

To: Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning
Decision: 06 October 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 initial approach for spending the funding provided by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) under the Household Support Grant.
- 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 the one week of October Half Term holidays.**
- 2.2 **To approve the purchase of supermarket vouchers (using approximately £38,000 of 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 new Household Support Grant on 30 September 2021. The detailed guidance is yet to be issued and in anticipation, the vouchers must be purchased urgently in order to be received by families before the October Half Term (25-29 October). 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 food costs for around 2,500 children.

4 Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 The funding provided does not have to be used for October half term vouchers, although there are likely to be specific conditions that the distribution of funding must meet. Therefore, if these recommendations are refused, an alternative proposal 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 a suitable use. Discussions with other councils also show that many, including neighbours such as Wokingham, are choosing to fund October Half Term 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, including through the later named COVID Local Support Grant. It is

understood that the Household Support Grant is a further extension of these themes. These extensions have been issued on short notice leaving very little time to adjust the council's approach. Councils had been advised that there was not expected to be any further funding after the Local Support Grant ended on 30 September 2021.

- 5.2 To date, around £500,000 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, May half term and the summer holidays.
- 5.3 The announcement of the most recent funding was issued on 30 September 2021. We recommend this funding is used for supermarket vouchers. Therefore, this total spend with Blackhawk will exceed the threshold for needing a key decision (>£400,000).
- 5.4 The announcement of the funding on 30 September 2021 allows only three weeks until the half term 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 for the Local Support Grant, remain relevant under this extension. A further policy amendment will be made to reflect the latest grant conditions and approach for the Winter.

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 endorsed the approach to school holiday vouchers. 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 again 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.
- 6.6 The council recognises that until full guidance is issued, providing school holiday vouchers could fall outside of the scope. However, in order to provide the vouchers, the purchase and distribution must be imminent and it is not clear when the detailed guidance will be received. The vouchers could be carried forward to Christmas, or alternative funding sourced if required.

Background Papers

n/a

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