

To: Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning
Decision: 01 July 2021

Purchase of Additional School Holiday Food Vouchers
Assistant Director of Early Help and Communities

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To set out the approach for spending the additional £208,200 of funding provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) under the COVID Local Support Grant (CLSG).
- 1.2 To set out the reasons why the decision must be made under the urgency process.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 **To approve the purchase of supermarket vouchers for all Free School Meal (FSM) eligible children attending Bracknell Forest schools, including equivalent under-fives living in the borough. At the value of £15 per child, per week, for six weeks of the summer holidays.**
- 2.2 **To approve the purchase of supermarket vouchers (using £208,200 of DWP funding and around £7,800 internal funding) through the existing provider, Blackhawk.**
- 2.3 **To make the approval under the urgency process.**

3 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 The council was notified of the extension of this scheme on 21 June 2021 by the DWP. Therefore, the vouchers must be purchased urgently in order to be received by families before the summer holidays. These recommendations allow the council to extend our previous offer of school holiday vouchers to the same cohort of children, using the same process as before, working closely with schools and early years settings. It is expected that these vouchers will support feeding around 2,400 children.

4 Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 The funding provided does not have to be used for school holiday vouchers, although there are specific conditions that the distribution of funding must meet. Therefore, if the recommendations were refused, an alternative could be developed. However, in considering all the options for previous tranches of this funding, it was agreed that supermarket vouchers over the school holiday would be the best use. Discussions with other councils also show that the large majority are choosing to use this additional funding for summer holiday vouchers.

5 Supporting Information

- 5.1 The DWP has provided ringfenced funding to the council for welfare related needs since December 2020. Whilst the initial funding as part of the COVID Winter Grant

Scheme was due to end in April, there have since been multiple extensions to the funding. These extensions have been issued on short notice leaving very little time to adjust the council's approach.

- 5.2 To date, around £300,000 has been spent on vouchers, through the provider Blackhawk. This has funded vouchers to FSM eligible pupils, and equivalent under-fives, for the Christmas holiday, February half term, Easter holiday and May half term.
- 5.3 The announcement of the most recent funding was issued on 21 June 2021 and must be used during the period of 21 June 2021 to 30 September 2021. This additional funding means that the spend will exceed the threshold for needing a key decision (>£400,000).
- 5.4 The announcement of the funding on 21 June 2021 allows only four weeks until the summer holiday starts. Therefore, time does not allow for a competitive tender across other voucher providers. The feedback using Blackhawk as a provider has been positive and therefore maintaining this status quo is recommended within the time limitations. This approach requires a contract standing order waiver which has been prepared.
- 5.5 The existing policy for the Winter Grant Scheme, and subsequent variation, remain relevant to use of the funding under the COVID Local Support Grant in the provision of vouchers for the school holiday.
- 5.6 It is not expected that the DWP will extend this funding any further, as it has been linked to the period of COVID restrictions. The council is developing a number of initiatives to address financial hardship longer term in the borough.

6 Consultation and Other Considerations

Legal Advice

- 6.1 The expenditure under the DWP funding (including previous DWP grants for this scheme) will remain below the threshold which would trigger application of the requirement to carry out a competitive procurement exercise under the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (as this type of contract is regarded as a "Light Touch" Service for which there is a higher threshold of £663,540).

In terms of the Council's internal governance requirements, the Contract Standing Orders will apply as the proposal concerns a grant to a private company. The Contract Standing Orders would ordinarily require a competitive procurement exercise to be carried out and a Strategic Procurement Plan used to obtain Executive Member approval.

A waiver will need to be obtained from the relevant Director in respect of the above, noting that rather than a full SPP being presented for Executive Member approval, the waiver will allow for this briefer form of report to be used for such purpose.

Financial Advice

- 6.2 This expenditure is funded by a ring-fenced grant which can be used for the purposes set out in the report. The late timing of the grant determination necessitates the action set out above and is in line with financial regulations. Blackhawk has

proved to be a reliable supplier and is an effective and efficient means of delivering this support.

Other Consultation Responses

- 6.3 Members representatives as part of the Welfare Steering Group have reviewed the proposal for the allocation of this additional funding and endorse the proposal. Officers across the council have also been involved in shaping these plans through the Financial Hardship group. The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny commission has been consulted as part of activating the urgency process.

Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.4 An initial equalities impact screening was completed when the scheme first started in December. This has been reviewed and is attached as Appendix A to this report.

Strategic Risk Management Issues

- 6.5 Following the same process as before to issue holiday vouchers aims to minimise the risk compared to making the purchase through a different provider.

Background Papers

n/a

Contact for further information

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