



Part of [Education and childcare during coronavirus](#)



Department for Education

Guidance

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

Updated 16 November 2020

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The latest update includes:

- information on support for clinically extremely vulnerable pupils eligible for benefits-related free school meals
- an update on school food contracts
- information on the Covid Winter Grant Scheme
- information on the expansion of the Holiday Activities and Food programme

Providing school meals from September 2020

This guidance explains what schools should do when providing school meals from the start of the autumn term.

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

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 restrictions](#)

Check the [local COVID alert level of your local area](#) to see which level applies.

Clinically extremely vulnerable pupils

The new advice for those identified through a letter from the NHS or a specialist doctor as in the group deemed [clinically extremely vulnerable](#) applies nationally up to 2 December.

Where a pupil is unable to attend school because they are complying with clinical or public health advice, we expect schools to be able to provide food parcels for pupils who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals during term-time.

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, 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.

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 and 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.

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.

School food contracts

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

The Cabinet Office guidance for public bodies ([Procurement Policy Note 02/20](#) and [Procurement Policy Note 04/20](#)) on the payment of their at risk suppliers ended on 31 October 2020.

Suppliers should have developed transition plans to exit from any relief before the start of the autumn term, but we understand that due to further COVID-19 related absences and lower take-up of meals normally purchased by parents, there may be ongoing risks to supplier sustainability.

Schools should continue to make payments to cover costs associated with the provision of free school meals and universal infant free school meals, including a proportion of the fixed costs incurred in the production of those meals. It should not include the costs of meals usually purchased by parents for pupils who are not eligible for free school meals.

Additional measures that schools can put in place to help suppliers include:

- encouraging pupils and parents to continue to participate in school meals
- ensuring prompt payment of invoices for goods and services supplied

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 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.

Covid Winter Grant Scheme

A new £170 million [Covid Winter Grant Scheme](#) announced on 8 November will be run by local authorities in England.

The funding will be ring-fenced, with at least 80% earmarked to support with food and essential utility costs, and will cover the period to the end of March 2021. Local authorities will receive the funding in the coming month.

It will allow 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

The government announced that the Holiday Activities and Food programme will expand in 2021.

Disadvantaged children in England will be offered free healthy meals and enriching activities over the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays next year.

Local authorities will receive funding to co-ordinate delivery. 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 would reflect the participation rate among eligible children, based on what we have seen in the pilot stage of this programme.

We will work with local authorities over the coming months and will put in place additional measures to support them, including guidance and best practice based on our pilot phase.

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