

END CHILD POVERTY NETWORK CYMRU

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A coalition of organisations working to end child poverty in Wales

On the International Day for the Eradication of Child Poverty (17th October 2008), the End Child Poverty Network Cymru coalition renews its call for the implementation of Recommendation 3 outlined within the **'The Cost of Education'** briefing paper that:

“The Welsh Assembly Government should conduct a study into the feasibility of introducing a universal free school meal service for all school pupils across Wales, noting the contribution that leading child poverty organisations, Hull City Council and the recent Free School Meals Bill consultation in Scotland have made.”

The above proposal was one of 8 recommendations directed at the Assembly Government and/or schools, and has since formed part of the on-going lobbying work following publication of the **'The Cost of Education'** briefing paper on Child Poverty Day in 2006. This paper focused on the 'additional costs' for families and children attending state education, notably around the cost of school uniforms, school trips and additional curriculum expenses which were, and indeed still are, causing real hardship for many low-income families. One of the key features within this paper was to highlight the cost of school meals for families who either do not qualify for, or do not take up their entitlement to free school meal provision.

The rationale for this renewed call is to highlight the progress that has taken place both at a national level in Scotland and England, and at a local level since the publication of our report. This progress builds on the positive conclusions from the evaluation of the pilot school meal scheme initiated by Hull City Council, findings from which were published earlier this year. It is with this evidence base and national developments at a UK level that we renew our call for the Welsh Assembly Government to take positive action to enable children in low-income families to access their entitlement to school meals and also help address the stigma often associated with the present divisive means-tested criteria for accessing free school meals benefits (FSMs).

UK National Perspective

England

In September 2008, the UK Government announced a £20 million scheme for all primary school children to be entitled to a free healthy school meal through a two-year pilot in three local authority deprived areas in England. Explicitly linked to the Government's programme to increase the quality and nutritional standards of school meals, and improve behaviour and educational attainment, this scheme came in response to data that reported that only 43.6% of primary school children currently sat down for a cooked meal in school. As the announcement made clear, *“reasons for not taking a school lunch vary but, for many families, particularly low income families, the reason is cost. The cost of one school meal is £1.66”*. Presently, for a family with more than one child of school age, this can equate to £16.60 (2 children) or £24.90 (3 children) per 5-day week. Over a 4-week period, this can equate to as much as £99.60 for a family with 3 children, a significant amount for families on a low income.

The UK Government's Health Secretary Alan Johnson acknowledged "For many children from poorer backgrounds, a school lunch is their only hot and healthy meal of the day so we need to investigate how we increase uptake". Ed Balls, the Secretary of State for Children meanwhile said: "We want a healthy lunch at school not just for some, but for every child. And we want to make sure that children, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds who need it most, are getting a free hot meal every school day."

This pilot will initially run for two years beginning in September 2009, with the option of extending it into a third year. The scheme will be subject to evaluation.

Scotland

In October 2008, Scottish Ministers announced plans for all children across Scotland in the first three years of primary education to receive free school meals. This follows the successful evaluation from an earlier £5m Government funded pilot scheme, which ran from October 2007 to June 2008, where the Scottish Government funded five local authorities in disadvantaged areas to provide free school meals to all primary 1 to 3 pupils. During the trial period, the overall proportion of 5 to 7 year olds eating school lunches increased from 53% to 75%, with a significant increase witnessed across all 5 areas. Within the target group of primary 1 to 3 pupils not registered for free school meals, uptake increased from 41% to 69%.

The independent evaluation study also reported that:

- Children were being given opportunities to try new and healthier foods as part of their school lunches
- Some children were asking for different, and healthier foods at home
- Parents reported talking about food more often with their children
- Teachers, caterers, parents and local authority staff all provided positive comments about the scheme

Building a bridge with the early years agenda and the drive towards healthier eating, Fiona Hyslop, the Scottish education minister, said: "This government has made it a priority to help children in their early years and this initiative does just that, providing every child with a free school meal in their first years at primary school." The Minister also went on to stress that; "Parents too will feel the benefit during these financially difficult times."

Prior to the pilot scheme, all local authorities had agreed to implement the project from August 2010 if it proved a success. Though concerns have been voiced around the lack of funding from Government to support this roll out, local campaigners view the national commitment as a positive step forward for ensuring that every child, regardless of their family's financial circumstances, is enabled to access a healthy meal in school.

Wales

In Wales, a Free School Breakfast scheme was introduced in 2004 and is a universal provision for those schools in Wales that wish to participate. The Appetite for Life programme is the Assembly Government's drive to increase the nutritional standards of school meals and drinks, and to encourage healthy eating. A National Assembly for Wales committee has also recently released its findings from the consultation on Healthy Eating in Schools (Wales) Measure, which outlines further proposals and thoughts in this area. It is worthy to note that the notion of universal free school meals was raised during the consultation, with the report, acknowledging developments in Scotland, recognising that "... it might be more appropriate to consider free school meals when there was more evidence available upon which to base a decision." (pg. 34, Point 164)

Local Perspective

Hull City Council

In May 2004, Hull City Council introduced a groundbreaking universal scheme which enabled all primary school children in the local authority region to become eligible for free school meals. In the 2 years in which the project ran, take up almost doubled from 36% to 64%, with the independent evaluation also recording improved concentration levels amongst pupils and a greater readiness to learn. The evaluation provided a compelling case of the positive outcomes for not only children from the poorest background but also the whole school. It also addressed the problems with the current narrow eligibility criteria of the FSMs benefit which continues to exclude large numbers of children in families officially recognised as being in poverty.

Liverpool City Council

Liverpool City Council is currently exploring the feasibility of providing a free school meal to every primary school child, in collaboration with the local primary care trust. If implemented, the scheme could benefit 26,000 children, aged between 4 and 11 in one of the UK's most deprived local authority areas. A study of the proposal has begun and will report on its findings later this year.

Other notable developments

In addition to the support the End Child Poverty Network Cymru is giving to redress the issues around free school meals, a number of other notable bodies have also been lobbying for universal free school meals in Wales. In August 2008, the largest union - the GMB - called for free school meals to be extended to all primary school children as a means of providing long-term benefits to the nation's health, address health inequalities and to take the pressure off families' monthly food bills. In September 2008, the public service union UNISON, reiterated earlier calls for free school meals for all children in primary school in addition to all secondary school children in poverty. Momentum, it appears, is building

Final comments

In 2006, the End Child Poverty Network Cymru highlighted the problematic nature of the current eligibility criteria for FSMs, the issue of stigma and lack of take up amongst those children entitled to FSMs, and the increasing cost for those families who do not qualify for assistance. Since then, good progress is being made in Wales in relation to promoting healthy eating and raising the quality of school meals being offered. Nonetheless, concerns remain that not all children and young people will be able to benefit from these changes due to the prohibitive cost. The Welsh Assembly Government has made a clear commitment to tackle child poverty, though the financial challenges faced by many children and families from the costs of school meals remain.

References

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Jane MacLardie, Chris Martin, Lorraine Murray and Kate Sewel (2008) Evaluation of the Free School Meals Trial for P1 to P3 Pupils – web only publication
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GMB (2008) - GMB Urges Government To Introduce Universal Free Healthy School Meals In Primary Schools To Help End Health Inequality In UK - press release 12 August 2008
<http://www.gmb.org.uk/Templates/PressItems.asp?NodeID=97375>

UNISON (2008) - Free school meals urged – press release 24th September 2008
http://www.unison.org.uk/news/news_view.asp?did=4852
(please also view Unison website for additional information, reports etc.)

NAfW (2008) Proposed Healthy Eating in Schools Measure Committee Report (October) -
<http://www.assemblywales.org/cr-ld7248-e.pdf>

WAG (2007) Appetite for Life
http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/policy_strategy_and_planning/schools/appetiteforlife/?lang=en

Other sources of information

Child Poverty Action Group – free school meals for all campaign
<http://www.cpag.org.uk>

End Child Poverty Network Cymru

The End Child Poverty Network Cymru is a coalition of concern focused on the eradication of child poverty in Wales, co-ordinated and managed on a day-to-day basis by Children in Wales. Its steering group include representation from across the voluntary and statutory sectors and the Network has an increasing supporting membership from a broad cross-section of agencies. The Network is supporting the Governments vision that no child in Wales should be living in poverty by 2020, and is working to achieve

- Increased public and professional understanding of child poverty in Wales
- Public and professional support for measures to tackle child poverty
- To ensure that policies are in place at all levels of government (local, Assembly and Westminster), which contribute to ending child poverty in Wales.

www.endchildpovertycymru.org.uk

Steering Group members include

Children in Wales
Save the Children (Wales)
Barnardo's Cymru
Action for Children (Wales)
NSPCC Cymru,
National Energy Action Wales
Welsh Local Government Association
Rainer-Communities that Care
Citizens Advice (Wales)
The Frank Buttle Trust,
Shelter Cymru,
Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales
Consumer Focus Wales
NPHS Wales
Fairbridge Cymru

Further information

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