



Petitions Committee

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

22 June 2021

Dear Thérèse,

Thank you for your reply of 19 May to my letter regarding child food poverty, which was especially helpful ahead of the Westminster Hall debate on Marcus Rashford MBE's e-petition on 24 May. I am writing to follow up on this vital subject which, as the debate showed, remains an important issue for Members right across the House.

The Petitions Committee has welcomed the Government's actions to date on this issue during the pandemic, including expanding the Holiday Activities and Food Programme and the increase in the value of Healthy Start vouchers – both of which were called for in the petition that led to our work on this subject. Members of the Committee who spoke in the debate also highlighted the incredible work of local volunteers in their area, and the Holiday Activities and Food Programme provides a welcome opportunity for groups like these to offer even more support in their communities.

During the debate, Minister Ford highlighted the actions the Government has taken to support vulnerable families and children during the pandemic. We have heard from people with lived experience of food poverty, as well as in evidence from charities like the Trussell Trust, that these measures have provided additional security for families during this time. The Minister also spoke about the Government's plans to support more people into employment as a route to help families out of poverty.

However, getting more households into secure, well-paid jobs will take time, and as I mentioned in the debate, most children living in poverty are already in households with working parents.

The evidence our Committee has heard suggests that once the temporary support provided during the pandemic (most notably the Universal Credit uplift) expires, there is a risk more children will fall into food poverty, and families who are already food insecure will see their situation deteriorate further – unless the Government takes action. We would therefore be grateful for further information on the following points.

Eligibility for entitlements

Concerns remain at the apparent gap in support for children from families on incomes too low to avoid food insecurity, but not low enough to qualify for free school meals or the Healthy Start voucher scheme. Marcus Rashford's petition highlighted the concern raised in Part One of the National Food Strategy independent review that current eligibility criteria do not allow these entitlements to reach all children whose families need support.

Guidance that free-of-charge participation in the Holiday Activities and Food Programme this year must be primarily targeted at children receiving free school meals, while understandable, appears to be another example of families with children just above this threshold missing out on support, with the risk that they may be unable or choose not to access this provision.

- What steps has the Government taken following the publication of Part One of the National Food Strategy independent review, to consider the impact of expanding eligibility for free school meals and Healthy Start vouchers beyond the current eligibility thresholds, both in terms of cost and the potential effect on levels of household food security?
- During the debate on 24 May, the Minister said the Government will “fully consider” expanding eligibility for free school meals, alongside the other recommendations of Part Two of the National Food Strategy independent review, later this year. Can you provide more details of what this consideration will involve, and what criteria you will use to assess the potential merits of such an expansion – such as reducing food bank use, or support for household groups identified as most likely to be food insecure in the most recent Family Resources Survey?

Support for families with No Recourse to Public Funds

Both in the debate and in the evidence our Committee took on this issue, there was praise for the Government’s decision to extend free school meals provision to children from families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) during the pandemic, who witnesses told us have often been unable to access other elements of the temporary support that has been provided. During the debate, the Minister mentioned that the Government is currently reviewing support for NRPF families.

- Can you confirm: that the review will consider a permanent extension of free school meals to these children; whether it will also consider eligibility for other related benefits, including Healthy Start vouchers; and when the review’s conclusions are expected to be published?
- Were children from NRPF families able to access the Holiday Activities and Food Programme provision on the same basis as other children eligible for free school meals during the Easter holidays; and does the Government intend for these children to be able to access this provision in the summer and Christmas holidays this year?

Healthy Start

The increase in the value of Healthy Start vouchers to £4.25 as of April is a welcome step. However, as I highlighted during last month’s debate, there are concerns about trends in the uptake of the vouchers. We are aware the Government plans to modernise the scheme by replacing physical vouchers with a digital version, to make it easier to apply for and make use of this benefit.

- Can you provide an update on progress in rolling out the digitised version of the scheme – in particular, what measures are being taken to ensure the lowest-income parents will be able to access digital vouchers – and any other action the Government is taking to improve uptake of the scheme?
- During the debate, I also raised specific concerns about barriers to using your Department’s Universal Credit data to help identify families eligible for Healthy Start vouchers and encouraging them to take up the scheme. What actions are you taking, in collaboration with the Department of Health and Social Care, local authorities, and other relevant stakeholders, to help tackle this issue?

Future of pandemic support initiatives

Many of the measures which the Government has cited in response to the issues raised by the petition are time-limited interventions. In particular, while today’s further extension to the Covid Local Support Grant is welcome, the scheme remains temporary and this funding will expire on 30 September; and although the Government has committed to funding the Holiday Activities and Food Programme in 2021, it is currently unclear whether it intends to make this a long-term, annual commitment.

- Given the vital role local authorities have demonstrated they can play in supporting vulnerable families during the pandemic, is the Government considering a permanent successor to the Covid Local Support Grant programme, or a long-term increase in funding for local authorities to provide discretionary support to vulnerable families?
- In the debate last month, the Minister promised the Government would fully consider all the recommendations of the National Food Strategy independent review and respond more fully to its recommendations following the publication of Part Two of the review. Will the full Government response to the review include details of a long-term funding model for the Holiday Activities and Food Programme beyond 2021?

Departmental co-ordination

Finally, you will be aware that for some time anti-child poverty campaigners have raised the perceived lack of clarity on where responsibility for this issue lies within Government. In your reply of 19 May you mentioned the DWP’s coordinating role in the “cross-Government approach to tackling poverty”. I asked Minister Ford to expand on this point when she responded to the 24 May debate, but no further explanation was forthcoming.

- I would be grateful if you could go into further detail on how the cross-Departmental co-ordination you referred to in your previous letter works in practice. What processes do Departments go through to review, for example, the role and effectiveness of targeted measures like free school meals that fall within the Department for Education’s remit?

We would be grateful to receive your response by Thursday 15th July to allow the Committee time to consider your reply before the summer Parliamentary recess.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Catherine". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letter 'C' being particularly large and prominent.

Catherine McKinnell MP
Chair of the Petitions Committee