

Huw Lewis AC / AM
Y Gweinidog Addysg a Sgiliau
Minister for Education and Skills



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref P-04-518
Ein cyf/Our ref HL/01799/14

William Powell AM
Chair Petitions Committee

committeebusiness@Wales.gsi.gov.uk

16 September 2014

Dear William

Thank you for your letter of September 2014, which enclosed a letter of response from a petitioner on the provision of free school meals (FSM) (petition ref: P-04-518).

We are strongly committed to ensuring that FSM are available to those learners who need them most. Provisions in the Healthy Eating in Schools (Wales) Measure 2009, which were commenced last September, place a duty on local authorities and governing bodies to take reasonable steps to ensure that every learner who is entitled to receive FSM does receive them, and to protect the identity of pupils who receive FSM. According to the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC), the uptake of FSM by primary school learners, as at census day 2013/14, was 80.4%; this is a 2.8% increase from 2012/13.

In response to concerns that stigma may discourage learners from taking up their entitlement for FSM, the Welsh Government worked in partnership with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) to produce a case study report considering the range of factors affecting uptake of FSM. Although cashless systems have often been viewed as a way to reduce stigma, the findings of pupil questionnaires indicated that FSM-entitled pupils in the sample were not particularly concerned about payment systems. The main concern for FSM-entitled pupils was queues. Other key concerns were: the type of food provided; cost (presumably the local authority 'allowance' for their meals); and, for FSM pupils not taking up their entitlement, what their friends did. These findings are supported by the data gathered from the WLGA review of payment systems, which indicated that cashless systems do not always result in higher levels of uptake of FSM.

A copy of the *Free school meals case study report* can be accessed via the following link:
<http://learning.wales.gov.uk/resources/free-school-meals-case-studies-report/?lang=en>

In order to provide FSM to all learners in reception, year one and year two in England, Whitehall departments had their budgets top-sliced. The implication for Wales was that we could not match the policy announcement made by the Chancellor for England without also replicating this top-slice; the Cabinet agreed not to do so across Welsh Government departmental budgets.

The Finance Minister released a Written Statement on this matter on 27 January:

<http://wales.gov.uk/about/cabinet/cabinetstatements/2014/autumnstatement/?lang=en>

The education budget is being used to meet priorities for Welsh schools in line with Welsh Government commitments. This includes School Challenge Cymru: a package of targeted support to boost the performance of up to 40 secondary schools that are both in challenging circumstances and challenged in terms of delivery. These schools are receiving additional resources and expertise to undertake a programme of swift, sustainable improvement.

The petitioner's letter suggests that replicating the UK Government's policy on FSM in Wales would reach practically every child, however the policy only applies to primary school learners in reception, year one and year two. Our Free Breakfast in Primary School Scheme provides the opportunity for a free breakfast to all primary school learners whose governing body has requested free breakfast provision. According to the 2013/14 PLASC data, 82.6% of maintained primary schools in Wales offer the service, and we will work to increase the uptake of this scheme by raising awareness with parents and governing bodies.

In addition, as mentioned in my letter of 2 January 2014, we have amended legislation which allows local authorities the freedom to price their meals more competitively.

Yours sincerely



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