

## **Providing school meals during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak – updated guidance.**

**To:** All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in England,

**For information:** Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

### **Key Issue**

On 16 November 2020, The Department for Education (DfE) published updated guidance on providing school meals during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak – updated guidance.

### **1.0 Background**

On 16 November 2020, The Department for Education (DfE) published updated guidance on providing school meals during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak – updated guidance.

The guidance explains what schools should do when providing school meals from the start of the autumn term and this briefing provides a summary of the latest updates to the guidance. The full document can be accessed via the following link:-

[Guidance - Providing school meals](#)

### **2.0 Providing school meals from September 2020**

Local Authorities across the UK have been providing school meals throughout the pandemic and in accordance with previously issued guidance have put a number of measures in place to deliver the catering service to schools as they opened to all pupils at the start of the autumn term.

The DfE has now issued an update to the guidance on 'Providing school meals during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak' regarding the following: -

- 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.

## **2.1 Information on support for clinically extremely vulnerable pupils eligible for benefits-related free school meals**

The guidance states that 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.

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

### **Food parcels**

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

The guidance comments that 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

The DfE advises that there has been guidance issued regarding free school meals and the document sets out some general principles for putting together a food parcel - [Guidance on free school meals](#).

It is also advised that 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.

## **2.2. Update on school food contracts**

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

Although there has not been an update to the guidance on procurement policy the DfE state that 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

### **2.3. COVID Winter Grant Scheme**

A new £170 million grant scheme which will be run by local authorities was announced by government on 8 November 2020.

It is stated that 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 and local authorities are set to receive the funding in the coming month.

Further details of the COVID Winter Grant Scheme can be accessed via the following link:-

[COVID Winter Grant Scheme](#)

### **2.4. Expansion of the Holiday Activities and Food programme**

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

The programme will provide for disadvantaged children in England and they will be offered free healthy meals and enriching activities over the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays next year.

It is commented that 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.

The guidance advises that the funding will go to local authorities to co-ordinate delivery and would reflect the participation rate among eligible children, based on what we have seen in the pilot stage of this programme.

The DfE comment that they 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 the pilot phase.

## **APSE Comment**

Local authorities have played a pivotal role in the COVID-19 response and have provided a wide range of support for the community and APSE welcomes the recognition from government of the role local council's play.

The support that the government has provided during the pandemic is unprecedented and the continued support for the poorest in society is welcomed.

However, the closure of schools has increased the attainment gap between families who are financially secure and the less well-off, therefore healthy food and activities add real value, not just to tackling the issues of holiday hunger and isolation, but also have a very positive impact on educational outcomes.

APSE would therefore like to see that the holiday programmes receive the appropriate levels of funding on a sustainable basis for this important area of work. APSE would also like to see the DfE publish the outcomes of the pilots, share best practice and work with councils, in a timely manner, to ensure that there is adequate time to put in place the required arrangements for holiday provision and not put an additional burden on already stretched services.

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