

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

29 SEPTEMBER 2022

PETITION

Report from: Dr Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People
James Williams, Director of Public Health

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Summary

This report advises the Committee of a petition received by the Council which falls within the remit of this Committee including a summary of the response sent to the petition organiser by officers.

1. Budget and Policy Framework

1.1 In summary, the Council's Petition Scheme requires the relevant Director to respond to the petition organiser, usually within 10 working days of the receipt of the petition by the Council. Overview and Scrutiny Committees are always advised of any petitions falling within their terms of reference together with the officer response. There is a right of referral of a petition for consideration by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee by the petitioners if they consider the Director's response to be inadequate. Should the Committee determine that the petition has not been dealt with adequately it may use any of its powers to deal with the matter. These powers include instigating an investigation, making recommendations to Cabinet and arranging for the matter to be considered at a meeting of the Council.

1.2 The petition scheme is set out in full in the Council's Constitution at:

https://www.medway.gov.uk/downloads/file/5702/401 - council_rules

1.3 Any budget or policy framework implications will be set out in the specific petition response.

2. Background

2.1 The Council's Constitution provides that petitions received by the Council relating to matters within the remit of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee

will be referred immediately to the relevant Director for consideration at officer level.

- 2.2 Where the Director is able to fully meet the request of the petitioners a response is sent setting out the proposed action and timescales for implementation.
- 2.3 For petitions where the petition organiser is not satisfied with the response provided by the Director there is provision for the petition organiser to request that the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee review the steps the Council has taken, or is proposing to take, in response to the petition.

3. Petition Referred to this Committee

- 3.1 The following petition has been referred to this Committee because the petition organiser indicated that they were dissatisfied with the response received from the Director.

3.2 **Reinstate School Holiday Free School Meal Vouchers for Medway Families**

- 3.2.1 A paper petition signed by 232 people was presented directly to the Council by Councillor Johnson. This number has since risen to 377. The petition statement was as follows:

“The Medway Conservative administration have ended holiday free school meal provision for Medway children. Medway school children who are entitled to free school meals will only receive a meal during the holiday if they attend one of the holiday activities laid on by the council. During previous holidays, children who did not attend one of the holiday activities were entitled to a voucher to cover their free school meal entitlement. This was funded by the government’s Household Support Fund. The decision was made by the Leader of the Council, Cllr Alan Jarrett, under urgency provisions, which means it was not open to scrutiny, in April. The decision was reported to council only on Thursday 21st July. The council needs to change this terrible decision now.”

- 3.2.2 On 11 August 2022, the of Public Health, on behalf of the Director of People responded as follows:

“I write in response to the petition, of which you are lead petitioner, entitled ‘Reinstate School Holiday Free School Meal Vouchers for Medway Families’. We received your petition on 4 August 2022. In line with Council’s petition scheme, I am responding to you as lead Director with the responsibility for these portfolio areas.

It is my understanding from the content of this petition, you are requesting Medway Council reverse a decision taken to apportion the limited resources it received from central government for 2022 via the Household Support Funding Grant. Petitioners wish this resource to be used to purchase supermarket vouchers which should then be provided to families with

children who are eligible for free school meals. It is my considered opinion, having reviewed the processes and evidence used by officers to inform the original decision taken by Medway Council, that the current model is best placed to serve the needs of the Medway Population. It is also my view that should the Council reverse its original decision and simply purchase supermarket vouchers, this would exacerbate health inequalities within Medway. I will provide a full explanation in response to the specific points raised in the petition. I will cover the benefits of the approach in Medway given the reduction in resources to support this programme. Most local authorities in England have adopted a similar approach to Medway. This includes the largest local authority in Europe, Birmingham City Council which has some of the most disadvantaged communities in Europe and the UK.

Clarification regarding factual inaccuracies

The petition states Medway Council has ended holiday free school meal provision for Medway's Children. This is factually inaccurate. Previous central government departments provided resources and support to schools through specific grants. This resource enabled schools (who chose to) to open during holiday periods and cater in house for children eligible for free school meals. Schools were also asked to dispense supermarket vouchers to the value of £15 per week to families within children eligible for free school meals. Medway council provided additional support to families in need. This included to families who were facing hardship, but who may not have been eligible for free school meals. This support included access to supermarket vouchers, food parcels collectable or home delivered. The range of funding sources used was extensive given the additional resources provided to all local authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic period. Funding sources included:

- Free School Meal Supplementary Grant – 2019 – April 2020
- COVID Emergency Funding - April 2020 and December 2020 (food parcels)
- Covid Winter Support Grant – 1 December 2020 – 16 April 2021 (food parcel delivery)
- Covid-19 Local Support Grant – April 2021 – September 2021
- Household Support Fund October 2021 – April 2022
- Household Support Fund extension April 2022 – September 2022
- HAF Programme November 2020 – March 2021
- HAF (first full year funding for delivery) April 2021 – March 2022

Any school that takes part in the current offer, the MedwayGo Holiday Activity Funded programme, and is open during the holiday period, can (should they wish) provide meals on site via their inhouse catering arrangements. Alternatively, schools can use an external caterer to provide meals. These providers must conform to the high standards set for the provision of school meals.

The Council has in fact made specific provision for children eligible for free school meals during the holiday period. All children eligible can access a

high quality (school meal standard) meal during the holiday period via the MedwayGo Programme.

Families where children are eligible for Free School Meals but who do not wish to participate in MedwayGo are eligible to apply for support (including vouchers for food) through the Household Support Grant alongside all residents in hardship, as set out below.

Wider benefits to the Medway Population

One of the main points raised in the petition, is the need to help mitigate the impact of the recent cost of living challenges. Inflationary pressures linked to world events, are causing challenges globally, in the UK and within Medway. In response to these challenges, and to make sure the Medway population is supported during hard times, the Council has made specific provision to mitigate against cost-of-living increases.

The Medway approach ensures **any** resident who can demonstrate they are in hardship, not just families in receipt of free school meals, can apply for support through the Household Support Grant. They can access both supermarket vouchers and fuel vouchers. They can also get funds to purchase, school uniforms, and pay other utility costs. Further, the support available in Medway is more generous than previous years where a £15 per week voucher has been issued. Other authorities are only providing a single one-off payment of £50 to cover the whole summer holiday. Any applicant to Medway's Household Support Grant who is eligible for free school meals, will automatically receive vouchers to the following values:

- Household with two people: £70
- Household with three people: £105
- Household with four people: £140
- Household with five people: £175
- Household with six or more people: £210

There is no limit on the number of times someone can apply through this scheme. The resources will be allocated until the funding received by the council is exhausted.

This approach is clearly more favourable for families who are eligible for free school meals. Their children can make use of the Medway Go programme for food and activities during the holiday period and they are also (if in need) able to access additional support to deal with the cost-of-living challenges during the holiday period.

High quality food and activity for children and young people in MedwayGo

The main premise of the petition is that children who are eligible for free school meals, are not able to access a meal during the holiday period. I have already set out the framework and assurance that all children in Medway who are in hardship and specifically those eligible for free school meals, can

access a high-quality meal during the summer break as they would had they been in school.

The Holiday Activities and Food programme is funded by the Department for Education DfE to deliver six weeks of activities, meals, and enrichment opportunities for children across the year. Teams and partners will deliver the programme split as such; Four weeks in the summer, one at Easter and one week in the Christmas holidays. The DfE suggests a model of delivery being 4x4x1 for Easter and Christmas and 4x4x4 for the summer (four hours per day, for four days, for one or four weeks).

MedwayGo is the local programme the Council uses to deliver the holiday activity programme across Medway. It started in line with government funding in July 2021, and we have distributed MedwayGo activities across all Medway. The intention is to provide activities in all wards. There is a particular focus on areas of high deprivation. There are more activities provided in disadvantaged areas, allowing more children and families in need to access provision.

There are a range of providers (sourced through a rigorous procurement process) who have been delivering activities since the summer of 2021 when the programme started. Models of delivery vary from one-week activities to whole summer holiday camps. Council services are working closely with MedwayGo to deliver a broad offer across Medway. These include Medway Sport, Youth Service, Medway Adult Education, Family and Children Hubs and our local schools.

External organisations for example Fuzion Active, StreetGames and the Street Soccer Foundation, deliver a wide range of projects in particular areas of deprivation, in partnership with local organisations, such as Luton Arches. Faith organisations are also involved in the delivery of clubs, such as St. Francis of Assisi church in Strood.

The programme offers bespoke provision for children with learning difficulties and disabilities, particularly those with moderate and severe disabilities. An example of which is ROCC (Rivermead Outreach and Community Challenge).

The programme will also offer Families free bus tickets to ensure access and travel to clubs upon request, which the programme has purchased from Arriva Buses. In addition, minibuses have been organised to allow children from remote areas to access provision and this is something we continue to monitor and will put in place, where required.

We are keen to tailor our programme to local needs. To do this we are partnering with the University of Kent who are conducting an external evaluation of MedwayGo.

Sufficient capacity to cater for the needs of all children eligible for Free School Meals

The petition states there is insufficient capacity to cater for the number of children eligible for free school meals through MedwayGo Holiday Activity Fund (HAF). The sessions will provide healthy, nutritious meals of all programmes during HAF, also will ensure fruit, healthy snacks and water are made available every day. In most instances, meals are hot, either produced on site or delivered and served by a local caterer. All meals adhere to school food standards and portion sizes accordingly to the age of the child.

I have already evidenced that all families in hardship are able to access and enhanced level of support during the holiday period. In addition, not every child or family eligible for free school meals (FSM) takes up the offer. The Council and its partners have worked together to ensure our local services models' national pilots. These pilots found uptake for holiday activities (HAF) was between 25 – 30%. Uptake rates for FSM eligible children in Medway since the start of MedwayGo has been in the region of 23%. It was slightly lower at Christmas due to a Covid outbreak (Omicron) and a shorter window at Easter.

Table 1 has the breakdown of children eligible for free school meals in Medway. This number has increased since 2021 due to global factors that I have referenced to above. Even with the increased numbers of children eligible, there is sufficient capacity within MedwayGo to meet the needs of children eligible for FSM in Medway. In addition, through the wider more flexible offer within the Household Support Grant, any family that falls into difficulty can apply for aid. Further, should there be a difficulty in any FSM child eligible accessing a MedwayGo activity, council officers will work with the family to mitigate.

The real benefit of MedwayGo is the programme is more than just the provision of food vouchers. The programme looks to build resilience so that people can support themselves. Nutritional education is provided in all provision where children learn about food, either from the perspective of cooking, nutritional content of food, or discussions around the impact of food in everyday life and cultures.

MedwayGo gives children and young people (and parents/carers) the chance to engage, socialise and take part in activities that stimulate both physical and emotional wellbeing. Activities include creative arts, theatre, drama, craft, gardening, and interaction with animals. Given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, this approach best serves the needs of the Medway population.

Table 1 Uptake of MedwayGo by children eligible for Free School Meals

	Summer 2021	Christmas 2021	Easter 2022	Summer 2022
FSM Eligible	9,400	9,600	10,400	11,113
*Booked	14,734	1,877	6,383	18,403 (to date)
Activities				
No of children accessing HAF	2242	895	1320	1,982 (to date)

*Individual children can book on multiple HAF activities during the period

We have also asked the University of Kent to evaluate the MedwayGo HAF programme to evidence the impact of the sessions / clubs. Evidence we have already gathered, from the pilots and residents, suggests free holiday clubs can have a positive impact on children and young people. These programmes work best when they:

- provide consistent and easily accessible enrichment activities
- cover more than just breakfast or lunch
- involve children (and parents) in food preparation
- use local partnerships and connections, particularly with the voluntary and community organisation sector

MedwayGo requires all providers to adhere to the Framework of Standards set out by the Department for Education. Providers must provide the following in their provision:

- Food provision
- Physical activities
- Enrichment opportunities
- Nutritional education
- Signposting
- Links to support services
- Policies and procedures to keep children and families attending safe
- Safeguarding

In summary it is my opinion that MedwayGo covers all aspects in the prior list of best practice. It provides access to all those children in Medway eligible for FSM. The approach in Medway and innovative use of the Household Support Grant, is more generous, offers best value and maximises the use of limited resources for those families in hardship. Using this grant to purchase supermarket vouchers solely for families in receipt of free school meals, would be regressive. It would not consider the needs or impact on families who may be in extreme hardship, but not be eligible for free school meals. The approach in Medway has been adopted and endorsed by most local authorities in the England, including Birmingham City Council.”

3.2.3 On 22 August 2022, the petition organiser requested that the matter be reviewed by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The reasons for referral are as follows:

“Thank you for the lengthy and detailed response to the petition. I am requesting that the issues contained in the petition be reviewed by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which I assume will be the Children and Young People Committee. My reasons are as follows:

- Your letter states that the petition’s position that Medway Council has ended the former provision for free school meals is inaccurate. I disagree strongly with your statement. The former provision, whereby all eligible families were entitled to a voucher to cover the cost of free school meals over the holiday period and that voucher was provided automatically, has ended. In the first days of provision, there were alternative delivery models, such as food parcels from schools or other support organisations, but the principle of the universal scheme ending is what the petition addresses.
- There has been a substantial growth in the numbers of children in Medway eligible for free school meals since the start of the pandemic. The council’s position that Medway Go can be an effective substitute is untenable because there are insufficient places to accommodate all children eligible. In fact, I note from your letter that the number is now 11,113 which is even higher than the most recent figure given by officers earlier in the summer and which, based on LGA analysis, shows that our figure is now above the national average, having been previously below the average.
- Even if the Medway Go provision was adequate for the numbers of young people eligible for free school meals, your own letter states that it will run for only four days per week and for only four weeks of the holiday period.
- There may be good reasons why families may choose not to engage with Medway Go activities: the activities may not meet their interests or needs or their family circumstances may not enable them to attend. There will be children with special needs who cannot engage. There will be families with difficulties travelling, including to activities that are appropriate to their interests but which are geographically less accessible. Medway Labour is supportive of Medway Go, but not as a substitute for sustained support for families.
- Your letter says gives the impression that Medway’s position aligns with the majority of other authorities. There are substantial numbers of local authorities who have used Household Support Funding to maintain provision for free school meals over the summer, including Kent, Essex and Surrey.

- Your letter states that extension of the previous scheme would exacerbate health inequalities seems to imply that families cannot be trusted to use the provision to provide healthy and nutritious food for their children.
- You state that families in need can apply to the council for support. However, this replaces an entitlement provision, automatically provided to all eligible families, with a means-tested provision which has to be applied for. The number of families and children eligible for free school meals means that is a bureaucratic burden on families and on council officers which is unnecessary, particularly when the identity of relevant families is already known. It also risks families going without because of difficulty in applying, through a lack of information provided by the council, and delays in providing support (which I am already aware of).
- Your letter also states that any family that falls into difficulty can apply for aid. By definition, families with children eligible for free school meals are in difficulty.
- This decision was taken under urgency provisions on 26th April. It was not clear until the end of the summer school term that the decision had been taken when parents began to be told that there would be no vouchers for the summer holidays and that message was passed to councillors. I raised it at Full Council on Thursday 21st July and no member of the administration addressed or defended the decision then. It is clear that there was no advance publicity about the ending of the voucher scheme and that the alternative provision, as described in your letter, was not publicised among officers, councillors or the wider system of schools and other support organisations. In fact, it was not until well into August that a member of the cabinet defended the position publicly or that I became aware that there was alternative financial support available for families in need.
- The Labour Group at a briefing on Medway Go and the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee when examining the same topic, both meetings held over the early summer, were assured by officers that the voucher scheme would be extended over the summer holiday period, the latter meeting being held in public."

3.2.4 In response, the Director of Public Health has further commented as follows:

- It is accepted there are (and it is helpful) to have, differences in opinion as to what may be the most effective way to support families/individuals in need. Any approach to tackle health inequalities should focus on empowering people to engage and take control where this is practicable. The substantive argument presented by the petitioner, is Medway Council unilaterally withdraw a universal offer of meal vouchers during holiday periods, for children who may have been eligible for free school meals. Evidence has been provided to clarify Medway Council did not universally withdrawn meal vouchers for families eligible for free school

meals during the summer holiday period. Moreover, the contention is the model adopted by Medway Council, is more generous financially and enables families to access wider support, during this period of rising household costs.

- It should be reiterated that Central Government, not Medway Council, is responsible for both funding and making changes to any national meal voucher scheme. Different government departments, in particular the Department for Education, communicated changes and the cessation of funding of their holiday period free school meal voucher programmes to stakeholders. The Department for Work and Pensions, who are responsible for the Holiday Activity Fund (HAF) announced changes to the funding criteria for the HAF programme. These changes were communicated to local stakeholders, particularly schools in advance of the summer holiday period.
- In relation to the points raised that members believe they may have received briefings from officers that were not factual, I can only apologise if members feel they have received misinformation. It is certainly never the case that any officer intentionally misleads members or purposely gives inaccurate responses to questions. I have personally checked with the Public Health officers involved in delivering this briefing. The team were aware that meal vouchers would only be available during half term weeks that the MedwayGo programme was not running (such as the May half term week). It may well be that the question wasn't clearly understood by the officer delivering the briefing. Their misinterpretation may have led to an inaccurate answer. As already advised, the MedwayGo service, is completely separate from the Household Support Fund and does not provide or approve meal vouchers. We will ensure any future requests for information are responded to by the appropriate colleagues responsible for these schemes.
- In relation to the specific points in terms of whether the MedwayGo programme has sufficient capacity and capability to support all those children who were eligible for free school meals, the answer is yes. Evaluation of the programme will demonstrate uptake rates have improved, access by children with special needs has improved and children who are eligible for free school meals have definitely taken up the offer during the summer period.
- It is reiterated that the HAF programme is only one strand of Medway Councils approach to tackle the cost of living crisis impacting on the local population. Information has been provided as to the context of HAF, guidance in relation to access and governance arrangements that inform the allocation (separately) of support for individuals and families in need. Medway council will work with central government and other agencies to mitigate the impacts of the cost of living crisis and await the publication of the new Prime Minister's spending plans focussed on dealing with inequity.

4. Risk Management

- 4.1 The Council has a clear scheme for handling petitions set out in its Constitution. This ensures consistency and clarity of process, minimising the risk of complaints about the administration of petitions.

5. Financial and Legal Implications

- 5.1 Any financial implications arising from the issues raised by the petitions will be taken into account as part of the review of these matters. Actions referred to in the officer responses which are not within existing budgets, and any further activity, would require Cabinet and Council approval for budgetary additions if funding was available.
- 5.2 Overview and Scrutiny Rule 21.1 (xiv) in the Council's Constitution provides that the terms of reference of this Committee include the power to deal with petitions referred to the Committee under and in accordance with the Council's petition scheme.

6. Recommendations

- 6.1 The Committee is requested to consider the petition referral request in paragraph 3 and the Director of Public Health's response.

Lead Officer Contact

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Appendices

None

Background Papers

None