

Written evidence submitted by the School & Nurse Milk Alliance
(SNMA)

**Education Committee Inquiry into
The Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services
A submission from The School & Nursery Milk Alliance**

May 2020

About the SNMA

- i. The School & Nursery Milk Alliance (SNMA) is a coalition of organisations from the dairy, health and education sectors, working to highlight the benefits of milk to children and encourage its increased consumption. As a membership organisation, the Alliance represents over 90% of the suppliers of milk to educational settings, as well as 10,500 nurseries, schools and other educational settings in receipt of milk.

Response summary

- i. The COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of schools across the country has meant that approximately half a million children are not getting any substitute to their entitlement of free school meals, according to a YouGov survey. Whilst we welcome the measures already introduced by the Government, including continuing school meal provision and the national free school meal voucher scheme, the Government must go further to ensure the continuity of school food services for all children in households currently affected by food insecurity and low or unpredictable income. The SNMA are calling on DfE to ensure additional funding to cover all the holiday periods until the end of August, in line with the Welsh Government's confirmation that additional funding of £33 million to provide £19.50 per week for every child entitled to free school meals during the summer holidays.

The impact of the lockdown is worst on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children

- ii. According to research by the Food Foundation, 31% of children entitled to free school meals are still not getting any substitute, despite the provisions the Government has already made. Out of the families who have received substitutes, 70% are receiving vouchers, but 12% have been unable to download the code. Additionally, of the 621,000 children who were accessing free breakfast clubs before the crisis, only 136,000 are getting a substitute.
- iii. Parents have been unable to shield their children from food insecurity, and the parents of two million children have said they had experienced one or more forms of food insecurity, with more than 200,000 children having had to skip meals because their family couldn't access sufficient food during lockdown.

The need to continue to support children throughout the school holidays

- iv. In light of the evidence of food insecurity the Welsh Government have confirmed additional funding of £33 million to provide £19.50 per week for every child entitled to free school meals to cover school holidays until 31 August. This provides schools and local authorities with both time and financial assurance to put in place their plans for holiday provision, contract with their partners, and most importantly the logistics to help them reach all those most in need.
- v. The Department for Education should extend the funding to enable the school meal voucher scheme to cover the summer holiday period, as done so with the Easter holidays. Additional funding must be made available to local authorities and school academy trusts (and their respective food partners), at a level sufficient to expand provision of free school meals substitutes, and to the National School Breakfast Programme, to cover all holiday periods across the whole of England until end of August.

The long-term implications of poor provision for children at this time

- vi. Prolonged school closures will also mean serious long-term emotional and physical problems for children. Not only are children missing out on learning and children's mental health, but also their nutrition and physical health. 40% of households with children who have been advised to self-isolate but are unable to do so because they need to go out for food, medical appointments or other essential reasons, are food insecure. The Trussell Trust [reported](#) that in the first two weeks of the pandemic, there was an 81% increase in need for food banks compared to the same period in 2019, and a 122 per cent rise in the number of parcels it provided for children.

- vii. Last year NHS Digital statistics showed that malnutrition cases treated by the NHS rose from 2,893 to 8,537 over ten years. Bapen [research](#) put the cost of malnutrition in the NHS at £19.6 billion, which equals over 15% of total public expenditure on health and social care. Reduced access to school meals, together with drops in household income, has had a direct, dramatic effect on children's food security, and this is likely to further increase costs for the NHS in the long term.

The impact of children not having access to milk

- viii. Milk is a superfood packed full of nutrients. Research published by Northumbria University in 2016 examined the evidence of the clear benefits of milk for children's development, and found a positive impact on levels of obesity as a direct result of milk being consumed, in addition to improvements in dental health, cognition and bone health.
- ix. The high satiety value of milk helps contribute to reduced childhood obesity and this important research found that children who drink milk are more likely to have a lower body mass than those who do not. Fat content is also low, with semi-skimmed milk containing just 1.7% fat and whole milk containing 3.9% fat. Providing milk in schools supports children to form the healthy habit of drinking milk.
- x. This evidence clearly shows that providing milk in education settings contributes to two child public health priorities: obesity and oral hygiene, both of which are in poor form and deteriorating in England. Figures from NHS Digital have shown that almost 1 in 5 children are overweight or obese when they start primary school, and this number is on the rise. There is also a strong relationship between deprivation and obesity prevalence, with 40% of children in England's most deprived areas being overweight or obese, compared to 27% in the most affluent areas. Furthermore, dental decay is the number one reason why children aged five to nine are admitted to hospital in England, and milk contains calcium, which is one of the most important nutrients for healthy teeth.
- xi. Providing milk to all children regardless of their background has helped to reduce health inequalities, as well as helped to tackle yet another growing problem in our society: child hunger. School closures has led to food insecurity in households with children nearly doubling since the COVID-19 outbreak.

Recommendations

- xii. The SNMA is calling on the Government to support help over five million people in households with children who have experienced food insecurity since lockdown began by:
- Providing better support for children on free school meals and putting effort into supporting schools to distribute food parcels as fixing the voucher system

- Ensure quick access for households becoming newly eligible for FSM and Healthy Start vouchers
- Extend vouchers/support for these children through half term and summer holidays
- Promote healthy foods, including milk, as families have more choice to decide what to eat.

Contact details

Jordan Newfield
Secretariat
School & Nursery Milk Alliance

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