



EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 28TH NOVEMBER 2023

**SUBJECT: CAERPHILLY CARES SUPPORT PACKAGE FOR FAMILIES
ELIGIBLE FOR FREE SCHOOL MEALS**

REPORT BY: DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To outline support available for families eligible for Free School Meals from Caerphilly Cares.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 On Wednesday 28 June 2023 Welsh Government informed the Council that they would no longer be able to support the payment of Free School Meal Holiday payments, with immediate effect.
- 2.2 The announcement generated a lot of feedback from families who were relying on the payment. Consequently, on the 12th July 2023 Cabinet agreed to provide **a one-off payment** of £19.50 per week, per child, to eligible families for the school holiday period commencing Friday 21 July 2023 and ending on Thursday 31 August 2023.
- 2.3 This decision was taken to cushion the impact of late withdrawal of funding by Welsh Government and required the allocation of one-off funding of £900,000.
- 2.4 The Caerphilly Cares team (and associated partners) currently provides a wide range of support to vulnerable individuals and families as part of the Cost-of-Living support package.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the content of this report.

4. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 To mitigate the impact of the withdrawal of Welsh Government funding for holiday payments to families eligible for Free School Meals.

5. THE REPORT

- 5.1 In March 2020, the Council commenced a free school meals home delivery scheme in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2020 Wales became the first UK nation to guarantee free school meals for eligible families during the school holidays. This scheme initially started with a food parcel being delivered to eligible families' homes on a weekly basis. For the next 2 years, the Council continued to deliver food parcels which were fully funded by Welsh Government.
- 5.2 Due to resource and supplier challenges to deliver food parcels, in Autumn 2022 a decision was made to change the scheme to the issuing of a Post Office Voucher to the value of £19.50 per week, per child. It was felt that using the voucher system would allow eligible families to receive cash payments directly.
- 5.3 The ever-increasing cost of living has become a significant burden on our communities, especially those from low-income backgrounds. Rising prices have placed a severe strain on households.
- 5.4 Vulnerable families have indicated that the funding of £19.50 per child, per week has been invaluable in supporting them to purchase food items during the current cost of living crisis.
- 5.5 On Wednesday 28 June 2023, the Welsh Government announced that there will be no further extension to cover the summer holiday period or beyond.

The Welsh Government stated that: "As you are aware, holiday provision for learners that are eligible for a free school meal was introduced in response to the COVID pandemic as a form of time-limited support to help families. While we have been able to support several temporary continuations of the scheme, we confirmed in March 2023 that the most recent extension would be up to the end of the May half term only. I can now confirm that this remains the case and that there will be no further extension to cover the summer holiday period or beyond.

Options for funding a further extension of the scheme have been fully explored, but due to budgetary constraints this isn't possible and I am grateful to you and your colleagues for your patience. We appreciate that the provision offered to those eligible throughout holiday periods has proven popular and understand that not extending the offer further will likely lead to additional enquiries from those families affected".

- 5.6 Feedback from families has evidenced a reliance on this payment and an expectation that it would continue.
- 5.7 The Caerphilly Cares Service currently offers access to a wide range of support initiatives for individuals and families who are vulnerable or in financial crisis and whilst this is not specifically targeted at families in receipt of Free School Meals, the service and support is open to anyone who is vulnerable or experiencing hardship.

5.8 Initial contact for support can be made to the Caerphilly Cares Team, which provides residents needing support with a single coordinated access point for information, advice and assistance, to ensure that residents' needs are met appropriately. This enables people to tell their story once and ensures their voice is central to the 'What matters?' conversation.

5.9 Referrals to Caerphilly Cares may be made via the Caerphilly Cares Gateway, via the following details:

Tel: 01443 811490

Text: SUPPORT to 07537 414443

Email: caerphillycares@caerphilly.gov.uk

www.caerphilly.gov.uk/CaerphillyCares

5.10 The Caerphilly Cares Gateway already provide direct support to Caerphilly County Borough Council (CCBC) Catering in fielding calls from families who are concerned about their ability to afford school meals for their children.

5.11 Specific engagement work has also been carried out with schools, to promote the gateway to the families and wider communities that are connected to each school. This has included attendance at CCBC Headteacher forums and email circulars to all schools outlining services available, as well as sessions held in specific schools in relation to cost of living support. Caerphilly Cares staff are also working in partnership with the Community Focused Schools team to develop a pilot for shared working and engagement, to raise awareness of local support with school communities. This approach will be piloted in the Upper Rhymney cluster initially.

5.12 A summary of some of the main activities and initiatives available through CCBC, which can be accessed via referral to the Caerphilly Cares Gateway and which may offer alternative or wraparound support to families in the wake of the withdrawal of Welsh Government funding for free school meals holiday payments, is as follows:

5.13 Cost of Living Hardship fund - A CCBC Cost-of-living Hardship Grant has been established in response to identified need across CCBC frontline support services, for those who are in need of urgent financial support but are not eligible for or have exhausted existing grant schemes, in particular those that might be working but are experiencing in-work poverty. The grant has been operational since April 2023 and provides either direct financial assistance (up to £700 per application) or equivalent white goods (if that is the specific need). The primary eligibility factor for the grant is professional judgement (via referral from an officer providing support), to give flexibility to support those who may not have been approved for other grants based purely on traditional criteria, such as employment/benefit status etc.

5.14 Financial Hardship/Maximising Income – For anyone experiencing financial hardship, the Welfare Benefits and Cost of Living teams within Housing (Rents) can support residents with a wide range of issues relating to maximising their income, including support with accessing any additional benefits and grants that they might be entitled to (including potential direct financial assistance).

5.15 School Essentials Grant (previously PDG Access Grant) – The School Essentials Grant provides £125 (or £200 for Year 7 Pupils) for eligible pupils to buy school uniform, equipment, sports kit, and kit for activities outside of school for children. This funding is for pupils currently eligible for free school meals.

- 5.16 Fuel Vouchers – Residents struggling with the cost of topping up their pre-payment meter could be eligible for a fuel voucher, which can be used to quickly add credit to their energy supply (in partnership with Citizen’s Advice). Referrals can be made via the Caerphilly Cares Gateway and can be supported with additional advice around managing energy bills and saving energy within the home, including energy advice visits or guidance on any grants or initiatives that may be available to assist with measures to improve energy efficiency, thus potentially resulting in savings on energy bills for residents.
- 5.17 Foodbank (and additional support for those experiencing food poverty) - The foodbank network extends across the Caerphilly County Borough and a referral can be made immediately, via the Caerphilly Cares Gateway, to support someone in urgent need of food and other household essentials. Support may be in the form of emergency food parcels or signposting to Fareshare or Food Pantry schemes to access low-cost food.
- 5.18 Mobile Phones – For families who require a phone to remain in contact with CCBC and other services, particularly where a phone is required for the provision of support, Caerphilly Cares may be able to provide a basic (call-only) phone and phone credit to help them to stay in touch. In addition, for residents in need of data to help them engage with key services, CCBC Library Service in partnership with the Good Things Foundation offer pre-loaded data SIM cards to residents who are most at need, via referral from CCBC staff.
- 5.19 Housing and Homelessness – The Supporting People team are able to provide expert support and advice for anyone experiencing difficulties with housing, including problems with their tenancy or even risk of homelessness. Support can include help with finding housing, support with form filling, debts, benefits, eviction notices and rent/mortgage arrears.
- 5.20 Employment Support - The Council has a dedicated team to support people to find work. The Employment team can help people to gain new skills, access training and improve their chances of getting a job by supporting with things such as updating their CV, job searching, interview skills etc. Staff can also complete “better off calculations” if customers have questions or concerns about how working might impact their current benefits.
- 5.21 Community Connectors - The Community Connectors team aim to promote well-being, reduce social isolation, help people feel part of their community and promote independence. The team reconnect residents (18+) with their community by helping them to find suitable groups, linking them to other people who have similar interests and encouraging them to participate within their community. The team will also make appropriate referrals for those on their caseload, for example signposting for support with maximising their income or accessing other forms of support such as those outlined within this report.
- 5.22 Warm Packs - To help support those that may be struggling to keep warm during the colder months and amongst rising fuel costs, CCBC has funded a supply of warm packs, containing warm clothing and other useful items (such as a hot water bottle). Warm packs are available for anyone that needs them, with no eligibility conditions, through professional or self-referral by contacting the Caerphilly Cares Gateway. Wherever possible, warm packs are always provided alongside the offer of additional support to assist someone with addressing the underlying issues which contribute to the difficulties in heating their home.

5.23 **Conclusion**

Members are asked to note the content of this report.

6. **ASSUMPTIONS**

6.1 There are no assumptions included in this report.

7. **SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

7.1 The decision to terminate the funding has been made by Welsh Government. The recommendation within this report is a measure to support families due to withdrawal of funding provided by Welsh Government.

8. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 There are no financial implications outside existing Caerphilly Cares Resources and the Cost of Living budget allocation of £3 million.

9. **PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 There are no personnel implications.

10. **CONSULTATIONS**

10.1 The draft report was distributed as detailed below. All comments received have been reflected in this version of the report.

11. **STATUTORY POWER**

11.1 None

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