

Meeting date: 11th March 2021

Report to: Cabinet



Subject/report title: SOLIHULL HOLIDAY ACTIVITY & FOOD PROGRAMME

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Wards affected:

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1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To update Cabinet about the help and support provided to families and vulnerable households during the winter period, particularly on how grants received from the government have been used to provide that help and support.
- 1.2 To inform Cabinet of the government's Holiday Activity and Food Programme (HAFP), including the funding provided to the council and requirements concerning its use.
- 1.3 To set out to Cabinet the food offer available to families with children in receipt of free school meals during the upcoming Easter holiday period.
- 1.4 To set out to Cabinet the options and recommended approach for developing a Solihull HAFP for summer 2021.

2. Decision(s) recommended

- 2.1 To note the positive progress and impact, as well as learning, from the delivery of help and support to families and vulnerable households during the winter period.
- 2.2 To note the approval given by the Cabinet Member for Stronger and Safer Communities for the food offer for families this Easter.

- 2.3 That approval is given to the council to develop and deliver a HAFP for eligible families in the Borough, based on the following:
- 2.3.1 The delivery of the HAFP during the summer and Christmas holidays for 2021;
 - 2.3.2 Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council as the lead and accountable body;
 - 2.3.3 A Cross-Directorate and multi-agency programme and delivery structure to make the best use of the council's and the borough's assets and expertise;
 - 2.3.4 The Cabinet Members for Stronger and Safer Communities and Children, Education and Skills as the joint portfolio holders for the Solihull HAFP;
 - 2.3.5 The Assistant Director Inclusion and Additional Needs and Assistant Director Communities and Partnerships as Programme Sponsors.
 - 2.3.6 The Head of Stronger Communities as the Programme Lead.

3. Matters for Consideration

- 3.1 On 8th November 2020, the Government announced an investment of £390m in two schemes to provide help and support to vulnerable households and families during the winter period and further into 2021. The first scheme was the COVID Winter Grant Scheme, providing help and support to households with food, household bills and essentials until 31st March 2021. The scheme provided funding of £565,838.18 and followed an earlier allocation of £209,692.97 from the government's Local Authority Emergency Assistance Grant for Food and Essential Supplies. Details about what has been delivered through Government grants this winter are included in Appendix 1.
- 3.2 On 25th February 2021, the Government announced an extension to the Winter Grant Scheme, so it will end on 16th April 2021. This will allow Local Authorities to use funding from the scheme to deliver help and support to families during the Easter holiday period. As a result of this change in policy, the council can extend the previous holiday supermarket gift card scheme for children and young people in receipt of free school meals during the Easter holiday. The funding of the supermarket scheme during the Christmas, February half-term and Easter holidays will account for the entire WGS allocation the council receives.

3.3 Holiday Activity and Food Programme

- 3.4 The second scheme announced by the government was the expansion of its Holiday Activity and Food Programme (HAFP). This scheme is allocating funding to Local Authorities to provide six weeks of activities and food during the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays of 2021, which are free to access for children and young people in receipt of benefits related free school meals. On 8th February, the council was notified it had been allocated £991,970 to deliver a holiday offer for 2021. This offer can be delivered during any six weeks of the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays with the option for Local Authorities to consider delivering it in its entirety during the six-week summer holiday period, for instance.
- 3.5 Whilst the HAFP is to some extent a continuation of the help and support provided through the Winter Grant Scheme, there are some differences between the two. The

Winter Grant Scheme was created by the Government and administered by the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that as many families and vulnerable households as possible could be “warm and fed” during the winter months. The intention was to provide short-term assistance to low income households with the food, energy and water bills and other associated costs. By contrast, the expansion of the HAFP is part of a longer-term strategy by the Department for Education to put in place a more permanent healthy holiday activity and food offer for children and young people, in receipt of benefits related free school meals.

- 3.6 As a result of the differences between the two schemes, there will be a change in approach to how help and support is provided to families and vulnerable households, when comparing the winter offer with what can be provided when the HAFP starts. Only children and young people in receipt of benefits related free school meals can be supported through the HAFP. This applies to approximately 6,500 children and young people (who live in the borough but may attend schools in neighbouring local authorities). The exact figure will need to be determined with those neighbouring local authorities in due course. When the Winter Grant Scheme comes to an end on 16th April 2021 there will be no further Government funded help and support for households other than those where children are in receipt of benefits related free school meals.
- 3.7 Notwithstanding the above, initiatives like the mutual aid food network will continue to be in place and supported by the council to continue providing help and support to any household in need. Likewise, there will continue to be help and support with money, debt and household bills through the borough’s financial inclusion group. A recent round of grants made by the council to voluntary sector partners has also increased short-term and long-term capacity for money and debt advice, between March and June 2021. The Discretionary Crisis Fund and Hardship Funds provided by the council and Solihull Community Housing will also continue to be available to eligible households. Help and support with energy efficiency and fuel poverty will also continue to be available through the council’s contracted partner, Act On Energy.
- 3.8 Another key difference between the Winter Grant Scheme and the HAFP is the need for parents to opt-in to the offer available. Through the Winter Grant Scheme every parent whose child receives free school meals was issued a supermarket gift card during the Christmas holidays (although approximately 10% did not redeem the cards) and parents will be sent the same for this Easter. By comparison, the government guidance for the HAFP is that the offer that is provided by Local Authorities should be optional for children, young people and families to participate in. As a result, the council will require parents to apply for and opt-in to activities and food, which is available through the HAFP. This would be through the attendance of children and young people at activities and/or booking onto holiday schemes and clubs. Whilst efforts will be made to maximise participation in the HAFP, access to provision will be dependent on parent engagement.
- 3.9 The final key differences between the winter offer and the offer available to families through the HAFP is the emphasis on providing healthy meals rather than food (or the means of purchasing food), as well as on face to face delivery of activities. Through the Winter Grant Scheme, the council has been able to offer all families, whose children receive free school meals, supermarket gift cards to purchase food and household essentials. Additional help could also be provided and accessed via referral

or self-referral with clothing, household bills and fuel. Through the HAFP, the council is required to provide meals, which comply with school food standards, with no scope within the guidance to provide food, the means for purchasing food, or help with household bills and essentials. Due to the potential COVID related restrictions and uncertainties during Easter, Local Authorities are being asked to deliver an offer which is within the spirit of the HAFP principles. This excludes the purchase of supermarket gift cards and vouchers for families, and would instead require the council to either deliver meals directly to families or to accompany the provision of food with the means for families to create healthy meals with the ingredients provided.

3.10 Details about the scope and government aims of the HAFP are included in Appendix 2. Whilst the financial impact of COVID has been to increase the number of children and young people who are eligible for, and in receipt of, free school meals, with a 32% increase in Solihull since 1st March 2020, the HAFP is not specifically about a short-term response to the pandemic. Instead it is about a longer-term response, including recovery from the pandemic, concerning the issues many children, young people and families face when schools close for each holiday period. To this extent, the intentions for children and young people accessing the Holiday Activity and Food Programme are for them and their parents to:

- (a) Eat more healthily
- (b) Be more active
- (c) Take part in engaging and enriching activities
- (d) Be safe and not isolated
- (e) Have greater knowledge of health and nutrition
- (f) Be more engaged with school and other services

4. What options have been considered and what is the evidence telling us about them?

4.1 Whilst the council has been allocated £991,970 to deliver a Solihull HAFP, there is no expectation or requirement for the council to deliver the programme. The council will be reimbursed, up to the total allocation, for activity it chooses to fund and deliver during the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays. In this regard the council can decide not to deliver a holiday offer or to access the funding.

4.2 However, based on the financial impact of COVID there are more families in need of additional help and support. This is evidenced by the 32% increase in Solihull of children and young people accessing free school meals since 1st March 2020. The social and emotional impact of COVID on children and young people also needs consideration, particularly the need to maximise the opportunities available for positive and structured activities ahead of the next school year.

4.3 In the long-term, the HAFP is intended to deliver a range of positive outcomes around school readiness, attendance and attainment. This is in addition to the positive impact on the ongoing social and emotional development of children and young people during the holiday periods, as well as wider benefits for families and community safety.

Based on this context and the additional strains being placed on schools and other agencies as a result of the pandemic, it is recommended that the council accesses the available funding and maximises efforts to derive as much benefit as possible from it.

4.4 Easter

- 4.5 Following the extension of the Winter Grant Scheme, until 16th April 2021, the council is no longer limited to the funding available through the HAFP to provide a food offer to families during the Easter holidays. The WGS extension enables the council to repeat the supermarket gift card scheme run for families during the Christmas holiday period.
- 4.6 Additionally, the COVID related restrictions which will be in place during the Easter holidays mean it will continue to be extremely challenging to deliver meals or face to face activities directly to children and young people – particularly at scale. The guidance provided by the Department for Education recognises this, advising Local Authorities to act in the spirit of the HAFP principles. Drawing on this guidance, the national learning from summer 2020, as well as experiences in Solihull since the pandemic started, the most feasible course of action would be to provide the means for families to prepare and participate in healthy meals and activities at home.
- 4.7 Where possible within COVID restrictions, there is also scope to support voluntary and community sector groups and organisations to continue the range of virtual and face to face food and activities, as well as activity and food packages being delivered to families. The Winter Wellbeing & Recovery Fund, which the council is delivering in partnership with the Heart of England Community Foundation, has provided a number of grants supporting food and activities for families. This funding will continue to be accessible to voluntary and community sector groups and organisations in the run-up to the Easter holidays.

4.8 Summer

- 4.9 The Department for Education guidance directs Local Authorities to provide six weeks of provision throughout the three holiday periods. Any combination of six weeks across the three holiday periods can be decided by Local Authorities, including delivering the HAFP over the entire six-week summer holiday period. This period is particularly important in terms of the need to prepare children and young people for the next school year, the length of time away from school.
- 4.10 One of the options available to the council, which some other Local Authorities are considering is to commission a third party to deliver the HAFP on its behalf. This approach would see an experienced and suitably qualified provider taking responsibility for meeting the HAFP requirements and ensuring there is a free to access offer available to eligible children and young people across the borough. Such an approach in Solihull is likely to result in the contracting of a regional or national organisation, as there is not a suitable organisation based in the borough which would be able to take this forward. Whilst this approach is likely to ensure that the borough meets the minimum requirements associated with the HAFP, it is inconsistent with its priorities and outcomes concerning the development and enablement of Thriving Communities, as it would divert resources away from local voluntary and community sector into a regional or national organisation with no local roots and investment in the

borough's neighbourhoods.

- 4.11 An alternative would be to work with the borough based voluntary sector to nurture a HAFP consortium. However, whilst this might be a solution for future years, in the short-term there is insufficient time to develop such an approach for this summer.
- 4.12 The council might also consider a more blended approach, making the best use of all the assets and expertise in the council and the borough. This would see the council taking the role as the lead organisation but funding and commissioning third parties to deliver activities and food, where they might be best placed and already equipped to do so. This would ensure that there is an approach tailored to different places and groups within the borough, particularly important in making the Programme as accessible and inclusive as possible.

5. Reasons for recommending preferred option

5.1 Easter

- 5.2 The Department for Education has been notified that Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council will not be delivering the HAFP during the Easter holidays and will instead be delivering it during the summer and Christmas holidays. This is for the following reasons:
 - (a) To maximise the reach and impact of the HAFP during the summer, once COVID restrictions have eased;
 - (b) To ensure that as many families with children and young people in receipt of free school meals can receive help with food and household essentials during the Easter holidays, whilst COVID restrictions remain in place;
 - (c) To prevent duplication between the help and support which can now be offered following the extension of the Winter Grant Scheme, and what might be delivered through the HAFP.

5.3 Summer

- 5.4 Due to the scale and potential complexity of the requirements and scope of the summer programme, planning will commence immediately, adopting a programme structure which will incorporate all the assets and expertise available in the borough. This will be led and co-ordinated by the council.
- 5.5 The Department for Education allows Local Authorities to use up to 10% of funding allocations for the administration of the HAFP. Funding would, therefore, be used to contribute to the costs of a project manager, administrative support and the co-ordination of local delivery, reflecting where additional capacity will be needed to support council and partner services, as well as deliver the HAFP overall.
- 5.6 A multi-agency programme board or partnership will be established to provide an advisory and reference group for the HAFP's development and delivery. This is based on best practice advised by the Department for Education including partners from health, education, community safety and the voluntary sector. The partnership would be particularly concerned with the co-ordination of activity across sectors and

agencies, as well as the outcomes, evaluation and legacy of the HAFP.

- 5.7 The establishment of a programme structure to develop, co-ordinate and deliver different strands of work and activity which will be needed to achieve the overall aims and objectives. The headlines of these are listed in Appendix 4.
- 5.8 Through this approach, the intention would be to create a well evidenced and co-ordinated multi-agency, cross-sector plan for May 2021 which can then be implemented during the summer. Work has already commenced to map and analyse where and to whom the HAFP will need to be delivered, as referenced in Appendix 3.

6. Implications and Considerations

- 6.1 State how the proposals in this report contribute to the priorities in the [Council Plan](#):

Priority:	Contribution:
<p>Economy:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Revitalising our towns and local centres. 2. UK Central (UKC) and maximising the opportunities of HS2. 3. Increase the supply of housing, especially affordable and social housing. 	
<p>Environment:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Enhance Solihull’s natural environment. 5. Improve Solihull’s air quality. 6. Reduce Solihull’s net carbon emissions. 	
<p>People and Communities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Take action to improve life chances in our most disadvantaged communities. 8. Enable communities to thrive. 9. Sustainable, quality, affordable provision for adults & children with complex needs. 	<p>The beneficiaries of the HAFP are children and young people in receipt of benefits related free school meals. This also includes children and young people with disabilities, special educational needs or other needs which are being supported by Children’s Services. The aims of the HAFP model are to address a range of inequalities and disadvantages these groups face whilst schools are closed during holiday periods, promoting a range of positive outcomes which will improve their life chances in the long-run.</p> <p>The recommended approach for the summer and post-COVID model in Solihull is consistent with the actions required to</p>

	enable communities to thrive. This is particularly through recognising and investing in the strengths and assets of the borough's voluntary and community sector, as well as schools and enterprises working with children, young people and families.
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6.2 Consultation and Scrutiny:

- 6.2.1 Officers from across the council have been consulted and engaged in the development of the model and recommended approach to developing the Programme. This includes officers from the Public Health, Children's Services, Resources, Economy & Infrastructure Directorates to recognise and build on existing plans, priorities and services, as well as learning and evaluations from previous holiday provision and schemes.
- 6.2.2 Representatives of voluntary, community and business sectors continue to be engaged in conversations and discussions about the development of the programme. This includes organisations involved in the delivery of youth work, holiday schemes and clubs, as well as COVID related projects. To formally capture and recognise the range of possibilities available from local providers an Expression of Interest form has been circulated to potential partners.
- 6.2.3 The voices and views of children, young people and families who will be the main beneficiaries of the Programme will also need to be included in the design and development of the food and activity standards and requirements. The opportunities to do this include the following:
- (a) Hotspots, groups and destination venues – organisations which apply for funding to support their holiday offer will be required to evidence how they have engaged and involved children, young people and parents in the design and development of their offer;
 - (b) Cold spots, marketing and engagement – through the programme structure, the council will work with children, young people and parents to co-produce and co-design activity which will be delivered directly by the council, as well as specifications to inform the commissioning of third parties.
- 6.2.4 The Department for Education have organised a West Midlands group of Local Authority Officers, through which activity can be co-ordinated and delivered across Local Authority boundaries. This group will ensure that Department for Education representatives and neighbouring Local Authorities can be engaged and consulted in the development of the Solihull offer.
- ## 6.3 Financial implications:
- 6.3.1 There will be no costs incurred by the council outside of the funding allocated to it by the Government through the Winter Grant Scheme, HAFP, Local Authority Emergency Assistance Grant for Food and Essential Supplies and COVID Outbreak Management Fund (COMF). Prior to the government's announcement of 25th February concerning an extension to the Winter Grant Scheme, the council had fully committed its funding

allocation to be spent by 31st March 2021. The total cost of the delivering a supermarket gift card scheme this Easter will be circa £223K and in order to release funding for the funding of the supermarket gift card scheme this Easter. This will be funded through the council's WGS allocation. In order to do this the COMF Local Authority Emergency Assistance Grant for Food and Essential Supplies and will now fund eligible activity previously committed to the WGS. This will apply to all activity which supports families and vulnerable households to be safe, fed and warm at home.

6.3.2 On 8th February the council received formal notification of the £991,970 HAFP funding allocation as part of its grant determination letter. This letter also sets out the conditions which need to be fulfilled to access this funding, which will be used to inform the development and delivery of the HAFP in the borough. In addition to funding the delivery of food and activities directly to eligible children and young people, the council will also be able to claim up to 10% of the available funding to meet the administration costs of the Programme. This provides a total budget of approximately £99,000 for staff and associated costs involved in the administration and delivery of the Programme.

6.3.3 The funding that has been provided also creates a platform and opportunity to leverage additional external funding into the borough. Discussions are underway between the council's HAFP lead, neighbouring local authorities, the Department for Education and the West Midlands Funders Network to develop opportunities to include independent funders, such as the National Lottery Community Fund and BBC Children In Need, in a wider programme of investment in activity which can support children, young people and families.

6.4 Legal implications:

6.4.1 The council has no specific statutory duty to deliver holiday based food and activity for families. However, the scope and aims of the HAFP are likely to have a positive impact in terms of reducing the demand on statutory duties concerning the provision of services and education for children, young people and families.

6.4.2 There will also be legal requirements and parameters in how provision is funded and sourced. This specifically refers to procurement rules and regulations, which are likely to be applicable when and where the council is required to commission provision to meet a specific need in one or more of the borough's neighbourhoods. Officers from the council's procurement division are already engaged in the development of the HAFP and will continue to play an important advisory and support role.

6.5 Risk implications:

6.5.1 In developing a programme approach and structure, a full risk register will be included and managed via the programme's project manager. This will be monitored and managed via the lead Cabinet Member, programme sponsors and lead, as well as the programme's board.

6.5.2 In advance of creating the programme structure, there are a number of risks that are already being identified which merit inclusion in this report. They include:

- (a) Reputational – there are some significant challenges in both developing and delivering the Easter and summer offer available to children, young people and families. These include managing expectations, as the offer changes from the winter to Easter, particularly if there is strong media interest in the provision of food and support to families during holiday periods. To mitigate this there has already been a significant investment in the communication and marketing of the new Programme to stakeholders, which will increase as Easter draws closer.
- (b) Financial – The council will be required to draw down funding from the Department for Education to reimburse it for spending and financial commitments already accrued. Due to the involvement of third parties in the delivery of different aspects of the programme there are some risks in ensuring that all provision which is funded and delivered through the Programme is consistent with the grant conditions and requirements set out by the government. These will be managed through grant agreements and contracts, where applicable.
- (c) Operational – There is a significant and challenging timeline in developing and delivering the Easter offer and the summer offer. The council's ability to deliver this will be dependent on the timely recruitment of suitably qualified staff to provide the additional capacity required. Recruitment processes have been initiated to ensure that staff can be available as soon as possible.
- (d) Fraud prevention – there will be two main aspects to this, including ensuring that only eligible children and young people are benefitting from the programme. This might include the provision of food, equipment, holiday activity cards or holiday scheme bookings. The other aspect will concern the financial claims of third parties for the delivery of activity and food to eligible children and young people. Officers from the council's audit division be engaged at key design points to advise on and mitigate these risks.

6.6 Equality implications:

- 6.6.1 The HAFP is not a universally accessible offer and the funding it provides is limited to the benefit of children and young people in receipt of benefit related free school meals. This is as directed by the Department for Education. However, whilst the council will be required to ensure that food and activities are free to access for children and young people in receipt of benefits related free school meals, they can be accessible to all children and young people.
- 6.6.2 The development and delivery of the Solihull HAFP will have due regard for vulnerable groups such as children with disabilities and young carers. It will also have due regard for the equity of access of different groups. The means for addressing these include:
 - (a) Demographic and geographic profiles of children and young people in receipt of free school meals. This has already identified the proportion of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities who will need to be considered in how provision is developed, delivered and accessed.

- (b) The intention to provide funding and support for provision for specific groups, such as children with disabilities, as well as directly in the neighbourhoods where children and young people live to maximise accessibility.
- (c) The focus on a HAF Academy to promote standards and best practice concerning the inclusion of children and young people with special educational needs, disabilities, as well as to broadly promote equality, diversity and inclusion across the holiday activity and food workforce of employees and volunteers.

6.6.3 Further more detailed assessments will be developed as the Programme's details and plans develop.

7. List of appendices referred to

- 7.1 Winter Offer delivery update
- 7.2 Department for Education overview and requirements for the holiday activities and food programme
- 7.3 Free School Meals Brief Analysis
- 7.4 Solihull Holiday Activity & Food Programme structure

8. Background papers used to compile this report

- 8.1 None

9. List of other relevant documents

- 9.1 None