



**Rt Hon David Laws MP**  
Minister of State for Schools

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27<sup>th</sup> July

Dear David,

**Subject: Free school meals campaign**

The Department has received many emails under the 38 Degrees campaign to extend free school meal entitlement, launched following the publication of the School Food Plan on 12 July. As you will appreciate, we are not able to reply to so many emails individually, so I am replying to the campaign as a whole as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

The government recognises the benefits of healthy school meals and is committed to providing free school meals to those pupils who need them most. Currently 1.3 million of the most disadvantaged children claim a free, nutritious meal at school every day. Some schools also provide breakfast clubs which often offer free or subsidised meals to pupils from poorer families.

Most parents do all they can to make sure that their children have healthy, nutritious meals at home. However, some children do arrive at school hungry and this is one reason why tasty, nutritious school meals are so important. Evidence shows us that children who eat healthy meals find it easier to concentrate, are better behaved and are more able to learn. We know that some families struggle with the cost of school meals, and free school meals have an important role to play in addressing poverty and inequality. Local authorities and schools share a responsibility to make sure that every child in their area who is entitled to a free meal is signed up to receive them.

The government is gradually introducing Universal Credit to simplify the benefits system, and this means the department has to change the rules for who should receive a free school meal. Welfare reforms with the introduction of Universal Credit will improve the lives of some of the poorest families in our communities,

making 3 million households better off and lifting up to 250,000 children out of poverty. The reforms, however, mean we have to think about the best way to decide who is entitled to free school meals so that they continue to be targeted at those who need them most.

We are currently working with the Department for Work and Pensions to simplify free school meals criteria under Universal Credit, while making sure that free lunches continue to be available to those families on the lowest incomes. The move to Universal Credit will not reduce the number of children entitled to free school meals. Our priority is to make sure that the most disadvantaged children are able to get a nutritious free meal at school.

The School Food Plan recommended that the government should extend entitlement to free school meals, particularly for primary school children. The government has agreed that, alongside the work on the new entitlement criteria, we will also investigate the case for extending the entitlement to more children. This would inevitably be costly. We estimate the current cost of free school meals to schools and local authorities at £460 million per year, and the department's budget remains very tight. Any increase in eligibility would inevitably mean a reduction in the budget available to spend on other areas. We will need to consider what the evidence tells us of the benefits of providing free meals to more children, compared with the benefits of using these resources to pay for other aspects of children's education or other ways to alleviate child poverty.

Thank you for drawing attention to this important matter. I hope this reply is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

*David Laws*



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