



## **CABINET – 20<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2020**

### **FREE SCHOOL MEAL PROVISION DURING SCHOOL HOLIDAYS**

### **REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE RESOURCES AND DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES**

#### **PART A**

##### **Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to advise the Cabinet on arrangements for the provision of vouchers for pupils who are eligible for free school meals over the school holidays for the rest of the current financial year, including the whole of the Easter Holidays in 2021 and to seek agreement for allocation of the necessary funding.
2. On 27 October the Leader of the County Council announced that the Authority would earmark funding to extend provision of free school meals over the school holidays. At the time of writing this report the Government has indicated it will be providing a package of support for children and families in poverty including a £170m ring-fenced fund to help with food and bills, to be distributed via local councils. Details as to how this might be allocated are still awaited.

##### **Recommendations**

3. It is recommended that -
  - a) The provision of Free School Meal vouchers for school holidays as outlined in this report is confirmed;
  - b) That it be noted that the Chief Executive, following consultation with the Director of Corporate Resources, the Leader and the Cabinet Lead Member for Resources, has agreed the spend of £360,000 in relation to the provision of free school meals over the Christmas/New Year holiday period;
  - c) That up to £1m in total be allocated for the provision of free school meal vouchers during the financial year 2020/21, noting that additional Government funding may reimburse the Council for a part or the whole of this sum.

##### **Reasons for Recommendation**

4. There has been increasing concern raised about the provision of food over the school holidays for those pupils who are eligible for free school meals, in particular in view of the financial difficulties faced by many as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
5. Delivery of free school meals via a voucher system is straightforward and comprehensive and will enable arrangements to be put in place in time for the Christmas and New Year holidays. The action taken by the Chief Executive to agree funding for the next holiday period was taken in order to secure a provider in anticipation of a busy market.
6. The cost of provision is currently estimated to be around £900,000 but this may increase, for instance if demand rises. The Council's latest outturn forecast for 2020/21 included an allowance for Covid-related costs that are likely to arise but have not yet been specifically identified.

#### **Timetable for Decisions (including Scrutiny)**

7. Subject to the Cabinet's approval arrangements will be put in place at the earliest opportunity, in readiness for the end of term in December.

#### **Policy Framework and Previous Decisions**

8. The County Council's General Scheme of Delegation (Constitution Part 3, Section D) requires that the urgent action taken by the Chief Executive is reported to the next Cabinet meeting.
9. Reports regarding the Council's financial position and work taking place to support local communities have been submitted to a number of Cabinet meetings, most recently on 20 October.

#### **Resource Implications**

10. The provision of free school meals on the basis set out in this report is estimated to cost the Council in the region of £900,000 for the 2020/21 financial year.
11. For the Christmas holiday period it is proposed to provide vouchers to the value of £15 per eligible pupil, which will cost circa £180,000 per week. There are 5 more weeks of school holidays in this financial year so on this basis the total cost will be £900,000. However, numbers of eligible pupils are currently rising so the cost may increase between now and Easter.
12. Alternative approaches to the provision of free school meals will be considered for future holiday periods (after Christmas 2020) if similar outcomes can be achieved for lower cost. There are indications that the Government will support the County Council through the recently announced Covid Winter Grant Scheme.

13. The Council's latest outturn forecast for 2020/21 included an allowance for Covid-related costs that are likely to arise but have not yet been specifically identified. These costs could be incurred in the current finance year or the next, where no indication of the level of Government financial support has been received. The funding of the Free School Meals can be accommodated in the allowance in the current financial year.
14. The Director of Legal and Governance has been consulted and is content with the contents of the report.

#### **Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure**

15. None.

#### **Officers to Contact**

Chris Tambini  
Director of Corporate Resources  
Telephone: 0116 305 6199  
Email: [chris.tambini@leics.gov.uk](mailto:chris.tambini@leics.gov.uk)

Jane Moore  
Director of Children and Family Services  
Telephone: 0116 305 2649  
Email: [jane.moore@leics.gov.uk](mailto:jane.moore@leics.gov.uk)

Neville Wilkinson, Head of Commercial Services  
Corporate Resources Department  
Telephone: 0116 305 5040  
Email: [nev.wilkinson@leics.gov.uk](mailto:nev.wilkinson@leics.gov.uk)

## **PART B**

### **Background**

16. There has been increasing concern raised nationally about the provision of food to pupils who are eligible for Free School Meals during School Holidays. There are currently 12,009 pupils registered to receive Free School Meals across Leicestershire. This figure has risen from 11,000 at the beginning of the School Year in September. The Council's traded service arm, LTS Catering, currently supplies 195 of the 353 schools within the County, with the others either providing meals themselves or using other suppliers.
17. There are a growing number of Local Authorities which have decided to offer support packages for pupils over the Christmas holidays. These include vouchers worth £15 per pupil, additional support to food banks and community hubs, food parcels and meal provision. Little detail is available on most of those schemes at present.

### **Voucher Scheme**

18. Officers have analysed the different options and sought views of Headteachers across the County as to how the free school meals could best be provided. The conclusion is that the most simple and comprehensive solution is an e-voucher scheme, very similar to the one that was operated by the DfE during the Summer holiday period, which both parents and schools are already familiar with.
19. It is intended that the e-vouchers would be provided to the parents/carers of all pupils who are eligible for free school meals in the last weeks of the Autumn Term. These could be distributed through the schools, meaning that there would be no additional GDPR (data protection) requirements.
20. Whilst there have been some concerns that the vouchers may not be used to buy food for pupils, there is no evidence to suggest that this was an issue during the Summer Holidays. Moreover, there are restrictions that mean the vouchers cannot be used to purchase controlled products such as alcohol and tobacco.
21. The Council has undertaken some research into the potential suppliers of vouchers and expects that the national provider (used previously) will provide the greatest range of shops for parents and pupils to shop from. The vouchers are currently eligible for use in Asda, Marks & Spencer, McColl's, Morrisons, Sainsburys, Tesco and Waitrose (John Lewis).
22. The Council will develop a bespoke solution to support those schools which are not located near to any of the above retailers, but again, experience over the summer holiday period suggested that these will be relatively few.
23. At the beginning of the summer holidays some parents experienced difficulty in accessing the vouchers once their child's school had closed. The Council

will put a system in place to enable vouchers to be distributed to new claimants over the Christmas holidays, and will make similar arrangements for pupils in Independent School Providers, who are eligible for free school meals receive vouchers.

### **Latest Position**

24. The decision to agree the spend relating to free school meal provision over the next holiday period was taken in light of the Council's stated commitment and following consultation with the Cabinet Lead Member for Resources, and to ensure that a partner to provide the vouchers could be secured in what is now likely to be a busy market.
25. At the time of writing it is unclear as to whether the recently-announced additional Government funding will cover a part or a whole of the cost of providing the free school meals.

### **Equality and Human Rights Implications**

26. The proposals set out in this report will have a positive impact on equality, helping to ensure that pupils and families in need are supported by the Council. The processes for distribution of the vouchers will be developed having regard to the Council's Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment process.

### **Background Papers**

None.

This page is intentionally left blank