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Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

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Ben Reynolds
Deputy Chief Executive, Sustain
By email: ben@sustainweb.org

26 November 2020

Dear Ben,

Thank you for your letter of 8 October, about children's access to healthy and nutritious food. I apologise for the delay in responding and would be grateful if you could share my response with your co-signatories.

The government encourages all schools to promote healthy eating and provide healthy, tasty and nutritious food and drink and to support children to develop healthy eating habits. The government remains committed to ensuring that the most disadvantaged children continue to receive this support throughout the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Regarding the soft drinks levy, the government announced investment in a number of child health programmes alongside the introduction of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy. This included doubling the primary sports premium to £320 million per year to improve the quality and access to physical education and sport for primary aged pupils to develop healthy habits early.

In addition, my department is investing up to £35 million into the National School Breakfast Programme, using funds from Soft Drinks Industry Levy revenues. Overall, this money will kick-start or improve breakfast clubs in up to 2,450 schools in disadvantaged areas, making them sustainable in the long run. The focus of these clubs has been to target the most disadvantaged areas of the country, including my department's Opportunity Areas, to help make sure every child gets the best start in life.

The school fruit and vegetable scheme (SFVS) provides over 2.3 million children in Key Stage 1 with a portion of fresh fruit or vegetables each day at school. We are not currently considering the extension of the SFVS beyond pupils in Key Stage 1. Inclusion of other types of produce in the scheme or the possibility of specifying additional British produce would require review when the current SFVS frameworks come to an end in 2024. Any decision made to change the scheme would require careful consideration of produce safety, acceptability of foods for schools and for pupils in Key Stage 1, growing seasons and produce availability, and the cost of including new types of produce.

Through the Healthy Food Schemes, the Department for Health and Social Care provides a nutritional safety net to those who need it the most, at an important stage of development.

Healthy Start helps to encourage a healthy diet for pregnant women, babies and young children from low income households. The scheme allows pregnant women (at least 10 weeks into pregnancy) and children over the age of one and under age four from lower income families to receive one voucher every week. Children aged under one receive two vouchers every week.

Furthermore, on 8 November, the government announced that, as part of the COVID Winter Grant Scheme, the Healthy Start voucher value will increase from £3.10 to £4.25 in England, from April 2021. This means that pregnant women and children will receive vouchers worth £4.25 per week, and children under the age of one will receive vouchers worth £8.50 per week.

These vouchers can be used to buy, or be put towards the cost of, fresh, frozen or tinned fruit and vegetables, fresh, dried and tinned pulses, plain cow's milk and infant formula. Recipients are also eligible for free Healthy Start vitamins.

Healthy Start is a statutory scheme and eligibility for the scheme is set out in regulations. Our focus is on supporting those who need it the most and the increase in the voucher value will support the most vulnerable families to purchase healthy foods for their children.

In regard to free school meal (FSM) accessibility, for more than a century, free school meal (FSM) provision has supported children with a healthy, nutritious meal to enable them to learn, concentrate and achieve while they are at school. It is an integral part of everyday school life and, now that our schools are once again fully open, this support has returned as intended.

The government remains committed to ensuring that the most disadvantaged children continue to receive this support. That is why this government has expanded eligibility for FSM to more children than any other in decades, by extending the scheme to families with no recourse to public funds and to eligible students who attend further education providers as well as through universal infant FSM.

The government has also announced a new £170 million COVID Winter Grant Scheme which will be run by councils in England, building on the significant support given to the most vulnerable during the COVID-19 outbreak. The funding will be ring-fenced, with at least 80% earmarked to support with food and bills and will cover the period to the end of March 2021. Local authorities (LAs) will receive the funding at the beginning of December 2020. It will allow LAs to directly help the hardest-hit families and individuals, as well as provide food for children who need it over the holidays. LAs understand which groups need support, and are best placed to ensure appropriate holiday support is provided which is why they will distribute the funds, rather than schools, who will continue providing meals for disadvantaged children during term-time.

Further to this we have provided £63 million in welfare assistance funding to LAs to provide emergency support to families for food and other essentials, and this was available throughout the October half term break.

The Holiday Activities and Food programme, which has provided healthy food and enriching activities to disadvantaged children since 2018, will also be expanded across England next year. It will cover Easter, Summer and Christmas in 2021, and cost up to £220 million. It will be available to children in every LA in England, building on previous programmes including summer 2020, which supported around 50,000 children across 17 LAs.

The Holiday Activities and Food Programme announcement is a major expansion of an existing, successful pilot.

Thank you for writing about this important matter.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'G. Williamson', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education