

Committee: **Council**

Date of Meeting: **20th July, 2023**

Report Subject: **Free School Meal Holiday Payments – Summer Holiday 2023**

Portfolio Holder: **Councillor Sue Edmunds, Cabinet Member - People & Education**

Report Submitted by: **Luisa Munro-Morris, Acting Director of Education**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance & Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Cabinet	Council	Other (please state)
							20.7.23	

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 Welsh Government have recently decided to no longer fund Free School Meal holiday payments from the Summer of 2023.
- 1.2 This report seeks Council's agreement to allocate one-off funding to continue the Free School Meal Holiday payments to eligible families across Blaenau Gwent during the Summer Holiday period 2023.

2. Scope and Background

- 2.1 In March 2020, the Council commenced a free school meals scheme supported by Welsh Government as a temporary 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. For the next 2 years the Council has continued to deliver this scheme which has been fully funded by Welsh Government.
- 2.2 On Wednesday 28 June 2023 Welsh Government Informed Councils across Wales that they would no longer be able to support the payment of Free School Meal Holiday payments.
- 2.3 The ever-increasing cost of living crisis has become a significant burden on our communities, especially those from low-income backgrounds. Rising prices has placed a severe strain on households finances.
- 2.4 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 school holidays and in the current cost of living crisis.

- 2.5 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.
- 2.6 This will require the allocation of one-off funding of approximately £300,000 based on current take up levels. This funding does not set a precedent but does provide some immediate support for vulnerable families during this continuing cost of living crisis, while also giving families forewarning that no further direct payment will be available for any future holiday periods.
- 2.7 There will be no future payments, unless Members are minded to build in an extra £700,000 of pressures into future budgets or Welsh Government change their policy on this matter.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

- 3.1 Council are asked to either agree:

Option 1 to approve one-off funding in the sum of approximately £300,000 from General Reserves to enable the extension of the free school meal holiday payments for the period outlined in 2.5.

Option 2 not to approve one-off funding in the sum of approximately £300,000 from General Reserves to enable the extension of the free school meal holiday payments for the period outlined in 2.5.

4. **Evidence of how this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

The Corporate Plan 2022-27 vision is that 'Blaenau Gwent – a place that is fair, open and welcoming to all by working with and for our Communities' and the proposal to support vulnerable families during these difficult times through the additional payment of those families eligible for Free School Meals during the Summer period fits within our vision.

It further supports our objectives by 'Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient' and that we are a 'An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place' and finally that we can 'Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent'.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

- 5.1 The estimated cost for extending the scheme for the Summer Holidays 2023 is approximately £300,000 based on the current level of take up. This is one-off funding and does not set a precedent.
- 5.2 It is proposed that this sum is funded from General Reserves.

5.3 To not allow the extension of the Free School Meal Holiday Payments Scheme for Summer 2023 for eligible families, considering the Welsh Government decision to stop this payment will create hardship on existing vulnerable families at a time of continuing pressure on household budgets due to the 'cost of living crisis'.

5.4 ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

5.5 There are risks that without this one-off payment vulnerable families will suffer significant hardship in providing food for their children during the summer period particularly during this continuing 'cost of living crisis'.

5.6 By agreeing Option1 this will 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.

5.7 There is a risk that eligible families not currently applying for free school meals will make an application. This will increase costs for the period.

5.8 Prioritising this area and increasing cost pressures for future years will necessitate Members having to de-prioritise other service areas.

5.9 ***Legal***

There are no legal implications.

5.10 ***Human Resources***

There are no personnel implications.

5.11 ***Health and Safety***

There are no health and safety implications.

6. **Supporting Evidence**

6.1 ***Performance Information and Data***

The ever-increasing cost of living crisis has become a significant burden on our communities, especially those from low-income backgrounds. Rising prices have placed a severe strain on household's finances.

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 school holidays and in the current cost of living crisis.

There was approximately 2,626 learners claiming the direct payment during the on May 2023 half-term , the last time the scheme was delivered across Blaenau Gwent.

6.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***

This additional payment will help ensure children from our vulnerable families will not go without food throughout the summer break during this particularly difficult time with rising prices.

6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

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. Many families have come to rely on this direct payment to ensure they can feed their children during school holidays.

6.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***

Although this is a short-term measure it will hopefully help families to get through the current cost of living crisis and we hope that inflation begins to reduce to take pressure of their household finances.

6.5 ***Preventative focus***

This proposal is trying to mitigate against potential hardship for vulnerable families during the summer holidays by ensuring they have funding to buy food to feed their children.

6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

This proposal is seeking to work with our communities to support them during these difficult times by ensuring they receive funding to enable them to buy food for their children.

6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***

We are taking a 'one Council' approach to support our communities during these difficult times with the 'cost of living' crisis, this is just another example of services coming together to ensure we meet the needs of our vulnerable children within our communities.

6.8 ***Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions***

The continuation of this direct payment will have a limited impact on decarbonisation and reducing carbon emissions.

6.9 ***Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)***

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.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

7.1 A further report will be presented to Council following the Summer period to identify the final cost of delivering the Free School Meals direct payment scheme across the 6 week holiday period.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

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