

Headteachers' Update

The Daily 5 O'Clock Update For Schools

Bank Holiday Weekend

I would like to thank all those schools and all the staff in them, teaching and non-teaching, who worked over the Bank Holiday weekend to keep their schools and settings open. It was a tremendous effort and is hugely appreciated by our colleagues in the health services and other key worker professions.

In terms of numbers, on Good Friday we had 47 schools and settings open with 92 children in attendance and, on Easter Monday, it was 48 schools and settings and 76 children. A good number of you only had one child attend but you were still open and doing your bit for the key workers and for vulnerable children. I can't thank you enough.

DfE / Edenred Statement Issued Today

I am acutely aware of the issues that you have been having with the Edenred FSM vouchers. We have escalated this to the DfE and will provide as much support as we can to schools.

Edenred have issued a statement today which, for those who haven't seen it, is copied below: During the course of the last week, orders placed within the Edenred system were higher than anticipated. This had an impact on the performance and experience.

Our teams have been working day and night through the Easter weekend to process orders and develop the system capability and performance for the weeks ahead. Improvements are being applied every day.

Paid Orders

All existing orders with status 'paid' continued to be processed over the course of the Bank Holiday weekend. These will all have been completed, with emails sent direct to families or as stock eCodes issued to schools by 8pm this evening.

ACTION: we respectfully request that schools who have already placed an order (which has been processed and sent) and who do not have an immediate requirement for eCodes this week, to not access the service.

Working closely with the Department for Education and in partnership with you, if we can balance the load on the system, we can provide a consistent and constant flow of essential support through to families.

Here are a few simple steps on the best way to engage with the platform over the next few weeks.

Processing pending orders

A number of schools were unable to complete their order through the checkout process – these orders are now in the system with status 'pending'.

From Tuesday morning, the system can now be accessed to complete the order process, but we ask this is done in a controlled and phased structure to maximise the speed and experience for everyone. Therefore, we respectfully request that you consider accessing the platform to confirm pending orders in the following way:

1. If the order is for a future release, after w/c 20th April, please do not submit this order until 4 calendar days before the due date

2. If the order is for release on or before Friday 17th April, please access the platform to confirm the order. These orders will then be processed and the associated eCodes distributed.

Addressing duplicate pending orders

We have identified orders which we believe to be duplicate. Please could you check your orders, particularly if there are the same orders with the same delivery date. If you believe any are a duplicate, please do not approve the duplicate orders.

For the valid order, please follow the instructions as explained above (processing pending orders).

Simplifying future order process

Ordering a single eCode to cover a longer time period

The Department for Education has agreed to allow schools to place an order for a family to cover a period of up to four weeks in one order (£60 instead of £15 on a four weekly cycle or £30 for a two weekly cycle), thereby reducing the administration burden on schools and further reducing the volume of visitors in the ordering platform at any one time. This will make a significant difference to your experience. When deciding the length of the eCode period, schools should consider what is appropriate for the family.

Ordering a single eCode to cover more than one eligible child

Please also order a combined eCode for eligible children in the same household, for example a family with three eligible children could receive an eCode for £180 to cover a four-week period, or £90 to cover a two-week period, instead of three individual £15 eCodes per child, per week. This would significantly reduce the number of orders and eCodes being processed, whilst also reducing school administration, so improving the speed at which the system can process all orders.

To start the process, and again to balance the load on the system, for this week, we request that only orders required for release this week and next week are placed on the system initially adhering to the guidance set out. Orders required for release w/c 27th can be placed on the system from w/c 20th April.

We'll be continuing to carefully manage the service and capacity over the coming week and therefore can confirm that the site will be open between the hours of 8am and 10pm.

We thank you for your continued patience. We appreciate it has been challenging to have a new process implemented very quickly. We'd also like to thank you in advance for your support in adhering to the guidance and the new instructions outlined in this communication. We are confident working in this way will enable support to get to families in a faster and more timely manner.

Headteacher Meetings

You may not be aware but, to date, we have held two headteacher conference calls with the headteacher lead from each locality. From the local authority's point of view, these have been extremely useful, and a number of issues have been raised by Headteachers that we have been able to respond to. The next meeting is this Thursday coming. We have established the core group of headteachers, but we have said that the locality representative can be rotated if that suits any particular locality.

If you have any issues that you wish to raise at the meetings, please let your locality lead headteacher know. You can also raise them directly with me, if you wish.

Similarly, if you are holding any locality headteacher conference calls and you would like me or a member of the local authority Education & Skills team to be involved, let me now and send an invitation. I will ensure that we are represented.

Guidance given to social workers in relation to vulnerable children and school provision

I thought that it may be useful for you to know the guidance that has gone out to our Social Workers regarding vulnerable children and school provision:

Where children have been identified as vulnerable, the national guidance is clear that there is an expectation that these children will attend their school / childcare provision.

Key Workers / Social Workers should continue to liaise with and support the family to ensure that the child attends the school provision wherever possible and should continue to revisit this with the family where they are not attending.

If they are not attending, explore the reasons for this with the family and school and make a safety plan that reflects the fact that the children will be at home, if they cannot be encouraged to attend or if it is not safe for them to do so.

For our looked after children, decisions on their school attendance have been made in conjunction with their carers, and ESLAC have offered support as needed to either the school or the placement respectively.

Should school staff have any concerns in relation to the children, please contact the social worker for that child

Annual Reviews of Education, Health and Care Plans During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Ordinarily, statutory processes require Annual Reviews for learners with EHCPs to take place every 12 months. Although the Coronavirus Act 2020 allows the Secretary of State to disapply the timeframes, this has not yet been enacted, so for the time being we are obliged to make reasonable endeavours to follow the Code of Practice.

This means that if you have learners in your school who have Annual Reviews due in the summer term, you are advised to take a pragmatic approach to it. You are striking a balance between adhering to guidance around social distancing and fulfilling your responsibilities.

We recommend that you discuss this in the first instance with families. Some parents/carers may prefer to delay the review. Where parents are wanting the review to take place, and this can be done remotely, then this should take place.

Where it is fitting for other professionals to contribute and/or attend, then it needs to be explained to parents/carers that this might not be possible due to other commitments of staff at the present time. A decision should be made jointly with parents/carers and recorded on the pupil's school record.

A document containing further guidance on this is now available on the COVID-19 resource page on Northumberland Education. This includes points to consider if you are holding a virtual review meeting.

DfE Guidance

No additional DfE Guidance or Updates have been issued over the Easter weekend or by noon today.