

Royal Society for Public Health submission to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee Call for Evidence on Covid-19 and food supply

The Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) is an independent health education and campaigning charity, dedicated to protecting and promoting the public's health and wellbeing. We are the world's longest-established public health body with more than 6,500 members drawn from the public health community both in the UK and internationally. Our award-winning External Affairs and Digital department develops content, creates high profile campaigns on issues including obesity, food and healthy environments – as well as driving change in policy.

We are submitting evidence as part of [our response to the coronavirus pandemic](#); among other issues facing the public's health, having equal access to affordable healthy food for all is a priority area for us, and remains so in the current crisis. Our response to this Call for Evidence focuses on accessing healthy food.

Are the Government and food industry doing enough to support people to access sufficient healthy food; and are any groups not having their needs met? If not, what further steps should the Government and food industry take?

Initially the Government and food industry seemed to not keep pace with the introduction of lockdown restrictions that resulted in a significant demand on food retail. The emergence of panic buying was partly behind this, which began before the lockdown was in place. We were pleased to see the retail sector has now met this higher demand, by increasing supplies, capacity for online delivery, and providing shopping hours solely for key workers, and the elderly and vulnerable.

A number of other schemes enabling particular groups to access food appear to have caught up with the demand for food in the 'new normal'. These are outlined below, along with suggestions for how the Government and food industry might better encourage uptake of healthier products.

Healthy Start Vouchers

It was promising to see that applications for Healthy Start Vouchers can now be completed entirely online, without needing a signature from a healthcare professional.¹ This has enabled eligible families to access the scheme under lockdown.

Last year it was revealed that many families have missed out on Healthy Start Vouchers, suggesting that the scheme is not being fully utilised. RSPH, along with other NGOs and charities, called for the scheme to be better promoted.²

We echo this call again – **the scheme must be promoted**, particularly as many families may newly qualify for the vouchers given the economic impact of the pandemic, but they may not be aware of this. The vouchers can be used to purchase milk, fruit and vegetables; if we are to improve access to healthy food, this information needs to be publicised.

Free School Meals

¹ <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/healthy-start-vouchers/your-questions-answered/#1>

² https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/exclusive-coalition-of-charities-warn-free-food-scheme-failing-low-income-families_uk_5cf1308be4b0e8085e38b490?utm_hp_ref=uk-homepage&gucounter=1

It was encouraging to see the provision of Free School Meals adapt to the schools closing and children being at home. We welcomed the weekly £15 vouchers to spend in supermarkets, and that this was extended over the Easter holidays.³

There are variations amongst the devolved nations (in Wales the vouchers will be worth £19.50 and available throughout the summer holidays)⁴. Whilst it is reassuring that there is provision across the UK, we suggest that **if the vouchers are going to be available through the summer holidays in Wales, this should be extended to England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.**

It is concerning to hear reports that parents are having difficulty obtaining the vouchers.^{5,6} While we appreciate that the logistics are challenging, families most in need of support at this time are being affected. We suggest that **where possible, the Government increases the system capacity for ordering vouchers.**

Once parents have the vouchers, they are mostly free to spend them as they wish (exemptions include age restricted items such as alcohol, cigarettes and lottery tickets).⁷ More supermarkets are now accepting the vouchers, but we would like to see **all major retailers, including lower priced outlets accept the vouchers.**

Shopping lists to the value of £15 have been suggested.⁸ **Retailers could promote these lists and recipe ideas in store**, to make it as easy as possible for parents to use the vouchers to purchase healthier food. Retailers could also **consider limiting the vouchers to healthier items**, in a similar manner to the Healthy Start Vouchers, to ensure that they are being spent on healthy nutritious products.

Universal Infant Free School Meals

Until schools closed, all children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 were entitled to a free school meal, regardless of their household income. However, since schools closed, only those children who are entitled to a free school meal because of low household income are eligible for the £15 voucher scheme, meaning that many infant school aged children do not qualify and are missing out.⁹

We would like to see the **voucher scheme extended to all infant school aged children**, to match the offer that would normally be available to them in school. If this was introduced, we would like to see the **vouchers incentivised to encourage spending them on healthier products**, as outlined above.

Food parcels for vulnerable or those who are 'shielding'

The delivery of food parcels to clinically vulnerable individuals containing pasta, fruit and tinned goods is a step in the right direction.¹⁰ We suggest that these **parcels are compiled in accordance**

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-52183713>

⁴ https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/education/free-school-meals-wales-education-18129426?fbclid=IwAR2Xzu8bznNDtRMUpShY3dgEAWGlcQ8cLVvDqMxXverU-mzRtUDnRY_dvNE

⁵ <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-free-school-meals-scheme-branded-disaster-as-parents-struggle-to-get-vouchers-11978035>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-52325332>

⁷ <https://dfemedia.blog.gov.uk/2020/04/17/free-school-meals-covid-19-faq/>

⁸ <https://biteback2030.com/real-story/making-your-ps15-free-school-meal-voucher-go-further-home>

⁹ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/williamson-free-school-meals-coronavirus-childrens-commissioner_uk_5e8703d1c5b63e06281c4142

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/first-food-parcels-delivered-to-clinically-vulnerable-people>

with the Government recommended Eatwell guide.¹¹ Farmers, restaurants, local councils and food banks could be brought together to support food supply.

Although in the current climate many people favour products with a long shelf life, we want to **emphasise the importance of fresh fruit and vegetables** for having a balanced diet. It is positive that markets have been allowed to stay open,¹² as these are a good place to source fresh produce.

The food industry reportedly has enough food to cope with demand, and farmers must be supported to continue to keep up supply; for instance, seasonal workers are needed on farms as the workforce is lacking due to restricted travel from Europe.¹³

We believe that the Government and food industry can continue to adapt to the new normal to give everyone access to healthy food, but this depends on a sustained coordinated effort across sectors and local communities. We are grateful to have the opportunity to respond to this Call for Evidence and would welcome assisting the national effort to keep everyone fed with nutritious healthy food.

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eatwell-guide>

¹² https://www.sustainweb.org/coronavirus/supporting_food_markets/

¹³ https://www.sustainweb.org/coronavirus/supporting_farmers/