



CABINET- 12TH JULY 2023

SUBJECT: FREE SCHOOL MEAL HOLIDAY PAYMENTS – SUMMER HOLIDAY 2023

REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR FOR EDUCATION AND CORPORATE SERVICES

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 Welsh Government have recently made a decision to cease Free School Meal holiday payments with immediate effect.
- 1.2 This report seeks Cabinet approval to allocate one-off funding to continue the Free School Meal Holiday payments to eligible families across Caerphilly during the Summer Holiday period 2023.

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 Due to the late notification, and the impact that this will have, it is proposed that the Council provides 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 will require the allocation of one-off funding of £900,000. This funding does not set a precedent but does provide some immediate support for vulnerable families, while also giving families forewarning of no further vouchers being available for any future holiday periods.
- 2.4 There will be no future payments, unless Members are minded to build in an extra £2 million of pressures into future budgets or Welsh Government change their policy on this matter.
- 2.5 The Caerphilly Cares team will also be looking at options for supporting our most vulnerable families through existing staff resources.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Cabinet Members are asked:

- 1) to approve one-off funding in the sum of £900,000 from uncommitted Capital Earmarked Reserves to enable the extension of the free school meal holiday payments for the period outlined in 2.2 above.

4. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 To allow the extension of the Free School Meal Holiday Payments Scheme for Summer 2023 for eligible families, in light of the Welsh Government decision to cease this payment.
- 4.2 To mitigate the impact this late decision will have on families who have grown to rely on this funding and were expecting it for the Summer period.

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 family's 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 by using the voucher system this 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 The feedback from families has evidenced that there is a reliance on this payment and an expectation that it would continue during the Summer Holiday 2023.
- 5.7 Due to the late notification from the Welsh Government and the impact on vulnerable families it is recommended that the Council fund the payment for the Summer Holiday period to support the families through this period of transition.
- 5.8 There are currently circa 7588 eligible pupils.
- 5.9 This is one-off funding and does not set a precedent but does provide immediate support while giving families forewarning of no vouchers for any future holiday periods.
- 5.10 There will be no future payments unless Members are minded to build in an extra £2 million of pressures into future budgets or Welsh Government change their policy on this matter.
- 5.11 The Caerphilly Cares team will also be looking at options for supporting our most vulnerable families through existing staff resources.

5.12 **Conclusion**

Members are asked to approve the recommendations in 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 during an interim period due to the short notice of funding withdrawal provided by Welsh Government.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The estimated cost for extending the scheme for the Summer Holidays 2023 only is £900,000. This is one-off funding and does not set a precedent.
- 8.2 It is proposed that this sum is funded from uncommitted Capital Earmarked Reserves.

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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