

Research Briefing

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School meals in England during the Covid-19 pandemic

The material in this briefing formed part of a previous version of the Library briefing on [School meals and nutritional standards](#). It is republished here for historical interest.

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Summary

School meals during the coronavirus pandemic

During the initial coronavirus lockdown, schools were closed to most pupils, and meals or food vouchers were provided to children staying at home.

The provision of support outside of term time has been contentious issue during the pandemic. Vouchers were provided during the 2020 Easter, May half term and summer holidays. [A Covid Winter Grant Scheme](#), run by councils in England, provided support from December 2020-April 2021.

Most pupils were again not in school during the national lockdown that began in January 2021. Families entitled to free school meals were offered food parcels or vouchers, funded by the Government.

1.1

School meal support

Closures in 2020

Most pupils stayed at home during the early part of the Covid-19 pandemic in spring 2020. From 23 March 2020, schools in England remained open where necessary, only for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children, including:

- Those with a social worker
- Looked-after children (ie those in local authority care)
- Those with an education, health and care (EHC) plan because they have complex special educational needs.

A phased re-opening of schools began on 1 June 2020. Full reopening of schools took place from September 2020.

The Library briefing [Coronavirus and schools: FAQs](#), provides more information.¹

School meals during spring 2020 lockdown

Schools were expected to provide meal options for all children who were in schools, which were free of charge to children who were eligible for free school meals.

Under normal circumstances, schools do not provide free school meals to eligible children who are not in school. But during the initial lockdown and phased reopening, the Government expected schools to continue supporting children eligible for benefits-related free school meals who were at home. This could be done through food packages, or a voucher scheme.²

Provision of school meals in 2020/21

Department for Education guidance on [Providing free school meals during the Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#) was last updated on 5 October 2021. In spring 2021, as during the 2020 period when most children were at home, children eligible for benefits-based free school meals were able to receive either vouchers, or food parcels if offered by their school.

¹ House of Commons Library, [Coronavirus and schools: FAQs](#), 30 September 2021, CBP 8915

² Department for Education, [Providing free school meals during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#), 28 May 2020

1.2

Voucher scheme

The Department for Education (DfE) announced on 31 March 2020 that children in England who were usually eligible for free school meals but were at home, would be [eligible for weekly £15 vouchers](#) to spend in supermarkets while schools were closed because of the coronavirus.³

If a school catering service could not provide meals or food parcels, an alternative should be offered, and the voucher scheme was set up for this purpose.⁴

The voucher scheme was funded centrally by the DfE and was available for the adult with caring responsibility for a child.

The scheme operated through the company Edenred's portal. Guidance stated that schools would receive an activation email and then be able to generate vouchers. An alternative approach was to send an eGift card for a particular supermarket.

Concerns were raised during the lockdown period about the operation of the voucher scheme, with problems reported including families not receiving vouchers and instances of the vouchers not working at checkouts.⁵

Vouchers during the school holidays

Easter and May half term 2020 holidays

It was originally announced that the vouchers would operate during term-time only. [Concerns were raised](#) about this, such as by Kevin Courtney, the joint General Secretary of the National Education Union, who said: “families on low incomes will need access to school meals during this [Easter] fortnight, particularly as food banks are seriously overstretched and it is much harder to shop affordably at the moment.”⁶

In the daily Number 10 press briefing on 4 April 2020, the then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove, announced that [the position had changed](#) and that the vouchers would be available over the Easter holidays.⁷

³ [Voucher scheme launches for schools providing free school meals](#), Department for Education press release, 31 March 2020

⁴ Department for Education, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): free school meals guidance for schools](#), 31 March 2020

⁵ BBC News, [Coronavirus: Families still waiting for free school meal vouchers](#), 30 April 2020; BBC News, [Coronavirus: 'Humiliation' as school meal vouchers fail at till](#), 7 May 2020; TES, [Edenred blames 'poor data' for 40k missing FSM vouchers](#), 4 June 2020

⁶ [Coronavirus: Pupils won't get free school meal vouchers during Easter holidays](#), Schools Week, 31 March 2020

⁷ [Free school meal vouchers WILL now be available over Easter](#), Schools Week, 4 March 2020

Questions were raised in Parliament about whether the scheme would be extended to the May half term and summer holidays. In response, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the DfE did not confirm ongoing support:

Vicky Ford: Ordinarily, provision for free school meals (FSM) is during term-time only. However, during the Easter holidays, the department met the costs of offering FSM to eligible pupils not attending school during term-time weeks. This was in recognition of the unprecedented levels of disruption and uncertainty for schools during this time.⁸

In evidence to the Education Committee on 27 May 2020, however, the Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, said the voucher scheme would continue over the May half term.⁹

Summer holidays

Attention then focused on whether support would be provided during the 2020 summer holidays. On 9 June 2020, the Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, told the House:

We are looking not only at the summer but much more over the longer term. We have never traditionally provided free school meals all the way through the summer, but the DWP has put in an extra £6.5 billion to support those families who are most vulnerable. We will continue to work with the DWP, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to continue to support those families who are most vulnerable.¹⁰

The issue of support over the summer holidays gained particular prominence on 15 June 2020, when the England [footballer Marcus Rashford published an open letter to MPs](#) in support of extending the voucher scheme over the summer holidays,¹¹ followed by a further [article in the Times](#).¹²

The Department for Education published a blog post on 15 June 2020 reasserting that the [scheme would not continue](#) during the summer break. The piece drew attention to a new [£63 million local authority welfare assistance scheme](#) that has been announced to provide help to those who were struggling to afford food and other essentials during the pandemic.^{13,14}

On 16 June 2020, however, the Education Secretary announced in the House that the Government would provide additional funding to enable children who

⁸ [PQ 47497, 20 May 2020](#)

⁹ Schools Week, [Rotas for primary pupils, U-turn on FSM vouchers and PPE concerns – Gibb at education committee](#), 27 May 2020

¹⁰ [HC Deb 9 Jun 2020 c184-185](#)

¹¹ Marcus Rashford, [Open letter to MPs](#), 15 June 2020

¹² Times, [Marcus Rashford: Ending child poverty is a bigger trophy than any in football](#), 16 June 2020

¹³ Department for Education, [Free school meal availability](#), 15 June 2020

¹⁴ MHLCG, Defra, DWP, [£63 million for local authorities to assist those struggling to afford food and other essentials](#), 11 June 2020

were eligible for free school meals to claim a [six-week voucher](#) over the summer holidays.¹⁵

Autumn term 2020 and support in 2021

Debate about the funding of school meals continued in the autumn term of 2020, when coronavirus restrictions were again imposed. The immediate focus was on October half term, but also on school holidays in the longer term, with the coronavirus pandemic ongoing.

A [parliamentary petition](#), opened by Marcus Rashford, focused on ending child food poverty, expanding access to free school meals, as well as meals and activities during the holidays, received more than a million signatures.¹⁶

An [Opposition day debate](#) on free school meals was held on 21 October 2020. The Opposition motion required the Government to continue directly funding provision of free school meals over the school holidays until Easter 2021. It was defeated by 322 votes to 261.¹⁷

On 8 November 2020, the Government announced [£170m of funding for a new £170m Covid Winter Grant Scheme](#), to be run by councils in England. The funding was ring-fenced, with at least 80% earmarked to support with food and bills, to cover December 2020-March 2021. This was later extended to mid-April 2021. Councils were asked to direct funding to families most in need, while schools continued to provide free meals during term-time.

The Government also announced that the Holiday Activities and Food programme (HAFP), which provides food and activities for disadvantaged children, would be expanded from its previous pilots (see section 4.5) to cover the whole of England, during Easter, summer and Christmas in 2021.¹⁸

The DfE has published [guidance for local areas on HAFP](#). This states that provision should be offered to all pupils eligible for and receiving benefit-based free school meals, although attendance is voluntary.

Providers can also offer places to other vulnerable children and young people, at the DfE's discretion and subject to a cap of 15% of their funding.

In September 2021, the Government launched a [Household Support Fund](#), which would provide £500 million to local authorities, to provide small grants to people in need of food, clothing, and utilities during the coming winter.¹⁹

¹⁵ [HC Deb 16 Jun 2020 c715](#)

¹⁶ House of Commons Petition, [End child food poverty – no child should be going hungry](#)

¹⁷ [HC Deb 21 October 2020 c1130-1176](#)

¹⁸ Department for Work and Pensions, [New winter package to provide further support for children and families](#), 8 November 2020

¹⁹ Department for Education, [Government launches £500m support for vulnerable households over winter](#), 30 September 2021

Renewed support during the early 2021 lockdown

On 4 January 2021, the Prime Minister announced a [national lockdown](#), following a rapid rise in coronavirus cases. Schools were again closed to most pupils.²⁰

The Education Secretary subsequently announced that families entitled to free school meals would [again be offered food parcels or vouchers](#), funded by the Government.²¹

As during the spring 2020 national lockdown, the Government expected schools to continue supporting children eligible for benefits-related free school meals who were at home during term time, as well as those in school.

Significant concerns were raised about the content of some school meal parcels provided to parents, including a renewed campaign from Marcus Rashford for higher quality provision.²² The children's Minister, Vicky Ford, [tweeted](#) that some parcels being provided were “completely unacceptable.”²³

Vouchers, again provided by Edenred, became available in mid-January.

Alongside funding to cover benefits-related free school meals, schools could claim funding of £3.50 per week for each pupil receiving lunch parcels at home. For pupils who received vouchers, schools could claim up to £15 per pupil each week.

The guidance also stated that vouchers or parcels would not be provided during February half term:

Schools do not need to provide lunch parcels or vouchers during the February half-term. There is wider government support in place to support families and children outside of term-time through the [Covid Winter Grant Scheme](#).²⁴

Extended eligibility for free school meals

During the coronavirus outbreak, [eligibility for free school meals was extended](#) to **some** groups of children who have no recourse to public funds

²⁰ Prime Minister's Office, [Prime Minister's address to the nation: 4 January 2021](#)

²¹ Department for Education, [Education Secretary outlines plans to support young people](#), 6 January 2021

²² See, for example, Sky News, [Minister brands free school meals hamper sent to mother 'completely unacceptable'](#), 12 January 2021

²³ [Vicky Ford MP, 12 January 2021](#)

²⁴ Department for Education, [Providing school meals during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#), 13 January 2021

(NRPF). In March 2022, the Government announced that this extension would be permanent.²⁵

1.3

National Audit Office report

In December 2020, the National Audit Office published a report on the [free school meal voucher scheme](#). The report looked at some of the problems experienced with the scheme, particularly in the early part of the pandemic, parental access to participating stores and the overall cost, which was then forecast to be no more than £384 million.²⁶

²⁵ Department for Education, [Providing free school meals to families with no recourse to public funds](#), 9 June 2022; UK Parliament, [Update on Children with no recourse to public funds: Statement UIN HCWS714](#), 24 March 2022

²⁶ National Audit Office, [Investigation into the free school meals voucher scheme](#), 2 December 2020

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