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Guidance

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

Updated 8 January 2021

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This publication is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools>

The latest update includes information on the support available to schools during the national lockdown beginning January 2021.

## 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
- 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.

All meals provided in school must still comply with the school food standards (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/standards-for-school-food-in-england>).

## 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. But 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.

We strongly encourage schools to work with their school catering team or food provider to provide food parcels to eligible free school meal pupils who are at home. Where school kitchens are open this should be the approach taken by schools.

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

This could include:

- providing food parcels through the school catering team or food provider
- providing vouchers for a local shop or supermarket
- using the Department for Education's national voucher scheme, which will reopen shortly

## 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 (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/free-meals-in-further-education-funded-institutions-guide-for-the-2020-to-2021-academic-year>) guidance.

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

We strongly encourage schools to work with their school catering team or food provider to provide food parcels to eligible free school meal pupils who are at home. Where school kitchens are open this should be the approach taken by schools.

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 food parcel provision at home.

There are significant benefits of providing food parcels including:

- 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
- the continuation of financial support to school caterers

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

Schools and families may find weekly collections of food 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.

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

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/standards-for-school-food-in-england>)

- cater for pupils who require special diets, for example, allergies (<https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/allergen-guidance-for-food-businesses>), 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 (<https://laca.co.uk/laca-view/free-school-meals-guidance-producing-food-parcels>) 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 food parcel which will allow parents and carers to prepare simple and healthy lunches for their children at home across the week.

Food parcels must be distributed in line with guidance on social distancing (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing>) at all times.

## Providing local vouchers

If the school has confirmed with the school catering team or food provider that they cannot provide food parcels for pupils eligible for benefits-related free school meals (FSM) who are at home, 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 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing>) at all times.

## National voucher scheme

We will open a national scheme to provide supermarket vouchers via an online portal as soon as possible. Further details will be published shortly.

Schools are strongly encouraged to work with their school catering team or food supplier to adopt a food parcel first approach. Vouchers will only be available through the national voucher scheme from the point it re-opens, however, any support provided since 4 January 2021 through food parcels or locally arranged vouchers can be claimed back from DfE.

We would encourage schools to continue working with their school catering team or food supplier to provide food parcels for the duration of the national lockdown where this remains feasible.

## 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 food 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.

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 food 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 food 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.

## Free school meal eligibility

The eligibility criteria for free school meals can be found at [apply for free school meals](https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals) (<https://www.gov.uk/apply-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 (<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.

## Support for families

Further government support (<https://www.gov.uk/find-coronavirus-support>) is available for families struggling as a result of coronavirus (COVID-19). If families need urgent help, they can contact their local council (<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-local-help>) to find out what services are available in their area.

## Covid Winter Grant Scheme

A £170 million Covid Winter Grant Scheme (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-winter-package-to-provide-further-support-for-children-and-families>) 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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