

Written evidence submitted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group

**Submission to the Education Select Committee: The impact of Covid-19 on education
and children’s services**

All-Party Parliamentary Group on School Food

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Contact

1. This submission has been written by Sharon Hodgson MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on School Food.

Summary

2. This submission is by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on School Food (APPG).
3. During the Coronavirus lockdown, Members of the APPG have been working locally and nationally to ensure that all children who are eligible for Free School Meals (FSMs) have access to that provision and any other further support they or their families might need.
4. School food has been a continuing issue throughout this period and the APPG would like to highlight some of those issues once again.

National Voucher Scheme

5. The APPG welcomed the introduction of the National Voucher Scheme in lieu of meals being provided in or by schools.
6. However, there were several issues that the APPG wishes to highlight.

Edenred

7. Schools can order the vouchers from Edenred.
8. Schools initially experienced long waiting times to get through to the Edenred system to purchase vouchers, with many schools reporting that their staff had to log on during the night when the website was experiencing less traffic or trying to get on to the system in the morning and waiting all day for it to load.
9. Families similarly faced problems with Edenred and the vouchers, with parents reporting that the vouchers were invalid at the till or online, resulting in them having to return their shopping. This will have had a devastating impact on them personally and also may have resulted in them not having access to food for their children.
10. There was also a case where Aldi temporarily disappeared from the options of supermarkets available on the voucher scheme, meaning parents either missed out altogether or had to go further afield to use the voucher.

Supermarkets available

11. The supermarkets available on the National Voucher Scheme, particularly M&S and Waitrose, does not reflect the reality of need or habits of families who are in receipt of FSMs.
12. Initially, the voucher scheme did not include Aldi, which was included eventually. However, the vouchers are still not available in Lidl, convenience stores such as Nisa, Londis, Premier, Costcutter. The inclusion of these stores would have more appropriately reflected the shopping habits of families and availability of stores close to where families live.

Lack of guidance

13. There was little guidance from the Government for families on how the voucher should be spent or what meals could be prepared within this budget (i.e. on healthy meals to reflect the fact it was replacing the meal usually given in school), with only a reference to the School Food Standards and the NHS Eat Well website.
14. Some schools did provide ideas, but this was dependent upon the school's own initiative.
15. NGOs stepped in to produce useful resources for parents (recipes and shopping lists) but these were not promoted by Government.

Alternative options to the voucher scheme

16. The costs of the National Voucher Scheme will be met centrally by the Department of Education.
17. However, guidance for funding for alternative provision, where the national voucher scheme was not appropriate, fails to make it clear to schools how or if they will be reimbursed for this additional spending.
18. This failure has led to some schools being overly cautious and therefore not providing the best provision that they could.

Eligibility

19. Eligibility for FSMs changed as a result of Coronavirus and lockdown.

Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSMs)

20. The closure of schools meant that the universal element of infant free school meals was suspended, and only children eligible for benefits-related FSMs were able to access the National Voucher Scheme.
21. Families whose children usually receive UIFSMs therefore found themselves having to provide a meal that they would not usually have to.
22. Many families in this position may have been eligible for benefits-related FSMs, but had not formally put the application in yet, as their child was receiving UIFSMs.
23. Taking away the universal element of UIFSMs overnight left many families confused and without provision that they felt they were entitled to.

Families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

24. Initially, all children with NRPF were excluded from access to the national voucher scheme.
25. However, provision was extended to some children with NRPF:
 - Children of Zambrano carers;

- Children of families with NRPF 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 NRPF restriction.
26. Each of these groups were initially subject to a maximum income threshold of £7,400 per annum – in line with the maximum income threshold for families on Universal Credit.
27. After campaigning by Sustain UK, the Hackney Migrant Centre and others, the Government recognised that this maximum income threshold excluded many families in need and therefore increased the threshold to £16,190 per annum. However, it took the Government over a month to update the guidance on its own website, meaning that families who were eligible under this change were not able to access the provision they were entitled to.
28. The income threshold was increased on 15th July from £16,190 per annum to £31,500 per annum for London and £28,200 for areas outside of London.
29. The Government has said that any provision will be backdated, however whether that is the case or not has not yet materialised.
30. It should also be highlighted that whilst some children with NRPF currently have access to FSMs provision, this is only a temporary measure and the Government have not set out how long it is expected to run for.

Not quite eligible

31. The APPG recognises that there are some children and families who would certainly benefit from access to the national voucher scheme or food provision during this time, but who are not quite yet eligible for FSMs due to their household income.
32. Families with parents on furlough or without a wage during the pandemic will be struggling financially and would have benefited from food support during this time if the provision was made universal or through a self-referral scheme.

Holiday provision

33. The APPG welcomes the extension of the National Voucher Scheme and alternative food provision over the Easter, May and summer holidays, however regrets that in the instance of Easter and May half-term this was confirmed at the eleventh hour and similarly with extension over the summer holidays that it took a threatened court case and extensive pressure from the public, media and Parliament after Marcus Rashford joined the campaign to extend provision over the holidays.
34. The APPG regrets that children who become eligible during the summer holidays will not be able to access the National Voucher Scheme, but will have to access the Local

Emergency Assistance Grant through their Local Authority. This will create a postcode lottery when it comes to food provision and support for these children.

School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme (SFVS)

35. The SFVS provides a free piece of fruit or veg to every 4-6 year old who attends a fully state-funded primary, infant or special school. The SFVS distributes 450 million pieces of fruit a year to 2.3 million children.
36. In March, at the beginning of school closures, the Government made a decision to pause the SFVS “so that as little fresh produce as possible would go to waste.”
37. For some children, the SFVS fruit and veg may be the first thing they eat that morning or the only piece of fruit and vegetables they eat all day.
38. The Government confirmed on 17th July that the SFVS would be reinstated in September.

Future of FSMs

39. As has been set out, the APPG welcomes the steps that have been taken to ensure that children continue to have access to FSMs during the pandemic. However, in the long-term, the Government must ensure that children are able to be fed a hot and healthy meal in school, in a safe way. School kitchens should be re-opened, a focus on healthy and nutritious food in schools should return and children should eat together, when it is safe to do so.
40. FSMs shouldn't be monetarised and the APPG will continue to campaign to keep school meals in schools, away from the focus of packed lunches and towards hot and nutritious meals.
41. More widely, the APPG will continue to campaign for Universal Free School Meals and champion the benefits of school meals.

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****ENDS****