



**To/  
Councillor Andrea Lewis  
Cabinet Member for Service  
Transformation (Deputy Leader)**

**BY EMAIL**

cc Cabinet Members

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**SPC/2023-24/10**

**20 February 2024**

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 13 February 2024. It is about the Call-in of Cabinet decision on 18 January 2024 which approved a Customer Charter and Service Standards Framework.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

### **Call in – Customer Charter and Service Standards Framework**

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 13 February 2024 to assist the Committee's consideration of the Call In received on the Customer Charter and Service Standards Framework.

In accordance with Council procedure, the Committee was required to consider the concerns raised in relation to the Cabinet report / decision made on 18 January, which had been 'Called In' by Councillors (lead Councillor, Sandra Joy). The Committee noted that this was a report from the Chair of the Corporate Services & Financial Resilience Service Transformation Committee, having overseen the development of the Charter and Framework, presented to Cabinet for decision.

We heard from Councillor Joy on her concerns, which centred on the timescale of 28 working days that had been agreed for the processing of applications for Free School Meals, i.e. almost six calendar weeks, and adverse impact of the lengthy process on the children and their welfare, which she felt was not consistent with this Council's commitment to the UNCRC and

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Tackling Poverty; and Cabinet not being aware of these concerns despite being raised in advance of decision.

The Committee benefited from a written note provided by the Chief Executive, which explained what the Council is able to do in terms of processing applications for Free School Meals, for the elements within its control, and indicated the intention to make a change to the Service Standards in response to the concern raised. We appreciated your response to the Call In and Committee questions, and the input and advice provided by lead officers, Sarah Lackenby, Head of Digital & Customer Services, and Julian Morgans, Head of Revenues & Benefits, which helped the Committee to better understand the process, and the issues that can arise that may delay confirmation of eligibility, and therefore processing times. We were pleased to hear within this that efforts have already been made to improve processes to maximise the take up of Free School Meals.

We heard why the 28 days timescale was originally set, as many applications for Free School Meals are made jointly with applications for Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Reduction. Decisions on these can often depend on obtaining various pieces of supporting evidence from the applicant, the Department for Work & Pensions and HM Revenue & Customs, and so there is a 28 day timescale for those decisions to reflect that. It was noted that current actual processing times are around 19 days.

We were pleased to hear that applications for free school meals are looked at within 2 or 3 days of receipt and at that point the necessary checks are made with the Department of Education's eligibility checking service to check entitlement. We noted that where the necessary information is obtained from that service to confirm eligibility, or there is evidence already provided to the Council of the qualifying benefit(s), the Council will send an email to the parent / carer confirming entitlement to Free School Meals and also the data team in the Education Department who will update IT systems, so schools are aware. This usually being done the same day that confirmation is obtained, which is good to hear.

We were assured that in most cases, where there is already proof of qualifying benefit provided or where confirmation of eligibility is obtained from the eligibility checking service applications are processed within days, not weeks. However, we noted that where the eligibility checking service cannot provide immediate confirmation of entitlement, there may be delays which are outside the authority's control. For example, when a new claim for Universal Credit is made there will be at least 5 weeks before a decision on that qualifying benefit is made. Also, with the migration of Housing Benefit to Universal Credit more and more checks will need to be conducted with the eligibility checking service in the future and more applications will be subject to a longer wait for a decision.

In conclusion, we agreed with the Chief Executive's advice regarding amending the Service Standard to include the elements that are only within the Council's control, as an improvement on the existing Standard.

### Committee Decision

Following our discussion, **the Committee recommended that the Cabinet decision regarding approval of the Customer Charter & Service Standards Framework be reconsidered, in light of the concern raised, and in line with the Chief Executive's proposed way forward.**

The Committee therefore recommends that the Service Standard for Free School Meals be amended to the following:

Request	When you contact the Council to:	The Council's Commitment to you:	Within the following timescales	Contact Details of this Service:
<b>Education: Free School Meals (FSM)</b>	Make a new application for FSM or tell us about a change in your household circumstances that might affect an existing award of FSM	If you have provided all the information we need <b>and we have been able to obtain confirmation of your eligibility/non-eligibility from DWP/HMRC, we will tell you if you are entitled to FSM</b>	<b>7 working days (of receiving the confirmation)</b>	Web: <a href="#">Free school meals - Swansea</a> Email: <a href="mailto:freeschoolmeals@swansea.gov.uk">freeschoolmeals@swansea.gov.uk</a> Phone: 01792 635353

*(Note - text marked in red indicates changes from the original)*

The change to the above definition and response time will help to make the Council's role and responsibility clearer to residents.

We noted that the Customer Charter and Services Standards Framework was intended to be implemented from 1 April 2024, and having been approved by Cabinet would nevertheless remain a 'living' document that would be subject to updates as deemed necessary at any time. We can see the Cabinet decision on 18 January delegated the Authority to Directors and the relevant Cabinet Member, to make any minor changes to the Standards as appropriate and always in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services & Performance (Joint Deputy Leader of the Council) and yourself. As such, we

were advised that amendments could be made without reference back to a future Cabinet meeting.

Reference was also made in the meeting to approaches in other Council's in the UK suggesting that it is possible to further reduce processing timescales, so Cabinet Member(s) should commit to look at that to explore the potential for further improvement in the Service Standard and perhaps engage the Service Transformation Committee in this work.

### **Your Response**

Although you indicated at the meeting support for and willingness to make the amendment shown above, having been involved in finding a way forward, **the Committee will be grateful if you could formally confirm that the Committee's recommendations will be accepted and actioned. We would be grateful for your response by 12 March 2024.**

A copy of this letter and your response letter will then be published in the agenda of the next available Committee meeting.

Yours sincerely,



**COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK**

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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