Parent view of voucher scheme

Mother in Westminster:
Parent contacted SFM as her ten-year-old daughter was entitled to free school meals, but she hadn’t received vouchers. SFM explained that the vouchers would be coming but that it was taking a little time to put the system in place. Parent commented that she had looked on both her school website and the website for her local council, but had been unable to find any information or anyone to speak to.

Father in Harrow:
Had received code to activate his Edenred voucher for Morrisons. Entered the code and received notification that the voucher would be with him within the next couple of hours. Five hours later he had not received the voucher, so tried to activate the code again. He then received notification that the code had already been activated. SFM explained that there were delays in the system because it was under a huge amount of pressure, but parent very concerned that voucher had been intercepted by an intermediary and stolen. SFM assured parent that this was unlikely to be the case and that voucher should arrive soon.

London parent:
Parent contacted SFM about voucher scheme over the Easter weekend as he hadn’t received any vouchers to date and didn’t know what to do. Very difficult to explain the system as English was not the first language of the caller and he was very confused. SFM unable to ascertain which borough the caller was from or where the child went to school. Eventually managed to communicate that if caller’s child was eligible for FSM, vouchers would be arriving shortly.

Schools

School in LB Richmond
School found original information from DfE slightly ambiguous, so decided to provide food parcels until the end of the Easter holidays. The school continued with this provision, even after voucher scheme had been established, as food parcels were pre-ordered and school did not want to end up covering the cost of both parcels and vouchers. Vouchers will be distributed from Monday 20 April.

School has found the Edenred website to be incredibly slow. While there is understanding of the fact that the system is under enormous pressure, it is very frustrating. The head reports spending over an hour trying to negotiate the system on one day and not achieving any of her objectives during this time. Delays between each stage mean that it is difficult to ascertain whether the system is processing or an error has been made. On seeking advice from the helpline she found it was impossible to get through, waiting for over three-quarters of an hour on one occasion and making over 20 attempts to call, but still finding the line engaged. Head also found that the number listed on
the website referred any caller enquiring about FSM vouchers to call an alternative number. After waiting for a considerable time to get through, this message was less than helpful. The head was also astonished that the calls were costing the school a considerable amount of money owing to the fact that they were being charged at a standard rate and were not free.

The school found that ordering the vouchers for parents who could download them at home was relatively straightforward. Head reports that the order has been acknowledged as fulfilled, but there is no indication of when the vouchers should arrive. Parents are asking for clarity on this and the school is unable to help.

Ordering the vouchers to print off for parents has been more challenging. Head spent some time trying to order multiple vouchers for parents with more than one child on the same code. After encountering the error screen several times, she eventually deduced that she would have to use a separate code for each voucher i.e. for a family with two children, two separate £15 vouchers should be ordered, rather than one for £30.

In terms of processing time, vouchers ordered on 6 April were eventually available to download on Monday 13 April, but when the codes were entered on the FSM website, an error message appeared. Head deduced that this was because vouchers were not valid until Monday 20 but had no way of finding out until an update from Edenred (14 April) explained that the activation and expiry dates referred to in guidance, related to when the school could redeem codes and order vouchers, not how long the vouchers lasted for. Head suggested to Edenred representative that this needed to be clarified on the guidance, but was told that the guidance was already clear enough.

School in LB Southwark
School had been waiting for Government voucher scheme to be activated by Southwark council. However, there was concern that it would not be in place before the Easter holidays and some vulnerable families were struggling. It therefore signed up to a Tesco corporate scheme and purchased two weeks’ worth of digital vouchers to the value of £25 per child to be redeemed in store. In addition, the school is still running a food bank for vulnerable families.

Secondary School in LB Southwark
Was offering packed lunches to FSM children, but switched to Wonde over the Easter holidays. Post Easter the school is switching to Edenred.

Secondary School in LB Richmond
Experience of Edenred scheme has not been good, although school acknowledges that the system is under considerable strain with a huge backlog. School reports that Edenred have sent out an email explaining that the system is under pressure and that schools should not keep checking the order status as this is blocking the system.

Head reports that system was running more smoothly at the start of April before guidance was given that the system could be used for the Easter period. At the start of April, the process of ordering vouchers for FSM families took approximately five hours from entry of the order to receipt of the codes. At this point, the head had the codes sent direct to the school. The school then ordered the vouchers and sent them direct to parents.

Over Easter however, the school asked for the codes to be sent direct to parents so that they could choose the supermarket most convenient for them. The website then crashed until 14 April. For families redeeming the voucher, the school reports that there is a ten-minute wait to access the website and when the voucher does arrive it is often going into junk or spam folders. The school is contacting vulnerable families to remind them to check all their folders. Parents are also reporting
problems with the system. Some have not received the link; others have received the link but are having problems accessing the voucher from the code supplied.

School acknowledges that Edenred has relaxed the rules to allow higher voucher quantities, for example one order can now be made for £60 for the next four weeks.

School has also identified families at risk of food insecurity and connected them to a local fund giving out small cash grants of £500. It is also directing families to a football club in Wimbledon and the Kingston Food Hub.

School in LB of Tower Hamlets
School sign posted vulnerable families struggling to afford or find food during the crisis to nine locations across the borough that would be serving hot meals between Wednesday 8 April and Friday 17 April. Each location will be serving a maximum of 300 meals to ensure social distancing.