

## **UNISON Cymru/Wales response to Welsh Government consultation on eligibility for free school meals.**

1. UNISON Cymru/Wales welcomes the chance to respond to the proposed changes for eligibility for free school meals and recognises that this is a vital citizenship issue for our members, many of whom are low paid women working the public sector.
2. UNISON Cymru/Wales notes Welsh Government's proposals to alter the earnings threshold for families in receipt of free school meals from the current arrangement, based on receipt of Universal Credit, to an income-based assessment. We welcome Welsh Government's transitional protections, attempting to mitigate the impact of the proposed changes on children currently in receipt of free school meals yet we have grave concerns regarding moving towards an income-based assessment for free school meals.
3. Both tax credits and the in-work elements of Universal Credit top up the incomes of low-paid families, and research undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>1</sup> found that the public strongly believe this is the right thing to do. Some seven in ten (70%) support wage top-ups for lone parents and six in ten (58%) support them for couples with children. As a result UNISON Cymru/Wales also considers that this should be extended to the eligibility of free school meals.
4. Putting aside UNISON Cymru/Wales' concerns about the roll out and introduction of Universal Credit, the Paper<sup>2</sup> supporting the White Paper introducing Universal Credit stated that as an in work benefit:
5. "[Universal Credit] will substantially reduce poverty"
6. Given the proposed purpose of the introduction of Universal Credit as a means to challenge in work poverty, UNISON Cymru/Wales would contend that Welsh Government should continue eligibility of free school meals to all children in households where the benefit is received.
7. The Joint Letter from Leader of the House, Minister for Children and Social Care and Minister for Housing and Regeneration to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in April 2018 highlighted the negative impact of welfare reforms on its attempts to tackle children living in poverty and acknowledged that the changes would cause an increase in child poverty in Wales. UNISON Cymru/Wales considers that Welsh Government has an opportunity to make a real difference to the lives and opportunities for children in Wales by retaining free school meals for all in receipt of Universal Credit.
8. UNISON Cymru/Wales notes that the percentage of take-up of free school meals is not at 100%. UNISON Cymru/Wales believes more should be done to promote and encourage families who are eligible for free school meals to take up the entitlement to ensure that children and families are not further disadvantaged.
9. Whilst UNISON Cymru/Wales acknowledges that no additional funding has been received in order to manage the impact of the migration to Universal Credit, we would highlight the positive impact that healthy nutritious meals can have on the engagement and educational attainment of children and the positive impact that this could have on other budgets such as health and social care budgets. This is particularly important when considering tackling child obesity and the results from the National Survey for Wales 2016-2017 Child Health –

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/universal-credit-needs-reform-unlock-families-work-poverty>

<sup>2</sup>

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/181145/universal-credit-full-document.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/181145/universal-credit-full-document.pdf)

Lifestyle results which found that only 53% of children ate fruit and vegetables every day in the most deprived areas in Wales.

10. The social benefits of free school meals can also not be underestimated, work undertaken by Kellogg's<sup>3</sup> on the benefit of breakfast clubs found that there significant social benefits to breakfast clubs including quality of friendship, feelings of security and development of relationships. As a result, the continued provision of free school meals to those families in receipt of Universal Credit would have continued social benefits that cannot be measured purely in a financial manner.
11. The UNISON Cymru/Wales position is clear that the current entitlement should be retained and will continue to campaign on this issue. Whilst we fundamentally disagree with an income based approach to eligibility if Welsh Government takes the disappointing decision to introduce an earnings cap UNISON Cymru/Wales considers that a cap of £7400 is too low when considering the negative impact welfare reforms will have on family incomes moving forward.
12. UNISON Cymru/Wales considers that funding of free school meals should continue to be met by the Welsh Government. Further, it considers that the Welsh Government should also seek to address the issue of lunchtime meals for children during school holidays.

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/Laura%20Street%20%E2%80%93%20Workshop%20.pdf>