

Providing school meals during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in England,

For information: Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Key Points

The Department for Education has published an update to the guidance on providing school meals during the coronavirus and includes information on the support available to schools during the national lockdown that began in January 2021.

1. Background

The Department for Education (DfE) has published an update to the guidance on providing school meals during the coronavirus outbreak and includes information on the support available to schools during the national lockdown that began in January 2021. This briefing provides an overview of the guidance, the full guidance can be viewed via the following link:-

[Providing school meals during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)

2. Providing meals for pupils attending school

The guidance states that schools should provide meal options for all pupils who are in school, including vulnerable children and the children of critical workers. Meals should be available free of charge to:

- all infant pupils
- pupils who meet the benefits-related free school meals eligibility criteria

It is also advised that the government will continue to provide schools with their expected funding for benefits-related free school meals and universal infant free school meals throughout this period.

Schools are advised to speak to their school catering team or provider about the best arrangements for providing school meals for those pupils in school.

All meals provided in school must still comply with the [school food standards](#).

3. Water

The guidance makes it clear that drinking water must be provided free of charge at all times to registered pupils on the school premises.

However, it advises that schools should consider the most appropriate way to do this if, for public health reasons, pupils do not have access to water fountains.

In addition, the guidance also comments that schools should take steps to limit the use of single-use plastic water bottles.

4. Support for pupils who have to stay at home

The DfE state that during the national lockdown, they expect schools to continue supporting children eligible for benefits-related free school meals who are at home during term time.

There is strong encouragement for schools to work with their school catering team or food provider to provide food parcels to eligible free school meal pupils who are at home. Where school kitchens are open this should be the approach taken by schools.

The guidance advises that the steps that should be taken during this national lockdown period will depend on local circumstances but could include:

- providing food parcels through the school catering team or food provider
- providing vouchers for a local shop or supermarket
- using the Department for Education's national voucher scheme, which will reopen shortly

5. Free meals for further education students

The guidance makes provision for further education institutions and advises that they should continue to provide support for students who are eligible for free meals, whether they are attending or studying remotely due to coronavirus (COVID-19).

Institutions should continue to provide support in the most appropriate way based on their local circumstances.

Further information is available in the [16 to 19 free meals in further education](#) guidance.

6. Providing food parcels through the school catering team or food provider

The DfE strongly encourages schools to work with their school catering team or food provider to provide food parcels to eligible free school meal pupils who are at home. Where school kitchens are open this should be the approach taken by schools.

It is stated that the government provides schools with funding to cover benefits-related free school meals. Schools can claim for additional funding of £3.50 per week for each eligible pupil receiving food parcel provision at home.

The guidance advises that there are significant benefits of providing food parcels which includes:

- the confidence that a nutritious and varied range of food is being provided in line with guidance published by the Lead Association for Catering in Education, and that meets the [school food standards](#)
- being able to quickly set up provision as many school caterers will have experience of delivering food parcels
- supporting safeguarding through the opportunity to maintain regular contact with vulnerable pupils and ensure they receive healthy nutritious food
- reducing the risk of food waste, which catering suppliers may have already purchased
- the continuation of financial support to school caterers

The DfE advised that they have been working with the school food industry to explore the best possible arrangements where food parcels are needed.

The guidance states that food parcels should:

- contain food items rather than pre-prepared meals due to food safety considerations
- minimise the fridge and freezer space that schools and families will need to store foods
- contain items which parents can use to prepare healthy lunches for their child/children across the week
- not rely on parents having additional ingredients at home to prepare meals
- not contain items restricted under the [school food standards](#)
- cater for pupils who require special diets, for example, [allergies](#), vegetarians or religious diets - schools should ensure there are systems in place to avoid cross-contamination
- contain appropriate packaging sizes for household use, rather than wholesale sizes

[Guidance on free school meals](#) has been produced by the Lead Association for Catering in Education, Public Health England and the Department for Education (DfE). It sets out some general principles for putting together a food parcel which will allow parents and carers to prepare simple and healthy lunches for their children at home across the week.

Food parcels must be distributed in line with guidance on [social distancing](#) at all times.

7. Providing local vouchers

In the circumstances where a school has confirmed with the school catering team or food provider that they cannot provide food parcels for pupils eligible for benefits-related free school meals (FSM) who are at home, the guidance advises that consideration can be given to other local arrangements, which might include vouchers for local shops and supermarkets.

Schools can claim to be reimbursed up to £15 per eligible FSM pupil per week. Schools may wish to arrange collection or delivery of vouchers where appropriate. Collection and delivery must be conducted in line with guidance on [social distancing](#) at all times.

8. National voucher scheme

The DfE confirms that they will open a national scheme to provide supermarket vouchers via an online portal as soon as possible and that further details will be published shortly.

However, schools are strongly encouraged to work with their school catering team or food supplier to adopt a food parcel first approach. It is reported that vouchers will only be available through the national voucher scheme from the point it re-opens. Any support provided since 4 January 2021 through food parcels or locally arranged vouchers can be claimed back from DfE.

9. Covering additional costs

The guidance advises that schools will continue to receive their expected funding for benefits-related free school meals throughout this period. To recognise the additional cost of provision for pupils at home, schools will be able to claim additional funding:

- up to £3.50 per eligible pupil, per week, where food parcels are being provided. The DfE strongly encourage this approach where it is feasible
- up to £15 per eligible pupil, per week, where vouchers for local shops or supermarkets are being provided

Schools should only claim for one of these approaches for each week.

It is reported that further details on how and when additional costs can be reclaimed will be provided shortly and schools should be assured that valid claims for costs will be met in full.

The cost of vouchers provided through the national voucher scheme will be met centrally by DfE.

The DfE state that they will monitor orders at the school level to check that schools are requesting the right amount of support for their eligible children. If a school's claims are higher than expected, the DfE advises that they may speak to the school about why this

has occurred and will pursue any necessary action to rectify the position, and which could include action to recoup funds.

It is recognised in the guidance that in some circumstances schools might use more than one approach. A cross-check will be made against claims for food parcels, claims for vouchers and orders through the national voucher scheme.

10. Period the support should cover

The guidance advises that support should be provided each week for benefits-related free school meal pupils at home during the national lockdown and school opening restrictions, from the week beginning 4 January to the week beginning 8 February.

The DfE state that the guidance will be regularly reviewed and will expire when schools are no longer asked to limit attendance.

Schools do not need to provide food parcels or vouchers during the February half-term. There is wider government support in place to support families and children outside of term-time through the [Covid Winter Grant Scheme](#).

11. Free school meal eligibility

The guidance outlines the eligibility criteria for free school meals including the extended eligibility criteria for groups should as those who have no recourse to public funds.

12. Support for families

It is advised that there is [Further government support](#) available for families struggling as a result of coronavirus (COVID-19). If families need urgent help, they can [contact their local council](#) to find out what services are available in their area.

13. COVID Winter Grant Scheme

The guidance makes reference to the £170 million [COVID Winter Grant Scheme](#) announced on 8 November 2020 is being run by local authorities in England.

The funding will be ring-fenced, with at least 80% earmarked to support with food and essential utility costs and will cover the period to the end of March 2021.

It is reported that Local authorities will receive the funding in the coming month.

14. Expansion of the Holiday Activities and Food programme

In addition to the Winter Grant, the guidance also provides details regarding the government's announcement on the Holiday Activities and Food programme that will be expanded in 2021.

Disadvantaged children in England will be offered free healthy meals and enriching activities over the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays next year.

Local authorities will receive funding to co-ordinate delivery. Some may co-ordinate it themselves, and others may choose to work with another organisation to co-ordinate provision on their behalf.

The programme will make free places available to children who are eligible for free school meals for a minimum of 4 hours a day, 4 days a week, 6 weeks a year. This would cover 4 weeks in the summer, and a week's worth of provision in each of the Easter and Christmas holidays.

Funding to local authorities would reflect the participation rate among eligible children, based on what we have seen in the pilot stage of this programme.

The DfE advises that they will work with local authorities over the coming months and will put in place additional measures to support them, including guidance and best practice based on our pilot phase.

15. National voucher scheme

The guidance advises that the vouchers will only be available through the national voucher scheme from the week commencing 18 January, however, any support provided since 4 January 2021 through lunch parcels or locally arranged vouchers can be claimed back from DfE.

Schools are responsible for providing free schools meals support to eligible pupils during term time, and should order vouchers on their pupils behalf. Before ordering vouchers, [check which pupils are eligible and would be receiving benefits-related free school meals](#).

16. How to order vouchers

It is reported that schools will receive an email from Edenred by 14 January, advising you how to either reset your password or activate your account for the first time. Once re-activated a further email will be received.

Schools are then able :

- order a single voucher to cover multiple weeks, for example, a £30 voucher to cover one eligible child over 2 weeks
- order a single voucher to cover more than one eligible child within the same household, for example, £60 to support 2 eligible children over 2 weeks
- set a weekly £15 rolling voucher, up to the week commencing 8 February

The guidance advised that to ensure that vouchers are processed in a timely manner, schools should submit one spreadsheet to order eCodes for all eligible families wherever possible.

Once the voucher value has been, schools will be able to:

- send an eCode directly to the parent or carers of the pupils(s) eligible for free school meals - they will need to choose an eGift card from a range of supermarkets
- select an eGift card on the parent or carer's behalf, and print and post the eGift card to them
- select an eGift card on the parent or carer's behalf, print the eGift card and arrange for families to collect it or deliver it to them in person

17. Sending eCodes to families

Schools are able to send a redemption eCode from the Edenred system directly to the parent or carers of the pupil(s) eligible for free school meals. It is reported that the eCode and instructions on how to use this to create an eGift card will be received within 4 days.

The DfE advises that this approach should only be considered if the family receiving the support has a working email account which they can access. Edenred will monitor where emails have not been successfully delivered to families, and they will contact the affected schools directly.

18. Alternative approach

The guidance states that schools can choose a supermarket on the family's behalf and either post the eGift card to the parent or carer or arrange for them to collect it. The family will be able to redeem the eGift card as soon as it arrives. This approach should be taken if the family receiving the voucher does not have access to an email address or the internet.

Schools are advised to think carefully about which shops and supermarkets are most convenient for families to access - if possible, ask the families.

19. Supermarkets available

The eGift cards are currently available for the following supermarkets:

- Aldi
- Iceland
- McColl's
- Morrisons
- Tesco
- Sainsbury's
- Asda

- Waitrose
- M&S
- Company Shop Group

It is also report that schools can purchase vouchers for other supermarkets and [claim back the costs](#).

20. Redeeming the vouchers

Families will be able to redeem them in store at the selected retailer by either:

- presenting the voucher on a smartphone or tablet
- presenting a paper copy of the voucher

The DfE comment that families are free to select the most appropriate lunch for their child. When selecting products, we encourage families to consider health and nutrition. The [school food standards](#) and [NHS Eat Well](#) may act as a useful guide for families.

It is clearly stated that the vouchers must not be used for age-restricted items, such as alcohol, cigarettes or lottery tickets.

APSE COMMENT

APSE has set up a COVID-19 Information Hub to deal with frontline service issues as they arise; ensuring greater resilience and learning between each other during this difficult time.

[APSE COVID-19 Information Hub](#)

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