

WIRRAL COUNCIL

WIRRAL SCHOOLS FORUM

20 OCTOBER 2015

REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR TRANSFORMATION & RESOURCES

MAXIMISING FREE SCHOOL MEALS TAKE UP IN WIRRAL

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. This report sets out the current position on Free School Meals and the additional work that is being undertaken by Wirral's Benefit service to increase numbers on Free School Meals and attract additional Pupil Premium for Wirral schools. Given the additional work undertaken has had to be met from the benefit budget this report requests if an additional contribution to offset the spend on this element of work can be made by the Schools Forum as has occurred in Calderdale Council.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. Free Schools Meals at Wirral are administered by the Benefits Service. The application process has for a number of years been part of the main Housing or Council Tax Benefit process. Until recently the Welfare Benefits form contained a separate section requesting applicants to indicate their wish to apply for Free School Meals. If that section was completed and the assessment process showed eligibility the schools and applicants were alerted and the child / children are able to access free school meals.
- 2.2. Free school meal eligibility is also a consideration in schools and the authority in accessing government funding, as the number on this benefit are a contributory factor in the payments of pupil premiums. Primary schools receive £1,320 (pupil premium) per child in receipt of Free School Meals and the secondary school receives £935 (pupil premium) per child in receipt. No Pupil Premium is payable for 6th form students who receive Free School Meals. This money is used to narrow the gap in attainment for children from disadvantaged areas or families via extra teaching time / resources etc. There is then a clear benefit in maximising numbers of eligible children.
- 2.3. Some parent / guardians who could access free school meals choose not to and this is sometimes attributed to the perceived stigma for the child when accessing a free meal. However the service also finds on contact there is as much resistance to registering as the child takes a packed lunch or dislikes school meals which is when the Pupil Premium issue is emphasised.
- 2.4. Both legislation and guidance state that an application has to be made before assessing eligibility for benefits including Free School Meals. Specific take up campaigns in Wirral have been made to encourage take up, both within the main benefits application process, as well as schools running their own campaigns. The campaigns lead by Wirral Benefits Team have focused on the benefits that the award brings, not just to the family income position, but the overall income benefits

to the school. At Wirral we have worked proactively for a number of years on an ongoing basis, with every claimant who doesn't apply for FSM being contacted and encouraged to apply. There has also been a programme of targeted campaigns which has allowed the authority to address take-up maximisation whilst retaining the necessary level of confidence and assurance as the controller of both financial and personal sensitive data.

- 2.5. In Wirral at the end of September 2015, 7,979 children (including 6th form) were in receipt of FSM. Traditionally numbers rise weekly after the start of the school academic year (having dropped when the changes are applied for pupils leaving and moving school in the summer). Numbers tend to fluctuate during the school year and have overall decreased over the last three years from 9,252 in April 2013 to 8,839 in April 2014 and at April 2015 8,376. Whilst this may reflect changes to school numbers it does reflect numbers of people moving onto working tax credit that no longer qualify for free schools meals.
- 2.6. From September 2014 all infant children receive a free meal regardless of income or circumstances under the governments Universal Free School Meals programme. At Wirral in the six months prior to the Universal programme introduction the service worked on an accelerated take up campaign, both directly with claimants and also in partnership with all of the schools. Managers attended the Head Teachers group and consulted on changes to the publicity approach and the application form and letters sent. This was moving the focus from applying for a Free School Meal to applying for the Pupil Premium for the school. Unfortunately there is no motivation for parents / carers to apply for something they are getting for free.
- 2.7. Wirral has continued the take up campaign after the start of the academic year, making phone calls and sending letters out to potential qualifiers. After consultation with the Data Protection Officer named letters were sent into the schools for them to be passed out to specific parents as it indicated that parents eligibility and as such their income criteria to the schools.
- 2.8. Wirral also targeted specific schools; those who had had a more significant drop in applications. The Benefits Team were supplied with names and dates of births of the children in Reception who were not in receipt of FSM from the CYP Department Admissions Team and after a benefits check on data specific take up letters to these parents were sent via the school as it was felt that the schools would be able to encourage and remind the parents to apply.
- 2.9. From a service perspective the take up work has not revealed a large additional number of entitlements and this work has been undertaken with schools and CYP support.
- 2.10. Other authorities are now reporting that due to Universal Free School Meals they too are seeing a loss in numbers of claimants. Alongside this the Government's Welfare Reform programme affects benefits for those parents and carers who either claim out of work, disability or pensionable age benefits and the national initiative to move people into work, has a very real impact on the numbers of people who qualify for FSM. Those in receipt of working tax credit are not entitled; with many families encouraged into lower paid employment and losing their FSM award. Whilst at present we are seeing increasingly fewer families qualify for FSM as their

income does not meet the qualifying criteria for the reasons above, a positive aspect of the Welfare Reform programme, in relation to FSM, is the roll out of Universal Credit as receipt of UC confers FSM eligibility whether in work or not.

- 2.11. There is a view that FSM recipient numbers in Wirral could still be significantly increased and Frank Field MP also identified this as part of his Poverty Review. This has seen the authority asked to look additional ways of increasing this number in Wirral such as has been seen in Calderdale and Liverpool recently with the adoption of some different processes to that at Wirral. It is understood that Calderdale may not have not been as proactive in Free School Meal take up as in Wirral and needed to maximise take up and Pupil Premium grant.
- 2.12. A review of how Wirral promotes and administers its Free School Meals was undertaken in the light of changes publicised at Calderdale and Liverpool Council earlier this year. It was considered that if Wirral could adopt these activities it would increase Free School Meal (FSM) take up and Pupil Premium grant paid to Schools.
- 2.13. When first raised in March 2015 officers reviewed both authorities work to compare them with what we do and if any should be utilised here. The contact work with potential claimants once underway is set to take six to eight weeks to complete, dependent upon the number of cases identified.
- 2.14. Given the additional work and focus Wirral has had in the past on maximising Free School Meals this exercise was projected not to have in Wirral the significant effect seen in Calderdale where an additional 600 cases were added. As an example in 2014 figures from August to the end of September saw an increase of 565 cases but in 2015 in the same period there has been an increase of 750. This may be indicative of a number of issues, easier on line application process, the mandatory requirement for children from year 11 having to remain in full time education, if not in work or apprenticeship and the take up work carried out by schools with new parents for Reception children.
- 2.15. The Opt-Out Project process involves proactively searching the Housing Benefit caseload, writing to families with children who would qualify and then put eligible claimants onto Free School Meals, only removing anyone who asked not to be given this award.
- 2.16. Wirral undertakes a range of proactive take up work in this area and this may affect how much any new activity increases numbers. The take up work in Wirral and our ongoing processes at least equals, if not exceeds that of the named authorities with the exception of the automatic registration initiative at Calderdale.
- 2.17. On a cautionary note, nationally the advent of the Universal Free School Meals programme in September 2014 means parents have no real incentive to apply. Authorities are seeing a reduction in claims for this reason as well as those people in receipt of Working Tax Credit no longer qualifying for Free School Meals. This is expected in the future to be offset by automatic eligibility under Universal Credit. In the months prior to the Universal Meals introduction Wirral Benefits Service in tandem with our Schools and Children and Young Persons Department saw the focus of take up work promoting application as a way of helping school funding as well as the support for each child.

- 2.18. Wirral already does all the activities Liverpool Council detailed and our on-line application form was changed to the opt out version for Free School Meals in March 2015.
- 2.19. Wirral looks to deal with Free School Meals quickly during the school year recognising the importance of the child accessing this facility and on receipt of benefit applications identifies queries and has a dedicated contact point for our 120 schools. We also check separately potential qualifier lists, school admission lists as well as information from Job Centre plus for our Universal Credit claims and also cross check our benefit claims for children within a claim that do not appear to be in receipt of Free School Meals and we do then actively ask the claimant to confirm they wish to apply for Free School Meals.
- 2.20. The already mentioned easier on line application process combines the Government's Eligibility Checking Service into the FSM application process, this gives an immediate eligibility response to the applicant.
- 2.21. To expedite this work a temporary officer has been recruited to focus on the Opt-Out Project, having received training in eligibility and award processes the work started in mid-September 2015 and the monthly review of successful numbers will start from the end of October. In the first week 209 letters covering 258 children were issued which if success levels are repeated here will translate to qualifying recipients and work will continue on these until complete.
- 2.22. Calderdale received £15,000 funding from their Schools Forum given the increased income for their schools and the cost of the additional staff over and above that already funded and dedicated to the normal FSM operational work.

3. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1. The additional work being undertaken by Wirral in the Opt-Out Project to increase Free School Meals take up and consequential increase in Pupil Premium is noted.
- 3.2. Given the additional staffing cost incurred to undertake this work that a contribution of £15,000 is made to offset the shortfall in the amount already given by the Schools Forum in the light of this successful one off task.

Malcolm Flanagan
Head of Business Processes