

Mitigating the Impact of School Closure on Pupils who are Eligible for Free School Meals – 16 March 2020

For a significant number of pupils who are eligible for free school meals (eFSM pupils), the lunch they receive at school is the only hot meal they receive all day. Closure of schools due to the Coronavirus outbreak would almost certainly have a serious adverse impact on these children and young people. We also need to consider the impact on eFSM pupils who are self-isolating at home.

Mitigating action

We are exploring options to make funding available above what schools/ LAs are currently getting. In relation to free school meals there are two scenarios:

- FSM pupils self- isolating while schools remain open
- FSM pupils should schools close

As an illustration of the costs potentially involved if we were to provide 130k eligible pupils with £2 per day, the costs would be:

- £260k per day
- £1.3m per week (5 days)
- £5.2m per month (4 weeks)
- **£20.8m 4 months (16 weeks)**

Options being considered are:

- Hardship fund

This could help pay for FSMs, school deep cleaning and other activities.

- Voucher systems

Some schools in England have already issued parents with vouchers for a weeks' worth of school meals (£11.50 per week/£2.30 per day). The schools have bought vouchers or gift cards from supermarkets. This option has the potential to be the most straightforward and consistent way of ensuring these pupils receive a free school meal allowance.

- Exploring other Government departments' existing systems

The Home Office have arrangements in place for asylum seekers where they are provided with a card with an amount of money on it which can be redeemed in shops to buy food and toiletries. The Healthy Start programme provides vouchers which can be used to purchase certain foodstuffs. However, this is a UK Government run scheme, and does not cover children of compulsory school age.

- DWP

DfE have asked if DWP would be willing to increase Universal Credit rates. This would, however, require legislation and DWP may be reluctant to do this and set a precedent.

- Utilising existing schemes

There are a number of schemes addressing holiday hunger that could potentially be utilised, such as Holiday Hunger Playworks, Fit and Fed (run by the charity "StreetGames") and food banks. There is not consistent provision across Wales and therefore a mix of different approaches, depending on the region, may need to be adopted.

Lines to take

- I am concerned about the potential impact that school closures will have on our most vulnerable students. A number of people have raised concerns with me about the impact on children receiving free school meals – I can confirm that I am actively considering a range of options to mitigate the impact and will make further announcements on the preferred option should the need arise.