

Eligibility for free school meals, September 2018

Tenovus Cancer Care is Wales' leading cancer charity. Our aims are simple. We want to help prevent, treat and find a cure for cancer.

We do this by offering support, advice and treatment to cancer patients and their loved ones. We also promote healthy lifestyles and fund cancer research to find new ways to prevent it, diagnose it, and treat it.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this important consultation.

General comments about Universal Credit

Although Tenovus Cancer Care appreciates that responsibility for Universal Credit and its roll-out is that of the UK, not the Welsh Government, we are nevertheless concerned about the impact of the proposed migration of claimants from working age benefits, as well as that for new claimants in Wales. In particular the removal of the Severe Disability Premium, worth £64.30 per week, via its phased removal for migrated claimants and inaccessibility for new claimants, would place some of our most vulnerable clients at risk of severe hardship. These views have been expressed to the UK Government as part of its recent consultation entitled '*Moving claimants to Universal Credit from other working age benefits*'.

Our response to the consultation [is available online](#).

Impact of cancer diagnosis upon household finances

The impact of a cancer diagnosis can be life-changing – it takes a toll physically, emotionally and financially.

Those diagnosed with cancer might feel too ill to go to work, or need time off for treatment, while family or friends might need time off work to help provide care and support.

The sudden and unexpected loss of income, coupled with hidden costs, the worry, and the stress of financial pressure can place a huge burden on people. Tenovus Cancer Care recognises this; that's why when cancer patients or their loved ones have money on their mind, they have someone with whom they can talk. Our qualified Cancer Support Advisors are on hand to tell people affected by cancer if there's any money to which they might be entitled.

The impacts of stress upon the immune system are well documented.¹ For cancer patients, many of whom have a suppressed immune system due to their treatment, the additional stress of financial worries can be a significant health risk. Expecting someone to prepare a packed lunch for their child, or find the money to pay for a school meal, while they are on a reduced income and undergoing treatment for cancer places an unnecessary additional burden that is easily avoided.

Net Income Threshold of £7,400

The rationale for calculating the net income threshold of £7,400 is explained - that being as a component of a

¹ Reiche, E., Nunes, S. & Morimoto, H., 2004. Stress, depression, the immune system, and cancer. *The Lancet Oncology*, 5(10), pp. 617-625; Segerstrom, S. & Miller, G., 2004. Psychological Stress and the Human Immune System: A Meta-Analytic Study of 30 Years of Inquiry.. *Psychological bulletin.*, 4(130), pp. 601-630.

minimum annual income of £18,000. However there appears to be no clear rationale explaining how this latter figure is arrived at – for example its relationship to multiple deprivation etc. While noting the Welsh Government’s estimate that, compared with the status quo, an additional 3,000 pupils would be set to receive Free School Meals at this proposed net income threshold, Tenovus Cancer Care would nevertheless be concerned at the apparent arbitrary nature of this figure. We also note with concern the intention to maintain this income threshold constant until the end of the Universal Credit roll-out period, scheduled to be 2022. We are also concerned at the lack of mechanisms for index-linking or uprating this value in future, following the end of the roll-out transitional period. This is of particular concern due to the erosion of household finances as a result of inflation throughout this period.²

It is also worthwhile noting that, while a transitional period for the proposed changes is suggested in order to help protect those affected by the proposals, the transitional period is a fixed date – i.e. 2022, rather than period of time. The effect is that those migrated onto Universal Credit near the end of the transitional period will have little-to-no time to adapt to the change in eligibility, whereas those who migrate in 2019 will have up to 3 years protection. This is clearly a matter that merits further consideration.

Free School Meals, Obesity and Cancer

There is evidence that eating a well-balanced, cooked meal at school has a positive impact on a child’s overall diet, while it is estimated that only around 1% of packed lunches meet nutritional guidelines set for school food.³ Equally there is a very well established link between being overweight, or obese, and risk of developing cancer.⁴

Tenovus Cancer Care would like to see any potential barriers to children accessing a good quality diet removed; thus decreasing the risk of an obesogenic diet that increases the risk of cancer. In particular we are concerned that, as a result of a cancer diagnosis, our clients may be placed at increased financial vulnerability and would find it harder to meet the nutritional standards required to give their children the best chances of avoiding an obesogenic diet. This risks a vicious cycle of negative health outcomes that we would urge the Welsh Government to consider its role and responsibility in helping prevent.

Conclusion

Tenovus Cancer Care wants to avoid any unnecessary barriers being put into place that places additional pressures; physical, emotional, logistical or financial, upon our clients. There is a risk that proposals contained within this consultation risk undermining that approach.

Therefore Tenovus Cancer Care would urge the Welsh Government to reflect upon the matters raised above and consider an exemption to those in receipt of a cancer diagnosis that allows their children to access Free School Meals, regardless of their income level. Furthermore, given the well-established positive social benefits of receiving a well-balanced, cooked meal at school the case for considering universal provision of Free School Meals for Wales’ children would attract support from many, including Tenovus Cancer Care.

² Hirsch, D., 2018. *The Cost of a Child in 2018*, s.l.: Child Poverty Action Group.

³ Evans, C., Greenwood, D. & Thomas, J. e. a., 2010. A cross-sectional survey of children's packed lunches in the UK. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 11(64), pp. 977-893.

⁴ <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/causes-of-cancer/obesity-weight-and-cancer/how-being-overweight-causes-cancer>