

Expanding Universal Free School Meals to All – Information Briefing.



Context:

As part of the STUC Women's Committee anti-poverty work - the Women's Committee have been lobbying the Scottish Government to expand Universal Free School Meals to all nursery, primary, and secondary school pupils in Scotland. Despite living in one of the wealthiest and most advanced nations in the world, the scale of poverty and inequality in Scotland remains unacceptably high. The coronavirus pandemic, combined with decades of austerity and neglect to public services has contributed to the exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities and intensified poverty in Scotland. The Scottish Government has committed to significantly reducing Child Poverty by 2030, with a view of ultimately eradicating it. However, the reality is that Poverty in Scotland continues to deepen, and without immediate action, the scale of poverty and inequality will continue to rise. The roots of poverty and the poverty-related attainment gap stretch well beyond the school gates, but the significant role our educational institutions play in tackling poverty, challenging inequality, and helping to build a healthier, more inclusive society cannot be underestimated.

That is why the STUC Women's Committee is demanding that the Scottish Government expand Universal Free School Meals to All with immediate effect, and fully invest in Local Government to ensure that there is adequate and fair funding across all of Scotland's 32 local authorities to help tackle hunger, poverty, and inequality. Hunger and Poverty-related stigma and shame know no age boundaries. Firm and decisive action on poverty in Scotland cannot be further delayed.

A little bit of history:

The STUC Women's Committee and the Scottish Trade Union Movement have a proud history of campaigning for Free School Meals in Scotland and fighting to eradicate poverty and build a more equal and fairer world. Scottish Trade Unions have been at the forefront of campaigning for free school meals for all in Scotland since pre-devolution and played a crucial role in supporting the first Free School Meals (Scotland) Bill in 2000. There has been welcome advancement in Free School Meals policy, however, the fight to expand Universal Free School meals goes on. The arguments are well documented, and the appetite for change is evident but now more than ever we need the collective strength and solidarity of Trade Unionists to demand that the will to act on expanding universal free school meals to all in Scotland is taken.

What is the existing position on Free School Meals Policy?

Since 2015, all primary 1 – 3 pupils who attend a local council school have been entitled to a universally free school meal/lunch. This means that every child from P1-P3 in Scotland receives a meal/lunch at school irrespective of their household incomes and family circumstances. From primary 4 through until the end of secondary school, a free school meal qualifying criterion is in place. Only families that receive a qualifying benefit such as income support, and whose monthly income is below £625 (before tax) can qualify for a free school meal.

In June 2021, the Scottish Government made advancements to Free School Meals policy in Scotland by committing to expanding Universal Free School Meals to ALL primary pupils on a phased basis. This means that as of August 2021, all primary 1-4 children should be entitled to a free school meal. It is expected that primary 5 pupils will become eligible in January 2022 and primary 6/7 pupils later into 2022.

So, what is the issue?

Whilst the Scottish Government has made some welcome advancements, the current policy position poses many challenges.

1. It is complex, confusing, and inaccessible – many families find the criteria difficult to navigate. Research has shown that there are families who qualify for free school meals but have not applied for a variety of reasons. This might be that they don't know how to or that they do not know they are eligible. Uptake for those that are eligible and have applied is patchy. Some children and young people do not take up their entitlement because of the long-standing stigma and shame associated with free school meals.
2. The threshold and eligibility criteria for FSMs is low. This means that there are thousands of working families who are living below the poverty line every day in Scotland but do not qualify for a free school meal for their child/young person. 65% of children in poverty live in a household where someone is in employment.
3. It creates division and inequality between pupils – young people are divided from a very early age. It makes no sense to give children a universally free school meal from primary 1 – 3 then strip this away as soon as they reach P4 and secondary school phase. It is discriminatory based on age and illogical. Hunger, poverty, and stigma knows no age boundaries. Why should a universal free school meal entitlement stop at secondary school?
4. The existing policy is in contrary to the Scottish Government's commitment to enshrining the United Nations Rights of a Child (UNCRC) into Law. Article 24 states that all children and young people have the right to nutritious food. It is also at odds with the Government's own commitments to tackle food insecurity; close the poverty-related attainment gap; tackle the hidden costs of the school day; and introduce measures to significantly reduce poverty in Scotland by 2030.
5. The Government's commitment to a phased expansion means that primary 5 – 7 pupils will not benefit until 2022. Tackling poverty and hunger cannot wait and the Scottish Government has the capacity, tools, and resources to implement a universally free expansion more immediately.
6. The ongoing economic and social impacts of Covid-19 on families means that for the first-time thousands of people are accessing benefits and the social security system. The impacts of furlough coming to an end and the insecurity of the labour market could be detrimental to many families and their incomes. Immediate Universal Free School Meals means that no children or young person will go hungry, and ease stress of all families.

Expanding Free School Meals to all will:

- ✓ **Help to tackle hunger, food insecurity and contribute to closing the poverty-related attainment gap.**
- ✓ **Shatter the long-standing stigma and shame associated with Free School Meals.**
- ✓ **Embed a whole-school community approach to nutrition, food, health, and wellbeing.**
- ✓ **Increase uptake**
- ✓ **Support working families**
- ✓ **Meet Children and Young People's human rights and address Inequality.**

The campaign to expand UFSMs to all is winnable. Please support the campaign and demand the Scottish Government to expand Universal Free School Meals to All.

For more information or to get involved please contact STUC Equality and Policy Officer, Erin McAuley, emcauley@stuc.org.uk