Part of
Education and childcare during coronavirus

Department for Education

Guidance

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

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This guidance explains how schools can support pupils eligible for free school meals during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Parents and carers can read about changes to schools and education during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. This includes information on receiving meals or food vouchers from your school and what to do if you're newly eligible for free school meals.

The latest update includes:

- further information on the Covid Summer Food Fund
- further information on free meals in further education
- the final ordering timescales for the national voucher scheme
- guidance on ordering vouchers in multiples of £5
- an update on school food contracts to include further guidance from the Cabinet Office on Procurement Policy Note 04/20
- information on wider support for families

Providing meals for pupils attending school

Schools should provide meal options for all children who are in school, and meals should be available free of charge to all infant pupils and pupils who meet the benefits-related free school meals eligibility criteria.

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

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. But during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, we expect schools to continue supporting children eligible for benefits-related free school meals who are at home.

The steps you take will depend on your circumstances. This could include:

- providing meals or food parcels through your food provider
- using the Department for Education's (DfE) centrally-funded national voucher scheme
- providing alternative vouchers for a local shop or supermarket

Free school meals should be offered to eligible pupils not attending school during term time weeks. Costs of the national voucher scheme to provide free school meals for eligible pupils will also be met by DfE over the Easter and May half-term holidays.

Schools can claim for additional costs incurred in supporting free school meals pupils, for example by providing vouchers for an alternative local retailer, as outlined in the additional costs section.

Covid Summer Food Fund

Due to the unprecedented nature of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, we are providing additional funding for a Covid Summer Food Fund which will enable children who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals to claim vouchers for the 6 week holiday period.

Schools must place orders at least one week before their school term ends. Further information is available in the Covid Summer Food Fund guidance.

You must ensure that there is no duplication or overlap between Covid Summer Food Fund vouchers and any vouchers that you have ordered to cover free school meals during the summer term.

Universal infant free school meals

Schools should provide meal options free of charge to all infant pupils attending school, including Reception and year 1 children returning from 1 June.

There is no requirement to provide universal infant free school meals to infant pupils who are not in school.

Free meals for further education students

Further education institutions 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.

Providing meals or food parcels through your food provider

We know that many schools and food providers are already finding very effective ways to ensure that eligible children already receive free healthy meals during this period.

As schools prepare to open more widely, they should speak to their school catering team or provider about the best arrangements for school meals. Schools should ensure that they are supported to return to school to provide food both for those children attending school and for those remaining at home who are eligible for free school meals.

We have published a planning guide to help schools prepare for children returning to school. This includes suggested approaches to help school leaders in their decision making around school meals, including working out arrangements for lunch so that children do not mix with children from other groups.

This could mean having several lunch sittings or serving lunch in more than one location, including if appropriate in a classroom, or asking your caterers to look at other flexible ways of giving pupils access to lunch such that it can be eaten in the small group setting (for example taking cold or 'packed' lunches to children in the areas they are in for the day).

In addition, please speak to your catering teams and food suppliers about the most effective ways to manage the ordering and delivery of food during this period. This may include:

- arranging fewer food deliveries each week compared with standard periods when the school is open to all pupils
- being as flexible as possible on delivery times during the day
- ordering longer shelf life products during this period, such as frozen foods or foods that can be safely stored at room temperature

In addition to providing meals in schools, you should consider with suppliers whether they can prepare meals or food parcels that could be collected by or delivered to families that are not in attendance. If you do provide meals or food parcels, ensure they are distributed in line with guidance on social distancing at all times.

The Food Standards Agency has issued general guidance for food businesses.

The School Food Plan Alliance has published a checklist designed for schools who self-manage their catering provision.

National voucher scheme

As schools open more widely, and their kitchens reopen, we expect schools to make food parcels available for collection or delivery for any children that are eligible for free school meals who are staying at home.

Arranging food parcels helps ensure that eligible children have access to a healthy free meal, and can also help the school to stay in contact with those families. We know that many schools have made excellent food parcel arrangements throughout this period.

If your school catering service cannot provide meals or food parcels for children who are at home, you can continue to offer vouchers to families of eligible pupils.

Before ordering vouchers, check which pupils are eligible and would be receiving benefits-related free school meals.

We are monitoring voucher orders at school level to check if they are ordering in line with our estimates of the number of eligible children. We recognise that for some schools this will be lower if they are providing food parcels, or using a local arrangement. If a school's orders are higher than expected, we may speak to the school about why this has occurred and will take forward any necessary action to rectify the position. A cross check will also be done for those making a claim for free school meals funding via the funding for exceptional costs associated with coronavirus (COVID-19).

For any voucher queries, please email:

- freeschoolmeals@edenred.com for schools
- freeschoolmealsparentscarers@edenred.com for parents and carers

Deadline for ordering vouchers

The national voucher scheme will be available to cover the period up until the end of your school's summer term.

Schools must place their final voucher orders at least one week before their school term ends. For example, schools closing on 17 July must place orders for all vouchers by 10 July.

Final orders will be issued to the family within 7 days unless you have specified a distribution date further in the future. If you choose a future distribution date, this must be before the end of the school term

How to order vouchers

Schools have received an email from Edenred with an activation code and a step-by-step guide to using the online ordering portal.

Once you have activated your account on the Edenred portal, you can begin to order vouchers.

You can provide supermarket vouchers to pupils eligible for free school meals who are not attending school, to the value of £15 each week or £3 each day. Please only order eCodes that are multiples of £5, as some supermarkets can only provide £5 eGift cards.

When ordering vouchers, please do so in an efficient manner to cover multiple weeks.

You can:

- order a single voucher to cover a longer time frame, for example, £45 to support one eligible child over 3 weeks
- order a single voucher to cover more than one eligible child within the same household, for example, £90 to support 3 eligible children over 2 weeks
- set a weekly £15 rolling voucher

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
- select an eGift card on the parent or carer's behalf, print the eGift card and arrange for families to collect it

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 should receive the eCode and instructions on how to use this to create an eGift card within 4 days.

You should only consider this approach if the family receiving the support has a working email account which they can access.

Please check that you have accurate email addresses for parents or carers.

Alternative approach

You 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. 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, ask the families.

Supermarkets available

Through Edenred, you can access eGift cards for:

- Aldi
- Asda
- Company Shop Group
- Iceland, including The Food Warehouse Stores
- M&S
- McColl's
- Morrisons
- Sainsbury's
- Tesco
- Waitrose

Company Shop Group eGift cards are accepted in Community Shops and Company Shops. Further details can be found on their website.

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

Guidance is available from Edenred for parents to help answer any questions they may have.

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 and the NHS Eat Well website may act as a useful guide for families.

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

Additional costs

The payments for the national voucher scheme will be met centrally by DfE.

We understand that other approaches, such as providing food parcels or purchasing vouchers for shops not in the national scheme, may mean that schools incur additional costs. We have published guidance on funding for exceptional costs associated with coronavirus (COVID-19 for schools who incur these additional costs in this way.

Schools will be able to claim up to a certain limit, depending on their number of pupils, and where they are unable to meet these additional costs from their existing resources, or which they could only meet by drawing down on reserves and undermining their long-term financial sustainability. In exceptional instances where individual schools face additional costs that are higher than the grant's limits, schools will be able to apply to increase their limit.

School food contracts

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

The Cabinet Office has published guidance for public bodies (Procurement Policy Note 02/20 and Procurement Policy Note 04/20) on the payment of their at risk suppliers to ensure service continuity during the current coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

There's also additional sector guidance on supplier relief due to coronavirus (COVID-19) for state-funded schools.

If you consider it appropriate in order to maintain delivery of critical services, continue to make payments as normal where suppliers are considered at risk, even if service delivery is disrupted or suspended. Payments should only cover the cost of free school meals and universal infant free school meals and not the costs of meals usually purchased by parents for pupils who are not eligible for free school meals.

This guidance under Procurement Policy Note 04/20 in relation to continued supplier payments is effective until 31 October 2020 at the latest. However, supplier relief for these meals should not continue during the school summer holidays and we would ask you to develop transition plans to exit from any relief before the start of the autumn term.

Any relief payments for free school meals and universal infant free school meals should be based on the 3 months' invoices prior to March 2020 (or the time period that is most appropriate). Your supplier must agree to act on an open book basis and make cost data available. You should make payments to suppliers promptly and on time.

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.

Free school meal eligibility

You should continue to accept and verify free school meal applications. The eligibility criteria for free school meals can be found at apply for free school meals.

If you receive a new claim for an eligible child after the final ordering date of at least one week before their school term ends but before the start of the school's summer holidays, you can place an exceptional order for that child via the Edenred system.

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).

This temporary extension covers both children who are attending school and who are at home.

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

Pupils who attend a breakfast provision

We are committed to supporting schools and their pupils who would usually benefit from the DfE breakfast programme.

If you're on the programme, you will have received an email from the National School Breakfast Programme about children who would normally receive a healthy breakfast at school.

You can choose to support eligible children in the way which works best for them, this could include:

- running breakfast provision in school for children who are attending
- families collecting food parcels
- delivering breakfast food parcels to families

The breakfast food parcels should be arranged alongside the school's wider support for children on benefits-related free school meals, and schools must follow Public Health England's advice on social distancing at all times.

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.

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