

# Universal free secondary school meals

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 8 Gorffennaf 2024  
Petitions Committee | 8 July 2024

Reference: SR24/8813

Petition Number: [P-06-1442](#)

Petition title: Extend Universal Free School Meals to secondary schools

Text of petition: We call for:

Implementing Universal Free School Meals in secondary schools, for all pupils regardless of dietary requirements for allergic, religious, or personal reasons.

Ensuring as far as possible that these Free School Meals are ethically and sustainably sourced, including protecting workers' rights in the supply chain.

Encouraging in all schools, high-quality in-house kitchens making fresh food whenever possible, and when not possible that providers use fresh and local produce.

As part of the Co-operation Agreement between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru in 2021, Universal Free School Meals were rolled out in primary schools. This has fed tens of thousands of young children many of whom are in poverty, and massively reduced the stigma behind taking these meals. Feeding children must always be a political priority.

It's time for this to go ahead. According to Child Poverty Action Group, 19% of children in poverty still don't have access to Free School Meals due to the means testing in secondary schools, that's approximately 25,000. Not only are they at risk of going hungry, but the Trussell Trust estimate 20% of adults in Wales experience food insecurity.



Additionally, we believe that Universal Free School Meals can and must be used to educate, including teaching home economics in Wales especially promoting value for money, healthy diets, with local, ethical, and sustainable sourcing as part of the Curriculum for Wales.

## 1. Background

### 1.1. Free school meal entitlement

Free school meals are available to eligible learners who attend a maintained school full-time. Pupils are eligible for free school meals if their parent (or the learner in their own right) receives certain benefits:

- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- Guaranteed element of Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (as long as parents do not also get Working Tax Credit and their annual income is £16,190 or less before tax)
- Working Tax Credit run-on (paid for 4 weeks after parents stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit)
- Universal Credit (as long as the annual net earned household income is less than £7,400, not including benefits).

At January 2023, 44,530 secondary school pupils (25.5%) were in receipt of free school meals (including those no longer eligible other than through receiving transitional protection). This figure relates to those learners who are eligible, and have applied for, free school meals. Families have to apply for free school meals and there may be learners whose families may be eligible but have not taken up their entitlement.

## 1.2. Ethical Employment in Supply Chains

In 2017, the Welsh Government introduced the [Code of Practice on Ethical Employment in Supply Chains](#) with the aim of ensuring that workers in public sector supply chains are employed ethically and in compliance with UK, EU, and international laws. It covers employment issues, including modern slavery and human rights abuses, blacklisting, and false self-employment (that is, functioning as an employee but without a contract of employment). All local authorities in Wales have signed up to the Code.

## 2. Welsh Government Action

From September 2022, as part of the Co-operation Agreement between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru, the Welsh Government began funding local authorities to roll out their offer of [universal free primary school meals \(UFPSM\)](#), starting with the learners in Reception classes. All primary school children and more than 6,000 nursery-age pupils attending a maintained school will be eligible for free school meals by 2024. The Cabinet Secretary's letter states that 20 of the 222 local authorities have completed the roll out and the other two (Bridgend and Swansea) will complete it by extending to Year 6 from this September.

The [Welsh Government has allocated £200 million revenue](#) over three years (£40m for 2022-23, £70m for 2023-24 and £90m in 2024-25) to support the scheme. It has also allocated £60 million capital over two years (£25m in 2021-22 and £35m in 2022-23) to support improvements to school kitchen facilities, including purchasing equipment and updating digital systems. [Plaid Cymru wanted to extend](#) universal free school meals to secondary schools, although this never formed part of the Co-operation Agreement as the then Leader explained to the [Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Committee in December 2022](#). However, it was noted in [the joint paper on the 2024-25 budget](#) as a priority area for Plaid Cymru in the event of any further funding from the UK Government.

## 3. Senedd Action

Between September 2021 and January 2022, the Petitions Committee considered petition [P-06-1178 Free school meals for all pupils in Wales](#). The

Committee congratulated the petitioner on a successful outcome as the Welsh Government in co-operation with Plaid Cymru had made a commitment to provide free school meals for all primary school children. The Committee recognised that the petitioner's overarching call was for all school pupils to be provided with free school meals, and suggested that this was a significant step in achieving that ambition. The Petition was therefore closed.

## 4. Further information

Universal entitlement to free school meals was introduced across Scotland in 2015, for all pupils in Primary 1 to Primary 3 year groups. This was extended to all pupils in P4 in August 2021, and then to all pupils in P5 in January 2022. The scheme includes learners aged 5–9 years old. In England, universal free school meals are currently provided for all children in reception up to and including Year Two (aged 4–7 years).

As universal free school meals has been limited to younger children, there is little literature on the feasibility and implementation for older students. A [small scale research project](#) was undertaken in two secondary schools in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham in 2020 to consider the potential benefits pupils and their households, and potential barriers. It did not look at the effectiveness or cost effectiveness of universal free school meals.

The research found that universal free school meals in secondary schools is a feasible and acceptable intervention, with increased access to a healthy meal, reduced food insecurity and better nutrition. Potential barriers to implementation included limited school kitchen and dining infrastructure, meal quality and choice, and increased queuing times.

The [Bevan Foundation published research in 2021](#) about the feasibility and benefits of extending eligibility for free school meals.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.