

Providing Free School Meals During Lockdown

How councils responded to
the challenge in the spring and
summer of 2020



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Why free school meals are important and what we found


What we looked at and why

We looked at how councils approached the challenge of continuing to provide free school meals during the national lockdown in the spring and summer of 2020, whilst schools were closed for normal classes. We undertook this work as part of our COVID-learning project. Our aim was to identify how councils adapted their free school meals service during the lockdown, and particularly if there are any learning points as a result of this experience both for councils and the wider public sector.


Why free school meals are important

Free school meals are available to eligible pupils who attend school full-time, including younger children who attend nursery for full days as well as sixth form school pupils. Many families and young people rely on provision of free school meals to help ensure that pupils have a regular source of nutritional food and is a key service that contributes to reducing child poverty.

When schools closed for normal classes on 18 March 2020 councils and Welsh Government were faced with a significant logistical challenge to maintain free school meals provision through different ways of providing the service.

 **18%**
of pupils eligible for Free School Meals in the 2019-20 academic year

 **77%**
take up of free school meals

 **Amount of provision decided by each council – eg in Cardiff it was £2.50 per meal in Primary and £2.95 in Secondary School in 2019-20**

School meals during lockdown – a timeline

Schools closed for normal operation on 18 March

March

- councils and Welsh Government faced the significant challenge to maintain free school meal provision.

Welsh Government responded with funding and guidance

March

- £7 million initially made available to councils to provide arrangements for free school meals.

April

- further £33 million committed to councils to continue free school meal provision until schools re-opened or up to the end of August 2020, including provision during school holidays from the Easter holidays onwards.
- a national free school meal voucher scheme was considered but decided against.
- guidance issued in April 2020 suggesting three options for providing school meals:
 - vouchers;
 - delivering food to families; or
 - transferring money directly into parents/carers bank accounts.
- although suggesting three options, the guidance recognised there may be other options that councils feel would work better locally
- guidance also emphasised importance of ensuring appropriate social distancing and therefore advised against 'grab and go collection schemes'

Spend

£7m

+£33m

April

- free school meal provision extended to eligible pupils in years 11 and 13 throughout the school summer holidays – usually they would not receive free school meals after June
- school meal provision in Wales was set at £3.90 a day / £19.50 per week while schools were closed – more than in usual times and more than the amounts provided in other UK nations.
 - **England:** a £15.00 supermarket voucher was provided per week per child.
 - **Northern Ireland:** £27.00 per fortnight per child was paid
 - **Scotland:** councils determined their own arrangements but the value of provision per child was generally less than provision by Welsh councils

Sept.

- further guidance issued on providing school meals during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak and £420,000 of additional funding announced for students who were self-isolating or shielding; and
- £1.28 million made available to local authorities in order to meet additional free school meal costs incurred during the first two weeks of the autumn term.

October

- October 2020 further free school meal provision for all school holidays up to and including Easter 2021 with £11 million of additional funding announced.
- in total, and including the funding detailed above, the Welsh Government made approximately £52 million of additional funding available to support provision of free school meals up to the end of the 2021 Easter holidays.

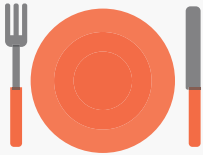
+£0.4m

+£1.28m

+£11m

=£52m

Councils



Responded quickly and worked hard to find ways of continuing to provide **free school meals**



Introduced temporary measures such as **'Grab and go'** lunch bags, and a few councils also gave an option to collect a hot meal



Delivered **'grab and go bags'** to the doorstep to support those families **'shielding'**

Some practical challenges from councils' initial approaches

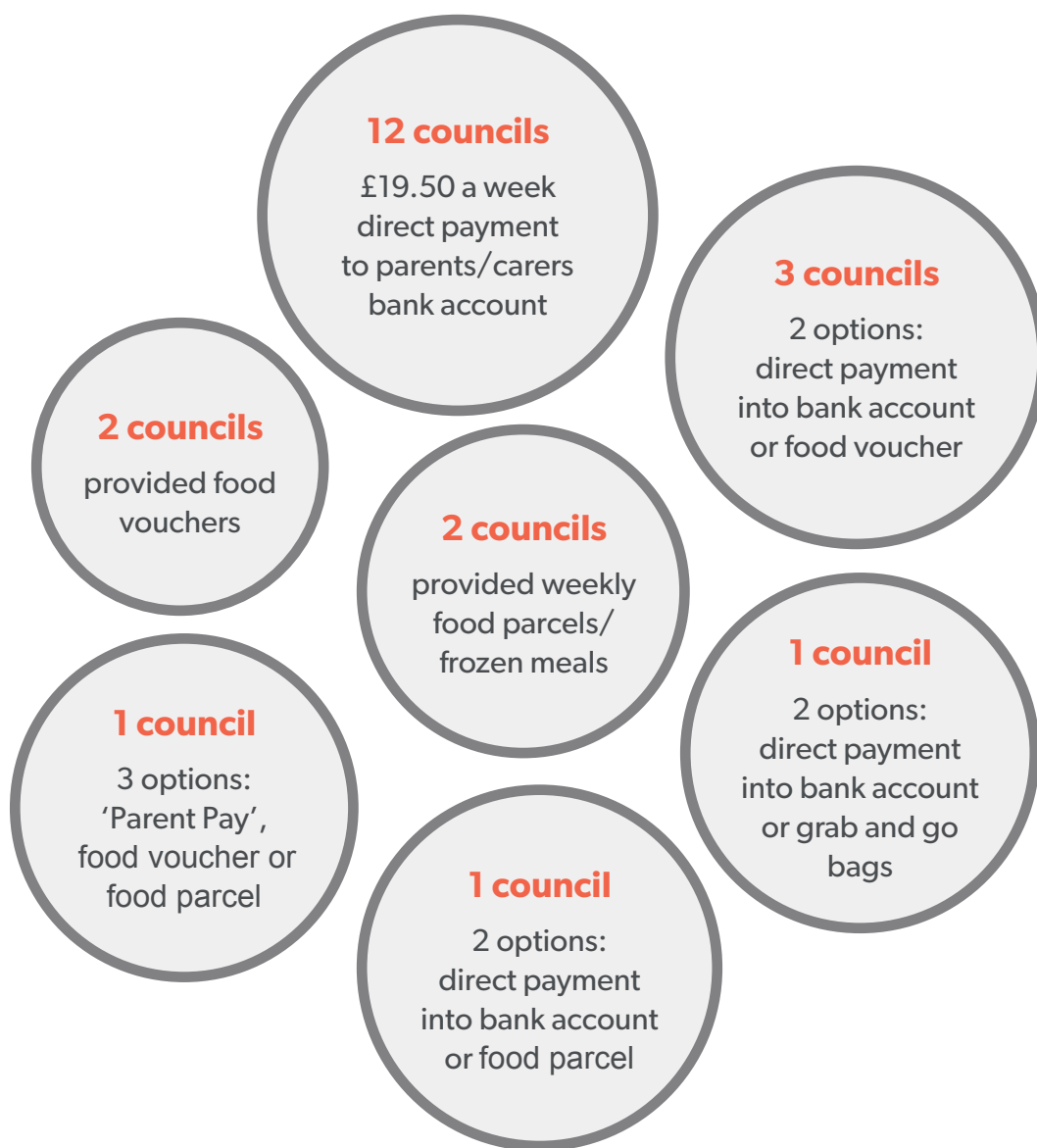
The 'grab and go' lunch bag menu became less appealing to service users, meaning a relatively low uptake.

- collection options required family members to leave their home to collect food when travel restrictions were in place due to the pandemic;
- designing a food delivery route to pupils' homes was complicated and involved many council officers and volunteers;
- there were difficulties in keeping food fresh when using a home delivery service;
- the number of vehicles required to make home food deliveries while maintaining food hygiene standards; and
- the collection of packed lunches or a home delivery service created dependence on a system that could break down if its workforce became unwell.



All councils changed their provision at least once since the initial lockdown

After having more time to plan, and learning from experience, by the end of June 2020:



Ways of working – how councils approached the challenge

Working in partnership

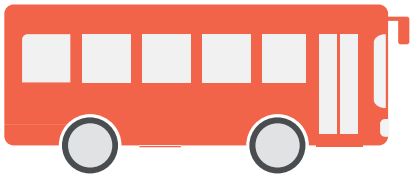
Examples included working with a national charity to assist with the delivery of cash payments to asylum seekers who did not have bank accounts, as well as working in partnership with key local suppliers to provide nutritionally balanced meals.

Helping to safeguard vulnerable children

Targeted services such as delivering food parcels to vulnerable families, this also helped social care staff stay in contact with vulnerable pupils and their families.

Tailoring solutions for local communities

For example, working with a local supermarket to enable the use of vouchers because it was easier for the local community to access than other national chains.



Using resources differently

For example, using school transport contractors to deliver meals in taxis and minibuses that were no-longer required for pupil transfer.

Managing logistical operations

For example, delivering food parcels to thousands of children each week.

Making use of IT systems

For example, to make it easier to send payments to eligible families.

Outcomes and learning points

Uptake of school meals increased and councils felt they were better placed for any future school closures



In June 2020, most councils reported an increase in the number of eligible free school meals pupils during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The uptake of alternative free school meals ranged from 85% to 100%, an increase from a national figure of 77% pre-COVID.



17 councils responded to our request for information and they told us in June that they were confident that should school closures happen again they are now better placed to maintain free school meal provision.

Arrangements for providing free school meals provision continue to be tested with the firebreak 'lockdown' that took place in October/November 2020 and on-going incidences of pupils being required to self-isolate.

Learning and adapting – lessons for other public services?

A good example of iterative learning and responding to feedback?

Councils responded quickly when schools closed for normal operation in March, and then changed their provision as they learned from experience, and/or had more time to consider the best options for their communities.

Able to change quickly?

Councils and other partners demonstrated their ability to change quickly when they needed to. Are there lessons for other services and organisations both during the pandemic and afterwards?

Changing quickly isn't just about having good 'arrangements'?

This required an adaptable workforce. Many staff throughout the pandemic have been redeployed into new roles. We have also heard about the importance of goodwill and the willingness of staff to go beyond what might be expected of them in their job descriptions or terms of employment. We also heard of councillors helping out with the distribution of food parcels.

The importance of partners and thinking differently?

Partnership working was a key and consistent theme of alternative delivery of free school meals. Some councils engaged with the third sector and the private sector in delivering a free school meal service. Council were also agile in identifying new partners and able to spot opportunities for multiple benefits, either through doing things differently and/or in partnership with others.

Keeping contact details up to date?

This learning point seems straightforward, but is a good example of how simple details and processes can make a big difference when systems are put under pressure. A couple of councils told us that when they needed to contact the families of pupils entitled to free school meals quickly to arrange alternative provision when schools closed, they sometimes found that contact details were not current.



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