

## **Motion to support the expansion of free school meals**

In Blackburn with Darwen, 34% of our children live in [relative low-income families](#) (2020/21), this is the second highest rate in the Northwest and is nearly double the average rate across England (18.5%).

At Blackburn with Darwen Council, we are well placed to see the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on our residents and their children and families. As an authority, we are 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 work to their potential during the school day. Not doing so would undermine all the great efforts of the education and healthcare workforce to tackle inequalities. We understand 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 behavior during lessons. We understand the effect they can have on improving school attendance, on children's health, and academic performance.

We know that, prior to the current cost of living crisis:

- [One in three school-age children](#) in England living in poverty (800,000) missed out on free school meals despite cost-of-living struggles of families. In large part, this is because of the restrictive eligibility criteria and lack of universal provision for all ages.
- Government action in England lags far behind Scotland and Wales, where government funding means primary schools are moving towards free school meals for all children.

The intensifying cost-of-living crisis means many more are now struggling to afford school lunches. Children are 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 hear from school leaders about 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 indicates an estimated 2.6 million children live in households that missed meals or struggled to access healthy food during April 2022. Additionally, [the Institute of Health Equity](#) has estimated that by January 2023, 66% or 18 million households, in the UK will be in fuel poverty, thus adding to the crisis.

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.

We are therefore asking the Leader and Chief Executive to write to the Secretary of State for Education, Kit Malthouse, to call for:

- An alleviation of financial pressure on hard working families struggling to feed their children during the cost-of-living crisis by implementing an urgent extension of free school meals to ensure universal provision for all school age groups, for a time limited period to match the cost-of-living crisis.
- A simultaneous review of the eligibility criteria and realistic threshold that would increase the number of children entitled to free school meals. Current eligibility for free school meals means a household on universal credit in England must earn less than £7,400 a year (after tax and not including benefits), regardless of the number of children in the family. This low threshold means that many children from working families in poverty are not entitled to free school meals. Universal provision to end only once this threshold has been implemented.
- Food provision for children on free school meals to be provided during the school holidays as standard. Children need healthy, nutritious meals all year round, and we need certainty that this will be provided continuously, outside of term time.

**Proposed by:** Cllr Julie Gunn, Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education

**Seconded by:** Cllr Damian Talbot, Executive Member for Public Health, Prevention and Wellbeing