

Written Submission to the Scottish Parliament's  
Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee

## **Provision of Free School Lunches in P1-P3**

Children in Scotland unequivocally welcomes the proposed legislation to provide free school lunches to all children in their first three years of primary school. The potential benefits are well documented and the experience with such provision thus far confirms that this potential can be realised in practice.

In our previous testimony to this committee, we highlighted a number of areas in which additional or more specific actions would result in more meaningful outcomes. We would like to re-emphasise the following key points:

1. It is essential that the positive outcomes intended are clearly defined and accompanied by appropriate ways and means of measuring the anticipated benefits of providing free school lunches in P1-P3. It is reasonable to expect direct health benefits, as well as more indirect educational and social benefits. Questions that should be considered at the outset include:
  - Which of the expected positive changes are intended to benefit all children and which are likely to have heightened effects on particular groups of primary pupils?
  - What specific changes are anticipated, and over what timescale, e.g. reduction in school sickness absences, lower incidence of certain medical conditions, better dental health, fewer children exhibiting signs of obesity?
  - Is there adequate baseline data already in the health, education and social realms – and, if not, how will such baseline data be gathered – so that the anticipated positive changes can accurately be monitored and analysed over time?
  - What measures will be used -- and how will the data gathering and analysis processes be established and maintained -- to monitor outcomes of free school lunches over time?
2. Simply providing free school lunches to all P1-P3 pupils is unlikely to produce the full range of potential benefits unless a range of ancillary supports accompany this step forward. These could and should include:

- Ensuring that pupil take-up is optimised and that there are strategies to encourage this result
- Ensuring that meals are consistent with the 'Hungry for Success' nutritional guidelines
- Working with parents to develop a complementary approach to eating and nutrition in relation to both meals at home and home-supplied packed school lunches
- Considering how mealtimes and the dining environment can be used to promote positive outcomes in terms of social behaviour
- Considering how school lunches can integrate with aspects of the curriculum; for example, in helping primary pupils to understand basic realities of food production, nutrition and the environment
- Ensuring that other actions to address childhood obesity (and related concerns) are put in place to support the free school provision

3. Too large a number of children across Scotland have entered Primary 1 with significant risks of poor outcomes in health, learning and social behaviour. Children in Scotland hopes that the forthcoming Early Years Framework will introduce a variety of 'transformational' changes that will significantly reduce the number of children already at risk of poor outcomes before they even have started primary school. Of particular relevance here are such early years initiatives as nature kindergartens, healthy snacks and meals at pre-schools and other out-of-home settings and support for positive parenting (including an emphasis on healthy eating). Examples of such approaches can be found in other European countries, where meal provision is included in holistic full day care settings. All of these will set the stage for, and increase the efficacy of, free school lunches in P1-P3.

4. Children in Scotland notes the controversy about funding free school lunches with disappointment. Our understanding is that financing for this provision explicitly was included in the current financial agreement between the Scottish Government and COSLA.

While it certainly is true that the decision to use funds for this purpose reduces the amount available for other purposes, exactly the same point could be made about the vast majority of other government expenditures. There is no compelling reason to single out free school lunches as a particularly problematic example of the general reality that funding any one programme or activity reduces the availability of funds for any other one. It may also be useful to consider how experience elsewhere could inform a best value approach. Sweden, for example, has lengthy experience in providing free meals to all children throughout pre-school, primary and secondary school and does so on a cost effective basis.