



2022-0047801NGPO

Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP
Minister of State for School Standards

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Councillor Bob Cook
By email: Peter.Bell@stockton.gov.uk

13 January 2023

Dear Councillor Cook,

Thank you for your letter of 7 December, regarding eligibility for free school meals.

The Government is committed to the wellbeing of children and young people, particularly the most disadvantaged. We are supporting children through not only free school meals, but also the National Breakfast Club programme, Holidays and Activities Fund, and the school milk and fruit and vegetable schemes. In addition, we are providing support to households to help with the cost of living.

There are currently 1.9 million pupils eligible for and claiming free school meals, saving families hundreds of pounds each year. Since 2014, a further 1.25 million children in reception, Year 1 and Year 2 have free meals through the Universal Infant Free School Meal programme. Together, that amounts to more than one-third of all children receiving a free lunchtime meal. Free meals are also available to disadvantaged young people in further education.

In addition, we have permanently extended eligibility for free school meals to children from all families who have no recourse to public funds, subject to income thresholds.

In setting an income threshold above which entitlement to free school meals no longer applies, the Government's judgement is that the current level enables the most disadvantaged children to benefit while remaining affordable and deliverable for schools and the taxpayer. For a typical family on Universal Credit, the current £7,400 earned income threshold, equates to an annual household income (depending on circumstances) of between £18,000 and £24,000 when benefits are taken into account.

It is right that provision is aimed at supporting the most disadvantaged, those out of work, or those on the lowest incomes. We do not have any plans to extend universal provision at this time but we will continue to keep all free school meal eligibility under review, to ensure that these meals are supporting those who need them most.

The Department has also announced a further investment in the National School Breakfast Programme, extending the programme for another year until July 2024 with £30 million of funding. This will support up to 2500 schools in disadvantaged areas, meaning that thousands of children from low-income families will be offered free and nutritious breakfasts to support their education, wellbeing, and readiness to be taught.

The Department also helps to support the most disadvantaged families through the expansion of the holiday activities and food (HAF) programme, which provides healthy food and enriching activities to disadvantaged children. The programme operated during 2021 in every local authority in England and a further £600 million was announced for this programme to continue for a further three years from 2022 to 2024. We have been delighted with local reports of the success of the programme last year and the positive impact it has had on hundreds of thousands of children and families. Food plays a major role in the HAF programme, but HAF is about more than just the food itself. It is an opportunity for young people to be taught about food and nutrition, to build an understanding of healthy food, and to learn to cook.

In April 2021, the Government increased the value of the Healthy Start scheme from £3.10 to £4.25 per week. Healthy Start offers support to pregnant women (at least 10 weeks into pregnancy) and families with a child under four years old. Eligibility for the Department of Health and Social Care's Healthy Start scheme is kept under continuous review and aligns closely with other benefits across Government.

The Government understands the pressures people are facing with the cost of living which is why, in addition to the £37 billion of support we have provided for cost of living pressures in 2022/23, we are acting now to ensure support continues throughout 2023/24.

To ensure stability and certainty for households, in the Autumn Statement the Government announced £26 billion in cost of living support for 2023/24. This includes Cost of Living Payments for the most vulnerable. In 2023/24, households on eligible means-tested benefits will receive up to a further £900 in Cost of Living Payments. A £300 payment will be made to pensioner households and individuals in receipt of eligible disability benefits will receive a £150 payment. Also included is the amended Energy Price Guarantee, which will save the average UK household £500 in 2023/24, and raising the benefit cap by 10.1 per cent in line with inflation.

For those who require extra support, the Government is providing an additional £1 billion of funding, including the Barnett Formula impact, to enable the extension of the Household Support Fund in England until 31 March 2024. This is on top of the amount the Government has already provided since October 2021, bringing total funding to £2.5 billion. Local authorities will use this to help households with the cost of essentials. It will be for the devolved administrations to decide how to allocate their additional Barnett funding.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick Gibb', written in a cursive style.

**The Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP
Minister for Schools**