

Rt Hon John Healey MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London, SW1P 3BT

9 June 2020

Dear Gavin

Free School Meals must continue in the summer holidays

I am writing to urge you to rethink on the Government's indefensible decision to deny free school meal vouchers to children during the Summer holidays. This current Covid crisis has caused the total disruption of children's education, with the very poorest hit hardest by the lack of good food and social support that also come with schooling.

It was reassuring when the Government, supermarkets and food suppliers acted quickly when schools closed to create a voucher system to keep children fed. I and other Labour MPs warmly welcomed your decision to break from the usual rules to extend the voucher scheme over the Easter and May-half term holidays, but this only makes the decision to end it before the summer break even more disappointing. This defies common sense. Why is a hungry child in the May half-term holiday different to a hungry child in August? The Covid crisis will certainly not have ended by the summer, nor will any school have returned to normal by then.

On 4 June, the Prime Minister's official spokesperson confirmed to journalists that the free school meal vouchers will not be extended to cover the Summer holidays.ⁱ

In Rotherham and Barnsley there are close to 14,000 children eligible for and claiming free school meals at our state-run Primary and Secondary schools.ⁱⁱ Around half of all the most vulnerable children in Barnsley, such as those in Special Schools or who attend Pupil Referral Units get free school meals, and a significant proportion of those pupils in Rotherham do as well.ⁱⁱⁱ Continuing free school meal provision out of term time has made all the difference to thousands of children, and has given vital help to their parents and guardians.

The suggested system of local councils bidding to Ministers funded meal and activity clubs is a totally inadequate substitute. It will be a lottery which bids are accepted and which kids are fed. It is very troubling for schools that know how vital the free school meal vouchers are, and it is very worrying to many families who have come to rely on the voucher system at this time of extra financial hardship. The figure announced for this meal club and activity scheme was £9m. Last year 15.4% of England's school population (1,358,343) were eligible



and receiving free school meals.^{iv} That's just £6.62 funding for each child in need of a free meal, or £1 per week, per child in the six-week summer holidays – before any activity costs are deducted from the fund.

Finally, with the announcement today that primary and secondary schools will not be returning in full until at least September, it confirms the disruption for pupils will continue. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor have both pledged to do 'whatever it takes' to help people get through the Covid-19 crisis. This promise rings hollow for parents who will struggle to feed their kids through July and August, if the free school meal voucher scheme is axed.

I urge you to rethink your decision to deny free school meals in the summer holidays and look forward to your response to my concerns in this letter.

Yours ever

John Healey MP
Wentworth and Dearne

ⁱ Huffington Post, 'Free School Meals Vouchers Will Stop In Summer Holidays, No.10 Reveals' 4 June 2020 https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/free-school-meal-vouchers-no10-summer-holiday_uk_5ed93d75c5b623988e611c32?i9&?

ⁱⁱ Barnsley: Primary age children receiving free school meals (4,470) and Secondary age (2,284)
Rotherham: Primary age children receiving free school meals (4,294) and Secondary age (2,924)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2019>

ⁱⁱⁱ Barnsley: Individual children in Pupil Referral Units receiving FSM (37 – 54.6%), in Special Schools (198 – 47.7%)

Rotherham: Individual children in Pupil Referral Units receiving FSM (77- 48.4%), in Special Schools (294 – 39.1%) <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2019>

^{iv} Statistics on pupils in schools in England as collected in the January 2019 school census. (27 June 2019)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2019>