

PROVIDING SCHOOL MEALS IN THE CITY OF BIRMINGHAM DURING THE COVID-19 EMERGENCY

CityServe is Birmingham City Council's (BCC) multi-award winning school catering business serving 50,000 meals every day. The business buys and procures £10 million of food every year. Cheryl Rudge, Head of Commercial Operations at CityServe, described how the Senior Leadership Team began scenario planning for a Covid-19 emergency at the beginning of March. As well as planning for potential Government guidance, the team worked with schools to prepare for their individual needs whilst prioritising safety and wellbeing of staff. One scenario included a total shutdown of all schools with a continued requirement to provide free school meals. Another scenario included a partial shutdown with essential workers given the option of sending their children to school as well as the continued provision of free school meals to children at school or at home.

Surplus food was purchased in the first week of March as the senior leadership team wanted to prepare for a potential impact on supply chains in the event of national lockdown. CityServe sourced extra fridges and freezers and stocked these with food for cold lunches including bread, tuna, cheese and sweet corn. This food was not required during the lockdown period but is now being used to continue supply of cold food options. This has now been used to continue the supply of cold food options. During the five days before the national lockdown CityServe set-up a 'dynamic register' to deal with the inevitable day-to-day requests from headteachers. This provides live information on the status of the 205 schools CityServe supplies and includes:

- **School status - open or closed**
- **Numbers of pupils attending (schools were expected to remain open for children of key/critical workers and vulnerable children)**
- **Number of pupils requiring free school meals and dietary allergies**
- **Availability of catering staff and their current health status i.e. whether staff are isolating**
- **Staff rotas to provide opportunities for all those that can work**
- **Risk assessments for food production and distribution at each school**

Bespoke plans for each school were prepared through the support of five Commercial Business Managers and five field chefs. They worked with school head teachers to plan for variable numbers of pupils attending as well as provision of free school meals for entitled children in school or at home. It was difficult for the heads to estimate numbers of pupils attending on a daily/weekly basis. Critical workers do not have to send their children to school during the crisis and, in some cases, schools were expecting pupils, but numbers varied and when the government voucher scheme was launched some schools also shut. Each school therefore has a different requirement for school meals and different plan for distribution of free school meals. Furthermore this varies on a day-to-day or week by week basis. 60-80 sites have remained operational throughout the period and of these around 20 remain open during holiday periods (Easter, Half-Term and Bank Holidays). CityServe therefore had to organise for term-time only staff to be available during these periods.

Risk assessments for food production are prepared by head teachers and catering supervisors and take into consideration social distancing rules. The safety of all staff as well as pupils and their families is taken into consideration. This includes safety of the food deliveries to the site as well as safety of staff who prepare and package food for collection.





Catering staff are allowed to work if they can drive or walk to school and are not dependent on public transport. To protect children and staff, teachers collect lunch parcels and take them back to the classroom where social distancing rules are observed. Families requiring free school meals are also provided with guidance from school staff. Free school meals for children at home are picked up by parents at a pre-arranged time and location from the school.

Cheryl said: 'We wanted to be in position where we could always say yes to the requests schools were making. Every request was different. We were very mindful of the safety issues and the need to follow strict guidance.'

National government has advised schools to plan for a phased re-opening from the week commencing 1st June. This includes nurseries, primary school, secondary school and special schools.

Guidance appears to support a phased re-opening. On May 19th, BCC published local guidance advising Birmingham schools to re-open when it is safe to do so. CityServe is now planning for the re-opening of schools from the start of June and their flexible approach is likely to have to continue in the coming months whilst they await clear direction.

A working group has been established to plan procurement, food safety, staff safety and commercial options across the estate. During week one of opening, only cold food options will be supplied, and by week three basic but nutritious and compliant hot meals such as baked potatoes will be provided on a two-weekly cycle.

The UK Government guidance on providing free school meals during the coronavirus outbreak can be accessed by following **this link**.