



Petitions Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA
Tel 020 7219 4887 Email petitionscommittee@parliament.uk
Website www.parliament.uk/petitions-committee

Rt Hon Thérèse Coffey MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

18 December 2020

Dear Thérèse,

As you will be aware, in October the Petitions Committee received [e-petition 554276](#), started by Marcus Rashford MBE, on the topic of child food poverty. To date, this petition has received over 1,100,000 signatures – the most signed petition this Parliament. The significant support for this petition, and the attention given to Mr Rashford’s campaigning efforts throughout this year, clearly underscores the intensity of feeling on this issue among the general public, at a time when many families are experiencing considerable hardship due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Committee is grateful to the Department for Education for its response to the petition, given on 11th November. We were also pleased to note the announcement on 8th November of a support package to help families through this winter and beyond, the details of which were outlined in the House of Commons on [9th November](#).

However, there are two key respects in which these measures don’t fully address the concerns raised in the petition. We would welcome further clarification on what the Government is doing to ensure the petition’s requests and ambitions are being given due consideration, in light of the substantial public support they have attracted.

Firstly, the package provided only a partial response to the needs of vulnerable children from families on incomes that are too low to avoid food insecurity, but not low enough to qualify for key Government initiatives such as free school meals or the Healthy Start voucher scheme. Around 1.4 million children in England received benefits-related free school meals in January 2020, and over 250,000 mothers and young children currently benefit from Healthy Start vouchers – but there are over 4 million children in the UK living in low-income households.

Some of these children may be able to access the discretionary support that will be offered this winter by local authorities in England under the Covid Winter Grant Scheme, and/or access food in the long school holidays in 2021 through the expanded Holiday Activities and Food Programme. However, the support package announced in November makes no changes to eligibility for free school meals or Healthy Start vouchers – despite this being called for in the petition.

We would therefore ask the Government to confirm whether it plans to reconsider the possibility of expanding eligibility for these schemes or to update its assessment of the costs and benefits of such an expansion – in particular considering the impact of Covid-19 on many households’ financial security.

Secondly, beyond its specific asks on individual Government initiatives, the petition calls for an end to child food poverty in the UK. While we welcome the measures announced in the Government's support package, these are mostly either one-off interventions (such as the Covid Winter Grant scheme) or have received no commitment to funding beyond 2021 (in the case of the Holiday Activities and Food Programme).

We would therefore welcome an update from the Government on its plans to bring forward a long-term plan to tackle food insecurity and child food poverty, including whether it is considering extending or making permanent the measures announced last month, and the role of the National Food Strategy within that plan.

The Petitions Committee plans to undertake further work on this vitally important topic in the New Year and so we would welcome a response before the House rises for the Christmas recess.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Catherine". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Catherine McKinnell MP
Chair of the Petitions Committee