

GUIDANCE

Revised guidance for schools in Wales: supporting children eligible for free school meals

How schools should ensure pupils who receive free school meals continue to receive food during the coronavirus pandemic.

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Overview

This guidance sets out what schools should do to help ensure that pupils who receive free school meals continue to be provided with access to food whilst their statutory education has been temporarily suspended because of the COVID-19

outbreak.

Current provision for free school meals

The Welsh Government expects that schools will continue to provide lunch for pupils eligible for free school meals (including those who are transitionally protected) whilst they are unable to attend school as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.

You can find out [what free school meal provision your local authority provides and how to apply](https://gov.wales/find-out-about-free-school-meals-during-coronavirus-outbreak) (<https://gov.wales/find-out-about-free-school-meals-during-coronavirus-outbreak>).

In light of government advice it is now advised that children eligible for free school meals should not attend school if they are not children of key workers or have been identified as vulnerable. We are aware of and grateful for local solutions that have responded very quickly to closure of schools, but as travelling must now be kept to a minimum these need to be revised.

Suggested options

We have confidence in the way that Welsh local authorities have responded swiftly to this emergency, and we are aware that local approaches are working well. In order to address the needs of vulnerable families, it may be necessary for local authorities to operate a number of schemes in parallel.

The options outlined below require less social interaction and we recommend that schools and local authorities consider them. These are not exhaustive and there may be alternatives which local authorities feel would work better locally however, it is vital that local authorities ensure appropriate social distancing measures are upheld. For instance, families should not be travelling to collect food unless this is unavoidable.

Provision of vouchers

Schools or local authorities have the discretion to purchase gift cards or e-

vouchers from local supermarkets or shops. The choice of retailer should reflect those which operate in the local area. The use of the voucher should ideally be limited to purchase food items, although we accept that retailers might not always be able to do this. In an instance where vouchers cannot be limited to food items a message could be issued with the voucher advising parents and carers that these should only be redeemed against food items.

Vouchers can be purchased directly from the retailer and it may be possible to order in bulk through the retailer's corporate division. In some instances you may be able to negotiate a discount for bulk buying vouchers from the retailer.

The cash value of the vouchers is £3.90 per child, per day and, at this stage, we recommend that vouchers are issued on a weekly basis (5 day week in line with current free school meal provision). Local authorities will be able to claim back the additional cost of vouchers or gift cards purchased on behalf of their schools from the Welsh Government.

Delivery of food items to the families of pupils in receipt of free school meals

You may choose to collaborate with local businesses and third sector organisations to provide and deliver food parcels for children who receive free school meals. If this option is chosen care needs to be taken to ensure that appropriate social distancing measures are still kept in place and families are consulted. This might be a helpful option for those families who, for whatever reason, are unable to access food supplies, perhaps because of isolation due to the virus or if they do not have a local supermarket they can access. It is therefore recommended this option is considered only if families indicate they are content with deliveries.

Food parcels could include ingredients, recipes and storage advice. They can also be packed to last for a few weeks with longer life items.

This could be done by a local organisation, such as a charity, who would coordinate requests for support.

There is an opportunity to develop this option in partnership with other approaches, such as meals on wheels services.

Transfer funds to the bank accounts of families eligible for free school meals (BACS payments)

This option would allow the local authority purchase ledger team to transfer funds directly into the bank accounts of those families with children eligible for free school meals.

A survey of local authorities would suggest that currently families in receipt of PDG access have in the main payments transferred directly into their accounts. There are some exceptions with a few local authorities also using vouchers and cheques for those families who for one reason or another cannot use the BACS option.

However, not all families eligible for free school meals are eligible for PDG Access, and these families will need to be contacted to provide their bank details if this option is chosen. This could be via an email asking recipients to log onto the council website to provide their bank details. It should be noted that for security reasons no one should be asked to provide their bank details by email or text.

Social distancing measures will still be maintained as families will be provided with their child's free school meal allowance directly into their bank account, which can then be spent when they do their shop. This will not require any additional travel or contact with others beyond what would be essential.

Scam emails

Local authorities need to make their eligible families aware that there are scam emails circulating, asking families to provide their bank details via an email. Local authorities will need to be alert to respond to these and keep families informed as soon as they are made aware. We will be putting out an alert on our media channels to raise awareness of this issue.

Special diets

If you chose to deliver food to pupils you will need to ensure that pupils with special diets or allergies are catered for. Care needs to be taken to check with families whether any pupils have allergies or special diets before food is issued to them.

Do I need to still comply with The Healthy Eating in Schools (Nutritional Standards and Requirements) (Wales) Regulations 2013?

It is recognised that in these exceptional circumstances compliance with the Healthy Eating in Schools Regulations may cause increased challenges. The recommendation in these circumstances would be that every effort is made to ensure that the food provided to pupils is as healthy and nutritious as possible, within the current constraints of the local and national supply chains.

Engagement with families

Local authorities should ensure that their websites are up to date with information for parents on how they avail themselves of the provision made in lieu of free school meals.

We encourage local authorities to be proactive in identifying learners who, under normal circumstances receive free school meals but who are not currently accessing this provision. This will help to ensure that all learners are getting the support they need.

Existing benefit claimants who are not in receipt of free school meals

Section 6 of the Healthy Eating in Schools (Wales) Measure 2009, requires local authorities that provide free school meals to encourage take up, and take reasonable steps to ensure that every learner entitled to receive free school meals does actually receive them. In the current emergency it is more important than ever that local authorities take every opportunity to support and encourage families to claim free school meals.

There are likely to be a significant number of families who find themselves in the situation where they are eligible to claim free school meals for the first time, during the outbreak. It is vital that these families are also proactively encouraged to claim free school meals and given all the information they need.

Families with no recourse to public funds

Local authorities may be contacted by families or their representatives, because they are experiencing severe hardship because they have no recourse to public funds. We would strongly encourage local authorities to exercise their discretion to allow the children of these families to benefit from local authority free school meal provision for the duration of school closure.

Costs

Where schools are not already contractually committed, you should use existing funds allocated for catering in schools to fund the provision for free school meals.

Where additional costs have been incurred in the provision of food to pupils who receive free school meals, the Welsh Government will reimburse costs where it can be demonstrated that these costs have been incurred as a result of dealing with COVID-19.

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[Education and childcare: coronavirus \(https://gov.wales/education-coronavirus\)](https://gov.wales/education-coronavirus)

[Food and drink in schools \(https://gov.wales/food-drink-schools\)](https://gov.wales/food-drink-schools)

