

P-05-1140 Revise the guidance for Free School Meals, removing the option for delivery of food parcels, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 08.03.21

Response to Minister for Education & petitions Committee

Free School Meals – use of food parcels

Below are my thoughts in response to points raised by the Minister

- 1. 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.**

Whilst the Minister has continued to make the point that she has encouraged local authorities to operate a number of systems in parallel, what evidence can she provide for doing so? I have continually challenged Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC), since they implemented this system in April 2020 and at no point have they said they will look at offering a blended option. They have stated that there are insufficient resources within the council to operate a range of options. (see attached letter to Bethan Sayed MS)

What support are the Welsh Government offering to enable local authorities to provide parallel options?

- 2. 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.**

Safety of children is of course a priority; however local authorities are hiding behind this reason as an excuse for continuing to use a blanket approach in providing food parcels. Some of the reasons BCBC offer for continuing to use parcels are the risk of food shortages, when there have not been any food shortages since the early point of the lockdowns almost 12 months ago, and that their staff were undertaking the deliveries to ensure safeguarding and wellbeing. It must be noted that they ended these deliveries in April 2020 when they contracted The Real Wrap Co to take over the contract. I quote "Therefore, since April 2020, the local authority has contracted the Real Wrap Company to pack and deliver the food parcels

directly to homes." Therefore, giving the reason that the continued use of food parcels is to safeguard children is false.

- 3. 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.**

As aforementioned, neither Bridgend or Caerphilly are offering parallel systems. This is why I ask that the Welsh Government change their guidance to ensure that all local authorities operation more than one option, removing the blanket use of food parcels which is not suitable for all families.

- 4. You may also be interested to see the menu choices offered in Caerphilly**

Whenever challenged, the Welsh Government hold Caerphilly up as a positive example of food parcels. At no stage have they acknowledged that the food parcels being proffered in Bridgend are sub-standard and well below the weekly allowance of £19.50. Families regularly send me images of

their parcels (see attached), and we undertake regular supermarket cost comparisons. The average supermarket cost of the Bridgend parcels is £10-11.

5. 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.

Having raised this issue at various stages with the Minister I would like to know where the mouldy and sub-standard food has been addressed with BCBC?

6. 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.

Again, the focus is on the food parcel best practice in Caerphilly. I would like to ask her opinion on why Bridgend have contracted a Bristol based private company, The Real Wrap Co, who drive weekly trucks to Bridgend for deliveries. Some families have missed their delivery due to having to go out to work, others have simply been missed. BCBC themselves cite that they opted to use Real Wrap because they "The Real Wrap company was chosen to supply the food parcel, as they were already on a National Procurement Strategy (NPS) Framework for Wales, as they supply sandwiches to all hospitals in Wales, including Bridgend's Princess of Wales Hospital."

I do not feel that this is a sufficient reason to procure 5,000 weekly food parcels to families across BCBC. If you refer to the images in their letter, you will also see heavy use of individually plastic wrapped items. I would like to know how these parcels fit BCBC's responsibilities under the Future Generations Act? Surely a single glass jar of jam would suffice rather than individual plastic wrapped portions?

7. 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).

Please see link to research from the Bevan Foundation, it clearly states that a benefit of offering cash payments is that families will spend this money in their local economy, as has clearly been seen across Wales during the lockdown periods.

<https://www.bevanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/State-of-Wales-FSM.pdf>

- Does it adequately address the issues that you raised?

The Ministers response does not adequately address why just two local authorities have continued to opt for a voucher only system. The Welsh Government focus on Caerphilly and do not address the concerns within Bridgend, of which she is well aware.

This policy of giving families in poverty no choice other than food parcels is based on negative assumptions, which can clearly be seen in tweets made by BCBC _____. Parents living in the area contacted me having seen this exchange stating that the words used by the Councillor led them to become very upset and avoid social media due to the mental health impact of the comments made.

I have these clear questions:

- What support is being offered to local authorities to enable them to meet Welsh Government guidance and offer multiple options in parallel?
- Will the Welsh Government change their guidance to ensure that all families are catered for and confirm that more than one option must be in operation?
- Will families be reimbursed for the £10 per week they have missed in essential food times where these costs have been absorbed into the running costs of the food parcel system?
- Will they investigate the procurement choices of BCBC in using The Real Wrap Co. because they deliver sandwiches to the NHS?
- Have the Welsh Government any information to show that they have questioned the quality of the parcels in BCBC?

I would like to thank the committee for taking the time to review these comments. As a child, I was in receipt of free school meals and still live with the long-term stigma that comes with being reliant on state benefits. It is for this reason that I have campaigned on this issue, as I am acutely aware of what value children place on themselves when those in authority believe that they are only worth a couple of mouldy oranges and some loosely termed 'recipes'.