

**Poverty and Inequality Commission**

**Free school meal provision during the COVID-19 crisis**

**Introduction**

The Scottish Government provided rapid funding and guidance around food insecurity, including free school meal provision at the start of lockdown.[[1]](#footnote-1) This included the announcement of a £70 million Food Fund, which included funding to support the delivery of free school meal provision. The accompanying guidance emphasised that local authorities should consider the needs of entire families whose children are eligible for free school meals and emphasised the importance of a cash-first approach, although this was not mandatory. Local authorities then acted rapidly to put in place local solutions that worked for local areas. Overall, the Commission is supportive of this flexible approach and commends the Scottish Government, COSLA and local authorities for quickly putting in place measures to help ensure that children and families continue to have access to food during this crisis.

We also hugely welcome this week’s announcement of an additional £12.6 million of funding provided to local authorities to support free school meals over the school holidays.

The Poverty and Inequality Commission set up a working group to consider immediate responses to COVID-19.[[2]](#footnote-2) Initially, our focus has been on food insecurity and we have completed two intelligence gathering exercises into emergency food provision across Scotland.[[3]](#footnote-3) We now turn our attention to considering free school meal provision.

We are over two months into lockdown and school closures and, now that initial responses have had time to settle, we have examined what is currently happening around free school meal provision. We have looked at analyses of the different approaches taken by local authorities, considered the views of people with direct lived experience of poverty, and outlined what this means for the upcoming school holidays.

**Analysis of free school meal provision by local authority**

Our Deputy Chair, Professor Morag Treanor, in her role as Professor of Child and Family Inequalities at Heriot Watt University, recently published the findings of an analysis of free school meal provision across different local authorities in Scotland.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As part of our ongoing work considering short term responses to COVID-19, we have examined Professor Treanor’s findings and find much to concern to us.

First, although the Scottish Government guidance encourages a cash-first approach, the analysis found that only 10 out of 32 local authorities’ first response is to give money to families (this was correct as of 12th May 2020 – we understand that there are now around half of local authorities taking a cash-first approach which is a welcome development). Other types of provision include vouchers, weekly delivery of food boxes or collection of food. Professor Treanor discusses some of the issues with these alternatives to cash. For example, vouchers are often provided for a single supermarket which may not be accessible to all families.

Second, there is considerable variation in the value of support given to replace free school meals. The amounts vary from a low of £2 to a high of £4 per child per day.

It is concerning to see such variations in approach across Scotland, leading to families across Scotland receiving quite different levels of support. We believe that providing cash is the most dignified and compassionate response, giving freedom of choice over what to eat, and should be the preferred method of support. However, during the current crisis, it also needs to be recognised that some families will still need more direct support because of shielding, health issues, lack of available transport etc. Therefore, it is disappointing that the majority of local authorities are not responding to this by providing families with the choice of what works best for them, including an option for a cash alternative.

One Parent Families Scotland have shared with us some findings from their investigation into local authorities’ responses to free school meal provision (unpublished). They found that while a majority of local authorities encourage parents who had not previously applied or been eligible for free school meals to make an application now, there are 12 local authorities that do not say whether they will accept new applications for free school meals. One local authority specifically says they are only able to support families who were eligible up to March 2020.

At a time when many people are losing their income and risk becoming trapped by poverty, they should be receiving the benefits to which they are entitled. We urge the local authorities who are not currently providing free school meal alternatives to those who are newly eligible to act quickly to rectify this.

**Evidence from people currently accessing free school meals**

We have considered available evidence on how people with direct lived experience of poverty feel about free school meal provision in their local area. The Poverty Alliance recently published a briefing which set out the views of community activists on a range of issues including free school meals.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Some of the views expressed are:

* Models of provision that involve vouchers that can only be redeemed in one retail outlet were considered to be particularly inappropriate and unable to meet the needs of all families. For example, if there were no stores in their community and no independent means of transport, their vouchers were not being used. There were also concerns of the additional stigma this approach could create for families.
* Some local authorities were providing vouchers which could not be used online – meaning families that were shielding were unable to use them.
* Other models that involve families having to travel to schools to pick up food parcels were also felt by community activists to be wholly inappropriate.

The community activists concluded that “while it was accepted that local authorities had to respond at pace to the crisis it was strongly felt that – more than two months after school closures – local authorities should be prioritising the development of cash-based approaches, which are the most effective, dignified and efficient way of supporting families through this period.”

**School holidays**

We are now two months into the school closures and the school holidays are looming. In its 2018 advice to the Scottish Government around school holidays, our predecessors on the non-statutory Poverty and Inequality Commission recognised the range of pressures that families face during the school holidays.[[6]](#footnote-6) These included food insecurity and childcare, but also related to wider finances, play and activities, parenting, and social isolation. The Commission described some of the innovative and successful examples of services and projects meeting the needs of families in local areas. A lot of these offered food as a core element but also play and activities and sometimes other supports to families.

We also know that food insecurity is of increasing concern to many families and those working in communities at the moment. For example, our recent work with Glasgow Caledonian University found the vast majority (65%) of frontline organisations felt that demand for emergency food had risen over the last month and an even larger proportion (73%) expected it to continue to increase.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Therefore, we welcome the additional support that is being provided to local authorities to support free school meal provision over the school holidays as this will provide essential support to many families trapped in poverty. We hope that this support will also continue for future school holidays.

**Recommendations**

The Commission is generally supportive of local authorities providing solutions that work for local families. However, the responses that have been put in place across Scotland differ hugely, both in the value of the support being provided and the mode of support. It is wrong that some children may be disadvantaged, simply because of where they live. This is not the intention of the flexibility offered in the guidance.

We now know that free school meal provision will continue over the school summer holidays. To ensure a more consistent approach to alternative free school meal provision, we make the following recommendations.

**1. Families that are newly eligible for free school meals must be able to receive the alternative support**

This is true in the majority of local authority areas. However, we are concerned that many families in specific areas of Scotland do not appear to have access to this support at this time. The local authorities that are not accepting applications for alternative free school meals from those newly eligible should rectify this as soon as possible.

**2. The Scottish Government should set a national minimum standard for alternative free school meal provision for periods when schools are closed (i.e. school holidays and during any future lockdowns) Providing cash is the most dignified and compassionate response, giving freedom of choice over what they eat, and should be the preferred method of support. However, during the current crisis, it also needs to be recognised that some families will still need more direct support because of shielding, health issues, lack of available transport etc.**

The support offered in lieu of free school meals has been an essential lifeline for many families trapped in poverty during this pandemic. While we welcome the recent confirmation that free school meal support will continue over the summer holidays, we would be keen to see this extended to all periods of school holidays and future lockdowns, providing families with reassurance that this support will not be taken away from them.

During normal times, school holidays place additional pressures on families locked in poverty. These are not normal times and families’ struggles to stay afloat this summer will be even harder. Therefore, we call for a cash payment to be made to families eligible for free school meals (including those newly eligible) in recognition of the additional costs that families face during school holidays. The amount should be set at a level that at least matches the equivalent costs of school meals. Direct cash transfers provide the most dignified way to lessen the financial pressures on families, offering families choices in how to meet their needs. However, more direct support should also be available for those who need it.

1. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-food-fund-guidance-to-local-authorities/pages/annex-b-community-food-infrastructure/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://povertyinequality.scot/about/our-working-groups/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://povertyinequality.scot/publication/covid-19-food-insecurity-briefing/>

<https://povertyinequality.scot/publication/local-action-to-tackle-food-insecurity-during-the-coronavirus-crisis/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.i-sphere.hw.ac.uk/covid-19-crisis-measures-poverty-and-free-school-meals/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Community-organisations-COVID19-Poverty-Alliance-briefing-2nd-June.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://povertyinequality.scot/publication/poverty-and-inequality-commission-advice-on-poverty-in-school-holidays/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://povertyinequality.scot/publication/local-action-to-tackle-food-insecurity-during-the-coronavirus-crisis/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)