



FOOD PROVISION

Free school meal provision during school closures

Free school meals (FSM) are a lifeline for many families, helping when money is tight, and ensuring that children and young people get a daily meal. Since schools closed, families across the UK have received support for food costs in a variety of ways. This support will continue to be necessary as we ease lockdown and enter the summer holidays, and when children move into a new world of blended (school and home-based) learning. Given the variety of approaches nationally and locally, it is important we get alternative provision right for the children and families who need it.

We heard from **635** parents and carers about their different experiences of alternative free school meal provision during the coronavirus outbreak: difficulties faced, what works well when it comes to different methods and the value and impact of receiving the right support.

Overview

What support has worked well during school closures?

- Families have appreciated support with food costs from their schools and local authorities in alarming and difficult times.
- Families had positive experiences of all methods of FSM provision, but by far the highest levels of satisfaction were with direct payments to people's bank accounts. 81 per cent of families receiving payments say this works extremely or very well, and 90 per cent of these families say they would pick this method if they had the choice.
- Families value FSM provision that offers choice and accessibility. This means they can choose shops they are able to get to, that sell the food their children want, that provide best value, and where they feel safe. Online shopping is also particularly important at this time.
- Families value easy application or automated processes for FSM provision.
- Families appreciate communication and kindness from their schools and local authorities regarding the support available, and how to access it.
- Families commended schools and councils for quickly setting up food provision or stepping in if there were difficulties, particularly in relation to the Edenred scheme in England.

What were the main challenges around alternative FSM provision?

- Options which do not offer choice for families can be unhelpful. Examples include being unable to get to specific supermarkets to use vouchers and deliveries of food that children won't eat. There is the risk that if an option does not suit a family they will go without any support.
- In England, the national voucher scheme has created access difficulties for families.
- Although support with food costs is welcome, many budgets are under such pressure that families still struggle to afford what is needed.

Conclusion

It is likely that all schools will be delivering a blend of in-school and at-home learning for the immediate future. Planning a curriculum for this 'new normal' will require a detailed audit of the resources available to pupils when they are studying at home. It is clear many children do not have the space, the equipment and the support they need to fully participate in learning from home. It is critical that governments take action to get these much-needed resources out to families as soon as possible.

Likewise, the new contact tracing strategies mean many children will have to undertake fortnight-long periods of self-isolation if anyone in their household tests positive for coronavirus. The Welsh Government acknowledges that certain occupations and individuals are more likely to be repeatedly contact-traced and asked to self-isolate.³⁰ Children living with parents who work in high-risk occupations, which are often customer-facing and low paid,³¹ are more likely to face repeated and unplanned periods of isolation away from school. Schools must be ready to continue supporting these learners, even if their peers have resumed full-time learning in the classroom.

Support needs to be tailored to suit the specific circumstances of each family. This will depend on the number and ages of the children, the existing resources available, the parents' occupations and whether an adult is available to support learning in the home. One thing is clear from the hundreds of families who told us about their experiences of receiving free school meal replacements during the lockdown – making payments directly to families is the easiest and most effective way of ensuring parents and carers can meet the specific needs of their children. It allows them to make best use of the assets they already have, while acquiring the things they need most, in a way that is most convenient for them. Our research shows that low-income families already have to buy more resources than better-off families in order to continue educating their children at home. This additional financial burden needs to be recognised and reimbursed by the state.

Our research shows that worrying about money makes it increasingly difficult for parents and carers to enjoy teaching their children at home. The families who were most concerned about money were also the families most likely to say they found it challenging to support their children's learning during lockdown. In our survey, families who are already at the greatest risk of poverty – particularly lone parents and families with three or more children – were more likely to tell us they had significant concerns about their finances. 11 per cent of lone parents told us they were extremely concerned about money, compared to five per cent of couple-parent households. 22 per cent of single parents also strongly agreed with the statement "I'm finding it difficult to support my child(ren) learning from home". This is double the number in couple-parent families.

Supporting low-income families over the duration of the pandemic will require concerted action from every aspect of the education system. There are big gaps in the provision of information, advice and signposting to support for families who are in need. Schools could play a pivotal role in connecting families to sources of support and income maximisation, which would help to lessen financial pressures, and make it easier for parents and carers to focus on supporting their children's learning.

The UK Government must also recognise the unique and extreme financial pressures that the Covid-19 pandemic is placing on families with children. Many of the obstacles that hold back children in poverty stem from growing up in homes that have to manage on insufficient incomes. The additional cost burden of learning at home needs to be recognised and supported through the social security system. Increasing child benefit by £10 per child per week would be a welcome start. Uplifts to the child element in universal credit and child tax credits would further help support families struggling to make ends meet. For families who face the greatest costs – those with three or more children, or whose support needs are significant enough for their awards to hit the benefit cap – the two-child limit and the benefit cap should be removed. Only by doing so can the Government ensure that every family receives the support they need and every child has the best possible chance to continuing learning through this pandemic.

³⁰ Welsh Government (2020) [Test, Trace, Protect](#)

³¹ Office for National Statistics (2020). [Which occupations have the highest potential exposure to the coronavirus \(COVID-19\)?](#)