



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

17th November 2020

Re: Free School Meals & Holiday Hunger

Thank you for contacting me recently about the provision of free school meals during school holidays, and how we collectively, as a nation, solve holiday hunger. This is an issue I care passionately about.

Let me start by offering some reassurance, as I know there are some scare stories around. Children who need free school meals during term time will continue to get them. The recent debate has been about how we support those children, and more, during school holidays.

I also want to explain the nature of the vote in Parliament. There has been much misinformation published and, as with most issues, it is never quite as presented.

Last month Parliament held an ‘Opposition Day Debate’. These are debates given to the opposition to allow them to politically point score on whatever the burning political issue of the day is. It was not a vote that would or would not have delivered more free school meals and so in reality has no impact. That means they are often designed to create outrage because that is all they can do. The way they are structured also means that you have to vote on the opposition wording before any amendment.

For example, if Labour put a motion down to say ‘we support clean drinking water’, and we wanted to amend it to say, ‘we believe in clean drinking water and fresh air’, we would have to vote against their original wording first, before voting on the new wording. This of course would allow the opposition to claim that “Conservative MPs voted against clean drinking water”. That is what happened on this vote. The final motion that was approved by the House, myself included, includes a clear determination to continue to make progress in supporting the most vulnerable children in our society.

Turning to the substance of the issue, the provision of food vouchers to Free School Meal eligible children, I am proud of our record. When this pandemic hit we have done everything possible to support children, recognising the enormous financial impact the pandemic is having on families across Burnley.

For the first time vouchers were issued to families who were eligible for FSMs during term time and this was absolutely the right thing to do. But with family finances changing so rapidly as a result of the pandemic I was, and remain, of the view that we cannot just look at old criteria and must also consider how we can help those children who may not be eligible for Free School Meals but need support nonetheless.

On this point it is important to note that Action for Children, and studies from other organisations, have highlighted that FSM eligibility is not an accurate barometer of need and using that alone, as the Parliamentary vote suggested, would leave thousands of children hungry. That’s the reason the Government introduced the

Welfare Assistance Fund. This fund, worth £150,000 to Burnley Council for the October half-term, more than covered the equivalent cost of FSM vouchers which would have been around £50,000. The additional funding was therefore to be used to support more families if needed and, importantly, with other costs. That could include, for example, heating or replacing white goods.

I know some are concerned that this fund may have been spent by the time of October half-term but I confirmed with the Council that this was not the case. As Government covered the cost of FSM vouchers during Summer holidays, this fund remained unspent and so it only opened for distribution on the Monday of the October half-term.

Moving forwards I and the Government remain committed to supporting local families who need it. That's why a further £3.9 million is being provided to Lancashire County Council to support families this winter. That will include a scheme similar to that which was in place in October, ensuring support is there for food and other essentials, and I am working with County Council colleagues on the distribution of this funding. Eighty per cent of this is also ring-fenced so it cannot be used for other council spending – guaranteeing it goes to those who need it across our borough.

As I have said on many occasions before, we also need to develop a long-term solution. The reasons a child might go hungry during school holidays, and term time, are often complex and can include a range of factors. And often it also means children miss out on other needs, including having activities to stimulate them during long school breaks.

You may also be aware that last year the Government asked Henry Dimbleby and a team of experts to pull together a National Food Strategy. In July they published Part One of this, containing urgent recommendations to support this country through the turbulence caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuring our most disadvantaged children do not get left behind. I read this report closely and, if you are interested, it can be found online at <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/>.

Its findings are striking and I am pleased that whilst Government pulls together a White Paper following its publication, to implement the findings, it has also acted at pace to put some of the recommendations into place immediately. This includes an immediate expansion of the Holiday Activity and Food Programme to all areas in England. This scheme was piloted with 50,000 children over the most recent summer holidays and the expansion is likely to result in more than 1.1 million children can take part – giving access to food and activities during the Easter, Summer and Christmas breaks in 2021. A Government investment into our young people of up to £220 million.

Healthy Start vouchers are also to be increased to £4.25 a week from £3.10. This scheme supports pregnant women or those with children under four who have a low income and are in receipt of benefits to buy fresh fruit and vegetables. This will help people boost the long-term health of their children.

And finally a further £16m has been pledged by Government to food distribution charities, with conversations with FareShare and others ongoing as to how this is allocated.

Taken together, these measures will mean there is certainty this Winter, and next year, that those who need help with food and other items will get it. And I will continue to work with Government to ensure the White Paper being developed brings with it a long-term, sustainable solution that benefits all of our local children.

The reporting on stories relating to the Parliamentary vote, and the development of

the Winter Plan, has been both inaccurate and misleading. The National Food Strategy has been underway for some time, and I have always been focused on supporting our most vulnerable children and families. It is what I think of day-in, day-out in this job. It is why I was elected.

I will never stop being an advocate for those who need support and I will always ensure we put in place the schemes needed.

I hope this has offered some reassurance.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'A. Higginbotham', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Antony Higginbotham MP
Member of Parliament for Burnley