

REPORT OF SERVICE DIRECTOR, EDUCATION, LEARNING & SKILLS

EMERGENCY PAYMENTS FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS TO ELIGIBLE FAMILIES

Purpose of the Report

1. To use the Chief Executive's emergency decision-making powers, in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, to enable the provision of Free School Meals (FSM) vouchers to eligible families during the half-term period.

Information

2. FSM are provided for vulnerable families during term time. It is essentially a statutory benefit to school aged children who receive other qualifying benefits and whose eligibility, following a formal application, has been checked. All publicly funded schools in Nottinghamshire currently use the Council's eligibility assessment checking facility. Applications made for FSM are processed by the school admissions and free school meals business support team using the DfE's ECS. Applications are assessed within 24 hours. This means that families are able to access this benefit as soon as they meet the criteria.
3. Section 512 of the Education Act 1996 places a duty on maintained schools and academies and free schools to provide free school meals to pupils of all ages that meet the qualifying criteria:
 - 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 - if you apply on or after 1 April 2018 your household income must be less than £7,400 a year (after tax and not including any benefits you get)

Children who are paid these benefits directly, instead of through a parent or guardian, can also access free school meals. It is also possible for a child to get free school meals if the parent or guardian is entitled to any of the above benefits and the child is both:

- younger than the compulsory age for starting school
- in full-time education.

4. There are currently 22,315 children in Nottinghamshire eligible for FSM. This includes 21 children who do not have a school place and whose education is provided directly by the Council. As of Monday 26 October, the breakdown of eligible children and young people across the County is as follows:

Ashfield	4825
Bassetlaw	3332
Broxtowe	2550
Gedling	2769
Mansfield	4182
Newark	2878
Rushcliffe	1758
Without a school place	21
Total	22315

5. There has been a national debate over many years regarding the provision of school meals during school holiday periods. Such was the concern around child hunger during the summer term and throughout the summer holiday period, the government agreed to centrally fund schools to ensure supermarket vouchers were provided to eligible families.
6. The Children's Commissioner of England, Anne Longfield, played a significant role in ensuring this provision was extended during the summer holiday period, arguing that the FSM was a significant defence against poverty and hunger for many vulnerable families. As a result, the Government funded school meals throughout the summer holiday period.
7. Since September, the Government has stated that this provision will no longer be centrally funded arguing that provision could be made at a local level with Council's funding from their COVID-19 Government grants.
8. In Nottinghamshire, some school-based provision has continued but this appears to be to a relatively small number of families with access to any provision inconsistent across the County. There has been some on-going delivery of food parcels in some areas whilst in others, supermarkets have, on an individual school basis, contacted schools to arrange the delivery of a sandwich to eligible children.

Other Options Considered

9. To continue the previous term-time only provision but this would not recognise the additional financial pressures facing vulnerable families as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Reasons for Recommendation

10. Throughout the summer term 2020, the summer holidays and to date, families entitled to the benefit have accessed supermarket vouchers which have been facilitated at school level. These vouchers have been given directly to the family at a rate of £15 per child per week and have allowed parents to shop for food at their local supermarket.

11. The number of families experiencing financial hardship has continued and the number of families eligible for FSM has increased significantly during the Pandemic; in March 2020 19,061 children were eligible for FSM and by October 2020 this had increased to 22,315 (and may increase further as new applications are received). It is not clear that all vulnerable families are currently accessing support to buy or access food for children and young people.
12. The benefits of the school facilitated supermarket voucher scheme is that it uses the knowledge of the relevant headteacher to verify entitlement and is also able to deliver vouchers directly to the parent or carer. The current system allows headteachers to order and buy vouchers from the local supermarket in each community thus ensuring that families do not have to travel significant distances to exchange the vouchers for food.
13. Local supermarkets in communities are now used to implementing the scheme with robust systems in supermarkets to allow parents and carers to use the vouchers in exchange for food. The voucher scheme also allows families with multiple children to combine vouchers for a weekly shop thus providing better value for larger families
14. Anecdotal feedback from schools and eligible parents has been positive. Whilst there has not been either nationally or locally a review of the use of these vouchers, headteachers have not reported any widespread misuse of the vouchers. Rather, they have cited appreciation from vulnerable families.
15. In light of the time sensitiveness of this issue, a decision cannot wait until the next meeting of Children and Young People's Committee. It is therefore proposed that the Chief Executive uses his Emergency Decision Making powers and the Committee receives a subsequent report on this issue to its meeting on 30 November 2020.

Communication with schools

16. All schools will be notified about provision of food vouchers through the regular Bulletins that have been sent to headteachers throughout the pandemic. Headteacher telekits arranged for the week commencing 2 November will also confirm details with all publicly funded school leaders.

Communication with parents and carers

17. Parents and carers will be informed through the Council's public website, facebook and twitter. In addition, parents and carers will be informed of the details of the arrangements for provision of FSM vouchers through their child's school and by headteachers.

Statutory and Policy Implications

18. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and

the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Financial Implications

19. Given that there are 22,315 children and young people currently eligible, the maximum cost to the Council to provide free school meals vouchers for the current October two week half-term period will be £669,450.
20. In light of the timing of this decision, the payments will be backdated to cover the full two weeks period for each eligible child and young person.
21. All schools will be funded based on eligibility over the holiday period. The relevant amounts will be paid to schools (including academies). The costs of any individual arrangements funded by schools in the initial period of half-term up to the cost of £15 per pupil per week can also be met from this allocation.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Chief Executive use his Emergency Decision Making powers to approve the provision of funding of £15 per week for free school meals for each eligible child and young person for the current October two week half-term period.

Marion Clay
Service Director, Education, Learning & Skills

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Constitutional Comments (HD – 27/10/20)

22. Under the Scheme of Delegation to officers, the Chief Executive has authority to exercise the powers of the County Council in the event of an emergency or a disaster and will report back to the relevant committee meeting when this authority is exercised. In this case, the powers would ordinarily be exercised by the Children and Young People's Committee regarding the proposal for the Council to provide emergency funding for children eligible for Free School Meals and the Finance and Major Contracts Management Committee regarding the budgetary spend to underpin that funding. Reporting to each of those Committees or to Policy Committee would therefore be appropriate.

Financial Comments (KRP - 27/10/20)

23. The cost of the proposed vouchers is a maximum of £669,450 as set out in paragraph 19. The government has previously announced emergency assistance of £63 million to be distributed to upper tier local authorities in England to use to support groups who are helping people who are struggling to afford food and other essentials due to COVID-19. Nottinghamshire County Council has been allocated £858,285 from this fund and has received bids for funding. The proposed vouchers will also be funded from this grant, with any excess over the total amount allocated being funded from the Nottinghamshire Covid - 19 Community Fund of £1m.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

None

Electoral Divisions and Members Affected

- All