Parent View
Mother in Richmond on the voucher scheme
“A little frazzled today I’m close to just giving up. It just does not seem worth six hours for nothing and a drained battery.”
Parent reports that she eventually received her first voucher email at the beginning of this week (w/b 27/04/20). She tried to redeem her code on the day she received it, but after spending some considerable time online, she was no further forward.

She explained that once she’d clicked on a link on the opening page, she then had to wait for approximately an hour before progressing to the page where her code was input. Once the next page was reached she entered her code but was told there was an error. She went through this process four times before the system eventually crashed. When the code was finally accepted, she managed to select her £15 Sainsbury’s voucher, but then encountered the error message again and was once more thrown off the system. She reported that other families had had the same issues.

Mother also commented that parents who had managed to get their vouchers were having trouble using them. Marks & Spencer and smaller Sainsbury’s stores had refused to accept them. One mother of four children had to go to a large Sainsbury’s store (over two miles away from her home) in order to use the vouchers. She has since discovered that a closer Waitrose store accepts the vouchers, but she is reluctant to use it as the store is more expensive and her voucher does not stretch as far.

London Mother via Email
Parent contacted SFM via email as had misunderstood the voucher system and hadn’t been able to contact anyone at her child’s school. She received the code, but had not understood that she needed to enter it into the website. She had therefore taken a screenshot of the code and tried to use it at Asda. Asda staff members explained what she needed to do, but parent very stressed as she had previously deleted the email. SFM suggested that she did a search on her mail system for the voucher, then suggested she contact her school to see if it held the code number on record. As she was concerned that she would get no response from school, SFM also signposted her to the Edenred contact email address for parents and carers, to see if the code could be reissued.

Schools
Primary School in LB Richmond
Head increasingly frustrated as she is being bombarded by emails from parents re the voucher scheme. When the codes are eventually received, parents are unable to activate the codes because the website is overloaded. Parents are unaware that this is the cause of the problem because they simply encounter an error message. They believe that the problem lies with the code itself and are therefore querying this with the head.
When parents are successful in inputting codes, some of the vouchers are taking up to four days to come through. She has heard that parents are experimenting with opting for vouchers from different stores to see whether this has an impact on delivery time.

Head phoned helpline to enquire about above issues. After more than an hour on the phone she was told that the system wasn’t working so Edenred couldn’t look into specific queries. However, head reports that the Edenred contact was very pleasant and promised to phone her back later, which she did. The system was still not working, so has promised that a more senior team member will call back once they are in a position to help. Edenred contact provided head with her email address so that she can reach her again if necessary.

By Thursday (30 April), head was being asked for help redeeming the vouchers by parents with no access to smart phones. In order to beat the queue, she got up at 2.42am to try to redeem the codes. There was still a short queue to get on the site, but when she got onto the site she redeemed the first code quite quickly. The remainder took much longer, but she was successful.

She reports that by Thursday 30th, approximately half of her parents had managed to download this week’s vouchers.

**Primary School in LB Southwark**

School in an area of need with 144 vulnerable children listed on its roll of almost 500. An additional 15 families have been added since the lockdown began and a further eight families have been added to the FSM register. The head has also had conversations with two families that are reluctant to take advantage of the system, but are definitely in need. All vulnerable children are receiving a weekly check-in from a member of the pastoral team.

Food is an issue for many families in normal circumstances, so head knew that it would become a major problem from the moment of lockdown. Head distributed the school fruit and breakfast stock on the last day before lockdown and was shocked at the level of desperation of the families. School is feeding some children three times a day, sending food parcels home. Other groups and organisations, such as Mercato Market, are providing the parcels for vulnerable families. Some families have children at other schools in the area, several of which are delivering hot meals to the most vulnerable, so some students are benefitting from these. The school is also baking each day and sending home baked goods with those in school.

Due to the level of need, school had set up a system for FSM families and those with no recourse to public funds before the government scheme was launched. They provided them with Tesco vouchers worth £15 per child per week. School raised money for the scheme through the Just Giving website. Tesco provided vouchers that could be used from the parents’ phones. However, school heard that it would need to change to the government system if it wanted to claim money back (school has a budget surplus from sale of land).

There is some frustration about the Edenred voucher scheme, as many families still haven’t received their vouchers and are struggling to get access to the website. The process is taking so long that some parents are running out of data and can’t afford to buy more. The school is therefore giving out its Wi-Fi details, so that parents can stand outside the railings to try to connect.

School has a long-standing relationship with Magic Breakfast, which caters for 200-250 children each day. Parents are very grateful for the breakfast food parcels. These are either collected from school or
delivered to the homes of the most vulnerable or those self-isolating. Parents particularly pleased with the addition of a voucher for fresh milk that was included in the latest parcels.

**Primary School in LB Southwark**

Head reports that her job largely revolves around the voucher scheme at present. The first batch of vouchers has only just (this week) been distributed, so in the meantime the school has spent £3000 of the school budget on buying vouchers for families from a different organisation. School will now claim this back.

Head very concerned about vulnerable families, such as those with no recourse to public funds. Fortunately the school has a strong relationship with the community and so the head is confident that she hears of families that need help.

School originally opted to provide packed lunches for its 150 FSM children. However, it became clear that families were worried about leaving home. The school has therefore moved over to the voucher scheme, but is still working with its caterer (ISS) to provide a hot meal for children in school. ISS is also providing food parcels for the most vulnerable, mainly for collection, but some are delivered.

Breakfast is being provided for vulnerable families in conjunction with Magic Breakfast. Volunteers from a local community organisation are helping with distribution.

**Primary School in LB Southwark**

School has ordered Edenred vouchers, but vouchers are only just beginning to filter through to parents. Because this is taking so long, the school has plugged the gap by sending two weeks’ worth of vouchers via Wonde.

**Secondary School in LB Southwark**

Has 711 student on role, of which 256 qualify for FSM. School reports that a further nine families have self-identified in the last couple of weeks, but approval is pending.

**London Boroughs**

**LB Lambeth**

A meeting with a group of head teachers showed that all had experienced similar issues over the past weeks. Some voucher codes are not working and some vouchers have still not come through. Some schools have felt the need to refer vulnerable families to Brixton food bank. There is frustration with Edenred over poor communication via email and the telephone helpline.

A different group of heads (another cluster) reported that getting vouchers has been incredibly time consuming for schools and they are dreading going through it again if/when they are applying for another four-week supply.

Some schools have very few admin staff working, and there are two small schools who have no admin staff in school at all so the Headteachers themselves have had to spend many hours working on the voucher scheme.

One school in the cluster is providing lunch hampers for 95 vulnerable families supplied by their caterer and they have been happy with this service.
Community Organisations

Community Organiser, PACT
Contacted SFM looking for advice on how to help families access food vouchers when they are not easily able to get online. Specifically, families that may not have access to the Internet, do not own suitable devices, or struggle to use the Internet due to learning difficulties, language issues or disabilities.

Family 1:
Single parent with 2 children, one of which has downs syndrome so is high risk. Her children's school is in a different borough to where she currently lives in temporary housing. Both of her children are eligible for free school meals. She didn't have a smart phone, internet or any credit on her phone to contact the school for the first few weeks of the crisis. A friend has now lent her a smart phone, but she has problems with digital literacy and English is her second language so she has trouble understanding any emails sent to her by the school. The school was aware of her needs because they were providing printed worksheets for her daughter. They sent her a form last week that she had to fill in and post back (with information they should already have), a friend helped post it this Monday so she didn't have to go out. I also contacted the school and did not receive any response. She is still yet to receive any food support from her school. She has been relying on food banks to feed her family. Luckily, she is amazingly resourceful.

Family 2:
Single parent, 4 children ranging from 2 - 14. She suffers from severe anxiety, made worse by the current crisis. She has been given school food vouchers to use in two different supermarkets, so she has to take all of her children out to two different shops to get their food. She also only has the small branches of supermarkets near her which are less well stocked and more expensive. This is very stressful for her.