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Dear Lordy,

Domestic Abuse Bill: School Places and Free School Meals

At Report stage on Monday 8 March, during the debate on your amendment 13, ('Duty to co-operate: children awaiting NHS treatment'), you asked about school places and free school meals for children who need to self-isolate (*Official Report*, column 1429).

To address your question regarding children who do not have a school place, I would like to reassure you that parents can apply for a place at any school at any time. If a school has places available, then it must offer a place to any parent who applies. Parents refused a place for their child at a school for which they have applied have a right of appeal to an independent appeal panel.

We know that it can often be difficult for parents to secure a place at the school they want when applying outside the normal admissions round, as schools may already be full at this point. Where families experience difficulties in securing a school place outside the normal admissions round, Fair Access Protocols exist to ensure that children without places, especially the most vulnerable, are offered a place at a suitable school as quickly as possible. All admission authorities, including those of academies and free schools, are required to participate in the Fair Access Protocol for their area.

We are also aware that processes for managing in-year admissions can vary across the country, making it difficult for parents to navigate the system. We have therefore consulted on making a number of changes to the School Admissions Code – to improve the clarity, timeliness, and transparency of the in-year admissions process – in order to ensure all children, especially the most vulnerable, can access a school place as quickly as possible, reducing to a minimum any gaps in their education.

You are correct that under the Education Act 1996, registered pupils who also meet the free school meals criteria through being in receipt of one the eligible benefits and who have had an application verified by a school or local authority, are able to

receive free school meals during term time, whereas unregistered pupils do not qualify.

Last November, however, we announced a significant support package including the £170 million Covid Winter Grant Scheme to support vulnerable families and children with food and other essentials through the winter. This support has now been extended until the end of the Easter holidays. We also announced the expansion of the Holiday Activities and Food programme, an increase in the value of Healthy Start vouchers, and an additional £16 million to FareShare. FareShare is working with local charities across England to provide food for people struggling due to the immediate impacts of the pandemic. In December, FareShare began purchasing food with the first delivery to charities taking place on 7 December. FareShare will use this and other donations to provide healthy and balanced meals to their beneficiaries, in line with the NHS Eatwell guide. Through the grant we aim to provide support for over 4,000 charities and not-for-profit organisations and to provide just over 7,600 tonnes of food – the equivalent of around 18 million meals.

The expansion of the Holiday Activities and Food programme, at a cost of up to £220 million, means that eligible children in every local authority area across the country will be able to access healthy food and take part in fun and enriching activities over the Easter, summer, and Christmas holidays if they need it.

We also continue to support children through the £35 million National School Breakfast Programme. Our suppliers have reported that the programme was reaching 375,000 children by the autumn term 2020. They have been working to make sure that children could still receive healthy breakfasts during the pandemic, including providing breakfast parcels for children staying at home. I am pleased to confirm we have extended the programme until July 2021, and we are considering options for breakfast provision beyond this date.

In response to your question on support for self-isolating pupils, I can confirm that since 8 March when schools fully reopened, all children should be able to access a nutritious meal at school, free to those that are eligible for benefits-related free school meals or Universal Infant Free School Meals. Where pupils eligible for benefits-related free school meals are self-isolating at home, schools should work with their school catering team or food provider to provide good quality lunch parcels. This will ensure that eligible pupils continue to be supported for the short period where they are unable to attend school – and is the same arrangement that was in place throughout the autumn term.

To support schools further during this period, we will continue to provide an additional £3.50 per eligible pupil per week which can be claimed for lunch parcels provided up until Easter as transitional support.

HM Government is wholly committed to supporting people on lower incomes. We have taken unprecedented measures during the pandemic to protect the most vulnerable, and put in place a strong package of financial support to support families and children.

I am copying this letter to Baroness Newlove, Baroness Meacher, Baroness Watkins of Tavistock, Baroness Brinton, and Lord Rosser who all participated in the debate on this amendment. I am also placing a copy in the library of the House.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'J.P.', with a horizontal line underneath.

LORD PARKINSON OF WHITLEY BAY

The Baroness Burt of Solihull
House of Lords