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Dear headteacher,

UNIVERSAL FREE SCHOOL MEALS FOR INFANTS

As you may be aware, there are important changes on the way for school lunch provision in English schools. The Government has announced that, from September 2014, every child in reception, year 1 and year 2, in state-funded schools, will be offered a free school lunch.

This follows a recommendation in the School Food Plan, an independent review published in July 2013, which aims to bring about a significant increase in the numbers of children eating good food in schools.

We have decided to write this letter jointly to you, as education ministers from both parties of the Coalition Government. This emphasises that this policy has strong cross-party support, and schools can plan confidently in the knowledge that we are making a serious and long term policy commitment.

As a signal of our commitment to universal infant free school meals, we are also announcing today our intention to amend the Children and Families Bill, which is currently before Parliament, to place a legal duty on primary schools to offer free meals to all pupils in reception, year 1 and year 2 from this September. The legislation will also include a power to extend the policy to additional year groups in future. Existing entitlements to free school meals for disadvantaged pupils in nursery classes and at key stages 2-4 will continue as now.

We know, from pilot projects held between 2009-2011, that universal free school meals can have significant benefits both for individual children and for the broader life of the school. Pupils in the pilot areas were found to eat more healthily and

perform better academically – and these improvements were most pronounced among the poorest pupils. Schools also reported improved behaviour and atmosphere, as a result of all pupils (and an increasing number of teachers) eating together every day.

We appreciate that you may have concerns about the logistical challenges of feeding more children: everything from managing longer queues to adapting your dining area or kitchen. The pilot projects showed that, with commitment on all sides and good planning, none of these challenges are insurmountable. But we would like to reassure you that we are making available a package of help and advice targeted at those schools that will need it most. We will announce the full details of this package shortly.

We have allocated significant new funding to support this policy – over £1 billion between 2014 and 2016, including £150 million of capital funding in 2014-15 to improve kitchen and dining facilities. The details of this capital funding were published before Christmas and can be accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/qh992nu>.

We have also announced today how revenue funding for this policy will be allocated in 2014-15. After discussion with schools, caterers and local authorities, we have decided that the fairest approach is to allocate schools a flat rate of £2.30 per meal taken, based on actual take-up by newly eligible infant pupils, which will be measured in the Schools Census from next year. In addition, we recognise that some smaller schools will face particular challenges. We will therefore be providing transitional funding totalling £22.5 million in 2014-15 to small schools, which will be provided before the start of the new academic year. More details will be made available shortly.

Every school is different. No-one knows the individual circumstances of your school better than you, the headteacher. In addition, the role of headteachers in creating a culture and ethos around school food was crucial for the success of the universal free school meal pilots. We would therefore urge you to start as soon as possible to consider the implications of this policy for your school, such as renegotiating existing catering contracts, and how you plan to deliver it.

In doing so, you should bear in mind that the introduction of free school meals for infants is likely to lead to greater take-up of school meals in other year groups too. You might therefore want to future-proof your plans so that your school is well placed to respond to any future further increase in take-up.

To help you make your plans, the Government has set up a webpage on free school meals, which you can find at <http://tinyurl.com/d7ywsnj>. This will provide more details on the support available for the implementation of the policy once they become available.

We would also strongly recommend that you read the School Food Plan (www.schoolfoodplan.com/universal-free-school-meals): an invaluable source of both inspiration and practical advice, which is largely written for headteachers. As well as explaining the case for universal free school meals in greater depth, it lays out 16 further actions that the Government and others will be taking to help you improve the food culture in your schools. This includes mandatory cooking and food education as part of the new national curriculum for all children up to the age of 14.

Some schools have contacted the Department with concerns about the impact of this change on the pupil premium. We would like to reassure you that pupil premium funding will not be affected. Schools will still receive the pupil premium for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, with funding allocations for 2014-15 informed by School Census data collected in January 2014. We encourage you to make sure that your School Census return is accurate so that you receive your full allocation.

The Department is also considering how the pupil premium is allocated in the longer term. A number of local authorities, such as Southwark, Newham, Durham and Islington, have provided free school meals to their primary pupils while still submitting the data used in the allocation of the pupil premium. We are considering their experience and will set out our proposals in due course.

We want to end by thanking you in advance for helping to deliver this major reform, which will have a positive impact on children, schools and families up and down our country. We know how much work headteachers put in day in, day out – often well beyond your contract hours. We would like to take this opportunity to thank you most sincerely for your dedication.

We would be grateful if you could pass a copy of this letter to your Chair of Governors, and also to the person who has the day-to-day lead for food matters in your school.



MICHAEL GOVE



DAVID LAWS

cc Local authority Directors of Children's Services

