

18th June 2020

Dear Constituents,

Thank you for contacting me about the provision of free school meals (FSM) during the coronavirus outbreak.

Like you, I welcome the action being taken to help schools keep providing FSM for eligible families during this difficult period. Schools are being encouraged, where possible, to continue providing meals or food parcels for eligible pupils through their existing food providers. Recognising that this is not always an option, on 31 March a national scheme was launched for schools to provide supermarket vouchers to eligible pupils, with costs covered by the Department for Education (DfE). This gives school leaders the flexibility to determine the best way to support families in their communities.

The vouchers are worth £15 a week per child, which is higher than the amount schools usually receive for FSM. Schools can place orders for vouchers online for parents and carers, who will be able to use them in a variety of supermarkets. The list of participating supermarkets currently includes Asda, Sainsbury's, Tesco, Morrisons, M&S, Waitrose, Aldi and McColl's and I know Ministers are working to expand this list. Where families are unable to access any of these supermarkets, schools are able to buy vouchers for other retailers and the DfE will refund the cost.

I welcome that during this challenging period, the eligibility criteria for FSM is temporarily being extended. This includes some groups who have no recourse to public funds. Further details can be found here - www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/guidance-for-the-temporary-extension-of-free-school-meals-eligibility-to-nrpf-groups.

This system was developed at pace to support families across England, and I am assured that the Department for Education is working closely with the supplier to ensure orders are processed quickly.

Provision for free school meals is ordinarily term time only. However, during the Easter and half term holidays the Department for Education met the costs of the national voucher scheme to provide free school meals for eligible pupils. I welcome that in recognition of the unprecedented situation facing parents this summer, a new Covid Summer Food Fund has been announced. Additional funding will enable children who are eligible for free school meals to claim a 6-week voucher to cover the summer holiday period.

A £9 million summer holiday activities and food programme will also run, offering activities and meals to thousands of disadvantaged children.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Alok Sharma MP

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