

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 17 April 2024
6th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6)

PE1926: Expand universal free school meals for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils

Introduction

Petitioner Alison Dowling

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to expand universal free school meals provision for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1926>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 28 June 2023](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and COSLA.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from COSLA and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage](#).
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills provided [the Scottish Government's initial position on this petition on 23 February 2023](#).
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 98 signatures have been received on this petition.
8. Members may also wish to note that [the 2023-24 Programme for Government](#) included a commitment to "work with COSLA in the coming year to prepare schools and infrastructure for the expansion of universal free school meal provision to Primary 6 and Primary 7 pupils during 2026".

Action

9. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
April 2024

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE1926: Expand universal free school meals for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils

Petitioner

Alison Dowling

Date lodged

08 March 2022

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to expand universal free school meals provision for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils.

Previous action

I have contacted a number of MSPs and local authority councillors. They have given positive and supportive responses to the petition aim.

I've consulted with low income families who struggle to meet the cost of school dinners for their children and supported families in accessing affordable credit, advice, benefit entitlement and local foodbank provision.

Background information

Urgent action is needed at a national level to tackle child and young person's food poverty in Scotland. No child or young person should go through the school day hungry. The Scottish Government can ensure that schools are free from hunger by providing universal access to a free, healthy meal for all pupils, regardless of age.

Free school meals for all pupils would remove the stigma of 'difference'. Some children entitled to free meals don't take them because of the stigma.

A national expansion of free school dinners by Scottish Government will alleviate hunger for pupils of all ages during the school day.

Some low-income families are not entitled to free meals but can't afford them or can only afford to pay for a school dinner for a few days each week.

Food poverty is sometimes hidden within schools, especially with secondary school age pupils. Many children lose access to free school meals because of moving out of the year group that provides a free school dinner. While P1-4 provision is intended to

expand to include older primary children, no such expansion is planned to include children attending secondary school.

Hunger doesn't recognise an age limit therefore the Scottish Government should not discriminate against tackling school day hunger on the basis of age. This is set against a backdrop of rising food and energy prices that disproportionately impact families with the lowest incomes.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1926 on 28 June 2024

The Convener: The next petition is PE1926, on expanding universal free school meals for all nursery, primary and secondary schools. Monica Lennon joins us again for our consideration of this petition, which was lodged by Alison Dowling and calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to expand universal free school meals provision for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils.

We last considered the petition at our meeting on 22 February, when we agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. I am pleased to say that we have received a response from the new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Jenny Gilruth, which states that the Scottish Government remains

“focused on working with delivery partners to progress our free school meal expansion programme.”

The cabinet secretary notes that the Government is continuing to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and other key delivery partners on the next phase of expansion, and goes on to say that she will

“update the committee on anticipated timescales for the pilot in secondary schools once”

the Government’s

“planning work has further progressed.”

Members may have noted that, in response to a question in the chamber on 18 May, the cabinet secretary said that she had not yet met officials to discuss proposals for the pilot in secondary schools but was willing to engage with young people in the design of the pilot.

Before I ask colleagues to comment, I invite Monica Lennon to contribute to our thinking.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Thank you, convener. I am grateful to have the opportunity to be here and I am grateful to the petitioner, Alison Dowling, for bringing the matter to Parliament.

I think that the response from the cabinet secretary that you referenced was to one of my questions in the chamber, of which I have asked many. I do not doubt the Scottish Government’s commitment to the policy, and I commend the Scottish Government for the implementation of universal free school meals so far. In many respects, we have led the United Kingdom. We have inspired other campaigners and we have probably prompted other Governments to follow in our footsteps. However, we are no longer leading the way, which is why I wanted to speak to the petition.

When I visit schools across Lanarkshire and Falkirk, in my region of Central Scotland, I have the pleasure and privilege of speaking to young people, teachers and school staff, and sometimes parents, when they are in the school. Some of the things that I have heard have shocked me to the core. This will probably not be news to colleagues, but it is important to get it on the record. When I am in schools and am speaking to teachers and their trade unions, they give me examples of hungry children eating pencils and rubbers in classrooms, and then going home and not having any food in their bellies until the next day.

We talk a lot in the Parliament about closing the poverty-related attainment gap. How can you learn and thrive when you are hungry and not getting the nutrition and nourishment that you need? I feel that there is a moral imperative not just to continue with the policy but to do so as a matter of urgency.

I am sitting here with lots of papers and dates of questions and updates. There has been a change in ministers, and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Jenny Gilruth, who has a background in teaching, understands the issues, but I am afraid that I have to tell you that there has been no progress. In fact, we are about to go backwards.

Since September last year, when the Scottish Government said in the programme for government that it would pilot the policy in secondary schools as well as progressing it at pace in primary schools, I have asked it many times—and journalists have also asked—where the pilot schemes will be and which schools and local authorities the Government is speaking to.

Eventually, I had to use a freedom of information request and, in the past few weeks, I have had all the responses back from every council—32 local authorities. I asked them whether any of their schools had had any contact from the Government, but not one had. We keep hearing that work is being done and there are discussions between the Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and partners, but that is not happening.

On Monday morning, I learned that the Government had approached COSLA and said that, due to budget pressures and other factors, it would not be able to deliver the scheme. In a report that I have seen—I probably should not have seen it—COSLA says and is telling its members that that could mean that full roll-out of universal school meals will be beyond this parliamentary session. I am here to tell you that children are eating pencils and rubbers, but the Government is willing to kick the issue down the road until the end of this parliamentary session or beyond. That is not acceptable by any measure. The good work that has been done up to primary 5 is due to the political will to make it happen.

I do not have much more of your time, but I want to say that I held a major event in Parliament in May with the Scottish Trades Union Congress women's committee, which has been leading the food for thought campaign. More than 100 people were there, mostly children and young people, and I believe that we need to hear their voices. They were very clear on what needs to happen, which is why I asked Jenny Gilruth about co-production—not because it is a buzzword to use but because if we bring children and young people into the decision-making process, they will tell us the solutions.

The Government has raised issues such as some schools being too small and some canteens not being big enough to have everyone in one lunch setting. That is fine; let us find some workarounds—for example, schools could have lunch time over two sittings, or they could work with partners, including businesses. Young people are learning about food waste and local food production. We are supposed to be a good food nation—surely we can find a way.

If the Parliament had approved my amendments to the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, we would have locked the policy in. I pay tribute to colleagues in Parliament, including those in Scottish Labour, the Scottish Conservatives and the Scottish Liberal Democrats, for backing those amendments. I know that Scottish National Party and Green colleagues believe in the policy, too, and we have to deliver it.

I will finish with the words of a young person, because I think that that is appropriate. Colleagues will be aware that today a landmark report by the Trussell Trust on hunger in Scotland was published. One in six of our citizens is going hungry. There is not a typical person, but we know that some groups are affected more than others. Gemma is a young person from the charity Passion4Fusion, and she was at the food for thought event in May. She said:

“Studies have shown that eating together with friends, peers and family promotes good eating habits, happiness and the ability to converse.”

Gemma is right. We have to take the stigma away from free school meal provision.

Providing universal free school meals for all students is about more than just removing the costs and worry of school meal debt, which is accruing and building up every day. It is about removing the divide between students from different backgrounds and building a sense of community. That is why I support the petition.

I thank the committee for your on-going work. I hope that, collectively as a Parliament, we can find some solutions, because children cannot wait until the end of the parliamentary session; they can barely wait until the end of the day. I commend the petition to the committee.

The Convener: Thank you for that passionate exposition of the objectives of Alison Dowling’s petition. I invite colleagues to discuss what our next steps might be.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank Monica Lennon for her presentation, which outlined exactly where we are. There are still questions that need to be asked regarding where we go with this, because the Government has expressed an intention, which I believe is still there, but no progress is being made and things are dragging on. It is important that we continue to ask about the issue.

We should write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills again to seek clarity on the Scottish Government’s pilot to roll out universal free school meals in secondary schools, including the timescale for developing the carrying-out of the pilot and the engagement that has taken place with young people in the design of that pilot. That, in itself, will be useful, and Monica Lennon has eloquently set out what information is required.

There is much more to do before we can determine whether the policy is progressing. There seems to be a logjam at the moment, so let us see whether we can manoeuvre around that to see where we can take it.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I agree with colleagues' recommendations so far. I add that, in practice, the feasibility of the roll-out would depend largely on local authorities leading the logistics. It might be useful to get an understanding from COSLA about how ready the school estate is to adapt to such a change, should it be introduced, what sort of capital changes might be required and what existing contracts might need to be changed. It would also be useful to get an understanding of the opportunity for things such as developing community food networks, using the school as the anchor for a community food network and building resilience around the good food nation concept, which was recently passed into statute by this Parliament.

Rather than simply seeing the issue as a potential liability, I think that it presents us with huge opportunities. Trying to socialise those ideas with COSLA and local authorities would be helpful at this stage, if the committee thinks that there is potential in them.

The Convener: The cabinet secretary notes that the Government is continuing to work with COSLA, so it would not be unreasonable for us to get a view from COSLA about what it thinks that that engagement is producing. I would like to ask whether it has highlighted some of the issues that Paul Sweeney has just identified and whether it has had any response, or whether there are other issues that it feels might arise as a consequence. Do we agree to that approach?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Annexe C: Written submissions

COSLA submission of 8 August 2023

PE1926/J: Expand universal free school meals for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils

Thank you for your letter of 4th July 2023.

COSLA works on behalf of Scotland's councils to focus on the challenges and opportunities they face, and to engage positively with governments and others on policy, funding and legislation. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the petition highlighted on Universal Free School Meal expansion.

Since 2014, all Primary 1-3 pupils at Scottish local authority schools, regardless of family income levels, have been able to access free, healthy school lunches during term-time. Universal provision was extended to Primary 4s in August 2021, and Primary 5s in January 2022. Local authorities are also responsible for providing free school meals to children in primary and secondary schools who are entitled due to low-income eligibility. Children attending funded early learning and childcare can also access free lunches.

Planning is currently underway, through joint governance arrangements which include representation from Scottish Government, COSLA, and Local Government professional associations, for the delivery of further expansion to P6-7 pupils. From work to date, we are aware that the school estate's readiness for accommodating the expansion of universal free school meals can look significantly different depending on each individual school. In some cases, there is capacity to accommodate the likely increase in uptake, whilst other schools are likely to require changes to infrastructure to meet the expected increase in demand.

Information gathering is currently underway with local authorities to enable an understanding of the resource and capital costs (based on infrastructure changes required) associated with this expansion (the Scottish Government have indicated their desire for an initial expansion to P6-7 pupils in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment in the first instance, followed by universal expansion to P6-7). This exercise is intended to inform the agreement of funding arrangements and timescales for delivery. COSLA is clear that in order for the expansion to be deliverable, the full resource and capital costs of the programme must be provided by Scottish Government. Any contractual matters arising from expansion would be considered by councils locally.

COSLA does not have an agreed position on expanding free meal provision in secondary schools beyond the current arrangements. Any proposed changes to secondary provision, and plans for delivery, including infrastructure requirements,

should be considered in partnership with Local Government. As with the primary school expansion programme, any new commitments would require full resourcing (both capital and resource) to enable successful delivery.

We hope that this information is helpful to the Committee in their consideration of this petition.

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 21 August 2023

PE1926/K: Expand universal free school meals for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils

Thank you for your letter of 4 July seeking an update on the timescales associated with the pilot of universal free school meal provision in secondary schools.

As you are aware, in December we announced that the next phase of our free school meal expansion programme will be to expand provision to primary 6 and 7 pupils who are in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment, as the next step towards universal provision in primary schools. I can confirm that this remains my priority.

Since this announcement, we have been in discussion with Local Authorities to identify the resource and capital needs to address the challenges that they may face, in what I envisage as a phased roll out of free school meals provision. The Scottish Futures Trust are undertaking a survey of Local Authorities' needs in this regard and we expect to have their returns in by the end of September. You will understand that this is an important step in supporting the planned rollout and our overall aim for free school meals in meeting the needs of our children.

As I have mentioned, my priority remains building towards universal free school meals for all primary school pupils. However, we will also bring forward further detail on how we will deliver a pilot of universal free school meal provision in secondary schools to inform our consideration of further expansion.

To this end, my officials have had initial discussions with local authorities to hear their views around a pilot in secondary schools and these views are now being carefully considered. This has been an essential first step to the delivery of a pilot and we will bring forward further detail when these views have been appropriately considered.

I hope that this information is helpful and will update the committee on progress with our planned work across this area in due course.

JENNY GILRUTH MSP