

Part of **Education and childcare during coronavirus**



Guidance
Providing school meals during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak
Updated 23 September 2020

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The latest update includes:

- information on school food from September 2020
- guidance on providing water in school
- further information on support for pupils eligible for free school meals who have to stay at home due to coronavirus (COVID-19)
- further information on universal infant free school meals
- information on additional costs incurred before the summer holidays
- an update on school food contracts
- further information on free school meals eligibility

Providing school meals from September 2020

This guidance explains what schools should do when providing school meals from September 2020.

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

As school kitchens will be open, normal free school meal provision will resume. We expect catering providers to support pupils eligible for benefits-related free school meals who have to be at home for reasons relating to coronavirus (COVID-19) by [providing food parcels](#).

Arrangements for providing school meals

Schools should speak to their school catering team or provider about the best arrangements for providing school meals.

We have published [guidance for full opening](#) to help schools prepare for pupils returning to school. This includes suggested approaches to help school leaders in their decision making around school meals.

This could mean:

- working out arrangements for lunchtimes so that pupils do not mix with pupils from other groups
- having several lunch sittings or serving lunch in more than one location including, if appropriate, in a classroom
- asking caterers to look at other flexible ways of giving pupils access to lunch, for example, taking food to pupils in the areas they are in for the day

These meals must still comply with the [School food standards](#).

Speak to your catering teams and food suppliers about the most effective ways to manage the ordering and delivery of food during this period.

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.

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

All pupils, in all year groups, will return to school and college full time from the beginning of the autumn term.

A small number of pupils will still be unable to attend if they are required to self-isolate or if local lockdown arrangements are in place. Schools should work with their suppliers to prepare meals or food parcels for pupils who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals and who are not in attendance because they:

- are self-isolating
- have had symptoms or a positive test result themselves
- are a close contact of someone who has coronavirus (COVID-19)
- are not attending as a result of local lockdown arrangements

If food parcels are needed

The government provides schools with funding to cover benefits-related free school meals. We have been working with the school food industry to explore the best possible arrangements where food parcels are needed.

Schools and families may find weekly collections of food 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 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.

Food 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 require special diets, for example, allergies, vegetarians or religious diets - schools should ensure there are systems in place to avoid cross-contamination
- contain appropriate packaging sizes for household use, rather than wholesale sizes

[Guidance on free school meals](#) has been produced by the Lead Association for Catering in Education, Public Health England and the Department for Education. It sets out some general principles for putting together a food parcel which will allow parents/carers to prepare simple and healthy lunches for their children at home across the week.

Food parcels must be distributed in line with guidance on [social distancing](#) at all times. During local lockdowns, families are able to continue collecting parcels where the appropriate social distancing measures are in place.

Universal infant free school meals

Schools should provide meal options free of charge to all infant pupils attending school, including Reception, year 1 and year 2.

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](#).

Additional costs incurred before the summer holidays

Before the end of the summer term 2020, schools were asked to put in place free school meal provision for pupils staying at home. This included arrangements outside of the national voucher scheme.

We have published guidance on [funding for exceptional costs associated with coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) for schools who incurred additional costs in this way required. Further information will be available via the guidance on [funding for exceptional costs associated with coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#).

Covid Summer Food Fund

Due to the unprecedented impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) this year, we launched a Covid Summer Food Fund. This supported pupils who were eligible for benefits-related free school meals during the summer holidays.

It was an exceptional fund to cover the 2020 summer holiday period only. The payments for the Covid Summer Food Fund were met centrally by DfE.

For costs relating to the 2020 summer holidays that were not covered by the Covid Summer Food Fund, schools will be able to claim for this in the autumn if required. Further information will be available via the guidance on [funding for exceptional costs associated with coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#).

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 is 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. However, supplier relief for these meals should not have continued during the school summer holidays. Suppliers should have developed 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.

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 will continue when schools reopen for the autumn term and covers both pupils who are attending school and who are at home due to coronavirus (COVID-19).

See [guidance for 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.

Is this page useful? Yes No Is there anything wrong with this page?

Coronavirus (COVID-19) **The UK has left the EU**

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance and support](#) [Check the new rules for January 2021](#)

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