutrition Trust  
Dr Matthew Philpott, Executive Director, Health Equalities Group  
Kevin Courtney and Dr Mary Bousted, Joint General Secretaries, National Education Union  
Hilary Croft, CEO, Coeliac UK  
Mary McGrath, CEO, FoodCycle  
Sarah Hickey, Director of the Childhood Obesity Programme, Guy's and St Thomas' Charity  
Lindsay Boswell, CEO, FareShare  
Mark Game, CEO, The Bread and Butter Thing  
Dr Maria Bryant, Chair of the Board of Trustees, Association for the Study of Obesity  
Professor Graham MacGregor, Chair, Action on Salt and Action on Sugar  
Andy Burman, CEO, British Dietetic Association  
Eddie Crouch, Chair, British Dental Association  
Sabine Goodwin, Coordinator, Independent Food Aid Network  
Sally Bunday MBE, Director/ Founder, Hyperactive Children's Support Group  
Prof Amelia Lake, Associate Director of Fuse, The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health and Professor of Public Health Nutrition, Teesside University

Jon Richards, Head of Education, UNISON  
 Anna Feuchtwang, Chair of the End Child Poverty Coalition and Chief Executive of the NCB  
 Melissa Green, General Secretary, The Women's Institute  
 Alex Cunningham, CEO, Magic Breakfast  
 Councillor Judith Blake, Chair of the Children and young people's board, LGA Labour Group  
 Councillor Julie Fallon, Deputy Chair of Children and Young People Board, LGA Independent Group  
 Councillor Lucy Nethsingha, Children & Young People Spokesperson, LGA Liberal Democrat Group



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