

# Birmingham City Council

## Report to the Chief Executive

15 October 2021



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

**Report of:** Kevin Crompton, 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

- 1.1 On 6 October 2021 the DWP confirmed that Birmingham City Council has been allocated £12,791,135.04 from the Household Support Fund.
- 1.2 The Household Support Fund seeks to help vulnerable households with essentials over the coming months as the country continues its recovery from the pandemic.
- 1.3 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.

- 1.4 This report seeks urgent approval to use £1,220,000 of this fund for supermarket vouchers for families eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) during the October 2021 half-term school holiday (25 – 29 October 2021).
- 1.5 If approved, Birmingham will secure an immediate order for free school meals vouchers through Sodexo for eligible families for the half-term school holiday period that is fast approaching.
- 1.6 Further reports will be produced to discuss future arrangements for Christmas 2021 and February 2022 school holidays.
- 1.7 Adults Social Care are working on plans for how the remainder of the fund will be used.

## **2 Recommendations**

That Chief Executive, under the powers set out at Para. 6.6 of the Constitution:

- 2.1 Approves the ordering of free school meal vouchers for eligible families for the October half-term period through Sodexo.
- 2.2 Delegates responsibility for the delivery of this to the Interim Director Education and Skills, in conjunction with the Chief Finance Officer via a Single Contractor Negotiation.

## **3 Background**

- 3.1 We will order 76,000 vouchers for school age children, 3,500 vouchers for Early Years, and the equivalent of 3,000 for children and young people post-16 and attending colleges.
- 3.2 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.
- 3.3 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.
- 3.4 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.

- 3.5 Using the Household Support Fund to provide free school meal vouchers during the half-term holiday will alleviate exceptional pressure on families and prevent over-reliance on emergency services such as children's social care in the longer term.
- 3.6 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 and not make use of the Household Support Fund allocation we have received for the half-term holiday. Sufficient funding is available to arrange vouchers for October half-term, Christmas holidays and February half-term within the 50% that must be spent on families with children.
- 4.2 Preferred option - organise vouchers for October half term. This will ensure that vulnerable Birmingham families are supported through the fund with food costs during the school holiday.

#### **5 Consultation**

- 5.1 The Leader of the Council and Group Leaders have approved this proposal for October half-term.
- 5.2 The Cabinet Members have been informed of this proposal.

#### **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 £12,791,135.04 from Government in relation to Household Support Fund, of which the Council wishes to spend £1,220,000 to assist the most vulnerable families during half term, which takes place in the next two weeks, however food vouchers need to be

ordered and distributed ASAP. 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 On the 6 October 2021 the Government Grant for Household Support was confirmed and Birmingham City Council has been allocated £12,791,135.04 from the DWP. Grants will be paid to LA's in arrears following submission of returns.
- 8.2 The grant is to support households with essential costs – food, energy and water, and housing costs where no other support route is available.
- 8.3 At least 50% of the total allocated to each LA must be spent on families with children, remainder for vulnerable households without children and single people. The proposal in this report meets the criteria of this grant.
- 8.4 The cost of the vouchers for distribution during October 2021 half term is £1,220,000.
- 8.5 The October 2021 half term vouchers are as follows :- 76,000 vouchers for school age children, 3,500 vouchers for Early Years, and the equivalent of 3,000 for children and young people post-16 and attending colleges.
- 8.6 Vouchers are in £15 denominations per week for school age children, £10 for Early Years children (for one week) and £15 (for two weeks). We will reimburse colleges on the same basis as the school-age children.
- 8.7 Due to the way we fund Early Years children aged three and four attending settings for their Early Education Entitlement of 15 hours per week the Early Years voucher value is different for one and two weeks.
- 8.8 Approval of this funding is in compliance with The Council's Financial Regulations section 1.8 for the Allocations of Revenue Grant and Ring-Fenced related reserves
- 8.9 **Procurement Implications (if required)**
  - 8.9.1 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.
- 8.10 **Human Resources Implications (if required)**
  - 8.10.1 Education and Skills Data Team will oversee the process
- 8.11 **Public Sector Equality Duty**

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