

Part of

Education, universities and childcare during coronavirus



Guidance

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

Updated 10 March 2021

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This guidance has been updated to include information on:

- providing school meals from 8 March
- expectations when providing meals for pupils with medical conditions, including allergies
- when to claim additional costs

Providing meals for pupils attending school

Schools should provide meal options for all pupils who are in school. Meals should be available free of charge to:

- all infant pupils
- pupils 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 speak to their school catering team or provider about the best arrangements for providing school meals for pupils in school.

Schools should make sure that they identify pupils with any medical conditions, including allergies, to ensure that all pupils are able to eat a school lunch safely. This is particularly important in circumstances where caterers are not serving meals to pupils directly but where for example, pupils are being served food in the classroom.

The [Food Information Regulations 2014](#) require all food businesses including school caterers to show the allergen ingredients' information for the food they serve. This makes it easier for schools to identify the food that pupils with allergies can and cannot eat. Further information is available in [allergy guidance for schools](#).

On 8 March, all pupils return to school and should receive their meal on-site. Where pupils eligible for benefits related free school meals are self-isolating at home, schools should work with their school catering team or food provider to provide good quality lunch parcels. This will ensure that eligible pupils continue to be supported for the short period where they are unable to attend school. An additional £3.50 can be claimed for lunch parcels provided up until Easter as transitional support.

All meals provided must 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 not in school. During the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, we expect schools to continue supporting children eligible for benefits-related free school meals who are at home during term time.

On 8 March, all pupils return to school and should receive their meal on-site. Where pupils eligible for benefits-related free school meals are self-isolating at home, schools should work with their school catering team or food provider to provide good quality lunch parcels. This will ensure that eligible pupils continue to be supported for the short period where they are unable to attend school.

Claiming additional costs for the period of restricted attendance

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 who were learning at home between 4 January until 5 March, schools will be able to make a claim for additional funding:

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

Schools will be able to make a claim for locally arranged vouchers to the value of £15 per pupil per week, during the period 4 January to 5 March. Claims for lunch parcel top ups to the value of £3.50 can be made from the period 4 January until the start of the Easter holidays. Claims should not include the half term as support was provided through the [COVID Winter Grant Scheme](#). Schools 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 received an inadequate lunch parcel that did not meet the standard expected, the school will be able to claim retrospectively for a locally arranged voucher. They cannot also claim the lunch parcel top-up funding for this period. All claims made will also be cross-referenced with orders made using the national voucher scheme. Orders made through the national voucher scheme should not be claimed as those costs have already been met centrally by DfE.

Beyond the fact that it will need to be a valid claim based on eligible pupils and support provided over the specified timeframe, claims will not be subject to any additional criteria. The claims window will open in April 2021 and further details will be confirmed separately.

We will monitor claims at school level to check that schools are requesting the right amount of support for their eligible pupils. If a school's claims are higher than expected, we may speak to the school about why this has occurred and will pursue any necessary action to rectify the position which could include action to recoup funds.

Short-term support with costs

We recognise that some schools may have been unable to make up-front payments to cover the additional costs of providing lunch parcels or locally purchased vouchers because of cash flow issues. In these circumstances, schools should have followed the normal process for seeking short-term advances to support their cash flow by contacting ESFA if they are an academy, or their local authority if they are a maintained school.

Any non-maintained special school with a cash flow difficulty should seek advice from ESFA in the first instance.

Providing lunch parcels through the school catering team or food provider

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 where they are learning from home or self-isolating until the start of the Easter holidays. Where you are working with your catering suppliers 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 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 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 possible 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, volunteer or family member to collect it 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 supporting 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 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 have special dietary needs, for example, vegetarians, religious diets, or pupils who cannot eat certain ingredients due to an [allergy](#) or other 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 [Lead Association for Catering in Education \(LACA\)](#) 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.

National voucher scheme

Vouchers were only available through the national voucher scheme from the week commencing 18 January to cover the period until 5 March (except for the February half-term week). Support provided since 4 January 2021 through lunch parcels or locally arranged vouchers can be claimed back from DfE - see [claiming additional costs for the period of restricted attendance](#).

Using funding for supplier relief

Where schools have continued to make payments to food suppliers in order to maintain critical services, such payments are not expected to continue beyond 5 March.

Free meals for further education students

Further education institutions will also reopen, with support for students who are eligible for free meals continuing as normal. Institutions should also continue to support eligible students who are self-isolating due to coronavirus (COVID-19).

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

Free school meal eligibility

The eligibility criteria for free school meals can be found at [apply 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. More information is available on the [new winter package to provide further support for children and families](#).

The funding is ring-fenced, with at least 80% earmarked to support with food and essential utility costs. It ran during the Christmas and half-term holidays and will cover the period to 16 April 2021.

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

Local authorities have local ties 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. More information is available on the [new winter package to provide further support for children and families](#).

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 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 will reflect the participation rate among eligible children, based on what we have seen in the pilot stage of this programme.

More information on the [holiday activities and food programme](#) is available.

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