

URGENT

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education

Tuesday 24 March 2020

We write to you regarding your department's response to Covid-19 and free school meals and refer to your publication **COVID-19: free school meals guidance for schools**.

We recognise and appreciate the Department's immediate and pragmatic response to the need to feed 1.3 million children entitled to free school meals. We are heartened by the response of local authorities, caterers, charities and community groups working tirelessly to ensure that every school has a feeding programme in place from day one of school closures.

We have learned this week that further guidance is needed from government to allay fears around school funding and cash flow, and around support for vulnerable families outside school term time.

- Please confirm that the block grant funding for Universal Infant Free School meals will be allocated as usual even though schools are currently closed. We recommend that DfE communicates this clearly to schools, and that headteachers are given the freedom to use the funds to provide food for vulnerable families in their communities. It will also allow any surplus to be used for siblings and other children in need.

Why is this important? We know that many eligible families have delayed registering for benefits-related free school meals because infant meals are free. These families fall outside your guidance and schools are concerned that if they provide meals for the children they identify as needing support they may not be covered by government funding.

- Your guidance describes a national approach to providing support through supermarket or shop vouchers. We expressed in our letter dated Friday 20 March our concerns around promoting this scheme over school catering solutions. Please confirm that DfE regards vouchers as a last resort catering solution and that the advice on social media will be changed to reflect this.

Why is this important? At time of writing, the only message on social media to families receiving free school meals states: "From now, schools will be able to order vouchers directly from supermarkets and shops in their communities" As stated in our letter of 20 March, the school catering networks are trusted partners of schools and local authorities, who understand school food better than anyone. We want to advocate partnering with them as the best route to emergency provision. Whilst we understand that it may not be possible in every location, catering suppliers have expressed concern to government that their businesses could fail if all support is routed via supermarkets.

- We have been unable to find any government guidance on the value of vouchers, should schools need to use them where a catering solution is not available. Whilst we appreciate that this scheme is a work in progress, schools need more information to allow them to make informed decisions on how to proceed.

Why is this important? Schools are concerned that the current allowance of £2.30 per meal will not cover food costs for families who cannot benefit from economies of scale. Co-Op Academies Trust is providing £20 per week per child.

- With the Easter holidays just two weeks away, low-income families will struggle to cover food costs. We believe that those children entitled to free school meals should continue to receive support through the Easter holiday and indeed, if the crisis continues, in the summer holidays too.

Why is this important? One million children have been estimated to be at risk of going hungry during school holidays. The loss of free school meals during school holidays typically adds £30-40 per week to household food spending. With even more families affected through loss of income and illness, the need to maintain support to feed children during the holidays has become imperative.

Finally, the government's emergency measures announced last night could leave parents fearful of approaching the school gate to collect the food provided. Please provide assurances to families that collecting food from school is a legitimate reason to leave home.

Yours sincerely

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