



Northumberland

County Council

Families and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Date: 4 February 2021

Winter Support Grant (Free School Meals)

Report of the Executive Director of Adult Social Care & Children's Services, Cath McEvoy-Carr

Cabinet Member for Children's Services: Councillor Guy Renner-Thompson

Report Author: Sue Aviston Head of School organisation and Resources

Purpose of report.

To provide members with an update on the delivery of the Winter Support Grant which includes the provision of Free School Meals (FSM) over the Christmas school holidays.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- 1) Note the content of the report and the successful implementation of the initiatives undertaken with the funding from the Winter Support Grant.
- 2) FACS receive an update report on the remaining allocation of Winter Support Grant to FSM following February and Easter half-terms, and including an update on the allocation of FSM during the current lockdown period.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the Council's Corporate Plan 2018-2021, in particular in relation to the value "We want you to feel safe, healthy, and cared for".

Key issues

1. A high profile national campaign led to the Winter Support Fund being issued by Government in November 2020 to support families and individuals up until March 31st 2021. The fund is not only intended to support eligible families who access FSM, but is open to support wider residents and communities. This report provides an update on the initiatives undertaken over the Christmas holiday period to the Families and Children Services Scrutiny

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2. As we were only given just over 4 weeks to plan for the Christmas holidays, we took a very practical approach by looking to have 3 methods of delivering support to families who are entitled to Free School Meals as follows:
 - Where a school or academy already has an appropriate response in place, whether this means hot meals, vouchers, or food delivery. School Organisation and Resources Team will complete the simple transfer of funds to these schools to cover this cost to a maximum of £3 per day per eligible child. Around a third of schools fall into this category.
 - For all other schools and academies, the local authority will offer a centrally funded vouchers system that will require cooperation from schools to administer.
 - For our rural communities where it is more difficult to access larger supermarkets, we will provide physical gift cards for the local Co-op. The Co-op doesn't have the infrastructure at present to provide electronic vouchers.

3. As a Local Authority, we were eager to offer a voucher platform system that gave parents' choice as well as a system that had been tried and tested and easy to use for both parents and schools in order to avoid a repeat of the chaos of the centrally run system of the summer term. We organised usage of an existing vouchering platform called Huggg as it was already being used successfully by other authorities and schools. The platform offers a choice directly to parents and carers of 9 supermarkets including Asda, Morrisons, Tesco, Iceland, Aldi, Waitrose, Marks and Spencer, McColls and Sainsbury's - 3 of these supermarkets also have the facility to use the voucher online.
 - The platform is free to use to the Council with 100% of funding going direct to parents and carers. Any unclaimed vouchers can also be reclaimed by the Council, allowing the funding to be reused for other initiatives or increasing FSM allowances in the other holiday periods.
 - A training and demonstration event was held with all school staff that were interested in using the Huggg platform, with a recording of the event being made available to schools who could not attend; following this event more schools were keen to use the voucher platform as it gives parents the choice of where to spend the vouchers and in a very simple way to redeem and spend the vouchers with a barcode going directly to parents phones or emails with one simple click. The schools also found the administration of the system to be far easier and more straight forward than with the national system. This resulted in 134 (80%) of schools and education providers using the voucher platform, 32 (19%) of schools and education providers having their own local arrangements and only 2 (1%) schools using the Co-op vouchers provided by the local authority, although some schools did use the Co-op as part of their local arrangements.

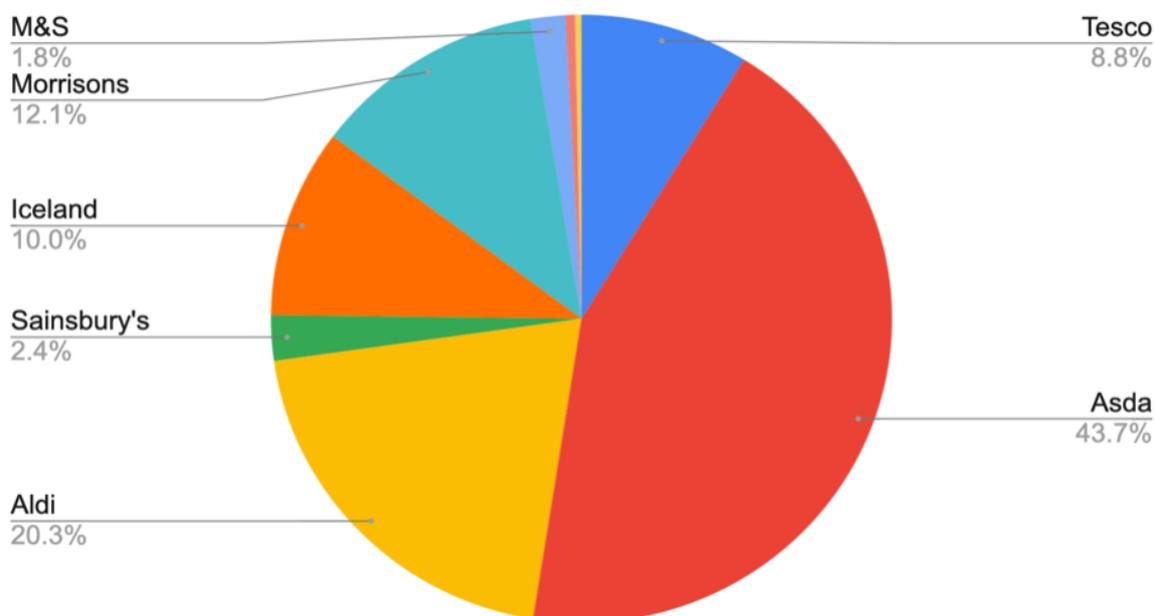
- The data in the Table 1 below shows the picture of vouchers issued and redeemed up to 6 January 2020. At that point, 85% of the vouchers had been spent, although we did give parents until 31 January to spend the vouchers.

Table 1

	Number produced	Number redeemed	Redemption rate	Total amount issued	Total amount redeemed
Schools	5869	5059	86%	£176,070.00	£151,770.00
Alternative Providers	52	35	67%	£1,560.00	£1,050.00
College take up	108	45	42%	£3,240.00	£1,350.00
Care leavers	94	45	48%	£2,820.00	£1,350.00
NCT team	94	89	95%	£3,735.00	£3,560.00
Totals	6221	5262	85%	£186,630.00	£157,860.00
Total Percentage redeemed					85%

- The data in the pie chart below also shows which supermarkets parents chose to spend their vouchers in Northumberland.

Breakdown of selection made (sample size ~100,000)



- Positive feedback has been received from schools about the ease of use of the HUGGG system, and schools have also passed on comments from their parents, typical comments being:
 - "I have to say we found it straightforward [Huggg] and I like that we can*

see when its been redeemed. I would be happy to keep using it this lockdown if possible” (school)

- *“We found Huggg really straightforward to use (much better than Edenred!)” (school)*
 - *“I have personally found using Huggg was pretty much stress free on the run up to Christmas” (school)*
 - *“From the feedback I have had from parents, it is easy from their end too”*
 - *“I trialled it (Huggg) with a parent first who advised it was super-easy”*
 - *“A few of our parents have responded to say it (Huggg) was much more user friendly”.*
- An update on 11 January 2020 shows there has been an 89% claim rate on the vouchers issued by schools for the Christmas period, which is the highest LA uptake registered on the Huggg system, part of which relates to the support given to schools by the Council.
 - We did receive some complaints about the quality of some of the food parcels provided by schools as part of their own local arrangements so we will be encouraging all schools to use the voucher platform for the February half term. Following the success of the scheme over the Christmas period our schools are continuing to use the system to provide free schools meals to those pupils not in school during the current national lockdown, including one school that has changed to Huggg from food parcels.
 - After the close of schools on 18 December 2020, Northumberland Communities Together provided support to parents over the Christmas holidays. As part of the flexibilities within the grant that allowed local determination to spend funds in Northumberland, a pot of £7,800 in total was allocated via the HUGGG system to the NCT team for distribution over the Christmas holidays to families in need. Overall, a total of £3,735 was issued by NCT over this period, £3,560 was redeemed (a rate of 95%);
 - £3,680 of the funds issued by NCT was in relation to the Berwick Pilot, with £3,520 redeemed (96% of this element). The Berwick Pilot involved the testing of a new digital app that was developed in house within 2 days to provide a discreet digital solution that provides choice and dignity to eligible families in need of support over winter. The pilot app offered families a choice to receive from a visit to Northern Soul café, a food hamper from Northern Soul kitchen, a takeaway from Northern Soul kitchen, Paypoint cash or a supermarket voucher through the Huggg system. The most popular choice of families was to receive a supermarket voucher, with £3,680 of vouchers being issued as stated above.
 - when families contacted NCT they are then able to access further supports such as for utilities, clothing, and other support funding or resources connected to the wider winter grant criteria, partners and community offers which in turn supports our schools to support families and learners.

Comments received by the NCT team in relation to the digital app
Included:

- *Amazing - topping up electric meter and doing some food shopping. App easy to use. Was totally amazed at receiving this”.*
- *“App easy to use and vouchers were sent to her phone. Has used the vouchers for Christmas food - amazing to receive this. Has helped enormously.”*
- *“Brilliant, came in so handy and help us out so much. The app was super easy to use and thank you so much for this”.*
- *“Really beneficial and really easy to apply. Voucher came directly through and got a phone call from Northern Soul Kitchen and got a delivery on New Year's Day - thank you so much.”*

BACKGROUND

Additional government financial support was provided for families who were eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) during the first lockdown (Easter, Half term and summer breaks). No additional support commitment was made for October half term payments 2020. A high-profile national campaign led to the Winter Support Fund being issued in November 2020 to support families and individuals up until March 31, 2021. The fund is intended not only to support eligible families who access FSM, but is open to support wider residents and communities.

Northumberland's allocation of the grant is over £992k to cover the 3 school holidays - Christmas, February half term and Easter Holidays up to 31 March 2021.

The grant has two criteria that NCC need to prepare for and deliver against:

- Household - 80% of the funding is targeted at Children and Young People and their families,
- 20% to other i.e. individuals

In relation to provision, the 80% criterion is targeted for Food, Fuel, Water and Utilities, while the 20% criterion is intended for other emergency assistance. In addition, the local authority will be required to monitor and report the spend and repay any underspend.

The winter support grant needs to be able to satisfy the government's commitment to FSM entitlement over the Christmas and February (spring half term) and March/April (Easter) school holidays - 5 weeks in total.

The issue about Easter holidays is slightly controversial as the holidays in Northumberland fall with 1 week at the end of March and 1 week in April. Other LA's have 2 weeks in April so this will require guidance from DWP so that there can be consistency of response across the country.

IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF THE REPORT

Policy:	The actions set out in this report support the vision and values set out in the Council's Corporate Plan 2020/21, particularly in relation to the value of "We want you to feel safe, healthy, and cared for"
Finance and value for money	The cost of the provision of FSM over the Christmas Holiday has been funded from the Government's Winter Grant as set out in para. 1 of this report
Legal	N/A
Procurement	N/A
Human Resources:	N/A
Property	N/A
Equalities	An Equalities Assessment was carried out in relation to the consent of parents/carers to approve the uploading of their contact details to the HUGGG system.
Risk Assessment	Not applicable
Crime & Disorder	This report has considered Section 1 (CDA) and the duty it imposes and there are no implications arising from it.
Customer Considerations:	The actions set out in this report are based upon a desire to meet the needs of children in receipt of FSM and their families fairly and effectively in response to the Government's allocation of Winter Grant to Northumberland.
Carbon Reduction	It is not envisaged that the processes set out within this report will have any impact on positive or negative on carbon reduction.
Consultation	This report has been considered by the Executive Director for Adult Social Care and Children's Services and the Member for Children's Services.
Wards	All

CONSULTATION

The actions set out in this report have been undertaken in consultation with the Executive Director for Adult Social Care and Children's Services and the Member for Children's Services.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

Report sign off

Finance Officer	AE
Monitoring Officer/Legal	N/A
Human Resources	N/A
Procurement	N/A
I.T.	N/A
Executive Director of Children's Services	CMC
Portfolio Holder(s)	GRT

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