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# NORTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

21 March 2023

## Cabinet

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**Title:** Future Holiday Meals Provision

**Purpose:** To provide proposals for the future provision of the school holiday meals provision and the use of the Scottish Government funding.

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that Cabinet:

- a) Approves the approach to the future use of the Scottish Government holiday meals funding as proposed in this report;
- b) Approves a summer programme of activities and food in localities to be designed with community partners; and
- c) Approves the replacement of shopping vouchers with a cash first approach for families with an assessed entitlement to free school meals.

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## 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Funding has been made available by Scottish Government to enable the delivery of alternative free school meal provision to all children and young people, eligible for free school meals based on low income, during the school holidays.
- 1.2 2022 saw the return of face-to-face activities through co-producing a holiday meals programme with our community partners. This paper sets out proposals including a continuation of this partnership to deliver a programme of summer activities in the heart of our communities which is sustainable and impactful.
- 1.3 Shopping vouchers have been in use since July 2020 as part of the emergency Covid response and subsequently to deliver support during school holiday periods. This report sets out a proposal to align the holiday meals support with other council payments and supports via a cash first approach. This approach is not only supported by child poverty groups as it supports a more dignified approach, but it would also provide a more efficient and accessible support for the eligible families.
- 1.4 The holiday meals provision is one aspect of the support available to families, who have also benefited from the recent increase in the Scottish Child Payment and other benefits.

## **2. Background**

- 2.1 North Ayrshire Council (NAC) has been running programmes of school holiday activities for primary age children, including meals, during school holidays since 2013. Over the years the NAC programme has developed, with partners joining the group of staff delivering activities. During the more challenging lockdown periods of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Council adapted the delivery to a voucher scheme to ensure that low-income households and individuals could still access food.
- 2.2 April 2022 saw the return of activities and meals being provided in localities and this was supported by our community partners. From April 2022, the holiday programme was also expanded to include young people attending secondary school. To increase uptake and remove any stigma and reluctance to visit schools during holidays, community halls, centres and libraries were used instead of schools. This ensured that support was offered in the heart of our communities.
- 2.3 The activity and meal programme ran for the Easter break and most of the summer break in 2022. The number of meals provided for Easter and Summer was 4,622 and 16,213 respectively. A voucher was also issued to all families with an assessed entitlement for free school meals. This ensured that those who did not attend a local holiday programme still had provision to purchase food during the holiday period.

### **Funding**

- 2.4 In 2021/22, the Scottish Government provided £0.712m funding to the Council to enable the provision of alternative free school meal provision to all children and young people, eligible for free school meals based on low income, in primary and secondary age groups, during the school holidays. This provision covered the 2022 summer holidays; the Christmas and Easter holidays during the 2022-23 school year; and the mid-term holidays in October and February. The same level of funding has been confirmed for 2023/24. Holiday meals provision is one aspect of the support available to families, who have also benefited from the recent increase in the Scottish Child Payment and other benefits. The guidance indicates that this provision can again be delivered through a flexible approach, for example through direct cash payments to eligible families; supermarket vouchers; or the delivery of food packages.
- 2.5 In North Ayrshire, vouchers have been provided to eligible families since July 2020 and introduced as part of the emergency response to the pandemic and this has continued as the method of support to families.
- 2.6 Vouchers are procured from a supplier and do have some limitations both in terms of administration and use for the families. The vouchers are not available for redemption at all retailers thus restricting to some extent where families can use them. Voucher codes are issued via email to parents/carers who then must download the actual voucher to their device for use in the shop. Those without email are sent a hardcopy of the voucher, which involves a more protracted process, officer time and an additional cost for postage.

- 2.7 The process for vouchers for families on Arran has been modified to take account of local circumstances. Currently Facilities Management staff will purchase the required number of vouchers from a mainland Co-op and then put each voucher in an envelope and post them to the eligible families. The Co-op is the only mainstream shopping outlet on the island that will accommodate a voucher scheme. Families on Cumbrae currently receive the electronic or paper voucher like families on the mainland, due to the close proximity and ease of access to the mainland to redeem their vouchers.
- 2.8 The voucher process has an administration fee on top of the value of the vouchers purchased. For financial year 2022/23 the administrative fee was circa £2,500. In addition, vouchers can only be issued in denominations of £5 with a minimum of £5 being purchased. This means that the value of the payment is slightly lower than the equivalent of the school meal credit allocation. The school meal allocation is £2.05 per day however for a full week we allocate a £10 voucher as we cannot issue an exact value of £10.25.
- 2.8 The contract for the voucher supplier is due to end in March 2023 therefore consideration of options available for payment has been undertaken.
- 2.9 The recommendation from child poverty organisations continues to be a cash first approach for any financial support to those in need/eligible. Direct payments are described by the Poverty and Inequality Commission as “the most compassionate and dignified support, giving freedom of choice over what they eat, and should be the preferred method of support.” Most local authorities are providing support via cash payments.
- 2.10 The Council’s Customer Service team already process cash payments for all other supports e.g. school clothing grants and child bridging payments. Changing the school holiday payment to cash rather than vouchers would provide a consistent approach for parents/carers and easy access to the funds they are eligible for. This would also provide a streamlined and efficient approach and where none of the funding is used for administrative fees or postage. Changing to cash payments ensures that all of the funding is available for distribution to eligible families, and families will be receiving exactly what they are entitled to rather than a rounded sum. The allocation under the new proposal would be £2.05 per day.
- 2.11 Direct cash payments would allow the families on Arran and Cumbrae the flexibility to use their allocation in their local shops and businesses rather than travel in some cases, a significant distance to redeem them in the Co-op or mainland supermarkets. Island families will continue to receive a higher payment to reflect the higher costs of living on the islands.

### **Activity Programme**

- 2.12 The activity programme is led by Connected Communities Community Empowerment and Youth Services Teams with support from Facilities Management, Active Schools, Information and Culture, KA Leisure and community partners. The programme of food and activities was co-created with our community partners to ensure there were no barriers to access. This new model allowed us to work closely with community partners and develop the 2022 summer programme based on the experience of the development of delivery during Easter 2022.

- 2.13 A joint review with partners of the initial year of delivery, and associated capacity, resulted in an ongoing commitment by community partners to deliver activity and food programmes as a priority during extended summer holiday holidays. As such, it has been proposed that activity programmes during the summer holiday periods be resourced and prioritised and that during Easter, October, Christmas and February holidays direct payments will be made.
- 2.14 Specific arrangements will be developed for the islands and rural communities utilising the local libraries as bases. Connected Communities staff will work with colleagues and local community partners to develop a programme of events and activities on both islands and rural communities in order to maximise local resources and broaden the scope of activities.
- 2.15 Following feedback from the Easter and Summer 2022 sessions, we plan to continue providing hot soup and packed lunches as this offers the flexibility for outdoor eating and activities or for local trips to be undertaken.
- 2.16 Community partners continue to be supported by Locality Officers to build their resilience for their delivery of community activities. Last year's pre summer training sessions for staff and community partners were well received and will be delivered again this year as further support to the integrated teams. In addition, sports and arts resources will be supplied. The partners and venues for the four-week summer 2023 programme will be finalised and communicated to elected members and residents early in June 2023 in order to ensure that promotion and uptake is maximised.

### **3. Proposals**

- 3.1 It is proposed that Cabinet:
- a) Approves the approach to the future use of the Scottish Government holiday meals funding as proposed in this report;
  - b) Approves a summer programme of activities and food in localities to be designed with community partners; and
  - c) Approves the replacement of shopping vouchers with a cash first approach for families with an assessed entitlement to free school meals.

### **4. Implications/Socio-economic Duty**

#### **Financial**

- 4.1 Funding of £0.712m has been provided for school holidays meals during 2023/24. It is expected that this funding allocation will be expended via cash payments and the summer food and activity programme in July.

#### **Human Resources**

- 4.2 Connected Communities, Community Empowerment team will work with partners to ensure resources are available and the summer programme can run as proposed.

#### **Legal**

- 4.3 None

## **Equality/Socio-economic**

- 4.4 Scottish Government funding is targeted to address inequalities. The guidance on use of the funding is for all children and young people, eligible for free school meals on the basis of low income, in primary and secondary schools.

## **Climate Change and Carbon**

- 4.5 None

## **Key Priorities**

- 4.6 The proposal contained within the report supports the North Ayrshire Council Plan priorities:
- Active and strong communities;
  - Children have the best start in life;
  - Inclusive, growing and enterprising local economy; and
  - People enjoy good life-long health and wellbeing.

## **Community Wealth Building**

- 4.7 The summer programmes support the following pillars of community wealth building:
- Creating volunteering and skills development opportunities;
  - Advancing community enterprises; and
  - Supporting local businesses.

## **5. Consultation**

- 5.1 Discussions have taken place with key partners and other council services.

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## **Background Papers**