



**UPDATED 29 March 2020**

## **School Meals Programme – Guidance for Schools**

### **To Principals and School Management Bodies**

We appreciate that this is a very challenging time for teachers, staff, students and parents. We appreciate all that you have done so far and all that you will continue to do in the weeks ahead.

All of Government is hugely grateful for the effort, commitment and energy that students and teachers are putting in to continue education in difficult circumstances. Colleagues at post-primary level are urged to keep up the momentum and focus particularly with exam class students, to prepare for the State exams.

The Government would also like to acknowledge the many efforts being made at school level to support children in difficult circumstances.

The Minister and the Department of Education and Skills are aware that schools and education staff have expressed concerns about the impact of school closures due to coronavirus (COVID-19) on pupils who avail of school meals, and that the unavailability of school meals impacts in particular on the most disadvantaged in our society.

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has confirmed that funding to schools will continue, in line with the parameters of the School Meals scheme.

This guidance note will explain what schools should and need to do to make sure pupils have continued access to school meals while the school is closed.

In considering those who may need support, schools should be mindful that economic and employment circumstances may have changed in some households due to the Covid-19 situation, to the extent that families that previously would not have been dependent on school meals may be experiencing different circumstances now. It may be useful for schools to contact families already in receipt of support under the School Meals Programme to establish if they wish to continue to avail of this support during this period of school closure.

Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) have communicated with all home school community liaison coordinators (HSCL) and School Completion Programmes (SCP) and asked both HSCL and SCP staff to liaise with school principals across all schools where HSCL and SCP currently work to ensure that children/families in need of the School Meals Programme are identified and supported.

Schools are encouraged to maintain the service during the Easter holiday period.

It is important that all food safety and preparation guidelines are adhered to. All HSE guidelines in relation to Covid-19 need to be adhered to, including maintaining physical distancing and avoid gatherings or queues.

### **School Meals as an essential service**

Following from the Taoiseach's announcement on 27 March 2020, schools are advised that where school meals provision is being arranged that this is considered an "essential service" and staff, (including support staff, teachers, principals or Home School Community Liaison or School Completion Programme staff), travelling to assist are included in those considered to be travelling for work purposes. Volunteers assisting with the School Meals Programme are also covered.

To comply with the new arrangements, **collection of food or food parcels from schools by individuals should only take place where delivery to pupils' home addresses is not possible and where collection can be arranged strictly in line with HSE Covid-19 physical distancing guidelines.**

Mindful that food producers/distributors have been working over this weekend for Monday morning deliveries to schools, and given that it may take a few of days for distribution arrangements to be set up **collections of school meals by individuals can continue until such time as a school has made alternative arrangements for distribution. In these cases, collection should only occur strictly where it is possible to do so in line with HSE Covid 19 social distancing guidelines.**

Schools should also put arrangements in place to ensure that the provision of food parcels is arranged no more than once per week.

### **Distribution arrangements**

Under the latest public health measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19, until 12 April 2020 everyone is urged to stay in their home wherever possible.

With that in mind, **schools are requested to make arrangements for distribution of food packages.**

In some cases schools will already have made local arrangements to facilitate the distribution of food to pupils' homes and these arrangements can continue if still feasible. For those that have not made arrangements for distribution at this stage, they are requested to put in place such arrangements as soon as possible.

*Delivery via An Post can be put in place where local arrangements for distribution are not in place or no longer feasible:*

- In order to manage the distribution logistics, An Post have agreed to facilitate the carriage of food packages from any of their 114 Delivery Services Units to pupils' home addresses.

- Food packages for delivery to pupils should be non-perishable goods, weighing no more than 30kg each and securely wrapped.
- Food packages will need to be addressed by schools, and will then need to be delivered by the school to the An Post Delivery Service Unit (DSU), for delivery to pupils' home address by An Post. Details of these centres are attached.
- Packages will travel through the An Post network to pupils' home addresses on a FREEPOST basis.
- Schools should contact their local An Post DSU (see list of contact details which will be sent to Principals) to put local arrangements in place.

### ***Additional assistance where required***

Each local authority is co-ordinating Community Support Network Programmes to assist with volunteer efforts. Each County has a Community Champion whose role is to direct queries and requests for assistance to local community and voluntary groups. School principals may contact the Community Champion if they wish to enlist support through the local community & voluntary groups to assist.

### **Physical Distancing Guidance**

- Physical distancing is important to help slow the spread of coronavirus. It does this by minimising contact between potentially infected individuals and healthy individuals. More information is available here: <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/protect-yourself.html>
- You should keep a space of 2 metres (6.5 feet) between you and other people
- Floor marking should be used to mark out two metres visually for people attending. Material is provided here for download that can help with this:
- <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/472f64-covid-19-coronavirus-guidance-and-advice/#social-distancing-graphics>
- Ensure that the floor is marked with the correct position for tables etc. and that furniture is not moved from these positions.

### **Options for Schools**

It is open to schools to consider the method which works best for the school within the parameters set out by the Department. While not prescriptive, the following options may be helpful to consider:

#### **Option 1: Delivery of food to central site (e.g. School Hall, Community Centre)**

Schools have already received funding for school meals for this year, and therefore payment to suppliers would generally issue on foot of invoices paid in arrears. Each school has their own arrangement in place with food suppliers.

Given the need to restrict movement it would not be appropriate to create a situation where people congregate to eat food. Therefore any system would have to be based on distribution from a central hub for delivery to home addresses or, only if delivery is not possible, for collection by individuals. Volunteers (school completion staff, etc.) may be able to assist. An Post have agreed to facilitate the carriage of food packages from any of their 114 Delivery Services Units to pupils' home addresses

Under normal circumstances, home school community liaison co-ordinators are tasked with home visits and therefore would be familiar with pupils' home addresses. It is not envisaged that home visits would be conducted, but that deliveries could be co-ordinated and arranged if

needed. Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) has communicated with all home school community liaison coordinators (HSCL) and School Completion Programmes (SCP) and asked both HSCL and SCP staff to liaise with school principals across all schools where HSCL and SCP currently work to ensure that children/families in need of the School Meals Programme are identified and supported.

Ideally non-perishable food could be used. Food providers could be asked to consider this and to arrange for an 'Emergency Provisions' box for each child.

One provider has suggested that by amalgamating the already allocated breakfast and lunch funding of €0.60c and €1.40 daily respectively, food providers could use the weekly allocation of €10 to furnish a healthy breakfast and lunch for each child, which meet the criteria of *Nutrition Standards for School Meals* available at the following link;

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/484f17-nutrition-standards-for-school-meals/>

\*An example of what an Emergency Provision box could contain (to be changed weekly):

- -Fresh sliced pan (Carbohydrates)
- -Chicken/turkey/ham (Protein)
- -Cheese (Dairy)
- -Fruit (Part of 5 a day)
- -Breakfast Cereals (Wholegrain)

Schools can explore with their providers the options available, and to consider feasibility of co-ordination of collection and/or delivery of food. Where packs are being provided, schools will need to be aware of dietary requirements for particular pupils where known.

### **Option 2: Purchase food from a Wholesaler or Local Supermarket**

If it is not feasible or appropriate to spend the funding on food through the existing contract with a supplier the option to purchase from a wholesaler or local supermarket will be acceptable. All food purchases must have receipts to verify the expenditure.

Supermarket providers and retailers are asked to facilitate school representatives who may be purchasing food in bulk for school meals purposes.

The HSE Public Health advice on physical distancing in relation to the collection and/or delivery applies here also.

### **Option 3: Link in with local charity or community group**

In some areas, local charities, clubs, restaurants and community organisations have arranged for meal provision or food provision. It may be useful to link up with some of these to see if meals can be arranged for your pupil cohort.

Schools can use social media or direct communication with clubs and volunteers to communicate that they are seeking assistance.

If a school experiences difficulty identifying or getting into contact with a local organisation, contact can be made with the local Community Champion.

### **Option 4: Pooling staff resources**

Schools may consider pooling staff resources between schools to assist in the operational aspects of ensuring that school meals continue to be delivered.

The above options are not prescriptive. Other options may be considered also once the parameters of the scheme are followed.

### **In summary – Actions required**

If your school is availing of the continuation of the School Meals Programme during the Covid-19 situation:

- You should contact your supplier to arrange that supplies are delivered no more than once per week. Schools should arrange for a weekly (or less frequent) pack of food to be provided – daily deliveries should be avoided.
  
- You may already have made local arrangements to arrange for distribution with school staff, TESS support and School Completion Staff, or local community assistance. If you have arrangements in place to facilitate distribution and it is feasible to continue with these, you should continue to arrange for distribution. When food is being collected from school, **arrangements must be in place for this to happen strictly in line with HSE Covid-19 physical distancing guidelines.**
  
- If you have not made arrangements to deliver food to families, please do this using the guidelines for An Post delivery as outlined above.
  
- It will remain the responsibility of the schools to manage the funding and make all necessary arrangements with their supplier.
  
- If you are unable to use your current provider to continue offering school meals, schools have autonomy to consider other options, for example:
  - using other local initiatives such as community initiatives or a local charity providing food or meals
  - alternative method of supply (e.g. obtaining food supplies from alternative provider or retailer)
  
- If you require any assistance from local community or voluntary groups, and have difficulty identifying or getting in contact with a suitable organisation, please contact your Community Champion. Details of champions is contained in an appendix at the end of this guidance
  
- The funding provided under the School Meals Programme must be used for food items only – not vouchers.
  
- Schools will have to keep receipts for all food items purchased in line with the School Meals Programme.
  
- There is no extra funding available to that already provided to the individual schools. Funding is allocated per meal, per child, per day.

*If you require any clarification on the school meals programme please email [school.meals@welfare.ie](mailto:school.meals@welfare.ie) or telephone 071 9138625.*

*If you require clarification in relation to the guidance above, please email [social\\_inclusion@education.gov.ie](mailto:social_inclusion@education.gov.ie)*

## **Q & A**

**Q1. If a school is in receipt of School Meals Programme funding does it have to put in place provision to maintain school meals provision during the Covid 19 school closures?**

**A1.** Schools are asked to ensure that children who previously would have depended on school meals still have access to this provision. Tusla Education Support Service staff have been asked to liaise with school principals across all schools where HSCL and SCP currently work to ensure that children/families in need of the School Meals Programme are identified and supported.

**Q2. How can School Meal provision be maintained by schools?**

**A2.** Each school has their own arrangement in place with food suppliers.

Given the need to restrict movement it would not be appropriate to create a situation where people congregate to eat food. Therefore any system would have to be based on distribution from a central hub for delivery to home addresses or, only if delivery is not possible, for collection by individuals. Volunteers (school completion staff, etc.) may be able to assist.

Ideally non-perishable food could be used. Food providers could be asked to consider this and to arrange for an 'Emergency Provisions' box for each child. One suggestion is that by amalgamating the already allocated breakfast and lunch funding of €0.60c and €1.40 daily respectively, food providers could use the weekly allocation of €10 to furnish a healthy breakfast and lunch for each child, which meet the criteria of Healthy Eating Guidelines.

Schools will be asked to explore with providers the options available, and to consider feasibility of co-ordination of delivery of food.

If it is not feasible to spend the funding on food through the existing contract with a supplier the option to purchase from a wholesaler or local supermarket will be acceptable. All food purchases must have receipts to verify the expenditure. Other options include linking in with a community organization, club or charity.

**Q3. What additional funding is being made available for this?**

**A3.** There is no additional funding for the School Meals Programme. The funding allocated per meal, per child, per day, will continue in respect of the number of children supported by the school during the Covid 19 closure. For example, a school may have an enrolment of 200 and decide to support 20 of the most vulnerable students. The rate will therefore be the funding currently allocated per meal, per day X 20 students.

**Q4. Can my school purchase vouchers for a supermarket and distribute them to the students concerned?**

**A4.** No the purchase of vouchers is not an option. The School Meals Programme provides for food purchases only.

**Q5. Will school meals continue to be provided during the Easter Holidays?**

**A5.** Yes, schools can continue to provide school meals during the Easter Holidays. Schools are encourage to maintain the service during this period.