

Friday, 15 January 2021

Dear Parents and Carers

We are writing to let you know about some changes to our free school meal (FSM) provision. We are sure that you will not have missed discussions in the news and Parliament around FSMs this week, and the fact that in some schools the food hampers provided have been less than satisfactory. Thankfully, these examples do not reflect our offer and has not been the case in our schools.

We have worked with Chartwells, our catering partners, closely throughout the pandemic and they have been consistently supportive in our shared bid to offer high quality food to our entire school community. At the start of term, with an unbelievably short notice period, the schools and Chartwells were able to source some food for children receiving FSM across the Inclusive Multi Academy Trust. This provision was enhanced the following week and will be enhanced again going forward now they have been able to mobilise their supply chain and workforce and have a clear idea of numbers in each school. Throughout the last two weeks and the previous lockdown before it, Chartwells have been in constant contact with us seeking feedback on menus and the content of food parcels.

There are number of arguments being put forward in the media around FSM provision, most notably that parents and carers should have the choice of what they feed their children, and this has caused us to reflect on our offer of hampers. Up until this point we have chosen to provide hampers for several reasons, most notably that the government guidance very clearly directs us to do so. Additionally, we felt it right to support our caterers who have done an excellent job in supporting us in extremely challenging times. Lastly, until yesterday, there simply was no National Voucher Scheme in existence for this most recent lockdown.

Following intervention from footballer and food campaigner Marcus Rashford MBE, the government yesterday announced details of the National Voucher Scheme, amending their guidance to say:

Under normal circumstances, schools do not provide free school meals to eligible children who are not in school. During the national lockdown, we expect schools to continue supporting children eligible for benefits-related free school meals who are at home during term time.

Schools may consider working with their school catering team or food provider to provide good quality lunch parcels to eligible free school meal pupils who are at home. The steps schools take during this national lockdown period will depend on local circumstances. This could include:

- *providing lunch parcels through the school catering team or food provider*
- *providing vouchers for a local shop or supermarket*
- *using the Department for Education (DfE)'s national voucher scheme, which will reopen on 18 January 2021*

Having listened to and engaged in the debate around provision we have reflected on the powerful arguments put forward around choice and we agree that schools across the Trust should adopt the National Voucher Scheme. We want to be very clear though that this is not because of any lack of quality from Chartwells. They support our decision and continue to be an integral part of our wider team.

All children, in receipt of the pupil premium and universal infant free school meals, who have been invited into school will continue to receive a free hot lunch. There continues to be a choice of vegetarian and non-vegetarian meals as well as a jacket potato. These will as ever, be prepared and served by our Chartwell teams.

Voucher Scheme

Schools will be able to order vouchers for eligible families from Tuesday 19th January. **We have been advised that these may take up to 4 days to be delivered. Therefore, food hampers will be available as usual on Monday.** A £15 voucher per child will then be received weekly, up to the week commencing the 8th February (half term) when the Government scheme currently finishes. Whilst we do not have specific guidance yet, we are expecting that an eCode will be sent directly to the parent or carers of the pupils(s) eligible for free school meals - you will need to

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choose an eGift card from a wide range of supermarkets. As soon as we have more specific information on the operational details of the scheme from the Government, we shall be in touch further.

Who is eligible?

Before ordering vouchers through the National Voucher Scheme, the school has to check which pupils are eligible and in receipt of benefits-related free school meals. **Only those parents who are entitled to income related free school meals are eligible at this current time.** This means that if your child receives Universal Free School Meals as a result of being in EYFS or KS1 then you are not eligible. If your child currently receives benefits related free school meals then you do not have to do anything. However, we appreciate that over the lockdown period many people's employment and financial situations may have changed. In order to check if you may now be eligible for free school meals, please consider if you receive any of the following:

- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance
- Child Tax Credit (not Working Tax Credit), with an annual income below £16,190
- Pension Guarantee Credit
- Employment and Support Allowance, income related
- Support under part 6 of the Immigration and Asylum Act, 1999
- Working Tax Credit run-on, paid for 4 weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit
- Universal Credit, with a household income of £7,400 or less (after tax and not including any benefits you get)

Please register at [Hertfordshire Free School Meals](#). If you need support, please email or phone the school and they will help you with your application.

if you are now eligible for income related free school meals and were not previously, please let the school know as soon as possible and we will apply for you to be included in the scheme.

James Roach – CEO, Inclusive Multi Academy Trust
Gillian Jackson – Headteacher, Beechfield School
Cheska Tyler – Headteacher, Cherry Tree School
Sebastian Gray – Headteacher, Laurance Haines School