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CABINET STATEMENT

Written Statement: Extending Free School Meal entitlement to all primary school children

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Over the summer I updated members on the work underway to review the eligibility criteria for Free School Meals. This work was undertaken in the context of our clear commitment to continue to meet the rise in demand for Free School Meals resulting from the pandemic and to extend entitlement as far as our resources allow.

Since then, and drawing on the learning from the review work undertaken, we have explored with Plaid Cymru a range of policies in which we have common interests. The resulting Co-operation Agreement sets out the outcome of these efforts and the will to work together in delivering them. At the heart of this approach, is a commitment to extend Free School Meals to all primary school pupils over the lifetime of the agreement.

Our ambitions are informed by our understanding that younger children are more likely to be living in relative income poverty and, in taking this action, an additional 196,000 children will become eligible to take up the offer of a Free School Meal in Wales. Our commitment, therefore, represents a transformational intervention and an important further step to reaching our shared ambitions of tackling child poverty and ensuring that no child goes hungry.

Evidence also points toward the wider benefits of Free School Meals, including raising the profile of healthy eating across the whole school, increasing the range of food pupils eat, improving social skills at meal times, as well as improvements to behaviour and attainment. More widely, in rolling out this commitment we will be working with partners to increase the supply of Welsh food onto the school plate. This will shorten supply chains and reduce carbon emissions, support local food producers and distributors, and strengthen the Foundational Economy.

In preparing to deliver this commitment, we have already begun the important work of co-constructing an approach to implementation with our key delivery partners, including local authorities, schools, food producers and suppliers, and relevant voluntary organisations. This includes efforts to better understand the capacity of the workforce and kitchen and dining facilities that form the backbone of the school meal infrastructure within Wales.

There is also work to be done in meeting our shared ambitions for a Community Food Strategy, and the necessary steps to be taken that will improve food procurement, building in social value, recognising quality as local provenance, and moving away from lowest cost.

We are very keen to make progress at the earliest opportunity. Our early discussions with partners suggest it is likely that the remainder of the 2021/2022 academic year will be necessary to put the delivery arrangements and capacity in place. We are also mindful of the challenges local authorities and schools continue to face in operating during the pandemic.

As the Co-operation Agreement sets out, this joint commitment will be rolled out across the lifetime of the agreement. We are therefore working with partners to develop a staged approach to implementation so that the growth in numbers of pupils eligible for, and taking up their offer of a free school meal can be matched by the capacity of schools to effectively deliver the extended provision. While there is still work to be done to better understand what this looks like in practice, our aim is to begin implementation in September 2022 with our youngest learners in primary receiving free school meals. We would then look to continue the roll-out in September 2023 so that all learners in primary schools can benefit from a free school meal. This will allow sufficient time for planning and preparation of the required infrastructure to best ensure success. I will provide a further update early in 2022 which will set out our detailed plans for implementation of this commitment.

Finally, in delivering this commitment every primary aged learner will be offered a school meal for free. This means that we will no longer be able to use Free School Meal eligibility as a proxy indicator for disadvantage for children in this age group. We know that this indicator has, for many years, informed both local and national policy and the way in which funding is allocated. We therefore need to work closely with partners, and right across government, to consider the impact of this change, and to ensure that we minimise turbulence to both funding allocations and ways of working going forward. Whilst this is very important work, it will not hold up the rolling out of the programme once the practical matters referred to above have been addressed.

Our refreshed Programme for Government, which now incorporates the Co-operation Agreement, remains clear - we will maximise fairness for all and eliminate inequality at every level of society. Wales will be a country where nobody is held back and no one is left behind. In delivering our shared commitment to universal primary Free School Meals we are taking significant strides towards realising these ambitions.

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