

**TITLE OF REPORT:** An update on the position regarding Free School Meals Benefit Entitlement in Gateshead

**REPORT OF:** Colin Huntington, Strategic Director, Housing, Environment and Healthy Communities

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### Purpose of Report

The purpose of the report is to provide committee with the context to a presentation that will be delivered at the meeting providing an update and overview regarding the situation with means tested free school meals benefit entitlement in Gateshead.

### Background

There are currently 7,200 children eligible for means tested free school meals in Gateshead, covering 4,150 individual households. The table below shows the recent increase in known eligibility across Gateshead.

Gateshead Council	No. of pupils known to be eligible for FSM	% of pupils known to be eligible for FSM
January 2020 census	6,135	21.3%
October 2020 census	6,743	24.8%
January 2021 census	7,038	25.6%

The most recent census data available shows an increase of 903 children with known FSM eligibility in the space of one year, January 2020 to January 2021. This represents a 4.3% increase across all Gateshead.

Over the last 14 months, Covid 19 has had a significant impact both in terms of the number of children and families now in receipt of benefit, the take up of school meals, the arrangements implemented during lockdowns and schools holidays, and how the holiday activities and food programme has supported families at scale during the summer of 2020 and Easter 2021.

The free school meals benefit entitlement is still not an automated benefit and requires families who may be eligible to apply for the benefit.

The presentation to be delivered at committee will provide councillors with an update on:

- The number of children eligible for the benefit and the changes in Gateshead
- A summary of the service provided to schools and the changes in uptake.
- Arrangements implemented throughout the pandemic to provide help and assistance to eligible families and their children.
- Holiday Activities and Food including support, connection to nutrition and access to food in communities during key school holiday periods.

- Whether the Council wishes to consider lobbying the Government for automatic registration.

### **Recommendations**

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to consider the information provided in the presentation and comment on the impact and implications for Gateshead's children and their families.

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