

School Forum – 7th July 2015

Free School Meal Support – Increase Take Up Option

Service: Money, Home, Job

1. Summary

This report:

- Details the Free School Meal service currently provided by Walsall Council
- Provides information about proposed service improvements.
- Invites schools to participate in the further development of the service to secure mutually beneficial outcomes.

2. Service Improvements

Service improvements were developed in conjunction with Short Heath Junior School and Rosedale Infants School (*Federation*). (See appendix B)

A short period of collaborative working has enabled the authority to understand what was important to the schools and to work with them to develop a scheme that meets their needs.

The collaboration commenced 5th June 2015 and in just 3 weeks has resulted in:

- 9 additional free school meal registrations of which 6 were successful
- This will result in an additional £7,920 in school premiums in January 2016
- Stream lined administration releasing staff resources
- More collaborative working and greater understanding of pressure and bottlenecks
- Open evening joint working (a recent approach adopted at 2 open evenings resulted in the above 9 additional FSM applications).

Work at the Federation is ongoing and we anticipate a greater FSM take up, increased pupil premiums and more savings over the next few weeks as we continue to work with the schools.

In addition the following work is planned which we believe will lead to further cashable and non cashable savings

- Early Years Pupil Premium – we will look into the possibility of having a combined EYPP and FSM form.
- Improved weekly eligibility reports.
- Debt advisors, budgeting experts, jobs assistance officers and welfare advice and support officers to be made available to attend open evenings if required.

- Schools to be linked to the crisis support team to assist families experiencing exceptional financial difficulties

3. Walsall Council Free School Meal Service

Our purpose is to support Schools to deliver a better educational experience to its pupils by ensuring that all children that are entitled to free school meals are made aware of that entitlement.

We will make the process of applying for FSM as simple as possible and we will work with schools to deliver the service in an efficient and effective way. In addition to our core purpose we help maximise the available income to schools through pupil premium.

In 2005 the elected members made a decision that free school meals administration should be merged with Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Administration. Only a small minority of Local Authorities administer FSM in this way.

The direct link to HB information enables eligibility to be quickly determined and speeds up the FSM administration process. This link also enables the FSM team to advise schools of urgent changes so that no child goes without a meal.

This approach has contributed to the improved take up of FSM from 19% in 2005 to 26% in 2014. The national average is 20%.

The pupil premium 2014/15 for primary age pupils is £1300.00 and £935.00 for secondary school pupils. **The pupil premium generates £13,365,300 for Walsall schools.**

A contributing factor to this high rate is Walsall's FSM team's unique relationship with the housing benefits service. **Most eligible children in Walsall are automatically awarded a Free School Meal/Pupil Premium without the need to complete a FSM application form.** This is because a combined benefit application form enables families to claim a multitude of benefits via one form. **This accounts for approximately 87.5% (7136) of FSM applications each year.**

The design of our service places the FSM team in a unique position to be able to constantly maximise take up. We wish to work with schools to develop this service further and provide added value to schools and parents.

If a family apply for FSM but do not qualify, their records are held and should their circumstances change and the **child becomes eligible, our system will in most cases automatically award FSM** using information already held. Approximately 400 pupils benefit from this each year.

We proactively write to parents though out the year to register for FSM where it is brought to our attention that they are eligible. **We issue approximately 400 letters annually.**

Our links to the housing benefit system permit us to share verification documents. This means we are able to issue shortened versions of registration letters which only require signatures and sometimes confirmation of the school the child

attends. **The Free School Meal can then be awarded without any other information being gathered.** The majority are processed in 1 day. Parents support this approach.

Arrangements exist to fast track claims on the same day, we work collaboratively with schools to help them exercise their discretion to ensure no child goes with a meal (approximately 150 per annum).

Our registration letters clearly explain the importance of **registering to ensure the school receives the maximum funding that they are entitled to even if it is not the intention of the family to take the meal. Approximately 700 are issued per annum.**

We identify all rising 5's about to start full time school that are eligible for FSM and proactively send a registration letter emphasising the importance of registering their infant school age child even though they will be receiving a school meal free of charge under the government Universal Infant Free School Meal System. In addition we issue reminders where there has been no response. Typically 500 letters are issued and 250 reminders per annum.

We automatically transfer children registered to receive FSM from one school to another e.g. infant to junior, junior to secondary. There is no need to re-apply when changing school. This is done in conjunction with the Childrens Services who hold the details for the school the child is transferring to. Approximately 800 cases each year are dealt with. Parents support this approach.

We automatically award a sibling a FSM if we already have a child registered from the same address. New applications may be required by other FSM service providers (increasing the administrative burden on schools).

We can take a request to award FSM directly from a school if the original request has come via the parent and we hold the necessary information.

We attend intake evenings/parent evenings and provide help and advice to schools and parents. We attended 20 last year. At our last event we took 9 new registration forms and 6 were successful

Parents can speak to someone face to face at the Civic Centre to seek advice or dispute a FSM decision. We also speak to families on behalf of the schools.

A dedicated phone line for schools is provided 5 days per week enabling a rapid response to queries needing immediate attention. Approximately 2000 calls were received last year.

Where schools have several queries a **secure email has been established** to enable the schools to post several enquiries at one time. **The team responds within a day to secure emails from schools. Approximately 3000 enquiries are received per annum.**

OFSTED are increasingly asking schools to provide evidence surrounding FSM eligibility and registration. Our weekly reports ensure records are robust, accurate and reliable.

4. The benefits of using the FSM team are:

- Automatic awards of FSM in 87.5% of cases equating to 7136
- Increased take up (19% to 26%)
- Ability to comply with OFSTED requests for FSM information therefore less risk
- Mutually beneficial maximisation of eligible claims and pupil premium
- Links to Crisis Support
- Links to Housing Benefits
- Links to Welfare Advise and Support
- Secure email
- Data protection compliance
- The possibility of combined FSM and Early Years Pupil Premium application forms and processes to maximise potential income
- Production of improved reports ensuring robust, reliable and accurate records.
- Debt advisors, budgeting experts, jobs assistance officers and welfare advice and support officers available to attend open evenings

5. Recommendations

The report recommends that:

- Schools note the pilot results and proposed improvements
- Schools note and take full advantage of the current service provision and proposed improvements
- Schools continue to work collaboratively with Walsall council to maximise free school meal take up, pupil premium and to ensure pupils continue to get the support they need when they need it.
- Schools consider the invitation to participate in the further development of the service to secure mutually beneficial outcomes.

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Appendix A

FSM Service

In 2005 the elected members made a decision that free school meals administration should be merged with Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction Administration. Only a small minority of Local Authorities administer FSM in this way. Prior to 2005 FSM was administered by Education Services.

The direct link to HB information enables eligibility to be quickly determined and speeds up the FSM admin process. This link also enables the FSM team to advise schools of urgent changes so child does not go without a meal

This approach has contributed to the improved take up of FSM from 19% to 26%

The FSM team currently consists of one full time member of staff and three part-time members. It works with 114 schools, academies and free schools. 10,281 pupils are in receipt of Free School Meals.

The team provides dedicated support to schools and academies to encourage take up of the Free School Meals service and maximise the pupil premium.

Service provided include:

- Carry out Hub checks using the Eligibility Checking System administered by the Department For Education through HMRC and DWP.
- Have a dedicated telephone number (01922 650443) for schools only to make any emergency queries
- We offer an e-mail service for queries concerning more than 2 or 3 children and aim to reply to these queries within 48 hours (e-mail address: benefitsservice@walsall.gov.uk)
- Carry out regular Batch Hub Checks to identify eligible children who are entitled to Free School Meals but are not receiving them, and those that are receiving FSM but are no longer entitled. These are scheduled to co-incide with schools Census days to ensure as accurate a picture and maximum take up for the Census
- We offer to attend parent evenings, open evenings and visits to schools to talk to parents, teachers and school staff about eligibility criteria to encourage parents to register their children, thereby increasing take up.
- We run information sessions (based on interest from schools) to offer information and support to school staff involved with Free School Meals
- We advise schools of any urgent changes so that a child does not go without a meal
- We arrange for the transfer of movers from Infant to Primary and Primary to secondary School in conjunction with our Systems Team.

- We write to parents of all those children identified as rising 5, to ask them to register their children for FSM and explaining the difference between the new Government scheme UIFSM (Universal Infant Free School Meals) and the existing Free School Meals and how registration can help the school acquire more funding
- Lists of eligible pupils are made available to schools every Monday and are uploaded to the S2S website – these lists contain all the changes made during the previous week and show those children who have become eligible for FSM and those who are no longer eligible
- Letters sent to parents weekly advising of awards/cancellations
- A full list of all eligible pupils is made available at the beginning of every term and half term
- The team are currently gathering information on how schools use these lists to give us a better understanding of any problems schools may face and see if only changes reports would be more useful and if necessary a full list too to follow..
- Electronic on-line application with receipt facility that goes directly to the team- parent doesn't need to take form to school or Civic Centre, also provide a n application that can be downloaded
- Regular checks on Out of Borough cases to confirm eligibility
- We could ask schools if estimates of what costs are going to be would be helpful.
- WMBC currently hold necessary information for confirming the eligibility of FSM's without the need for the school to gather or hold the information.
- We can provide a list to the school during the summer holidays of any pupils that are moving up into their school in September. If the school run any sort of summer club they may need to know if the child is going to be eligible for FSM before they start.

Appendix B

