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30 August 2021

Dear Linda Somerville,

Thank you for your letter dated 16 August 2021 regarding your campaign to expand the provision of free school meals to include all children and young people in nursery, primary and secondary schools.

Myself and my ministerial colleagues fully recognise that free school meals are a vital support to thousands of children and young people across the country - ensuring that they are fed and ready to engage in learning. That is why we are fully committed meeting our manifesto commitment of rolling out the expanded provision of free school lunches to all children in primary and special schools by August 2022.

We have provided local authorities with £28 million of funding during this financial year to support the expanded provision of free school lunches to primary school children. All children in primary 4 became entitled to receive free school lunches during school term-time after they returned from their summer holidays earlier this month and this universal provision will be further expanded to include all children in primary 5 starting from January 2022. We will also be working with our local authority partners throughout the remainder of this financial year to ensure our programme of expanded provision of universal free school lunches is completed by our August 2022 deadline.

Whilst we appreciate many people would understandably like to see the full programme of expanded universal provision put in place before this date, it should be noted that a commitment of this scale requires a significant amount of diligent planning and discussion with local authority partners to ensure everything is in place to deliver a healthy and nutritious free meal to every child who wants one. It is important to understand, for instance, the current capabilities of existing school kitchens and dining settings and to identify where these may need to be upgraded or improved in order to accommodate

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the anticipated increase in uptake.

With regards to the further expansion of free school meals to include nursery-aged children and young people in secondary schools, I am sure you may be aware that our policy of increasing funded early learning and childcare to 1,140 hours came into effect earlier this month. As part of this offer, all children three and four year olds and eligible two year olds will be entitled to receive a free meal on every day they attend a funded early learning and childcare session.

With regards to universal free school meals for young people in secondary schools, at this time our focus is on expansion for children in primary school. However, during the course of this parliamentary session, we are also committed to piloting approaches to universal meal provision in secondary schools.

To further support primary and special school children throughout the year, we are also committed to introducing free year-round breakfast and lunch provision for these children over the course of this parliament.

We keep our eligibility criteria under review to ensure that free school meals are available to those who need it most and there is a legal duty on local authorities to promote the availability of free school meals to all eligible young people, in every educational setting. Furthermore, local authorities also have a statutory duty to take all reasonable steps to ensure that all children and young people who are eligible for free school meals receives them.

However, we also believes that free school meals alone will not alleviate the effects of poverty and that is why we have put in place a range of other measures to help families on low incomes. We have also provided local authorities with £21.75 million in this financial year to provide support for families in receipt of eligible qualifying benefits for free school meals to receive support during the school holidays throughout the course of this school year. This support began at the start of the summer holidays in July and will also include the Christmas and Easter holidays, and the mid-term holidays in October and February, during this school year. Local authorities will have the flexibility to make provision available in any way they feel will best meet the needs and circumstances of eligible families in their local areas.

We have also provided local authorities with £11.8 million in funding this year to support increased school clothing grant payments of £120 for every eligible child in primary school and £150 for every eligible young person in secondary school.

Furthermore, during this parliamentary session, we will also introduce statutory guidance for schools; increasing the use of generic items of uniform and reducing costs for families. This comes on top of other policies introduced by this government in recent years to help low income families with children, such as the Best Start Grant and the Scottish Child Payment.

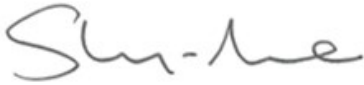
We have declared a national mission to eradicate child poverty - calling on all in society to support us in taking the steps needed. We will set out further action to deliver at the pace and scale required, as part of our next Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan to be published in March 2022.

I hope the information contained within this reply helps to reassure you about the Scottish Government's determination to tackle child poverty.

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Yours sincerely



**SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE**

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