

REPORT OF THE INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Free School Meals Update

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report updates the Forum on the work to maximise the uptake of Free School Meals by the Benefits Team, for which a contribution of £21,200 is made from the Schools Budget.

2. BACKGROUND

The statutory eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) is unchanged from previous years and is based on the following criteria for parents / carers:

- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- The guaranteed element of Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (provided you're not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190)
- Working Tax Credit run-on - paid for 4 weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit
- Universal Credit

Application forms can be found at www.wirral.gov.uk/free-school-meals

FSM Applications

When applications are made on-line the applicant receives an immediate response regarding eligibility. The application is then automatically forwarded for processing. The immediate response is achieved via an automatic on line check, using the Department for Education's ECS facility (and links with DWP and HMRC records). Unfortunately the system cannot check for Universal Credit (UC) entitlement with DWP. As a result all negative applications are retrieved and re-checked for UC.

Automatic Opt Out

A report to the Forum in October 2015 described the automatic Opt In / Opt Out system put in place for FSM's in order that the award of FSM's was maximised. Potential FSM qualifiers are cross checked with Benefits data. There is an automatic Opt In assumption which ensures all eligible children receive a FSM award, whether or not they actually have the meal in school each day. Parents are advised of this outcome and may if they choose ask for an Opt Out for their child. To date very few replies have been received requesting this.

As a result the decline in the overall number of FSM's has ceased and since 2015 numbers have increased as indicated in the table overleaf. This increase has a positive impact on Pupil Premium and any future National Funding Formula for Schools.

FSM Awards

The total FSM awards at 11th June 2017 are 8,396 which include 219 in respect of sixth formers.

The table below indicates the number of FSM's over the past 5 years and the more recent increase in numbers:

Free School Meal Numbers

Period		Primary / Secondary	6 th Form	Total
26/03/2012	01/04/2012			9621
18/03/2013	24/03/2013	8900	367	9267
24/03/2014	30/03/2014	8516	321	8837
30/03/2015	05/04/2015	8068	308	8376
28/03/2016	03/04/2016	8129	252	8381
27/03/2017	02/04/2017	8273	233	8506

Early Years

There is no provision for FSM's in Early Years; however the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) is based on the equivalent data used for FSM eligibility in schools.

All applications for EYPP are copied to the Benefits team where they are stored to be checked for eligibility when the child enters Reception.

Details of children starting in Reception are confirmed each year by School Admissions.

This information enables checks to be carried against Benefits records to maximise awards.

Ed Bens Connect System

There are noticeably fewer queries from individual schools since the web based system Ed Bens Connect was implemented. Most arise now from new staff dealing with FSM administration in schools. The FSM team based in Cheshire Lines will provide advice where needed (tel 0151 666 3455).

Most schools find Ed Bens Connect extremely helpful at census time to match pupil number totals. Schools are supported by Benefits to do this where needed. There are now very few schools that don't access their FSM data on the prescribed census date.

Registrations for pupils in non LA funded schools (special placements)

Following recent legal clarification eligibility for FSM will be assessed for pupils placed in non-maintained and independent special schools both in and out of area. This will further maximise the pupil premium income for a group of about 90 children and young people.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Forum Notes the report and the work of the Benefits team in maximising the award of FSM's in schools

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