

Briefing: Free School Meals and Holiday Hunger

The Free School Meals debate so far

The Free School Meals system

Under normal circumstances, pupils are eligible for free school meals (FSM) if their parents are eligible for Income Support, income-based Jobseekers' Allowance, support under the Immigration Act Part VI, the guaranteed element of State Pension Credit, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit run-on or Universal Credit.

Under the Universal Credit eligibility criterion, parents are eligible for FSM if their household income after tax but before benefits does not exceed £7,400 per annum.

Since 2014 pupils in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 have all been eligible for FSM under separate funding arrangements. They will be set aside for the purposes of this briefing.

Determining eligibility for FSM is the responsibility of a school, though they usually work with the local authority.¹ This is carried out via the Eligibility Checking System (ECS), to which all local authorities have access. The ECS allows local authorities to check DWP data to establish eligibility. FSM must be applied for by the parent.²

Costs

When estimating the cost of FSM in the mainstream media, people often cite the cost of FSM at £2.30 per meal per pupil. This is derived from the government's FSM guidance.³ When estimating the true cost of FSM, it is perhaps easier to use the number of pupils known to be eligible for FSM and multiply this through by the cost per head.

In January 2020, the number of pupils known to be eligible for FSM was 1,440,788.⁴ It is therefore estimated that funding free school meals for one week for all of these pupils would cost £16.6 million. **Over the course of the academic year, FSM for this cohort would cost £629.6 million.**

The lockdown and Covid Summer Food Fund

Due to the March-July lockdown period, parents whose children would normally be eligible for free school meals were no longer able to receive them since the children were not attending school. This left them marginally worse off, as they would need to cover the cost of a further 5 meals per week that would normally have been provided in school.

To redress this the government introduced a national food voucher scheme for pupils eligible for FSM; this was a contracted out service run by Edenred. It provided eligible families with access to a rolling £15 per week food voucher redeemable via certain supermarkets.⁵ There was also considerable charity sector activity in providing food relief, including organisations such as Street Games Fit and Fed and FareShare, work in a range of locations.

Responding to political pressure, the government extended its provision of FSM throughout the summer of 2020 via the Covid Summer Food Fund.⁶ The funding commitment was met centrally via the DfE. Through the fund, schools could support pupils eligible for free school meals with a £90 voucher valid for the 6-week holiday period, increasing to £105 if a school operates a 7-week holiday.

1. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/700139/Free_school_meals_guidance_Apr18.pdf

2. <https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals>

3. Department for Education, 2018. "Free school meals supplementary grant Guidance for local authorities, maintained schools, academies and free schools"

4. Department for Education, 2020. "Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics"

5. <https://educationbusinessuk.net/features/coronavirus-getting-food-pupils-free-school-meals-fsm>

6. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-summer-food-fund>

During the coronavirus pandemic the DfE extended FSM eligibility to some groups who normally do not have recourse to public funds (NRPF).⁷

Costs

In response to the Marcus Rashford campaign, the DfE extended FSM into the summer holidays. They provided FSM through the Covid Summer Food Fund for children on FSM. The total funding announced by DfE for the summer was £120 million, £20 million per week.⁸

However, it is reported that the initial contract given to Edenred to run the voucher scheme totalled £234 million, nearly double the value of the vouchers distributed; the contract was awarded without a competitive tendering process.⁹

According to the DfE £380 million worth of vouchers were redeemed under the lockdown and summer schemes, taken together.¹⁰ It can be assumed that the amount paid to Edenred would have been significantly higher, factoring in the extension of the scheme through the summer.

Rashford campaign for Christmas FSM

The costs associated with extending the FSM funding programme as before are considerable. If FSM were to be extended to cover all holidays in an academic year for the 1.4 million pupils known to be currently eligible for FSM, this would cost the government £260 million.

HOLIDAY	LENGTH	COST OF FSM SUPPORT
October Half-Term	1 week	£20 million
Christmas Holiday	2 weeks	£40 million
February Half-Term	1 week	£20 million
Easter Holiday	2 weeks	£40 million
May Half-Term	1 week	£20 million
Summer Holidays	6 weeks	£120 million

A further ask of Marcus Rashford's campaign is to extend FSM to all pupils in a family on Universal Credit. It is estimated that doing so would make an additional 1.5 million pupils eligible for FSM.¹¹ This would equate to spending an additional £17.3 million per week, £655 million per year on FSM.

DfE response

However, the DfE has responded to the further campaigning to extend FSM provision for the October half term and 2020 Christmas holiday up to Easter 2021, and to extend the eligibility to all those receiving Universal Credit (UC).¹²

It stated that from March through to the closure of the voucher scheme in July £380 million worth of vouchers were claimed, and that this provision was warranted due to the unique circumstances provided by Covid-19.

Responding to calls to extend the voucher scheme, the DfE said:

7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/guidance-for-the-temporary-extension-of-free-school-meals-eligibility-to-nrpf-groups>

8. BBC News, 2020. "Covid: What's happening to free school meals during holidays?"

9. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/edenreds-national-voucher-scheme-contract-worth-up-to-234m-new-documents-reveal/>

10. <https://dfemedia.blog.gov.uk/2020/10/19/questions-and-answers-on-free-school-meals/>

11. Food Foundation, 2020. "Marcus Rashford MBE launches petition to urge UK government to act without delay on ending child poverty"

12. <https://www.goal.com/en/news/marcus-rashford-free-school-meals-campaign-explained-how-to-sign-/8vwag6ov4uq91fou335ldpwmg>

"It is not for schools to regularly provide food for pupils during the school holidays.

We believe that the best way to support families outside of term time is through Universal Credit. We have made urgent advances available so no one has to wait five weeks for a payment. In response to the pandemic, we have also introduced income protection schemes, mortgage holidays and additional support for renters."¹³

The government is correct that in general the responsibility does not fall upon schools or DfE funding structures to pay for children's food outside of term time. This would hold true in normal times.

As a rule, public support for low income families with children should be delivered through the Universal Credit system, administered and delivered via the DWP. If there is a case to be made that UC is insufficiently generous in its provision for households with children, that is a separate argument.

However, it should be recognised that present circumstances are unusual, and that therefore falling back on UC as a solution to child holiday hunger may not be sufficient.

The CSJ therefore envisages a two-stage response:

The CSJ Response

Short term: immediate holiday funding support for food

In the short term, a temporary food hunger relief fund should be made available, limited to the Christmas holiday. The funding could be directed from HMT to local authorities with tight spending conditions attached. Professional nutritional guidance should be issued to local authorities who are distributing the funds, with a clear obligation to pass on such guidance to claimants.

Alternatively, funds could be distributed from local authorities to food charities, but with strict nutritional guidance on how the funds can be deployed. Otherwise, the payment would be at risk of simply becoming a cash transfer rather than a solution to the question of children's nutrition.

Eligible parents should be assessed according to existing UC eligibility criteria for FSM, as detailed above. The remit should not be extended to all UC recipients.

A possible funding solution could involve businesses contributing voluntarily to a food poverty relief fund, for which the seed funding would be provided by the government. Financial contributions to the holiday relief fund could then be offset against business tax liabilities in order to incentivise private sector involvement.

Based on the weekly cost of the Covid Summer Food Scheme, the cost would be £40 million for two weeks. However, by eliminating the need to go via the contractor (Edenred), there would be efficiencies and this figure might fall.

Most importantly, FSM vouchers should not be understood as a long-term solution. Not only is the system inefficient and open to abuse through secondary black markets, it also removes responsibility from parents for feeding their children and denies them agency. There may be a purely financial element to the wider question of child food poverty, but it also revolves around deeper needs such as for nutritional education, parenting support, support with personal spending, and social issues such as addiction and indebtedness.

13. <https://dfemedia.blog.gov.uk/2020/10/19/questions-and-answers-on-free-school-meals/>

Long-term: Universal Support, locally driven

In the long term, a national solution to the problem of child food poverty is needed, and should be provided via the existing UC system.

The National Food Strategy report, led by Henry Dimbleby, addressed the complexity of food poverty:

“Everyone visiting the drop-in centre had been referred there - by a GP or social worker, the Citizens Advice Bureau or the local Jobcentre Plus. They were all given a food box, but the most critical service dispensed was advice. Every client was interviewed and triaged when they arrived and then they got to see a project worker, benefits advisor or housing expert, depending on the situation that had brought them to the food bank.”¹⁴

Problems identified as root causes include mental illness, domestic abuse, revised or delayed benefits claims, or problems in claiming benefits. The report says that “a surprising number were able to solve long-running problems - such as difficulties claiming benefits - with the help of one of the advisers.”¹⁵

A solution beyond immediate short-term relief is clearly needed which is based around individualised, bespoke and personal support for individual welfare recipients, who often experience complex and interconnected social problems, all of which contribute to the problem of food poverty.

The CSJ’s medium to long-term plan to deal with these obstacles and to delivery personalised, locally-based support is detailed in our plan for Universal Support.¹⁶

Universal Support deploys the “Key Worker” model. The Key Worker is universal point of contact for the claimant / recipient tasked with developing a personal action plan for the individual that reflects their specific and overlapping needs.

This is delivered locally through local authorities partnering with specialist third sector provider organisations. Referrals to the Universal Support system can be made from any of a number of points of contact including: GP, Housing Association, DWP office (via a Universal Credit assessment), local authority or third sector organisation such as a charity.

The aim is to develop a bespoke solution for the individual concerned in a personalised way. In the case of food poverty this might involve help with budgeting, spending habits, dealing with problem or hidden debts, addressing substance or gambling abuse, advise on nutrition and health, and other forms of parenting guidance. The Key Worker might for example liaise with a food bank, food charity or partnered supermarket, as well as charities aimed at overcoming social problems (money advice charities, addiction charities, etc.).

A Universal Support-based model for dealing with food poverty could prioritise better use of existing benefit money by a recipient, or it could entail guidance provided by a Key Worker on how to spend a specifically earmarked Food Poverty top-up to the child element of UC. The top-up should be conditional upon engaging with the Key Worker.

14. <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/partone/>, p. 52

15. *Ibid.*, p. 53

16. <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/core/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CSJJ8435-Universal-Credit-Universal-Support-201007.pdf>

Structure of government response

The overall response to holiday hunger has lacked co-ordination between the relevant government departments. In particular there is no clear delineation of responsibilities between MHCLG, the DWP and DfE.

The CSJ therefore support the reinstatement of the Social Justice Cabinet Committee. It is comprised of relevant government ministers from across government departments. It should include the Work & Pensions Secretary, Education Secretary, Minister for Housing, Communities & Local Government, relevant ministers for welfare, children and families, and a Treasury minister. Its aims are:

- To provide political leadership and oversee the setting of priorities across government, specifically on Social Justice, equality and poverty, to deliver the Prime Minister's intent.
- Actively to encourage and support cross-Government working, recognising that policy to deliver Social Justice outcomes cannot be developed or delivered in silos.
- Support and act as an advocate for innovative evaluation techniques and delivery mechanisms that have the potential to further the Social Justice agenda.

By restoring the Social Justice Cabinet Committee, it can be ensured that the appropriate mechanism is being used to address social justice issues, including food poverty.

Conclusion

Both economically and politically a solution is required to solve the question of holiday hunger. A short-term response is needed to deal with immediate pressure, but funds allocated must be earmarked in some form, with spending conditions attached. This must not become the norm as an approach to feeding children.

Long-term, food poverty must be addressed via completion of the Universal Credit system through the development of Universal Support and the Key Worker model as a way of tackling its complex social causes.

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