

## URGENT

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP  
Secretary of State for Education

Friday 20 March 2020

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We write to you in response to the guidance issued to schools on 19 March 2020:

### **COVID-19: free school meals guidance for schools.**

We understand that government is 'developing a national approach to providing support through supermarket and shop vouchers.' Whilst we understand the need for an immediate pragmatic approach to feeding the 1.5 million children entitled to free school meals, we urge you to consider the consequences of delegating responsibility for feeding school children entirely to families who may be faced with multiple challenges at this time, and to consider how existing food services could be utilised to support children in a better way.

Where catering services are able to operate in schools, please ensure that funds available for free school meals are invested in those catering services, rather than investing in food vouchers for supermarkets. This will allow for better purchasing in terms of food quantity and quality, and enable schools to continue to provide food and other support for the most vulnerable children.

School caterers are best placed to feed children well at this difficult time, having the skills and expertise to provide a nutritionally balanced meal, mindful of special dietary needs and allergies.

Additionally, there are consequences for jobs and the economy. If the government funds a supermarket voucher scheme rather than prioritising investment of funds in existing school meal services, catering teams will lose their jobs. Wholesale distributors who supply school meals, already hit by the loss of private sector contracts, could also lose the public sector market resulting in more job losses.

School kitchens, that might otherwise be used to prepare free school meals to vulnerable children locally, may have to close if funds are diverted elsewhere, just when they could also be used to make meals for older and housebound people having to self-isolate over an extended period. School kitchens are a vital community food infrastructure at this time of national emergency.

Please also be mindful of the long term effects of diverting free school meal funding to parents and supermarkets, and consider the long term resilience of our excellent school meal service and the health of our most vulnerable children.

Yours sincerely

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Jeanette Orrey MBE, co-Founder Food for Life and co-Chair School Food Plan Alliance

Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive, Sustain; the alliance for better food and farming

Anna Taylor OBE, Executive Director, The Food Foundation

Naomi Duncan, Chief Executive, Chefs in Schools

James Bielby, Chief Executive, Federation of Wholesale Distributors

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Dr Helen Crawley, Director, First Steps Nutrition Trust

Duncan Stephenson, Deputy Chief Executive, Royal Society for Public Health

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