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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref P-05-1140
Ein cyf/Our ref KW/00938/21

Janet Finch-Saunders MS
Chair
Senedd Petitions Committee.
Ty Hywel
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

11 February 2021

Dear Janet

Petition P-05-1140 Revise the guidance for Free School Meals, removing the option for delivery of food parcels

Thank you for your letter regarding Petition P-05-1140. I have set out below a number of points for consideration by the Petitions Committee.

The Welsh Government has given local authorities the flexibility to choose which method of free school meal provision best meets the needs of the population they serve whilst eligible pupils have not been able to attend school as a result of Covid-19.

We have encouraged local authorities to operate a number of systems in parallel because we are very conscious that one single method may not meet the needs of the families of all eligible pupils within a local authority area, particularly those of more vulnerable families. Anecdotally we have been made aware of families who do not have bank accounts (and therefore unable to receive BACs payments) and also of local authority concerns in a small number of cases of some vulnerable children where there is a very real danger that they might not benefit if a cash payment is made to their parents. We have also been told that delivering a parcel of food has provided local authorities with an invaluable opportunity to check on the welfare of a vulnerable child. Similarly, in some areas where large supermarkets have a limited presence and transport or delivery slots are unavailable for whatever reason, vouchers are of little use. Being able to operate a number of parallel systems enables a local authority to meet the many and varied needs of their resident eligible population.

I understand that currently the majority of local authorities in Wales are making free school meal provision using either cash payments or vouchers. Local authorities have considered

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

the means of free school meal provision they have adopted very seriously and I know of at least one where this issue has been considered and the decision made at Council level. My officials are unaware of any concerns being raised by those families provided with vouchers and I can see no merit in not allowing local authorities to issue them routinely. I am aware of two local authorities routinely providing food parcels (Caerphilly and Bridgend) with Swansea allowing eligible families the choice of a payment or a food parcel.

You may also be interested to see the menu choices offered in Caerphilly (<https://www.caerphilly.gov.uk/Services/Schools-and-learning/School-dinners-and-breakfast-clubs/COVID-19-Free-school-meals-delivery-service>). I understand that both Caerphilly and Bridgend are able to make provision for those with special dietary requirements.

It is important to recognise that the petitioner refers to “images of English food parcels” which caused a recent media storm. The same media storm gave rise to very positive comments from families living in two local authority areas in Wales which currently routinely make free school meal provision in the form of food vouchers. I attach links to two media articles which illustrate this point

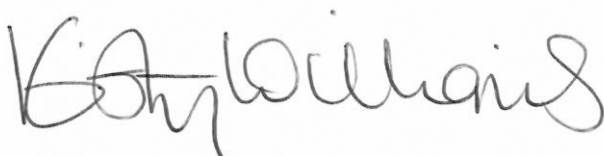
(<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/education/free-school-meals-food-wales-19607778>
<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/stark-contrast-between-free-school-23306723>).

Where my officials have been made aware of individual concerns regarding the contents of food parcels, these have been resolved by reference to the local authority concerned.

Local authority staff all over Wales have worked extremely hard to ensure that eligible pupils who rely on free school meals have not had to go without because they are not able to attend school because of Covid-19. I also think it is important to recognise that in Caerphilly, additional effort has been made to make use of local suppliers who have been especially hard hit by fallout from the pandemic. On the other hand, I know of little evidence that would indicate that parents would be more likely to spend with local, independent retailers, rather than supermarkets (as cited by the petitioner).

I hope the information I have provided is helpful for the Petitions Committee and, in the event that further details are required, please let me know.

Yours sincerely



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