



POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 11 November 2020

REPORT TITLE:	THE PROVISION OF FOOD AND ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN IN SCHOOL HOLIDAYS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION

REPORT SUMMARY

This report provides the Policy and Resources Committee with an overview of the provision of free school meals (FSM) in school holidays during the Covid-19 emergency pandemic since March. The report also sets out proposals for the funding of FSM between Christmas and the end of the Easter holidays in 2021 and recommends a process for the development of a sustainable approach to the provision of FSM and support to eligible children in the medium and longer term.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee agrees:

1. The proposal to provide funding for FSM during school holidays up until the end of 2021 Easter holidays.
2. To ask the Children, Families and Education Committee to develop proposals for consideration by the Policy and Resources Committee on a sustainable approach for the provision of FSM and support to eligible children in the medium and long term.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the need for children to be able to access FSM and support activities during school holidays. A specific request has been made by the Leader of the Council for a report to come to the Policy and Resources Committee to address two issues. Firstly, an urgent decision is needed on the use of the Tranche 4 Covid-19 emergency fund to provide funding for FSM between Christmas and the end of the Easter term 2021. Secondly, as the full impact of Covid-19 becomes clearer the Policy and Resources Committee will need to consider how best to meet the needs of children eligible for FSM in the medium and longer term.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 The option to not provide any free school meals to children over the coming school holidays has been considered.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the needs of children who are eligible for FSM who in more normal times do not receive support to access food during school holidays.
- 3.2 The Child Food Poverty Task Force (CFPTF), which includes many food manufacturers and suppliers and is led footballer Marcus Rashford, has recently endorsed recommendations made in the National Food Strategy (NSF and published in July). The NFS sets out to address the support needed from the sector to address the turbulence caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and to prepare for the end of the EU exit transition period on 31 December 2020. The strategy has identified where the worst cracks have appeared during the pandemic and recommends some immediate Government actions to help those most affected.
- 3.3 The CFPTF has asked Government to support vulnerable children to end child food poverty by implementing 3 key recommendations in the NFS. These are to expand access to Free School Meals, provide meals & activities during holidays to stop holiday hunger & increase the value of and expand the Healthy Start scheme.
- 3.4 The establishment of the Task Force follows the success of a campaign led by Marcus Rashford where the Government provided a supermarket voucher system for children to access FSM over the school summer holidays. This scheme has not been extended to cover other school holidays following the summer break.
- 3.5 During the summer, many families were issued with either an electronic voucher or gift card worth £15 each week per pupil, to spend at supermarkets including Sainsbury's, Asda, Tesco, Morrisons, Waitrose and M&S.
- 3.6 The Government also launched a Covid Summer Food Fund. This supported pupils who were eligible for benefits-related free school meals during the summer holidays. It was an exceptional fund to cover the 2020 summer holiday period only. The

payments for the Covid Summer Food Fund were met centrally by DfE. Within the region, Edsential, the company owned by Cheshire West and Chester Council and Wirral Council were successful in receiving £1.8m from this fund which meant that around £750k was made available to support Wirral children.

- 3.7 In England, about 1.4 million children claimed for free school meals in January 2020 - 17.3% of state-educated pupils. The take-up was greatest in the north-east of England (23.5%), followed by the West Midlands (20.5%) and the north-west of England (20.2%).
- 3.8 Analysis by the Food Foundation estimates a further 900,000 children in England may have sought free school meals since the start of the pandemic. The original scheme changed during the pandemic as most children were not at school during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. This prompted concerns that those eligible for free school meals could "fall through the cracks" and go hungry.
- 3.9 In recent years, free school meals have been linked to lowering obesity levels, and boosting academic achievement for poorer pupils.
- 3.10 During term time, the government in England expects schools to support pupils eligible for free school meals through alternative schemes, including:
 - Food parcels for collection or delivery
 - The government's centrally funded national voucher scheme
 - Alternative vouchers for a local shop or supermarket
- 3.11 There is currently support available for pupils who have to stay at home with Government guidance stating that schools should work with their suppliers to prepare meals or food parcels for pupils who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals and who are not in attendance because they:
 - are self-isolating
 - have had symptoms or a positive test result themselves
 - are a close contact of someone who has coronavirus (COVID-19)
 - are not attending as a result of local restrictions

4.0 WIRRAL COUNCIL SUPPORT SO FAR

- 4.1 At the start of the pandemic, the Council made provision for free school meals over the Easter holidays in March and April 2020 by allocating £386k to the Children and Young People's cell from Tranche 1 of the emergency Covid-19 funding provided by the Government. This funding was not specifically provided for the provision of FSM over school holidays, but Local Authorities has flexibility to use it as it saw fit in supporting the emergency response.
- 4.2 This support for providing FSM continued during the May school half term and an additional £240k was allocated to the Children and Young People's cell from the emergency Covid-19 funding. Both allocations of funding were made under emergency powers delegated to the Chief executive by the Administration and were approved through the Council's Covid-19 emergency governance process.

- 4.3 Originally there were no plans for the Government's FSM voucher scheme during the school summer holidays, so the Council were poised to continue to support this, once again, to be funded from the emergency Covid-19 grant funding. However, the Government's FSM voucher scheme was established which meant that the Council did not have to support this from its own resources.
- 4.4 Over the summer months, the Humanitarian Cell took over the responsibility for all support provided to the community for food and essential supplies, including the responsibility for and the allocation of the Financial Support with Welfare Scheme (formally the Local Welfare Assistance Scheme). This Cell led the Council's response to the preparation and delivery of emergency food supplies to anyone in the Community who needed it. The members of the Humanitarian Cell include various community organisations as well as Council employees. This meant that a joined up response was able to be provided and that the organisations involved in providing that support were aligned and really got to know the community and how best to support them effectively.
- 4.5 In August, the Government provided funding of just over £450k to the Council in the form of a Local Authority Emergency Assistance Grant for food and essential supplies. The Council had discretion as to how this fund would be allocated and spent to identify and support those in most need. The Humanitarian Cell allocated the funding as described in the table below:

Local Authority Emergency Assistance Grant for Food and Essential Supplies

a) Financial support with welfare needs.	£275,000
b) Food supply for central food warehouse.	£38,000
c) Targeted work with the 3.6% second most dependent cohort (grant payable local charities Citizens Advice Wirral and Involve Northwest, split equally).	£12,000
d) Small Grants Programme for community food and welfare support providers.	£75,000
e) Supply of reusable protective face masks to those in financial hardship (x20,000)	£26,000
f) Fuel (utility) poverty advice and triage (grant payable to Energy Projects Plus)	£10,450
g) Pump priming for community-based projects to provide support with white goods, household items and clothing.	£10,000
h) Digital access and support for 25 vulnerable and digitally excluded people to enable access to online food shopping (Age UK Wirral)	£6,670
Contingency	£708.63
Total	£453,828.63

- 4.6 During the October school half term this allocation of this funding was used to ensure free school meals could be provided. The Small Grants Programme highlighted in item d) provided just under £80k of grants to 16 different organisations across Wirral to provide food and activities to children over the October break. The details of these organisations can be found in Appendix 1.
- 4.7 During the October half-term, extensive communications were provided under the banner of “Wirral Community pulling together” so that families knew what to do and where they could access support. The details of this are provided in Appendix 2.

5.0 PROPOSED PROCESS FOR CONTINUATION OF FSM SUPPORT TO 2021 EASTER SCHOOL HOLIDAYS

- 5.1 During the past 8 months different types of schemes have been in place to support the provision of FSM over school holidays, the main ones being Free School Meal vouchers and the Small Grants Programme.
- 5.2 Community-based feeding groups and organisations are well-established supporting those in crisis and/or vulnerable in need of food. They have established relationships with many of the families they are supporting and can help ensure the provision of advice and guidance and targeted support where need is identified. They seek leadership and support from the Council, not replication of their activities.
- 5.3 Many local groups already have strong relationships with local schools within their respective areas; this together with their expertise needs capitalising upon. The operation of the Edsential Holiday Activity Fund over the summer which can be adapted as a successful model of delivery. It should be noted that the Fund showed that only 56% of families entitled to FSMs needed additional support - a number were able to manage on their existing budgets, etc. Additionally, about 10% of those engaged did so to access the activities available, rather than because they needed help with food.

5.4 Project Proposal

- Continue to work existing community-based groups and schools across the borough to ensure those Children & Young People entitled to FSMs who needed it throughout the holidays (Christmas, February half-term and Easter).
- Further engage with schools to support parents to access points for food. This is an approach that has worked well in several local areas. Schools are a trusted point of contact for families and provide dignity for parents (not being contacted directly by a charity) and choice; this also acknowledges that not all FSM families need additional help with food.
- Funding will be provided to NEO Community (Feeding Birkenhead) to co-ordinate the logistics of the project. The organisation has experience co-ordinating similar projects across the borough (most recently as described above, the administration of the Edsential Holiday Activity Fund and co-ordinating the distribution of FSMs to families self-isolating; they were also a key partner in the delivery of the Emergency

Food Hub). NEO will be able to plug gaps in delivery in local areas where identified and facilitate the buddying up between organisations to share skills and resources.

- Funding will be distributed according to geographical need to community organisations to provide resource for the periods identified; this includes home delivery of food for families self-isolating (this is based on a set cost per head so levels the playing field for families irrespective of geography).

5.5 The estimated budget for the proposal would be £150,000 as the proposal currently stands. An additional option to include activities for families in the provision, as was provided for the October half-term and would result in additional funding of £25,000 bringing the total budget requirement to £175,000. However, as these figures are estimates, it is recommended to set a total budget of £200,000 to include for an element of contingency.

5.6 The proposal would be funded from the Tranche 4 of Government Covid-19 emergency funding of £5.4m which the Council has recently been notified about. Any funding from the proposal not allocated after the 2021 Easter school holidays, would be returned to the Council's Covid-19 emergency funding reserve for reallocation. See Appendix 3 for the detailed breakdown of funding required for the proposal.

5.7 Neo Community have been consulted with regards to whether the proposal is viable and manageable, and they agree that this option is the most effective way forward to support the ongoing provision of FSM over school holidays.

6.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The recommendation includes for funding to be provided of £200k to support the proposal. This funding can be allocated from Tranche 4 of the Government Covid-19 emergency funding which provides discretion for Local Authorities on how to spend it.

7.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Funding will be made available subject to an appropriate agreement to ensure the desired outcomes are achieved.

7.2 Any regulatory measures that may be required will be investigated and actions taken to ensure compliance with legal requirements and processes, including contract procedure rules and state aid.

8.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

8.1 There are no specific additional implications resulting from this report as all resources required will come from existing areas.

9.0 RELEVANT RISKS

9.1 A positive risk occurs in that the Government may choose to make provision to fund FSM during the following school holidays, in which case any funding allocated will be returned to the Council's Covid-19 Emergency funding reserve to be reallocated.

10.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

10.1 Informal consultation has been carried out with Neo Community.

11.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

11.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision, or activity.

11.2 Each proposal will have its own EIA which will form part of the decision making process as per requirements.

12.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

12.1 There are no specific environment or climate implications resulting from this report.

REPORT AUTHOR: Paul Boyce
0151 666 4288
paulboyce@wirral.gov.uk

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Covid-19 Emergency Governance processes
Tactical Coordination Group Minutes
Strategic Coordination Group Minutes
JESIP approval forms
Officer published decision reports

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – List of organisations providing support over the October half-term
Appendix 2 - Communications provided over the October half-term
Appendix 3 - Free School Meal Proposal – Funding Requirement

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
None	