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Guidance

Coronavirus (COVID-19): free school meals guidance for schools

Updated 24 April 2020

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This publication is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools>

We know that schools are concerned about the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on pupils eligible for benefits-related free school meals.

This guidance explains what schools should do to make sure eligible pupils have continued access to free school meals where the pupil is not attending school.

Information regarding which pupils should continue to attend school is available in the guidance on maintaining educational provision (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision>). Schools which are open for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children should provide meal options for staff and children who are in school, and free school meals for all eligible pupils in attendance. Further details are set out in this guidance.

Support for pupils who have to stay at home

Under normal circumstances, schools are not expected to provide free school meals to eligible children who are not attending due to illness or if the school is closed. However, during the COVID-19 outbreak we expect schools to continue to provide support to these children if the school is:

- only open for certain groups
- closed

We understand that schools will have different approaches to how they would normally provide free school meals to eligible children. These might include:

- an in-house catering team
- a local authority catering service
- a private catering provider

The steps you take to support children at this time may be different depending on the individual circumstances of the school.

You might be able to provide eligible pupils not attending school with meals or food parcels through your current food provider.

Where this is not possible, the Department for Education (DfE) has developed a centrally-funded national voucher scheme to support schools with this process. This funding is additional to existing free school meal budgets. Schools will now have received an email from the Department's supplier Edenred regarding how to access and administer the voucher scheme locally.

If the national voucher scheme is not suitable, you could consider providing alternative vouchers for a local shop or supermarket.

Existing school food arrangements

You should speak to your school catering team or provider to see if they can prepare meals or food parcels that could be delivered to or collected by families.

If you use a local authority catering service, you should check if they have a scheme for providing meals or food parcels to vulnerable groups affected by coronavirus (COVID-19).

If you use a private catering provider, contact them to see what alternative arrangements are available.

If you are able to provide meals or food parcels, ensure they are distributed in line with social distancing guidelines:

- guidance on social distancing for everyone in the UK (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people>)
- implementing social distancing in education and childcare settings (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-implementing-social-distancing-in-education-and-childcare-settings>)

Other options if you cannot provide meals or food parcels

If you are unable to use your current provider to continue offering free school meals, consider using other local initiatives – this could be a local school acting as a community hub, or a local charity.

National voucher scheme

If your school catering service cannot provide meals or food parcels, you should offer families of pupils eligible for benefits-related free school meals an alternative.

We have developed a national scheme to provide supermarket vouchers via the Edenred online portal. Schools will not have to pay for these vouchers as the costs for this scheme will be picked up centrally by DfE.

Before ordering vouchers, you should check which pupils are eligible and currently in receipt of benefits-related free school meals. Vouchers should be made available to the adult with caring responsibility for that child.

How to order vouchers

You will be able to access the voucher scheme using the Edenred portal. Edenred have now sent schools an activation email, explaining how to access the portal and order vouchers.

Once you have activated your account on the Edenred portal, you can begin to create vouchers. Edenred will provide schools with a step-by-step guide to ordering vouchers through their online portal.

Firstly, you will need to confirm the value of the voucher(s). You will be able to:

- order a single voucher to the value of £15 each week for every child eligible for benefits-related free school meals who is not attending school
- set a weekly £15 rolling voucher
- combine funding where a family has more than one child eligible for benefits-related free school meals

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

- 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

The approach you can take will depend on parents and carers' ability to access the internet.

Sending eCodes to families

You can send a redemption eCode from the Edenred system directly to the parent or carers of the pupil(s) eligible for free school meals. They will receive instructions on how to use this eCode to create an eGift card, which the family should receive within 3 hours. You should only consider this approach if the family receiving the support has a working email account which they can access.

Alternative approach

You can choose a supermarket on the family's behalf and send the eGift card to the parent or carer. 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; we encourage you to engage families in this decision where possible
- how to share vouchers with families in a safe and easy way - this may include posting the voucher or arranging for a secure collection

Supermarkets available

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

- Morrisons
- Tesco
- Sainsbury's
- Asda
- Waitrose
- M&S

We recognise that it may not be convenient or possible for some families to visit one of these supermarkets and we are working to see if additional supermarkets can be added to this list.

Aldi has joined the list of supermarkets who can accept the national scheme gift cards. Parents will be able to order Aldi vouchers from the week commencing 27 April.

If families are unable to visit one of these supermarkets, we encourage your school to continue with a local solution to supporting pupils eligible for free school meals.

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 food and drink for their child. When selecting products, we encourage families to consider health and nutrition. The School Food Standards (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/standards-for-school-food-in-england>) may act as a useful guide for families.

The vouchers should not be redeemed for any age-restricted items, such as alcohol, cigarettes or lottery tickets.

There are a number of online resources available to support families in preparing healthy and nutritious food, including on the NHS Eat Well website (<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/?tabname=recipes-and-tips>).

Additional costs

Under the national voucher scheme, schools will be able to order vouchers and the payments will be met centrally by DfE.

We understand that other approaches, such as providing food parcels or purchasing vouchers for shops currently not included in the national scheme, may mean that schools incur additional expenses.

Guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-financial-support-for-schools>) is available setting out how we will compensate schools who incur these additional costs in providing free school meals or vouchers to pupils affected by coronavirus (COVID-19).

School food contracts

We advise that you speak to your catering provider(s) about your arrangements in response to coronavirus (COVID-19).

The Cabinet Office has published Procurement Policy Note 02/20 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/procurement-policy-note-0220-supplier-relief-due-to-covid-19>) with guidance for public bodies on payment of suppliers that are at risk. Some suppliers may face risks in terms of their financial viability, ability to retain staff, and their supply chains. Public sector contracting authorities must act now to ensure that suppliers that are at risk are in a position to resume normal contract delivery once the outbreak is over.

In line with Procurement Policy Note 02/20, contracting authorities should inform suppliers who they believe are at risk that they will continue to be paid as normal (even if service delivery is disrupted or temporarily suspended) until at least the end of June. 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 of closure.

You should, therefore, continue to make payments to food suppliers that are considered at risk in relation to the cost of free school meals and universal infant free school meals. This does not apply to the costs of meals usually purchased by parents for children who are not eligible for free school meals. Such

payment to suppliers should be made on the basis of the previous 3 months' invoices, and only where suppliers agree to act on an open book basis and make cost data available to the contracting authority.

The government is determined to support businesses that are affected by coronavirus (COVID-19) and has announced a package of measures to support businesses

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19/covid-19-support-for-businesses>).

Free school meal eligibility

The eligibility criteria for free school meals can be found at [apply for free school meals](https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals)

(<https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals>).

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

- children of Zambrano carers
- children of families with no recourse to public funds with a right to remain in the UK on grounds of private and family life under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights
- children of families receiving support under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 **who are also** subject to a no recourse to public funds restriction

These groups are also subject to a maximum household earnings threshold of £7,400 per annum.

We are also temporarily extending free school meal eligibility to children of a subset of failed asylum seekers supported under Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

This group is **not** subject to any maximum household earnings threshold.

This extension is temporarily in place due to the current unique circumstances. It covers both children who are attending school and children who are at home.

See guidance for the temporary extension of free school meals eligibility to NRPF groups

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/guidance-for-the-temporary-extension-of-free-school-meals-eligibility-to-nrpf-groups>) for more information.

Free meals for further education students

We expect further education institutions to continue to provide support for free meal students where their existing funding and delivery arrangement allow for this.

Further information is available in the [16 to 19 free meals in further education guidance](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/16-to-19-funding-free-meals-in-further-education-funded-institutions-for-2019-to-2020)

(<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/16-to-19-funding-free-meals-in-further-education-funded-institutions-for-2019-to-2020>).

Q&A

Will every child at home due to school closures receive support?

This support focuses on those eligible for benefits-related free school meals.

Will pupils who become newly eligible for free school meals be supported?

Yes.

Schools and local authorities should continue to accept free school meal applications. Parents should make contact with the school or local authority, who will verify eligibility and award free school meals.

What about infants that receive a free meal under universal infant free school meals?

It is right that schools concentrate their effort and resources on those who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals at this time. There is no requirement to continue to provide universal infant free school meals to pupils in Reception, Year 1, or Year 2 who are unable to attend school. Children in those year groups who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals will be supported.

What about children who are attending school?

In the maintaining educational provision guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision>), we ask schools to continue to provide care for a limited number of children, including those who are vulnerable and children whose parents are critical to the coronavirus (COVID-19) response and cannot be safely cared for at home.

Where schools are open for children of critical workers and vulnerable children, schools should continue to provide meals for pupils in attendance. Meals should be provided by the school and be free of charge for pupils who would normally receive free school meals, and schools have discretion as to whether they charge other pupils.

What about families that do not have access to the internet?

Schools are best placed to decide how to support eligible families in their areas with access to free school meals.

Where schools want to provide supermarket eGift cards to families that do not have access to emails, the school may choose to:

- print and post the eGift cards to families
- arrange for families to collect their vouchers

How will children who usually attend a breakfast club be supported?

Alongside our national approach to supporting free school meal pupils, we are committed to supporting schools and their pupils who would usually benefit from the DfE breakfast club programme. The suppliers, Family Action along with Magic Breakfast, are in contact with the schools on the programme, and are working closely with them to reach children who would normally receive a healthy breakfast at school.

Schools on the programme can choose to support eligible children in the way which works best for them, this may include parents collecting food parcels or breakfast food 'drop offs'. This should be arranged alongside the schools' wider support for children on free school meals. Schools must follow Public Health

England's advice on social distancing at all times.

How do schools and local authorities identify suppliers that are at risk?

The Cabinet Office supplier information and guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/procurement-policy-note-0220-supplier-relief-due-to-covid-19>) provides details on this issue. In summary, contracting authorities and suppliers should work collaboratively to ensure there is transparency during this period, and any suppliers in receipt of public funds on this basis during this period must agree to operate on an 'open book' basis.

Suppliers should not expect to make profits on elements of a contract that are undelivered during this period and all suppliers are expected to operate with integrity. Suppliers should be made aware that in cases where they are found to be taking undue advantage or failing in their duty to act transparently and with integrity, contracting authorities will take action to recover payments made.

What wider support is there for suppliers?

The government has announced a significant package of measures to support businesses (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19/covid-19-support-for-businesses>) during this period, including a Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, deferring VAT and Income Tax payments, grant funding for smaller businesses, a new Bank of England lending facility for larger firms and the HMRC Time To Pay Scheme.