News from schools and local authorities during Covid-19
Week 12

Schools
School in LB Richmond
Approximately 60 children have returned to school, but the caterer is only offering packed lunches, despite the school cook being present and wanting to provide a hot lunch for the children. The packed lunches offered are being made off-site and delivered, when they could be prepared at school.

Local Authorities
LB Lambeth - Brixton School Cluster
Primary schools and Early Years settings opened to more pupils from 1 June (Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6). There are now 900 children attending school in Lambeth, compared to 37,000 on roll. New routines have run smoothly with schools using different entrances and exits for drop-offs and a good system of social bubbles has been established. Schools are asking their caterers to provide packed lunches for children or cooked meals served in disposable tubs in order to minimise the need for additional staff and to keep arrangements simple. There is some concern, however as to how they can keep these lunches healthy, varied and nutritious.

There has been positive feedback from parents about schools being organised and welcoming. Numbers have been low to start with, with many parents still very hesitant, but they are gradually increasing. Schools are requesting up to two weeks’ notice of children’s return in order to organise social groups, ensure appropriate staffing etc.

Headteachers have been briefed by the local public health team that Lambeth is now seeing less than five C-19 cases a day, most in NHS settings, care homes and amongst older people. The public health advice is that schools are a low risk setting for transmission. This information gives senior leadership more confidence to encourage staff and children back to school.

Schools and the LA have noted that higher income families are happier for their children to return to school. It’s believed that they feel more confident in the risk assessment process and may have fewer family members in vulnerable groups. St Saviour’s Primary, which has comparatively low pupil premium numbers, has had 22 out of 30 Reception children in school this week and is expecting 29 out of 30 children in Year 6 to return next week. Vauxhall Primary, which has a high pupil premium, has a total of only 19 children back in school.

Schools have really valued the breakfast box offer from GSTC/SFM. Many schools continue to use the voucher system for children at home and some families are still reporting problems with vouchers, with some shops not accepting them. There is still concern that some families haven’t been accessing the free food offers, even where there are high levels of deprivation or NRPF. According to school teams, this is for a range of reasons including issues of trust, culture and language barriers. With these families, the drop-in style of distribution has been more successful as it allows parents to choose food that they want from a selection.
LB Hounslow
There are reports that low-income families who were starting to send their children back to school are now not doing so. This is because if they stay at home they receive the £15 voucher, whereas for many, if they go into school they only get a sandwich. Even schools with proper kitchens aren’t always opening them as they cannot cook and serve safely within the 2m rules. Obviously if a good hot meal was offered, many families would be sending their children to school, but for many schools that isn’t an option. Families find that £15 goes a lot further when spent in a shop, so many low-income families are choosing to keep children at home.

Caterers
Federation of Wholesale Distributors
Federation conducted a survey of 130 of its members, 67% of which supply to education. The crisis has had a huge impact on the 130 businesses surveyed, with 61 saying that they believe that they are at high risk of folding by the end of the year. Of these 61, 58% have education contracts worth £212 million in total. Other points gleaned from the survey were as follows:

- If some businesses fold, in the short time other businesses will be able to pick up the trade. However, in the medium term this will be more difficult due to specific products required in the education sector.
- There are currently issues with payments from schools as many accounting teams have been furloughed. In secondary schools there is currently no income from ParentPay.
- Manufacturers have rationalised product ranges, so a narrower range of products is being produced. This mainly affects dairy and short-life ambient products.
- Drop sizes are small due to the reduced number of children in attendance (20% of normal; up from 3% during lockdown). This makes it commercially impossible to be profitable at the contract prices agreed based on volume.
- Product substitutions are an issue. For example, a school may request a specific brand of yogurt, but the numbers are insufficient for the wholesaler to hit the minimum order required by the supplier. Sensible substitutions are not always being accepted.
- Menus have been simplified.
- Short-dated stock. FWD has requested an extension to the Best Before Date (if it’s ok to consume) to avoid food waste. Difficult to repurpose school packs to retail or other demand opportunities.

Contract caterer working across England
Caterer has decided to offer packed lunches in all schools as they begin to reopen, assessing the new conditions before they progress to hot food. Caterer is trialling hot meals at a school in Richmond from next week, but many schools are opting for packed lunches in any case as it’s easier to serve food in the classrooms. Caterer is still providing special schools with hot food.

Caterer is providing food parcels to some Richmond and Kingston schools (about 700 per week), plus the picnic bags. However, the numbers of children in schools is very low, so they are working from hubs. Only approximately 25% of the catering staff are still at work. Caterer is finding that the rules and funding arrangements from lockdown are making the return to school very difficult. Whilst the caterer is keen to increase the number of schools able to serve hot meals, the small numbers of children returning mean that this will be difficult to achieve across the board before September at the earliest. Caterer has hopes that they will get back to serving hot food soon. All the plans and preparation have been put in place, but schools are feeling their way back slowly.
Community Groups

Newcastle

There is a clear feeling of anxiety coming from parents who are on a very minimal budget and are already facing financial hardship as a result of COVID-19 as they approach the summer holidays. We have been speaking with parents who are really worried that they won’t be getting the school meals vouchers and the food support that they have had because of COVID-19 might stop as lockdown ends and restrictions are eased. They feel that they have had all this amazing support and that it might all disappear in one go and leave them not being able to feed their children.

Burnley

We have managed to secure further surplus food supplies from our partnership working with FareShare during the pandemic, however, we are extremely concerned about further spikes in demand due to the cessation of the school vouchers in a few weeks’ time, which will leave many families reliant again on the foodbank and once the furlough schemes change in August and cease in October we predict we will be inundated with referrals. Our main concern will be how to keep up with the demand as all those families will need our support, which will put a huge strain on our foodbank.

Leeds

Leeds has funding for holiday hunger programmes over the summer but this will not cover all the children eligible for FSM let alone the additional vulnerable children there are at the moment. There are lots of families struggling who are not eligible for FSM e.g. asylum seeker families who are not eligible for free school meals but desperately need the support too.