



Free School Meal Holiday Provision in England

Parliamentary Facts and Figures Briefing

Topline Policy Asks

- **The government should guarantee funding as soon as possible for Free School Meal (FSM) provision over the six-week summer holiday period.**
- A timely announcement is essential to provide overdue security and clarity for families, schools and local authorities.
- **At least £117 million in funding is needed** to support the pre-Covid numbers of FSM-eligible children over the summer break. Additional funding is likely to be required to support the many children newly eligible for FSMs and children from No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) families.
- Any government funding per pupil entitled to FSMs needs to be **extended to children from NRPF families** who have been temporarily made FSM-eligible during the pandemic.
- Government should introduce a **simple, centrally funded mechanism**, which allows schools to flexibly identify the right local solution for each pupil, whether this is a supermarket voucher, cash payments, or food provided through catering teams.
- Schools should be able to **draw down this funding per eligible pupil**, through a simple monthly claim form, with audit evidence available through the school census and attendance records.
- This approach would require minimal central or school administration and would allow the existing voucher system to be wound down gradually without a gap in provision.
- **To tackle the systemic issue of children's food insecurity longer term, Government needs to launch a Children's Right to Food Commission to join up policy across relevant government departments and hold government to account for addressing the critical policy gaps identified through the Children's Future Food Inquiry.¹ While exacerbated by Covid-19, the inequality and food insecurity issues being faced by children now are not new.**

Facts and Figures

Eligibility for Free School Meals (FSMs)

- 1.3 million children were eligible for FSMs in England in Jan 2019.²
- Although updated figures are not yet available, the surge in Universal Credit claims³ suggests that the number of children eligible for FSMs will have increased substantially due to Covid-19.⁴

¹ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Childrens-Future-Food-Inquiry-report.pdf>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2019>

³ Between 16 March to the end of April, DWP reported having received more than 1.8 million claims for Universal Credit (<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/dwps-response-to-coronavirus-covid-19>)

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-declarations-claims-and-advances-management-information>

- The Edenred national voucher system providing substitutes for FSMs during school closure has been plagued by technological failings resulting in additional pressure on struggling families.

Child Food Insecurity Before and During Covid-19

- Data gathered by the Food Foundation on food insecurity levels during the UK Covid-19 lockdown showed that, among households with children, the prevalence of food insecurity has increased from 5.7% to 11.0% (not including food insecurity resulting from shortages in supermarkets).⁵
- The Food Foundation also found that, a month into lockdown, parents of two million children said they had experienced one or more forms of food insecurity, and more than **200,000 children had needed to skip meals** because their family couldn't access sufficient food during lockdown.⁶
- Households with children eligible for FSMs are at an elevated risk of food insecurity after seven weeks of lockdown, 30% of adults with children eligible for Free School Meals reported having experienced food insecurity during the previous month (mid-April-mid May), compared to 9% of adults with children who are not on free school meals.⁷

Funding Holiday Provision

Provisional costings for funding Free School Meals during the Summer Holidays		
Cost of continuing to provide £15/child/week for the 6-week summer holiday	At least £117million	Based on 1.3 million eligible children in England. Does not take into account children newly eligible for FSMs due to Covid-19, and the funding needed for children with NRPF.

Additional funding sources to help address food insecurity during Covid-19		
Committed DfE funding through the Holiday Activities Fund (HAF)	£9million ⁸	Expected to reach around 50,000 children - just 3.8% of the 1.3million+ children eligible for FSMs
Additional funding to support food aid charities	£16million ⁹	These are general funding streams i.e. not dedicated to supporting children eligible for FSMs
Additional funding announced last week for Local Authorities – to be spent on welfare assistance	£63million ¹⁰	

⁵ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/new-food-foundation-survey-five-million-people-living-in-households-with-children-have-experienced-food-insecurity-since-lockdown-started/>

⁶ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/new-food-foundation-survey-five-million-people-living-in-households-with-children-have-experienced-food-insecurity-since-lockdown-started/>

⁷ https://foodfoundation.org.uk/vulnerable_groups/food-foundation-polling-fourth-survey-seven-weeks-into-lockdown/

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/free-meals-and-summer-holiday-activities-for-children>

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/16-million-for-food-charities-to-provide-meals-for-those-in-need>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/63-million-for-local-authorities-to-assist-those-struggling-to-afford-food-and-other-essentials>

Covid-19 Holiday Provision – Government Track Record

- The government extended the national voucher scheme over both the Easter holiday and May half-term break in recognition of the unprecedented levels of disruption and uncertainty for schools during this time.
- Both announcements were made at the last minute, leading to confusion, stress and mixed messages for parents, schools and local authorities. This has resulted in children missing out. A third of eligible FSM children did not receive a substitute through the Easter holidays.
- There are inconsistencies between the nations. In April the Welsh government committed £33million to provide schools with £19.50 of funding per week per FSM pupil (to cover both breakfast and lunch) until the end of August 2020. The Northern Irish and Scottish governments have not yet committed to support FSM children over the summer holidays.

Impact of Holiday Food Insecurity

- Research shows summer holidays have a negative effect on the educational levels of low-income children through a combination of social isolation, low levels of stimulation and activity and poor diets. Of note, mathematics and spelling performance are particularly susceptible to adverse effects and children can take up to 7 weeks to make up loss of learning.¹¹
- The additional 3 months of Covid-19 school closures will put vulnerable children at an even greater disadvantage, with repercussions on their academic performance likely.
- The nutritional impact on low-income children is already palpable; research from Northumbria University shows that children eligible for FSMs are consuming less fruit and vegetables and more sugary drinks during the lockdown than before.¹²

The Government should commit now to support vulnerable FSM children over the summer holidays and establish a Children's Right to Food Commission to help tackle systemic childhood food insecurity longer-term. The funding committed to date to tackle food insecurity during Covid-19 is an inadequate response to the acute level of need.

About the Food Foundation:

The Food Foundation is an independent charity working to address challenges in the food system in the interests of the UK public. Working at the interface between academia and policy makers (parliamentarians, civil servants, local authorities, business leaders) we use a wide range of approaches to make change happen including events, publications, media stories, social media campaigns and multi-stakeholder partnerships. We also work directly with citizens to ensure their lived experience is reflected in our policy proposals. We work with many partners on a range of different thematic areas, working closely with academics to generate evidence and campaigners who can drive change. We are independent of all political parties and business, and we are not limited by a single issue or special interest. We work with others who believe there is a problem with the system and want to change it.

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¹¹ Aceves-Martins M, Cruickshank M, Fraser C & Brazzelli M. Child food insecurity in the UK: a rapid review. *Public Health Res* 2018;6(13), *Public Health Research* Volume: 6, Issue: 13, Published in November 2018; pp. 57 (<https://www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk/phr/phr06130#/abstract>)

¹² <https://northumbria-cdn.azureedge.net/-/media/corporate-website/new-sitecore-gallery/news/documents/pdf/covid-19-free-school-meal-vouchers-final.pdf?modified=20200605160553>