Part of
Education, universities and childcare during coronavirus

Department for Education

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

Updated 4 February 2021

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This guidance has been updated to include information on:

- supplier relief payments
- the period for which the support should cover

Providing meals for pupils attending school

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 children in school
- children who meet the benefits-related free school meals eligibility criteria

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 should apply to their school catering team or provider about the best arrangements for providing school meals for those pupils in school.

Pupils eligible for benefits-related free school meals at home during term time, schools have the freedom to decide on the best approach for their pupils and have a number of options available to them. We have provided vouchers or the Department for Education's national voucher scheme.

All meals provided must still comply with the school food standards.

Water

Drinking water must be provided free of charge at all times to registered pupils on the school premises.

Schools should consider the most appropriate way to do this. If for public health reasons pupils do not have access to water fountains,

Schools should take steps to limit the use of single-use plastic water bottles.

Support for pupils who have to stay at home

Under normal circumstances, schools do not provide free school meals to eligible children who are absent from school. However, schools have the flexibility to continue supporting children eligible for benefits-related free school meals who are at home during term time.

Schools may consider working with their school catering team or food provider to provide good quality lunch parcels to eligible free school meal pupils who are at home.

The steps schools take during the national lockdown period will depend on local circumstances.

This could include:

- providing lunch parcels through the school catering team or food provider
- providing vouchers for a local shop or supermarket
- using the Department for Education (DfE)'s national voucher scheme, which reopened on 18 January 2021

Free meals for further education students

Further education institutions should continue to provide support for students who are eligible for free meals, further they are attending or studying remotely during the 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.

Providing lunch parcels through the school catering team or food provider

Schools can work with their school catering team or food provider to provide lunch parcels to eligible pupils for benefits-related free school meals are at home.

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 lunch parcel provision at home. Where you are working with your catering supplier to provide lunch parcels, you are expected to pass on the additional funding we are providing in full.

The benefits of providing lunch parcels include:

- the confidence that a nutritious and varied range of food is being provided in line with information published by the Local Association for Catering in Education, and that meets the school food standards
- the ability to control the quality and provision as many school caterers will have experience of delivering lunch 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

We have been working with the school food industry to explore the best practice arrangements where lunch parcels are needed.

Schools and families may find weekly collections of lunch parcels easier than a more frequent approach. Where parents are unable to collect the parcel, they can tell the school that they have asked a friend, neighbour or family member to collect on their behalf.

Schools may wish to work with other local schools to provide food boxes where they are easier to deliver or collect from one location, or when supplying multiple children from the same family who attend different schools.

Lunch 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 contents
- contain items which parents can use to prepare healthy lunches for their children/children across the week
- include a mixture of non-perishable ingredients at home to prepare meals
- not contain restricted under the school food standards
- cater for pupils who have special dietary needs, for example, vegetarians, religious diets, or pupils who cannot eat certain ingredients due to an allergy or medical condition - schools should ensure there are systems in place to avoid cross-contamination
- contain appropriate packaging sizes for household use, rather than wholesale sizes

The Local Association for Catering in Education (LACE) have produced information on lunch parcels. It sets out some general principles for putting together a lunch parcel which will allow parents and carers to prepare simple and healthy lunches for their children at home across the week.

Lunch parcels must be distributed in line with guidance on social distancing at all times.

Providing locally-arranged vouchers

If schools have confirmed with their school catering team or food provider that it is not the best interest of pupils to provide lunch parcels, they can consider other local arrangements, which might include vouchers for local shops and supermarkets.

Schools can claim to be reimbursed for £15 per eligible free school meals pupil per month to cover the cost of providing vouchers to families, where this is more appropriate. For example, it may help to support safeguarding. Collection and delivery must be conducted in line with guidance on social distancing at all times.

Charge 15 has been produced easy, low-cost lunch recipe ideas which may support families who are receiving a voucher.

Covering additional costs

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:

- £3.50 per eligible pupil, per week, where lunch parcels are being provided
- £15 per eligible pupil, per week, where lunch vouchers for local shops or supermarkets are being provided

Schools can vary their approach according to local needs, but should only claim for one of these approaches per pupil for any given week. During the period from 4 January to 16 January, if parents have received an inadequate lunch parcel that does not meet the school food standards, schools can also claim an additional £15 for providing a food voucher. They cannot also claim the lunch parcel top-up funding for this period.

Beyond the fact that it will need to be a valid claim based on eligible children and support provided over the specified timeframe, claims will not require any additional criteria. Further details on the claims process and timing will be confirmed separately.

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

Period the support should cover

Support should be provided such a 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 29 March. It will restart again for the week beginning 22 February.

Support during the half-term holiday will be available through the Covid Winter Grant Scheme.

We will monitor orders at school level to check that schools are receiving the right amount of support for their eligible children. If a school's claims are higher than we would expect, we will contact the school to check that they are following the guidance and necessary action to help the position which could include action to recover funds.

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

This guidance will be regularly reviewed and will expire when schools are no longer asked to limit attendance.

National voucher scheme

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 school meals support to eligible pupils during term time and should order vouchers on behalf of eligible pupils. Schools should ensure parents are aware of the support they are receiving.

How to order vouchers

You should have received an email from our supplier Edenred by 18 January, advising schools to either create your password or activate your account for the first time. If your schools has not received this email, please complete Edenred's contact change request form.

Once you have done this, you will be able to:

- enter a single voucher to cover multiple weeks, for example, a £30 voucher to cover one eligible child over 3 weeks
- enter 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 ordering cycle, up to the week commencing 8 February, after half term you can continue to order up to week commencing 1 March

Further information about placing orders after the half-term holiday will be issued by Edenred.

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

You must confirm the terms and conditions at the end of the ordering process, otherwise, your vouchers will not be processed.

Once you have confirmed the voucher's value, you can either:

- email the voucher PDF to the parent or carers of the pupil(s) eligible for free school meals - they will need to choose a gift card from a range of supermarkets
- select a gift card on the parent or carer's behalf, print and post the gift card to them
- choose an ePDF card on the parent or carer's behalf, print the ePDF card and arrange for families to collect it or deliver it to them in person

Sending eCodes to families

You can send a redemption eCode from the Edenred system directly to the parent or carer's mobile phone by text message. Parents will receive a text message with instructions on how to use this to create an eVoucher to spend within 4 days.

You should only consider this approach if the family receiving the support has a working email account which they can access. Edenred will monitor email receipts and will notify successfully delivered to families, and they will contact the affected schools directly.

Alternative approach

You can choose a supermarket on the family's behalf and either post the gift 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. You should take this approach if the family receiving the voucher does not have access to an email address or the internet.

If you choose this option, you should think carefully about which shops and supermarkets are most convenient for families to access - if possible, use the families.

If families are self-isolating and do not have support from local family, friends, or neighbours to access food, they should contact the school or local authority, to seek support.

Supermarkets available

Through Edenred, you can currently access eGift cards for the following supermarkets:

- Aldi
- Iceland
- McColl's
- Morrisons
- Ocado
- Sainsbury's
- Asda
- Waitrose
- M&S
- Company Shop Group
- Farmfoods

The vouchers for Asda, Sainsbury's and Waitrose can be used online as well as in the store.

Schools can purchase vouchers for other supermarkets and claim back the costs.

Redeeming the vouchers

Once families have received their voucher, they 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

Families are free to select the most appropriate lunch for their child. When selecting healthy options, they should follow the Department for Education's the school food standards and NHS and Eat Well guidance as a useful guide for families.

Vouchers must not be used for age-restricted items, such as alcohol, cigarettes or tobacco.

Using funding for supplier relief

Speak to your catering provider(s) about your arrangements in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

The government will continue to provide schools with their expected funding, including funding to cover free school meals and universal infant free school meals, throughout this period.

If appropriate to maintain delivery of critical services, you may consider making payments as normally to suppliers that you consider are at risk of going out of business or disrupted or suspended. Such payments should only cover the cost of free school meals and universal infant free school meals and the costs of meals usually purchased by parents for pupils who are not eligible for free school meals.

You will want to consider:

- food already purchased by suppliers, including food for pupils who are attending school (for example, for the children of key workers)
- whether you are working collaboratively with your supplier on the provision of food parcels for free school meals children learning at home

Any relief payments for free school meals and universal infant free school meals should be made on the condition that the supplier and their subcontractors agree to act as an open-book basis and make cost data available. Schools should make payments to suppliers promptly and on time.

Schools should work with suppliers to ensure that:

- any relief payments are used by suppliers to help cover non-furloughed staff costs and other overhead expenses only - relief payments must not be used to cover costs associated with staff furloughed under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme
- they do not make profits on statements of a contract that are undelivered during this period

You should work in partnership with the supplier to plan an exit from the agreed interventions and transition to a new, sustainable operating model. You and your supplier should agree how to share the costs and benefits equitably during this transition to ensure that contracts are still sustainable.

Free school meal eligibility

The eligibility criteria for free school meals can be found at eligibility for free school meals.

During the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, we have temporarily extended free school meals eligibility to include some groups who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF).

This temporary extension is continuing and covers both pupils who are attending school and who are at home due to coronavirus (COVID-19).

See guidance on the temporary extension of free school meals eligibility to NRPF groups for more information.

Support for families

Further government support is 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.

Covid Winter Grant Scheme

A £170 million Covid Winter Grant Scheme announced in November is being run by local authorities in England.

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

It will allow local authorities to directly help the hardest-hit families and individuals over the winter period.

Local authorities have local lists and knowledge, making them best placed to identify and help those children and families most in need.

Expansion of the Holiday Activities and Food programme

In November, the government announced that the Holiday Activities and Food programme will expand in 2021.

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

Local authorities will receive funding to coordinate the delivery of the programme. Some may co-ordinate it themselves, and others may choose to work with another local organisation to provide the provision.

The programme will make free places available for children who are eligible for free school meals for a minimum of 4 hours a day, 4 days a week, 5 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 will reflect the participation rate among eligible children, based on what we have seen in the pilot stage of the programme.

More information on the holiday activities and food programme is available.