

30th May 2022

*The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak, MP, The Chancellor of the Exchequer
The Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi, MP, Secretary of State for Education
Helen Whately, MP, Exchequer Secretary (HM Treasury)*

Dear Ministers,

We represent over one million people working as teachers, school and trust leaders, support staff, and governors and trustees in the nation's 24,400 schools. We are well placed to see the impact of the cost of living crisis on our 8.9 million pupils' ability to learn and lead healthy lives.

Every single school professional is focused on ensuring that our most disadvantaged children are not left behind, in line with the levelling up agenda. To help us do that, we must make sure that every child has the nutrition they need to be able to learn and do well. Not doing so would undermine all the great efforts of the education workforce to tackle inequalities.

Every school day we see the benefits free school meals provide to those currently entitled. For many it is the only hot, nutritious meal they have in a day. A quality school meal helps improve children's concentration and behaviour during lessons. We witness, first-hand, the effect they can have on improving school attendance, on children's health, and academic performance.

However, the intensifying cost of living crisis means many more are now struggling to afford school lunches. We are seeing children falling into school meal debt, and there is a serious threat to take-up of school meals and the viability of the catering service, not to mention risking the health and wellbeing of our pupils. We see the devastating reality of children coming to school unable to afford to buy lunch, because their family circumstances mean they fall outside the restrictive free school meal eligibility criteria. The Food Foundation's latest data indicate an estimated 2.6 million children live in households that missed meals or struggled to access healthy food during April. Excluding so many vulnerable children is a real barrier to learning and must be urgently addressed.

Now is the right moment for the government to commit to an expansion of free school meals, providing a nutritional safety net that supports all children to learn and achieve. The clear solution to ensuring fairness and equity across our schools is to extend universal provision, as Wales and Scotland are now committed to deliver. But as an immediate first step, free school meal eligibility criteria need to be expanded to all families receiving universal credit (or an equivalent benefit).

We, as representatives of our nation's school professionals, believe this is a quick, effective and highly targeted way of delivering on the levelling up agenda and will support schools in delivering vital educational outcomes for all children.

Yours sincerely,

Geoff Barton, General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)

Dr Mary Bousted and Kevin Courtney, Joint General Secretaries, National Education Union (NEU)

Dr Nicholas Capstick, Principal of Drove Primary School, and CEO of White Horse Federation Trust and Chair, School Food Review Working Group

Leora Cruddas, CEO, Confederation of School Trusts (CST)

Russell Hobby, CEO, Teach First

Emma Knight, CEO, National Governance Association (NGA)

Christina McAnae, General Secretary, Unison

Stephen Morales, CEO, Institute of School Business Leadership (ISBL)

Dr Patrick Roach, General Secretary, NASUWT

Steve Taylor, Chair, Queen Street Group and CEO, Cabot Learning Federation

Paul Whiteman, General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT)