



2020-0021947VFPO

**Vicky Ford MP**

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

Sanctuary Buildings 20 Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT  
tel: 0370 000 2288 [www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus](http://www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus)

Barbara Crowther  
Children's Food Campaign  
By email: [barbara@sustainweb.org](mailto:barbara@sustainweb.org)

9 June 2020

Dear Barbara,

Thank you for your letter of 15 May, addressed to both myself and the Secretary of State, about vouchers for pupils on free school meals (FSM) following school closures during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. I would be grateful if you could share my reply with your co-signatories.

May I begin by wishing you and your co-signatories well in these challenging and troubling times.

We remain committed to ensuring that no child should go hungry as a result of the measures that we have introduced to protect the NHS and save lives, and we appreciate you raising these concerns.

Policy on school food and free school meals is devolved and so the support I outline below is applicable for England only. In Wales, they have combined funding for breakfast and lunch to arrive at the weekly payment of £19.50 (£3.90 per school day) per pupil.

In England, we have said that schools are best placed to make decisions about the most appropriate free school meal arrangements for eligible pupils during this period.

In the first instance, we are asking schools to speak to their catering teams and food suppliers about making food parcel arrangements for children staying at home, as we believe this is the best way to ensure children are continuing to receive healthy meals.

Where this is not possible, schools can use our national voucher scheme or, alternatively, can set up their own voucher arrangements where the national scheme is not suitable. For example, in areas that are not well served by the supermarkets on our national scheme. Schools using their own voucher scheme can be reimbursed through the school's fund. The guidance, 'School funding: exceptional costs associated with the coronavirus (COVID-19) for the period March to July 2020', sets out how we will compensate schools which incur these additional costs in providing FSM or vouchers to pupils while schools are closed. A copy of the guidance is available at: [tinyurl.com/QQYnJ9m](http://tinyurl.com/QQYnJ9m).

Provision for free schools meals is ordinarily term time only, however, costs of the national voucher scheme to provide free school meals for eligible pupils was met over the Easter holiday and May half-term break. This was in recognition of the unprecedented levels of disruption and uncertainty for schools during this time. We have no plans to extend free school meal availability into future holiday periods, including the school summer holiday.

We have been working tirelessly with Edenred to resolve any outstanding technical problems so that children eligible for FSM are supported quickly. We have seen significant improvements as a result of this work and Edenred reported that, on Monday 8 June, over £139 million worth of vouchers had been converted into supermarket gift cards by schools and families. Edenred have also reported that 17,500 schools have placed orders for the scheme, as of Tuesday 26 May.

In addition, we are committed to supporting schools and their pupils who would usually benefit from the department's national school breakfast programme, all of whom should now have received an email with advice on how to continue to support pupils who would normally receive a healthy breakfast at school. Be this by continuing to run breakfast provision or by arranging breakfast food parcels. At present, more than 830 schools in disadvantaged areas are registered to receive breakfast deliveries from the programme.

Furthermore, we remain committed to supporting children and families through our 2020 Holiday Activities and Food programme. We know that COVID-19 will have an impact on the delivery of the programme, but we have worked, and will continue to work, with our coordinators to ensure that the programme goes ahead and that it will support thousands of children and families through the 2020 summer school holiday.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, we are temporarily extending free school meal eligibility to include some children of groups who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF).

These groups are:

- children of Zambrano carers
- children of families with no recourse to public funds with a right to remain in the UK on grounds of private and family life under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights
- children of families receiving support under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 who are also subject to a no recourse to public funds restriction.

These groups are also subject to a maximum income threshold of £16,190 per annum. We are also temporarily extending eligibility to children of a subset of failed asylum seekers supported under Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. This group is not subject to a maximum household earnings threshold.

This extension is temporarily in place to support families facing difficulties due to the current unique circumstances. It covers both children who are attending school and children who are at home.

Schools will also continue to accept FSM applications from any newly eligible pupils. We want to make sure as many eligible pupils as possible are receiving their FSM, and to make it as simple as possible for schools and local authorities to determine eligibility. To support this, we provide an eligibility checking system to make the checking process as quick and straightforward as possible and have developed a model registration form to help schools encourage parents to sign up for free school meals. We also provide guidance to Jobcentre Plus advisers so that they can make Universal Credit recipients aware that they may also be entitled to wider benefits, including FSM.

Thank you for writing about this important matter. I hope this reply is useful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vicky Ford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

**Vicky Ford MP**  
**Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families**