

GROWTH IN FREE SCHOOL MEALS

Report of the Director of Education, Work & Skills

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 As part of the Scrutiny Work Programme approved by the Council for the municipal year 2022/23, the Children & Families Scrutiny Committee directed a review in respect of School Place Sufficiency and agreed to understand the growth in children eligible for free school meals in Stockport and assess its impact.
- To review in detail the growth in numbers of children eligible for free schools meals, looking at regional and national comparisons, comparisons between primary and secondary schools and examining the potential cause of this growth.
 - To assess the impact this growth in free school meals eligibility has on school meals and food.
 - To review the wider impacts of this growth in deprivation, looking in detail at financial impacts and potential impacts on education and learning.

2. REVIEW METHODOLOGY

- 2.1 The review was undertaken by Elected Members during two sessions held in December 2022 and February 2023. Session One considered a presentation by Tim Bowman, exploring the growth in FSM at borough, ward and school level. The report also outlined comparison to regional and national figures. Session Two considered a presentation by Tim Bowman and Lynn Perry explaining the impacts of school funding and the outcomes delivered by Stockport schools for those children who are in receipt of eligible for benefits-led Free School Meals.

3. RESOLUTIONS

- 3.1 Following consideration of the review, the Council Meeting resolved to ask the Chief Executive to write to the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, to call for:
- An alleviation of financial pressure on hard working families struggling to feed their children during the cost-of-living crisis by implementing an urgent extension of free school meals to ensure universal provision for all school age groups, for a time limited period to match the cost of living crisis; and
 - A simultaneous review of the eligibility criteria and realistic threshold that would increase the number of children entitled to free school meals, with universal provision to end only once a more realistic threshold has been implemented; and
 - Food provision for children on free school meals during the school holidays as standard.
- 3.2 In addition, the Council Meeting recognised:

- There are an estimated 3,626 children living in households in Stockport that are in receipt of housing benefit and/or Council Tax Support but not receiving Free School Meals; and
- That extending means-tested free school meals to ineligible households in receipt of housing benefits and/or Council Tax Support could provide them with the equivalent of approximately £500 of support per child over this next year.

3.3 The minutes of the Council meeting record the following: this Council believes that the Leader of the Council; the Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education; and the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources should commit at the February 2023 Council Budget meeting :

- To creating the Stockport Cost-of-Living Free School Meals Guarantee. This will extend means-tested free school meals for one school year from the June 2023 term to children in households in receipt of housing benefit and/or Council Tax support currently ineligible for means-tested free school meals;
- To ensuring that the existing Household Support Fund is directed as far as it can to include those who most need it including households who are in receipt of Universal Credit and Housing Benefit/Council Tax support;
- To utilise any one-off resources available to the Council to fund the Stockport Cost-of-Living Free School Meals Guarantee at an estimated cost of £1.875m as agreed with the S151 Officer; and
- To monitor the social and economic impact of the Stockport Cost-of-Living Free School Meals Guarantee, with reports regularly brought to the relevant scrutiny committees and to full council.

4. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

This is a proposal to extend existing schemes following consideration of the need for continued support for eligible children and households. The additional cost associated with this needs to be fully considered. The legal framework for making such payments will be reviewed as and when new legislation is introduced. The current process aligns with current duties and obligations required of the Council.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 An overview of actions completed in response to the review recommendations is included at appendix one to this report.
- 5.2 Whilst this update indicates much action and impact, there remains much to do to ensure that children eligible for FSM are supported to achieve well. This will therefore remain a key priority as is demonstrated in the Council Plan (Ambition Two) and the Stockport Family PPRA.
- 5.3 The Cabinet is invited to endorse and adopt the response set out in the report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

There are none.

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Tim Bowman on Tel: 07977 661073 or by email on tim.bowman@stockport.gov.uk