

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



Mr Craig Mealey
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Your reference: CL160226

COR-0232-2026

Dear Mr Mealey

Thank you for your letter dated 16 February 2025 in relation to Council's concern in respect of the Education Authority's (EA) decision to increase the price of school meals from January 2026 and its support for the provision of free school meals (FSM) for all children. The Minister notes the Council's position on these matters has asked me to respond on his behalf.

When the EA made its announcement of the school meals price rise in November 2025, it noted that was facing a significant funding shortfall of around £300m in the current financial year. More recently, the Education Minister stated in the Assembly that the Finance Minister's draft budget for 2026-2029/30, currently out for consultation, would require the Department of Education to make savings of approximately £826 million in 2025/26, just over £1 billion in 2027/28 and £1.15 billion in 2028/29. Such a budget would require very severe and damaging cuts to the education system.

The Minister has stated that it is regrettable that an increase in the EA's school meal prices has been necessary. However, it is important to note that the EA had maintained the same school meal prices since 2017/18 despite significant rises in costs during that period. The EA's cost of producing a meal is more than 70% higher than it was in 2017/18. This approach was no longer sustainable in the current budgetary circumstances. Despite the EA's price rise in January, it remains well below its cost of producing a meal and the school meals service therefore continues to operate at a substantial loss.

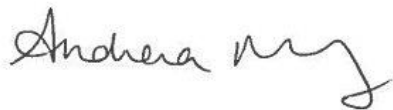
In relation to providing FSM for all children you may be aware that this was debated in the Assembly on 25 November 2025. The Minister recognised the importance of pupils having access to a healthy lunch but emphasised the importance of only seeking to take forward policy changes that are both affordable and deliverable. As the Minister stated in the debate, the current and anticipated future severe budgetary pressures on

the education sector means that no significant expansion of free school meals provision can be taken forward.

The more detailed response that the Minister provided as part of the Assembly debate can be found in [Hansard for 25 November 2025](#).

I hope you find this information useful.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrena Murray". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping 'M' at the end.

Andrena Murray
Private Secretary to the Minister of Education
Department of Education