

The free school meal voucher scheme & children's access to food during the Covid-19 crisis

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AUTHOR

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Contents

| | |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| SUMMARY | 5 |
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 6 |
| 2. METHODS | 7 |
| 3. FINDINGS | 8 |
| 4. DISCUSSION: A TOOLKIT FOR SCHOOLS? | 10 |
| CONCLUSION | 12 |

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Summary

In March 2020, in the early days of the first UK-wide lockdown, the Department for Education (DfE) implemented a shopping voucher scheme worth £15 per child per week in England to provide support for children who would normally receive free school meals. Data gathered by the Food Foundation (2020) in late April 2020 indicated that five million people in the UK living in households with children under 18 had experienced food insecurity since the first lockdown started. Of these, 1.8 million experienced food insecurity due to food supply problems in shops, which means that 3.2 million people (or 11 per cent of households) suffered from food insecurity due to other issues such as loss of income or isolation.

The Food Foundation (2020) also discovered that, one month into lockdown, the parents of two million children said they had experienced one or more forms of food insecurity, and that more than 200,000 children had skipped meals because their families could not access food during lockdown. Therefore, households with children eligible for free school meals (FSM) were, after seven weeks of lockdown, at an elevated risk of food insecurity, as they would typically access food in school.

We need to reduce food poverty, holiday hunger and reliance on food banks. To do so, we need to both provide evidence to raise the profile of such issues and find ways to reduce the number of children going hungry. We need to devise sustainable policies to address these issues, and engagement with schools, activists and young people is crucial in this. Following a campaign led by England and Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford, the government committed to providing free school meals to children in England during the 2020 summer holidays – an example of the potential positive effects of influencing opinion.

As part of this research project I am creating a school food toolkit that will help schools to take longer-term approaches to integrating food into the curriculum, enabling them to compare their contexts to other schools, learn about what it means to adopt a 'school food ethos' and consider the impact of school food policies on children's wellbeing. While they will not provide a simple solution to ensuring that children have access to nutritious meals, they will enable school leaders to consider school food policy more

broadly, knowing that deeper, more prolonged effort is necessary to bring about lasting change.

KEY FINDINGS

- Food has a huge impact on the daily lives of children, so school culture and organisation matters.
- Data revealed that schools responded very differently to Covid-19 both locally and nationally.
- There has been a lack of training for staff and parents on the operation of the voucher scheme.
- School resource varies in terms of financial resources and funding models, but also in terms of knowledge, specialist skills and capacity.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

- Have contingency plans for school meals in place.
- Consider school food a central part of the curriculum, and review staff working practices to this end.
- Continue engaging with local stakeholders to secure access to fresh produce and create seasonal menus.
- Engage with local MPs, parent governors and pupil committees.
- Stagger lunchtime arrivals, and introduce one-way travel systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATIONAL POLICYMAKERS

- Engage with key stakeholders such as Chefs in Schools, school leaders, School Food Matters, the DfE's school food unit, the Food Foundation and Taste Education.
- Listen to the views of families by holding regular informal focus group meetings.
- Consider the variability of school structures and deprivation when formulating policy by adopting a more localised approach and moving away from short term solutions.

1. Introduction

It is a legal requirement for state schools to provide FSM to eligible pupils (DfE, 2018), and in January 2020 there were approximately 1.44 million eligible children in England (Adams & Butler, 2021). Essentially, the DfE funds FSM to ensure that disadvantaged pupils have access to a healthy school meal to support their learning and development.

Initially, the DfE believed it would be best for schools to support children eligible for FSM who were not attending school by using their catering providers to supply meals or food parcels directly to families. Ultimately, however, the DfE concluded that a national electronic voucher scheme was the only secure, viable and cost-effective solution. This led to the approval of the scheme on 13 March 2020 and, after two weeks of working with the contractor, Edenred, the DfE launched the scheme on 31 March (DfE, 2021).

More than 90 per cent of state schools registered to use the scheme, a proportion that rose to 94 per cent (20,717 schools) by August 2020. Some schools and families experienced difficulties during the early weeks of the scheme, as Edenred's IT system did not generate complete and systematic data. Schools reported difficulties registering with the scheme, with school staff having to work late at night in order to register eCodes. The number of calls to the helpline also increased, peaking at 3,940 on 14 April (NAO, 2020). The DfE then took action to address the scheme's capacity and performance, and there were indications that the scheme did improve over time.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that Covid-19 has dramatically widened inequalities in food security and nutrition (Food Foundation, 2021). It was found that, in the month following the first UK lockdown (from 16 March 2020), 49 per cent of eligible children did not receive any form of FSM, which demonstrates that the voucher scheme did not serve children and young people adequately (Parnham et al., 2020). We also learned that just over half of pupils who would have received FSM at school in England stated that, across a three-day period around two months after the initial closure of schools, they had eaten no fresh vegetables (Defeyter & Mann, 2020).

In response to the issues with the scheme raised by many parents and schools, the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland chose to introduce alternative schemes (Defeyter et al., 2020). These concerns also prompted an investigation into how the DfE set up and implemented the FSM voucher scheme, and how much it cost, by the National Audit Office, which published its report on 24 December 2020 (NAO, 2020).

Despite the problematic rollout of the school food voucher scheme, on 13 January 2021 – amid the third national lockdown – the UK government announced that it would relaunch the scheme using the same provider, Edenred.

This research project explores the difficulties with accessing the food voucher scheme reported by both parents and schools. Households with children eligible for FSM are at risk of food insecurity, and for this reason it is critical to investigate the impact of food on young people and holiday provision.

2. Methods

2.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were developed to meet the project's objectives.

1. How have schools responded to Covid-19 in relation to food during holiday provision?
2. What have families identified as barriers to accessing the school food voucher scheme?

2.2 RECRUITMENT & DATA COLLECTION

This project involved 20 online interviews with a number of participants across the UK, and one from the Republic of Ireland, between September and November 2020. These included:

- five school catering managers
- four school leaders (two headteachers and two assistant headteachers)
- three young people aged 14–16
- one lunchtime supervisor
- one public health nutritionist
- one food writer and doctoral student
- one director of a food organisation
- one health visitor
- one poverty and inequality commissioner
- one health promotion educator
- one school food coordinator.

The interviews were conducted with participants who reside and work in all four UK nations – England (n=12), Scotland (n=3), Wales (n=2) and Northern Ireland (n=2) – and one participant from the Republic of Ireland (n=1). An opportunity sampling approach was used to collect the data. This involved, for example, contacting colleagues within my network to who could introduce me to relevant participants across the devolved nations. The 20 online interviews involved six questions, with each interview lasting between 20 and 40 minutes.

I also conducted a two-part online workshop series in which my interviewees helped co-design and validate an online toolkit. On submission of this report, the toolkit will be sent to participants for further input

before it is finalised and disseminated to schools in the West Midlands.

I gained ethical approval from the University of Wolverhampton in the first instance. I also received informed consent from all participants, by providing information on the research project. Young people were accompanied by their legal guardian when online interviews began; once I had met with their guardians I was able to conduct these interviews on a one-to-one basis with those young people.

Electronic data was securely stored using a password protected device, and I adhered to BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines with regards to respecting cultural, social and religious backgrounds. I also ensured I that met GDPR guidelines, and participants were able to access a transcript of all interview data. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and, to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity, I used pseudonyms.

2.3 DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analysed using thematic and descriptive analysis in order to draw out key themes to respond to the research questions. Qualitative data analysis involves three distinct processes.

1. Noticing things.
2. Collecting and sorting.
3. Thinking about things (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

For this research I adopted the framework developed by Boyatzis (1998), which offers rigour in producing reliable data for analysis, to code the data from the interviews. Following this coding process, the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to thematically analyse the data was used.

3. Findings

Below I map out my 20 interviewees' responses to my two research questions.

3.1 HOW HAVE SCHOOLS RESPONDED TO COVID-19 IN RELATION TO FOOD DURING HOLIDAY PROVISION?

I was interested in learning about views and experiences from schools, so I spoke to headteachers in both primary and secondary schools about how they responded during the first lockdown that began in March 2020. It was interesting to learn how one school acted as a 'hub school' to take in children from other schools that were unable to accommodate them due to staffing shortages, as in the following example.

'It quickly became apparent that food was a huge issue. We started to think, okay, what can we do? Obviously the voucher system was there, but wasn't working properly, and that's what led us to start the food distribution programme.'

'...When the government said they wanted schools to make an offering to key workers and to vulnerable children – we wanted to make sure that we could do that in the best way possible and we stayed open. We didn't close for a single day throughout lockdown.'

'What was happening was that many other local schools just didn't have the staffing capacity to stay open, and with us being one of the largest schools the local authority spoke to us about whether we could become a hub school and whether we remained open and took children from other schools. Over the Easter break we had children from 10 different schools with us.'

Headteacher 1

Another headteacher spoke about the stark reality of the lives of some families in terms of their background and lack of access to food. The headteacher also discussed the impact of school closures on families who parents worked long hours.

'We kept up with our caterers, we kept up hot meals, because one of the vital things about that is making sure these children had a hot meal. For those, obviously, from backgrounds where they're

impoverished, [unclear] hot meal anyway, so it's keeping that up, but also, those from crucial services, it was making sure that they also had a meal, because obviously, their parents would have been working long hours...'

Headteacher 2

One assistant headteacher discussed how he had fundraised by travelling across the country on a charity bike ride, as funding for children and their families was very limited.

'I've delivered free school meals to children during Covid, during the lockdown, and then after that had finished, after 17 weeks I then went on a bike ride for children struggling with holiday hunger... [for] the charity Meals & More. My target was £5,000 and I'm not far off £11,000 at the moment. Unbelievably overwhelmed by the support I got on my ride and the money is just – wow. It's going to do so much good for children who are those kids that are struggling, that don't get anything.'

'During the holidays when they're most invisible, when we don't see them at school, and we can't give them breakfast clubs, and what's happening to those kids at that point?'

'Parents didn't know this was going to happen. They weren't prepared for it, and as one of the families said later on... normally during and up to the summer holidays she saves money to be able to feed her children through the summer holidays but actually because the kids are home more...'

Assistant headteacher 1

3.2 WHAT HAVE FAMILIES IDENTIFIED AS BARRIERS TO ACCESSING THE SCHOOL FOOD VOUCHER SCHEME?

Following multiple periods of lockdown, we have learned a great deal about government's attempts to ensure children are able to access nutritious food. However, it was interesting to learn from participants' accounts of the barriers that impede children's access to food. Below I provide excerpts from participants' responses which illustrate those barriers.

'...I think we've got a lot of parents who aren't totally IT literate, a lot of parents who – we are constantly on to our parents about ensuring we've got the correct contact details.

'There was the in-school barrier, which was the fact that we couldn't get on the [voucher] system. The system kept crashing. Our business manager would be logging on at two in the morning. I think there was a chart showing when the least traffic was going through the site so he'd set his alarm and get up at half past one, two o'clock and start trying to get onto the site.

'The barriers for the parents which were around the lack of understanding around the voucher system, the fact that when parents went on, often they couldn't access the programme. Also, we had a lot of parents who should have been entitled to free school meals but had never registered.'

Headteacher 1

'Yeah, that [Edenred voucher scheme] didn't come in until – I mean we started on the Monday and that didn't come in for probably two or three weeks after I started delivering the meals. We didn't really go for that. There are a couple of reasons [why] we didn't go for vouchers. Firstly, what we were doing was working brilliantly and I was able to see the parents and children every day and make sure things were good. With the voucher scheme that wasn't a possibility. I couldn't see the children.

'Then also with the voucher scheme the parents had to leave the house to spend the vouchers which meant... putting themselves and their children in danger. Taking three or four kids to the supermarket during Covid restrictions probably wasn't the best idea in the world. It was stressful for everybody. So, although it was a great idea from the government as a backup there were better systems that schools could have done like delivering the meals by hand or some things like that.'

Assistant headteacher 1

One young person described the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their family life and how unemployment affected access to food.

'They were – of course my dad had just recently just lost his job. So, there was – we had those – like financial turmoil in our family. It was a really scary prospect because of course like you know the mortgage payments had been stopped and everything with that Covid relief.

'But the prospect of having to pay for food and having to pay for lunch and this much money that normally I'd be having at school, I'd be having a good, nutritious lunch at school. My parents having to like you know having to pay for this. It was a scary prospect for them. So, I think what I know – like yeah, how they'd normally have to compromise on bills etcetera.'

Young person 1

'At my school we got the vouchers, but obviously in most supermarkets food does not cost £3 per day. So, meals were just less consistent. My sister's school for example, they told them that if they wanted to eat they had to go to school to eat. They wouldn't give them vouchers so they would have to go to school for lunch and then come home. Which made no sense and obviously not many kids wanted to commute all the way there and be more exposed and then come back. [...]

'All I know is the schools voucher scheme didn't necessarily work for everybody. They couldn't access vouchers. They'd turn up to the shops and stores to find there's no credit on them and things like that. I don't want to be too negative about it, but a lot of people were saying that it wasn't functioning very well, the way it was set up.'

Young person 2

A manager at one of the catering organisations described the importance of a hot meal, but also the problems with the voucher scheme itself.

'So, the whole voucher scheme, candidly, we weren't a fan of... We would have much preferred the kids to have had food delivered rather than have the option of abusing a system. There's a big difference between a free school meal pupil having a hot meal or even a cold meal in a school, where somebody is aware of safeguarding and pupil wellbeing, than somebody getting something at home where you may or may not be suffering because they're latchkey kids, they're whatever they happen to be in terms of the terrible world that we live in.'

Catering organisation manager

4. Discussion

A toolkit for schools?

As part of this research project I proposed conceptualising a school food toolkit, but came to learn that several such toolkits already existed. Therefore, on reflection, I thought it would be useful to ask stakeholders on their thoughts on what would be useful as a toolkit for schools. With their input I then started to develop a school food toolkit.

Several responses have been collated and included here from which I aim to develop this toolkit. Inevitably, curriculum design and staff training were identified as key triggers for designing a suitable toolkit for schools. The discussions held typically focused on the need for a change in school culture and the importance of the school leader pushing forward a vision of school food-growing, food education and positive eating habits.

'I've been a strong advocate of food growing and food cooking for some time, and the sustainability agenda. What I found in a previous role, I was working with several schools and exploring this. There were several schools that were very keen, but looked at their staffing structure and thought, hey I've got a teaching assistant who's quite a keen gardener, let's get them doing it. But their skillset wasn't where it needed to be. I think the same with cooking... We've brought an organisation in to do some cooking training with our staff, with our teachers, with our TAs. Here's a TA who's shown a bit of interest, let's get them leading on this. When the skillset isn't exactly where it should be, the level of sustainability doesn't – isn't where it should be. [...]

'What I've done in the last two schools I've been headteacher of is I've appointed – we've done a slight restructure and we've reduced the number of teaching assistants, but looked at specialist non-teachers, I guess. So, we've currently got a gardener in residence and we've got a chef in residence. The gardener leading our food-growing programme and the chef leading our cooking programme. [...]

'That just means that we've got two people that, one, are passionate about their subjects, they are experts in their field, but also because they're not teachers and they're not teaching assistants, they don't get dragged into other elements of the school. [...]

'...There've been lots of toolkits that have been produced around giving schools good options – I don't know, recipe cards, tips and hints about using food in certain project areas and the same with growing. I think the problem is, without the expertise that sits underneath it, then these things often fall, they collapse within schools.'

Headteacher 1

The point above illustrates the need for more resource, not purely in terms of finance but in relation to knowledge, specialist skills and capacity.

'...The toolkit for me is more about encouraging schools to think creatively about how they embed these areas, it's not just a bolt-on. It's not just something that is a nice to have. It's getting schools to really get under the skin of their whole operation, to look at their staffing structure, to look at their budget, their resources, the facilities they've got. We've put in some raised beds and edible playground in the playground. We've built a teaching kitchen now. So, we've got those real sustainable resources.'

Headteacher 1

'I mean food is obviously imperative for children. For them to understand where it comes from and what to do with it, it doesn't only help them there and then as a child growing up but as a life skill forever. They'll know what to do with this food and it's why it's essential. I mean us as a school we go on a residential once a year to a place called... Farms for City Children.

'We go to a farm, we take 37 kids to the farm and they work and live on this farm for a whole week, and they work with the animals and feed them and clean them out. They realise that these animals

while we feed them they're going to end up as whatever they're going end up as. But the chickens and the eggs and the – there's a dairy farm we visit and that's the milk, and the ones that are born male they maybe don't give the milk, so they're sold for meat.'

Assistant headteacher 1

'One of the first things I think would be really good in a toolkit would [be a] contingency plan. What do you do if there is an emergency? What have you got in it already about food, or food provision?'

Poverty and inequality commissioner

5. Conclusion

This report draws on the views and narratives of key stakeholders to learn about the views of school leaders on school food reform. A toolkit for schools could be useful, but the research suggests that in order to have impact we need to train children to think about becoming responsible citizens and being responsible consumers by thinking about the future. At this point I would like to return to each of the main research questions.

5.1 HOW HAVE SCHOOLS RESPONDED TO COVID-19 IN RELATION TO FOOD DURING HOLIDAY PROVISION?

The Edenred voucher scheme was problematic when it was first launched and, as the data presented in this report highlights, it caused avoidable hardship to young people and their families and created additional difficulties for schools amid a national crisis.

The way in which schools responded varied, and it was only possible to capture what schools had done during this period by talking to those schools. This demonstrated the need to develop a wider network for school leaders so that schools' varied activities and approaches can be shared to ensure that schools learn from one another and develop consensus about what constitutes good practice.

5.2 WHAT HAVE FAMILIES IDENTIFIED AS BARRIERS TO ACCESSING THE SCHOOL FOOD VOUCHER SCHEME?

The barriers identified included a lack of understanding of how to access the voucher scheme and, for some, a lack of ICT skills. They also included the stigma attached to the vouchers, and they clearly did not provide a budget sufficient for families to feed their children on.

This report has highlighted the impact of Covid-19 on feeding children. However, more importantly, we knew of the issues around food security prior to the global pandemic, and understood food to be a human right not a privilege. In this research, providing families with cash funds as opposed to vouchers has been identified as a key recommendation that would ensure that families are able to feed their children immediately during such critical times.

5.3 NEXT STEPS

This research has led to the development of a toolkit for schools which is currently being finalised. A further investigation of school food policy was identified as an important next step once this project is completed. For this reason, a proposal was submitted to Generating Excellent Nutrition in UK Schools (GENIUS), which was successful. I will be leading this new multidisciplinary project alongside colleagues based at Northumbria University, the University of Edinburgh, Queens University Belfast and Cardiff University, and will use this dataset alongside newly obtained policy data to understand more about school food policy across the devolved nations and its impact on children and families. I welcome opportunities for collaboration on this topic.

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