

**Barnardo's NI Response to the Department of Education Consultation on
Changes to Eligibility Criteria for Free School Meals and Uniform Grants
June 2017**

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. We work with almost 11,000 children, young people and families across more than 40 different services and programmes and in over 200 schools. We provide a wide range of services, from working with disabled children, minority ethnic families, looked after children and care leavers, to offering family support and early intervention. We believe that every child deserves the best possible start in life, and our service provision reflects that philosophy.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Changes to Eligibility Criteria for Free School Meals and Uniform Grants Consultation. Our comments are informed by our extensive experience of working with children and families in Northern Ireland, particularly those who are marginalised.

We support the Department's primary aim to ensure that those most in need are able to access free school meals and uniform grants following the introduction to Universal Credit. We also agree with the Department's five objectives underpinning the new criteria and urge the Department to take all necessary steps to fulfil these objectives, for example to ensure the criteria are clear and easily understood by the public and data collection is facilitated etc.

We welcome the prospect that the new criteria, when set at a threshold of £14,000 net earnings could qualify an additional 2,000 pupils. However we are extremely concerned that:

"pupils from families currently entitled to tax credits that have a gross annual income below £16,190 but net annual earnings higher than the proposed net earnings threshold of £14,000 may no longer qualify for free school meals after they migrate over to Universal Credit over the 2019/2022 period. New applicants with net earnings over £14,000 would not be eligible for free school meals and uniform grants." (para 8.7ii, page 8)

Following the introduction of Universal Credit, there is a strong likelihood that those pupils who fall between the proposed net earnings criteria (£14,000) and the current gross annual income threshold (£16,190) are from families most in need (see aim and objective a. para. 5.2 and 5.3).

Given that the data modelling has at best produced projections, we recommend that for at least the first year the Department amend the first proposal of the new eligibility criteria (para 8.4i) to read 'the pupil or parent is in receipt of Universal Credit and has a gross annual taxable income not exceeding £16,190

or has net earnings not exceeding £14,000 per annum'. In this way the Department will have a clear view of the impact of changing the criteria from £16,190 gross to £14,000 net and then will be in a position to make an informed decision further down the line, without risking the exclusion of vulnerable children who fall between the gross and net limits.

We hope our comments are useful and Barnardo's NI is happy to engage further as these proposals develop.

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