

SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES DURING THE PANDEMIC

As things have been moving at speed nationally over this week this short guide hopefully provides information around the different support available for families including children eligible for FSM Vouchers and support for those who have been financially impacted by the Pandemic.

This is not a comprehensive list as I know there are other local Hardship grants, foodbanks and other networks providing support.

Free School Meals - There has been some questions around the Free School Meals below overview hopes to provide further information or links including criteria and process FAQ's.

- The eligibility criteria for a child to be entitled to a free school meal or free school meal voucher are set out nationally <https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals>
- Schools hold lists of identified children within their school of those who are eligible and will have access to vouchers through nominated contractors to provide lunches for any child. Schools access vouchers (normally electronically) for each eligible child on their list directly from the nominated contractors providing FSM vouchers, they are not issued by Government or WSCC to individual schools.

Free School Meal Vouchers

- School Holidays – Christmas and February Half Term (West Sussex County Scheme)
 - COVID Winter Grant Scheme – Government provided funds to upper tier authorities to support families with at least 80% earmarked to support with food and essential utility costs. Decision Details 7th December 2020
https://westsussex.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s20559/FRC02_20_21_COVID_Winter_Grant_Scheme%20Report.pdf
 - £675,000 has been allocated to support children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) over the Christmas and February school holidays within West Sussex. Eligible families are entitled to a £30 (£15 per week) food voucher per child, distributed by their school, which can be used in a variety of supermarkets to cover the two-week December break. This mirrors the national approach used during the Easter and summer holidays and will be replicated for the February half-term.
 - Every school in West Sussex (including Academy's and Free Schools) were contacted via school news letter who would have contacted parents on their eligibility lists. Many of who would have participated in the previous National FSM Voucher schemes earlier in the year.
 - Free School Meal Voucher scheme providers are Edenred and Wonde
 - Redeeming Vouchers - The providers have a list of main supermarket and retail chains that have signed up to accept the vouchers <https://www.edenred.co.uk/df-freeschoolmeals-administrators/>
<https://www.wonde.com/free-school-meals>
- Term Time – 4th January to 18th January
 - Schools have an obligation to provide free lunches to eligible children in school and those learning from home
 - They have been working with their catering suppliers to provide food parcels for eligible children learning from home

- National Lockdown 3 - Term Time from 18th January (National Government Scheme)
 - Government announced on 13th Jan 2021 that the National Voucher Scheme will be available from Monday 18th January
 - Free School Meal Voucher National scheme provider is Edenred
<https://www.edenred.co.uk/df-freeschoolmeals-administrators/>
 - FAQ's for parents on the scheme and how it works can be found on their website
https://www.edenred.co.uk/Documents/Select/clients/SelectGrocery_FSM_ParentCarerFAQs.pdf
 - Every School in West Sussex (including Academy's and Free Schools) have been contacted today 13th January as soon as the Government announcement has been made. Including information on the national scheme reopening with the aim to move over to the Government scheme commencing Mon 18th Jan.

Other support available

Apart from the FSM Vouchers other support is available for families who are experiencing financial hardship during the pandemic. This includes support with fuel or utility bills, council tax and rent as well as food.

- WSCC Community Hub Families with children who aren't eligible for FSM but who are experiencing financial hardship are encouraged to contact the Community Hub in confidence to seek practical support and advice. The Hub will be open seven days a week between 8am-8pm on 033 022 27980 <https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/fire-emergencies-and-crime/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-and-information/community-hub-covid-19/>
- WSCC Children Services will be supporting families and most vulnerable children. They also work closely with the Community Hub on requests for support where appropriate
- Horsham DC <https://www.horsham.gov.uk/coronavirus/coronavirus-housing,-council-tax-and-benefits> or <https://www.horsham.gov.uk/community/managing-your-money-and-debt-advice>
- Citizen Advice along with advice, have a number of grant funds that can support families <https://www.advicewestsussex.org.uk/horsham/> and
- Supporting residents facing fuel hardship this winter - To support residents who are facing fuel hardship this winter, the DWP Covid Winter Grant Scheme has been launched by Citizens Advice in West Sussex (North, South, East) and Arun and Chichester Citizens Advice in partnership with the County Council.

What can it do It can help with paying for gas, electric and water bills, boiler repairs, purchasing blankets, slow cookers, heaters. Other help may also be available such as mobile phone top ups, energy advice, benefit checks referrals for specialist debt advice.

Examples of who could be eligible:

- Families who have had to claim Universal Credit and don't have significant savings
 - Families on Universal Credit, home schooling and worried about heating their home
 - Families in debt and struggling to pay their gas or other bills
 - Care leavers on a low income
 - People with disabilities who are worried about putting their heating on.
- Government expansion of the Holiday Activities and Food Programme statement
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools>

The government announced that the Holiday Activities and Food programme will expand in 2021. Disadvantaged children in England will be offered free healthy meals and enriching activities over the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays next year. Local authorities will receive separate funding to co-ordinate delivery. Some may co-ordinate it themselves, and others may choose to work with another organisation to co-ordinate provision on their behalf. The programme will make free places available to children who are eligible for free school meals for a minimum of 4 hours a day, 4 days a week, 6 weeks a year. This would cover 4 weeks in the summer, and a week's worth of provision in each of the Easter and Christmas holidays. Funding to local authorities would reflect the participation rate among eligible children, based on what we have seen in the pilot stage of this programme. We will work with local authorities over the coming months and will put in place additional measures to support them, including guidance and best practice based on our pilot phase.