

## **County Council – 6 November 2020**

### **Item 9(g) - Notice of Motion by Cllr Michael Jones**

#### **Provision of Free School Meals in School Holidays – Briefing Note**

##### **Background and Overview**

At the January 2020 schools census, there were 11,469 free school meal eligible children in West Sussex who qualify for free school meals (FSM), around 10% of the total school roll. Whilst we are awaiting the Department for Education to verify the October 2020 schools census, we do know that we have processed around 6,000 FSM applications since January, with approximately an additional 3,500 children qualifying for FSM. It is therefore likely that the FSM number in West Sussex is currently around 15,000.

As well as COVID-19, a contributing factor to the rise of FSM eligibility is that, since 2018 we are no longer allowed to check FSM eligible children for on-going eligibility under the Government's Universal Credit Transitional Protection scheme. Councils used to check every three months for eligibility. Therefore currently we are adding FSM eligible children to the FSM roll but not taking any away. Pupils cannot be removed from FSM when their circumstances change until the end of their current phase of Education after 31 March 2022.

School meals are provided for 190 term time days and are not provided during school holiday periods. During the Easter and May school breaks, the Government provided supermarket food vouchers at a value of £15 per week during the school holiday periods. Although initially deciding not to extend this through the summer holiday period, the Government altered its position and food vouchers were provided through the Government's own voucher system organised by Edenred over the six-week summer school holidays.

Schools are currently funded for schools meals during term time through their school budget, which is calculated through an agreed formula as part of the Dedicated Schools Grant. FSM funding is included within the additional needs section within the formula and, for 2020/21, is calculated at £540 per eligible pupil. The data set used to calculate the percentage of pupils eligible for FSM is based on parents' receipt of specified benefits, and this information was taken from the October 2019 schools census.

The funding for universal infant free school meals for pupils in reception year, year 1 and year 2 is not included as part of the school budget but is funded through a separate grant.

##### **Support via the Community Hub**

The Community Hub, which was set up in March 2020 to give practical support and assistance to anyone adversely affected by COVID-19, has provided access to food and essential household supplies since its launch as well as information, advice and guidance.

The Community Hub telephone lines are open from 8am to 8pm, 7 days a week supported by the County Council's [Community Hub website](#) and a series of e-forms to provide digital access.

The Community hub can be contacted directly by residents, their friends or families or via a referral from an agency such as borough and district councils or Citizens Advice where they have identified a support requirement, including the provision of food/household essentials.

Staff are trained to ask the right questions in order to assess the needs of the resident or caller. Incoming calls will be triaged to assess the level of need and an order for a food delivery placed with the relevant supply organisation as appropriate.

The Community Hub has received over 54,000 inbound calls and online support request forms, undertaken over 37,000 outbound calls and delivered in excess of 3,000 food parcels across the county. The food and support provided has reached across all the communities of West Sussex and ensured that support needed has been, and will continue to be, provided to anyone in need.

Prior to receiving the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' hardship grant the County Council had spent £140,000 on providing essential food and supplies to support vulnerable people. Since receiving the grant of £737,319 a further £383,000 has been spent on essential food and supplies £160,000 has been provided to Citizens Advice and local food networks to ensure access to essential supplies and food is available locally.

### **October Half Term Demand**

Children and families who needed support over the school holidays were reminded to contact the Community Hub set up to provide help during the COVID pandemic. Contact volumes into the Community Hub were very low during the October half term period. Two contacts were received in respect of FSM, one seeking information and the other requesting non urgent food support, which was provided.

### **Paul Wagstaff**

Director of Education and Skills

### **Emily King**

Director of Community Services