

Child Poverty Action Group, One Plus and Poverty Alliance are leading voluntary sector organisations concerned with the welfare of children and families in Scotland. Together we co-ordinate the Free School Meals Campaign.

Poverty, diet, health and the ability to learn

- A quarter of Scots children (260 000) live in households officially recognised as poor (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/06/07115348/53542>)
- Thousands of children are going without basics: without fresh fruit and vegetables, a warm coat or a properly fitting pair of shoes. They are missing out on school trips, on hobbies and on visits to friends and family. (see www.irf.org.uk/bookshop/eBooks/185935128X.pdf)
- Parents often go without food themselves in order to provide for their children.
- 25% of low income families can't afford to give their children the food they want to.
- Low income families spend nearly £11 a week less on average than the Family Budget Unit estimates is essential to provide a healthy diet.
- Health and nutrition experts tell us that:
 - adult dietary patterns are learnt in childhood
 - poor diet in children is linked to disease in later life
 - Scottish children eat only two of the five recommended portions of fresh fruit and vegetables a day
 - 75% of Scottish children appear to eat no green leafy vegetables
 - nutritious food at school improves cognition, attendance and classroom behaviour.

Current Free School Meal provision

- Around 100 000 children who are officially recognised as living in poverty are not currently getting the benefit of a free school meal. 25% of children live in poverty yet only 19% of school children are entitled to free school meals. One in three children entitled to free school meals are not taking them (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/06/06172925/29269>)
- Extending entitlement to free school meals would help increase the disposable income of some of our poorest households by up to £27 per week.
- Means-testing creates stigma that discourages uptake of free school meals (see <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB270.PDF>).
- For children who do take up their entitlement, evidence suggests that stigma all too often exacerbates the impact of poverty on their lives (CPAG, 1999)
- Save the Children research (2003) shows that many children living in the most severe and persistent poverty had not been in receipt of benefits. There is therefore no guarantee that they currently receive a free school meal.

Hungry for Success

- The Scottish Executives "Hungry for Success" strategy recognises these facts and significant progress is being made in improving Scotland's school meals.

- However “Hungry for Success” falls far short of ensuring all school pupils receive a nutritional meal at least once a day. No extension of free school meal entitlement has been made, despite the significant numbers of poor children who remain excluded and the Hungry for Success report’s finding that the Executive should “ensure that families and young people do not fall through a gap”.
- The Scottish Executives own research finds that cost is a key factor in choosing *not* to eat a school meal for 21% of primary and 31% of secondary school pupils (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/01/13110440/3>).

Cost and the case against targeting

The **costs** of extending free school meal entitlement to all primary school children are estimated at £88 to £89 million. Additional investment in the dining and kitchen capacity of schools is already needed to implement the Hungry for Success strategy.

A key argument against free school meals for all children is that limited resources would be spent on well off children at the expense on the most disadvantaged. However;

- Research from economists at Dundee University (www.dundee.ac.uk/econman/discussion/DDPE_173.pdf) modelled the impact on differing income groups of providing free school meals as first a means tested benefit and then a universal benefit. The results show that only when entitlement is extended to the richest 10% of families is there no additional benefit to less well off children. The research showed that means testing fails to deliver to the poorest and that targeting is *not* an efficient way of helping the neediest.
- It is not only children in poverty who would benefit from a healthy school dinner. Poor diet and its impact on health and learning affects children across all income groups.
- Targeting and means testing inevitably undermine people’s efforts to move out of poverty through work. Losing free school meals entitlement means losing the equivalent of up to £27 a week – a sum that can easily leave families no better off when they move into work.
- A UNICEF report on Child Poverty in Rich Countries highlights the problem highly targeted social expenditure creates across the developed world and concludes that “benefits universally provided, though *apparently* more expensive, can avoid this poverty trap” (www.unicef-icdc.org/presscentre).

Conclusion

Providing a nutritious good quality free school meal to every Scottish primary school child would have a massive impact on the health and wellbeing of Scotland’s children – particularly those in our poorest families. The case for free nutritious school meals is supported by leading anti-poverty charities, teachers unions, children’s organisations, politicians across the political spectrum, The Herald and Mirror newspapers, the STUC, Unison and leading nutritionists and medical experts. **What better way for the Scottish Parliament to tackle our child poverty and child health problems than to ensure every child receives at least one healthy meal a day?**

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