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Our letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding free school meals during the Covid-19 pandemic

8 June 2020

The following is a letter from Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner for England, to the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding funding for free school meals.

I am writing about the Treasury's decision not to fund free school meals over the summer holidays. As Chancellor, you have announced measures in response to Covid-19 which are, by your own admission, exceptionally generous. However, it seems this generosity does not extend to children. This week we learnt that Covid-19 has already seen 300,000 children descend into poverty, during a Parliament that was already predicted to see the highest rates of child poverty on record. In the same week, the Government announced that children will not get free school meals over the summer holidays.

Even before Covid-19 there were nearly 2 million children in families in England classed as 'food insecure'. The summer holidays are a particularly difficult period for these families, but Covid-19 has exacerbated a range of issue they are facing, not just financial but in terms of the networks of support they can access either formally or informally.

A free school meal is the last line of defence against poverty and hunger for children. When everything else fails, when there are problems accessing universal credit, or families are verging on the edge of crisis, a school meal is the most basic level of subsistence we provide to our children. At a time when more families are facing pressures than ever before, and so many other sources of support are behind closed doors, the decision not to continue free school meals over the summer holidays appears uncaring and lacking in compassion.

have announced extends to £132bn. It reflects very poorly on the importance the Government places on children that within £132bn of spending you cannot find a few million pounds to keep children fed.

I also believe that your decision is exceptionally short-sighted. Financial pressures are one of many issues families are facing at the moment. Poor finances are often the trigger for families to move from coping to crisis. Thus, your decision is likely to compound the level of instability some children are experiencing at home and place more pressure on social care in the midst of their response to Covid-19. It is well established that poverty is one of the main drivers for children ending up in care, which is incredibly expensive for the Government.

A Government committed to families, to fairness and to intelligent, preventative spending would not be denying children free school meals over the summer holidays. I hope you will reconsider.

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