

Committee: Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: 11th February 2014

Agenda item: 6

Wards:

Subject: Free School Meals

Lead officer: Paul Ballatt

Lead member: Councillor Martin Whelton

Forward Plan reference number:

Contact officer: Peter Gasparelli, School Admission Service

Recommendations:

A. Members of the Panel to note and comment on the report.

B.

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Increasing registration and uptake of free school meals is important for pupil wellbeing and attainment. Registration for free school meals also attracts pupil premium, an enhanced level of funding which schools receive for certain pupils. Merton has a relatively high under-registration rate and in autumn 2013 CSF department initiated a project to increase registration and take up of free school meals in the borough's schools. This paper summarises work to date on this project.

1.2 A central government decision was taken in 2013 to provide free school meals to all pupils of primary age in reception, years one and two classes. This provision is due to be implemented from September 2014. Full guidance has not yet been provided, although a small capital grant has been announced to support necessary works to kitchens etc. Information on how Merton will implement this public policy initiative will be provided in a future update report to panel.

2. DETAILS

2.1 Towards the end of 2012, DfE produced a national report on take up of Free School Meals (FSMs). The DfE report showed that Merton had a 27% under-registration rate. This compared with an outer London average under-registration rate of 17%, an inner London rate of 9% and a national under-registration rate of 14%. An update of this report was published in December 2013 with Merton's under-registration rate falling to 23% against rates of 15% in outer London, 7% in inner London and 11% in England overall. Merton's rate represents some 1200 entitled children not claiming FSMs.

- 2.2 Failing to submit applications for FSMs cost eligible families, inherently some of the poorer families, hundreds of pounds annually. The loss of pupil premium to schools' budgets could well amount to over £1million across Merton's schools. Research has clearly demonstrated the importance of FSMs in promoting attainment. There were obvious drivers, therefore, for the project initiated in autumn 2013 to increase registration and take up of FSMs in Merton's schools.
- 2.3 Merton's rate of registration has continued to lag despite historical steps taken to maximise registration which have included publication of leaflets and information in a wide variety of settings; providing these materials to all applicants for school places on a routine basis; providing training for outreach staff working with 0 - 5s to ensure maximum uptake of benefits and therefore possible eligibility for FSM; and awareness raising at Headteacher meetings, EYFS co-ordinator meetings and PVI manager meetings. While these approaches are continuing, the challenge for the project is to identify and implement further steps with more effective impact.
- 2.4 Towards the end of 2013, an analysis was completed of schools' FSM registration rates against areas of deprivation in Merton. This analysis gave an indication of schools which had registration rates lower than could have been expected. This information was provided to all schools which were then requested to focus on maximising registration prior to the school census in January 2014 (the point at which levels of pupil premium for the following academic year are calculated). As a result of the data sharing and encouragement provided via a letter to schools and support from the school admissions service, a further 62 children have become eligible for FSMs and the pupil premium. Checks on applications previously classed as ineligible have also resulted in a further 6 children being registered as eligible.
- 2.5 These 'quick wins' have achieved modest success to date. Analysis of boroughs with a lower eligibility – registration gap than Merton's suggest that increasing the application 'channels' will help further. Merton is seeking to maximise on-line applications for both school places and FSMs but we will continue to allow paper applications and, additionally, consider establishing a telephone application system, used in a number of other boroughs. Further promotional material is to be provided on Merton's website and via Housing Need and Library services within the council. CSF department's commissioned services – largely local community and voluntary organisations – have also been asked to support the initiative via use of promotional/application materials. The council's communications team has included the FSM project in its work plan for 2014 and will support the project by contributing more specialist communications input.
- 2.6 In addition to increasing FSM registration, the project is also aiming to support increased take up of meals by children. Increasing numbers of Merton's schools operate cashless systems which are designed to minimise the potential stigma which pupils taking FSMs can experience. A survey of pupils' views of the choice and quality of meals provided and of their views of the broader school meals 'experience' is also planned with feedback provided to school meals contractors. Incentivisation, used in some service areas including the health sector, will also be considered.

2.7 It is proposed that further information on the project will be provided to the panel in the routine update reports presented.

3. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

3.1 Not relevant for the purposes of this report.

4. CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

4.1 Not relevant for the purposes of this report.

5. TIMETABLE

5.1 Not relevant for the purposes of this report.

6. FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Not relevant for the purposes of this report.

7. LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Not relevant for the purposes of this report.

8. HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Not relevant for the purposes of this report.

9. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Not relevant for the purposes of this report.

10. RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Not relevant for the purposes of this report.

11. APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

Not relevant for the purposes of this report.

12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Not relevant for the purposes of this report.

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