

FREE SCHOOL MEALS (FSM)



Introduction

All children and their families have found themselves in exceptional and unexpected circumstances since March 2020, as a result of COVID 19.

During the period of full lock down between 23rd March 2020 and the end of the summer term the majority of children were not attending school. The impact on employment and income nationally, saw a significant rise in the families needing to claim free school meals.

In Plymouth there is a continuing increase of eligible families for free school meals and since March numbers have risen in the city by over 14%. Universal credit claimants (28,500 in September 2020) also continue to increase meaning that the trend upwards of FSM will continue.

In previous school holidays arrangements were made to ensure that children not attending school, who are eligible for FSM, had vouchers through the national voucher scheme, could pick up take away meals from their school, or collect weekly food parcels. The government recognised that those eligible for FSMs would need continued support during the long summer holiday period and the national voucher scheme was put in place.

Current position

Schools have now fully re-opened since the beginning of the new academic year. With the support of the LA and Trusts schools had worked well to ensure COVID secure arrangements in place. For most schools in Plymouth attendance has been high; however, there have been a series of suspected cases, and confirmed cases that have required 'bubbles' (in some cases whole year groups) to remain at home and for two special schools short periods of closure. This has led to between 400 and 1100 children being at home at any one time during the first half term.

In relation to FSM the uptake has continued to rise, and there are now over 8730 pupils in the city who are eligible.

During the school term schools and the LA catering company (CATERed) provided food parcels for those children who were self-isolating and FSM eligible. Whilst not all children accessed this offer, in excess of 90 families did.

Along with other Local Authorities and school leaders we have lobbied the government to ensure that arrangements for the October school break were put in place, and in view of the timing of previous announcements had anticipated a late decision in relation to this half term.

This has not been forthcoming. In recognition of the hardship experienced by many families, and the impact for their children this required an urgent decision, and actions to be taken as half term began.

We recognise that families experiencing poverty and exceptional circumstances over a period of longer than 7 months do need additional financial support at this time, in order to ensure that they can feed their children over the half term break. Additional hardship, and difficulties in providing basic food for their children, will add to the difficulties their children will face in maintaining their health, their ability to engage in their education, and for some families exacerbate their ability to maintain and support their children's attendance at school.

With other factors related to COVID likely to cause further disruption to children's education, we will continue to support schools to manage periods of self isolation among pupils and staff. We believe we should support access to a holiday meal for those families that do need additional financial assistance over the school holiday.

It is clear that other local authorities are taking similar action to support the most disadvantaged pupils during the half term break.

Financial/budgetary implications

It is anticipated that only those most in need will access the financial assistance, and checks are in place to ensure that only those already eligible for FSM will be considered for payment.

If all families with children eligible for FSM did make a claim, there is a potential full cost impact of over £90k. However it is more likely that around a third of those most in need will apply and this will bring a cost of £30k.

Funding this additional cost are being considered in full, including whether the grant for food poverty and hardship has sufficient funds to cover these costs. It is clear that the LGA are challenging the view that this was the intention and therefore appropriate.

We will also be considering whether the school allocated FSM funding – which are usually specifically for term time only provisions, can be accessed. This will require Schools Forum consideration.

In the event that these funding options are not possible, it is the case that this spend will be additional COVID related expenditure for the Council. Our current understanding of how existing national grants are being deployed means that we do anticipate this may bring an additional financial burden that will need to be managed within the COVID Council related reserve.

Recommendation and decision

In order to support the health and well-being of the most disadvantaged children and continued engagement in their education, this report recommends that a delegated decision is taken to support the system to make a payment of £11 available to families whose child is eligible for FSM.