Supporting Children’s Rights to School Meals during Covid-19 Emergency

11am - 12.30pm Thursday 23 April 2020

Speakers: Louise Nichols, Brad Pearce, Jenny Rosborough, Andy Hudson
Webinar team: Stephanie Wood (Chair), Barbara Crowther (Q&A facilitator), Indu Gurung (tech support)

This webinar, chaired by Stephanie Wood of School Food Matters, brought together school leaders, local authorities, catering providers and the Department for Education to discuss the different models of delivery of school food to children normally in receipt of free school meals, and other groups of vulnerable people.

1. Rupert Bazeley-White: Operations Manager, HC3S, Hampshire

Rupert and Business Development Manager, Amanda Whatley, spoke about caterers working in partnership with local authorities and schools. In Hampshire, HC3S has been working to continue to offer school meal for children of key workers still attending while also offering lunch packages in the form of picnic boxes for students not at school. They have provided 151,000 hot meals for children of keyworkers, and vulnerable children including by offering a hot lunch ‘take out’.

They have established a set menu of meals they will be preparing over the coming weeks, and this was significantly guided by trying to make the best use of stock left from last month. They are also encouraging families to adopt this approach, and are posting weekly ‘Food Hacks and Rescue Recipes’ under the hashtag #WhatsInYourCupboard.

Questions

Rupert and Amanda responded to a selection of questions on topics including: Identifying and adapting to price increases by working with key suppliers; addressing the needs of children with special diets through a registration process and ongoing engagement with schools on the needs of their students; and; the establishment of specific timetables to ensure smooth delivery of packages in rural areas.

In the chatroom, several participants requested the shopping lists and recipes be shared across the group; as well as sharing others they had come across.
2. Louise Nichols - Headteacher, LEAP Federation, Hackney

Louise spoke about using the existing school meal service to feed the community. Since the school closures the LEAP Federation has worked with the charity *Chefs in Schools* to keep school kitchens open as hubs providing hampers that feed children and families from nine local schools from three hubs. The schools involved have made a decision not to engage with the National Voucher Scheme as many families live too far from participating supermarkets.

*Chefs in Schools* is producing weekly meal hampers for FSM children, which include: a hand of bananas, six tomatoes, a cucumber, four apples, six eggs, a loaf of bread, baked beans, four large potatoes, a freshly made curry (vegetable or meat), pasta sauces and biscuits. They are purposely bulked out with food surplus supplies to help feed the rest of the family.

Louise spoke on the importance of families coming to the hubs to collect hampers as a way to continue safeguarding check-ins for vulnerable children as well as the pleasure staff and families have from seeing each other, even at a distance. She also highlighted the possibility that deliveries might become increasingly necessary as families may be self-isolating or scared/unable to go out. They are working with *Chefs in Schools* to develop a fridge van delivery.

**Questions**

Q: Would they continue to provide these packages during the summer holidays,
A: There has not yet been a decision by the government on funding for summer holiday food, but they are looking into an existing funding stream they could tap into in order to fund a summer holiday programme – there is no confirmation as yet though.

Q: Would they accept donations of foods that are high in fats, salts, or sugar (HFSS);
A: LEAP is not accepting HFSS donations. She recognised that during this time of crisis these foods make tempting snacks, but they could not endorse them by including them in packages.

Q: Were they able to support children of families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF).
A: Louise also noted that the government has now provided guidance on supporting NRPF families; however, LEAP had made a decision to do that from the beginning. She noted there are families that fall just out of the threshold for FSM who also need support, and so LEAP’s approach has been to try to feed anyone who wants to be fed, as much as possible.

In the chatroom, participants expressed strong support for the work LEAP has been doing; as well as showing an interest in understanding the breakdown of voucher vs hamper models across England, and the number and types of schemes that have emerged.
3. Jenny Rosborough - Nutritionist, Jamie Oliver Group / Biteback2030

Jenny spoke about the work Biteback2030 and School Food Matters has been doing developing shopping lists and menu ideas to help families use the National Voucher Scheme to buy and prepare healthy food on £15. She noted that for school lunches at home to be successful, families need: a basic understanding of nutritional needs; appropriate cooking skills and equipment; variety in food served; time to prepare.

Questions

Q: Is she working with supermarkets to ensure vouchers go as far as possible
A: She explained they are in discussion with supermarkets about ways this could be done, including specials on targeted items on shopping lists, and pre-made baskets families can collect. They are also trying to get physical copies of shopping lists available at supermarkets to assist families without easy internet access

Q: Are there plans to update and change the menus
A: Jenny explained more lists are being developed and will be shared soon. They are trying to come up with a variety, in order to meet the needs of as many people as possible.

4. Andy Hudson, Department for Education

Andy spoke on the National Voucher Scheme, and about the new Public Procurement Note on protections for caterers (PPN 02/20).

Andy outlined that DfE encourages schools to continue to use their kitchen or a catering service where possible, but the National Voucher Scheme was set up as a way to support families where these services are not running. He acknowledged there had been problems with the Government’s supplier (Edenred), but stressed that people are working hard to overcome the problems and noted that already 11,000 schools have placed orders, and roughly £15 million worth of vouchers have been distributed. He also reiterated that in circumstances where the National Voucher Scheme is not appropriate for a school, they should make local arrangements that will be reimbursed by DfE - although it is expected this should not be unnecessarily more expensive.

Andy explained the PPN 02/20 has been published to provide clarity and security for public sector caterers. It is a highly technical document, but broadly speaking caterers should expect to be paid as usual until at least the end of June, even if supply is disrupted.
Questions

Q: Are there plans to provide guidance on the scheme for families with English as a second language
A: Andy confirmed this does not exist at this stage - the priority has been to ensure a clear, user friendly interface but he is happy to feed this suggestion back.

Q: Are restrictions in place to ensure that vouchers are spent on food and drink only
A: Supermarkets and families have been issued general guidance that the vouchers are only to be used for children’s food and drink however this is difficult to enforce. DfE has resisted using specialised vouchers for this programme, to reduce the risk of stigmatisation.

Q: How did DfE arrive at the figure of £15, and set the threshold for NRPF families
A: Andy explained the £15 figure was reached by factoring in that families would not be able to access the economies of scale available to Local Authorities and Catering Services. The threshold for NRPF was chosen in line with the Universal Credit threshold.

In the chatroom, participants also discussed supporting children using funding available to schools through the Universal Infant Free School Meals programme, supporting families who have applied to Universal Credit but have not yet been accepted and the provisions available in the PPN 02/20 Guidance.

Andy also acknowledged that everyone wants clarity on support through the summer holidays. DfE has nothing to announce as yet, but the department is aware this is a concern across the sector and for vulnerable families.

5. General Discussion Themes

Stephanie brought the webinar to a close by highlighting some observations and questions that arose repeatedly throughout the discussion. These included:

- The number of caterers across the country who are providing activities with meals. This is really important as it keeps children and families engaged and thinking about the food they are eating.
- Making sure no one falls through gaps - special concerns for vulnerable children, those with limited or no internet connection, and those with special diets
- The importance of evaluation and monitoring. It is especially important to understand whether engagement with the various models of provision varies according to Socio-economic Status (SES), the rate of take-up of vouchers vs food parcels, and how families are spending their vouchers.
- Learning lessons and developing a fair and effective response to this challenge is essential if we are to build resilience to future shocks to the food system.

Notes by Jackson Reynolds-Ryan, School Food Matters