



Department
for Work &
Pensions

THE RT HON THERESE COFFEY MP
Secretary of State for Work & Pensions
Caxton House, Tothill Street, London, SW1H 9NA

Catherine McKinnell MP
Chair, Petitions Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

19th May 2021

Dear Catherine,

Thank you for your letter dated 18th December regarding child food poverty which unfortunately was not shared with my department when it was posted on the committee's website. While the Department for Environment Food and Rural affairs leads on food security and the Department for Education has responsibility for children which led it to replying to the petition on 11th November 2020, I am writing on behalf of the Government as the Prime Minister asked me to coordinate our cross-Government approach to tackling poverty. I apologise for the delay in responding.

I recognise the extent of the economic challenges that many households have faced during the Covid pandemic. Unprecedented times called for an unprecedented response from the Government, which I believe we have delivered, with over £407 billion spent on protecting jobs, keeping businesses afloat and helping families get by in these extraordinary times.

We know that employment offers the best route out of poverty, for those who are able to work. That is why our economic response to the pandemic – one of the most generous and comprehensive in the world – has focused on protecting lives and livelihoods. Our furlough scheme has supported 11.4 million jobs while the Government will have spent over £33 billion supporting those in self-employment through the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS), making it one of the most generous self-employment income COVID support schemes in the world. We have also strengthened the welfare safety net with an injection of well over £7 billion. Alongside permanently increasing Local Housing Allowance to the 30th percentile of local rates, we have extended the Universal Credit (UC) uplift to September and supported local welfare schemes.

Last summer, we provided £63 million to Local Authorities in England for local welfare provision and £16 million to support food redistribution charities. In November 2020, I announced the Covid Winter Grant Scheme. Backed by £170 million, this has enabled Local Authorities to support the most disadvantaged families during the winter months. In February, we added a further £59.1 million to continue the scheme into April and on 14th April we announced our provision of a further £40 million to extend support until 20th June, in line with the Prime Minister's roadmap to recovery.

The additional investment of up to £220 million in the Holiday Activities and Food programme allows us to expand the current provision so that children in England eligible for free school meals can benefit from this programme, through the provision of healthy meals, enriching activities and nutritional education. This is a crucial part of our holistic approach to health and education during the longer school holidays this year. Participating families can also be signposted to wider local support during the school holidays.

Regarding the eligibility criteria for free school meals, the committee will be aware that, as voted by Parliament, UC was introduced to replace a number of benefits including Tax Credits, meaning UC is a benefit for people both in work and out of work. With the national rollout of UC, the Department for Education consulted on new eligibility criteria for families on UC which were then introduced in 2018. The Department for Education's impact assessment at the time estimated that this would help an additional 300,000 pupils by January 2021. The nature of UC reflects household circumstances such that there are some households with an overall income of more than £40,000 a year who still receive UC. Transitional arrangements ensured that any child who was receiving free school meals at that point continued to do so.

From April, the value of Healthy Start vouchers has increased by over a third, helping low-income families with the cost of milk, fruit, vegetables, pulses and vitamins. In terms of eligibility, the UC earnings threshold for the scheme was designed to ensure that additional support is targeted at those families and pregnant women most in need.

As for support available in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the UK Government has already allocated Barnett formula funding to enable the devolved administrations to provide equivalent support.

Regarding the independent review to inform the National Food Strategy, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been clear that he will consider the final report's recommendations before the Government produces our National Food Strategy.

Longer-term strategy for tackling poverty, including child food poverty

To deliver on the Government's clear manifesto commitment to reduce poverty, including child poverty, we need to look beyond the welfare system.

This Government has long championed work as the best route out of poverty. Before the pandemic, this approach delivered record levels of employment, supported by a welfare system designed to ensure people are better off working than not working (unless they are unable to). We have introduced the National Living Wage, with millions receiving a pay rise when it increased above inflation by 2.2%. Also, by raising the personal tax allowance to more than £12,000, we have lifted at least four million people out of paying tax altogether, increasing the take-home pay of families. As people earn more, the Government is committed to reducing taxes on their wages. The Budget confirmed a tax cut for 31 million people with the increase in the National Insurance contributions (NICs) thresholds for employees and the self-employed, saving the typical employee around £104 and a typical self-employed person around £78 in 2020-21. Taken together with increases to the NLW and to the Personal Allowance, an employee working full-time on the NLW anywhere in the UK will be over £5,200 better off compared to April 2010.

As we look to our economic recovery, through our ambitious Plan for Jobs, we are creating jobs and supporting people of all ages to move into work or gain the skills that will open up job opportunities. This includes our £2 billion Kickstart scheme, which has so far seen over 180,000 high-quality job placements created for young people, one of the groups hardest hit by the pandemic. We have boosted our Flexible Support Fund by £150 million to provide localised and tailored employment support for people across the UK. We have also invested £895 million to recruit an extra 13,500 Work Coaches to help people build new skills, gain vital practical experience and get them back into work.

As part of a sustainable approach to tackling poverty, it is also important we bring down the cost of living, particularly expenses that are disproportionately higher for low-income households. Our Warm Home Discount Scheme supports over two million low-income customers each year with their energy costs. We deliver this initiative by enabling data matching for people eligible with the energy companies so that nearly one million eligible claimants received the £140 discount automatically and did not need to apply.

We want to lower bills by removing the barriers to consumers finding cheaper deals and to support vulnerable customers to stay connected to all key utilities. The Government's Energy White Paper sets out plans to consult on a range of measures to tackle fuel poverty, improve the energy efficiency of homes and remove barriers to switching.

The Government is also committed to ensuring school uniform costs are reasonable and no pupils or families are left unable to apply to the school of their choice because of this expense. That is why the Government supported the Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Bill, which has now received Royal Assent.

I am convening ministerial roundtables to look at what more government can do to tackle the financial pressures families on low incomes face. We continue to work closely with colleagues across Whitehall, including in the Treasury, the Department for Education, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Transport, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Territorial Offices to support those on low incomes and tackle poverty at its root, helping to ensure each child is able to reach their full potential.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Theresa Coffey". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping 'C' at the end.