

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

14th November 2022

Dear Minister

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

We, the undersigned, representing major food businesses in the UK, are writing to add our support to calls for Free School Meals to be expanded to all children from families in England that receive Universal Credit to guarantee they can eat a filling, nutritious lunch at school every day.

The story so far

During the pandemic, a coalition of food businesses created the End Child Food Poverty Task Force to support Marcus Rashford's campaign to prevent child hunger in the UK. The Task Force requested more government support to protect children that receive Free School Meals during the school holidays. We were grateful that you committed three years of funding for the Holiday Activities and Food Programme.

However, our mission did not end there. In light of a deteriorating level of food security across the UK, impacting four million children (or one in four households with children), we are extremely concerned that 800,000 children living in poverty are not currently eligible for Free School Meals.

The issues on the horizon

In the coming months, food insecurity in the UK will inevitably rise. Increasing energy bills will place pressure on household budgets and limit funds available for food. Simultaneously, external pressures are causing everyday groceries to rise in price. Many families are approaching breaking point.

As food retailers, we witness first-hand the daily struggles our customers face to feed their families. We are committed to doing all we can to support them – with several actions set to be implemented in the coming months – but we cannot do this alone. For this reason, we call on the Government to do more to protect children and ease the burden on struggling parents.

Free School Meals bring numerous long-term benefits

Lack of access to good food and proper nutrition during childhood can have a devastating effect on children's educational attainment, physical and mental health, and social wellbeing - all of which have lifelong consequences. We cannot leave children in this precarious situation.

Free School Meals can be an effective and targeted way to address these problems. With access to a hearty school lunch, children can better concentrate in class and keep up with their peers.

School meals also provide better nutrition than most packed lunches, which can facilitate healthy physical development. In the long-term, providing this nutrition can reduce the chance of a child suffering from obesity and associated conditions.

In the face of food insecurity, parents do everything in their power to protect their children, often going without food themselves. By guaranteeing their children will receive a decent meal, every day, at school, you can relieve the anxiety and stress felt by millions of parents across the UK.

There are also critical economic benefits. Over a twenty-year period, expanding the provision of Free School Meals would require an investment of £6.5 billion. Yet, when we consider the core benefits – including savings to schools, the NHS and food costs for families, as well as increased lifetime earnings – it would generate a return of £8.9 billion. Furthermore, it would return an additional £16.2 billion in benefits to producers and suppliers in the school food economy.

As such, expanding the Free School Meals scheme is a sensible economic decision for the Government – not a burden.

The ask

So, now, we strongly urge you to consider the scale of children's food insecurity across the UK and act without delay to prevent its devastating consequences. We encourage you to use the Budget announcement on 17th November to commit to expand Free School Meals to all children from families in England that receive Universal Credit as a first step to universal provision, so no child has to go through the school day hungry.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Walker, Managing Director of Iceland

Simon Roberts, Chief Executive Officer of Sainsbury's

James Bailey, Executive Director of Waitrose

Giles Hurley, Chief Executive Officer of Aldi

Shirine Khoury-Haq, Chief Executive of The Co-op

Neil Fuller, Managing Director of Caterlink

Ryan McDonnell, Chief Executive Officer of Lidl GB

Jason Tarry, Chief Executive Officer, UK & ROI at Tesco

Hayley Tatum, Chief People & Corporate Affairs Officer, Asda

David Potts Chief Executive Officer, Morrisons

Jamie Oliver, Jamie Oliver Limited

Tom Kerridge, Michelin-starred chef