



2020-00VFPO

Vicky Ford MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

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TO ALL MPs in England

Dear Colleague,

Free school meals provision during the coronavirus outbreak

We know that schools, children and parents are concerned about the impact of school closures on pupils eligible for benefits-related free school meals (FSM).

We are encouraging schools to continue supporting eligible pupils by providing meals or food parcels through their existing food providers wherever possible, and we are aware that there are some excellent examples of this. I would like to thank all those schools who are continuing to provide meals and food parcel offers locally. They have shown that this can be an important way to help maintain contact with, and support for, children and young people in their local area at this unprecedented time.

I would also like to thank the Department's Breakfast Club providers, Family Action with Magic Breakfast, who are continuing to support families with free breakfast provision in many of the schools they work with especially those in disadvantaged areas.

However, we recognise that providing meals and food parcels is not a practicable option for all schools and we are keen that school leaders have the flexibility to determine the best support for families in their communities. That is why on 31 March we launched a national scheme for schools to provide supermarket vouchers to eligible pupils, with costs covered by the Department for Education.

National voucher scheme for free school meals

Our scheme enables us to provide vouchers on a national scale to help ensure that we can meet the needs of those pupils who are eligible for free school meals. The vouchers are worth £15 a week per child, which is higher than the amount schools usually receive for free school meals.

The scheme is an online service for schools, allowing them to place orders on behalf of parents and carers. The school has flexibility to order in line with the needs of their eligible families, and to fit with any other support they may be providing for a family. Schools can choose from two options:

- Firstly schools can order 'direct to parent': if the school has a parent email address, they can set up an order that sends an email direct to the parent / carer, which contains a unique eCode. This allows the parent to select their preferred supermarket e-gift card, which is emailed to the parent. The parent can then use the e-gift card in the supermarket. The e-gift card can be carried on a phone or tablet and scanned by the checkout assistant.
- Secondly they can order 'direct to school': this allows the schools to order a batch of codes that can either be emailed on to parents, or they can be turned into e-gift cards by the school and sent to the parent. The school can print and post/deliver the e-gift card, if the parent doesn't have internet or mobile email access.

All e-gift cards are the same as other e-gift cards used in supermarkets, so there is no stigma attached to their use.

The vouchers can currently be spent in a variety of supermarkets. Initially, the scheme includes supermarkets that already have e-gift card arrangements in place with Edenred, including Asda, Sainsbury's, Tesco, Morrisons, M&S and Waitrose. Today we delighted to confirm that Aldi will be added to the list of supermarkets from week commencing 27th April. Where families are unable to access any of these supermarkets, schools are able to buy vouchers for other retailers and we will refund the cost. We are working to add other retailers to this list as soon as possible, as part of this, we need to ensure that any additional retailers have suitable infrastructure to provide and accept e-gift cards.

We are monitoring the use of the scheme on a daily basis. Voucher codes are being processed and many thousands of families are already redeeming them. So far, Edenred have indicated that over 11,000 schools have placed orders for codes under this scheme, and over £11 million worth of codes have been converted into supermarket e-gift cards by schools and families.

At the moment our supplier is experiencing incredibly high demand on the system and we are working with them to ensure that orders are being received and processed most effectively. Schools can support us by:

- **Ordering a single eCode to cover a longer time period:** Where it is appropriate for the family, schools can create an eCode to cover a period of up to four weeks in one go.
- **Ordering a single eCode to cover more than one eligible child:** For example, a family with three eligible children could receive an eCode for £180 to cover a four-week period, instead of 3 individual £15 eCodes per child per week.

We know that many MPs have received queries from schools and constituents about the delivery of this scheme. Edenred are therefore setting up a dedicated hotline and email address for MPs so that these queries can be addressed swiftly. The phone number and email address will be confirmed shortly.

We know that further education institutions are already supporting many students who are entitled to free meals, and we will provide information on arrangements for this sector shortly.

You will understand that no system of this magnitude to provide school meals has ever been implemented in such a short period of time before. Our supplier continues to work day and night to process orders and develop the system capability and performance for the weeks ahead. We would like to thank schools for their continued patience while we implement this new scheme, and their continued determination in supporting the families who need it most.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Vicky Ford" with a small dash at the end. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Vicky Ford MP
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