



Thousands more children to benefit from enlarged school meals scheme – Mary Coughlan Minister for Social and Family Affairs

Almost one hundred schools across the country have expressed an interest in setting up a new school meals scheme, said Mary Coughlan Minister for Social and Family Affairs today.

Funding for the scheme has been doubled to €4million and expanded to target disadvantage, and the bans that restricted the scheme to urban primary schools only have been removed. Up to June of this year a total of 147 school meal projects received funding – benefiting 15,700 children.

The expansion of the scheme will take place in the coming school year after up to 100 schools expressed their interest in joining the scheme and could benefit more than 4,000 children.

Following discussions between Minister Coughlan’s officials and the Department of Education post primary schools with pupils most at risk of early school leaving and their feeder primary schools were targeted to encourage a take up of the expanded scheme.

“This expression of interest by so many schools from all around the country is very encouraging and makes me optimistic of an enthusiastic take up of the scheme, “ said Minister Mary Coughlan today.

”Obviously it is too early yet to say what the final take up will be –however, the signs at this stage are encouraging as most of these responses to my doubling the funding available came from the schools in response to a targeted and limited mail shot.

“This new expanded scheme could see an increase of up to 40percent in the numbers of children in both primary and second level schools receiving a snack or a hot meal, “ said Minister Coughlan.



”This scheme has huge potential, and having worked with the Department of Education in prioritising schools with disadvantage I’d be optimistic that with the funding I have now made available, that most of these schemes would be in up and running in the coming school year.

”I have seen at first hand how these schemes can work and spoken with teachers who have told me how they have seen the benefit of the provision of a breakfast or lunch for children who might otherwise go to school hungry because of their family circumstances and may not eat until the school day is over.

”I have to say that I have been impressed by the commitment of teachers to the extension and improvement of this scheme, and to the local communities who provide the support and put the schemes into place,“ added Minister Coughlan.

Earlier this year the Minister published the first review of the ninety year old schools meals scheme. International experience had shown that a school meals scheme proved a positive force for children at school, and in areas of disadvantage helped children concentrate consequently limiting disruptive behaviour, and encouraged children to attend school.

Schools currently provide a variety of services for children, either a hot meal cooked on the premises, a light snack or a breakfast. The programmes are organised by the schools and funded by the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

“I am open to how the funds in this scheme are spent – whether on hot meals cooked on the premises in kitchen facilities, airline type food trays that need only be microwaved in the school, or nutritious cold meals such as fruit, milk and sandwiches, ” added Minister Coughlan.

ENDS

2nd September 2003