**Report to Hartlepool Schools’ Forum 14 July 2020**

**From Sally Robinson, Director of Children’s and Joint Commissioning Services and Chris Little, Director of Finance and Policy**

# Item 12: School Meals Provision during COVID-19

1. **Introduction**

1.1 The purpose of the report is to agree charging for the provision of school meals throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

**2. Background**

2.1 In normal circumstances schools receive funding for Free School Meals (FSM) through a combination of the DSG and Universal Free School Meals Grant. Hartlepool Council’s School Meals service charges schools based on actual FSM on a monthly basis. In other councils, FSM are charged up front on a termly basis.

2.2 Anticipating the lockdown announcement by the Prime Minister on Monday 23 March 2020, schools in Hartlepool closed to the majority of pupils on Friday 20 March 2020. Vulnerable pupils and children of key workers were still able to attend and packed lunches were available to be delivered/ picked up from their home school for those pupils who were entitled to a Free School Meal (FSM).

2.3 Throughout this period, the Council’s School Catering Service has continued to operate. Up to the end of May, packed lunches have been provided and more recently individual schools have approached the Catering Team to arrange a more bespoke service including the provision of hot meals.

2.4 To ensure service continuity during and after the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, all public sector contracting authorities have been advised by the government to support their at risk suppliers in a range of ways to ensure business and service continuity and to protect jobs. The measures set out in the Procurement Policy Note (PPN) 02/20, issued on 19 March (expiring 30 June 2020), are to ensure suppliers are in a position to resume normal contract delivery once the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak is over. PPN 04/20 was issued on 9 June 2020. It updates and builds on PPN 02/20 and is valid from 1 July 2020 to 31 October 2020.

2.5 PPN 04/20 acknowledges that the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak is not a short term crisis and states that while the supplier relief provisions set out in PPN 02/20 may still be appropriate, contracting authorities and their suppliers now also need to work in partnership to plan an exit from any support and transition to a new, sustainable, operating model. The transition planning section of this guidance explains the planning that should be undertaken now.

2.6 At a national level the Government’s rationale for PPN 02/20 and PPN 04/20 reflects the funding arrangements in place for public services and continuity of funding, such as the DSG and Universal Free Schools Meals Grant, during the COVID period. Therefore, the Government expects public bodies to comply with PPN 02/20 and PPN 04/20. The alternative national approach would have been for the Government to clawback such funding and then use this funding to support furloughing of public sector staff, including school catering staff.

2.7 No Catering staff have been furloughed during this period by the Council. This followed government guidance which discouraged councils from furloughing staff where it could be avoided and to adopt arrangements under PPN.

1. **Charging**
   1. Schools will continue to receive their core funding allocations throughout this period, regardless of any periods of closure or reduced operation - and will therefore be in a position to consider supporting suppliers at risk. The Department for Education (DfE) is putting in place [an additional fund to support schools with unavoidable additional costs associated with COVID-19 that cannot be met from existing resources](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-financial-support-for-schools/school-funding-exceptional-costs-associated-with-coronavirus-covid-19-for-the-period-march-to-july-2020).

3.2 The local authority does appreciate that some schools may not be eligible to apply for this funding as the guidance states ‘Schools are not eligible to make a claim against this fund if they expect to add to their existing historic surpluses in their current financial year (September 2019 to August 2020 for academies and April 2020 to March 2021 for maintained schools). This means schools cannot claim if they began their current financial year with an accumulated historic surplus and expect to increase that surplus this year and thereby finish the year with a higher level of reserves than they started.’

* 1. For the avoidance of doubt, costs associated with supporting suppliers through the PPNs would not be eligible for support through this fund as these costs are already covered from existing funding. Schools should only support suppliers through core funding allocations.

3.4 The PPN suggests that any relief payments for free school meals and universal infant free school meals should be based on the 3 months’ invoices prior to March 2020 (or the time period that is most appropriate), provided the supplier agrees to act on an open book basis and make cost data available. Schools should make payments to suppliers promptly and on time.

3.5 The government have announced they will continue to provide schools with their expected funding, including funding to cover free school meals and universal infant free school meals, throughout this period.

3.6 It is therefore proposed to charge schools from 1 April 2020 based on the 3 months December 2019 to February 2020. A reduction of 27% will be made to reflect the savings by the Catering Service on the purchase of food. These reductions are net of food costs for the reduced number of meals provided over this period.

1. **Recommendations**

4.1Schools’ Forum are asked to notethe national guidance and the charging mechanism set out at paragraph 3.6 above