



## PART 2

# EXTENSION OF THE FREE SCHOOL MEAL SCHEME FOR PUPILS

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Image source (ITV, 2020)

On the 16th of June, a dramatic government U-turn was observed as the decision to **not** extend the free school meal scheme was reversed.

## FREE SCHOOL MEAL ACCESS

In the UK there is legislation that ensures schools provide free school meals to pupils who meet the eligibility criteria (Education Act 1996). Children whose parents receive certain benefits, such as universal credit or income-based job seekers allowance, are eligible to receive school meals at no cost with the aim of ensuring children have access to sufficient and nutritious food (Department of education, 2018). In England, an estimated 1.3 million children are eligible for free school meals, demonstrating the necessity of the initiative and its value to many families across the country (BBC, 2020).

During lockdown, schools were unconventionally forced to close during term time meaning children were no longer able to access the food provided in the school environment. For families relying on the free school meal scheme, feeding children posed a troubling and urgent challenge. In order to protect children from hunger and food poverty, the government released guidance to schools and local authorities on how to support families access food during lockdown. The guidance released on the 19th March (Department for Education, 2020) outlines the ways in which schools could continue their support via distributing vouchers and delivering food parcels. The guidance encouraged schools to adopt a flexible and tailored approach; headteachers were allocated the responsibility of determining the support strategy which was rationalised by the Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, since

**“they can make the most appropriate decisions for families in their communities, and provide immediate reassurance that this important support will continue” (Department for Education, 2020).**

The national voucher scheme was launched on the 31st of March and operated via an online system- headteachers could place orders for supermarket gift cards which had a value of £15 per child/week and families received them via email or post (Meadwell, 2020). The cost of the supermarket vouchers would be covered by the Department for Education, but the schools were responsible for ordering the vouchers and distributing them accordingly. The provision of the vouchers was vital for providing families with a source of finance for their child's food during the lockdown.

The voucher scheme was scheduled to terminate at the end of the school term, meaning school children would not be able to access government-funded food support throughout the summer holidays. Families who had become reliant on the initiative would face food insecurity once more.



Image shows a school's advertisement of the voucher scheme (Bulwell Academy, 2020)

## OPPOSITION TO THE SCHEME'S PROPOSED TERMINATION

The proposed termination of the scheme was greeted with strong criticism from multiple spheres of interests. Campaigners, unions, high profile celebrities and certain politicians have all been vocal against the scheme's termination. Campaigners threatened to pursue legal action against the government in June when it was announced that the scheme would not continue throughout the

summer holidays and Ministers insisted that the closure of the voucher scheme had always been intended to coincide with the end of the summer school term (Butler, 2020). The directors of prominent food charities called for a suitable alternative to be communicated and implemented quickly and drew attention to the urgent and prevailing need for food provision (Butler, 2020).

Marcus Rashford, a Manchester United football player, had a prominent role in the fight to extend the school meal scheme. Growing up, Rashford and his family were reliant on food banks and free school meals and his personal experience caused him to be sensitive towards the food related challenges faced by families throughout the pandemic (BBC, 2020). Led by his personal insight into the realities of food insecurity and financial hardship, Rashford became motivated to take action and oppose the government in their decision to terminate the voucher scheme. Whilst Rashford has no political campaigning experience, he is not a fresh arrival to the fight against child food poverty as he has been a long-time supporter of the charity 'Fareshare', which is a food redistribution charity that relocates surplus industry food to community groups



Rashford is pictured speaking with families impacted by the scheme (Rashford, 2020b).

and charities (Fareshare, 2020). Prior to campaigning for the extension of the scheme, Rashford worked collaboratively with the Co-op on an advertising campaign that encouraged people to donate to the charity (Hegarty, 2020).

Marcus expressed his empathy towards families relying on the scheme via his twitter profile and used the platform to present an authentic account of the importance and value of food support for children's current and future lives. His honest approach and motivation to help families experiencing similar hardships gained the public's attention and evoked a wave of support to campaign for the voucher scheme to be extended. Rashford called on his followers for support and he reached out to those utilising the scheme by asking for families to send recorded videos of themselves explaining the impact of the scheme's impending termination (Rashford, 2020a).

Despite his compelling narrative and public support, the plea to extend the scheme was rejected by the Prime Minister. Rashford was not deterred by this and he upheld his commitment to pushing for the scheme's extension. In his call for action, Rashford stripped back the politics and asked for attention to be focused on the issue at hand, he tweeted

**“This is not about politics; this is about humanity. Political affiliations aside, can we not all agree that no child should be going to bed hungry?” (Rashford, 2020c).**

This powerful message evoked sympathy, not just in the public sphere, but also in the political sphere with politicians such as Labour’s David Lammy and deputy leader, Angela Rayner



**Marcus Rashford** @MarcusRashford · Jun 15  
An Open Letter to all MPs in Parliament...  
#maketheUturn

Please retweet and tag your local MPs



13K 159.9K 310.3K

supporting Rashford’s efforts. On the 15th of June, Rashford addressed the MPs in parliament by letter which is shown above (Rashford, 2020d). The letter followed Rashford’s narrative of his experiences throughout childhood relying on food support and how this is the everyday reality for thousands of children.

Rashford proposed that food insecurity in the UK is a systemic issue and stresses how parents should not be burdened with the blame. He acknowledged his position of influence and why he felt it was necessary to leverage it and finally, he terminated the letter by directly asking the government to reconsider the decision to cancel the food voucher scheme throughout the school holidays. The letter circulated twitter with supporters calling on their local MPs to ‘make the U-turn’, this was used as the campaign’s hashtag and it was received with great support. Rashford was praised personally by Sir Keir Starmer for his work (BBC, 2020) and other prominent figures including the Mayor of London demonstrated solidarity with Rashford’s demands (Mayor of London, 2020). The campaign spread beyond twitter and proliferated with the support of wide media coverage including a BBC interview (BBC, 2020).

## OUTCOME

Rashford continued his twitter outreach on the morning of the 16th with a series of posts asking people to reflect on, and appreciate, the lived reality for families experiencing financial hardship and food insecurity. The very same day, the decision to extend the scheme was announced with a spokesperson for the PM explaining the decision was taken in reflection of the unprecedented circumstances families are facing due to the pandemic (Sky news, 2020). Upon hearing the news about the reversed decision, Rashford tweeted:

***“I don’t even know what to say, just look at what we can do when we come together, THIS is England in 2020.” (Rashford, 2020e).***

The new plan termed as the ‘COVID Summer Food Fund’ is a one-off initiative funded by the Department of Education. The fund gives each child who is eligible of receiving free school meals a £90 voucher to supplement the cost of groceries over the 6-week summer holiday. As with the previous voucher scheme, schools were made responsible for requesting and distributing the vouchers (Department for Education, 2020).

## **IMPLICATIONS OF IT COMING FROM RASHFORD**

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Rashford’s actions have been admired by the public and politicians alike, he has even been awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Manchester for his commitments to fighting child food poverty (The University of Manchester, 2020). However, it is alarming that an issue of this magnitude and urgency had to be addressed by a famous footballer player rather than the politicians who have been elected into positions of power to serve the nation (George, 2020). Whilst there was opposition to the scheme’s termination before Rashford intervened, it was his public profile and celebrity influence that spear-headed the campaign and allowed a major political decision to be revoked and amended (George, 2020). The Prime Minister acknowledged that Rashford acted appropriately to draw attention to the challenge of food poverty, effectively recognising the failure of his own government to firstly anticipate and, subsequently, address the issue. In modern times, the power of celebrities and social media is widely established, yet Rashford has shown how celebrities can use their influence to mobilise action at a political level (George, 2020). This is a considerable feat which raises questions about the effectiveness and trust in the government’s competency to manage the interests and needs of the public going forward.

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