



The Educational
Institute of Scotland

Shirley Anne Somerville
Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

Ref: LF/AB/LM
21 December 2021

Via email only
CabSecES@gov.scot

Dear Shirley Anne

I'm writing on behalf of the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), Scotland's largest teacher trade union and professional association, to request that you give full consideration to the urgent expansion of universal free school meals provision to all children and young people who are currently excluded from the offer.

The EIS welcomes the expansion of free school meals to all Primary 4 children at the beginning of this academic session and the imminent expansion to Primary 5s but is clear that provision needs to be extended and accelerated to be inclusive of all young people at all stages of school in Scotland, as an urgent priority.

As the cost of living rises and the economic shocks of the pandemic continue to be felt, thousands of parents, women who are single mothers especially, are going regularly without food in order that their children can eat, both at home and in school.

The choices are as stark as that for an alarming number of families in Scotland, and thousands of children and young people who live in homes where there is not enough money coming in or food in the cupboards, are all too aware of the sacrifices that their parents are having to make on their behalf. Many thousands of other children are even less fortunate than that.

The EIS is clear that the means tested free meals provision that will remain in place from January for young people from P6- S6 means that too many children (and their parents) will continue to go hungry on a daily basis- until after the summer holidays for P6s and P7s and indefinitely after that for all Secondary-aged pupils.

Means testing of free school meals provision neither succeeds in meeting its own policy objective nor enables children's universal right to healthy nutritious food to be realised. Many families are unaware of their entitlements to free school meals so are missing out; many others fall just below the threshold of entitlement so are missing out; and crucially, many older children- the group who are entirely excluded from the current

provision- those who are entitled to free meals, experience real stigma in going to collect one, so miss out rather than suffer the shame.

Against such a backdrop, the EIS calls on the Scottish Government to act more decisively and with a similar strength of commitment to that shown in the recent budget announcement of the doubling of the Scottish Child Payment from April to offset the cuts to social security that have been imposed by the UK Government. This essential payment will be a lifeline to many families.

Yet even such a strong mitigation as this will not suffice in ensuring that parents will no longer be faced with the dilemmas that they currently grapple with in relation to heating or eating or going without meals so that their children don't have to.

And without further anti-poverty mitigations, the Scottish Government is reliably forecast to fall short of its own statutory child poverty targets for 2023/24.

The EIS understands the complexities of tackling child poverty and the fact that there are no quick fixes given the current constraints. Labour market and employment issues; unaffordable childcare, housing and transport costs; and inadequate social security provision conspire to keep more than 1 in 4 (more than 8 children in a class of 33) children in poverty in Scotland, this rising to as many as 1 in 2 (16 children in a class of 33) in some parts of the country.

The EIS does not underestimate the level of challenge that there is in seeking to resolve these issues in Scotland. However, we do believe that the Scottish Government can and must do more to alleviate the suffering of thousands of families who are in poverty, and the children of those families who attend our schools.

As a union of teachers, we see this as being fundamental. Expansion of the current provision would alleviate hunger by enabling all children and young people in our schools and nurseries to have at least one meal a day that does not have to be paid for out of meagre family budgets or supplied from sparsely stocked food cupboards. This is essential to enabling all young people, regardless of age and stage, to participate, concentrate, and to learn and achieve. If we are to succeed in our collective mission of closing the poverty related achievement and attainment gap, in full adherence with the UNCRC, then we need the Scottish Government to utilise more of the powers and resource that it has, to urgently respond to the needs of the groups of young people that are missing from the current provision.

The EIS understands from its engagement with and support for the STUC Women's Committee campaigning on free school meals that there are perhaps some practical issues that may impede further roll out of free school meals provision within school buildings at this time- limited capacity to supply meals and shortage of dining space, for example. We recognise that such practical considerations require time and planning to resolve but in no way should preclude the urgent expansion of provision by other means. For example, this could be done using food vouchers or, better still, non-

stigmatising direct cash payments to families, as happened in many local authorities during the earlier stages of the pandemic when schools were closed and the usual means of supplying free meals to children disrupted.

The EIS is in no doubt that the Scottish Government is more than capable of such committed endeavour to safeguard families from the worst ravages of poverty, and towards this, would urge that appropriate steps are taken to expand universal free meals provision, in alignment with UNCRC principles, to all school-aged children without further delay.

Yours sincerely

Larry Flanagan
General Secretary