

Public Accounts Committee : Free school meals voucher scheme

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 20,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.

General points

- 2 ASCL welcomes the opportunity to contribute to your investigation. The introduction of the National Free School Meal Voucher Scheme was welcomed by members when it was announced in March this year, as the need for providing free meals to eligible families is an essential service of significant national importance.
- 3 However, the delay between the announcement and availability (scheme announced 19 March and launched 31 March) meant that some schools had made arrangements with alternative voucher providers in the meantime. The subsequent administrative issues experienced by the Edenred system then led to many schools deciding to stay with their alternative provider.
- 4 As schools began to try and use the Edenred system to order vouchers, we became aware of a number of issues related to the design, implementation, and performance of the scheme.
- 5 In collating our response, we have drawn on feedback from members via two routes:
 - Emails to ASCL Hotline throughout the period that the scheme was active.
 - We have asked some members to respond to specific questions about the design, implementation, and performance of the scheme. We have included the collective responses to these questions below.

Design, implementation, and performance of the National Voucher Scheme

Was it a good idea to introduce a national voucher scheme or would something else have worked better?

- 6 Broadly speaking schools thought the voucher scheme was a good idea in principle.
- 7 Some felt that reliance on using parental email addresses created unnecessary challenge, particularly for families where a stable, dependable internet connection was not readily available.
- 8 In the context of getting funding to vulnerable families to feed their children, consideration could perhaps have been given to utilising the benefits system. A direct payment system may have been better equipped to get money where it was needed and would have avoided the issue of access limited to a few supermarkets.
- 9 The number of supermarkets initially included (subsequently expanded) in the scheme was a barrier to some schools. For example, for some families those supermarkets were simply not available within reasonable travelling distance.

Was there a need to mitigate risks apparently unforeseen in the design of the scheme?

- 10 To ensure that all families could have access to their free school meal entitlement, schools took a range of measures to mitigate circumstances where the scheme could not or did not work. These included making packed lunches available for collection or delivering to homes, assigning staff specifically to manage the number of enquiries from families experiencing difficulties with the scheme (voucher rejected at the supermarket, delays in processing of vouchers).
- 11 Independent schools were not in scope for the scheme. This meant that bursary pupils also eligible for benefits related FSM may not have received meals during periods of school closure when kitchens have been closed.

What were the key implementation issues?

- 12 On 29 April ASCL contacted colleagues at DfE to highlight key areas of concern:
- 13 We had significant concerns about the vast amount of time that school staff were spending trying to process and check voucher orders via the Edenred system. Several members had contacted us about this. One member stated that they accessed the system at 11.30pm to process a single voucher and after 17 minutes they were still waiting.
- 14 While we understand that a period of embedding a new system is required to work through problems, we feel that it was completely unacceptable that school staff were spending hours trying to process orders and accessing the system at unreasonable hours in order to try to cut down the time the spent on it – particularly at a time when they were having to put in place multiple new systems and approaches to support pupils in other ways through the lockdown period.
- 15 This issue was exacerbated by school leaders reporting that communicating with Edenred was also challenging, for example, emails sent but with no response and contacting the telephone helpline on numerous occasions without being able to get

through. We are aware that Edenred sent a communication to schools that some may have experienced slow running of the systems and ecode error messages on 27 and 28 April. However, in our view this did not account for the high number of issues that school leaders were reporting to us.

- 16 Also, at the end of April we became aware of an emerging issue around 'high' value vouchers. One school leader reported that there was a limit of £100 on a voucher, the parent could not redeem it and there was a block on splitting the entitlement into smaller blocks. We understand that this may have been an issue in some supermarkets, but not all, on the voucher list.

Given the initial implementation problems that were experienced in accessing the Edenred portal and voucher delivery, did the scheme redeemed itself as an effective vehicle to get food to families eligible for benefits related FSM?

- 17 During the period that the scheme was active school leaders told us that the performance of the scheme improved. Broadly speaking, at the end of the period the scheme was working for schools.
- 18 The addition of more supermarkets was welcomed.
- 19 However, we think that the system did not address all its weaknesses, particularly regarding families for whom digital literacy remains a challenge.

Were schools the right organisational body to administer the scheme ?

- 20 School leaders are committed to fulfilling their duty of care to all their pupils. However, it is also reasonable to consider any additional administrative workload that such a scheme entails. The ASCL view is that schools probably would have been the right organisational body if the system itself had not been overburdensome to administer at the outset.
- 21 However, it was essential that the scheme was not perceived as an effective means of keeping in touch with vulnerable families over school holiday periods. Schools, Local Authorities and other agencies have continued to need to find other ways of safeguarding vulnerable pupils while they are not in school.

Other comments

- 22 The sector welcomed the introduction of the National Voucher Scheme and the speed with which it was created. This inevitably hindered the usual tender process.
- 23 While we acknowledge that Further Education providers have been given access to additional funding to continue to provide meals for eligible students, we were disappointed that colleges were not included in the national voucher scheme.
- 24 There appears to have been some confusion during the implementation period around whether government was actively encouraging schools to use the scheme or to use it only if local solutions could not be found. This was amplified by concerns around availability of funding to cover local solutions, whilst the national scheme was to be fully funded. Below is an extract from the DfE in response to ASCLs concerns:

- 25 *We have confirmed in our guidance that schools are able to claim for additional costs incurred in supporting free school meal pupils where the national voucher scheme is not an appropriate approach. There are some conditions applied here: a ceiling on the overall total that can be claimed; and an expectation that schools will not claim if they are able to add to any historic reserves in their current financial year (September 2019 to August 2020 for academies and April 2020 to March 2021 for maintained schools). These conditions do not prevent schools from working with alternative voucher providers, or for being fully reimbursed where doing so will have a negative impact on their financial position.*
- 26 I hope that this is of value to your investigation, ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

Julia Harnden
Funding Specialist
Association of School and College Leaders
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