Part of
Education and childcare during coronavirus

Department for Education

Guidance

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

Updated 13 January 2021

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This guidance has been updated to include information on:

- how to order vouchers
- sending eCodes to families
- supermarkets
- redeeming the vouchers

Providing meals for pupils attending school

Schools should provide meal options for all pupils who are in school, including vulnerable children and the children of critical workers. Meals should be available free of charge to:

- all infant pupils

Expansion of the Holiday Activities and Food programme

Print this page

- pupils who meet the benefits-related free school meals eligibility criteria

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

Schools should speak to their school catering team or provider about the best arrangements for providing school meals for those pupils in school. Schools have the freedom to decide on the best approach for their pupils and have a range of options which include lunch parcels, local vouchers or the Department for Education's national voucher scheme.

All meals provided in school must still comply with the school food standards.

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

Under normal circumstances, schools do not provide free school meals to eligible children who are not in school. During the national lockdown, we expect schools to continue supporting children eligible for benefits-related free school meals who are at home during term time.

Schools may consider working with their school catering team or food provider to provide good quality lunch parcels to eligible free school meal pupils who are at home.

The steps schools take during this national lockdown period will depend on local circumstances.

This could include:

- providing lunch parcels through the school catering team or food provider
- providing vouchers for a local shop or supermarket
- using the Department for Education (DfE)'s national voucher scheme, which will reopen on 18 January 2021

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 lunch parcels through the school catering team or food provider

Schools can work with their school catering team or food provider to provide lunch parcels to eligible free school meal pupils who are at home.

The government provides schools with funding to cover benefits-related free school meals. Schools can claim for additional funding of £3.50 per week for each eligible pupil receiving lunch parcel provision at home.

The benefits of providing lunch parcels include:

- the confidence that a nutritious and varied range of food is being provided in line with guidance published by the Lead Association for Catering in Education, and that meets the school food standards
- being able to quickly set up provision as many school caterers will have experience of delivering food parcels
- supporting safeguarding through the opportunity to maintain regular contact with vulnerable pupils and ensure they receive healthy nutritious food
- reducing the risk of food waste, which catering suppliers may have already purchased

We have been working with the school food industry to explore the best possible arrangements where lunch parcels are needed.

Schools and families may find weekly collections of lunch 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.

Lunch 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 (DfE). It sets out some general principles for putting together a lunch parcel which will allow parents and carers to prepare simple and healthy lunches for their children at home across the week.

Lunch parcels must be distributed in line with guidance on social distancing at all times.

Providing local vouchers

If the school has confirmed with the school catering team or food provider that it is not in the best interest of pupils to provide lunch parcels, you can consider other local arrangements, which might include vouchers for local shops and supermarkets.

Schools can claim to be reimbursed up to £15 per eligible FSM pupil per week. Schools may wish to arrange collection or delivery of vouchers where appropriate. For example, it may help to support safeguarding. Collection and delivery must be conducted in line with guidance on social distancing at all times.

Covering additional costs

Schools will continue to receive their expected funding for benefits-related free school meals throughout this period. To recognise the additional cost of provision for pupils at home, schools will be able to claim additional funding:

- up to £3.50 per eligible pupil, per week, where lunch parcels are being provided – we strongly encourage this approach where it is feasible
- up to £15 per eligible pupil, per week, where vouchers for local shops or supermarkets are being provided

Schools should only claim for one of these approaches for each week. During the period from 4 January to 16 January, if parents have received an inadequate lunch parcel that does not meet the standard expected, the school will be able to claim retrospectively for a locally arranged voucher. They cannot also claim the lunch parcel top up funding for this period.

Further details on how and when additional costs can be reclaimed will be provided shortly.

Schools should be assured that valid claims for costs will be met in full.

The cost of vouchers provided through the national voucher scheme will be met centrally by DfE.

We will monitor orders at school level to check that schools are requesting the right amount of support for their eligible children. If a school's claims are higher than expected, we may speak to the school about why this has occurred and will pursue any necessary action to rectify the position, and which could include action to recoup funds.

We recognise that in some circumstances schools might use more than one approach. A cross-check will be made against claims for lunch parcels, claims for vouchers and orders through the national voucher scheme.

Period the support should cover

Support should be provided each week for benefits-related free school meal pupils at home during the national lockdown and school opening restrictions, from the week beginning 4 January to the week beginning 8 February.

This guidance will be regularly reviewed and will expire when schools are no longer asked to limit attendance.

Schools do not need to provide lunch parcels or vouchers during the February half-term. There is wider government support in place to support families and children outside of term-time through the Covid Winter Grant Scheme.

National voucher scheme

Vouchers will only be available through the national voucher scheme from the week commencing 18 January, however, any support provided since 4 January 2021 through lunch parcels or locally arranged vouchers can be claimed back from DfE.

Schools are responsible for providing free schools meals support to eligible pupils during term time, and should order vouchers on their pupils behalf. Before ordering vouchers, check which pupils are eligible and would be receiving benefits-related free school meals.

How to order vouchers

You will receive an email from our supplier Edenred by 14 January, advising you how to either reset your password or activate your account for the first time.

Once you have done this, you will receive an email confirming when you can begin to order vouchers during the week commencing 18 January.

You can then:

- order a single voucher to cover multiple weeks, for example, a £30 voucher to cover one eligible child over 2 weeks
- order a single voucher to cover more than one eligible child within the same household, for example, £60 to support 2 eligible children over 2 weeks
- set a weekly £15 rolling voucher, up to the week commencing 8 February

To ensure that vouchers are processed in a timely manner, schools should submit one spreadsheet to order eCodes for all eligible families wherever possible.

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 or deliver it to them in person

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. Edenred will monitor where emails have not been successfully delivered to families, and they will contact the affected schools directly.

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 currently access eGift cards for the following supermarkets:

- Aldi
- Iceland
- McColl's
- Morrisons
- Tesco
- Sainsbury's
- Asda
- Waitrose
- M&S
- Company Shop Group

Schools can purchase vouchers for other supermarkets and claim back the costs.

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 lunch for their child. When selecting products, we encourage families to consider health and nutrition. The school food standards and NHS Eat Well may act as a useful guide for families.

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

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 on 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 £170 million Covid Winter Grant Scheme announced on 8 November 2020 is being 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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