

URGENT

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

Tuesday 31 March 2020

We write to you regarding your department's response to Covid-19 and free school meals and refer to your updated guidance: **COVID-19: free school meals guidance for schools** published today.

We welcome the Department's further guidance in response to the need to feed 1.3 million children entitled to free school meals. We know that local authorities, caterers, charities and community groups will appreciate the updated guidance and the clarity it brings to the challenge of ensuring that our most vulnerable children are well fed during school closures.

We would now like to make the following suggestions to ensure the government's national voucher scheme delivers our shared mission to feed our most vulnerable children well during school closures.

- You state that "vouchers should not be redeemed for any age-restricted items, such as alcohol, cigarettes or lottery tickets." We welcome this guidance but we believe that these vouchers should be restricted to food and drink items only, as the purpose of this scheme is to replace school meals. Using the vouchers on food and drink would then make it easier for families to use any other income for non-food items. We would urge you to ensure that Edenred embeds these restrictions into the voucher scheme, so that the allowance of £15 per child per week is spent on the healthy, nutritious food that you recommend. Advice on how to spend the allowance, to accompany the voucher, would be an excellent addition to the scheme. Great examples of shopping lists that meet the school food standards are already appearing on social media.
- We would like to seek clarification on whether supermarkets will provide change to families if they do not spend the full £15, recognising that supplies of core foods including milk, bread, pasta and some tinned goods have been unreliable. If not, we would advocate vouchers being provided (as with luncheon vouchers) in smaller denominations (eg 5 x £3 or 3 x £5) so that families can manage their spending more efficiently.
- We were relieved to hear that government will also continue to provide schools with funding for universal infant free school meals (UIFSM) throughout this period of closure. We know that many schools are already using UIFSM funding to support younger siblings of children entitled to free school meals and vulnerable families who are not eligible. We would urge you to encourage schools to ring-fence UIFSM so that it's used only for feeding families during this difficult time.
- We note that vouchers are for term time only. With the Easter holidays just one week away, low-income families will struggle to cover food costs. We believe that those children entitled to free school meals should continue to receive vouchers through the Easter holiday and indeed, if the crisis continues, in the summer holidays too. As stated in our previous letter (24 March) one million children have been estimated to be at risk of going hungry during school holidays. The loss of free school meals during school holidays typically adds £30-40 per week to household food spending. With even more families affected through loss of income and illness, the need to maintain support to feed children during the holidays has become imperative.

- We understand that you are working with Edenred to find additional supermarkets to join the national voucher scheme. We hope that you will consider the independent convenience store networks (eg Nisa, Spar, Bestway, Costcutter, Londis, Premier). Fruit and vegetable box schemes can also play a part and will support British farmers during this crisis. Likewise, wholesale distributors could help to make voucher spend go further. BidFood, for example, is now delivering to households to make up for the loss of business from the hospitality sector. Partnering with companies that offer home delivery has the added benefit of supporting families that are self-isolating and unable to visit the supermarket, and supports social distancing measures.

Finally, we appreciate the department's support of our school caterers and the guidance for suppliers at risk. We urge you to continue to advocate for caterers first and remind headteachers that the voucher scheme is a safety net for families where no catering provision is available.

Yours sincerely

Stephanie Wood, Founder/CEO, School Food Matters 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

Barbara Crowther, Coordinator, Children's Food Campaign

Rob Percival, Head of Policy (food and health), Soil Association