



Local authority responses to COVID-19 in relation to Catering services.

This briefing is provided to all APSE member authorities but will be of particular interest to those officers responsible for Catering services.

Key Issues:

With the onset of ever more stringent measures to control the spread of the coronavirus, local authorities are having to implement pre-prepared business continuity plans and prioritise the level of services they provide.

This short briefing provides the most up-to-date information as to how these plans are being implemented and service priorities decided with regards to Catering services.

1. Background

APSE has canvassed members to ascertain how local authority catering services are being affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

From the responses APSE has received to date, it is apparent that the majority are referring to pre-prepared Business Continuity Plans (BCP's) and there is a good deal of commonality across the UK with regards to the changes to delivery either implemented or ready to be implemented should the need arise.

Following the government announcement that schools would be closed from Friday 20 March for all pupils except the children of [key workers](#) and vulnerable children that cannot access any other safe childcare, local authorities have had to implement plans to provide those eligible for a free school meal at very short notice.

Responses from local authorities with regard to the plans that councils have in place can be categorised as the following:-

- Providing food for children eligible for free school meals
- Provision of meals for the children of key workers attending school

Detailed below is a summary of the key points that local authorities have raised regarding the plans that they have put in place.

2. Providing a meal for children eligible for free school meals.

(i) Packed lunches

The vast majority of councils responding advised they would be providing a packed lunch that could be collected from the school entrance, with arrangements being put in place to comply with the social distancing guidance. The most common of responses advised that these packed lunches would include, a sandwich, a piece of fruit, and a drink.

(ii) Weekly food bags

A handful of authorities have advised that they would provide a food bag containing a weeks' worth of food. The purpose stated for providing it on a weekly basis was to reduce the requirement for daily visits to a pick-up point. There are two types of weekly food bags being provided:-

1. A bag containing items for lunch, e.g. a loaf of bread, cheese triangles, cucumber, five pieces of fruit, and a tin of tuna or beans.
2. A bag containing ingredients such as pasta, wraps, vegetables, tinned fruit, etc. A tin opener and recipe cards for a suggested menu.

(iii) Voucher schemes

Some authorities are providing shopping vouchers equivalent to the Free School Meal Allowance within their area. So for example one is providing a 'Farm Foods' voucher to the value of a ten day allowance as this can be pre-paid by the authority and based on £1.90 a day over ten days the pre-purchase is for £20.00.

3. Provision of meals for children attending school

It is clear from the responses received that how the children who are in school are catered for will be dependent to a large degree on the arrangements implemented at a local level, the number of children requiring a meal and the number of staff available to prepare the food.

(i) Packed Lunches

Some of the respondents reported that they will be providing a packed lunch for the children of key workers as this would reduce the produce, skills and time required to prepare the food which would mitigate the impact from shortages in the supply chain and a reduced number of staff.

(ii) Hot Meal

A minority of respondent reported that they will be providing a hot meal for the pupils remaining at school. However, it is clear that this will be a much-reduced service, with just one meal option such as soup and a sandwich and the reasons stated for this approach include the fact that it will reduce the produce, skills and the time required to prepare the food which would mitigate the impact from shortages in the supply chain and a reduced number of staff.

Other plans include only providing a hot meal at the main feeder school in the area and preparing food at one kitchen and distributing to the schools requiring it.

Where a hot meal is being provided the catering service is implementing additional processes to minimise the potential of spreading the virus. Examples of this include, providing wrapped cutlery, additional cleaning of touchpoints and no contact deliveries e.g. the person delivering leaves the delivery at an agreed delivery door, maintains two metre distance and awaits for the catering assistance to collect the delivery.

4. Civic Catering

As would be expected with the current government guidance, councils are reporting that they have ceased providing civic catering, which includes take away services such as the kiosks in parks and staff canteens. The main reason stated is to protect staff and the public, and that the service is deemed as not being a priority. One respondent advised that these staff would be re-deployed were possible to support other council priorities where practical.

5. Other issues

Although councils are now implementing their Business Continuity Plans, concerns have been expressed in relation to ensuring children with allergens are protected and the children who are in most need receive the food that is available, especially when providing a packed lunch for pick up from a central hub or providing a meal from an alternative site than their school.

APSE Comment

The UK and local authority services are certainly facing difficult times. Not only are local authorities dealing with austerity measures and changing public demands, but we now face the biggest challenge since the Second World War in relation to meeting public need.

From the responses received it is apparent that local authorities have been planning for such an incident such as this but perhaps the sheer speed and scale of the pandemic has taken many by surprise. Nevertheless, local authorities are clearly implementing their business continuity plans and have in place services which will continue to meet public need even in these strange times.

APSE will continue to support its members through daily monitoring and disseminating information as it becomes available. To ensure you are kept up to date please visit [the APSE COVID 19 support hub](#).

APSE's network query service will still be operational and advice will be forthcoming as and when it is received. You can sign up to join our COVID 19 rapid response services including access to our dedicated frontline WhatsApp groups and rapid email query service using [this link](#).

Members should look out for regular updates either via the APSE website or through short briefings such as these.

Undoubtedly there will be significant changes and demands being placed on local authorities but through the sharing of information and experiences we will undoubtedly rise to the challenge and meet the needs of our public and customers.

Vickie Hacking

APSE Principal Advisor