

This record relates to urgent decisions taken by Chief Officers under the Scheme of Delegation to Officers Paragraph 7(2).

RECORD OF URGENT DECISION TAKEN BY Nigel Manvell, Chief Finance Officer

SUBJECT: Allocation of the Household Support Fund for payment of vouchers during the Easter School Holiday 2024 to Free School Meal eligible children

CONTACT OFFICERS: Paul Ross-Dale, Welfare, Revenues & Business Support Manager

REASONS FOR URGENCY AND WHY NOT PRACTICABLE TO HOLD A SPECIAL MEETING OR URGENCY SUB-COMMITTEE:

The government announced in the Spring Budget a new 6-month Household Support Fund for 2024-25 at the same funding level as previous tranches and the council therefore expects to receive £2.140m for 2024-25 to be used by 30 September 2024. The Local Authority must decide how to allocate the fund in its entirety and a report to full Council on 28 March 2024 is in development to seek approval for allocation of the fund. One of the key areas of funding is expected to be continuation of providing food vouchers for children eligible for Free School Meals during school holidays.

An Urgency Decision is required because fund details were only announced on 6 March 2024 and in order to provide vouchers to families for the Easter Holiday, the council's payment provider, Huggg Ltd, needs to be issued with instructions and payment by Tuesday 19 March at the very latest in order to distribute vouchers in good time to all eligible families and their children. In practice, the funding required for Easter, approximately £285,000, will come from a mixture of available 2023-24 Household Support Fund (approx. £117,000 and the new 2024-25 Household Support Fund (£168,000). It is the latter for which an urgency decision is required as allocations from the 2024-25 HSF have not previously been approved by committee as required.

As noted earlier, further allocations of 2024-25 HSF will be brought forward to full Council on 28 March 2024 for approval, which is expected to include provision for further school holiday vouchers together with broader community support including emergency food provision.

DETAILS AND OUTCOME OF CONSULTATION WITH THE CHAIR/DEPUTY CHAIR OF RELEVANT COMMITTEE:

The Chair of Strategy, Finance & City Regeneration Committee (Cllr Sankey) was sent the Urgent Decision for approval and comments on 14 March 2024. The chair gave their approval on 15 March 2024.

DATE OF CONSULTATION WITH CHAIR/DEPUTY CHAIR:

14 March 2024

THE DECISION:

To approve the allocation of £168,000 from the 2024-25 Household Support Fund to provide food vouchers (at £15 per voucher as previously) to the families of children eligible for Free School Meals for the Easter 2024 school holiday period (2 weeks).

REASONS FOR DECISION:

The council's allocation of the Household Support Fund in 2023-24 is £4.280m and expected to be £2.140m for the 2024-25 Household Support Fund (to be used between 1 April and 30 September 2024).

For previous HSF allocations, a broad discretion has been conferred on local authorities in spending the funds with some limitations. The grant must be allocated to provide support with the costs of food, energy (for heating, lighting and cooking), water (for household purposes, including sewerage) and other essential living needs, including emergency housing related costs, in accordance with the Scheme guidance. In this council, in common with many, it has been used to provide a Local Discretionary Social Fund, Discretionary CTR hardship funds, vouchers for low income families during school holidays and distribution to various emergency food providers and other community and advice organisations.

At this time, detailed guidance for the 2024-25 Household Support Fund has not been issued but as the sum allocated is exactly the same as previous tranches, no changes to the guidance are expected or have been indicated by the government's statement.

The original proposal to offer vouchers to low income families during school holidays was developed in collaboration with Families, Children & Learning, Revenues & Benefits, and representatives from Community Works and the Moneyworks / Advice Matters partnerships. It is still considered by partners to be one of the most successful ways to deploy HSF as these families often have multiple needs and vulnerabilities and it is key to addressing child and food poverty. School holidays are known to be particularly challenging periods for low income households.

The following allocation is to enable the Easter School Holiday 2024 voucher provision to go ahead due to the need to make payment over to the council's voucher provider, Huggg Ltd, by 19 March 2024 at the latest in order to distribute the vouchers effectively and in time for the start of the Easter Holiday period (1 April). The payment will be funded by a mixture of the current HSF 2023-24 and HSF 2024-25 as follows:

Funding Source for Easter Holiday Vouchers	Amount	Explanation and notes
HSF 2023-24	£117,000	Already allocated
HSF 2024-25	£168,000	Requires this Urgency Decision by the CFO
TOTAL	£285,000	

DETAILS OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED:

There are no alternative options under consideration for this Urgency Decision. However, it should be noted that the allocated amount under this Urgency Decision represents only a small percentage (8%) of the overall fund, expected to be £2.140m, and therefore full Council will have the opportunity to consider allocation of the majority of the remaining funding.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS:

The Council has the power to allocate this proposed additional funding for the uses described in this report. The Chief Finance Officer has the necessary delegations under the Scheme of Delegation to Officers (Part 6 of the Council's Constitution) to use Urgency Powers after consultation with the Chair of Strategy, Finance & City Regeneration Committee. The record of the Officer Decision taken will be reported to full Council on 28th March for information.

Lawyer Consulted: Elizabeth Culbert

Date: 14.03.24

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

The funding announced in the Spring Budget for the 2024-25 HSF was at the same level as previously and therefore the council expects to receive an allocation £2.140m to be used within 6 months. Although guidance has not yet been issued, the eligible areas of spend are expected to be identical to the 2023-24 Household Support Fund given that the sum provided is identical to previous tranches. The grant is required to be utilised by 30 September 2024 and therefore deployment will need to be relatively quick to maximise the use of the funding starting with the proposed issuing of vouchers for Easter School Holidays as set out above.

Finance Office Consulted: James Hengeveld *Date: 14 March 2024*

DATE OF NEXT COMMITTEE MEETING TO WHICH THE DECISION WILL BE REPORTED:

Full Council on 28 March 2024.

Date:	14 March 2024
Signed: Chief Finance Officer	
Logged by Democratic Services Officer for Annual Report: Name: Anthony Soyinka	Date: 28 March 2024

