

Report to the Chief Executive

22 November 2021



Subject: Use of Household Support Fund for Children Eligible for Free School Meals

Report of: Sue Harrison, Director Education and Skills

Relevant Cabinet Members: Cllr Jayne Francis, Cllr Sharon Thompson

Relevant O &S Chair(s): Cllr Narinder Kaur Kooner

Report author: Lisa Fraser, Assistant Director Education and Early Years

Are specific wards affected?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No – All wards affected
If yes, name(s) of ward(s):		
Is this a key decision?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
If relevant, add Forward Plan Reference:		
Is the decision eligible for call-in?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
If relevant, provide exempt information paragraph number or reason if confidential :		

1 Executive Summary

In a draft letter dated 6 October 2021 from the 'Head of Local Authority, Partnership, Engagement and Delivery' (LA-PED) division, Birmingham City Council has been allocated £12.791m from the Department for Work and Pensions in respect of the Household Support Fund.

- 1.1 The Household Support Fund seeks to help vulnerable households with essentials over the coming months as the country continues its recovery from the pandemic.

- 1.2 The Household Support Fund will be distributed by councils, who can directly help those who need it most. Under the terms of the fund, at least 50% of the total funding must be spent on families with children. Suggestions made by government for use of this fund include for small grants to meet daily needs such as food, clothing, and utilities.
- 1.3 In October, a Chief Officer report approved the use of £1.220m of the fund for one week of supermarket vouchers for families eligible for free school meals (FSM) during the October 2021 half-term school holiday (25 – 29 October 2021).
- 1.4 This report seeks approval for use of the fund for vouchers for the Christmas holidays at a cost of £2.500m.
- 1.5 A draft plan of how the £12.791m will be spent was developed jointly by the Education & Skills and Adults directorates and submitted to the Department for Work and Pensions at the end of October 2021. This plan included the issuing of vouchers for the Christmas holidays.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 For the Chief Executive to take the urgent decision to approve the proposal above that free school meal vouchers can be ordered for eligible families for the Christmas holiday through Sodexo.
- 2.2 For the Chief Executive to delegate responsibility for the delivery of this to the Director Education and Skills, in conjunction with the Chief Finance Officer via a Single Contractor Negotiation.

3 Background

- 3.1 Vouchers will be provided for the 76,500 eligible school age children, 8,000 eligible Early Years children (including eligible two year olds), and 3,000 children and young people at post-16 and attending colleges.
- 3.2 Two weeks of vouchers will be provided for the Christmas holidays.
- 3.3 This is more vouchers than were ordered in previous rounds due to the ongoing increase in the number of eligible children we have seen since the beginning of the pandemic. Eligible two year olds will also be included in this allocation.
- 3.4 Despite the broader reforms on child poverty, unemployment has risen significantly since the start of the pandemic. Birmingham's claimant count unemployment is now 25,865 higher than it was in February 2020 prior to the first lockdown; an increase of 53% in claimant numbers. Birmingham's claimant unemployment rate stands at 13.8%; above both the West Midlands (7.7%) and the UK (6.1%) rates. The government-funded furlough scheme has ended, as has the £20 uplift to Universal Credit.
- 3.5 Supermarket vouchers have been provided to eligible families for school holiday periods since the start of the pandemic and have provided vital support to address

the issue of holiday hunger. Various funding streams have been used to purchase the vouchers, most recently the government's COVID Local Support Grant.

- 3.6 Using the Household Support Fund to provide free school meal vouchers during holidays will alleviate exceptional pressure on families and prevent over-reliance on emergency services such as children's social care in the longer term.
- 3.7 Birmingham has used Sodexo Exchange several times to deliver free school meals vouchers for holiday periods and they have significant experience of delivering a voucher scheme for Birmingham.

4 Options Considered and Recommended Proposal

- 4.1 Do nothing now. The impact of this will be to exacerbate food poverty and mental health issues within our city.
- 4.2 Preferred option - organise vouchers for the Christmas holidays. This will ensure that vulnerable Birmingham families are supported through the fund with food costs during the school holiday.

5 Consultation

- 5.1 This proposal was discussed at informal Cabinet on Wednesday 10th November where Cabinet indicated their approval for providing vouchers for the Christmas holidays.
- 5.2 Group Leaders have been consulted and Cabinet Members have been briefed.

6 Risk Management

7 Compliance Issues:

- 7.1 **How are the recommended decisions consistent with the City Council's priorities, plans and strategies?**

- 7.1.1 Outcome 2, Priority 1: We will improve protection of vulnerable children and young people (including those with Special Educational Needs and Disability).

- 7.2 **Legal Implications**

- 7.2.1 Under Part B6, Para 6.6 of BCC's constitution the Chief Executive can make an urgent executive decision, following consultation with the Leaders of the Political Groups. The constitution states that "an urgent decision is defined as one which could not reasonably have been foreseen or anticipated prior to the most recent Cabinet meeting". BCC has been allocated a grant of £12,791m from Government in relation to Household Support Fund, of which the Council wishes to spend £2,500,000 to assist the most vulnerable families during the Christmas break, ordering and distributing vouchers to schools as soon as possible ahead of the holiday. The legal view is this decision meets the definition of urgent under Part B6, Para 6.6. of BCC's constitution.

8 Financial Implications

- 8.1 In October, a Chief Officer report approved the use of £1.220m of the Household Support Fund for one week of supermarket vouchers for families eligible for free school meals (FSM) during the October 2021 half-term school holiday (25 – 29 October 2021).
- 8.2 This report seeks approval for further use of the fund for vouchers for the Christmas holidays at a cost of £2.500m.
- 8.3 The total Household Support Fund grant allocation for Birmingham City Council is £12.791m.
- 8.4 In the draft spending plan submitted to the Department for Work and Pensions at the end of October 2021 a total of £7.285m was included to provide food support to children eligible for Free School Meals during school holidays. The cost of the Christmas holiday vouchers would come from this allocation.

9 Procurement Implications (if required)

- 9.1 If approved, BCC will place a bulk voucher order with Sodexo for multiple digital codes to send to parents via schools. Schools will distribute voucher codes to parents digitally, or redeem on their behalf for those without internet access at local supermarkets.

10 Human Resources Implications (if required)

- 10.1 The Education and Skills Data Team will oversee the process.

11 Public Sector Equality Duty

- 11.1 This is an urgent response to ensure that our most disadvantaged children in the city are supported and protected from food poverty during the Christmas holidays.