Guidance

**Providing free school meals during the coronavirus outbreak**

Updated 15 May 2020

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This guidance explains how schools can support pupils eligible for free school meals during the coronavirus outbreak.

Parents and carers can read about [changes to schools and education during the coronavirus outbreak](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers). This includes information on receiving meals or food vouchers from your school and what to do if you’re newly eligible for free school meals.

**Providing meals for pupils attending school**

Schools should provide meal options for all children who are in school, and meals should be available free of charge where pupils meet the benefits-related free school meal eligibility criteria and to all infant pupils.

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

**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. But during the coronavirus outbreak, we expect schools to continue supporting children eligible for benefits-related free school meals who are at home.

The steps you take will depend on your circumstances. This could include:

* providing meals or food parcels through your food provider
* using the Department for Education’s (DfE) centrally-funded national voucher scheme
* providing alternative vouchers for a local shop or supermarket

**Pupils who attend a breakfast club**

We are committed to supporting schools and their pupils who would usually benefit from the DfE breakfast club programme.

If you’re on the programme, you should have received an email from Family Action and Magic Breakfast about children who would normally receive a healthy breakfast at school.

You can choose to support eligible children in the way which works best for them, this could include:

* parents collecting food parcels
* breakfast food ‘drop offs’ which should be arranged alongside the school’s wider support for children on benefits-related free school meals, and schools must follow Public Health England’s advice on social distancing at all times

**Universal infant free school meals**

There is no requirement to continue to provide universal infant free school meals to infant pupils who are not in school.

**Meals for children returning to school**

When reception and year one children return to school they should have the option of a free meal under the universal infant free school meals policy. Meals should be available for all pupils in school as a priority, and these should also be free of charge for pupils that qualify for benefits-related free school meals.

**Free meals for further education students**

Further education institutions should continue to provide support for free meal students where their existing funding and delivery arrangements allow for this.

Further information is available in the [16 to 19 free meals in further education](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/16-to-19-funding-free-meals-in-further-education-funded-institutions-for-2019-to-2020) guidance.

**Providing meals or food parcels through your food provider**

We know that many schools and food providers are finding very effective ways to ensure that eligible children already receive healthy meals during this period. As they prepare to open more widely, schools should speak to their school catering team or provider. You should ensure that they are supported to return to school to provide food for those children attending.

In addition, you should consider with them whether to see if they can prepare meals or food parcels that could be collected by or delivered to families that are not in attendance. If you do provide meals or food parcels, ensure they are distributed in line with guidance on [social distancing](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing) at all times.

**National voucher scheme**

If your school catering service cannot provide meals or food parcels for children who are at home, you can offer vouchers to families of eligible pupils.

We have developed a national scheme to provide supermarket vouchers via the Edenred online portal. You will not have to pay for these vouchers.

Before ordering vouchers, check which pupils are eligible and would be receiving free school meals.

**How to order vouchers**

You should have received an email from Edenred with an activation code and a step-by-step guide to using the online ordering portal.

Once you have activated your account on the Edenred portal, you can begin to order vouchers.

You can:

* order a single voucher to cover a longer time frame, for example, £45 to support one eligible child over 3 weeks
* order a single voucher to cover more than one eligible child within the same household, for example, £90 to support three eligible children over 2 weeks
* set a weekly £15 rolling voucher

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

**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.

**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
* McColl’s
* Morrisons
* Tesco
* Sainsbury’s
* Asda
* Waitrose
* M&S

We recognise that it may not be convenient or possible for some families to visit one of these supermarkets and we are working to see if additional supermarkets can be added to this list.

**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, we encourage families to consider health and nutrition. The [School Food Standards](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/standards-for-school-food-in-england) and the [NHS Eat Well website](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/?tabname=recipes-and-tips) may act as a useful guide for families.

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

**Additional costs**

The payments for the national voucher scheme will be met centrally by DfE.

We understand that other approaches, such as providing food parcels or purchasing vouchers for shops not in the national scheme, may mean that schools incur additional costs. We have published guidance on the [financial support available](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-financial-support-for-schools) for schools who incur these additional costs in this way.

Schools will be able to claim up to a certain limit, depending on their number of pupils, and where they are unable to meet these additional costs from their existing resources, or which they could only meet by drawing down on reserves and undermining their long-term financial sustainability. In exceptional instances where individual schools face additional costs that are higher than the grant’s limits, schools will be able to apply to increase their limit.

**School food contracts**

Speak to your catering provider(s) about your arrangements in response to the coronavirus outbreak.

The Cabinet Office has published guidance for public bodies ([Procurement Policy Note 02/20](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/procurement-policy-note-0220-supplier-relief-due-to-covid-19)) on payment of suppliers that are at risk. It provides details on identifying suppliers that are at risk.

Inform suppliers who you consider to be at risk that they will be paid as normal (even if service delivery is disrupted or 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.

You should continue to make payments to food suppliers (that are considered at risk) for the cost of free school meals and universal infant free school meals. Payments should be based on the previous 3 months’ invoices, provided the supplier agrees to act on an open book basis and make cost data available.

This does not apply to the costs of meals usually purchased by parents for pupils who are not eligible for free school meals.

**Free school meal eligibility**

You should continue to accept and verify free school meal applications. The eligibility criteria for free school meals can be found at [apply for free school meals](https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals).

During the coronavirus outbreak, we are temporarily extending free school meals eligibility to include some groups who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF).

This temporary extension covers both children who are attending school and who are at home.

See [guidance for the temporary extension of free school meals eligibility to NRPF groups](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/guidance-for-the-temporary-extension-of-free-school-meals-eligibility-to-nrpf-groups) for more information