



2020-00VFPO

Vicky Ford MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

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Robert Halfon MP
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Friday 22nd May 2020

Dear Robert,

Thank you for your letter of 13 May regarding the Department for Education's national voucher scheme.

In my recent attendance at the Committee I set out just how important this agenda is. We moved at pace to set up the national voucher scheme, a scheme that had never been operated in this way before. We recognised just how important it was for schools, children and parents to be reassured that those pupils eligible for benefits-related free school meals would be supported while schools were closed to most children. We were clear on the need for flexibility for schools so where schools are unable to provide meals or food parcels using their existing providers, a voucher scheme was stood up by 31st March.

I recognise that there have been challenges in schools and families accessing the national voucher scheme. However, I have made it a personal priority to ensure the service improves on a daily basis. I am holding regular discussions with the Managing Director of Edenred to ensure that continuous improvements are being made. And I'm very pleased to confirm that they are.

As a result of this intervention, and the efforts and resources they have put in place to drive these improvements at pace, Edenred have made a number of significant advances to their system. For example, they have:

- virtually eradicated queue times on both the ordering and eCode redemption sites - where queues exist, these now typically last less than five minutes
- brought in additional technical support from a leading technology firm to ensure their tech expansion is a success.
- significantly expanded the capability of the site to manage the huge levels of demand
- expanded their own contact centre and brought in a third-party contact centre to more efficiently deal with queries from schools and parents
- introduced an MP hotline to deal with any urgent queries from MPs for their constituents.

Edenred continue to work day and night to process orders and further improve the system capability and performance so that families can access the support they need.

We know there are still issues, and we continue to work with Edenred on these. For example, Monday remains the busiest day as that's when many schools place orders and check the status of orders, so queues can occur. At its worst this Monday, queue times were 25 minutes for a short period. However, at other times queues are now no more than five minutes and there is often no queue at all. Edenred are committed to fully eradicating all queuing. We're also firmly encouraging schools to order efficiently e.g. vouchers that cover a fortnight, rather than a week, or a single order for a household with multiple children, and for orders to be uploaded to the order system in bulk. Ordering this way is much more efficient for system processing which means eCodes are sent out more quickly and it's also more efficient for schools.

I'm also writing to supermarkets to thank them for their hard work and support with this scheme. We're mindful that families will sometimes need some help when they go to the store, for example we've heard of families trying to use a eCode before turning it into an eVoucher for their chosen supermarket. This is clearly frustrating and Edenred have made a number of updates to their user guide and FAQs for families, responding to the feedback and evolving the advice.

When I presented to your committee on 22 April, the value of eCodes redeemed into supermarket eGift cards by schools and families was £15 million. I'm pleased that Edenred have now reported that over £101m worth of voucher codes had been redeemed into supermarket eGift cards by schools and families through the scheme as of Friday 22 May. And over 17,000 schools had placed orders for the scheme as of Tuesday 12 May. This is a clear demonstration of the speed of progress and the positive real impact this approach is having on families.

I'm also pleased with the progress we have made to add in two more retailers. Through the scheme, families could initially access vouchers for Morrisons, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda, Waitrose and M&S. We have since added Aldi and McColl's to this list and we continue to work to see if additional supermarkets can be added. But as part of this, we need to ensure that any additional retailers have the infrastructure to provide and accept suitable gift cards across all their stores.

Where the national voucher scheme is not an appropriate approach, schools are able to claim for additional costs incurred in supporting free school meal pupils, by e.g. providing vouchers for a local Co-op. As set out in our guidance schools will be able to claim up to a certain limit, depending on their number of pupils, and where they are unable to meet these additional costs from their existing resources. Schools are not eligible to make a claim against this fund if they expect to be able to add to their existing historic surpluses in their current financial year. The full additional costs guidance is available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-financial-support-for-schools>

We are not requiring schools to open over May half-term but have instead issued guidance to schools that they should work with their school community, including parents and carers of vulnerable children and those who are critical workers, to agree arrangements. These expectations reflect that we have asked schools to open to more children from 1 June and welcome the reopening of school kitchens where they have been closed. We continue to provide schools with all their expected funding, including funding to cover free school meals, throughout this period of closure. Costs of the national voucher scheme will continue be met by the Department for Education over half-term.

I thank the Committee for its ongoing support during these challenging times.

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 that extends to the left.

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