

A time for change?

With the conversation around Free School Meals more prevalent than ever, Katie Palmer, Programme Manager at [Food Sense Wales](#) addresses the huge difficulties that many families face and discusses how reviewing Wales' Free School Meals system could provide a possible solution.

Although the Welsh Government has committed to providing free school meals – either in the form of cash, vouchers or food parcels for the 90,000 eligible families in Wales during this lockdown period as well as during school holidays until Easter 2022 - around another 70,000 children, living below the poverty line won't benefit from this much needed support. This is because they don't meet the eligibility criteria set by Government.

Covid has exacerbated and brought to the forefront the twin challenges of inadequate state safety nets and low paid work.

The issue of how children receive their right to good food has rightly been highlighted through campaigns such as Marcus Rashford's where [more than 1 million people signed a petition](#) calling on the governments of the UK to expand free school meals to all under-16s where a parent or guardian is in receipt of Universal Credit or equivalent benefit. Campaigners are now calling for an urgent review of FSM across the UK.

Some low income families are managing without this support. Many parents are cutting down on their own food to ensure their children have sufficient. Others will turn to foodbanks. Some will be supported through community provision such as Pantries and others will rely on friends and family. But many are experiencing physical and/or mental ill health as a result of being unable to access sufficient food in a dignified way. Most of these parents are working and on low incomes. Many are single parents.

[ACE \(Action in Ely and Caerau\)](#) is seeing increasing numbers of working families who are not eligible for FSM support, but still struggling to make ends meet. ACE's Your Local Pantry project now targets these families experiencing in-work poverty to provide ongoing support with food costs. One of its members (Family A) stated that they didn't know how they would have coped without the use of the Pantry during the lockdown: "I have been placed on furlough and despite a reduction of income we are still not eligible for free school meals and the children are eating more at home, mostly due to boredom. Previously they would attend the breakfast club and have a small packed lunch. We are having to pay extra costs for gas and electricity as well as the extra food costs that seem to have shot up. Using the pantry has meant that I can get some good quality food for less and have a little extra money available to help with the fuel costs and other bills. I feel there should be more help available for parents who may be working but have had a loss of income through no fault of their own. I have lost 20% of my salary but the bills remain the same and still need to be paid."

This troubling situation isn't new. Covid has just made it worse.

*Back in 2018 Welsh Government reviewed free school meal eligibility in line with the roll out of Universal Credit. At that time I wrote about how changes to the criteria of those who could access free school meals was an opportunity [to put children's nutrition first](#). After consultation, Wales decided on rules that mean that families on universal credit are able to earn just **£7,400** a year before they become **ineligible** for free school meals. The threshold is not adjusted to account for the number of children in the family, or to account for two-parent households, and it is not automatically increased in line with rises in the national living wage. Northern Ireland opted for a wider criteria allowing earnings of up to £14,000 and although England and Scotland also have the £7,400 earning*

cut off, both nations have introduced Universal Infant free school meals – meaning all children in reception and years 1 and 2 receive a free hot lunch. However, Wales decided to resource free primary school breakfasts instead and has pledged to [pilot an extra allowance for Year 7 children receiving free school meals to enable them to have free breakfasts in school](#).

It should therefore come as no surprise that the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) has found that Wales has the least generous provision for free school meals across the UK. It means Children growing up in poverty in Wales are less likely to get a free school meal than children growing up in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, because [Wales has a tighter means-test and less generous universal infant provision than other nations](#). As a result, these two policies mean significantly more parents and carers in low paid jobs in Wales can't access free school meals for their children.

Many families are being supported in term time and during the holidays but many other children are missing out altogether. Missing out on free school breakfasts (due to Covid); free school meals (due to eligibility) and any form of holiday provision. Indeed, Welsh Government's flagship School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP), which supports many children on low incomes, not just those eligible for Free School Meals, was cancelled last year with funding repurposed into holiday free school meal provision, meaning that those children ineligible for FSM who might have attended, didn't have the opportunity to do so.

However, having worked on the establishment of the School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP), I'm really pleased that Welsh Government's commitment to increase its funding, allocating an additional £2.2m to the Programme, almost doubling its investment to £4.9m in 2021-22. This will provide opportunities for up to 14,000 children aged 7-11 years to be more active, eat healthily, and develop friendships whilst also making the most of local school facilities in disadvantaged areas during the summer holidays.

Welsh Government support during the pandemic for children currently eligible for FSM is to be commended but I do worry for those children who aren't meeting the eligibility criteria. Wales has enshrined the Rights of the Child in our domestic legislation. Surely it is time to do a Children's Right Impact Assessment to see how current policies are affecting all those children living in families on low incomes? Now must be the time to align support with need? And that need is likely to become even more urgent as the fall out of Covid sees reductions in household incomes (rising unemployment) meeting increases in household bills.

Working as a coalition of organisations, [Food Policy Alliance Cymru](#), has been advocating for Welsh Government to set up a Food System Commission that would link all elements of the food system - from production and supply to consumption - and would pay due regard to all the challenges in the food system including public health, climate change, nature loss, fair work and rising food insecurity.

If predications of [child poverty reaching 39% by 2022 are correct](#) we need a radical rethink, one which links the "safety net" element of Free School Meals with the production standards in agriculture and food production; school food standards; food education and public procurement policies. This could help reduce inequalities, protect the environment and support the food and farming sector – especially if Government were to look at serving every child in Wales a free hot nutritious school meal sourced sustainably from the Welsh supply chain. In other words a Universal Free School Meal service fit for our future generation. One that protects their health, their local economy and their planet.

Earlier this year, the [University of Essex published its final report on the impact of Universal Infant Free School Meals](#). It demonstrates an increase in uptake of Meals by Free School Meal registered

children and those not registered; reduction in children's bodyweight in the first year of school; improved absence rates and indications of reducing the attainment gap at age 5 between FSM-registered children and those not registered. This evidence wasn't available in 2018 when eligibility criteria was last reviewed. Wales has one of [the highest child Obesity rates of all 4 nations](#) and is working hard to reduce the attainment gap but again, this is another target that's been hindered by the impact of Covid.

So what should we do next?

Members of the Wales Antipoverty coalition have recently written to both the First Minister and the Education Minister calling on Welsh Government to:

- *Extend free school meals to all families receiving universal credit (or equivalent benefits)*
- *Permanently extend free school meals to families with no recourse to public funds*
- *Build on the successes of the School Holiday Enrichment Programme by continuing to invest in provision outside of term time*

But I think Welsh Government could go further. I'd like to see Government conducting research into the feasibility and impact of providing Universal Free School Meals – a policy that could benefit all children in Wales as well as providing a solid market for our food producers whilst also driving up environmental standards.

Universal provision of healthcare was conceived in Wales. The NHS is rooted in Wales. I'd like to see Wales continue to pioneer and to become the first UK nation to create a world class universal free school meal service that supports all children, their local economy and protects their planet.

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

- For further information, please contact Siân-Elin Davies, Communication and Engagement Manager, Food Sense Wales – sian-elin.davies@wales.nhs.uk / 07733 305018
- Katie Palmer, Programme Manager, Food Sense Wales is available for interview. Please contact [Sian-Elin Davies](#) to arrange.

About Katie Palmer:

Katie Palmer is Programme Manager for Food Sense Wales. Katie has an MSc in Nutrition from Kings College London and in Food Policy from City University. She has worked in the world of food for over 20 years with experience in both the private sector (Volac International), and third and public sector (including 6 years on Food Standards Agency's Welsh Food Advisory Committee).

Katie founded Food Sense Wales in 2018, (part of the Cardiff and Vale Health charity). It was borne out of the work of the Sustainable Food Place, Food Cardiff.

Katie is currently a member of the Food and Drink Wales Industry Board; the Healthy Weight, Healthy Wales Implementation Board and is a founding member of the Veg Power Board.

She also sits on the WLGA's School Holiday Enrichment Programme Advisory Group and was one of the team of four who created the multi award winning Food and Fun programme in Cardiff in 2015.

About Food Sense Wales:

Food Sense Wales is working to create a food and farming system that is good for people and good for the planet. We want to influence how food is produced and consumed in Wales, to ensure sustainable food and farming is at the heart of a just, connected and prosperous food system.

To achieve this we believe that the environment; health and wellbeing; social justice, and the economy should be integrated in all policy thinking in Wales. We believe that this “food in all policies” approach can be achieved through research, cross sector collaboration and mobilising citizens and stakeholders as part of a “Wales Good Food Movement”.

Food Sense Wales is a fund within the Cardiff and Vale Health Charity and hosted by the Cardiff and Vale Public Health team. Food Sense Wales takes a systems approach to food and farming in combination with strong working relationships with public, private and civil society organisations operating in and cutting across the food space in Wales and the UK.

Food Sense Wales delivers a number of programmes across Wales – many as part of UK partnerships – including [Peas Please](#), [Food For Life Get Togethers](#) and [Sustainable Food Places](#).

Food Sense Wales is also a member of Food Policy Alliance Cymru, a coalition of organisations and stakeholders building and promoting a collective vision for the Welsh food system. Through collaboration, engagement and research the Alliance aims to:

- Co-produce a vision for a food system in Wales that connects production, supply and consumption and gives equal consideration to the health and wellbeing of people and nature.
 - Advocate for policy change to address the climate and ecological emergencies, the public health crisis and the rise in food insecurity.
 - Ensure Wales is linked to UK policy, research opportunities and the broader Global system.
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- The members of Food Policy Alliance Cymru are:
 - [Food Sense Wales](#)
 - [Food, Farming and Countryside Commission](#)
 - [Landworkers Alliance Cymru](#)
 - Dr Pam Mason
 - [Oxfam Cymru](#)
 - [Slade Farm](#)
 - [Social Farms & Gardens](#)
 - [Sustainable Food Places](#)
 - [Sustainable Places Institute, Cardiff University](#)
 - [RSPB Cymru](#)
 - [Urban Agriculture consortium](#)
 - [WWF Cymru](#)