

LS/EM/PW

6th September 2021

Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills
Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

Expanding Universal Free School Meals to All

On behalf of the STUC Women's Committee, I wish to express my sincere disappointment in your response and the Scottish Government's lack of commitment to using every resource possible to eradicate the poverty experienced by thousands upon thousands of children and young people in Scotland.

Your Government has been in power for fourteen years now. The continued rise in level of Child Poverty and Inequality in Scotland is a shameful indictment.

Despite being one of the wealthiest nations in the world - Scotland continues to suffer a poverty epidemic, and your own policies are failing to get to grips with it.

Unless urgent action is taken, the situation will significantly worsen, and the Scottish Government will fail to meet its own child poverty interim targets and ambitions of significantly reducing child poverty by 2030.

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As you will be aware, child poverty in Scotland is on course to continue to rise over the next five years and without sufficient intervention such as provision of Universal Free School Meals for all children and young people, will hit a 20-year high of 29% by 2023-24.

This situation is deeply distressing, completely unacceptable, and wholly avoidable if the Scottish Government resolves to act on this matter and to introduce other measures that will directly impact on the income of families such as doubling the Child Payment and Expanding Universal Free School Meals to All within this year's budget. The Women's Committee observes that the Scottish Government expounds much rhetoric about its commitment to eradicate child poverty. However, policy soundbites do not feed hungry children or salve the shame that particularly secondary aged children, experience in accessing their free school meal entitlements. What is needed is change on the ground.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Parliament passed world-leading legislation to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into domestic law, and this week it was announced that the Right to Food will be enshrined into Scots Law following the agreement between the Scottish Greens and Scottish Government. The First Minister also stated that she wants to "make ending Child Poverty a driving mission for the next Parliament".

It is therefore deeply regrettable, and in our view hypocritical, that at a time when the Scottish Government claims to be committed to eradicating child poverty and introducing a range of measures to tackle inequality - that the Scottish Government is choosing not to expand provision of Universal Free School Meals to all. By failing to do so, the Scottish Government is in some part contributing to the continued escalation of poverty, food insecurity and hunger experienced by children and families, and thereby the widening of the attainment gap.

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In your response, you said that the Scottish Government cannot provide Universal Free School Meals to primary 5 - 7s pupils until 2022 due to “diligent planning”. You also mentioned in your reply that the justification for failing to commit to Universal Free School Meals expansion for all Secondary Pupils is because of “the current capabilities of existing school kitchens and dining settings”.

The STUC Women’s Committee acknowledges the planning implications of delivering an effective and nutritional Universal Free School Meal provision programme. However, this is not justification for complete inaction now. In our view, a response that seeks to justify such inaction is deeply inadequate, reflecting a lack of understanding on the part of Government of the plight of hard-pressed families and the associated impacts on children within those families. We believe it also reflects a lack of innovation, creativity, and solid commitment to working collegiately with the education workforce, pupils, parents, communities, and external experts to overcome such barriers in the interests of providing every single child and young person who attends our nurseries, primary and secondary schools, with one nutritious meal a day and a healthy breakfast. Where there is political will there is always a way.

For example, if logistics really do mean that primary 5-7 pupils cannot sit down in school cafeterias and canteens to eat a free school meal until 2022 because of the need for associated ‘diligent planning’, then surely a short-term solution such as the provision of cash or vouchers as has happened during the pandemic, could be a contingency in the meantime?

To stress again, COVID-19 has intensified poverty and inequality in Scotland. It has created unprecedented upheaval and uncertainty. The health and economic impacts have been profound, and the full impacts are yet to be felt. Thousands of families have come into contact with the social security system for the first time and have had to access other lifeline supports provided by volunteers because of the insufficiency of State provision.

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With the furlough scheme coming to an end, and additional Universal Credit payments about to be removed, the Scottish Government should be doing everything in its power to protect and support all children and young people within our education system, regardless of their age – including reducing the risk of greater food insecurity and hunger. Expanding Universal Free School Meals to all could go a significant way towards doing that.

The benefits of free school meal provision are well documented. Clearly, the Scottish Government understands them otherwise there would not be plans to expand provision (albeit too slowly) to all primary-aged children. The STUC Women's Committee call for secondary-aged children and young people to be included in the provision, and for this to be delivered now. This campaign and policy call is supported by all of Scotland's Trade Unions, the education workforce, the Scottish Youth Parliament, the Children's Parliament, the Scottish Greens and the Scottish Labour Party, a multitude of third sector and social justice-related expert organisations, and your own Poverty and Inequality Advisors.

The question remains, why not you?

The STUC Women's Committee asks once again for the Scottish Government to reconsider its Universal Free School Meals policy and to commit to expanding provision to secondary pupils, and to urgently putting in place contingency provision for primary 5 - 7s.

The STUC Women's Committee is willing to meet with you and appropriate colleagues to discuss these issues further.

Yours sincerely

Brenda Carson

On Behalf of the STUC Women's Committee

c.c. Patrick Harvie MSP and Lorna Slater MSP, Co-Leaders, Scottish
Green Party