

SERVICE UPDATE

<u>Name of Function:</u>	Resources
<u>Date:</u>	15/11/23
<u>Title of Update:</u>	Expansion of Universal Free School Meals for Primary 6 and Primary 7 pupils
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UPDATE:

Universal entitlement to free school meals was introduced across Scotland in 2015, for all pupils in Primary 1 to Primary 3 year groups. This universal entitlement was extended to all pupils in P4 in August 2021, and then to all pupils in P5 in January 2022.

The further expansion of universal free school meals to Primary 6 and Primary 7 pupils was due to be implemented nationally from August 2022, but this was later postponed. The Scottish Government is currently undertaking a planning exercise to help estimate the likely costs associated with the further expansion, and officers have contributed to this exercise by submitting estimates of costs for work likely to be required across Aberdeen City schools, to extend school kitchens and dining spaces to provide the additional capacity which is expected to be required to support the expansion.

In addition to providing estimated costs for works required across the school estate as a whole, work has been undertaken to produce detailed costed designs for six schools which were deemed to be the highest priority for requiring additional kitchen and dining capacity. The cost of this work is currently estimated at £9m.

To date the Council has received capital grant funding from Scottish Government in 2022-23 and 2023-24, to assist with the cost of capital works to support the expansion of universal free school meals. This funding amounts to £3.3m. There is therefore already a significant shortfall in available funding to cover the work needed at the first six priority school buildings. No additional revenue funding has yet been made available to the Council to support the rollout of free school meals to Primary 6 and Primary 7 pupils.

Whilst the available capital funding could be used to proceed with some work to extend kitchens and dining spaces (the funding would be sufficient to complete works in no more than two priority schools), given that the availability

of any further grant funding to support the expansion is not yet known, there is a risk that any future funding may be insufficient to carry out the works which are necessary across the remaining estate, leaving the Council with significant challenges in delivering the expansion of universal free school meals to Primary 6 and Primary 7 pupils.

As no additional revenue funding to support the expansion has yet been made available, proceeding with any capital works now would also risk placing additional revenue cost pressures on Council budgets, as larger kitchens and dining spaces would cost more to run and maintain.

Officers consider that by pausing all current work on designing or carrying out improvements to school kitchens, until the level of any further capital and revenue funding is confirmed, and timescales for implementation are known, there would be an opportunity to retain maximum flexibility in the way in which the currently available funding can be deployed. This would allow appropriate decisions to be taken on how best to deploy all of the available resources, once it has become clear how much additional funding will be available in total.

For this reason no further work on designing and planning solutions for increasing the capacity of school kitchens and dining spaces will be undertaken, until details of any further capital and revenue grant funding from Scottish Government to support the rollout are known, and until the required implementation date for the provision of free school meals to Primary 6 and Primary 7 pupils is confirmed.

The project will be referred to the Council budget setting process for 2024/25, in anticipation of further details of likely available funding and required timescales for implementation being available by then. This would allow the appropriate decisions and actions to be taken to begin work on expanding kitchens and dining spaces, as soon as the necessary details have been confirmed.