

EXECUTIVE 22nd February 2022

Report Title	Provision of school holiday food vouchers for children and young people eligible for benefits related Free School Meals (FSM) in future school holiday periods
Report Author	AnnMarie Dodds, Director of Children's Services
Lead Member	Councillor Jason Smithers, Leader of the Council

Key Decision	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for call-in by Scrutiny?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Are there public sector equality duty implications?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information (whether in appendices or not)?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Applicable paragraph number for exemption from publication under Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1974	

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to provide Members with all the necessary information to make a fully informed decision in respect of the funding and future provision of school holiday food vouchers for the 2022 Easter and May half-term holiday periods. The report will provide the following detail;
- Number of eligible children and young people resident in North Northants;
 - The cost to the Council of providing school holiday food vouchers;
 - The process utilised to distribute vouchers to eligible families.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) began to provide school holiday food vouchers to children and young people eligible for benefits related Free School Meals in October 2020, in an effort to ensure that vulnerable families were supported during the Coronavirus pandemic. From 1st April 2021, North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) has continued this support in all subsequent school holiday periods.

- 2.2 The number of children and young people eligible for benefits related Free School Meals (FSM) has increased throughout the Coronavirus pandemic, currently 10,095 individuals are eligible (as of 20th January 2022) however, this situation is very fluid and is highly likely to increase.
- 2.3 The Department for Education (DfE) standard rate for the provision of FSM is £15 per pupil per week and this is the value that NNC has utilised when providing school holiday food vouchers.
- 2.4 The cost of providing school holiday food vouchers during the Easter holiday period to NNC would be £306,000, with a further £153,000 required to fund vouchers at May half-term (allowing for a small increase in the number of eligible children and young people between now and the school holidays).

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 It is recommended that the Executive:
- a) Approve the funding of school holiday food vouchers for the 2022 Easter school holiday period at a cost of £306,000, from the 'Household Support Grant' received from central government for the purpose of providing financial support to vulnerable families during the pandemic.
 - b) Approve the provision and funding of school holiday food vouchers for the 2022 May half-term period, at a cost of £153,000 from the 'Household Support Grant' received from central government for the purpose of providing financial support to vulnerable families during the pandemic.
- 3.2 Reasons for Recommendations:–
- Customers will receive the maximum benefit from the option proposed and it will provide support to financially disadvantaged residents of North Northamptonshire during school holiday periods.
 - The recommendation is consistent with previous decisions taken by the Council.
 - Use of the 'Household Support Grant' for this purpose is compliant with the terms of the grant.

4. Report Background

- 4.1 The Council has partnered with a company named 'Huggg', an online voucher distribution platform, to facilitate the distribution of school holiday food vouchers to eligible families across North Northamptonshire, since the unitary authority was established in April 2021. Voucher codes to the value of £15 per child, per week were generated via the 'Huggg' platform and then sent to individual schools for onwards distribution to families.
- 4.2 Families in receipt of a school holiday food voucher have been able to utilise the voucher at the following retail outlets; Aldi, Asda, Marks and Spencer, McColls Newsagents, Morrisons, Sainsbury's and Tesco.

4.3 Since the 1st April 2021, the Council has funded the following amounts of school holiday food vouchers to support financially disadvantaged families during the pandemic;

- Easter 2021: £300,000;
- May half-term 2021: £150,000;
- Summer 2021: £900,000;
- October half-term 2021: £150,000;
- Christmas 2021: £300,000;
- February half-term 2022: £150,000;
- Total: £1,950,000.

4.4 The Council received a total of £2,508,248 as its allocation of the 'Household Support Grant'. The terms of the grant require that at least 50% of the grant is used to support families with children and the proposal to use this grant to fund school holiday food vouchers is fully compliant with the terms of the grant.

5. Issues and Choices

5.1 To fund school holiday food vouchers from the 'Household Support Grant' for the Easter and May half-term holiday period: This option would allow the Council to provide financial support to residents of North Northamptonshire that require it most during the pandemic, whilst complying with the grant conditions for its use. This option has no impact on the Council's general fund.

5.2 To fund school holiday food vouchers from the 'Household Support Grant' for the Easter but not May half-term holiday period: This option would allow for partial financial support to be provided to financially disadvantaged families, whilst complying with the grant conditions. This option may mean that the Council is unable to utilise the full amount of the 'Household Support Grant' funding received from central government. This option would also be inconsistent with other decisions made in relation to the provision of school holiday food vouchers in the 21/22 academic year.

5.3 To fund school holiday food vouchers from another source: Whilst this option would allow the Council to support financially disadvantaged families resident in North Northants, no other funding stream has been identified for this purpose and would impact upon the NNC general fund. No alternative use has been identified for the 'Household Support Grant' and progression of this option may result in grant funding being returned to central government.

5.4 To not fund school holiday food vouchers: This option would not allow the Council to provide financial support to disadvantaged residents of North Northamptonshire.

6. Implications (including financial implications)

6.1 Resources and Financial

- 6.1.1 Use of £459,000 of 'Household Support Grant' funding for the provision of school holiday food vouchers for the 2022 Easter and May half-term school holiday periods would not have any financial implications for the Council as the proposal is to use grant funding received from central government for this purpose. The proposal will not have any impact upon the Council general fund.
- 6.1.2 The Free School Meals Administration Service would be utilised to distribute voucher codes to schools for onwards distribution to families. The team is in place and has distributed vouchers for all previous school holiday periods. The resources for progression of this option are already in place and no further resource would be required.

6.2 Legal

- 6.2.1 The use of the funds is compliant with the grant conditions as set out in the report. It is an Executive function to agree to provide Free School Meals vouchers. The grant forms part of the Council's Budget and Policy Framework and therefore is an Executive function.

6.3 Risk

- 6.3.1 There are no significant risks to the Council that would arise from this proposal.

6.4 Consultation

- 6.4.1 No consultation was required or undertaken in respect of this proposal.

6.5 Consideration by Scrutiny

- 6.5.1 N/A

6.6 Climate Impact

- 6.6.1 N/A

6.7 Community Impact

- 6.7.1 The community impact of this proposal would be positive, as it seeks to provide financial support to disadvantaged families across North Northamptonshire that they otherwise would not receive.

7. Background Papers

7.1 N/A