

Cabinet - 5 July 2012

Report of the Chief Executive

Electoral Division affected:

All

Benefits Take Up - Free School Meals and the Data Sharing Opportunities

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Executive Summary

To set out an approach to increasing the level of free school meals across Lancashire Schools.

Recommendation

The Cabinet is asked to:

- (i) Note the approach agreed by all Councils in Lancashire to joining up data to increase the level of free school meals across Lancashire Schools;
- (ii) Authorise the Chief Executive to take forward these proposals with One Connect Ltd.

Background and Advice

In 2011/2012 some 23,500 children were awarded free school meals (FSM) in Lancashire. However, national statistics would suggest that more than 10% of entitled families to this benefit do not claim this entitlement.

Free school meals are recognised as a vitally important contribution to the nutrition of children in low income families. The cash value of free school meals is around £400 per child per year. A significant sum to a family in poverty.

Failure to award free school meals has a major impact on school funding. Schools now receive an annual pupil premium worth £600 for each child eligible for free meals. It is likely that Lancashire schools are missing out on around £1.5 million. Essential local spending to support improving the life chances of the most economically deprived children is not available due to a simple failure to join up data and ensure entitlement.

National evidence from take up campaigns suggests that the main reason for failure to claim is a lack of general awareness of entitlement which can sometimes be compounded by having to deal with what seems like a complex process of claiming free school meals.

The majority of families that are entitled to free school meals will be receiving Housing and / or Council Tax Benefit from their local Council. They will have actually provided all the income information needed to process a claim for free school meals as part of this process. If this data could be used then all families entitled to (but not receiving) free school meals could be identified and the benefit awarded to the benefit of; families, children and schools.

An approach to joining up data has been proposed that will overcome these historic problems of failure to claim. This approach has been agreed by each of the Councils of Lancashire. This approach will also help to open up the possibilities of further data integration to support improved intelligence led take up claims for other vulnerable households and individuals across Lancashire.

Working Together To Award Free School Meals

By all Councils (and the County Council) working together the failure to take up free school meals can be remedied very quickly and simply. However this will need full support and cooperation from all Borough and District Councils over the coming weeks and months. However the prize is great.

A new and proactive approach to maximising the take up and award of free school meals is proposed which looks to secure the customer's consent to share income and household details from Housing and Council Tax Benefit (HB/CTB) claims with the County Councils. This will allow the children of families entitled to free school meals to be awarded and schools to receive additional funding **without parents** having to make any further claim.

This approach overcomes reservations that some Councils have previously expressed about data sharing. District and Borough Councils HB/CTB claim forms often allow for the claimant to consent that the data held about them can be used to positively identify their entitlement to other benefits. However some Councils have suggested that information supplied for HB/CTB claims could not be used for this purpose because free school meals do not fall within the legal definition of a 'benefit'. Others have expressed concerns that some information was supplied by DWP solely for HB/CTB processing.

The simple remedy to overcome these concerns is to write to all customers to advise them of this change and ask their permission to share the data using an 'informed consent' process.

What will happen next?

Councils across Lancashire award HB/CTB to around 110,000 households. Information on income and family make up is used to calculate entitlement to these benefits. By comparing this with the existing records for free school meals claims

and school admissions data held by the County Council it is possible to identify households that are entitled to but not claiming free school meals.

By writing to households receiving HB/CTB with school age children and seeking 'informed consent' to share data with the County Council all those entitled to free school meals can be awarded **without the need** to complete a claim form.

The first stage will involve each Council running reports from its HB/CTB system to identify households who meet the criteria for free school meals. At this stage it will not be possible to ascertain which households are already receiving free school meals.

The next stage will involve a mail shot to all potentially qualifying households to advise that unless they object, then the Council will share their details with Lancashire County Council to allow them to confirm and award free school meals entitlement.

A special telephone and email 'hotline' will be set up by One Connect Limited for a 4 week period in line with data protection requirements to any customers that do not want to take part and to opt out. During the final stage for those customers who decide not to opt out, their details will be securely shared with the County Council's Children and Young People Service to confirm and award any missing entitlements. The school and the child's parent or guardian would then be notified of their award ahead of the early October school census data. This census data will be used for the allocation of funding in the coming year and it is therefore essential to both families and schools to complete this exercise before October 2012.

The high level tasks associated with the project are:

- Councils identify FSM eligible households.
- County Council provides template to all local Councils for mail shot to eligible parents.
- Hotline set up with One Connect Limited to receive any opt out responses.
- Mails hot issued by local Councils with 4 week period for parents to respond.
- Hotline closes and all opted out households removed from list.
- Remaining households sent securely to the County Council Children's Services.
- Eligibility confirmed and entitlements awarded.
- Schools and parents notified of awards.

Future Opportunities

This exercise will demonstrate that by integrating data and working together vulnerable households can be assisted to claim. The approach is far more effective than publicity or outreach campaigns because it uses specific data intelligence to identify under-claiming and award benefits. Traditional take up campaigns cannot target in this way and ultimately place the responsibility to claim on the individual (who has already failed to claim perhaps due to ignorance, the complexity of the process or other reasons).

Soon the Government plans to introduce new data sharing powers enabled under the Welfare Reform Act. Regulations will come into force in July 2012 to enact new powers. These will enable local Councils to share data gathered for the processing of HB/CTB with other 'welfare services' and County Councils. This will include:

- Social Care Financial Assessments (home and residential care).
- Blue badges.
- Homelessness.
- Disabled Facilities Grant.

Data sharing will relate to households affected by restrictions on housing benefit under new rules about excessively large accommodation in the social sector.

This opens up major opportunities to maximise the income of vulnerable households within local areas. At the same time by re-using data it will be possible to make sure customers do not have to repeatedly supply the same information to different services. This also reduces costs to Councils with fewer transactions and duplication. For example it would be possible to:

- Compare data on households receiving care to confirm if local Councils hold details of disability benefits that trigger higher HB/CTB payments.
- Remove the need for customers receiving a new care package to supply financial details if these have already been used to claim HB/CTB.
- Identify further take up campaigns around disability benefits.

These are new opportunities and they demand that County, Boroughs and District services start to understand how they can best join up to support vulnerable customers, maximise entitlements, improve customer services and ease the process of claiming benefits or receiving a financial assessment.

Consultations

District Councils in Lancashire.

Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

Financial

As indicated in the body of the report, by increasing the take up of free school meals the County Council will be maximising the resources available to Lancashire schools through the pupil premium mechanism potentially increasing resources within the schools budget by c£1.5m (c0.2%). In addition, the provision of free school meals if taken up by families will reduce the financial pressure they are under which may reduce demand on other County Council services.

Risk management

The risks relating to data sharing will be managed by writing to customers to advise them of the change and ask their permission to share the data using an "informed consent" process.

Any representations made to the Cabinet prior to the issue being considered in accordance with the Public Notice of Forward Plans

Name:	Organisation:	Comments:
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N/A

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Directorate/Tel
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N/A

Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate

N/A