



2023-0011797NGPO

The Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP
Minister for Schools

Sanctuary Buildings 20 Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/contactus/dfes

Professor Kevin Fenton CBE, President, Faculty of Public Health
Professor Jim McManus, President, Association for Directors of Public Health
Professor Lord Patel of Bradford OBE, President, Royal Society of Public Health
Ms Sharon White OBE, Chief Operating Officer, School and Public Health Nurses
Association

By email: president@fph.org.uk

9 May 2023

Dear Professor Fenton, Professor McManus, Professor Lord Patel and Ms White,

Thank you for your letter of 1 February, addressed to the Prime Minister, regarding public health. Your letter has been passed to this Department and I am replying as the Minister for Schools.

Under this Government, eligibility for free school meals has been extended to more groups of children than any other government over the past half a century. The Government spends over £1.5 billion annually delivering free meals to pupils in schools. Around 1.9 million disadvantaged pupils are eligible for free school meals, as well as an additional 1.25 million infants who receive a free meal under the Universal Infant Free School Meal policy. Together that is over one third of all pupils in schools.

For those who qualify on Universal Credit, we have set an income threshold above which entitlement to free school meals does not apply. For a typical family on Universal Credit, the current £7,400 earned income threshold equates to an annual household income (depending on circumstances) of between £22,000 and £29,000 when benefits are taken into account.

Extending free school meal eligibility to all families on Universal Credit would carry a significant financial cost, quickly running into billions of pounds. It would result in around half of pupils becoming eligible for a free meal, with substantial further effects for the affordability of linked provision, such as the entitlement for Pupil Premium.

The Government believes it is right that provision is aimed at supporting the most disadvantaged, those out of work or on the lowest incomes. The current level enables the most disadvantaged children to benefit while remaining affordable and deliverable for schools and the taxpayer. Whilst we have no plans to extend it, we will continue to keep eligibility under review to ensure that these meals are supporting those who need them most.

The Government is committed to continuing support for school breakfasts, and in November 2022 we extended the National School Breakfast Programme (NSBP) for an additional year until the end of the summer term in 2024. We are investing up to £30 million in this programme overall. This funding will support up to 2,500 schools in disadvantaged areas, meaning that thousands of children from low income families will be provided with free nutritious breakfasts to better support their attainment, wellbeing, and readiness to acquire knowledge. Schools are eligible for the programme if they have 40 per cent or more pupils from deprived households, as measured by the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index. Alongside the NSBP, there are a number of organisations, such as FareShare, Magic Breakfast, Kellogg's, and Greggs, providing valuable support to schools with a breakfast provision.

With regard to the Healthy Start scheme, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has committed over £150 million to the Healthy Food Schemes, which provide a nutritional safety net to those families who need it the most.

The NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) delivers the Healthy Start scheme on behalf of the DHSC. The NHSBSA actively promotes the NHS Healthy Start scheme through its digital channels and has created free tools to help stakeholders and healthcare professionals promote the scheme at a local level. These include a social media toolkit, editable posters, videos and animations, leaflets including Easy-Read, digital screen designs, banners, guidance documents, materials in other languages, and stickers.

The latest Healthy Start uptake figures were published on 31 March, when it was 63.8 per cent. Figures for the fully digitised scheme show that uptake is higher than the previous paper voucher scheme. Healthy Start now supports more than 360,000 beneficiaries and the number of new families joining the scheme continues to rise. Uptake data is published on the NHS Healthy Start scheme website, available at: tinyurl.com/YeYtv6z8.

Eligibility for Healthy Start aligns closely with eligibility for other benefits or schemes, such as tax credits, and is kept under continuous review. There are currently no plans to change the eligibility to include all families on Universal Credit with a child under five.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick Gibb', written in a cursive style.

The Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP
Minister for Schools