

Dr Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for the Department for Education
20 Great Smith St, Westminster,
London SW1P 3BT

12 March, 2020

Re: School closures and provision of school meals

Dear Gavin Williamson CBE MP Secretary of State for the Department for Education,

We are writing to you to receive clarification on the provisions that are being made to ensure that children who are reliant on school meals do not go hungry due to potential school closures linked to the outbreak of Covid-19.

We welcome a number of the measures that were included in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Spring budget, in particular his promises to "do whatever it takes" in order to help households and families to weather the outbreak including speeding up access to benefits and removing the minimum income requirement to claim Universal Credit.

Whilst of course we understand the potential need for school closures in order to reduce the spread of the virus in order to follow guidelines from the Department of Health, we are deeply concerned that such measures might negatively impact upon children who are living in food insecure households as they will no longer receive a school meal. This includes, but is not limited to, the 1.5 million children currently eligible for free school meals due to very low household income.

Whilst we do not yet have accurate figures on household food insecurity in the UK, figures from London as well as Scotland show that a large percentage of the population is food insecure meaning that millions of people have an insecure or inadequate access to food. For children, household food insecurity can have serious physical and mental health consequences and it is crucial that all measures are taken in order to ensure that children don't go hungry.

We would also like to stress that cash transfers direct to individuals or households are by far the most effective tool in order to aid families to weather the storm and not vouchers for food aid or financial or in kind support for food aid providers including lunch clubs.

Food aid providers have reported a drop off in food donations recently at the same time that many of the volunteers that run these projects may need to take a step back in order to take care of children or grandchildren. This means that the thousands of emergency food aid providers across the UK will have even less capacity to support their community members in need. There is also a significant percentage of volunteers that work in emergency food aid provision that are over 60 and are therefore at a higher risk from the virus whilst the venues themselves might need to close in order to follow Department for Health guidelines.

There are concerns that by solely supporting emergency feeding programmes, similar to those that feed children during the school holidays, this will not respond adequately to the need, and it also does nothing to address the families who will need to quarantine themselves as well as might go against future restrictions against bringing groups of people together.

We also hope that support will be made directly available to children who are not entitled to free school meals but might be living in families that experience poverty, these children might include

those whose parents or carers have No Recourse to Public Funds as well as children whose families are facing financial difficulties due to coronavirus.

Yours sincerely,

Kath Dalmeny, CEO of Sustain: the Alliance for Better Food and Farming

Anna Taylor, Executive Director of the Food Foundation

Niall Cooper, Church Action on Poverty

Dr Rachel Loopstra, King's College London

Alex Cunningham, Magic Breakfast

Sabine Goodwin, Independent Food Aid Network

Barbara Crowther, Children's Food Campaign

Eve Dickinson, Project 17

Caroline Bovey BEM RD chair of the British Dietary Association

Imogen Richmond-Bishop, Right to Food Campaign

Deidre Woods, co-founder Granville Community Kitchen

Helen Crawley, First Steps Nutrition

Victoria Williams, Food Matters

Ben Pearson, Church Action on Poverty

Kerry Melville, Belfast Food Network

Dr Kayleigh Garthwaite, University of Birmingham

Clara Widdison, Kitchen Social

Rob Percival, Soil Association

Emily Fay, Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance