



2021-0056536POSoS

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus

Councillor Ian Ward
Leader of Birmingham City Council
By email: Ian.Ward@birminghamcouncil.gov.uk

Your ref: Our Ref: IW/1218tr

4th February 2021


Thank you for your letter of 30 September, about the provision of free school meals (FSM) during the school holidays. I apologise for the delay in responding. I would be grateful if you could share this response with your co-signatories.

For more than a century, Free School Meals (FSM) provision has supported children with a healthy, nutritious meal to enable them to learn, concentrate and achieve while they are at school. It is an integral part of everyday school life.

The government remains committed to ensuring that the most disadvantaged children continue to receive this support. That is why this government has expanded eligibility for FSM to more children than any other in decades, by extending the scheme to families with no recourse to public funds and to eligible students who attend further education providers as well as through universal infant free school meals.

During the period of national lockdown, schools should continue to provide meal options for all pupils who are in school. Meals should be available free of charge to all infant pupils and pupils who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals who are in school.

Schools should also continue to provide free school meal support to pupils who are eligible for benefits related free school meals and who are learning at home. Schools are free to decide the best approach for their free school meal pupils. They can provide lunch parcels, locally arranged vouchers, or they can use the national voucher scheme which re-opened on Monday 18 January.

We will provide £3.50 top-up funding per eligible pupil per week for schools providing lunch parcels and up to £15 per eligible child per week for vouchers. This is in addition to the usual funding that schools receive for benefits-related free school meals. Extra costs incurred will be claimed retrospectively by schools, all valid claims will be paid in full.

School leaders have worked incredibly hard during this outbreak and it is not reasonable to ask them to provide food when they are closed for the holidays. However, we recognise the current challenges and have spent billions to significantly strengthen the welfare system including increasing Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits by up to £20 a week this financial year.

As was the case over Christmas, vulnerable families will continue to receive support for food and other essentials over February half term through the £170 million Covid Winter Grant Scheme. The funding is ring-fenced, with at least 80% earmarked to support families with food and essential utility costs, and will cover the period to the end of March 2021. It will allow Local Authorities (LAs) to directly help the hardest-hit families and individuals, as well as provide food for children who need it over the half term period. LAs understand which groups need support, and are best placed to ensure appropriate holiday support is provided which is why they will distribute the funds, rather than schools, who will continue providing meals for disadvantaged children during term-time.

In addition to this, the government will establish an up to £220 million Holiday Activities and Food programme to provide enriching activities and a healthy meal for disadvantaged children in the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays in 2021. It will be available to children in every LA in England, building on previous programmes including summer 2020, which supported around 50,000 children across 17 LAs. This provides funding up to the end of the Christmas holiday period in 2021 and supports the government's commitment to establish a flexible childcare fund to increase the availability of high-quality and affordable flexible childcare.

To support pregnant women and those with children under the age of four, who have a low income and are in receipt of benefits to buy fresh fruit and vegetables, Healthy Start scheme payments are also set to increase from £3.10 to £4.25 a week from next April, 2021. This will help parents and carers boost the long-term health of their children.

The government has also pledged additional funding of £16 million for food distribution charities, with conversations with FareShare and others ongoing as to how this is allocated.

We appreciate that it has been a challenging time for families, which is why we have increased the safety net available to them with income protection schemes, mortgage holidays and support for renters. These welfare measures sit alongside our extensive support package, which has so far protected 12 million jobs and people at a cost of almost £53 billion.

Further to this we have provided £63 million in welfare assistance funding to LAs to provide emergency support to families for food and other essentials, and this was available throughout the October half term break.

We are actively considering the recommendations set out in the National Food Strategy.

Thank you for writing on this important matter.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gavin Williamson', written in a cursive style.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education