

**Report to:** Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change

**Date of meeting:** 2 March 2026

**By:** Chief Operating Officer

**Title:** Award of the School Meals Catering contract for Primary, Special Educational Needs and Disability, Secondary Schools and Academies

**Purpose:** To seek approval for the award of the School Meals Catering contract

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**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The Lead Member is recommended to:

- 1) note the work undertaken regarding the future provision of school meals in East Sussex as set out in this report; and
- 2) approve that the contract is awarded to the highest scoring bidder as set out at paragraph 2.6 of the supporting exempt report later in the agenda.

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**1. Background**

1.1 The Council's Property team have successfully procured various property related key services to schools which include cleaning, waste and recycling as well as grounds maintenance contracts. These contracts were reprocured in 2023 with commencement dates in Spring 2024. This report focuses on the letting of a new further contract for the provision of schools' meal catering as the current contract expires in August 2026. The school meals catering contract is fully funded by Primary, Secondary and Academy schools. Local Maintained schools are invoiced directly by the contractor, but Academies are invoiced via East Sussex County Council (ESCC) and then recharged by the Contracts Management Team.

1.2 The school meals catering contract has been in place since 2019. The current provider is Chartwells, which in the final year of the contract in 2025 caters for 136 schools. This has seen a slight decrease from 146 schools catered for at the time of the contract award in 2019, therefore, the demand for school meals buy back has remained relatively stable. The contract has largely performed well and has weathered some significant disruption during this time. This includes school closures during COVID, food supply instability and higher inflation during 2022/23, and the Department for Education (DfE) funded portion of the school meal not keeping in line with actual trading conditions to manage the contract.

1.3 There is a small ESCC Contract Property team, with costs being recovered via an annual management fee to schools, which is levied. The Contracts team provide support services for schools that use the catering contract and are the main point of contact for schools and academies. Through auditing, monitoring and engagement, they work closely with the contract provider to deliver a partnership approach to support schools. Collectively, school management fees recover the cost for the following services:

- School kitchen equipment - servicing, repairing, and replacing
- General services – including auditing system
- ESCC Property Contract catering team

- Service to Schools contribution
- Food waste collections

1.4 As part of an early consideration for a future service provision, there was engagement with the Council's Children's Services Department (CSD) via an Education and a 'food for life' working group to get their views about how the organisation could or should support a school meal service to children in East Sussex. CSD are supportive of ongoing service provision of school meals, due to increased food poverty and a need to ensure every child matters. Feedback, via a survey, was also collated and considered from participating schools.

## 2 Supporting information

2.1 The Property contract team have historically secured a healthy buy back for schools and academies over the current contract term (2019-present) one of which is in West Sussex. In total, 136 schools and academies buy into the school meals service. This includes maintained schools who have converted to academies. Furthermore, there is potential for an increase in the number of children qualifying for free school meals (FSM) in the next 2 to 3 years due to wider economic pressures. Due to a Central Government increase in National Insurance employer contributions, there was an additional cost associated with this contract from April 2025; however, this is now included in the overall meal price for the new contract.

2.2 The current school meals contract has historically performed well, with consistent performance and 100% of schools scoring 4 or 5 (out of a possible 5 score) against the overall contract performance via key performance indicators (KPI) and contract monitoring. In addition to this, the contract is monitored quarterly via a performance RAG (Red, Amber, Green) rating tracker, in line with other Soft Facilities Management (FM) contracted services.

### Options considered prior to procurement

2.3 Option 1 **Providing the service inhouse** – this is not a viable proposition for this service unless the Council was to establish a large in-house facilities management service.

2.4 Option 2 - **Procure separate contracts for Primary and Secondary Schools** – This would not offer economies of scale and would therefore not be considered to successfully deliver the service across the county with value for money and service delivery at the forefront. Primary, Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and Secondary schools have varied meal requirements with specific dietary needs, so having a "one school" contract provides economies of scale and robust continuity of service delivery.

2.5 Option 3 – **Don't reprocure the provision**. ESCC education service support the school meal provision so there is consistency, value for money and good choice of school meals. Food Poverty in the county is addressed via this method, ensuring all children receive a nourishing meal, in line with Government guidelines.

2.6 Option 4 - **Procure a new contract for an agreed term** - This is the recommended option to ensure continuation of the service delivery, which is successful and preferred by schools and Academies while continuing to offer value for money and a healthy and nutritious menu. This also allows the Council to explore and interact with potential providers and gauge their interest via market engagement and requests for clarity. This proved to be a great help in scoping and understanding the potential of the service delivery.

2.7 Option 5 - **Accessing a schools meals framework** – the current contracted school meal price has remained stable and competitive when taken in comparison to other local county school meal prices, given the type of meal provision the contract serves. Neighbouring local authorities do not deliver the same service model as ESSC. This makes joining a framework less viable due to the size and requirements of the ESSC contract. Frameworks in this category provide limited flexibility and would not provide the bespoke service, added value and the specific environmental and social value that this contract requires. The Eastern Shires Purchasing Organisation (ESPO) is the most well established framework but, on investigation this does not appear to offer the Council any additional advantages or efficiencies over any of the other viable options. It is likely this may also limit the ability of the Council to bespoke requirements and leverage social value.

2.8 Option 4 was the agreed upon route to market, allowing for the service delivery model to continue and for the bespoke contract specification to be met by bidders. Market engagement was held with contract providers as part of the procurement process to provide greater certainty and assurance of value for money and quality.

#### Key points during procurement

2.9 The success of the current contract is due to consistent contract management which focusses on efficiency, environmental impact, value for money and good service levels. For the new contract, there will be expanded contract management arrangements to ensure additional control and monitoring of contract and KPIs. Contract management meetings will continue to focus on wider climate change outcomes in line with goals that the organisation is pursuing as well as added value for schools.

2.10 The Property and Procurement teams have ensured that key factors were built into the procurement timeline. Critical pre-procurement activities included in the timeline were soft market testing, supplier engagement, engagement with schools to collate feedback and in accordance with the Procurement Act 2023, the procurement process followed the prescribed requirements for the evaluation of tenders at the Invitation to Tender (ITT) stage. All submissions were assessed against the published evaluation criteria to ensure a fair, transparent, and proportionate assessment. To be clear that the contract will be fully operational in August 2026, a period of engagement took place with schools and academies to ensure feedback was gathered and critical information was recognised ahead of contract specification, evaluation and award. A contract management plan will be created and monitored during the lifespan of the contract, as will a risk register in addition to the standard contract management tools used by the Property contracts team.

2.11 The Council seeks to support its ambitions to become net zero, by 2050 at the latest and this is set out in the [East Sussex County Council Climate Emergency Plan 2025-2030](#). Under Section 6 of the Plan, it seeks to focus on procurement of services and how they can reduce carbon emissions. This is known as reducing Scope 3 emissions. The contract is currently one of the Council's Top 10 contracts regarding Scope 3 emissions. Wider sustainability impacts have also been addressed within the procurement and contract, such as food production and supply, food waste and use of energy and resources, such as water. This contract will fully support the Council's climate change commitments, and it was specified that tenders should have a contract focused climate and carbon reduction plan that aligns with ESSC's. Property contracts team will also continue to work with food partnership groups and Procurement colleagues to drive down Scope 3 emissions in relation to this contract.

2.12 Delivering on the government's manifesto commitment to ensure state primary schools offer free breakfast clubs to all pupils, DfE is starting a national roll out of free breakfast clubs from April 2026. A further 2,000 new schools will join the 750 schools already successfully delivering free breakfast clubs across the country. While some schools choose to self-deliver this service, this was

included in the winning bidder's submission and if the contract is awarded to the winning bidder, will be further supported and explored during the contract lifecycle.

### Award of new Contract (TBC)

2.13 In accordance with the Procurement Act 2023, the procurement process followed the prescribed requirements for the evaluation of tenders at the Invitation to Tender (ITT) stage. All submissions were assessed against the published evaluation criteria to ensure a fair, transparent, and proportionate assessment (Appendix 1). There were 3 bids submitted and, following a period of request for questions (RFQ) and a period allowing ESCC to ask for clarification on certain answers submitted, evaluation of submissions and a period of moderation took place in January 2026. The bid criteria were based on 60% quality and 40% price.

2.14 The new school meals catering contract will run for an initial period of 5 years, with an optional extension for a further 2 years, based on performance, quality and value for money. The decision to potentially extend after the first 5 years will be governed by the contract management monitoring during the initial term and will reflect on KPI performance, value for money, added value and feedback from schools and Education colleagues.

2.15 Strong contract management will record performance from the mobilisation phase to the proposed extension, and will provide a robust overview of contract performance, carbon reduction and climate change goals progression, innovation via the provider, value for money and overall contract delivery.

2.16 Regular feedback sessions will be held via school bursars and annual Service to Schools conferences to get valuable feedback on the contract and the delivery of this critical service. Monthly and quarterly management meetings will continue between the Property contract team and supplier to ensure the contract is performing efficiently, and in line with the contract specification. A risk register will also be put in place, along with a detailed contract management plan to monitor and manage the lifecycle of this new contract.

## **3 Conclusions and reasons for recommendations**

3.1 There is a consistent requirement for the school meals contract to deliver a high-quality bespoke menu, whilst continuing to provide schools and academies with value for money and a high level of service delivery and support. This standard is met by the highest scoring bidder. The Lead Member is therefore recommended to approve the award of contract to the highest scoring provider, noting that a full competitive procurement exercise was undertaken and bids were scored against the evaluation criteria.

### **ROS PARKER Chief Operating Officer**

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### **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

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