



From: The Minister

Private Office
Level 9
Causeway Exchange
1-7 Bedford Street
Belfast
BT2 7EG
e-mail: private.office@communities-ni.gov.uk
Tel: **I&S**
Our ref: EXEC-0354-2020

Your ref: DE SUB-1840-2020

20 October 2020

Peter Weir MLA
Minister of Education
Department of Education
43 Baloo Road
Rathgill
Bangor
BT19 7PR

Peter a chara,

FUNDING FREE SCHOOL MEALS FOLLOWING SCHOOL CLOSURES 19-23 OCTOBER 2020

Thank you for sight of the draft Executive Paper in relation to the above.

I have noted the proposals outlined in your paper. I would advocate that Free School Meals continue for the 2 week break from school in line with assistance provided over the summer period (and not just for the period 19th October to 23rd October). I would also request that the Department of Education remove recommendation 2 from their paper as it refers to the my Department providing food assistance during the Halloween holiday (26th October to 30th October) as this assistance is not targeted in the same way as Free School Meals.

Please see amendments to recommendation 8 and context for changes provided in Annex A.

Is mise le meas,

Personal Data

Carál Ní Chuilín MLA

Minister for Communities

Recommendation 8

The Department for Communities (DfC) has the lead for the anti-poverty strategy and have also invested in an Access to Food Programme. This includes investment in “Fare-Share” to deliver an increased supply of food to community food providers, invested in local councils under a COVID-19 Access to Food fund and in five social supermarket pilots offering food provision alongside a wraparound of support to address the underlying causes of food vulnerability/insecurity. I understand DfC continue to signpost people to other ways in which they can access food including local support through voluntary and community sector organisations/food charities. The intention is that families who experience food vulnerability/insecurity, including over the Halloween holiday period, can access the necessary support through these channels.

Background

- DfC is committed to delivering long-term sustainable solutions to poverty in all its forms including food poverty and very much aware of the increasing need for food across our communities and the likelihood of this continuing as the economic consequences of the pandemic continue. The issue of food insecurity and the associated impacts of COVID-19 cut across all Departments. Tackling this in the longer term must be considered within the broader context of an Anti-Poverty Strategy that is well informed throughout its development with the involvement of our citizens and communities.
- DfC does not provide any direct food provision as this is provided through Councils and the local Voluntary and Community Sector.
- We are acutely aware of the ongoing needs of the most vulnerable in our society and of the need to ensure they have access to alternative sources of help with access to food.

- Delivery of food boxes to those shielding and others who are economically vulnerable has ended. This was a short term emergency response to the first wave of the pandemic.
- There are no current plans to reinstate this at a regional level.
- Instead a more sustainable longer term support offer has been developed with both the Department for Communities and Councils working with local community food providers and providing additional investment to build their capacity. Support through community organisations is in place and the Department has provided support of almost £800k to Fareshare to ensure adequate food infrastructure and additional supply is in place across NI until the end of March 2021.
- **Fareshare**, a food redistribution charity, will help to deliver an increased supply of food to community food providers. Anyone requiring help should contact the COVID-19 Community Helpline where an advisor will match them with local help and support tailored to their circumstances. Freephone 0808 802 0020, text ACTION to 81025, or email covid19@adviceni.net