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## **OVER £1M OWED IN SCHOOL MEAL DEBT**

Aberlour Children's Charity has revealed that over £1m is owed by thousands of families across Scotland unable to pay for their children's school meals.

New research commissioned by the charity outlines the extent of the school meal debt and highlights a worrying increase in hidden hunger amongst Scottish school pupils.

The research was conducted by **Professor Morag Treanor** from the Institute of Social Policy, Housing, Equalities Research (I-SPHERE) at Heriot-Watt University who reports that school meal debt is just "the tip of the iceberg for families".

Currently children in P1-5 receive universal free school meals. This means that the debt amounting to £1,032,500 is owed by struggling families with children in their final years of primary school.

A contributing fact identified in the research is that income thresholds for free school meal eligibility have barely risen in the last twenty years, when they were first introduced. This means that low income working families are gradually being excluded and far fewer children are eligible for free school meals today than twenty years ago.

It is unknown exactly how many children are affected by hidden hunger in secondary schools. Evidence suggests that secondary school pupils, without any money in their school meal account, are choosing to avoid stigma, shame and debt, and instead are going hungry.

Young people voiced their concerns to Aberlour about hidden hunger. They cited friends who were ineligible for free school meals going without or returning their lunch money to parents for more pressing bills. **One young person said:** "I know a good few people who don't actually get lunch because they feel like they're using the money their parents could be using for something better...They feel responsible."

**Another said:** "In my friend group, I'd say about half of them can't eat food when we go out, so you see people buying food for their friends...We go to Greggs and, because I've got like £3 or £3.50 to

spend, I'll get two Yum Yums and a sausage roll and I'll give them the Yum Yums, just because they don't get any food anyway."

The research also highlights inconsistencies between how Local Authorities recover school meal debt, in some cases children being denied access to school meals and debt being carried over from primary into secondary schools.

**Martin Canavan, Head of Policy and Participation at Aberlour said:** "We believe in a country as rich as Scotland no child should ever go hungry. We're very concerned about hidden school hunger and believe there are likely significant numbers of children going hungry in school across Scotland. In the last ten years we've seen child poverty rise significantly yet far fewer families are eligible for free school meals now than they were when the thresholds were introduced 20 years ago.

"The issue of school hunger and significant numbers of children going hungry every single day means we are failing as a country to protect children's human rights – specifically the right to food.

"We are calling on Scottish Government to maximise eligibility for free school meals for low income working families with immediate effect. This will ensure more families receive this entitlement, reduce financial hardship, help end school meal debt and reduce the likelihood of hunger in schools".

**Professor Morag Treanor from the Institute of Social Policy, Housing, Equalities Research (I-SPHERE) at Heriot-Watt University said:** "The debt highlighted through our research is, we believe, just the tip of the iceberg as the number of families struggling to pay for a school meal in Scotland continues to soar. We have unquantified levels of hidden hunger in secondary schools. The impact of children going hungry has a catastrophic impact on their health, wellbeing and educational attainment. The lack of access to free school meals in the later years of primary and in secondary schools is harmful to both children and families. With the current cost of living crisis, we expect this to worsen without immediate action.

"We welcome the Scottish Government's commitment that it will continue to work with local authorities to plan for the expansion of free school meal provision, but we urge immediate action.

With the summer holidays coming up, many families will struggle to find an additional five meals a week to feed their children. We need to work together quickly to end food poverty in Scotland.”

The full report can be read at: <https://www.aberlour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Summary-of-School-Meal-Debt-processes-June-2022.pdf>

and is part of a wider piece of research currently being conducted for Aberlour by Professor Treanor around involuntary public debt which will be published later this year.

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### **Notes to Editors**

#### **About Aberlour Children's Charity**

Aberlour is one of the largest Scottish children's charities, helping to improve the lives of Scotland's vulnerable children and young people. At Aberlour we know that not all children are born with an equal chance. Together, we will be brave for children, young people and families and will overcome poverty, disadvantage and discrimination.

Aberlour's mission is to reach Scotland's vulnerable children as early as possible to stop damage being done, before families reach crisis point, before it's too late. Taking action quickly, significantly improves long-term outcomes for children and young people.

Aberlour provides a wide range of services including:

- Residential care and fostering: we provide safe, loving homes for children who have experienced trauma and abuse
- Early years: we give babies a brighter future by building confidence in their parents
- Disability: we make life easier for families where a child has a disability
- Recovery: we help parents to recover from drug and alcohol misuse, poor mental health and domestic abuse, so their children can thrive.

Please visit [www.aberlour.org.uk](http://www.aberlour.org.uk) for more information.



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