

MIDLOTHIAN: School meal debt wiped as cost of living crisis continues

More than £32,000 in unpaid school meal fees have been written off by councillors in Midlothian as they revealed their shock at the levels of poverty in the county.

A report brought before councillors on Tuesday revealed nearly a quarter of children in Midlothian are living in poverty, while 21,000 adults cannot afford to eat one balanced meal a day.

And it highlighted the costs of the school day on families as councillors approved plans to set up new measures to provide support to them.

A council officer told the meeting: "Schools play an important part in reducing the impact of poverty and cost of living through keeping the cost of the school day to a minimum."

But she said more was needed to tackle the issues and proposed, among other things, a school meal debt policy to be drawn up for Midlothian and the current debt of £32,000 outstanding to be written off, which was agreed by councillors.

Council leader Kelly Parry acknowledged that a year had passed since councillors were re-elected and a cross-party cost of living taskforce was established.

She said while many initiatives had been set up and were working, more needed to be done to help people with the ongoing crisis.

Councillor Parry said: "Several charities and organisations have identified that costs relating to the school day remain high as a burden to parents and children alike.

"Writing off the school meal debt would alleviate the financial burden on parents who are already struggling to make ends meet."

The report to councillors included some initial findings from an independent study carried out on behalf of the taskforce into poverty in Midlothian.

Among those figures it was estimated between 17,000 and 21,000 adults cannot afford to turn their heating on to keep their home warm; 21,000 cannot afford to eat balanced meals; 8,000 went hungry due to lack of money in the last month; 8,000 missed a priority payment over the last three months and 16,000 have had their mental health/ health negatively affected.

Councillor Derek Milligan described the findings of the study as 'really alarming'.

He questioned the need for parents to pay for expensive school uniforms producing a receipt from supermarket Sainsburys where a constituent had bought 12 tops for school for a total of £30.

He told the meeting: "The school encourages parents to buy a uniform from one of their agreed companies. The bill she was quoted for six polo shirts and six sweatshirts was £153.

"£153 for the same thing you can buy in Sainsburys for £30 and what do you get on it? A school badge."

Councillor Milligan called for a report to be brought to elected members with views from parent councils and schools about current uniform costs and options.

Councillor Ellen Scott pointed out many schools have uniform exchange schemes and other support available to help families. She said: "I know every school is looking at whether they need to have badges on uniforms and whether it is cheaper to go to Sainsburys or Asda to buy the uniforms."

Councillor Willie McEwen said the report outlining the issues facing many families in the county was shocking.

He said: "I was shocked when we got this report. What really got me was 21,000 people – a quarter of our community – cannot afford to eat one balanced meal a day.

"When we are faced with these figures it is very very challenging and I am very concerned about it."

Councillor Stuart McKenzie added his concerns at the number of children in the county living in poverty.

He said: "For the life of me I cannot believe how a county which gave so much to the industrial revolution and powered so much wealth has children who cannot afford to go to school with food in their tummies. How on earth did we get into that situation?"

Councillors agreed to write off the school meals debt and look at a new policy.

by Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter

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