

Forty-First Report of Session 2019-21

Department for Education

COVID 19: the free school meals voucher scheme

Introduction from the Committee

At January 2020, 1.44 million children in England were eligible for free school meals, representing 17.3% of all pupils. The Department funds free school meals with the aim of ensuring that disadvantaged pupils have a healthy lunch that will support their learning and development. State schools are legally responsible for providing free school meals to eligible pupils. Pupils may be eligible if their parent or carer is in receipt of specified income-related benefits, including Universal Credit.

On 18 March 2020, the Government announced that, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools in England would close on 20 March 2020 for all pupils except vulnerable children and children of key workers. On 31 March 2020, the Department announced a national free school meals voucher scheme, as a temporary substitute for the normal arrangements. The vouchers were worth £15 per week, for each eligible child.

The Department awarded a contract to run the voucher scheme to a private contractor, Edenred without tender under the emergency procurement rules. Schools participating in the scheme ordered electronic codes (eCodes) online that could be converted into shopping vouchers for families to use at nominated supermarkets. The number of supermarket chains taking part in the scheme rose from six at the start to 10 by 29 June 2020. The scheme ran until the end of the school summer holiday and over 90% of state schools registered to use the scheme. The Department spent £384 million on the scheme.

Based on a report by the National Audit Office, the Committee took evidence on 17 December 2020 from the Department for Education (the Department) and Edenred (UK Group) Ltd (Edenred) about the free school meals voucher scheme, which ran from 1 April 2020 to the end of the school summer holiday. The Committee published its report on 5 February 2021. This is the government's response to the Committee's report.

Relevant reports

- NAO report: [Investigation-into-the-free-school-meals-voucher-scheme](#) – Session 2019-21 (HC 1036)
- PAC report: [COVID 19: the free school meals voucher scheme](#) – Session 2019-21 (HC 689)

Government responses to the Committee

1: PAC conclusion: *The Department's failure to understand how schools and parents would use the scheme contributed to delays in getting vouchers to families.*

1: PAC recommendation: *The Department should take on board lessons from the scheme and ensure, in designing services intended to be used by schools and parents, that:*

- *it properly user-tests new systems and engages with front line school leaders and representatives to better identify likely problems before they are launched; and*
- *there is sufficient call centre capacity to meet maximum expected demand at the start, which can be stood down or increased further as needed.*

1.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation implemented

1.2 In response to the COVID-19 national lockdown announced in March 2020, the department launched the national voucher scheme to support pupils eligible for benefits related free school meals