

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

30th April 2020

Re: Temporary extension of free school meals eligibility to No Recourse to Public Funds groups

Dear Secretary of State,

Whilst we welcome the extension of free school meal eligibility to certain groups announced by your department, we still have a number of concerns.

1. The maximum household income threshold for receiving free school meals for the children of Zambrano carers, children of families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) with a right to remain in the UK on grounds of private and family life under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and children of families receiving support under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 who are also subject to a no recourse to public funds restriction is set extremely low at just £7,400 per annum.

Whilst the maximum income threshold is the same for other eligible families, this income is then topped up by welfare payments such as Universal Credit or child tax credit all of which families with NRPF are unable to claim.

For the eligibility for families with NRPF to be set at a maximum income of £7,400 or £616 per month is clearly far too low. This amount is far below any minimum income that a household would be able to live on, and only those who are the most destitute will be eligible, leaving many thousands of children who are living in poverty ineligible despite being in need.

We ask that the minimum income threshold be raised so that it is in line with the average income of a household in receipt of welfare payments

2. The restriction of eligibility to children of Zambrano carers, children of families with NRPF with a right to remain in the UK on grounds of private and family life under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, children of families receiving support under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 who are also subject to a no recourse to public funds restriction, as well as children of a subset of failed asylum seekers supported under Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 is causing many children to miss out.

Thousands of undocumented children whose families do not receive support or support under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 are still excluded. Yet

these families are likely to be the poorest as their parents are not allowed to work and they are not accessing any state support.

We ask that all children who are living in poverty be eligible for free school meals regardless of immigration status.

3. Finally we are concerned by the fact that the Department for Education plans to withdraw the support provided to newly eligible families with NRPF as soon as schools have reopened to all children. We know that there will still be many children who will be suffering from household food insecurity when schools are reopened, and that many families will likely be facing financial difficulties due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We ask you to keep the extension for eligibility to free school meals beyond the pandemic period so that no child goes hungry during the school day.

As I am sure you well know, for all people but especially 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. Furthermore, no child should be excluded from this support due to their parents' immigration status.

Due to their exclusion from welfare support children from families with NRPF are particularly vulnerable to experiencing destitution. While thousands of families with NRPF were already in need prior to the pandemic, this has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has left many parents and carers without employment or support from friends and charitable organisations.

Yours sincerely,

Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive, Sustain: The Alliance for Better Food and Farming

Eve Dickson, Policy Officer, Project 17

Stephanie Wood, Founder/CEO, School Food Matters

Daf Viney, Director of Services, Hackney Migrant Centre

Anna Taylor, Director, Food Foundation,

Jess McQuail, Director, Just Fair

Rebecca O'Connell, Abigail Knight, Julia Brannen, Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education. Co-authors Living Hand to Mouth: children and food in low income families. Child Poverty Action Group, 2019