

P-06-1442 Extend Universal Free School Meals to secondary schools - Correspondence from the Petitioner to the Committee, 2 July 2024

Dear Petitions Committee,

You don't have to look very far to see the number of children in poverty in the UK.¹ Nor the number of people in food poverty in Wales and its brutal consequences.²

The Welsh Government's budgetary constraints will always be a factor in its responses to justified demands to address child / household poverty. But that shouldn't be used as an argument against making commitments - which are about choices and priorities. Actually, we've learned that the roll out of free school meals in primary schools has had the problems of capacity, caused by previous directions in sourcing, procurement and standards, kitchens, and eating spaces, where the Welsh Government must commit to provide a lead to, and support to, councils for long term planning of school meals provision.³ Meanwhile, the Welsh Government has consistently lacked ambition and political commitment, reversing its decision to provide FSM (Free School Meals) in school holidays, and forcing local authorities to pick up the bill without breaking its moral and legal duties under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁴ This decision by the Welsh Government was later ruled illegal by the High Court and continues to this day to be a moral scourge that must be rectified immediately.^{5 6} We want to know if the Cabinet Secretary has any plans to reverse this decision.

The Cabinet Secretary's reply not only contains no commitments but says nothing whatsoever about bringing pressure to bear on the next UK government regarding regional funding and providing the publicly funded services - UFSM (Universal Free School Meals) and others - that are so desperately needed. The Welsh Government simply cannot continue to use the Barnett formula as an excuse while it holds tax-raising powers, if it will not directly address its plans to lobby the UK government into reforming it, and what the Welsh Government's preferred system would be instead. The need is on us right now, not at some distant future point where a benevolent UK

1

<https://cpag.org.uk/news/child-poverty-reaches-record-high-failure-tackle-it-will-be-betrayal-britains-children>

2

<https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/06/2023-Hunger-in-Wales-report.pdf>

3

<https://www.voice.wales/cardiff-council-must-roll-out-free-school-meals-faster-say-anti-poverty-campaigners/>

⁴ <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/education/second-welsh-council-agrees-fund-27344035>

⁵ <https://www.bevanfoundation.org/views/welsh-government-free-school-meals/>

6

<https://childrenslegalcentre.wales/the-free-school-meals-challenge-in-wales-a-case-for-optimism/>

government will kindly bestow upon us a slight increase in funding⁷, devolution requires decisions about Wales to be made in Wales and our government to be held accountable. If we limit ourselves to what arbitrary fiscal rules allow, then we accept that children will go hungry. The wealth is there but in the wrong hands, and new tax-raising schemes such as the council tax surcharge for empty and second homes shows the innovation required to find those funds, it may be a challenge but that does not mean we can reject our collective responsibility. While these are wider issues for the Welsh Government, we call for consideration of ways for Wales to directly fund extension of UFSM to secondary schools instead of waiting for money to arrive via Barnett consequentials.

While we do acknowledge that funding constraints have hampered the Welsh Government's ability to provide all the resources needed here, we believe that it would be worthwhile for there to be a bolder and clearer statement of Welsh Government's vision and future intentions regarding policies aimed at eradicating child poverty, in particular the universal provision of free school meals at all levels of education. One with secure targets and scrutiny mechanisms, unlike the current version of the document.⁸ This document must also include the extension of Universal Free School Meals at its heart, particularly in reducing food poverty. In essence, the Welsh Government continues to maintain its position that the extension of UFSM is to occur once it has the budget, but is simply not attempting to find or fight for that budget at this time. Simultaneously, with every year of delay Wales' secondary school children are missing out on the immense benefits of universalism in Free School Meals⁹ which the Welsh Government promotes, and approximately 25,000 children in poverty in Wales continue to go without Free School Meals.¹⁰

Furthermore, claiming communication and marketing campaigns to get families to sign up to FSM as a success is disappointing, as this money could be used to get FSM to more hungry children rather than spent on advertising. This highlights the failed prioritisation of resources regarding FSM from the Welsh Government at this time, why does the Cabinet Secretary not agree with this assessment?

7

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/mar/07/ifs-warns-of-labour-and-tory-conspiracy-of-silence-over-future-tax-and-spending-plans>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-68056286>

⁹ <https://cpag.org.uk/news/universalism-multiplier>

¹⁰

<https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/Free%20school%20meals-%20third%20of%20kids%20in%20poverty%20miss%20out.pdf>

We do agree that the roll out of the new Curriculum for Wales during the UFSM in primary schools is a great opportunity, and we hope that in order to realise that potential more resources could be provided to schools to encourage embedding local, sustainable, and healthy food. If the Cabinet Secretary could provide examples of collaboration with local authority education departments or work directly with schools by the Welsh Government to provide these resources, we would welcome it, as to see this ambition put into practice requires work at all levels of government.

As the Cabinet Secretary will know we are yet to see the impact of the Social Partnership and Public Procurement Act (Wales) 2023, but the level of control local authorities hold over schools' catering decisions is often limited and especially so under current budget constraints. Not to mention that the provisions held within the act are broad in scope, and more guidance regarding school catering would be welcomed to put pressure on schools to bring catering provision in-house or ethically sourced where possible, and expand capacity through capital funding to prevent the same delays which slowed down the rollout for primary schools such as in Cardiff. It must also be noted that at this time carbon reporting in schools only considers cost as a way of measuring carbon emissions through Tier 1 spend methods rather than wider mitigating factors, this incentivises local authorities and schools to focus on a cost-only approach when choosing catering providers.¹¹

Finally, we would like to highlight the continuing problem of young people reporting continuing hunger after receiving a school meal across Wales.¹² We call on the Welsh Government to publish its new consultation on school meals portion sizes as quickly as possible so schools can put larger portions into practice as soon as possible.

We hope the Petitions Committee will work collaboratively with us in the pursuit of our goal to let no child go hungry in Wales, and that the Welsh Government reconsiders its current position on Universal Free School Meals both in secondary schools and school holidays. Let us reignite the debate which is as crucial now as ever, with a cost-of-living crisis, mental health crisis, and climate crisis holding the children of Wales back.

Yours faithfully,
Ewan Goodjohn,
Chair, Unite Community Cardiff and Area

¹¹

<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2024-06/welsh-public-sector-net-zero-carbon-reporting-guide.pdf>

¹²

<https://www.itv.com/news/wales/2024-04-29/it-doesnt-fill-you-up-children-say-they-are-going-hungry-after-school-meals>