

All Head Teachers

Our Ref

CO'N/BT

Date:

05 October 2017

Dear Colleague

Introduction of Universal Credit and Free School Meals

I am aware that you have already received a briefing from the Council (updated version attached) in connection with Universal Credit in Gateshead. However, in summary, Universal Credit is a national benefit which will replace existing benefits such as Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance, Housing Benefit, Job Seekers Allowance, Child Tax Credits and Working Tax Credits. Universal Credit will be rolled out in Gateshead from 11 October 2017.

There are significant concerns that those parents/carers claiming Universal Credit will receive the benefit in arrears with a likely 6-8 weeks wait between claim and payment.

The Department for Education has advised that anyone who has applied for a benefit but not yet been awarded it is not eligible for free school meals. This applies to Universal Credit claimants even where they may be waiting 6-8 weeks for entitlement to Universal Credit to be confirmed.

This situation will clearly place significant financial uncertainty and strain on those families already experiencing financial challenges.

Children with parents/carers in receipt of Universal Credit **will** be entitled to free school meals for their children but the delay of 6-8 weeks could mean that our most financially vulnerable families may struggle to have the resources to feed their children.

I know how, as leaders of Gateshead schools, you consistently go that extra mile to ensure that our most vulnerable children are supported in a myriad of ways. I am therefore asking you, and your Governors, if you would be good enough to ensure that the introduction of Universal Credit does not result in hungry children that have not received a school meal if it is needed. I know school budgets are stretched but I also know you will continue to do everything in your power to support vulnerable children and families.

I thank you in advance for your support.

Yours sincerely



Caroline O'Neill
Strategic Director
Care, Wellbeing and Learning

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