

Part of  
**Education, universities and childcare during coronavirus**



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

Updated 5 May 2021

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This guidance has been updated to include information on:

- the claims window for additional costs

**Providing meals for pupils attending school**

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

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 pupils in school.

Schools should make sure that they identify pupils with any medical conditions, including allergies, to ensure that all pupils are able to eat a school lunch safely. This is particularly important in circumstances where caterers are not serving meals to pupils directly but where for example, pupils are being served food in the classroom.

The [Food Information Regulations 2014](#) require all food businesses including school caterers to show the allergen ingredients' information for the food they serve. This makes it easier for schools to identify the food that pupils with allergies can and cannot eat. Further information is available in [allergy guidance for schools](#).

On 8 March, all pupils returned to school and should receive their meal on-site. Where pupils eligible for benefits related free school meals are self-isolating at home, schools should work with their school catering team or food provider to provide good quality lunch parcels. This will ensure that eligible pupils continue to be supported for the short period where they are unable to attend school.

All meals and other food provided during the school day, including in breakfast and after school clubs, must 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 coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, we expect schools to continue supporting children eligible for benefits-related free school meals who are at home during term time.

On 8 March, all pupils returned to school and should receive their meal on-site. Where pupils eligible for benefits-related free school meals are self-isolating at home, schools should work with their school catering team or food provider to provide good quality lunch parcels. This will ensure that eligible pupils continue to be supported for the short period where they are unable to attend school.

**Claiming additional costs for the period of restricted attendance**

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 who were learning at home between 4 January until 5 March, schools were able to make a claim for additional funding. Further details are available in [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) free school meals additional costs: guidance](#).

The claims window closed on 4 May. We will review claims and may contact you if additional information is required. We aim to pay standard claims to local authorities at the end of May 2021 and to academies at the beginning of June 2021. We are monitoring claims at school level to check that schools are requesting the right amount of support for their eligible pupils. 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 which could include action to recoup funds. As such, the payment process may take longer for these schools.

**Providing lunch parcels through the school catering team or food provider**

The government provides schools with funding to cover benefits-related free school meals. Where pupils eligible for benefits related free school meals are self-isolating at home during term time, schools should work with their school catering team or food provider to provide good quality lunch parcels.

The benefits of providing lunch parcels include:

- the confidence that a nutritious and varied range of food is being provided in line with information 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 lunch 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 have special dietary needs, for example, vegetarians, religious diets, or pupils who cannot eat certain ingredients due to an [allergy](#) or other medical condition - schools should ensure there are systems in place to avoid cross-contamination
- contain appropriate packaging sizes for household use, rather than wholesale sizes

The [Lead Association for Catering in Education \(LACA\)](#) have produced information on lunch parcels. 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.

**Free meals for further education students**

Further education institutions should continue to support students who are eligible for free meals as normal. Institutions should also continue to support eligible students who are self-isolating due to coronavirus (COVID-19).

Further education institutions were able to apply for retrospective funding for the period 4 January to 5 March 2021, where they were not able to continue support for their students during term time from their existing funding and/or using their usual delivery arrangements.

Further information is available in the [16 to 19 free meals in further education guidance](#).

The claims window has now closed. Further details are available in [Claiming additional costs for the period of restricted attendance](#).

**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 Local Support Grant**

A £40 million Covid Local Support Grant is being run by local authorities in England.

Read more information on [extending local support measures](#).

The funding is ring-fenced, with at least 80% earmarked to support with food and essential utility costs. It will cover the period from 17 April to 20 June 2021.

It allows local authorities to directly help the hardest-hit families and individuals.

Local authorities have local ties and knowledge, making them best placed to identify and help those children and families most in need.

This grant is further to the £229 million Covid Winter Grant Scheme, in place between November 2020 and 16 April 2021.

**Expansion of the Holiday Activities and Food programme**

In November, the government announced that the Holiday Activities and Food programme will expand in 2021. [More information is available on the new winter package to provide further support for children and families](#).

Disadvantaged children across England are being offered free healthy meals and enriching activities over the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays.

Local authorities will receive funding to coordinate the delivery of the programme. Some may co-ordinate it themselves, and others may choose to work with another organisation to co-ordinate their 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 will 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 will reflect the participation rate among eligible children, based on what we have seen in the pilot stage of this programme.

More information on the [holiday activities and food programme](#) is available.

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