

# Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

3rd Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday  
22 February 2023

## PE1926: Expand universal free school meals for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils

<b>Lodged on</b>	8 March 2022
<b>Petitioner</b>	Alison Dowling
<b>Petition summary</b>	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to expand universal free school meals provision for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils.
<b>Webpage</b>	<a href="https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1926">https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1926</a>

### Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [28 September 2022](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received a new response from Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, which is set out in **Annexe C**.
4. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
5. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.

6. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).

## **Action**

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

**Clerk to the Committee**

## Annexe A

# PE1926: Expand universal free school meals for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils

## Petitioner

Alison Dowling

## Date lodged

8 March 2022

## Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to expand universal free school meals provision for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils.

## Previous action

I have contacted a number of MSPs and local authority councillors. They have given positive and supportive responses to the petition aim.

I've consulted with low income families who struggle to meet the cost of school dinners for their children and supported families in accessing affordable credit, advice, benefit entitlement and local foodbank provision.

## Background information

Urgent action is needed at a national level to tackle child and young person's food poverty in Scotland. No child or young person should go through the school day hungry. The Scottish Government can ensure that schools are free from hunger by providing universal access to a free, healthy meal for all pupils, regardless of age.

Free school meals for all pupils would remove the stigma of 'difference'. Some children entitled to free meals don't take them because of the stigma.

A national expansion of free school dinners by Scottish Government will alleviate hunger for pupils of all ages during the school day.

Some low-income families are not entitled to free meals but can't afford them or can only afford to pay for a school dinner for a few days each week.

Food poverty is sometimes hidden within schools, especially with secondary school age pupils. Many children lose access to free school meals because of moving out of the year group that provides a free school dinner. While P1-4 provision is intended to expand to include older primary children, no such expansion is planned to include children attending secondary school.

Hunger doesn't recognise an age limit therefore the Scottish Government should not discriminate against tackling school day hunger on the basis of age. This is set against a backdrop of rising food and energy prices that disproportionately impact families with the lowest incomes.

## Annexe B

### Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1926 on 28 September 2022

**The Convener:** PE1926, which was lodged by Alison Dowling, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to expand universal free school meals provision to all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils. We previously considered the petition on 20 April, when we agreed to seek more views and information from the Scottish Government and a number of stakeholders. I am pleased to say that we have received responses from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland, Public Health Scotland, the Child Poverty Action Group, and the Trussell Trust.

Members will be aware that expanding provision of free school meals has been the subject of discussion in the chamber—notably in relation to our consideration of the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill.

Do members have any comments or suggestions of actions that we might take?

**David Torrance:** The committee should write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills seeking an update on the work that is being undertaken to expand provision of free school meals and asking what priority is being given to extending such provision to secondary pupils.

**The Convener:** I am happy to do that. We might advocate taking the petition to the chamber for a debate, but in the first instance we will wait for a response from the cabinet secretary.

## Annexe C

### Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 26 October 2022

#### PE1926/H: Expand universal free school meals for all nursery, primary and secondary school pupils

Thank you for your further letter dated 3 October 2022 in relation to Petition PE1926, seeking an update on the work being undertaken to expand the provision of free school meals, and to ask what priority is being given to extending the provision of free school meals in secondary schools.

As you will be aware, universal free school lunches are now available during school term time to all 281,856 children in primaries 1 to 5 and special schools, as well as eligible pupils in P6-S6.

Whilst Scotland is currently leading the way with the most generous universal free school meal entitlement of any UK nation, we are committed to expanding our offer even further by making universal free school lunches available for all primary school children during the course of the current parliamentary term.

During the academic year 2022-23, we will continue to work with our partners in local authorities to plan for the expansion of free school meal provision to primaries 6 and 7 and this work is being supported by £30 million of capital funding during this financial year to support expansion of catering and dining facilities to help schools prepare for the anticipated increase in uptake in school meals.

With regards to your point about what consideration we are giving to expanding universal availability into secondary schools, we are committed to a pilot of free school meals in secondary schools to support our consideration of further expansion.

I also fully acknowledge the current cost of living crisis is having an adverse impact on many household budgets, including an impact on

some families who may not have previously been experiencing financial difficulties.

Whilst all local authorities have a statutory duty to promote school meals, and to take all reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people entitled to free school meals are supported to access them, where families do not meet the regular eligibility criteria for receiving free school meals, local authorities have the flexibility to make discretionary offers where families are experiencing financial hardship due to exceptional circumstances. I would therefore encourage any families experiencing difficulty with meeting the cost of school meals to contact their local council to enquire about what assistance may be available.

I hope this information is helpful to the committee.