

Citizens Advice Swansea Neath Port Talbot - Contribution to Revised Eligibility for Free School Meals Consultation

Introduction

We welcome the consultation paper on proposals for Free School Meals eligibility and how this may increase in volume as Universal Credit rolls out. In our own area covering the City and County of Swansea and the County Borough of Neath Port Talbot we have endured the full service of Universal Credit since December and October 2017 respectively.

We believe, however, that the consultation doesn't go far enough and that its main driver is saving public sector finance through the limit of families estimated to become eligible under the new income threshold. However, we don't believe the consultation goes far enough in addressing the underlying issues of poverty, ill health and hunger.

1 in 5 children live in poverty in Wales in some of the areas we work in the proportion is as much as 1 in 4. Households in poverty face disproportionately higher costs for housing, utilities, consumer goods and often are unable to afford insurance in the event of a range of crisis events. As a matter of course, we would suggest in light of the links between nutrition and poverty, and educational attainment to give life chances for children to move into adulthood with opportunities away from the poverty of their childhood, there should be a greater emphasis placed on healthy eating and school meals on a universal basis as a means of preventing unavoidable reliance on health and other support services. We would suggest an impact assessment should be looked at as to the cost benefits of funding universal school meals linked to the latest in nutritional science and co-produced by the catering professionals of the future using FE colleges and residential care provision to support the delivery.

In the Public Health Observatory's report of 2013¹ it was stated: *'The majority of children and young people in Wales do not eat guideline amounts of fruit and vegetables daily; with only just over 30% of those aged 11-16 consuming a portion of fruit and vegetables each day, the percentage in Wales being lower than England, Ireland and Scotland.'* This could be addressed within the school system surely?

If there are around 466,500² compulsory school age pupils attending state schools in Wales the cost of free school meals on a weekly basis would be £5,255,010.³ However, should this be set against the administration costs in each local authority

and school of administering the charges and free school meals? Should it also be set against the costs associated with health and social care intervention where children are malnourished and dehydrated or generally neglected? Could a wider initiative be looked at in terms of addressing food poverty, levering in local producers and calling to account the larger supermarkets who throw away large amounts of fresh food? Food banks are relying on donations of tins and non-perishable food but is there not a wider initiative incorporating locally grown and freshly produced meals for the nation rather than pockets of children and households going hungry because the food chain is dysfunctional. This could also link to the wider agricultural policy once the UK leaves the European Union. There is such a richness in natural resources in Wales it would be beneficial for those in poverty, those currently following unhealthy diets and surely the planet, to look at the issue of food through a wider scope piece of work that is beyond saving minimal amounts of funding due to subsidising free school meals for those below a specific income threshold.

We now turn our attention to the specific proposals:

Income Threshold

The take home figure of £7,800 does not allow for larger families and for the cost of associated school costs for them. As the benefits system has started to work against families with more than 2 children we are urging Welsh Government to address this inequity. We have a number of case studies from client evidence that we can use to illustrate this.

Case Studies

- 3 school age children under 16.

Single father of 3 children between 11 and 16. His take home pay is around £9,600 per annum which would take him out of support for free school meals. The client has council tax debt and despite modest housekeeping expenditure of £115 per week is unable to meet all his commitments which include public transport costs for the children to go to school (£90pm); school costs in the form of after school clubs, trips and school uniform (£47pm estimated). (CA-137662696. Neath)

It is also costs of other education related matters such as uniform and school trips that is also impacting on low income families.

- Impact of other children related costs – e.g. childcare

One single mother of 2 school age children estimates the costs of trips and meals to be around £800 per year plus uniform costs to be around £120 per year. This single mother would be eligible under the proposals for free school meals but had she not been she would be spending even more on her two children from her £120 per week take home pay as she pays around £135 per week for child care costs (which is met by 70% under the Tax Credits system). (CLI-3215704-R6N6Z6. Neath) Should her circumstances change to lead to her needing to claim Universal Credit she is likely to find the delay in getting UC payments for her child care costs to be a significant issue. We would therefore suggest some further guidance on educational related costs and to consider a figure that covers any additional costs for child care that is not met under the current systems as a deduction from the take home figure.

- Disincentives to work

We recently recruited a single parent to our paid staff team. She was previously reliant on benefits as she has responsibility for two school age children following a relationship breakdown. She says to us '*I am poorer in work*' as the loss of entitlement to the free school meals now at a cost of £22.50 each work for both children and net child care costs are not made up for by the pay she receives. She is part time on 20 hours a week and her take home pay is higher than the national minimum/living wage. She does, however, feel that there are other reasons to work like mental well-being etc and for her children, but already we have seen someone we are responsible for as an employer lose out because of the loss of entitlement to the current system for free school meals. For others the loss of this contribution to the costs of bringing up children and more so, in bigger families may not lead to individuals going back into work.

Impact on Equality

As this initiative is one around income in excess of Universal Credit which along with an increasing number of other welfare schemes limits the support to families with less than three children we believe, if there hasn't been one already, that there should be a specific impact assessment conducted into whether there are specific groups of families who are more impacted by these provisions. With the changing family make up it is not unusual for households to have a combination of step children from previous relationships brought together by new couples living together. It is also not unusual for some ethnic minorities to have larger family sizes and who may therefore be indirectly impacted by these types of provision and more so if there are changes to the adults in the household bringing up one or

more groups of children following death or relationship breakdown. We would urge Welsh Government to undertake a review where it is able to of the impact of these proposals in respect to family size.

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