

National free school meals voucher scheme opens to orders

Schools can begin ordering free school meal vouchers for eligible pupils from today as the Government's national scheme launches, adding to the support available for disadvantaged families.

An online service for schools, the scheme allows schools to place orders for supermarket gift cards on behalf of parents and carers whose children are eligible for free school meals.

The vouchers are worth £15 a week per child and families can receive codes by email to redeem themselves, or as a gift card provided by post, collection or delivery to families without internet access.

The national scheme, run through Edenred, also ran between March and August last year, with £380 million worth of voucher codes redeemed into supermarket gift cards during that time.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

There should be no doubt in this Government's commitment to free school meals support for children who need the most help.

The centrally-funded national voucher scheme gives schools another option in providing that support – but they can of course continue providing locally-arranged solutions or high-quality lunch parcels where this is most convenient for their families. These costs will be reimbursed.

As was the case over Christmas, vulnerable families will continue to receive meals and other essentials over February half term via councils through the £170 million Covid Winter Grant Scheme launched last year.

From today, schools can order vouchers for the four-week period between 18 January and 12 February.

Edenred have reported that, as of 13:15 this afternoon, more than 4,600 orders have been placed by schools through the national voucher scheme worth a total of £9.18m.

In addition to the national scheme, schools can continue providing free meals to eligible pupils via lunch parcels, through catering suppliers, or via locally arranged solutions. This might include vouchers for a local shop or supermarket not currently included in the national scheme.

During February half term, vulnerable families will continue to receive meals

and other essentials through the £170 million Covid Winter Grant Scheme as they did during the Christmas holidays. Launched in November last year, the Grant Scheme is helping families struggling with the costs of fuel and food and is ringfenced, with 80% earmarked to support families until the end of March 2021.

As was the case over Christmas, it will fund support through local authorities – this might include vouchers, meal parcels or holiday clubs.

The Government has also provided a further £16m funding for food distribution charities and has expanded its Holiday Activities and Food Programme which has provided healthy food and enriching, engaging activities to disadvantaged and vulnerable children since 2018. It will run across England at Easter, summer and Christmas in 2021, backed by £220 million.

The Department for Education continues to work with LACA, the body representing school caterers to ensure lunch parcels and meals all meet high standards. Guidance developed by LACA and Public Health England is being updated to reflect the additional funding that has been provided to support schools and school caterers in following this approach.

Information for parents and carers:

- If your school is providing vouchers through the national voucher, they will email or post a 16-digit eCode that you can redeem online from a selection of supermarket 'eGift cards'.
- Alternatively, if you do not have an email address or access to the internet, your school can print off the voucher, or 'eGift card', and post it to your home address, or arrange a collection or delivery if easy and safe to do so.
- Take the eGift card in-store and present it at the till to pay for food and groceries up to the value of the eGift card. This can be presented at the till in-store either on a smartphone screen or printed on a piece of paper, just like a gift card.
- More details can be found in the [step-by-step guide](#) for parents.
- FAQs for parents and carers can be found [here](#).
- You can check if your child is eligible for free school meals [here](#).

Information for schools:

- Schools should have already received an email from Edenred advising them to activate their account, or to reset their password if they have already used the platform.
- If a school did not receive an email from Edenred, or wants to change their admin details, they can do this [here](#).
- Schools will be notified whether to begin ordering on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday (18-20 January). These initial order dates are being allocated in three batches to help manage demand on the site.
- The Department will reimburse costs for locally arranged vouchers up to £15 and provide £3.50 on top of a school's regular funding for those providing parcels. Costs can be claimed back to 4 January, recognising the schools will of provided support since that point.

- Ten retailers have signed up to the Edenred scheme: Aldi, Sainsbury's, Tesco, Asda, Morrison's, Iceland, the Company Shop Group, Waitrose, McColls and M&S. This gives families greater choice of where to redeem their eCodes.
- Schools can either order eCodes to be sent by email to a parent or carer to redeem into a supermarket gift card, or they can have gift codes posted directly to parents who may not have access to a printer.
- Department for Education [guidance](#) explains how schools can order vouchers and distribute them to families – this includes eCodes, which can be sent directly to families, or gift cards which can be posted by schools to those who do not have access to a printer.
- More details will be provided shortly on how schools who prefer to use locally-arranged vouchers can claim back these costs. These will need to be valid claims based on eligible children and support provided over the specified timeframe, including covering costs back to 4 January, but no other additional criteria will be applied.