

## HERTSMERE BOROUGH COUNCIL

Meeting name & date	<b>EXECUTIVE</b> <b>11 November 2020</b>
Agenda item	<b>7.1</b>
Report title	Christmas Holiday 2020 Free Meals
Report reference no.	EX/20/78
Wards affected	All wards
Report author, job title & email	Sajida Bijle, Managing Director <a href="mailto:sajida.bijle@hertsmere.gov.uk">sajida.bijle@hertsmere.gov.uk</a>  Hilary Shade, Head of Partnerships, Community Engagement and Housing <a href="mailto:Hilary.shade@hertsmere.gov.uk">Hilary.shade@hertsmere.gov.uk</a>
List of Appendices	Appendix A – Letter from GMSP Foundation
Reason for urgency	Not applicable

Is it a Key Decision?	Yes
Call-in expires on	The Proposals are exempt from call-in on the grounds of urgency.
Exempt from Call-in	The Proposals are exempt from call-in on the grounds of urgency.
Portfolio Holder	Cllr Morris Bright, Leader of the Council

**PUBLIC REPORT - this report is available to the public.**

### **1 RECOMMENDATION**

#### **1.1 That the Executive approves:**

- 1.1.1 collaborative working between Hertsmere Borough Council and GMSP Foundation for delivery and distribution of free hot meals for children entitled to free school meals during Christmas 2020 school holidays;
- 1.1.2 the allocation of up to £10,000 to fund the costs of delivery and distribution, and this to be funded from the 2020/21 revenue contingency budget that has been set aside for Covid related costs.

## **2 PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT**

- 2.1 All across the country the Covid-19 pandemic has caused hardship to a significant number of the population due to loss of employment and closure of businesses. Even where people are still working under the government's furlough/Job Retention/Job Support Schemes, there is still an impact on many family finances. There has been a large increase in requests from families who would not normally claim free school meals for their children.
- 2.2 The GMSP Foundation founded by Mr Ramesh and Mrs Pratibha Sachdev, Hertsmere residents, approached the Council to offer free hot meals during the school holidays for Hertsmere's school children (please see attached letter at Appendix A) in light of the current Covid-19 pandemic and its adverse detrimental financial impact on struggling families. Although the council is not an education authority, it recognises that there are almost 1,800 Hertsmere children who are eligible for free school meals during term time. Working in partnership with the GMSP Foundation and it's charity Akshaya Patra, this project will provide hot and nutritious meals to the borough's most disadvantaged children during the Christmas school holiday period.
- 2.3 The meals will be provided at no cost to the council from a new Akshaya Patra kitchen facility in Watford and the council will need to organise the collection and distribution of the meals. If the council were to cover the costs of the meals then the cost to the local taxpayer could be in the region of £61,200 (assuming £17 x 2 weeks for c.1800 children). By accepting GMSP's generous offer of free meals, the council would have to bear only the cost of delivery and distribution which is estimated to be less than £10,000.
- 2.4 Officers are currently working on the logistics for how the scheme will work, however the Foundation and the Akshaya Patra charity are already working with a number of London authorities. The proposed approach will be to work through local schools to make the scheme available to those entitled to free school meals with the council then collecting and distributing the meals from hubs across the borough using volunteers, to those who have registered for the scheme.
- 2.5 An update will be brought to the December Executive to report on progress and to clarify how the scheme will operate.
- 2.6 This report is brought to the Executive to seek approval for the proposal to work in collaboration with the GMSP Foundation and to identify funding of up to £10,000 to support any costs associated with the collection and distribution of the meals.

## **3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION**

- 3.1 The council has no statutory duty to provide free meals however, it does not wish to see any schoolchild eligible for free school meals in Hertsmere go hungry when schools are not open over the Christmas holiday period. This initiative is initially intended to cover the Christmas school holidays only at this stage. However, this may be reviewed for future school holidays.

3.2 Working in partnership with the GMSP Foundation, through its charity Akshaya Patra, means that the council are able to bring forward this scheme to support disadvantaged children in a cost effective manner as the charity will be preparing the hot meals free of charge, with the council only meeting the costs of collection and distribution.

#### **4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

4.1 The Executive may decide not to work in collaboration with GMSP and Akshaya Patra. If the council want to proceed with its own scheme the anticipated cost of the meals would be in the region of £61,200 for the Christmas period. This approach would not be recommended, not only because of the costs but because the council has no experience in providing a meal preparation service as this is a function of the County Council as an education authority.

4.2 The council can decide not to take part in the provision of the free school holiday meal scheme. However, this means the most disadvantaged children, through no fault of their own, may go hungry in the school holidays this winter.

#### **5 BACKGROUND**

5.1 In two tier authorities, education and related activities is the statutory function of the upper tier authority; in Hertsmere's case this would be Hertfordshire County Council. In Hertsmere there is a total of 40 state schools with circa 1,800 schoolchildren eligible for free school meals.

5.2 The table below shows the breakdown of children eligible for free school meals by main settlement as of the end of October 2020. It should be noted that this figure varies on an ongoing basis as new applications are made and additional children become eligible and vice versa.

Hertsmere (total)	1793
Elstree	10
Borehamwood	786
Shenley	48
Radlett	46
Bushey	645
Potters Bar	258

5.3 The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the food poverty issue facing many families in the UK. In light of this a number of local authorities throughout the country have extended free school meals during the school holidays in a number of different forms including packed lunches and food vouchers.

5.4 Through the proposed scheme Hertsmere will be working very closely with the GMSP Foundation to work out the best possible route to reach all parts of Hertsmere. This means that the Council will be looking at working with local schools as well as other organisations such as Citizens Advice and Communities 1<sup>st</sup>, to 'reach out' to families of the children who are eligible for free school meals.

- 5.5 It is proposed to utilise a volunteer workforce to support the distribution of the meals and there will be some costs associated with volunteer co-ordination, expenses, and the cost of hiring vehicles and possible hire of venues if required.
- 5.6 The founders of the GMSP Foundation, Ramesh and Pratibha Sachdev, are long-time funders of Akshaya Patra in India and have been residents of Hertsmere for forty years. The GMSP Akshaya Patra Kitchen opened in Watford in October and started producing and delivering thousands of nutritious, low cost meals to children in London initially. The kitchen is able to produce highly nutritious food at large scale. It can produce up to 5,000 meals per day, serving everything from mac and cheese with broccoli to Thai green curry with rice.
- 5.7 There are other schemes operating within the borough to support access to food, including the foodbanks in Borehamwood, Potters Bar and Bushey as well Gratitude providing access to food. The County Council also provides crisis intervention services which can be accessed via Hertshelp and can provide food vouchers for individuals and families in need. In addition in the Easter and Summer holidays programmes such as Fit, Fed and Read Have been offered to children aged 7-12 years who were eligible for free school meals.
- 5.8 It is important to note that the Council has budgeted £427,300 for support to the voluntary sector for the financial year 2020/2021. In addition to this, in June 2020 the Executive allocated additional support of £17,215 for the Covid-19 voluntary sector for additional Covid-19 initiatives. Members chose to utilise their Wiis funding to support various organisations providing support to our communities and £5,820 was allocated to foodbanks. An additional £10,000 has been allocated to foodbanks in Hertsmere from the County Council using DEFRA funding to support access to food. Notwithstanding this the scheme proposed is an additional source of access to food for those children in need.

## **6 FINANCIAL AND BUDGET FRAMEWORK IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 For this scheme to proceed the council has to fund the cost of collection and distribution of the meals.
- 6.2 In light of the absence of historical data the costs associated with the distribution of these meals is an estimate however it is anticipated that the costs will be no more than £10,000. It is proposed that this be funded from the 2020/21 revenue contingency budget that has been set aside for Covid related costs.

## **7 LEGAL POWERS RELIED ON AND ANY LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 Section 1 of the Localism Act 2011 gives the Council a general power to do anything that a competent individual can do - the so called 'general power of competence' (GPC). For principal Councils in England, the GPC has replaced the powers in section 137(1) of the Local Government Act 1972 which enabled the Council to incur expenditure that would directly benefit

the Borough or a part of it or bring direct benefits to some or all of the inhabitants. The GPC also replaced the so called 'well-being' powers in Section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000 which enabled the Council to do anything which was likely to achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic, social or environmental well-being of the Borough or a part of it or of some or all of the inhabitants .

7.2 Accordingly, the Council has the unrestricted power to incur expenditure on making arrangements for the distribution of meals over the Christmas holiday period to children who are entitled to free school meals during term time, without having to:-

- consider whether such expenditure will directly benefit the areas or some or all of the inhabitants (s.137 (1) LGA 1972);
- consider whether the amount of the expenditure incurred will be commensurate to the degree of benefit conferred (s.137(1)(b) LGA 1972);
- account for such expenditure in a separate account (s.137(7) LGA 1972); or
- consider whether the expenditure will facilitate or conduce the promotion or improvement of the economic, social or environmental well-being of the Borough or a part of it or of some or all of the inhabitants (s.2 LGA 2000).

7.3 Regardless of the very broad drafting of the GPC, the Council is a steward of the public purse and remains under a general fiduciary duty to the taxpayer to ensure that all expenditure is in the public interest and represents good value for money. Accordingly, it is recommended that members satisfy themselves that the expenditure proposed to be incurred in the delivery of meals over the Christmas period to children entitled to free school meals in term time, is commensurate to the benefits that this initiative will deliver and otherwise represents good value for money.

## **8 EFFICIENCY GAINS AND VALUE FOR MONEY**

8.1 Working in collaboration with the GMSP Foundation means that the council can achieve the intended outcome for a fraction of the cost than doing this on its own which will deliver both cashable efficiency as well as value for money.

## **9 RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 There are a number of risks arising from this scheme as it is one that the council has not previously operated. A risk plan will be developed by the officer working party to identify those risks and to ensure suitable mitigation measures in places.

## **10 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 This project will be led by officers with the Partnerships and Community Engagement Team, with an officer working party proposed to plan and manage the logistics of the scheme to include representatives from Environmental Health and Customer Services.

## **11 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 This proposal will provide support to those disadvantaged school children in the borough.

## **12 CORPORATE PLAN and POLICY FRAMEWORK IMPLICATIONS**

- 12.1 The proposal accords with the council's corporate plan and the objective of "Supporting our Communities"

## **13 ASSET MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS**

- 13.1 None for the purposes of this report

## **14 HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

- 14.1 The delivery of hot food will need to meet all relevant health and safety and food safety legislation and guidance. Relevant officers from the council's Environmental Health Team will be engaged in the proposed officer working party to ensure that these considerations are fully taken into account.

## **15 APPENDICES**

- 15.1 Appendix A – Letter from GMSP Foundation

## **16 BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS USED TO PREPARE THIS REPORT**

- 16.1 None

Letter from GMSP Foundation



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Registered Charity No. 1113218

Sajida Bijle MD  
Hertsmere Council  
3 Elstree Way  
Borehamwood  
WD6 1WN

29<sup>th</sup> October 2020

Dear Madam,

GMSP Foundation supports vulnerable communities in India and the UK. We have recently launched the GMSP Akshaya Patra kitchen which is a high tech kitchen that serves freshly cooked hot nutritious vegetarian meals to children and other groups that face food insecurity. The kitchen uses technology to cook at speed and scale producing up to 9000 meals a day. We are environmentally sustainable with zero waste and a minimal carbon footprint. We have a cook to consumption ratio of 2 hours so can reach areas up to an hour's drive from Watford.

We have been residents of Hertsmere for over 30 years and would like to support our local community. During the summer months we funded Gratitude and Compassion London to deliver meals in Borehamwood. Working in partnership and collaboration is central to our ethos.

We would like to support children in our local area to ensure they have healthy, hot nutritious meals to eat over the Christmas period. We will fund the full cost of the meals to ensure they are free to all that need them. Please can you let us know how to take this forward?

Yours sincerely,

Pp

Ramesh and Pratibha Sachdev

Co-founders of GMSP Foundation