

Press Release

Dated: 26th November 2010

*Fabian Hamilton MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA*

Free school meals benefit under threat

While on a recent visit to a primary school in the constituency, Fabian was alarmed to learn of the implications of the coalition government benefits review for free school meals. These free dinners have been provided over many years to children whose families do not have sufficient income to support the purchase of a lunch.

Fabian says,

"It is self evident that a child who is hungry or poorly nourished cannot work well at school. If a child needs food then the efforts of their teachers are likely to be in vain."

Free dinners have often been controversial. Parents have to apply for them as they are means tested which means confidential financial information has to be provided. Some parents have been reluctant to apply thinking that to do so is something to be ashamed of. This is a prevalent view among some sections of society and it can sometimes mean that children who need and deserve the meals do not receive them. Schools have also had to devise ways in which children excused from paying are not stigmatised in the school canteen for example by being put in a different queue. Nevertheless free school meals have been a very important part of our caring welfare state that seeks to give all children the opportunity to do well and succeed when at school.

Now it is proposed that the money used for free school meals is to be aggregated into the future single benefit, the Universal Credit. It will mean that parents will get the money, if they are eligible to receive it, and will then be expected to pay for their children to have their meals at school.

Fabian is very sceptical.

"If we could be sure that 100% of all parents could manage money, recognise priorities and guarantee that their children would be fed properly, then this naive approach might work. We know that this is not the case. While most parents and carers will try their best for their children, sadly we know that there will be many who cannot be relied upon. These children from dysfunctional homes will suffer. What is a school then to do? They will have to stand by and watch the suffering. I know that there will be teachers distressed and heartbroken to see some of their children neglected and hungry in school and without the authority or money to do anything about the situation."

Provision of free school meals is a compromise solution to a serious problem. It has the merit that the benefit can only be used by the children themselves. In future the real risk will be that some children will not get their meals - even though their parents have been given the money!

"The government must think again on this," says Fabian. "I am going to write to Michael Gove and lobby for a reconsideration. I am sure there are many MPs from all sides of the House who realise that this change means that children will go hungry in our schools once more. We must not go back to the dark ages with children's nutrition"

Notes for editors

Fabian Hamilton MP was alerted to this issue by a constituency primary school who showed him a letter sent on the 15th November 2010 by David Pattison, Education Benefits Development Officer at Leeds City Council to School Meals administrators.

A scan of this letter is included with the email of this press release.

Contact details

Telephone: 020 7219 3493 (Westminster)

Constituency Fax: 0113 235 9866

Constituency Office: 0113 249 6600

e-mail: hamiltonf@parliament.uk

Issued by

R Douglas Masterton

Communications Officer for

Fabian Hamilton MP

Leeds

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The Free School Meals Administrator

Leeds Revenues & Benefits Service

Room 14 Hough Top Court

Hough Top, Bramley

Leeds

LS134QP

Contacts

David Pattison and Linda Baldwin

Email: fsmenq@leedslearning.net

Tel: 01132243929/3951721

15th November 2010

Dear Colleague

IMPORTANT NEWS ON THE FUTURE OF THE FREE SCHOOL MEALS SCHEME

On 11th November 2010 the Coalition Government published its long-awaited White Paper

on the future of welfare provision in this country.

The paper sets out proposals for a complete overhaul of the current benefits system. The

major thrust of this initiative will see the entire range of benefits and Tax Credits replaced by

a single payment- the Universal Credit. It is proposed that this benefit will be assessed by the

Department of Work and Pensions.

This means that- with the single exception of Council Tax Benefit- all the other locally

assessed means-tested benefits, including Free School Meals and Housing Benefit, will be

phased out, starting in 2013.

www.leedsne.co.uk

Specifically for Free School Meals, this will mean that instead of schools being notified of all the eligible children as at present, parents assessed as meeting the new qualifying criteria will be given a sum of money within the Universal Credit to cover school dinner costs for their children. They will then be expected to use this money to pay for the meals at school.

If you wish to make any comment about these proposals, whatever your opinion, we would greatly value your feedback. You are invited to respond in writing, either by email to our normal LLN address, or by letter, to the address shown at the top of this letter.

David Pattison
Education Benefits Development Officer
Leeds Revenues and Benefits Service
www.leeds.gov.uk switchboard: 0113 234 8080