

**To: Executive Member Key Decision
4 May 2022**

**Purchase of Additional School Holiday Food Vouchers May Half Term
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 Fund extension.

2 Recommendation(s)

- 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 one week of May Half Term holidays.**
- 2.2 **To approve the purchase of supermarket vouchers, or direct payment to schools as pre-agree (using approximately £42,000 of funding) through the existing contract holder Blackhawk incentives.**

3 Reasons for Recommendations

- 3.1 The council was notified of the extension to the Household Support fund on 1 April 2022. The vouchers must be purchased urgently to be received by families before the May Half Term (30 May – 3 June). These recommendations allow the council to extend the 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 2,800 children.
- 3.2 Full proposals for the Household Support Fund will be discussed and presented to Executive in May. However, this would not be in time for the May half term period, hence the Executive Member decision requested here.

4 Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 The funding provided does not have to be used for May half term vouchers, although there are specific conditions that the distribution of funding must meet including at least one third of the funding being allocated to families with children. Therefore, if these recommendations are refused, an alternative proposal could be developed. However, in considering all the options for previous tranches of this funding since December 2020, it was agreed that supermarket vouchers over the school holiday would be a suitable use.

5 Supporting Information

- 5.1 Context of Funding

The Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) has provided ringfenced funding to Local Authorities for welfare needs since December 2020. The scheme was extended multiple times with the latest due to end on 31st March 2022. It has since been extended for a further six months to support individuals hardest hit by the cost-of-living crisis.

5.2 The council has been given a further £555,468.03 of funding from DWP to help support vulnerable households through the rise in energy bills and the cost of living. The money is available to the council from the 1 April 2022 and must be spent by 30 September 2022. Local authorities have discretion on exactly how the funding should be spent within the scope set out in the guidance and can deliver this scheme through a variety of routes including, through direct provision of food, delivering vouchers to households or issuing grants to third parties. The funding can cover reasonable admin costs.

5.3 Criteria of Funding

The guidance states that at least one third of the funding must be spent on families with children and at least one third on pension age individuals, the remaining should be used for other vulnerable households. The funding should primarily be used for immediate food, energy, and water related costs.

6 Consultation and Other Considerations

Legal Advice (Claire Bradford – Contracts and Procurement Lawyer)

6.1 Although £735,000 has in total been spent with Blackhawk on food vouchers, the spend which is relevant for the purposes of this report is the spend which has been incurred pursuant to the new contract procured under a framework and governance process (approved by the Executive) which was followed in November 2021 (as initially some of that £735,000 spend was made under separate governance arrangements). I understand the spend to date under the *current* contract is in the region of £430,000 (such spend has been authorised by the Executive as per the below).

A Strategic Procurement Plan dated 16 November 2021, which was approved by the Executive, authorised the following: *to delegate the award of the contract, based on the quotations received and the specification as initially set out in 2.6 to the Executive Director for People for the maximum new contract value of up to £1,800,000.....*

The contract will allow a maximum spend of £1,800,000 over 3 years to allow the possibility of further grants being awarded by the Government in subsequent financial years. On that basis the contract allows for an annual purchase of £600,000 over 3 years.

This contract was awarded under a framework (the procurement implications of which were addressed in the report to the Executive), and full Executive approval was given of the SPP and report. The client team have confirmed that the order form which forms the current contract refers to anticipated annual expenditure of £600,000 over a 3 year period.

As such, the further spend of £39,000 falls within expenditure which has already been authorised by the Executive and does not exceed the expenditure stated on the order form (so ordinarily would simply require Executive Director sign off).

However, it is noted that this sum of £39,000 has come from a new tranche of DWP funding (which itself exceeds £500,000) and it is appropriate that there is oversight of the decision to use the funds for food vouchers under the existing contract with Blackhawk rather than to spend such grant funds on other permitted uses.

Financial Advice

6.2

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.

Equalities Impact Assessment

6.4 An initial equalities impact screening was completed when the household support fund was first introduced and has been updated in line with the new guidelines and attached as Appendix A.

Strategic Risk Management Issues

6.5 Following the same process as previously to issue supermarket vouchers aims to minimise any risks compared to using a new process.

Climate Change Implications

6.6 The recommendations in Section 2 above are expected to:

Have no impact on emissions of CO₂.

The reasons the Council believes that this will have no impact on emissions are that the vouchers are purchased and redeemed through an online platform.

Health & Wellbeing Considerations

6.7 The scope of the funding is to support those with welfare needs therefore the recommendations aim to directly support individuals with financial help in turn helping to reduce the negative impacts financial difficulties has on well-being.

Background Papers

N/A

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