

## Written evidence submitted by Mr Andrew Forsey

### Submission from Feeding Britain to the Education Select Committee The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

1. The sole focus of this submission is on the effect on disadvantaged groups of the Department for Education's approach to free school meals.

#### Hampers and vouchers

2. Ministers and officials deserve the utmost credit for moving quickly, prior to the enforced closure of schools, to issue guidance around the continued provision of free school meals.
3. When that guidance was issued, we strongly welcomed the Department's policy of encouraging schools, wherever possible, to make food hampers available at collection points or through home deliveries. A voucher scheme was initially offered as a back-up measure for schools that may struggle to implement this policy.
4. While many schools have opted to administer hampers, in partnership with their local community, a more explicit commitment from the Department – in respect of funding and an encouragement to administer hampers in partnership with local businesses, local authorities, and voluntary bodies – could have resulted in many more doing so. It could also have laid the foundations of a national framework for the delivery of meals, childcare, and activities for children during school holidays.
5. Instead, vouchers have come to be seen as the main plank of the Department's policy. They have worked well for lots of schools and families, but have not worked as intended across the board. In some cases, the design and administration of the voucher scheme have had severe consequences for low-income parents' ability to feed their children. Feeding Britain's emergency food programme has represented a safety net for thousands of families who are at risk of hunger, but may not be able to access the voucher scheme.
6. Local authorities across the Feeding Britain network report that a relatively high proportion (in the region of 15-20%) of eligible families are not able to claim or redeem vouchers. Some families struggle to convert vouchers into goods, due to malfunctioning barcodes or an inability to get to a supermarket. Likewise, administrative barriers have prevented some schools from accessing the scheme.
7. Below are some case studies from the Feeding Britain network:
  - a. 'spoke to a mum of 3 today [...] she is owed over £100 in FSM vouchers but the system of getting them from the school to her in a redeemable format does not work . She hopes to get them next week but called today because she doesn't have enough food for the weekend and no money until later in May.'
  - b. 'EDENRED?!! ....Logging on can take all day and night! Feel totally in the dark, you place orders (which can take hours) and then it's like a lottery! And to add to it the contact number is at premium rate and the email address they don't even answer! Can't give our Parents any answers to queries.'
  - c. Long waiting times just to log-in; long waiting time navigating between pages when on the site; 14-day wait for an order to be fulfilled; error messages/ failures at the approval stage of placing an order; no support from either the e-mail or the telephone line; unable to delete pending orders; parents having great difficulty redeeming vouchers

- d. Length of time to access system – can take 1 ½ hrs to logon. The vouchers are not sent at a consistent time. Emails – Have not received a response to any queries raised. Not being able to cancel the vouchers although it showed in the user guide you could (this has now been sorted)
- e. Extremely slow logging in time; Unclear instructions; Orders have to go through several approval processes which takes a lot of time and effort to wait and continuously check; Once you have downloaded the orders you then have to input codes to receive the vouchers, again time consuming; The school had to select the supermarket for the voucher, it would be better for it to be flexible for the parents.
- f. Can only use it effectively late at night; it is then straightforward to use and a lot easier than when we were ordering and distributing Tesco vouchers ourselves. A couple of parents have sometimes found it hard to access them, though I'm not sure why.
- g. Some parents are struggling redeeming them. As admin, you cannot always log in. It took over three weeks to get a log in and welcome pack for our school!
- h. The first time was hard due to glitches, lack of user knowledge both administrators, long queues but now it is much better. I think that under very hard circumstances they did a good job and the system is very good.
- i. Still waiting for an order placed a week ago to be fulfilled. 9 parents still not able to access vouchers ordered for the first week of Easter hols. A further 9 haven't redeemed other vouchers, HUGE wait times for staff when uploading checking system- once sat in queue for 10 hours
- j. Unable to access during school hours. 9pm tends to be the best time to place orders!
- k. An email was sent to all FSM families detailing the FSM supermarkets and about 85% took us up on the offer. Following a recent check 3 families had not redeemed their vouchers. Telephone calls have been made to all these families. Tried to get this info from edenred site but sat in a queue forever and a day (that's after 6 attempts to actually access it.) I know there are some families that haven't used them.
- l. Absolutely awful and very stressful for around 2 weeks. This is not very helpful in the current situation. We waited a while before the email came through with the details and then for around 10 days couldn't move the voucher state from pending to paid. Even the orders that has previously been approved had a status of pending and then had to be approved again. It took about 2.5 weeks to get these vouchers to parents and we have a number of queries from worried parents in this period. The site is atrocious and I think I may have spent 10 to 15 hours processing 4 weeks' worth of vouchers and most of this time was spent in a queue or waiting for the page to refresh.
- m. Long wait to get on website. VERY long wait (up to 6 days at this point) for order to go from paid to fulfilled. School admin frequently logging on at home late in the evening/weekends when queues are shortest. Parents having long waits to get on to parent webpage, some giving up as have limited credit on phone to do this. Some parents struggling with technology.
- n. The system has presented a significant amount of issues for us. It appears not to cope with the sheer volume of users and so it has taken hours to log in at times or required me to access the system as early as 6.30am. eCodes have not been emailed to parents on the stated dates and resulted in the school needing to arrange emergency vouchers for some families from another provider and also two food bank referrals.
- o. The only challenge currently is a parent who had redeemed her code 2 weeks ago has still not received her actual voucher.
- p. Difficulty getting into the website, long waiting times, orders not being fulfilled on the date of delivery requested

- q. Extremely long wait in the “waiting room” to access website for staff and parents. E-codes voucher not being emailed out. No response from Edenred when emails are sent.

### Provision of meals and activities during school holidays

8. This is the final year of the Holiday Activities and Food programme, which was initiated on the back of Feeding Britain’s work with the Department in 2018, prior to the enactment of the Government’s £1 billion manifesto commitment in 2021.
9. The programme will help communities in several parts of England to administer high-quality meals and activities during the Summer Holiday. We are contributing to that administration in Cheshire West & Chester, and Wirral.
10. However, the social and economic consequences of COVID-19 have made vulnerable families even more so, while simultaneously adding to the numbers of families who are struggling to afford food for their children.
11. We are therefore calling on the Department to fund a national programme of meals and activities, costing between £50m and £100m, to support disadvantaged children during the upcoming Whitsun and Summer Holidays.
12. In particular, we advocate a strategic national approach which, in addition to the Holiday Activities and Food programme, covers the whole country. This could be led by the Department, and local authorities, with strong support from the voluntary and community sector and local businesses.
13. A minimum ringfenced sum, that is weighted according to need, should be awarded to every local authority to implement a programme, which meets clear minimum standards, in the upcoming Whitsun and Summer Holidays.

### School breakfasts

14. Disadvantaged children are particularly likely to require more intensive support upon their return to school, to prevent a widening of educational inequalities.
15. Part of that support package must involve the provision of free school breakfasts for all children who are deemed to be in need. Such provision should be run along universal lines in schools in deprived communities. This is known to have an overall positive impact – particularly on children’s health, but with some encouraging signs too of a correlation between school breakfast provision and improved cognitive skills, test results, attendance, punctuality, relationships, and behaviour.
16. To that end, we encourage the Department to support an upcoming Private Members Bill on school breakfast provision. The Bill is sponsored by Emma Lewell-Buck MP, a Trustee of Feeding Britain.

### Registration for free school meals

17. Prior to COVID-19, 140,000 children from families on low incomes were missing out on their free school meal entitlement as they were not registered to receive them. Following the tidal wave of new claims being made for Universal Credit, that number looks set to increase during the pandemic.
18. We therefore recommend the introduction of a policy of automatic registration for passported benefits (especially free school meals). Digital systems should be adapted so that, when a claim is made for Universal Credit, explicit consent is gained from the claimant for their data to be used for the purposes of automatic registration. As soon as eligibility for Universal Credit is confirmed, and where a claimant has given their explicit consent, data should be used automatically to check their household’s entitlement to passported benefits and, where eligible, to register them accordingly.

### Review of school food funding

19. In the longer term, we believe the Department should consider allocating to each school an annual food budget, with autonomy and flexibility over how to utilise this budget, covering both term time and school holidays. Minimum standards and requirements would need to underpin this broadly flexible approach. The allocation could include breakfasts, lunches, after-school clubs, and holiday provision, with schools able to deliver services themselves or commission partners in the community to do so on their behalf.
20. We recommend that, in the months ahead, a review of school food funding be established and given an overriding objective of equipping schools with the resources they need, in partnership with their community, to safeguard children's access to nutritious food on a year-round basis.

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