**FREE SCHOOL MEALS FOR CHILDREN ON SECTION 4**

It came to light in Stockton that one asylum family with a 5 year old child were not getting the vouchers, worth £15 per child, issued in the Easter school holidays, for the temporary extension of free school meals. (as per Government guidance)

The family had only happened to hear about this scheme from another parent in the same situation.

They went to the school to apply, but were told it was up to the local authority, who said it was the school. The ping pong between them went on for a week, and I was asked to intervene.

The Council were adamant that it was up to the school, but there have been problems with the computer systems, and schools did not necessarily know this.

(in this case the family are getting temporary vouchers until the system is set up for it to happen automatically.)

Also the schools do not necessarily know the exact immigration status of a child, so may not know which children are on Section 4.

Both the Council and government guidance are asking the VCSE to inform families. However not only do the VCSE necessarily know who is on S4, most services and communication systems are not working owing to the lockdown. In Stockton, none of the Drop Ins for asylum seekers is able to operate.

Only the Home Office holds the information on who is on S4, and they share this information with Housing Providers, who are not allowed to share it with the Council or schools.

The issue has been raised, via Stockton’s Multi Agency Forum, with Mears. They have been sent the relevant information from both Government and Council.

Mears are now going to inform by text all S4 families in the NE, and follow this up on their regular welfare calls with the families, to ensure they are able to claim.

Mears are also going to extend this to all of their housing portfolio for asylum seekers in the UK.

VCSE everywhere need to be aware of this, and ensure that as far as they are able, the S4 families do receive the free school meal or voucher if the school is not open for them.

The next step is to ensure that this concession in the time of emergency does not end when all schools are back again, but is continued so that S4 families who have less than S95 families to live on continue to get free school meals.