



COVID-19: Free School Meals guidance (updated 31 March 2020)

To: England

For info: Contacts from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This briefing will be of particular interest to officers with responsibility for catering.

Key Issues

Following the announcement to close all schools except for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children, the government issued a further update to the guidance on 31 March 2020 regarding the national voucher scheme for children eligible for Free School Meals.

1. Introduction

Following the announcement to close all schools the government published updated guidance on 31 March 2020 regarding the national voucher scheme for children eligible for Free School Meals.

This briefing provides an overview of the guidance regarding free school meals.

Full details of the guidance can be viewed via the following link:-

[COVID-19 - free school meals guidance for schools](#)

The guidance explains what schools should do to make sure eligible pupils have continued access to free school meals where the pupil is not attending school.

The Department for Education (DfE) reiterated the details from the guidance that has already been published regarding support for pupils who have to stay at home, existing school food arrangements, and other options where a school cannot provide meals or food parcels. These details were outlined in APSE Briefing - [20-10 COVID-19 free school meals guidance for schools \(issued 19 March 2020\)](#).

The guidance issued on 19 March 2020 clearly stated that if it was not possible to provide a meal or a food parcel, a voucher scheme would be an alternative option. Therefore, the guidance issued on the 31 March 2020 provides additional information regarding the national scheme.

2. National voucher scheme

The DfE state that a national scheme has been developed to provide an alternative option where the other options are not possible. The scheme will provide supermarket vouchers via the Edenred online portal.

Edenred are a company that currently helps organisations and public institutions streamline and simplify payment processes, reduce administrative burdens, through vouchers, prepaid cards, online platforms and digital & SMS products.

Schools are not required to pay for the vouchers as the costs for this scheme will be picked up centrally by DfE.

However, schools are requested to check pupils eligible and confirm that they are currently in receipt of benefits-related free school meals prior to ordering vouchers and that the vouchers should be made available to the adult with caring responsibility for that child.

How to order vouchers

The school will be able to access the voucher scheme using the Edenred portal. Once activated vouchers can be created in line with the step-by-step guide to ordering vouchers through the online portal that will be provided.

Following accessing the portal schools will need to confirm the value of the voucher(s). There are three options available:

- order a single voucher to the value of £15 each week for every child eligible for benefits-related free school meals who is not attending school
- set a weekly £15 rolling voucher
- combine funding where a family has more than one child eligible for benefits-related free school meals

Once the voucher value has been confirmed the following options are available.

- 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

The approach taken will depend on parents and carers' ability to access the internet.

Sending eCodes to families

A redemption eCode from the Edenred system will be sent directly to the parent or carers of the pupil(s) eligible for free school meals. The parent / carer will receive instructions on how to use this eCode to create an eGift card, which the family should receive within 3 hours. The guidance states

that this option should only be considered if the family receiving the support has a working email account which they can access.

Alternative approach

A supermarket can be chosen by the school on the family's behalf with the school sending the eGift card to the parent or carer. The family will be able to redeem the eGift card as soon as it arrives. The guidance advised that this approach should be taken if the family receiving the voucher does not have access to an email address or the internet.

Prior to choosing this option, the DfE asks schools to give carefully consideration to the following:

- which shops and supermarkets are most convenient for families to access; we encourage you to engage families in this decision where possible
- how to share vouchers with families in a safe and easy way - this may include posting the voucher or arranging for a secure collection

Supermarkets available

Through Edenred, eGift cards are available for the following supermarkets:

- Morrisons
- Tesco
- Sainsbury's
- Asda
- Waitrose
- M&S

It is recognised in the guidance that these may not be the most convenient or even possible for some families to visit one of these supermarkets, and the DfE state that they are working to see if additional supermarkets can be added to the list. If families are unable to visit one of these supermarkets, schools are encouraged to continue with a local solution to supporting pupils eligible for free school meals.

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 food and drink for their child. When selecting products, the DfE are encouraging families to consider health and nutrition. The [School Food Standards](#) may act as a useful guide for families.

The vouchers should not be redeemed for any age-restricted items, such as alcohol, cigarettes or lottery tickets.

The guidance also promotes online resources available to support families in preparing healthy and nutritious food, including on the [NHS Eat Well website](#).

Additional costs

Under the national voucher scheme, schools will be able to order vouchers and the payments will be met centrally by DfE.

The DfE acknowledge that other approaches may mean that schools incur additional expense and are looking to issue further guidance shortly on how schools will be compensated for additional cost incurred additional costs in providing free school meals or vouchers to pupils affected by coronavirus (COVID-19).

School food contracts

The DfE are advising schools to speak to their catering provider(s) about your arrangements in response to coronavirus (COVID-19).

The Cabinet Office has published [guidance](#) for public bodies on payment of suppliers that are at risk. Some suppliers may face risks in terms of their financial viability, ability to retain staff, and their supply chains. Public sector contracting authorities must act now to ensure that suppliers that are at risk are in a position to resume normal contract delivery once the outbreak is over.

Contracting authorities should inform suppliers who they believe are at risk that they will continue to be paid as normal (even if service delivery is disrupted or temporarily suspended) until at least the end of June. 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 of closure.

Therefore, continue to make payments to food suppliers that are considered at risk in relation to the cost of free school meals and universal infant free school meals. This can apply to up to 25% of the value of a contract and applies until the end of June 2020. It does not apply to the costs of meals usually purchased by parents for children who are not eligible for free school meals.

The guidance also reiterates that the government is determined to support businesses that are affected by coronavirus (COVID-19) and has announced a [package of measures to support businesses](#).

3. Question and Answers

The guidance issued by the DfE sets out the following questions and answers relating to the national voucher scheme:-

Will every child at home due to school closures receive support?

This support focuses on those eligible for benefits-related free school meals.

Will pupils who become newly eligible for free school meals be supported?

Yes. Schools and local authorities should continue to accept free school meal applications. Parents should make contact with the school or local authority, who will verify eligibility and award free school meals.

What is the eligibility criteria for free school meals?

The eligibility criteria for free school meals can be found on [apply for free school meals](#).

What about infants that receive a free meal under universal infant free school meals?

It is right that schools concentrate their effort and resources on those who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals at this time. There is no requirement to continue to provide universal infant free school meals to pupils in reception, year 1, or year 2 who are unable to attend school. Children in those year groups who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals will be supported.

What about children who are attending school?

In the [maintaining educational provision](#) guidance, we ask schools to continue to provide care for a limited number of children, including those who are vulnerable and children whose parents are critical to the coronavirus (COVID-19) response and cannot be safely cared for at home.

Where schools are open for children of critical workers and vulnerable children, schools should continue to provide meals for pupils in attendance. Meals should be free of charge for pupils who would normally receive free school meals, and schools have discretion as to whether they charge other pupils.

Our school is open over the Easter holidays and our food supplier is able to continue to provide food parcels to free school meals children not in school over the Easter holiday. Is that allowed?

Yes. It is for schools to decide locally how their arrangements for free school meals will operate.

Whilst the vouchers are for term time only, if there is a local arrangement to supply food that the school and the supplier intend to continue over this period then that can be agreed and managed locally. This would need to be manageable within schools' existing resources, as there will not be additional funding available for this purpose.

What about families that do not have access to the internet?

Schools are best placed to decide how to support eligible families in their areas with access to free school meals.

Where schools want to provide supermarket eGift cards to families that do not have access to emails, the school may choose to:

- print and post the eGift cards to families
- arrange for families to collect their vouchers

What about students in further education (FE)?

We know that FE institutions are already supporting many students who are entitled to free meals, and we'll be looking to clarify our advice and guidance on this in the coming days

How will children who usually attend a breakfast club be supported?

We are working to consider options to support children who currently receive a free breakfast through DfE's contract with Family Action and Magic Breakfast. Family Action with Magic Breakfast will liaise directly with the schools involved in the programme.

How do schools and local authorities identify suppliers that are at risk?

The Cabinet Office [supplier information and guidance](#) provides details on this issue. In summary, contracting authorities and suppliers should work collaboratively to ensure there is transparency during this period, and any suppliers in receipt of public funds on this basis during this period must agree to operate on an 'open book' basis.

Suppliers should not expect to make profits on elements of a contract that are undelivered during this period and all suppliers are expected to operate with integrity. Suppliers should be made aware that in cases where they are found to be taking undue advantage, or failing in their duty to act transparently and with integrity, contracting authorities will take action to recover payments made.

What wider support is there for suppliers?

The government has announced a significant [package of measures to support businesses](#) during this period, including a Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, deferring VAT and Income Tax payments, grant funding for smaller businesses, a new Bank of England lending facility for larger firms and the HMRC Time to Pay Scheme.

APSE COMMENT

APSE has set up a COVID-19 Information Hub to deal with frontline service issues as they arise; ensuring greater resilience and learning between each other during this difficult time.

Details can be accessed via the following link:-

[COVID-19- APSE information hub](#)

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