

26th October 2020



Cllr Lee Dillon
Leader of the Opposition

Leader of the Council

West Berkshire Council
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Dear Lee,

Thank you for your letter of the 23rd October with regards to the important issues that have been raised through the recent debate around the extension of the free school meals scheme over holiday periods. As you know West Berkshire Council is committed to ensuring that residents are supported during this very difficult period and we already have in place arrangements which mean that no child needs to go hungry in West Berkshire.

The government have provided additional resources to local government to support families in financial hardship during the COVID pandemic and this is the best route to provide support to those who need it rather than just through the Free Meals Scheme which is restricted to a limited and specific set of residents. Over the course of recent months we have worked proactively with local community groups, charities, West Berkshire Volunteer Centre and Greenham Common Trust to ensure that those facing hardship as a result of the COVID pandemic are supported. I have regularly met with these groups and I would publicly thank them for their work to date.

In recent days we have also seen a number of local businesses have pledged support and I would thank all of those businesses and individuals who have been willing to offer help at this time.

Any resident who is in financial hardship and is finding it difficult to provide food for their children during the half term period, and indeed at any other time, should **contact our Community Support Hub on 01635 503579** who will be able to ensure that they are provided with advice on all the current forms of support that are available to them locally.

In terms of the details of your letter I would just wish to clarify that there are in fact 2,829 children in the District who qualify for Free School Meals. As you will be aware the previous scheme to provide support to those receiving Free School Meals over the period of restricted access to schools was administered by the Department for Education, who commissioned a private company to deliver the voucher commitment, rather than local authorities.

For the Council to provide support to children identified within the free school meals arrangements over the coming Christmas period would in fact cost £93,000 and require additional administrative arrangements, which would also need to be funded by the local authority.

The Government recently announced a further tranche of overall grant to local authorities and the Council will consider ways in which this additional resource can be used to continue to address the issues around access to food and other hardship issues to support struggling families with children of all ages.

We already have arrangements in place to support those in food poverty over the course of the current school holiday period, as outlined earlier in this letter. Any additional arrangements proposed to provide specific support over the Christmas period will require further consideration. Options that are proposed in respect of the support to be provided over the Christmas period, can be considered by Council at the meeting which is already scheduled to take place on the 3rd December, within our normal Meeting timetable.

I am sure you can appreciate that ensuring children and families receive the right support to meet their needs in this difficult time is an absolute priority for this Council, and that the package of support currently in place provides a rounded comprehensive means of enabling this.

Yours sincerely,

Lynne Doherty
Leader of the Council