

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

The Rt Hon Vicky Ford MP  
Minister of State for Schools

Monday 22 June 2020

---

We write to you regarding your department's decision to set up the £120 million Covid Summer Food Fund. We welcome this move and would like to thank you and your department for making this vital step to support more than 1.3 million children, entitled to free school meals, during the summer holidays.

We anticipate that you are working on comprehensive guidance on the Covid Summer Food Fund and would therefore like you to confirm the following:

1. During the recent commons debate, you stated that the Covid Summer Food Fund is to enable children eligible for free school meals to claim a six-week voucher. SchoolsWeek<sup>1</sup> later reported that DfE had said families would be provided with a voucher "... which schools will be able to order before the end of term." **Can you please confirm whether there will be a mechanism for families who become eligible for free school meals during the school holidays to apply for support?**

**Why is this important?** The most recent data on free school meal eligibility/uptake in England dates back to January 2019. We know that since lockdown there have been at least 1.8 million new applications for Universal Credit<sup>2</sup>. As the furlough scheme is tapered, more and more families are likely to be faced with redundancy and find themselves with significantly reduced or no income over the summer months. In Scotland alone, the number of children eligible for free school meals has risen by 53,000 since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

2. On 6 April, eligibility for free school meals has been temporarily extended to families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) until 'schools have reopened to all children'. The maximum income threshold of £7,400 was increased to £16,190 on 28 May following legal action<sup>4</sup> but the government guidance on eligibility has not been updated. **Can you please confirm that the guidance will be updated to reflect the new income threshold and that the extension will remain in place through the summer holiday?**

**Why is this important?** The current guidance states that the extension will be reviewed before 1 June 2020<sup>5</sup>. We are hearing from organisations working with children from families with NRPF, that local authorities and schools are unaware of the extension of eligibility and the £16,190 income threshold that now applies. Without an update to the guidance, schools may assume that children from families with NRPF are no longer eligible and thousands of children will miss out on support during the summer holidays.

3. In January 2020, DfE announced £9 million funding for the Holiday Activities and Food programme (HAF) to offer disadvantaged children activities and free meals during the six-week summer holiday in 2020. **Can you please confirm that the guidance for HAF programme co-ordinators and advice for parents will make it clear that the HAF programme will run alongside, and in addition to, the Covid Summer Food Fund?**

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/government-sets-up-covid-summer-food-fund-after-free-meal-vouchers-u-turn/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/universal-credit-29-april-2013-to-14-may-2020>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/news/free-school-meals-extended/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.matthewgold.co.uk/government-u-turn-on-income-threshold-for-free-school-meals-following-legal-challenge-by-low-paid-carer/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/guidance-for-the-temporary-extension-of-free-school-meals-eligibility-to-nrpf-groups>

**Why is this important?** Without clear guidance from government, there is a danger that families may fail to register for their local HAF programme thinking that they are ineligible if accessing support through the Covid Summer Food Fund.

4. The current government guidance on providing free school meals during COVID-19 highlights that the type of support offered will depend on the school's circumstances. Some schools have successfully provided a catered offer through school caterers, others have registered their families for the centrally funded national voucher scheme with Edenred, some with alternative vouchers and cash-based systems, claiming through the department's 'exceptional costs' fund. **Can you please confirm that you will allow schools to continue to choose the best provision for their families during the summer holidays and that schools using alternatives to the voucher scheme will be able to claim through the exceptional costs fund, with the fund extended to meet the need?**

**Why is this important?** Despite recent improvements, the Edenred scheme remains limited to specific national retailers, many of which do not accept the vouchers online. The scheme continues to omit Co-op, Lidl, local convenience stores and food markets, limiting options for families, particularly in rural areas. The scheme has presented an administrative burden for schools and has left some parents unable to convert e-Codes to gift cards and others at the supermarket checkout suffering the humiliation of having gift cards rejected. Many schools abandoned the scheme early on, preferring alternative vouchers, cash transfers or catered solutions.

Whilst the national voucher scheme provides a financial solution to free school meal provision, catered solutions ensure that families are receiving food prepared by school caterers who understand the importance of a nutritionally-balanced meal. This alternative feels even more important in the light of a study published by Northumbria University<sup>6</sup> showing that half the children receiving vouchers are eating significantly less fruit and fewer vegetables. We hope that the guidance on the Covid Summer Food Fund will signpost to the many excellent resources designed to help families convert vouchers into nutritious meals.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Stephanie Wood, Founder/CEO, School Food Matters and co-Chair School Food Plan Alliance

Barbara Crowther, Coordinator, Children's Food Campaign

Anna Taylor OBE, Executive Director, Food Foundation

Naomi Duncan, Chief Executive, Chefs in Schools

Rob Percival, Head of Policy, Soil Association's Food for Life

James Toop, CEO, BiteBack 2030

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://northumbria-cdn.azureedge.net/-/media/corporate-website/new-sitecore-gallery/news/documents/pdf/covid-19-free-school-meal-vouchers-final.pdf?modified=20200605160553>