

The Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, Secretary of State for Education

3rd November 2022

Dear Ministers

Feed the Future: Urgent Expansion of the Free School Meals Scheme

As healthcare professionals, healthcare organisations and health charities, we strongly support calls from the Feed the Future campaign for the UK Government to extend the eligibility of Free School Meals to all children in households on Universal Credit, as a first step to universal provision, to improve children's nutrition and protect their health.

The devastating impact that the cost-of-living crisis is having on children across the country, particularly those on lower incomes, is clearly evident. Research from The Food Foundation shows that levels of food insecurity among households with children have more than doubled since January, reaching 25.8% in September 2022. This represents a total of four million children who live in households where access to nutritious food is under threat.

Good nutrition in childhood is essential for this critical period of rapid growth and development. It lies at the heart of health and wellbeing for children and young people. Without it, health outcomes worsen as do children's life chances, as well as pressure on the NHS. Investing in the Free School Meals scheme would have long term positive economic benefits in savings to the NHS, and the wider economy. The recent Impact on Urban Health report includes analysis from PWC which puts that boost to the economy at £8.9 billion.

The Government's Free School Meal scheme has been shown to be an effective policy solution to reduce obesity, food insecurity and health inequalities. However, currently 800,000 children living in poverty do not qualify for this nutritional safety net due to the criteria being too low. For many of these children, they may have to skip lunch completely or rely on cheap, unhealthy food that is damaging to their long-term health.

Every day, healthcare professionals see the impact of hunger and malnutrition in their work. We believe all children in England should be guaranteed access to the food they need to live healthy lives. We urge the UK Government to act now to protect the health of the nation's children by expanding the Free School Meals scheme to all children in desperate need to guarantee them a hot, nutritious meal at school, for their health, the economy and the NHS.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr Camilla Kingdon, President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

Professor David Strain, Chair of the Board of Science, British Medical Association

Pat Cullen, General Secretary & Chief Executive, Royal College of Nursing

Gill Walton, CEO & General Secretary, Royal College of Midwives

William Roberts, CEO Royal Society for Public Health

Professor Andrew Elder, Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh

Sharon White OBE, CEO the School and Public Health Nurses Association (SAPHNA)

Prof Jim McManus, President, on behalf of the Association of Directors of Public Health

Dr Jennifer Dixon, Chief Executive, The Health Foundation

Chair Caroline Bovey and CEO Liz Stockley, British Dietetic Association

Dr Hilda Mulrooney, Committee Member of the Obesity Group of the British Dietetic Association

Eddie Crouch, Chair, British Dental Association (BDA)

Dr Nigel Carter, OBE BDS LDS(RCS), Chief Executive, Oral Health Foundation

Fiona Hallam, Chair of the British Association of Dental Therapists

Albert Yeung, President, British Association for the Study of Community Dentistry

Jenny Harris, President, British Society of Paediatric Dentistry

Elaine Hindal, Chief Executive, British Nutrition Foundation

Sarah Hickey, Executive Director, Impact on Urban Health

Chris Askew, Chief Executive, Diabetes UK

Professor Graham MacGregor, Chair of Action on Salt and Sugar

Katharine Jenner, Director of Obesity Health Alliance

Dr Matthew Philpott, Executive Director, Health Equalities Group

Martin Drewry, Director of Health Poverty Action

Dr Nicola Heslehurst, Chair of the Board of Trustees, Association for the Study of Obesity

Emma Rigby, Chief Executive, Association for Young People's Health

Alison Morton, Executive Director, Institute of Health Visiting

Professor Sir Michael Marmot, UCL Institute of Health Equity

Professor Martin White, Professor of Population Health Research at the MRC Epidemiology Unit

Professor Heather Brown, Professor of Health Inequalities, Lancaster University

Professor Kate Pickett, Healthy Livelihoods, UK Prevention Research Partnership: ActEarly Research Collaborative

Dr Christina Vogel, Associate Professor in Public Health Nutrition, University of Southampton

Professor Maria Bryant, UKRI Fix our Food, and Food and Healthy Weight theme for the UK Prevention Research Partnership: ActEarly Research Collaborative

Professor Wendy Wills, Professor of Food and Public Health, University of Hertfordshire

Professor Rebecca O'Connell, Centre for Research in Public Health and Community Care (CRIPACC), University of Hertfordshire

Katrina Stephens, Director of Public Health, Oldham and Councillor Amanda Chadderton, Leader of Oldham Council

Alice Wiseman, Director of Public Health, Gateshead Council and Councillor Martin Gannon, Leader of Gateshead Council

Councillor Ian Moncur, Cabinet member – Health and Wellbeing, Sefton Metropolitan Council

Dr Rupert Suckling, Director of Public Health, Doncaster Council and Councillor Lani-Mae Ball, Doncaster Council

Sarah Muckle, Director of Public Health, Bradford Council and Councillor Susan Hinchcliff, Leader of Bradford Council

Imran Choudhury, Director of Public Health, London Borough of Sutton; Councillor Ruth Dombey, Leader of Sutton Council; and Councillor Marian James, Lead member for Adult and Children's Services, London Borough of Sutton.